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Kandinsky's Nonrepresentational Art: Finding Meaning Through Aesthetic Experience

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KANDINSKY'S NONREPRESENTATIONAL ART:
FINDING MEANING THROUGH
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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2011

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THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

by

Kandice Nikkole Diaz

THESIS

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Painting is like a thundering collision of different worlds that are fated to create the new world of the work in and from the battle with each other. Each work arises technically the way the cosmos arose—through catastrophes that finally form a symphony, the music of the spheres—from the chaotic roar of instruments. Creating a work is creating a world”

- Wassily Kandinsky (as cited in DÜchting, 2008, p. 32).

Modern art, or rather abstract art, which is enveloped in the same art genre, is hated, loved, or criticized, but more likely than not, misunderstood in many ways. It has been said that it is next to impossible to discover the artist’s motive, feelings, or mood behind such non-representational works of art (Stafford, 2007). Modern artists were so obsessed with expressionism that they did not feel compelled to paint religious icons, Madonnas, or historical figures as did their Renaissance and Baroque predecessors because all they wanted to do was “feel their paintings and give the viewer an emotional outlet as well” (Stafford, 2007, p. 1). Modern art has been described as meaningless because it does not depict any recognizable or discernable object in the natural world (Huer, 1990). As Jon Huer (1990) observed it in his book *The Great Art Hoax: Essays in the Comedy and Insanity of Collectible Art*, “...modern art functions as a conduit of the most meaningless, underdeveloped ideas and moods which find haven in it. Chaotic and meaningless renditions of the artist’s inner confusions are, thus, the very lifeblood of modern art” (p. 159). However, this is not the case, for modern art is not meaningless because it is capable of being interpreted.

Wassily Kandinsky’s paintings, as modern, abstract artworks, are full of meaning. Simply because a work of art may be devoid of any discernable object is no reason to assume that it is meaningless when in fact, modern paintings, such as those of Kandinsky, are full of meaning and can be interpreted.

“Modern painting is a journey toward abstraction, yet abstraction expresses meaning, often- as Wassily Kandinsky argued in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*- transcendental ideas. He believed that contemporary humans had lost their ability to see the spiritual and that his art could awaken dormant imaginative, intuitive, and inspirational powers,” (Schwarz, 1997, p. 6). It is through Kandinsky’s aesthetic, object form, and, “the formal and representational aspects of art” that we discover that these aspects are only meaningful as the expression of the artist’s “innermost feelings” (Selz, 1957, p. 132). Thus, the purpose of the study is to show how modern art, in particular the work of Kandinsky, has impacted aesthetic experience in order to show that modern art is not meaningless and has value because of its artistic expression. Through the use of rhetorical criticism, photo elicitation, and a questionnaire, I show how Kandinsky’s abstract art can be interpreted because it expresses meaning. The meaning found in Kandinsky’s art can only be discovered by examining his artwork in conjunction with certain historical contexts to include his writings, his life, and the time period in which he painted.

1.1 THE HISTORY OF ABSTRACT ART

Although there are many times in art history that can be deemed to be the starting point of modern art, the year that is most frequently referred to is 1863, which is the year that the famous Parisian Salon des Refusés, created by Emperor Napoleon III as an alternative showing space for art that had been deliberately excluded from the more prestigious Salon, premiered Édouard Manet’s controversial *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (Arnason & Prather, 1998; Cottington, 2005). Manet’s painting became star of this exhibition because it not only drew large crowds, but got the largest amount of criticism for essentially making fun of “old master art and its audience,” with its young, naked woman’s gaze fixated on the viewer and its outdated male garb (Cottington, 2005). In other words, Manet’s painting did not meet the set standards for what was considered an appropriate painting, “in ways that were either laughable or offensive” (Cottington, 2005, p. 13).

However, there was no definitive emergence of modern art, it was a gradual process that took place over the course of about 100 years, at a time of intense “social and political” movements, “bloody revolutions in the United States and France and industrial revolution in England” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 17). A defining characteristic of modern art is the challenge it presented to the more traditional ways of “representing three-dimensional space” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p 17). The “revolution of modern art” was a rebellion against the French academic Salon system that had dominated art for years (Arnason & Prather, 1998). As Perry Anderson (1984) notes, “Without the common adversary of official academicism, the wide span of new aesthetic practices have little or no unity: their tension with the established or consecrated canons in front of them is constitutive of their definition as such” (p. 105).

Central to the discussion of the historical foundations of modern art is how such art came to be called “modernist” (Cottington, 2005). This discussion correlates with the “dynamic cultural, social, economic, and political changes in the Western world that have been experienced as ‘modernity’ for the last 150 years (Cottington, 2005, p. 2). Modern art first emerged in the 19th century as a challenge to widely held values regarding art, “aesthetic autonomy,” and to recognize the influence of novel visual media. However, the community that is accepted today as establishing the modern art movement did not emerge as a cohesive group until the 20th century (Cottington, 2005). The reason that 19th century artists began to move in the direction of modern art have a lot to do with the growth of capitalism in the Western world over the duration of that century and the constant infringement of “commercial values” on all facets of the cultural norms of the public at that time. This, in turn, caused many artists to look for a way out of the conventional art that represented those values (Cottington, 2005). As Cottington (2005) contends, “...painters such as Manet, found their very existence as members of a materialistic, status-seeking bourgeoisie problematic – their distaste for such values not only isolating them from existing social and artistic institutions but also generating a deeply felt sense of psychic alienation” (p. 4).

Many of the artists that made up the community of those responsible for the emergence of modern art were French, coming from Paris, which at the time was seen “as the cultural capital of Europe,” because it contained an unparalleled “cultural bureaucracy,” and numerous art schools. Ambitious artists and writers herded to the city of love for the chance to partake of this plethora of expression. Although many were unsuccessful, they sought other means of advancing their careers through group exhibitions and networking at small cafes in order to “promote, compare, and contest new ideas and practices, about which they wrote in a proliferating range of ephemeral little magazines” (Cottington, 2005, p. 4). By the time World War I broke out, there were about 200 of these magazines in circulation in Paris, containing critiques about the new, modern art they had created. These artists believed that art had a “public role to play” and that it had the capability of being transformed from mere entertainment, a role it has played in the Salons, to a type of art that was open to all (Cottington, 2005). The emergence of modern is not confined to Paris, in large cities in both Europe and the United States, communities of so-called “anti-academic artists” were emerging as a side effect “of the process of social and cultural ‘modernization’ in the advanced capitalist countries of the Western world” (Cottington, 2005, p. 20). By 1914, modern art communities existed in every large city “from New York to Moscow” and “Rome to Stockholm.” In fact, a book that was published in 1974 that comprised numerous listings of modern art exhibitions held throughout these cities between the years 1900 and 1916 took up two whole volumes (Cottington, 2005).

1.2 ABSTRACTION

Abstraction, as part of the modern art movement, has been called “the most dramatic and far-reaching development in the history of twentieth century art” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 217). A defining characteristic of abstract art is that it has no “representative form,” it includes “absolute composition (as in music)—composition which neither imitates nor suggests objective forms” (Cheney, 1939, p. 158). It has been called “the ideal” that underlies the modern art movement itself (Cheney,

1939). Although in Europe and the United States, there were artists that were attempting to discard the “realm of appearances in pursuit of absolute, pure form,” abstraction found a better grounding in Russia and the Netherlands (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 217). Here, abstract art embodied a new way of thinking. Abstract artists believed their art would not lose any of its “expressive power or meaning” simply because it was removed from “the tangible world” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 217). Rather, they believed by expressing “pure sensation,” they could develop “a universal visual language” with the power to surpass “mundane experience and place the viewer in touch with an alternative, ultimately spiritual world” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 217).

In Russia, Wassily Kandinsky’s homeland, it was not until the last two decades, with the termination of the Soviet Union, that scholarship on art from this country had emerged. Prior to this time, scholarship on Russian art was restricted and at times stifled. This, in turn, made it hard for Western scholars wanting access to “archival materials and works of art during the Cold War due to official policies of censorship and control of art that dated back to the government of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who, in 1932, decreed that Social Realism (naturalistic art that celebrated the worker)” was the only kind of type of “acceptable” art (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 222). As a result, art groups that had previously thrived in Russia were banned and paintings produced by many of the world’s greatest artists were put in storerooms, concealed and even destroyed. They could not even be lent to museums outside of Russia for exhibition (Arnason & Prather, 1998).

1.3 KANDINSKY- THE “FATHER” OF ABSTRACT ART

Wassily Kandinsky has been credited as being the “inventor” or “father” of abstract art (Webel, 2007; Southgate, 2004). Born in Moscow in 1866, Kandinsky’s artistic career did not begin until he was 30 (Webel, 2007). While a student at the University of Moscow, Kandinsky studied law and economics, but his interest in art was peaked after a few visits to Paris where he saw a French painting exhibit. As a result, at the age of 30, he turned down a position as a law professor in order to study painting (Aarnason

& Prather, 1998). In 1896, Kandinsky moved to Munich, Germany to study painting under a man named Franz von Stuck (Webel, 2007). In 1901, he created an artists' association called Phalanx and founded his own art school. He also began exhibiting his work in the "Berlin Secession," and by 1904, his works had been displayed at "the Paris Salon D'Automne and Exposition Nationale des Beaux-Arts" (Aarnason & Prather, 1998, p. 148). In 1904, Phalanx displayed the work of such prominent Neo-Impressionist artists as Cezanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). Kandinsky became the leader of a new art movement which was revolting against the "established Munich art movements," so in 1909, he formed "Neue Kunstler Vereinigung (NKV, New Artists Association)" with other artists such as Gabriele Munter and Alfred Kubin (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). NKV exhibited the work of Picasso, Rouault, Derain, and Braque (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). In 1911, NKV split, and with Munter and Marc, Kandinsky established "Der Blaue Reiter" (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). "Der Blaue Reiter" or "The Blue Rider" is the title of one of Kandinsky's paintings, "that became the manifesto of the southern German expressionist movement" (Fleming, 1955, p. 531). It was also the title of a book written by both Franz Marc and Kandinsky that duplicated paintings that had been exhibited in Munich in 1911 (Fleming, 1955). The book contained works of art produced by French fauves, Paul Klee, and articles on the subject of modern art (Fleming, 1955).

It was during this time of his life that Kandinsky began toying with the idea of nonobjective or abstract art, the beginning of which he traced back to 1908 (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). That year, Kandinsky realized that in order to truly express his emotions or what he referred to as the "hidden," he would have to completely abandon everything that fell within the realm of traditional art in favor of something nonrepresentational, which would be described as "pieces of expressions of personal feelings rather than as representations of objects in the world" (Webel, 2007; Greenberg, Landau, Martens, Pyszczyński, & Solomon, 2006). In 1896, Kandinsky had two profound experiences that impacted his life very deeply, the first was his encounter with one of Monet's *Haystacks* and the other was listening

to a presentation of Richard Wagner's opera "Lohengrin" (O'Donovan, 2011). For the remainder of his life, Kandinsky sought to create a kind of art "that would resemble music, which he considered the greatest and most abstract of the arts-'the best teacher,' he called it" (O'Donovan, 2011, para. 3). These experiences led Kandinsky to feel that he no longer needed to paint the "material object," later expressing, "From then on I looked at the art of ikons with different eyes; it meant that I had 'got eyes' for the abstract in art" (Selz, 1957, p. 129). According to Arnason & Prather (1998), Kandinsky "first sensed the dematerialization of the object in the paintings of Monet" (Arnason & (p. 148). To take this notion even further, Selz (1957) asserts that the "dematerialization" of Kandinsky's art was created due to the fact that he believed that the function of art was to convey "the spirit."

An account of exactly when, in 1908, the "invention" of abstract art took place appears in a first-hand account written by Kandinsky included in the work of Will Grohmann (1958), *Kandinsky: His Life and Work*. The account goes that upon returning to his studio after having been out sketching, Kandinsky noticed a piece of artwork that he was unable to recognize. He was unable to "discern in it no subject, no objects, nothing but patches of color" (Southgate, 2004, p. 1274). Kandinsky later realized that what he had been looking at was in fact his own painting that he had inadvertently placed on its side (Southgate, 2004). Kandinsky later recounted this experience saying:

It was the hour of approaching dusk. I came home with my paint box after making a study, still dreaming and wrapped up in the work I had completed, when suddenly I saw an indescribably beautiful picture drenched with an inner glowing. At first I hesitated, then I rushed toward this mysterious picture, of which I saw nothing but forms and colors, and whose content was incomprehensible. Immediately I found the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, leaning against the wall, standing on its side (Webel, 2006, p. 544-545, as cited in Grohmann, 1958).

This experience led Kandinsky to examine his belief that some kind of similarity existed between music and art and that if music could provoke emotion in an individual, then painting could do so as well (Southgate, 2004). Kandinsky illustrated this belief in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977) when he wrote, "...colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul" (p. 25). As expressed by Kandinsky himself, through his art, he sought to duplicate the "choir of colors which nature has so painfully thrust into my very soul" (Fleming, 1955, p. 532).

Kandinsky now believed that "the representation of nature was superfluous in his art" (Selz, 1957, p. 129). Thus, Kandinsky became the first "modern European artist to break through the representational barrier and carry painting into total abstraction," and, while other so-called non-objectivity innovators worked in a purely "Cubist-derived geometric mode," Kandinsky operated "in a painterly, improvisatory, Expressionist, biomorphic manner" (Aarnason & Prather, 1998, p. 149). Once painting abandons natural form, becoming entirely abstract, "the pure law of pictorial construction can be discovered. And then it will be found that pure painting is internally closely related to pure music or pure poetry" (Selz, 1957, p. 134). Because Kandinsky wanted his work to be linked with "an image free art form," he started to use titles for his paintings associated with music (Aarnason & Prather, 1998). Artworks that necessitated "an evenly sustained pitch of inner emotional uplift sometimes lasting for days," Kandinsky referred to as "compositions," and artworks that were impulsive and not as time consuming, such as sketches and watercolors, he called "improvisations" (Fleming, 1955, p. 532). He produced seven key artworks entitled "Composition," which he believed to be his most comprehensive "artistic statements," that communicated what he referred to as "inner necessity" or the artist's intuitive, emotional response to the world" (Aarnason & Prather, 1998, p. 149). In 1909, Kandinsky became more abstract while infusing his paintings with "cosmic significance by using apocalyptic and utopian motifs"

because he longed to create a new kind of art that he thought could “evoke a vision of a heavenly cosmic realm” (Long, 1980, p. ix-x)

In his autobiography, Kandinsky expressed that he experienced things such as “objects, events, and even music primarily in terms of color,” however, he did not visualize color as having physical or material attributes, but instead in terms of the emotional effect it could evoke (Selz, 1957, p. 128). Therefore, the elemental objects of painting, such as lines, colors, and the combination of the two, are capable of eliciting “emotional associations in the observer” because through the elimination of representational objects in painting, the “plastic elements” become the bearers of the message the artist was attempting to convey (Selz, 1957, p. 135). After 1912, Kandinsky produced very few works that could be categorized as “objective,” because his art was now entirely divorced from nature, and similar to music, “its meaning was now meant to be inherent in the work itself and independent of external objects” (Selz, 1957, p. 130). As Webel (2007) observed, “Kandinsky believed it was necessary to divorce completely his compositions from the ‘representational’ mode that had characterized Western art for centuries in order to let his ‘inner necessity’ to manifest itself in the play of bright color-forces” (p. 545).

Having been forced out of Germany due to World War I, Kandinsky returned to Russia in 1914. In the years following the “Russian Revolution,” the newly established Soviet government urged experimentation and new practices in the arts to go along with the notion of communism, so in 1918, Tatlin asked Kandinsky to become a part of “the Department of Visual Arts (IZO) of Narkompros (NKP, the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment) in Moscow” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 226). While there, Kandinsky aided in reorganizing “Russian provincial museums.” He stayed in Russia for another seven years, but left for good in 1921 to return to Germany (Arnason & Prather, 1998). In 1922, Kandinsky became part of the “Weimar Bauhaus,” a school founded by Walter Gropius which focused on architecture, design, and craftsmanship, where he became part of the faculty (Arnason & Prather,

1998; Lucie-Smith, 1986). He stayed with the Bauhaus until 1933 when the school was closed by the Nazi government and he moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine with his wife Nina (Arnason & Prather, 1998; “Kandinsky Biography,” n.d., para. 3). In 1937, fifty seven of Kandinsky’s artworks were seized by the Nazi regime during the “purge of ‘degenerate art’” (“Kandinsky Biography,” n.d., para 3). The seizure of Kandinsky’s pieces, along with those of other prominent artists such as Paul Klee, is symbolic of the intolerance of modern art at this time period. The “degenerate art” gallery was next to Haus der Kunst, where German art that had been sanctioned by the National Socialist Government was only display (Roskill, 1992). However negative this might have been at the time, it prompted interest in modern art in the United States. In 1935-36, Kandinsky’s art was included in several American exhibitions to include J.B. Neumann’s Art Circle in New York and California, a Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and later a traveling exhibition organized by an art dealer named Curt Valentin and Karl Nierendorf (Roskill, 1992).

Despite being primarily known for his painting, Kandinsky was also a writer, theorist, and printmaker (Southgate, 2004). He died in France on December 13, 1944, only a few days after having turned 78 years old, but today he is remembered as one of the “great pioneers of abstract painting” (Galenson, 2002; Southgate, 2004; “Kandinsky Biography,” n.d., para 3). Thus, in order to explore the assertion that modern art is not meaningless, it is necessary to use the great pioneer’s abstract paintings to show how, through aesthetic experience, Kandinsky’s paintings, as modern artworks, are full of rhetorical meaning. As Kandinsky himself has shown, people may express how they experience an artwork in different ways and as such, his or her expression may greatly differ from what the artist was intending to convey; however, “direct communication” can take place on a “visual level” and, “it is toward this level of communication that the art of Kandinsky and other expressionists was directed” (Selz, 1957, p. 136).

1.4 LINKING COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND ART

“Visual communication studies” is a fairly new branch in the discipline of communication studies.

This branch of the communication discipline has been gaining much more attention recently because of the fact that “visual modes of communication” are quickly becoming more dominant than the verbal (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). As such, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, scholars have begun to discuss the study of “communicative function and rhetorical power of images,” both of which have greatly expanded over the past 20 years (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 1002). According to Littlejohn and Foss (2009), what differentiates “visual communication studies” from other communication theories is what is being analyzed and due to the fact that “literally everything that can be seen can be analyzed and interpreted, the types of visual phenomena studied continue to expand” (p. 1002). New theories being developed in “visual communication studies” offer new ways of looking at the many methods in which “visual representations” communicate so that scholars in this area are delving deeper and deeper into how “images mean” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Much of the work that takes place under the umbrella of “visual communication studies” occurs in the area of “visual rhetoric.” The logic behind the concept of visual rhetoric lies in the fact that semioticians declared that there is a vast amount of various phenomena that can be considered symbolic and therefore, communicative. This in turn has led rhetoricians to assert that these same phenomena potentially have the power to “influence the beliefs, opinions, and/or behaviors of those who were exposed to them” so that, in a sense, they become rhetorical (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 1003). The work that occurs in visual rhetoric involves the critical analysis of a large variety of images by scrutinizing viewers’ responses and “by studying the ways that the images being analyzed appear to draw on the influences of other, often famous and iconic images” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 1004). This is where the link between communication and art lies for purposes of this study because viewers’ responses to Kandinsky’s art will be analyzed here for their communicative powers and/or function as

“famous or iconic” images that are literally know throughout the world, and in many cases, these images are analyzed by how they relate to each other.

1.5 STUDY OVERVIEW

Through the use of a rhetorical analysis method, I will examine five of Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract artworks to demonstrate that abstract, modern art can be interpreted, and as such, has meaning. I will argue that through these images, communication takes place between a viewer and the artwork itself, and that such communication results in meaning. By looking closely at Kandinsky’s artworks, many aspects of not only his life, but influences on his art become apparent, all of which can be interpreted, and indeed seen by a viewer of his artwork. Additionally, I will show that contrary to what Foss argues regarding the capability of an individual to interpret art is not dependent on a certain level of art training, but rather an appreciation for abstract art that allows for an aesthetic experience between artwork and viewer that can be gained through Bourdieu’s cultural capital.

Kandinsky’s artwork will serve as the central focus of analysis here due to the fact that he is considered the father of modern, abstract art (Webel, 2007; Southgate, 2004). Particularly, five of his artworks were chosen for analysis for the following reasons: their titles, which directly relate to Kandinsky’s beliefs regarding art and music, secondly, these paintings illustrate how Kandinsky expressed his “inner necessity,” and lastly, these works were created in the years following Kandinsky’s “invention” of abstract or nonobjective art. The artworks chosen for analysis are *Composition IV* (1911), *Composition VI* (1913), *Composition VIII* (1923), *Improvisation 31* (1913), and *Improvisation 30* (1913). I also discuss how Kandinsky’s production method varied with these paintings, and how this aspect relates to the meanings embedded in these paintings and Kandinsky’s beliefs regarding his art and its function. In chapter two, I discuss various studies that have been conducted in the realm of art and aesthetic experience and show how this study will fill a gap in the research that has been conducted in these two areas. I also discuss rhetorical criticism in reference to Sonja K. Foss and her research

conducted in visual rhetoric and how it relates to this study. In chapter three, I present my rhetorical framework and the method being used for analysis as well as the procedures followed for the administration and conclusion of this study. In chapter four, I conclude by observing how, using a rhetorical method developed by Foss, I was able to find meaning in Kandinsky's abstract art with the following questions guiding this study:

RQ1: Is abstract art capable of interpretation?

RQ2: If abstract art is capable of interpretation, then can meaning also be ascertained?

RQ3: What meanings emerge from Kandinsky's abstract paintings?

The first research question attempts to get at heart of this study, namely whether or not abstract art can be interpreted seeing as many scholars assert that its nonobjectivity prevents interpretation. The second research question assumes that abstract art can be interpreted and that as such, meaning can be ascertained so that the third and final research question can be answered. The last research question refers particularly to Kandinsky being the father of abstract art as well as to the fact that his paintings are nonobjective, which is the basis for the assertion that abstract art is meaningless, and therefore not capable of interpretation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The world of art is a topic that has been widely disregarded in the realm of communication research for the growth and conveyance of knowledge in the field (Lievrouw & Pope, 1994). As Lievrouw and Pope (1994) assert, “The art world has rarely been chosen as a context for studying the creation and communication of new ideas” (p. 374). In fact, there has not been significant research conducted in order to comprehend how an individual responds to a piece of artwork (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). What has been widely studied is aesthetic experience, and how it relates to the meaning or understanding an individual gains through it (Karson, 1980; Bauer, Fischmeister, Florian, Ledder, & Lengger, 2007; Redies, 2007; Krupinski, Locher, Mello-Thomas, & Nodine, 2007). As such, the purpose of this study is to explore how modern art, in particular the work of Wassily Kandinsky, has impacted aesthetic experience in order to explore the notion that modern art is full of meaning.

Despite the fact that aesthetic experience has been widely studied on its own, it has not been put into practice in regards to how an individual experiences this phenomenon as a result of a particular kind of art, in this case, abstract art (Karson, 1980; Bauer, Fischmeister, Florian, Ledder, & Lengger, 2007; Redies, 2007; Krupinski, Locher, Mello-Thomas, & Nodine, 2007). The very little body of work that does exist in the area of art and aesthetics has mainly been conducted by Sonja K. Foss (1993) with her analysis of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. In this article, Foss, a communication scholar at the University of Colorado at Denver, includes “visual images in the scope of rhetoric or communication,” so that she is able to analyze these images in terms of what kind of response they are capable of evoking (Foss, 1988, p. 11). Foss (1988) discusses “visual images” as types of rhetoric that try to affect others’ thoughts and behavior by means of “the strategic use of symbols” similar to the way “discursive rhetoric” does.

No model of aesthetic experience meant for the study of nonrepresentational art existed until 1980. This model emerged through Foss' work with a publication entitled *The Aesthetic Response to Nonrepresentational Art: A Suggested Model*. However, despite the fact that Foss' work has been in print since 1980, her model has not been studied or put into practice. Foss' (1980) model consists of three steps (1) the production of a reality or world by the art item, (2) "vitalization" of the generated reality by an audience and (3) the generation of some sort of "identification" between the audience and the artist to allow for the occurrence of "vitalization." The significance of this model for purposes of this study lies in the fact that in order for a person to be able to go through these steps to create meaning from nonrepresentational artworks, this person must have some specialized training in the art realm (Foss, 1980). As such, this assertion will effect who the participants in this study will be (as far as their art education is concerned), something that will be further explained in the method chapter.

One aspect of aesthetic experience that has been subjected to empirical research that includes finding meaning in modern art has to do with ambiguity. Performed in the realm of psychology, this research study concluded that some level of ambiguity is a significant factor of "aesthetic appreciation" and is actually "appreciable" (Jakesch & Leder, 2009). In fact, Jakesch and Leder (2009) found that uncertainty, when it comes in the form of ambiguity, might be a "defining feature of aesthetic experiences of modern art" (p. 2105). They refer to finding meaning and understanding in art as a large part of appreciating art and go on to assert that these "processes" can be "investigated by presenting artworks along with supplementary information such as interpretive titles or stylistic information" (Jakesch & Leder, 2009, p. 2106). Jakesch and Leder (2009) found that with nonrepresentational works of art, information of this kind is an essential precursor for understanding and "aesthetic appreciation." The most important part of the afore mentioned study revealed something that is quite important for my study, the fact that modern art allows individuals to have a "positive experience of ambiguity" in that the artworks used in the study that contained a fair amount of ambiguity were "most liked and were found to

be most interesting” (Jakesch & Leder, 2009, p. 2111). This has a great impact on what I am trying to accomplish with my study because if ambiguity is preferred in nonrepresentational artworks, such as Kandinsky’s, then an audience will find them interesting enough to be able to interpret them, and thereby, assign meaning to them.

There is no question that art does impact individuals; however, the kind of research that has been conducted in this area has been mostly empirical, and while this same topic has been studied under what encompasses critique, “the definitional perspectives of impact have focused on social impacts, and have marginalized the aesthetic, cultural, or intrinsic impacts of art” (White & Hede, 2008, p. 22). Thus, a plausible means to study the impact of Kandinsky’s abstract art on aesthetic experience is through rhetorical criticism, which has been recently expanded to include “non-discursive communication,” a term under which the non-representational art of Kandinsky would fall (Reid, 1990; Foss, 2005). At the forefront of the study of “non-discursive communication” is Foss. She asserts that works of art have both “rhetorical and aesthetic qualities.” To experience a work of art on a purely aesthetic level means to observe what Foss (1988) calls the “sensory elements of the object,” which include the “enjoyment of its colors or the valuing of its texture” (p. 11). When a viewer of a visual image assigns meaning to the “sensory elements,” so that they come to reference “images, emotions, and ideas beyond themselves, the response has become a rhetorical one” (Foss, 1988, p. 11). While Foss is not the only one to have conducted research on visual imagery utilizing rhetorical methods, her studies are “methodologically unique” (Fisher & Mullen, 2004). Other studies conducted using visual rhetoric have been conducted in analyzing advertisements (Fisher & Mullen, 2004), political cartoons (Morris, 1993), and online media (Kahn, Peters, & Landow, 1995).

2.1 MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

Scholars such as Foss that conduct research in rhetorical criticism perform interpretive analysis, which is “scholarship concerned with meaning” (Griffin, 2003, p. 10). Paul Martin Lester (2006) argues

that, "...almost any action, object, or image will mean something to someone somewhere" (p. 55). Thus, Kandinsky's paintings, as images, will also "mean something to someone somewhere" as well. However, meaning is a complex concept. Lester (2006) asserts that almost any image has something to say because "every picture created has some meaning to communicate," but the question then becomes one of pinpointing where meaning lies in a piece of art (p. 112). Danto (2000) asserts that due to the fact that artworks are "about something," they must "have a content or meaning," hence, meaning is the artwork's content. This is in opposition to where Hegel argues meaning lies, outside the work of art, as is the case with what he calls "symbolic art," where meaning is external (Danto, 2000). Danto (2000) goes on to assert that the purpose of art criticism is to make meaning "explicit," which is what I am attempting to accomplish with this study. However, there are scholars who argue that "the basic carrier of meaning is culture, which is indeed just shared meaning," so that art, as part of culture, "conforms to this notion," and that without shared meaning, there really is no meaning at all (Bohm, 1989, p. 10). As Lester (2000) asserts, the meaning that an individual obtains from a symbol, such as elements in a painting, "is highly personalized and often distinct" (p. 58). Contrary to such notions, I will argue that meaning can exist even when it is not shared because art has no fixed meaning and even though the meaning of art can be subjective, especially with abstract art, there still exists the possibility that two people can find shared meaning in a painting, a notion that will be further explored in chapter five. Indeed, as Carpenter (2005) contends, "...interpretations of works of art can be individual or communal endeavors" (p. 90).

There is no one "true meaning or interpretation" that can be assigned to the role that an art object plays as a "rhetorical symbol" (Foss, 1988, p. 11). The meaning that a viewer assigns to an art object does stand for "some fixed referent," but rather, meaning develops out of and needs "a viewer's creation of an interpretation" (Foss, 1988, p.11). Various meanings can be assigned to an art object by different viewers as a consequence of the varying experiences that these viewers transport to the artwork.

Although it is the viewer's role to assign meaning to an art object, it does mean that the viewer can assign just any meaning that he/she feels like because the meaning is restricted by the art object itself (Foss, 1988). As Foss (1988) argues, "the physical characteristics render one rhetorical interpretation more likely to occur than another" (p. 12).

2.2 "AGAINST INTERPRETATION"

Although scholars such as Foss and Lester assert that visual images, such as art, can be interpreted, there are scholars who argue otherwise. One of the foremost scholars, who argues that to interpret images, literature, film, etc. would "impoverish" or "deplete the world-in order to set up a shadow of meanings," is Susan Sontag (1966) with her essay *Against Interpretation*. Sontag (1966) believes that "interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" (p. 7). Sontag (1966) defines interpretation, in the art context, as picking out "a set of elements" from the whole of the painting and basically assigning meaning to those elements. She argues that interpretation presumes that there is an inconsistency "between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers," and that interpretation attempts to settle the inconsistency (Sontag, 1966). However, for Sontag (1966) this kind of interpretation was not harmful to the text because the text was only being interpreted in order to preserve it, and therefore, its interpretation was based on "a sense" that was already present. The kind of interpretation that Sontag (1966) says is harmful is the modern form, which she contends, "excavates, destroys" and "digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one" (p. 7).

One of the basic arguments that Sontag (1966) advances is that "real art" is capable of making us "nervous," and indeed, abstract art has done exactly that, which is why for so many years it was rebuked, and in some instances, remains highly misunderstood in that it rejects the so-called reality of traditional art. In this context, it seems as though Sontag would consider abstract art "real art," but then what is one to do with it? For Sontag (1966), the answer to that question is easy, just leave it alone, and enjoy it for what it is, but she asserts that abstract art escapes interpretation because it is without content.

It is here where my argument regarding abstract art eludes Sontag; why bother with abstract art if it is so abstract that it cannot be interpreted? This is exactly what this study will attempt to answer. As Sontag (1966) contends, the only kind of “commentary on the arts” that she considers desirable is one that “dissolves considerations of content into those of form,” and if, as Sontag asserts, abstract art is devoid of content, then it can and shall be interpreted according to its form (p. 12). Additionally, since Sontag (1966) asserts that the only acceptable form of criticism is the kind that supplies “a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art,” then, as a Kandinsky art lover, this is exactly what I will do.

2.3 VISUAL RHETORIC: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A new form of rhetorical criticism has emerged which allows for the examination of visual objects or “visual imagery,” in the rhetorical realm, something that Foss (2005) calls “visual rhetoric.” As Foss argues, “Current definitions of rhetoric continue to support the expansion of rhetorical study beyond its traditional concern for verbal texts” (2005, p. 14). She goes on to state that rhetoricians such as Kenneth Burke have enhanced this notion of “visual rhetoric” by calling for the analysis of “human symbol systems,” of which he considers painting a part (Foss, 2005). He believed that through communication, art, politics, philosophy and psychology united, enough so that he wrote about it in one of his works entitled *Permanence* (Wolin, 2001). Through Burke’s work, it seems that for Wolin (2001), rhetoric becomes a part of aesthetics by means of its ties to criticism. In addition, Foss contends that the “visual rhetoric” is the “image,” “tangible evidence, or “product of the creative act, such as a painting” that is the result of rhetors using these “visual symbols for the purpose of communicating” (2005, p. 143). Indeed, if art can be viewed as “equipment for living,” and thereby able to influence an individual’s expectations, “then art is to a great degree a matter of rhetoric” (Wolin, 2001).

Not every visual item can be considered to be “visual rhetoric.” What makes an object a “communicative artifact,” or a symbol that is communicative, and therefore able to be examined by

rhetoric, are three characteristics: (1) a symbolic image, (2) it must entail “human intervention,” or “human action either in the process of creation or in the process if interpretation,” and (3) must be shown to an audience so that it can communicate with that audience (Foss, 2005, p. 144). In this sense, Foss has expanded “visual rhetoric” to encompass any and every painting produced by Wassily Kandinsky, thereby opening up the possibility of subjecting his paintings to rhetorical examination.

What is central in the “evaluation of imagery from a rhetorical perspective” is not the function that the one who produced the image intended, but instead “the action that the image communicates, as named by the critic” (Foss, 1994, p. 216). This means that images, such as paintings, need to be interpreted (Foss, 1994). As such, Foss says that there are three types of judgments that make up the evaluation of an image in terms of rhetoric: (1) the discovery of a function that the visual object communicates, which can only be done via analysis of the object, (2) an analysis of how proficient that function is communicated and the backing that exists within the image for the function, and (3) the examination of the function (Foss, 1994). Within these three judgments are embedded ways of accomplishing each. For the discovery of a function within an image, Foss (1994) says that the analyst or viewer must support the function that they find in an image, and multiple functions can also emerge from the same image. For the second type of judgment, the viewer must examine the “various stylistic and substantive dimensions of the image,” which includes things like the subject matter, materials used to create the image, colors, context, etc. (Foss, 1994). All these things are analyzed because of the input that each provides to the communication of the function, and they may either reinforce or detract from the function (Foss, 1994). In addition, Foss (1994) also asserts that a viewer may also make judgments about the communication of an image by comparing it to similar images “to highlight available options” involved in the communication of the function. Lastly, when it comes to the third judgment, the examination of the function, Foss (1994) says that this is accomplished according to the viewer’s reasons for wanting to examine the image, which may include interest.

The meaning present in the modern art of Wassily Kandinsky can be discovered through aesthetic experience; however, in order for a viewer to be able to assign meaning to non-representational works of art, “methods of education about art that stress ways of seeing and a basic knowledge of the variety of choices available to artists,” is necessary (Foss, 1980). This goes along with what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) proposes in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. In this book, Bourdieu (1984) puts forth what he calls “aesthetic disposition,” or the ability to judge, not only a work of art, but also everything in the world, which Bourdieu believes not every human is naturally capable of doing. For Bourdieu, only those individuals who are born into what he calls the “socially recognizable” are able to naturally make judgments regarding anything that has to do with culture, whether it be art, literature, painting, or music because this “aesthetic disposition” is an indicator of someone with class, namely social class. Members of the higher social classes are endowed with “aesthetic disposition” because judgments made about anything having to do with culture are attained through upbringing and education. Because members of the lower social classes are not brought up or do not have access to the same level of education as those in the higher social classes, they lack “aesthetic disposition.” This is not to say that anyone born into anything less than the highest level of the class defined hierarchical branch cannot make these sorts of judgments, it simply means that they cannot naturally do so without attaining the ability to do so by means of what Bourdieu (1984) calls “cultural capital.” “Cultural capital” is basically the education required to be able to make judgments regarding anything in realm of aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984). It has to do with the meanings and pleasures that the lower social classes use to express themselves and advance their interests. However, Bourdieu (1984) also argues that through formal education, rather than “direct cultural action,” an enduring “aesthetic disposition” can be extended across all social classes.

What Foss and Bourdieu have in common along the lines of education or “cultural capital” is that both scholars argue that a certain type of education is needed in order to be able to have the capacity to

interpret art. For Foss (1980), due to the fact that abstract art presents the viewer with a “world that is puzzling, foreign and bewildering,” because it is so nonrepresentational, viewers need “some degree of familiarity with particular works, styles, and schools” and in some cases, education that emphasizes “ways of seeing” in order to be able to understand abstract art (p. 47). Additionally, Foss (1980) argues that there are individuals who are able to better understand abstract art because they identify with the “artist’s world” on a deeper level, which is a result of, among other things, “cultural background and knowledge of art.” This is similar to Bourdieu’s arguments about the bourgeoisie or higher classes he discusses in that because they are born into a higher social class and have “a more general familiarity with the things of taste and culture,” which thereby created in them “aesthetic disposition” (Lane, 2000, p. 52). Therefore, for both scholars, although certain people may not possess the innate ability to appreciate or interpret art, with some level of education about art and/or culture, these individuals can acquire “aesthetic disposition.” These assertions put forth by Foss and Bourdieu will have an impact on this study in terms of who the students will be and what their level of education consists of.

Thus, for purposes of this study, modern art will be defined as art that deviates “from the naturalistic imitation of realistic forms in the external world,” (Greenberg, Landau, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2006, p. 880). As an example of this definition, the authors cite the artwork of Wassily Kandinsky saying that it “eschews representational or ‘imitative’ form in favor of increasing abstraction potential” (Greenberg et al., 2006, p. 880). Aesthetic experience will be defined as an encounter between a person and a piece of art that leads to the opportunity to examine interaction between them (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). Indeed, as Foss (1980) so eloquently stated, “it [the meaning of an art object] grows out of social interaction that takes place between the artist and the viewer by means of the created work. The result is communication between the artist and the viewer or an aesthetic experience” (p. 45).

2.4 VISUAL ARGUMENTATION

Visual images can serve as arguments because viewers develop claims or contentions based on them (Foss, 1992). Visual arguments are no different from verbal ones because in order for visual arguments to differ from verbal ones, it would be necessitate that they be non-propositional. With paintings, sufficient information must be provided so that an “unambiguous verbal reconstruction of the propositions” can occur so that “combining that with contextual information, it is possible to reconstruct a plausible premise-and-conclusion combination” (Anthony, 1996, p. 12-13). However, Anthony (1996) asserts that while visual arguments are present in art, they should not be combined with “visual assertions which are expressed without argument” because he argues that such assertions can only be found in certain “dramatic works of art” (p. 9). Making this argument, Anthony cites various depictions of the Last Judgment that lie above the doorways of many “Gothic cathedral.” He contends that these images are unproblematic in expressing both unexpressed assumptions and implied conclusions “in the context of the times” (Anthony, 1996). However, Anthony is discussing representational art here, not abstract art, which is nonobjective, and therefore leads to many different assumptions and conclusions about its meaning. This refers back to what Foss (1988) has argued regarding fixed meanings to be found in art in that the meaning is limited by the art object itself. Indeed, as Anthony (1996) argues, in some paintings, there is no context that would allow “anything more than speculation about a range of possibilities,” but also states that there is nothing that actually prevents a painting from communicating an argument as long as it satisfies “the condition that we are able to identify its premise(s) and its intended conclusion (whether expressed or not)” (p. 8). As an example of this contention, Anthony (1996) cites Groarke’s interpretation of *The Death of Marat* saying that his interpretation is a successful one because he identifies “the propositions expressed or implied visually and their logical roles in the argument” (p. 8). By premises, Anthony (1996) means reasons, evidence or grounds. Thus, along these same lines of argument, arguments can successfully be made about Kandinsky’s artwork as long as the propositions and their proper roles in the argument being made are articulated. This very act will be

accomplished in the analysis portion of this study using evidence from Kandinsky's life, his writings, and interpretations from art critics and scholars.

A study that was recently conducted in the realm of visual argumentation and art by Margaret LaWare (1998) found that it is important to analyze "...visual arguments in context, particularly when pictures serve geographically localized and culturally specific concerns and needs" (p. 3). LaWare (1998) came to this conclusion by examining murals painted on a building, Casa Atzlan, in a Mexican American neighborhood in Chicago. She found that "visual images can make a particular argument about a community, its origins, its sources of power and its collective identity" (LaWare, 1998, p. 13). Her study places particular emphasis on taking into account "historical and cultural contexts" in examining the "function of visual arguments" (LaWare, 1998, p. 13). In a similar manner, when it comes to making arguments about Kandinsky's art (visual images), I take into account historical contexts (i.e. Kandinsky's life) and cultural contexts (i.e. the community climate at the time he produced these paintings) in order to formulate valid visual arguments. However, I also argue that, even though I will be take both types of contexts into consideration, the meaning that is embedded in these paintings transcends the time in which they were painted so that we (myself, art critics, students, etc.) today, are able to interpret them.

In examining the many texts that exist in the realm of research and/or analysis regarding Wassily Kandinsky and his paintings, it is apparent that an important gap exists. This gap is the examination of how Kandinsky's abstract paintings impact aesthetic experience, which this study attempts to accomplish. To date, much of what has been examined regarding Kandinsky and his style have traditionally focused on his contribution to the art world, his writings on art, and/or the creation of abstract art, which has been attributed to Kandinsky by many art historians (Webel, 2007; Southgate, 2004; Pickstone, 2006). In addition, while aesthetic experience has been widely studied on its own, it

has not been put into practice in regards to how an individual experiences these phenomena as a result of a particular kind of art, in this case, Kandinsky's nonrepresentational modern, abstract art (Foss, 1980).

Chapter 3

Method

3.1 ARTIFACTS

For this study, I utilized five of Wassily Kandinsky's artworks and their titles that were composed between 1911 and 1923, all of which were produced immediately following his invention of abstract art in 1908 in order to demonstrate how his nonrepresentational pieces impact aesthetic experience. These paintings in particular were utilized because as Kandinsky believed that some form of similarity existed between music and art and accordingly if music could evoke emotion in an individual, so could art, he produced a string of artworks with this in mind, having reached this realization only after inventing abstract art (Southgate, 2004). To be able to find meaning in Kandinsky's paintings through aesthetic experience, I used a methodology created by Foss (1992), called "message formulation from images," in conjunction with photo elicitation.

3.2 MESSAGE FORMULATION FROM IMAGES

"Message formulation from images" is comprised of three steps that are designed to allow an individual to form a message from an image allowing for them to then assign meaning to it (Foss, 1992). In addition, "message formulation from images" can be applied to a number of images including "architecture, interior design, furniture, paintings, sculpture, dress, record album covers, videos, films, and advertising from magazines and television" (Foss, 1992, p. 314). The first step is called "identification of presented elements," and it involves "the naming and sorting of the basic physical features of the visual image" (Foss, 1992). During this step, individuals identify the physical elements of the image that include "line, texture, rhythm, color, point, camera angle, lighting, architectural embellishments, interior furnishings, and accompanying verbal text" (Foss, 1992, p. 315). The second step is called "processing of elements," and it involves how the spectator goes from the elements of the image to forming a message. It is made up of two parts, the "identification and organization of the

suggested elements” (Foss, 1992, p. 315). The “identification of the suggested elements” is accomplished by formulating the “concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions suggested by the presented elements identified,” and the “organization of the suggested elements” the spectator tries to spot “interactions among the various suggested elements-how they relate to each other, how they can be grouped, and the tensions among them” (Foss, 1992, p. 315). The last step is called “formulation of the message,” and this involves the spectator coming up with a message, “assertion” or “thesis” for the image that is based upon the “categories or organizational schema developed for the suggested elements in the previous step (Foss, 1992, p. 316).

3.3 PHOTO ELICITATION

The way in which the students were presented with the images is where photo elicitation comes into play. Photo elicitation is a frequently used technique, especially in field research that involves “using one or more images (photos but also videos, paintings or any other type of visual representation) in an interview and asking informants to comment on them” (Bignante, 2010, para. 1). Although the majority of elicitation studies involve using photographs, “there is no reason studies cannot be done with paintings, cartoons, public displays such as graffiti or advertising billboards or virtually any visual image” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). What makes this technique unique is that the focus is not so much placed on the images being presented, but rather how individuals respond to the images, “attributing social and personal meanings and values” (Bignante, 2010, para. 1).

With photo elicitation, the researcher accepts the fact that the visual object being used, the various meanings given to them, the responses or emotions they evoke in the viewer, “and the information they elicit generate insights that do not necessarily or exclusively correspond to those obtained in verbal inquiry” (Bignante, 2010, para. 2). As Roland Barthes (1981) contends, images possess “polysemic” aspects, such as the fact that they can have numerous meanings and/or interpretations, so that, in a sense, they are like hidden messages waiting to be interpreted by the interviewee. Therefore, every

interpretation represents a description “of the specific methods through which we observe and experience the world, mediated by social and cultural institutions,” so that the very activity of observing is directly linked to the way we think, our imagination, memory of things in the past, and our capability of putting these things together (Bignante, 2010).

In the past, photo elicitation studies have been conducted in the following areas: “social organization/social class, community, identity and culture” (Harper, 2002, p. 16). However, to date, there has been one study that has used photo elicitation in the art context (Harper, 2002). The study, conducted by Peter Cowan, focused on art that Latinos painted on cars. It used photo elicitation interviews to scrutinize “the intersections of age, ethnicity, power and artistic practice” (Harper, 2002, p. 24). The participants in that particular study were interviewed using “photographs of their art texts rather than the texts themselves” (Harper, 2002, p. 24). Following this approach, I used photographs or prints of the original images or paintings produced by Kandinsky.

3.4 STUDY APPROACH: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND INSTRUMENTATION EXPLANATION

The participants for this study were approximately 118 university students in varying age levels as well as various majors. They were recruited according to both Foss’(1980) and Bourdieu’s (1984) assertion that a certain level of art training or in Bourdieu’s case, education, is required in order for an individual to be able to both appreciate art (Bourdieu) and interpret art (Foss). As such, I administered my study to two art appreciation classes, which provided requisite art training for art interpretation, and a communication course, comprised of students from varying majors. Some of the students had more art training than others because they were art majors. The reasoning behind selecting these students is also due to the fact that I was interesting in putting Bourdieu’s and Foss’ assertions to the test. I wanted to see if art training or lack thereof would play a factor in an individual’s capability to interpret art. The results of this exploration will be explained the conclusion portion of this study.

In order to be able to administer my study, I had to obtain approval from the UTEP Institutional Review Board, which I received, by providing them with my study rationale as well as my instrument, a questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed with very open-ended questions because I wanted to get as much information from the students as possible. There were also a few screening questions regarding major, age, classification, and whether or not the student had taken either an art appreciation or related class. These questions were aimed at obtaining information pertinent to Bourdieu's and Foss' assertions. The other questions on the questionnaire related to how the students would define abstract art, their interpretation of the painting they were being presented with, and whether they liked or disliked the painting. The question regarding how the students would define abstract art again corresponds to Bourdieu's and Foss' contentions because if a particular student lacked art training or cultural capital, he/she might not be able to define what abstract art is. The last question, pertaining to whether or not the students liked the paintings they were presented with, corresponds to a study that was discussed in the literature review of this study regarding art and ambiguity. I wanted to see whether the fact that the paintings are nonobjective, and therefore ambiguous, had any effect on the students' feelings of like or dislike toward the paintings. Please see the Appendix to view the instrument used for this study.

The students were presented with five photographs of nonobjective artworks produced by Kandinsky chosen for both their musical titles as well as their production periods via a large projection screen, adhering to the notions of photo elicitation. They were then asked to comment on the paintings according to questions they were presented with via a questionnaire, the rationale for which is explained above. Consent for participation in the study was also obtained through an informed consent form they were asked to read and sign. The consent form, approved by the IRB, explained what the study was, and any risks that were associated with the study, which there were none expressed, so participation was completely voluntary.

Chapter 4

Analysis

Wassily Kandinsky was convinced that a spiritual crisis plagued the people of his time. He once wrote, “The nightmare of materialism...[has turned life into an evil, senseless game” going on to express that Western culture, “awakening after years of materialism [is] infected with the despair born of unbelief, of lack purpose and aim” (O’Donovan, 2011, para. 1, as cited in Kandinsky, 1977). At the time that Kandinsky lived, he believed “religion, science and morality” were not sufficiently answering deep religious questions, so people had started looking for “inner knowledge” (O’Donovan, 2011; DÜchting , 2008). In response to this spiritual crisis, Kandinsky believed that a reconnection with the spiritual was possible via the arts, namely literature, music, and art because he felt that these were “...the most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt” (O’Donovan, 2011, para. 2, as cited in Kandinsky, 1977). I will argue that this way of thinking is ubiquitous through Kandinsky’s abstract art in the following section of this study, and that these beliefs underlie almost every painting he produced after 1908, the year he discovered abstract art. As Roskill (1992) wrote in his book *Klee, Kandinsky and the Thought of Their Time*, Kandinsky’s paintings depicted “...biblical themes of creation, resurrection and apocalypse, saints and riders, and subjects of battle and conflict in generalized landscape settings, which in turn became the basis of his first abstract works” (p. 39). Such themes were depicted in Kandinsky’s paintings because he believed that “only a purifying struggle [apocalypse] could eliminate the old material culture and create room for the new ‘spiritual realm’” (DÜchting , 2008, p. 32). The reason Kandinsky chose to depict these things through abstract images is because of his conviction that “residual images could be a powerful means of communicating cosmological ideas” (Long, 1980, p. 42). By making the viewer struggle to make sense of an artwork, the work would help he/she obtain “higher knowledge” (Long, 1980). Kandinsky even developed a “stylistic device” in order

to ensure that the apocalyptic images in his paintings would have “resonant levels of meaning to many people” (Long, 1980, p. 41).

4.1 MESSAGE FORMULATION FROM IMAGES

“Message formulation from images,” as developed by Foss (1992), was used to illustrate how viewers move from developing various assertions based on a specific painting by Kandinsky to actually assigning meaning to that painting to show that nonobjective/abstract, modern art has meaning. The first step of this method, “identification of presented elements,” as well as the first part of the second step, the “identification of suggested elements,” were performed by the participants in the present study via a questionnaire. A total of three university level classes were presented with a questionnaire pertaining to five nonobjective paintings produced by Kandinsky. The paintings utilized for the present study are: *Composition IV* (1911), *Composition VI* (1913), *Composition VIII* (1923), *Improvisation 31* (1913), and *Improvisation 30* (1913).

Modern, Abstract Art Defined

First and foremost, it is necessary to explore how the students defined abstract art, for abstract art is the very lifeblood of this study. Below is an overview of how the students defined abstract art. The definitions were selected based upon their frequency and adherence to the definition of modern, abstract art used for this study. For purposes of this study, modern art was defined as art that deviates “from the naturalistic imitation of realistic forms in the external world,” with special emphasis being placed on Kandinsky because his art “eschews representational or ‘imitative’ form in favor of increasing abstraction potential” (Greenberg et al., 2006, p. 880).

Students that had either taken an art class, were taking an art class, or had some type of art related training defined abstract art as “nonrepresentational, not referring to anything specific, distorted, expressing emotions through various shapes and colors, having meaning, but the meaning varies according to the individual.” Students of mixed majors that had no specialized art training defined

abstract art as “nonobjective art that can be interpreted by a viewer in several ways through colors, shapes and forms and mostly corresponds to something that an artist is trying to show.” For the most part, all the students, whether they had art related training or not, defined abstract art in a very similar manner, and were able to pinpoint two elements of its scholarly definition that has great impact for this study, namely that abstract art is nonrepresentational and that it has meaning. However, the students of mixed majors with no specialized art training failed to express one important element of abstract art that is important for this study, the fact that it expresses emotion. This is important for this study because Kandinsky felt that his art expressed his hidden, inner emotions. Additionally, though these same students did not mention this crucial aspect of abstract art, they did mention that abstract art corresponds to something that the artist is trying to convey, which is something that the students with specialized art training failed to express in their definition. To illustrate this point, I offer some corresponding student responses such as “Artist’s work done with the purpose of represent[ing] a feeling, situation, etc.” and “A collage of drawn images from different feelings and thoughts of the artist’s mind.” What these facts reveal will be further explored in the conclusion portion of this study, as they relate to assertions purported by both Foss and Bourdieu.

Step 1: Identification of Presented Elements

During the “identification of presented elements” step of the method being used here, the students recorded the “physical features” of all five of Kandinsky’s paintings they were presented with. The students were presented with prints of the original paintings as well as the titles of the paintings, which in this case would be the “accompanying verbal text.” The features identified by the students are listed below according to the specific paintings they viewed:

1. *Improvisation 30*: battlefield, war, cannon, night time, revolution, screaming face, explosion of color, city covered in smoke and fire, gunfire, flames, hills, buildings, explosions, crazy, chaotic,

unorganized, canyon, fence, tiger, wooden wagon, houses, people, working farmer, farm, dirty, cart, orange colors, dark tones, and musical.

2. *Composition VI*: faces, arms, hands, shapes, dark colors, loud and quiet colors, raging sea in a violent storm, ships being tossed, waves, scattered sailors, animal, explosions, chaotic, man trying to survive, field of color, scratched, distorted, mind, straight and curved lines, activity, dark colors form a circle around light colors, flowing lines, cheerful, energetic, music, high and low figures, loud, vibrant, angry man's face, pelican, whale, dolphin, red, yellow, guitars, small hands trying to play guitars, birds, water, musical instruments, cellos, harps, stripes, guitar strings, string ensemble, tunnel, people being moved by music, collision, fighting, turtle's eye and mouth, cage, big crowd, concert, forest, people having fun at a party, dancing, and an eagle
3. *Composition VIII*: perfect shapes, simple structures, soft colors, something musical playing in the sky, basic shapes, high class city, lines, organized, house, building, landscape, machine exploding, 80s décor, space, technology, smooth, angles, circles, figures of math, triangles, parallel and perpendicular lines, pool table, geometrical, ordered, sharp edges, everything points to the center, precise, straight lines, paintbrushes, bright colors, skyscrapers, planes, moon, sun, stars, clouds, birds, clouds, planets, sunset, mountains, distant road, city, artist's color palette, mechanical, child's drawing, numbers, retro, made on a computer, stages of a day, the environment, buildings, and primary colors
4. *Composition IV*: fictional place, lady in the dance world, buildings with streets and cars driving through, sunshine, library, school, books, landscape (warped and colorful), the human body, person screaming, human walking the earth, shapes, mountain range, landscape (with roads, mountains, rainbow, sunset), polluted city, separated into two parts, landmarks, someone

traveling, summer day, dark lines, broad daylight, man facing an audience, arms in a flexed position, desert, two arms holding a book, and childish

5. *Improvisation 31*: country, table, ships, animal shapes, island, beach, trees, water, boat on water, shoe, pond, person drowning, kids flying kites, boat on a lake on a summer day, three ships going through a canal, sea life, hot and sunny day, fish, garden, spring, blob of color, repetitive, falling items, junkyard, a messy room, lots of yellow, red and blue, cluttered, frazzled, kitchen table with someone sitting at it, hands, fingers, bugs, food at a dinner table, sidewalk full of trash, watermelon, crow, killer whale, sunset, rainbow, black lines, and chaotic

Step 2: Processing of Elements

This step is comprised of two parts, “identification of the suggested elements,” and the “organization of the suggested elements.” This step is what the viewer uses to progress from the “presented elements of the image to the formulation of its message” (Foss, 1992, p. 315). The first part of this step, “identification of the suggested elements,” was performed by the students. From their responses, several major themes emerged, which in turn, correspond to the overall meaning of the paintings used for this study. The themes that emerged are listed below by painting, while the discussion of the meanings that these themes convey will be reserved for step three of the methodology. This part, “the organization of the suggested elements” involves the viewer grouping the “suggested elements” from step one, thus the creation of themes (Foss, 1992). I grouped the responses into themes.

Themes

Improvisation 30: war, negative feelings, chaos, and city vs. farm life

Composition VI: movement and music/instruments

Composition VIII: geometrical/mathematical and environment

Composition IV: nature/surroundings and opposing emotions

Improvisation 31: unorganized, sea life, and food or kitchen

Step 3: Formulation of the Message

In this step, meaning comes into play. The meaning or message that has been developed based on the themes created in step two is conveyed in the following paragraphs as categorized by the painting that the message refers to.

Improvisation 30



Figure 1 Improvisation 30

For *Improvisation 30*, the suggested elements were grouped into four different themes corresponding to the painting. The first theme, containing the most widely recognized elements, is war. This theme was formulated based on such suggested elements as, “cannon, smoke, gunfire, screaming face, revolution,” etc. This theme is in direct correlation with the meaning of the painting that I, as well as art critics suggest, basically that *Improvisation 30* reveals the influence that impending war had on Kandinsky at the time the painting was produced, 1913. At this time of his life, Kandinsky was living in Munich, Germany, and World War I was just around the corner. A confirmation of this contention

appears in a letter that Kandinsky wrote to the eventual purchaser, Arthur Jerome Eddy “The presence of cannons...could probably be explained by the constant war talk going on throughout the year” (The Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.). In this same letter, Kandinsky also professes that he did not intend to provide a representation of war, yet it is clear that the war theme is what stood out to the participants of this study. As such, the meaning of this painting could be seen as the effect(s) that war has or can have on people and the consequences of such an occurrence. This interpretation is further solidified by the fact that in the aftermath of World War I, after having married Nina Andreevskaya in 1917, Russia “expropriated the apartment building Kandinsky had inherited,” Kandinsky’s family “went cold and hungry,” and his only child, a son, died at 2 years of age (O’Donovan, 2011, para. 10). These sad events illustrate the effects that war can have on an individual, which may very well have translated into Kandinsky’s subsequent paintings.

This interpretation is also supported by other suggested elements such as, “screaming face, flames, explosions, and city covered in smoke and fire.” Consequences of war include people with screaming faces because they are scared and/or in pain, and a city covered in flames, smoke and fire as a result of explosions. This interpretation is further supported by an article from The Art Institute of Chicago (n.d.), which states that there is a crowd in the lower left part of the painting and a tower and a couple of cannons in the lower right part. Taking into account the suggested elements the students identified, as well as the elements stated above, the crowd can be interpreted as people in a city, the cannons can represent smoke, fire and flames, and the tower, with its odd position in the painting, as if leaning to the right, can be interpreted as part of a city that is falling or crumbling due to war. This interpretation is reinforced by an article from the British museum Tate Modern (2006), which states that the paintings Kandinsky produced right before World War I, “...convey a dramatic sense of a world on the verge of destruction. It was a time of enormous upheaval, with the old social order on the verge of collapse in his native Russia.”

The second and third themes that emerged from this painting go hand in hand with the interpretation of war as explored above. These themes, negative feelings and chaos, are the result of war. The theme of negative feelings is the result of “suggested elements” like “discomfort, strange, dark, confusion, weird, and turmoil.” If a town or city is involved in a war, with the conflict taking place right at its door step, people are likely to experience these emotions, along with a feeling of chaos because they are literally watching their homes fall down around them, people dying, bombs exploding, etc., things likely to result in pure and utter chaos. War was indeed a big part of Kandinsky’s life, first World War I, which caused him to leave Germany in 1914 to return to Moscow. Then World War II followed, with the Nazis seizing and destroying several of Kandinsky’s works during the exhibition of “Degenerate Art” in the 1930s and the closing of the Bauhaus, where Kandinsky had been teaching at the time. Such occurrences would likely cause not only negative feelings, but chaos in one’s life, both of which seem to be apparent in Kandinsky’s art, especially in this particular painting.

The last theme that emerged from *Improvisation 30*, is city vs. farm life. This theme emerged as a result of suggested elements such as, “wagon, cart, hills, buildings, canyon, fence, farm, houses, people, working farmer, dirty, and urban vs. rural.” Elements that gave the impression of war in the first theme serve a dual purpose in this theme. For instance, the cannons in the painting can also represent wagons, the people in the painting can also invoke the image of a farmer, and the tower in the painting can also be representative of buildings and or houses. For many of the students, it seemed as though the painting represented two different aspects of life, with comments such as, “urban vs. rural” and “people moving from the wild to civilizations like cities.” As stated above, the image of a city in ruins or crumbling was expressed with the tower, but that same image can also be translated into a dirty city so that the two halves of the painting come to represent city vs. farm life.

This interpretation of the painting, although not one advocated by art critics and/or art scholars, is certainly a plausible one given Kandinsky’s personal life. Although this painting was produced in

1913, four years after the time that Kandinsky lived in the Bavarian village of Murnau with Gabriele Münter, it can certainly be argued that this time of his life could have influenced some of his later paintings, such as *Improvisation 30*. Murnau, Germany is a small village about an hour outside of Munich that lies “in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps.” While living there, Kandinsky produced many paintings depicting different parts of the village that have been described as “generally realistic, but increasingly abstract” compositions that depict “billowing white clouds over rolling hills...with a canticle to nature that burns with gemlike color” (O’Donovan, 2011). In this light, it can be seen how this time of Kandinsky’s life could have easily impacted *Improvisation 30* when interpreted as depicting “farm vs. city life” in that Murnau was a small village outside the larger city of Munich, with typical rural features, such as “billowing clouds” and “rolling hills.” To further solidify this contention, these elements can clearly be seen in Kandinsky’s paintings of this period, including *Landscape Near Murnau With Locomotive* (1909) and *Murnau With Rainbow* (1909).

Kandinsky’s Compositions

Before I can undertake an in depth discussion of this series of Kandinsky’s paintings, it is important that I point out some facts about them that will enable the reader to better understand my analysis of the paintings used for this study. There are seven paintings that make up this series of paintings, although not all of them survive because some were destroyed in the Nazi exhibition of “degenerate art” (Long, 1980). Kandinsky thought of them as his “most important works,” which is why they are imbued with “veiled religious motifs” (Long, 1980, p. 108). Kandinsky started the series in 1909 and finished them in 1913. What is very symbolic about these paintings is that there are seven of them because according to Long (1980), this number has both religious and mystical importance. Long (1980) argues that seven is repeated a number of times in “The Revelation to John”:

John is instructed to write to the seven churches, a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes opens the scroll with seven seals, angels blow seven trumpets, seven

torches symbolizing the seven spirits of God burn before His throne (p. 108).

These arguments regarding Kandinsky's *Compositions* help to place the following analysis in perspective for the reader as well as reinforce the underlying theme of almost all of Kandinsky's paintings, his religious beliefs and the role that his art played in relation to them.

Composition VI

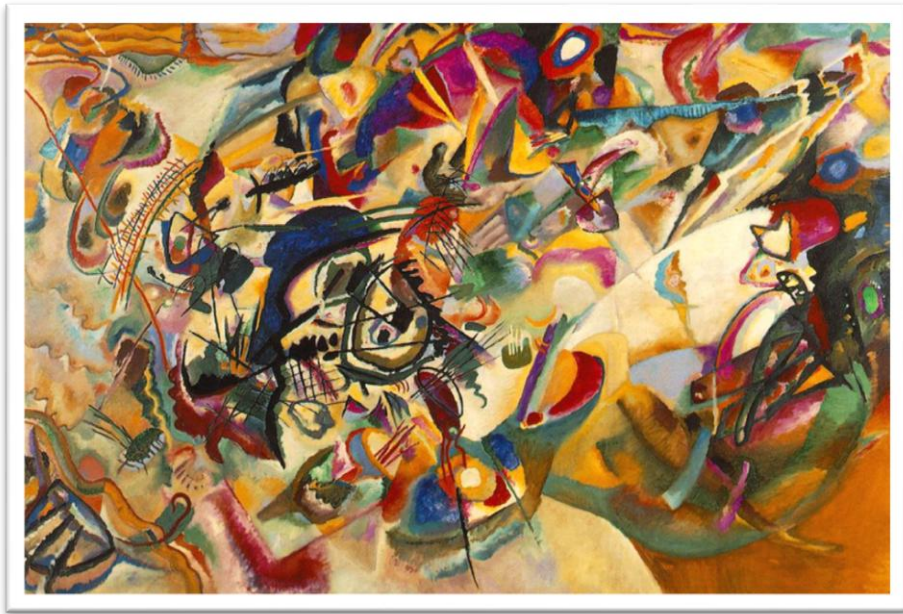


Figure 2 Composition VI

For *Composition VI*, the following themes emerged, movement and musical instruments. The musical instruments theme arose out of the grouping of terms like “music, loud, guitars, small hands trying to play guitars, musical instruments, cellos, harps, guitar strings, string ensemble, people being moved by music, and dancing.” This theme leads to an interpretation that can be easily correlated with many of Kandinsky's beliefs regarding painting, how he believed that he could express his “inner necessity,” and how he referred to his many *Compositions*. The overall meaning of this painting is music and how it can affect us as human beings. Kandinsky believed that his paintings could evoke emotions in a person similar to the manner in which music does, and it seems as though this painting is expressing that belief taking into account the fact that many of the students saw musical instruments in this painting

and described it as “people being moved by music,” and “dancing.” Such descriptions associated with music produce positive emotions within the individual when engaged with it, thereby emotionally affecting the individual.

Kandinsky believed that through his paintings, he could express what he called his “inner necessity” or “the artist’s intuitive, emotional response to the world” (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 149). It is highly likely that through this painting, Kandinsky expressed the necessity he felt to evoke emotion in people, just like music can, and this leads me to believe that this painting is the tangible embodiment of this very notion. This painting represents Kandinsky’s emotional response to the world as an embodiment of the ideas he held about painting, and he is portraying this to the world so that we, as viewers, are responding to his world/our world in a similar manner, emotionally. Additionally, because Kandinsky thought of his numerous *Compositions* as artwork that necessitated “an evenly sustained pitch of inner emotional uplift sometimes lasting for days,” then he is truly emotionally uplifting his spectators, just as music has the power to emotionally uplift an individual (Arnason & Prather, 1998, p. 149). In this sense, this painting, as one of many, embodies Kandinsky’s most comprehensive “artistic statements.” An important aspect of this painting that Tate Modern (2006) notes is its size (195 x 300 cm), asserting that its size gives the spectator “the sense of being immersed in the space of the painting.” The size of the painting, in conjunction with other “effects,” add to what Kandinsky referred to as the “inner sound” of the painting, which plays into his fascination with the emotional hold that music can exert (Tate Modern, 2006). Although the students were obviously not exposed to the immensity of this painting, I mention its size for the reasons stated above.

The movement theme is the result of the grouping of terms such as “raging sea in a violent storm, waves, ships being tossed, scattered sailors, people being moved by music, activity, energetic, flowing lines, small hands trying to play guitars, and collision.” This theme is closer to the interpretation supported by art critics, art historians, and interestingly enough, Kandinsky himself. In his many

writings, Kandinsky expressed the meaning embedded in *Composition VI* as being the “Deluge, or great Biblical flood, a cataclysmic event that ushers in an era of spiritual rebirth” (Tate Modern, 2006). This interpretation can also easily be drawn taking into account the “suggested elements” identified by the students. A “raging sea in a violent storm, waves, ships being tossed, scattered sailors, and collision” all directly link to the notion of a “Biblical flood.” Furthermore, Tate Modern asserts that one can discern “the forms of boats, crashing waves, and slanting rain” as well as “the mood of violence and chaos,” some aspects which were identified by the students. Tate Modern (2006) also argues that the overall characterization of this painting is a “powerful sense of movement,” which corresponds to this very theme. As Kandinsky wrote in an essay about *Composition VI* “Out of the most effective destruction sounds a living praise, like a hymn to the new creation, which follows the destruction” (as cited in Long, 1980, p. 118). This quote further enforces Kandinsky’s notion regarding apocalypse and its outcome as well as the arguments made about this painting and his *Improvisations* that were analyzed for this study.

Composition VIII

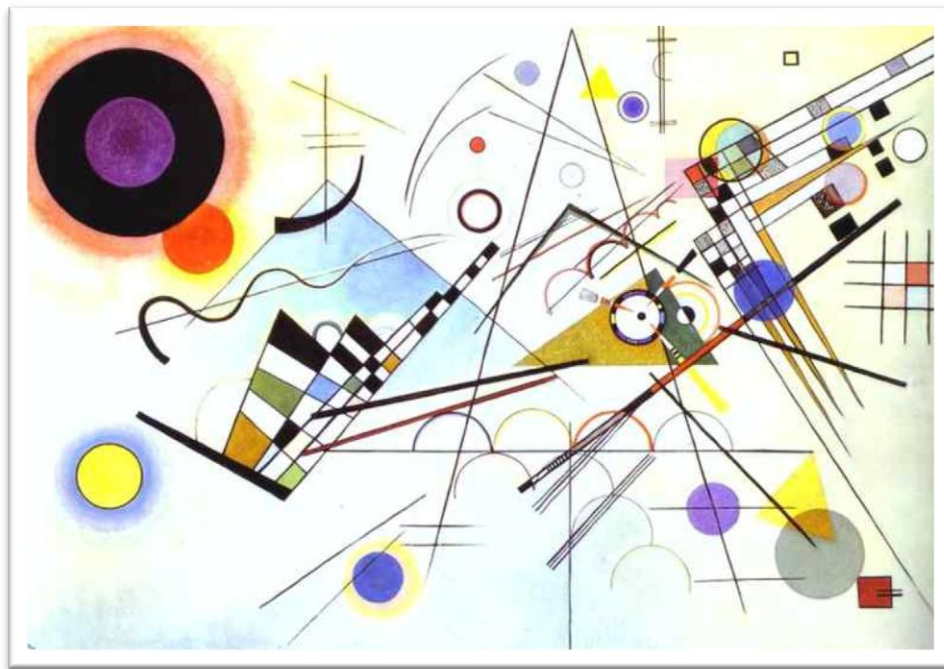


Figure 3 Composition VIII

The themes that emerged from *Composition VIII* are geometrical/mathematical and environment. The geometrical/mathematical theme is the result of elements such as: “perfect shapes, simple structures, basic shapes, lines, organized, technology, smooth, angles, circles, figures of math, triangles, parallel and perpendicular lines, geometrical, ordered, sharp edges, everything points to the center, precise, straight lines, and mechanical.” This painting represents a shift in Kandinsky’s style in that it is reflective of the Suprematism and Constructivist art movements going on in Russia before he returned to Germany to provide art instruction at the Bauhaus (Harden, n.d.). In this painting, it is apparent that Kandinsky adopted some of the “geometrizing trends” of both the Suprematist and Constructivist movements, having been inspired by other Russians, who through this style, were attempting to “establish a universal aesthetic language” (Spector, 2011). However, Kandinsky was also somewhat alienated from these groups because of “his belief in the expressive content of abstract forms” (Spector, 2011).

One of the dominating features of this painting is the large black and purple circle in the upper right hand corner. This feature is an important aspect of this painting because for Kandinsky, a circle “is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form and in equilibrium. Of the three primary forms, it points most clearly to the fourth dimension” (Spector, 2011). This statement of Kandinsky is the perfect way to synthesize this painting because, as the students pointed out, it is “orderly” and “organized,” aspects which provide a sense of balance to the painting between its “angles” and “sharp edges.” The painting also represents the perfect balance of “the greatest oppositions” as art critics have described it in terms of opposites, calm and quiet as opposed to aggressive, and along these same lines, as the students pointed out, “smooth,” but with “rough edges.” The fact that the circle is so large in this painting also points to Kandinsky’s spiritual beliefs, because as he pointed out, not only does it point “to the fourth dimension,” but it also correlates with his assertion that there is a “correspondence between colors and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects”

(Spector, 2011). In this sense, one can see just how prominent this belief was in Kandinsky's mind as he painted this work in that the immensity of the circle clearly dominates the space and the painting itself. For Kandinsky then, the circle acts as some sort of conduit that is capable of providing some sort of "psychological" or "spiritual" effect in an individual.

Along the same geometrical lines, one art critic wrote, "...geometry has become musical, playing across the canvas from lower left to upper right, from bottom to top. A black, eclipse-like circle in the upper left corner echoes the apocalyptic hints of Munich and the severity of Moscow" (O'Donovan, 2011, para. 12). This comment illustrates many points I have made about Kandinsky's paintings. First, in this comment, O'Donovan acknowledges the presence of geometry in the painting, which confirms the assertion about the Suprematist and Constructivist influence on Kandinsky mentioned above. Secondly the fact that he mentions the circle confirms how Kandinsky felt about circles, in that they represent the "fourth dimension," which serves as both a reference to the spirituality he longed to express in his painting and the religious dimension to his paintings in that for O'Donovan (2011), this circle "echoes...apocalyptic hints." This also serves to illustrate the arguments I made about Kandinsky's *Compositions*, namely that they represent Kandinsky's ideas regarding the Biblical apocalypse. Lastly, the fact that O'Donovan (2011) sees Kandinsky's geometrical shapes as musical solidifies Kandinsky's beliefs regarding art and music, although this was something not expressed by the students, but rather deduced from the perusal of information.

For the students, this painting was also reminiscent of the environment, in every sense of the word. This theme emerged from elements such as "house, building, landscape, skyscrapers, planes, moon, sun, stars, clouds, birds, planets, sunset, mountains, distant road, city, etc." This theme mirrors the first theme for many reasons. Many of the elements that the students identified in this theme correlate to the first in that the sun, moon and planets, all being circular, directly parallel the image of the immense circle in the first theme. Additionally, the images that recall a city here correspond to the

images of parallel and perpendicular lines” in the first theme. In this way, these two themes, as mirror images of one another, play into Kandinsky’s notion of equilibrium expressed in this painting.

Composition IV



Figure 4 Composition IV

Three themes emerged from the grouping of elements for *Composition IV*, and they are nature, surroundings and opposing emotions. The identified elements that led to the creation of the nature/surroundings theme are “sunshine, landscape (warped and colorful), landscape (with roads, mountains, rainbow, and sunset), buildings with streets and cars driving through, human walking the Earth, polluted city, and desert. The identified elements that led to the opposing emotions theme are “cheerful, happy, boring, sad, calm and busy.” The reason that these themes are mentioned together is due to the fact that they will be discussed in conjunction with one another.

Although the nature and surroundings themes do not necessarily correlate to an interpretation that has been drawn by art critics and/or scholars, some of the elements listed by the students are confirmed by art critics as being present in the painting. Such elements include mountains and figures (Phelan, n.d.). However, these themes do give insight to an interpretation that is advocated by art

scholars and the like, through the element of the figure/human present in the painting. Art scholars such as Vassilena Kolarova (2007) state that the painting depicts, "...three Cossacks in red hats (the two lines dividing the picture are their spears) against the background of a blue mountain" (para. 35). Cossacks were Russian horsemen and soldiers that originated as, "Slavic peasants, misfits and adventurers who migrated to the borders to escape the heavy hand of governments, serf owners, and the tax collectors" (Grau, 1993). They have had many functions in history, but they are most widely known for leading numerous revolts against Russian Tsars in power between 1600 and 1800 (Grau, 1993). According to Kolarova (2007), the painting depicts an "apocalyptic battle," that will conclude with "eternal peace," adding that the "white figure" can be seen as a dove with open wings which stands for "spiritual rising and serenity" following the establishment of order. In my mind, this interpretation makes perfect sense. This interpretation relates directly back to the interpretation of *Composition VI*. Both paintings depict the Biblical apocalypse, and in this sense, Kandinsky's works can clearly be seen as spiritual in nature, given his subject matter. As Kolarova (2007) asserts, Kandinsky's "Compositions demonstrate the inseparable nature of the biblical thematic."

The opposing emotions theme plays into the theme discussed above in that both Phelan (n.d.) and Kolarova (2007) assert that *Composition IV* is divided into two parts. Phelan (n.d.) states that the painting is divided in half by black lines, with the right hand side of the painting being more peaceful than the left. On the other hand, Kolarova (2007) states that the black lines mentioned by Phelan are actually the spears of the Cossacks; however, both agree that the painting is indeed divided. The division mentioned by both scholars was also picked up by the students, as can be seen with such statements as, "the left part of the painting, the middle part, and the right side," and other statements that clearly refer to "bold, dark black lines." What Phelan asserts, namely that one side of the painting is more peaceful than the other, directly corresponds to the opposing emotions theme in that the students identified similar emotions, such as calm. Additionally, the students also stated that they experienced

both emotions in opposition to one another, with such statements as, “it’s happy, but sad” and “happiness in the crazy life.” Indeed, as one Kandinsky scholar noted, “images of upheaval are combined with images of hope,” giving as an example an image of a rainbow (identified by the students) appearing behind a gun (Long, 1980).

Improvisation 31



Figure 5 Improvisation 31

For *Improvisation 31*, three themes emerged. The themes are unorganized, sea life, and food or kitchen. The unorganized theme is the result of the grouping of the following terms: “falling items, junkyard, a messy room, cluttered, frazzled, and chaotic.” It plays into the larger theme of sea life in an interpretation supported by art critics because what at first appears to be unorganized, or “formless and free is in fact more manicured than that” (Ford, 2010). This is true of all of Kandinsky’s *Improvisations* because although they are titled in a manner to make them appear to be improvised, which would lead

the spectator to think that such disorganization is the result, these works actually took months of preparation (Ford, 2010).

The sea life theme is what is at the core of the interpretation of this painting. This theme emerged from the grouping of such terms as “ships, water, boat on water, boat on a lake on a summer day, three ships going through a canal, sea life, and fish.” According to Ford (2010), this theme is exactly what this painting depicts, however, in a slightly different manner. Ford (2010) asserts that this painting portrays warring ships, identified by their masts, represented by the tall black lines in the painting. The painting also depicts cannons, rolling waves, and a tower that appears to be falling over (Ford, 2010). These elements are important because, as Ford (2010) suggests, the painting was produced on the “eve of World War I,” and despite the fact that the painting is not a direct interpretation of the war, as Kandinsky himself said, he aimed to visualize “a terrible struggle ... going on in the spiritual atmosphere” with this painting. The “spiritual atmosphere” that Kandinsky sought with this painting can also be seen with his abundant use of color, especially blue and yellow. These colors emphasize that Kandinsky believed that color conveyed meaning, something which consumes a whole chapter in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (2008). This painting is infused with spirituality in that, for Kandinsky, blue represented a “heavenly color,” and yellow he saw as “aggressive” (The National Gallery of Art, 2006). Because Kandinsky saw yellow as being “aggressive,” he may have deliberately chosen to include it in this painting, which further supports the contention that this painting shows the possible impact of World War I on Kandinsky, as is the case with *Improvisation 30*, which was produced in the same year.

To further solidify the argument that is painting is infused with spirituality, Long (1980) offers a parallel interpretation of this painting. In the study for *Improvisation 31*, images of saints were revealed which led Long (1980) to believe that the *Improvisations* were “intended to represent more than a prediction of earthly events such as the First World War” (p. 101). Instead, he asserts that this series of

paintings is related to Kandinsky's idea of Armageddon writing it off as just another "experiment with a grouping of motifs which could represent the battle of the spiritual versus the material" (Long, 1980, p. 101). He goes on to assert that even though these paintings do not have biblical titles, they all have the same motif that are also in the paintings that depict the "Deluge," such as some of the *Compositions* (Long, 1980). Either way, both of the preceding interpretations provide evidence for the contention that Kandinsky infused his paintings with his beliefs regarding both religion and spirituality.

The last theme to emerge from this painting is rather odd given the subject matter that the painting actually portrays, but it is something that many of the students claimed to see, namely food or a kitchen table. This theme is the result of a grouping of such terms as "kitchen table with someone sitting at it" and "food at a dinner table." These observations can only be indicative of the fact that people truly do interpret the same painting differently, as Foss (1998) points out. As Foss (1998) asserts, not just any meaning can be assigned to a painting because its physical elements make this impossibility, and that seems to be the case with this theme. The physical elements that suggest an interpretation stemming from this theme just are not present in my view, and for that reason, I cannot suggest a meaning based on this theme. This is not to say that this particular painting cannot be interpreted, it just cannot be interpreted from the point of view suggested by this particular theme because the elements present in this painting do not suggest an interpretation that correlates to this theme in my opinion. The only aspect of Kandinsky's painting that might suggest an interpretation for this painting might be his inclusion of Biblical themes in his paintings so that this painting may be depicting some aspect of the Last Supper. However, there is no direct evidence from art critics or art scholars to support this contention.

Color in Kandinsky's Paintings

An important aspect in all of Kandinsky's paintings is color. He uses color in very strategic ways in all of his abstract paintings because of what he believed color could do, "directly influence the soul" (Kandinsky, 1977, p. 25). One way in which Kandinsky strategically used color in his painting was to

“offset the feeling of general agitation with a note of calmness and universality” (Long, 1980, p. 118). To take the importance of color to Kandinsky even further, he designed a “color opera,” entitled *The Yellow Sound*, which was never shown during his life. Kandinsky believed that people experienced color not only through sight, but with all the senses (Düchting , 2008). He regularly compared colors to “musical sounds,” calling “lemon yellow...the sound of a high trumpet,” and “deep blue was like an organ stop” (Düchting , 2008, p. 29). These points regarding how Kandinsky felt about color are important because not only did he use them in his paintings to bring about certain responses in his spectators, but in every painting that was analyzed for this study, the students identified their presence with such statements as “orange colors, dark tones, field of color, red, yellow, and soft colors.” To illustrate the importance of why color is so central to Kandinsky’s paintings, I offer one comment made by a student about *Composition VI*. The student expressly mentioned that the painting contains both “loud and quiet colors,” which directly correspond to a main point. This comment demonstrates how Kandinsky referred to colors as musical sounds in that it refers to the colors in the painting as being “loud and quiet,” both of which are levels of sounds that can be produced by musical instruments. Additionally, the fact that the students identified colors like red, blue and yellow in paintings such as *Improvisation 31* and *Composition VI* is significant in terms of how Kandinsky experienced things such as “objects, events, and even music primarily in terms of color,” (Selz, 1957, p. 128). The combination of lines and colors have the power of evoking “emotional associations” in the spectator, which is exactly what Kandinsky’s use of color did for the students. Therefore, Kandinsky, through color and the associations people make with it, has succeeded in bringing his spiritual message to his spectator, thus allowing for the generation of meaning, for as Selz (1957) asserts, by doing away with representation, the “plastic elements” of a painting are what conveys the artist’s message.

As can be seen from the analysis of Kandinsky’s paintings, he infused his art with Biblical themes that he hoped would reawaken spirituality in a materialistic age, and these elements are visible to

spectators of his art. His strategic use of color also plays a vital role in the interpretation of his art in terms of the emotions they evoke in an observer of his paintings. Indeed, when Kandinsky's paintings are examined within the context of his life, his writings, and the age in which he painted, his paintings say a lot. Whether or not he accomplished what he set out to do with his paintings will be discussed in chapter 5 of this study, but what Kandinsky has certainly done is create artwork that is capable of interpretation. This is a large leap in terms of not only the development of visual rhetoric, but the study of visual communication and the strides being made in the discipline seeing as there is very little work being done in this area, the implications of which will be addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Examining the way that Kandinsky used color, line, form, and his method provided great insight into the meaning embedded in his artwork. The extraordinary life that he lived is clearly reflected in his art whether or not he wished for such a manifestation. It is apparent that abstract art, in particular the work of Kandinsky, can be interpreted and additionally, that it expresses meaning, the implications for the communication field are numerous. First and foremost, this study adds to the small body of work that has been conducted in visual rhetoric studies, particularly on art. Second, the methodology utilized for this study was also put into practice for the very first time, and in a successful manner. Lastly, this study illustrates the contention that abstract art is not meaningless, and can serve as a form of argumentation.

One of the most important arguments that emerged from this study deals with a contention held by scholars such as Foss, that some sort of training is needed in order to be able to interpret abstract art. This study has suggested otherwise. All the students that were interviewed for this study defined abstract art in a very similar manner, identifying crucial aspects of the formal definition of modern art I used. For the most part, the students identified elements in Kandinsky's paintings that have also been deemed to be depicted by art critics and art scholars alike. Thus, the amount of art training the students had no impact on their ability to interpret the artwork or how they defined abstract art. However, for purposes of Bourdieu's argument regarding cultural capital, the students did have access to education that allowed them to obtain the requisite capital he deems is required in order to be able to appreciate art, so it seems as though Bourdieu's argument is valid along these lines. To be more precise, of the 118 students that were interviewed, 67 of them had no art training and 51 of them had some level of art training. To further illustrate this contention, it is imperative to point out that the students were also able to identify many of the elements in Kandinsky's paintings that were confirmed to be present by art scholars. This

illustrates two things. First it shows that no art training is required to be able to interpret art, and second, that it seems as though a certain level of cultural capital is needed in order to obtain “aesthetic disposition,” which is required for an individual to appreciate art.

Another important aspect of this study relates to whether or not the students liked or disliked the paintings they were presented with. This is important because a study had been conducted that found that that some level of ambiguity is a significant factor of “aesthetic appreciation” and is actually “appreciable” (Jakesch & Leder, 2009). From this study, I concluded that because abstract art is abstract, and therefore ambiguous, that the students would find it appreciable so that they would be more inclined to interpret Kandinsky’s paintings. In order to explore this notion, I asked the students whether or not they liked the paintings they were presented with. Whether or not the students liked the paintings had no bearing on their inclination to interpret them. Rather, what is interesting to note is their reasons for either liking or disliking the paintings. Most of their reasons for either liking or disliking the paintings were related to how the paintings made them feel, or how the painting affected their emotions. This fact has a huge bearing on communication studies because despite reporting not liking or liking a particular painting, the student was still able to interpret the painting, it made he/she feel something. Feeling something when it comes to an abstract painting is significant because of what Foss (1988) asserts when it comes to a viewer assigning meaning to a painting in terms of the “sensory elements.” Foss (1988) states that these “sensory elements” come to reference “images, emotions, and ideas beyond themselves,” which makes such a response a “rhetorical one” (p. 11). This argument adds to the reasons in favor of studying visual images in a rhetorical manner, under visual rhetoric particularly.

The fact that the students reported feeling something from examining Kandinsky’s abstract paintings brings up another point important for visual rhetoric scholars. Because there are scholars, such as Jon Huer (1990) that consider modern art, such as that of Kandinsky’s, nothing more than “...Chaotic and meaningless renditions of the artist’s inner confusions,” this study illustrates how many people can

interpret and value art. If anything, this study has demonstrated that modern art, and more particularly abstract art, are not “meaningless renditions of that artist’s inner confusions,” but the very opposite, at least with Kandinsky’s art. This study has definitively shown that Kandinsky’s paintings can be interpreted, that they make people feel emotion, that his paintings are meaningful, and that they are an outward manifestation of his “inner necessity,” and what he hoped his art would accomplish, a sort of spiritual awakening. Just as Kandinsky expressed that his time was one of “spiritual crisis,” his art has come to literally mean much more than that because it has proven to have the ability to awaken emotions in an observer, thereby solidifying the fact that visual images truly do have to the power to influence people’s emotions, so that his art has become an answer to the crisis of defining art.

A spiritual awakening was identified by many of the students in this study, if not in those exact words. Evidence for this argument is apparent in the fact that Kandinsky’s *Compositions* tend to depict cataclysmic, apocalyptic images, and in the paintings that were presented to the students for this study, they identified elements that can be associated with such events. Although the students never explicitly identified spiritually associated elements with Kandinsky’s art, the elements that they identified can easily be associated with such when examined in line with other factors, such as Kandinsky’s writings and life. To illustrate this point, take Kandinsky’s use of the circle in *Composition VIII*. Despite the fact that the students had no idea why Kandinsky used this geometric shape in the way he did, they were able to point out its prominence in the work, and taking this into consideration when examining Kandinsky’s writings, it can be seen that he believed that the circle has the power to psychologically or even spiritually effect a spectator of his work, thus its utilization in his painting. In essence, he has accomplished what he initially set out to do with his work, spiritually awaken his audience.

This observation is also important for reasons supporting visual argumentation in that the above argument has shown that by examining Kandinsky’s paintings in a certain context, similar to the way in which LaWare (1998) did in her study, images become arguments. The contexts in which Kandinsky’s

paintings were analyzed were his life, the time in which he painted, and the sentiments regarding modern art at the time he produced his works. By examining Kandinsky's paintings under these contexts, his works perform two functions. First, they serve as examples upon which visual arguments can be made and second, they transcend the time parameters placed upon them in terms of being forced to being examined in their own time period in order to ascertain meaning. This also implies that meaning can be ascertained from visual images outside of the time in which they were produced, still adhering to the contexts under which they were produced. As LaWare's (1998) study illustrates, the murals painted on Casa Aztlán depict images of a time long past, but they can still be analyzed outside of the time period they depict due to the importance they serve as iconic images to the Mexican American race, a modern context. Similarly, Kandinsky's paintings serve the function of representing the origin of abstract art for generations past and generations to come. As Düchting (2008) expressed in his book *Wassily Kandinsky*, "With abstract compositions, he [Kandinsky] opened up a new orientation in art that many other painters were to adopt and develop in their own way" (p. 31).

It is necessary to note that art in general is capable of being interpreted, as illustrated by this study. Studies such as this provide insight into the motivations for some of the most popular artwork of our time because they are capable of being analyzed. Because meaning is expressed in Kandinsky's paintings, they can be interpreted, and whether an individual walks away from an encounter with his painting with a distinctive meaning or meaning that can be shared, the point is that the meaning is derived from the interaction between the spectator and the painting. In a sense, the meaning in a piece of art is internal, i.e. contained in the painting, as painted by the artist, and is externalized through the painting itself to speak volumes to its audience, it visually communicates. Meaning, whether shared or not still meaning. There were students in this study who interpreted Kandinsky's paintings in a manner that was not consistent with the interpretations of other students, but this does not mean that there was no meaning at all even though for the most part, meaning was shared.

This notion is important because the visual communication branch is a new branch of communication studies, and it merits exploration. Additionally, visual rhetoric, as part of visual communication deserves further scrutiny. There are limitations to this type of communication, as with anything, but the limitations are dwindling with more and more scholarship in this area being conducted. Although scholars may disagree on what can be considered a visual artifact or whether or not visual images can be analyzed and interpreted, the point is that with time comes new information, and with new information, strides in this field are being made. It is apparent that visual images have power, but the extent of that power has yet to be examined and it would be interesting to see studies performed in this area. What do other visual images, such as films and advertise communicate? How do these visual images communicate and how do they affect individuals that engage with them? How could such studies be utilized to understand human behavior and the like? The implications of conducting such studies are endless.

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Appendix

Instructions

The following questionnaire is designed to see what can be gained from abstract art.

Please complete the following questionnaire using either blue or black ink to ensure readability and be as honest as you can. Feel free to use the back of this paper if necessary. Thank you for your time and participation.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your major? _____
3. What is your classification? (circle one)

Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Master's Student	Doctoral Candidate		
4. Have you ever taken an art appreciation class or related art class? (circle one)

Yes	No
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5. How would you define abstract art?
6. What is your interpretation of this painting?
7. Do you like this painting? Why or why not?

Vita

Kandice Nikkole Diaz was born in El Paso, TX, and is the first child of Rodolfo Armendariz, Jr. and Joanne Aguilar Barraza. She graduated from Loretto Academy High School in May of 1999 and began her college career at El Paso Community College. She transferred to The University of Texas at El Paso in the spring of 2000 and obtained a bachelor's degree in political science in the fall of 2004. While in pursuit of this degree, she was accepted into the Law School Preparation Institute and was a member of the Model of American States, under the direction of Dr. Tony Payan. She was accepted to law school in the spring of 2005 at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL where she studied law for a year. She returned to El Paso in 2007 with her husband, a practicing attorney, and her daughter. Since then, she has worked as a freelance writer, in public relations, and marketing for a number of local businesses. In the spring of 2009, she once again enrolled at The University of Texas at El Paso to pursue a master's degree in communication.

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