ПРОУН

Она была новым станом на пути, соединяющим новую форму, что дает нам в память четыре столетия истории и появления формы. Форма была впервые создана в Европе. Четыре столетия истории и появления формы. Четыре столетия истории и появления формы. Четыре столетия истории и появления формы.

ГРОУН

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ДОКЕРМАН
Must we not then renounce the object altogether,
throw it to the winds and instead lay bare the purely abstract?
—Vasily Kandinsky, 1911

ROUGHLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a series of precipitous shifts took place in the cultural
sphere that in the end amounted to as great a rewriting of the rules of artistic production
as had been seen since the Renaissance. That transformation would fundamentally shape
artistic practice in the century that followed. Beginning in late 1911 and across the course
of 1912, in several European and American cities, a handful of artists—Vasily Kandinsky,
František Kupka, Francis Picabia, Robert Delaunay, Arthur Dove—presented paintings that
differed from almost all of those that had preceded them in the long history of the medium
in the Western tradition: shunning the depiction of objects in the world, they displayed
works with no discernible subject matter. Indeed they abandoned the premise of making a
picture of something. “Young painters of the extreme schools,” the poet and critic Guillaume
Apollinaire wrote in February 1912, “want to make pure painting, an entirely new art form.
It is only at its beginning, and not yet as abstract as it wants to be.”

In the period immediately following, abstraction was proposed many times over,
by different artists working in different places and with different philosophical foundations.
Its pioneers included Hans Arp, Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Natalia Goncharova,
Marsden Hartley, Paul Klee, Mikhail Larionov, Fernand Léger, Kazimir Malevich, Franz
Marc, Piet Mondrian, Hans Richter, and Wyndham Lewis. By the eve of World War I, artists
producing abstract works could be counted in the dozens. This shift in the frontier of
possibility moved so suddenly as to shake the foundations of art as it had been practiced.
Observers spoke of the exhilaration and terror of leaping into unknown territory, where
comparison with the past was impossible. This evacuation of the object world was, to be
sure, hardly a silent disappearance, but rather was accompanied by a shower of celebratory
manifestos, lectures, and criticism, a flood of words flung forth perhaps in compensation
for their makers’ worry about how the meaning of these pictures might be established.

Scores of earlier images from other Western disciplines—chromatic studies, theo-
sophical and mediumistic images, cosmogonic images, scientific images (fig. 1)—may
resemble abstract art. But these are not art at all, for despite any formal similarity they
were intended to produce meaning in other discursive frameworks. Within the sphere of modern art, J. M. W. Turner’s seascapes (fig. 2), James McNeill Whistler’s Nocturnes (fig. 3), Edgar Degas’s landscape monoprints, Gustave Moreau’s ink drawings and watercolor sketches, and Hermann Obrist’s theater sets, among other images, have been held up as important forms of proto-abstraction. But these works do not declare a break with subject matter, even though, in so rigorously defining it in terms of atmospheric and experiential qualities that it is all but obscured, they provide an important foundation for the emergence of abstraction in the twentieth century. (Landscape above all, wrote the art historian Henri Zerner, was “a laboratory for abstract art.”) This exhibition and book, however, do not, as several previous studies of abstraction have done, attempt to inventory such precedents for abstraction *avant la lettre*, though of course they have bearing on the story being told.

Before December 1911, when Kandinsky exhibited *Komposition V* (Composition V; plate 18) in Munich, in the first exhibition of the *Blüte Reiter*, the artists’ group he had co-founded, it seems to have been impossible for artists to step away from a long-held tenet of artistic practice: that paintings describe things in a real or imaginary world. In the years preceding, there was some sense of building consternation around this issue, of possibilities tested and rejected and of ideas yet unrealized, but it was only in the anni mirabilis that followed Kandinsky’s showing of *Komposition V* that abstract pictures began to be exhibited publicly as art, and their philosophical justification developed in treatises and criticism. It was only then, one could say, that the idea of an abstract artwork began to make sense. And for some artists and intellectuals, abstraction not only began to seem plausible but took on the character of an imperative.

**TWO STORIES** from the years immediately preceding 1912 convey some sense of how difficult it was to arrive at the novel idea of an abstract picture.

In 1910, while Pablo Picasso was summing at Cadaqués, Spain, he made a small group of strange pictures that looked unlike any that had preceded them. Leaving behind the hillsides of reversible cubes that he had made the previous year in Horta, he now worked
in an idiom that seemed closer to a diagram (plates 3, 4). His new paintings featured angled planes defined by linear scaffolding that shifted across the work's surface. Only the faintest traces of the structure of the female figure or still life named in the pictures' titles were discernible within. "The Cadaqués images are so difficult to decipher," wrote Picasso's biographer John Richardson, "that even the artist sometimes forgot what a particular image represented." These works seem abstract in all but name.

Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler could not reconcile himself, it seems, to the terrifying novelty of these new works: he declared them "unfinished." The Picasso scholar Pierre Daix has noted that while Kahnweiler had the right of first refusal of Picasso's paintings, these particular works went to a rival dealer, Ambroise Vollard—suggesting that Kahnweiler had rejected them. And it seems that Picasso himself—the most nimble-minded, radically innovative artist of the first decade of the twentieth century—also struggled with the implications of these works. In a later conversation reported by his wife Françoise Gilot, Picasso asserted that these "pure" pictures required supplements to function as painting. Referring to the fragmented forms of bodies, musical instruments, and words that began to appear in the Cubist pictures he made immediately after his sojourn in Cadaqués (plates 1, 3), he explained, "I painted them in afterwards. I call them 'attributes.' At that period I was doing painting for its own sake. It was really pure painting, and the composition was done as composition. It was only towards the end... that I brought in the attributes." In the works that followed those almost abstract images made in Cadaqués, Picasso incorporated the shattered forms of representation as if to tether his paintings securely to the world of things. Failure to do so, it seems, threatened painting itself. He would later declare that abstraction was impossible: "There is no abstract art. You always have to begin with something. Afterwards you can remove all appearances of reality, but there is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark."#*

Writing to Marc in October 1911, Kandinsky described Picasso's pictures, which he had seen in photographs sent to him by Kahnweiler, as "split[ting] the subject up and scattering[ing] bits of it all over the picture," an effect that was "frankly false" but nonetheless an auspicious "sign of the enormous struggle toward the immaterial." While Picasso in 1910 could paint a picture approaching abstraction but could not embrace it philosophically, Kandinsky conversely could develop a theoretical rationale for abstraction but could not make the final break. The sheer difficulty of thinking such a radically new idea—thinking within a new paradigm—is evident in the publication history of Kandinsky's hugely influential tract On the Spiritual in Art (plate 10)." The manuscript existed in draft form as early as 1909. In the first two published editions, which appeared in December 1911 and May 1912 respectively, Kandinsky sets abstraction as a goal, clearly and effectively advocating a practice that would advance "deeper... into this territory."#* He nonetheless balks in embracing in the present day an art that breaks "the tie that binds us to nature."#* "Today," he writes, "the artist cannot manage exclusively with purely abstract forms."#* Indeed, in his paintings of that date, referential form is almost but not quite effaced. But his opinion changed in the next two years (as did his painting), and by 1914, in a manuscript for a planned fourth edition of On the Spiritual in Art that was forestalled by World War I, he edited this paragraph to allow for the possibility of a fully abstract art. "Today," the new phrasing read, "only a few artists can manage with purely abstract forms."#* In a lecture written (but never delivered) some years later, the artist commented on the difficulty of this intellectual passage: "As yet, objects did not want to—and were not to—disappear altogether from my pictures. First, it is impossible to conjure up maturity artificially at any particular time. I myself was not yet sufficiently mature to be able to experience purely abstract form without bridging the gap by means of objects."#*
IN 1911, HOWEVER, THE ASSAULT WAS LAUNCHED.

That December in Munich, Kandinsky exhibited *Komposition V*, a monumental manifesto for abstraction that maintained only the most inscrutable traces of figural references. That same month, he published *On the Spiritual in Art*, his loquacious paean to the ineffable. Three Kandinsky works—none quite so ambitious or so determined in their evacuation of referential content as *Komposition V*—were shown a few months later in Paris, at the Salon des Indépendants, in March–May of 1912. Delaunay, who had been corresponding with Kandinsky since late 1911, and had studied French translations of *On the Spiritual of Art* made by Sonia Delaunay-Terk and Elisabeth Epstein, understood these works to herald the birth of abstraction. “This inquiry into pure painting is the current problem,” wrote Delaunay to Kandinsky. “I do not know any painters in Paris who are truly seeking this ideal world.” Soon afterward the French artist made his own near-abstract works, his *Fenêtres* (Windows) series (plates 31–33), and showed them in July 1912 in the Ausstellung des Moderne Bundes, in the Kunsthalle Zurich, at the invitation of Bund co-founder Arp (who had in turn obtained his address from Kandinsky). These works similarly announced a new form of picture-making to key viewers in German-speaking realms. The Swiss artist Klee, who saw the Zurich show, proclaimed in a review that Delaunay “has created the type of autonomous picture, which leads, without motifs from nature, to a completely abstract life form. A structure of plastic life, *nota bene*, almost as far removed as a Bach fugue is from a carpet.”

And then in October of that year, at the Salon d’Automne in Paris, a traditional forum for scandalous artistic gestures, the Czech painter Kupka dispensed with all lingering hesitations, displaying two paintings, *Amorpha, chromatique chaude* (Amorpha, warm chromatic) and a second, more monumental one called *Amorpha, fugue à deux couleurs* (Amorpha, fugue in two colors; plate 24), that declared independence from traditional subject matter. The paintings were filmed for Gaumont newsreels and shown across Europe and the United States. For some critics these works only offered proof of the dangers of such a departure: Gustave Kahn called them “games which are not within everyone’s reach,” and Louis Arnould Gréville asked, “With their clear musical titles, don’t they demonstrate the difficulty with titles and the worry of escaping from painting for painting?”

In considering Kupka’s role as the one who took this particularly public step in breaching convention, it may be relevant that he was something of an outsider in the sphere in which he worked: he was trained in Prague and Vienna in a heady Symbolist milieu. Yet in Paris, far from being the isolated émigré figure he is frequently portrayed as in the literature, he was a member of artistic circles in which some of the most experimental ideas about avant-garde practice were discussed (giving him an insider/outsider status that seems particularly fertile for paradigm-shifting thought): he lived next door to Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and during 1911 and 1912 was a sometime guest in the Sunday salons held at Jacques Villon’s house in Puteaux, frequented by a changing cast of characters including Marcel Duchamp (Duchamp-Villon’s and Villon’s brother), the Delaunays, Picabia, Léger, Apollinaire, Gino Severini, Albert Gleizes, Emile Le Fauconnier, and Jean Metzinger. Although those who gathered there have often been labeled the “Puteaux group,” and identified with the rigid second-generation Cubism of Gleizes and Metzinger, something else was clearly also in the conversational mix: a core group of participants in these Sunday salons were to play important roles in abstraction’s early history.
Then, should there have been any doubt that something was happening, Paris newcomer Picabia thrust his own stake in the ground of this terrain at the same Salon d’Automne in which Kupka’s *Amorpha* works appeared. He, too, showed a gargantuan tableau, *La Source* (The spring, 1912; plate 86), which invoked a figurative reference through its title but was nonetheless an audacious declaration of abstraction. He simultaneously placed a closely related canvas of the same scale—*Danses à la source II* (Dances at the spring II, 1912; plate 87)—at the Salon de la Section d’Or, which also opened that October. Picabia had made both works the summer before, which he had spent almost continuously in the company of Apollinaire. At the time, the poet was working on his booklet *Les Peintres cubistes*, on Cubism and its aftermath,36 the impact of the 1912 exhibitions led him to make major late-stage changes in the proof of the book.37 Divided between venues, Picabia’s irreverent pair of pictures invoked Picasso’s work through their faceted planes and rose-period palette, then seemed to travesty its refinement in their billboard scale, crude paint handling, and pulsing eroticism, as well as through their defiant breach of the figurative tradition, which Picasso had maintained. One critic wrote that Picabia had “set the year’s record for fantasy” with “ugly” works that “evoke incrusted linoleum.”38 At the same Salon d’Automne, Léger showed his *Femme en bleu* (Woman in blue, 1912; plate 89), a work that, rather than describing a woman dressed in blue, seems to efface the figure with large arcing planes of that color, so that the only remaining trace of human reference is the painting’s vertical orientation. The work’s indecipherability was played out in the press, the subject of jest, but savored nonetheless: the work was reproduced on the front page of the newspaper Éclair, the public was invited to decipher it, responses were published through October, until the mystery was “solved” in a letter from Léger himself on November 3.39

On a different shore, in February 1912, Dove, who had been living and working in Westport, Connecticut, showed works so distilled from natural motifs as to approach abstraction in a one-man show in the gallery at 291 Broadway, New York, established by the photographer and aesthetic impresario Alfred Stieglitz (plate 81).40 Dove was no stranger to European modernism: he had spent fifteen months in France in 1908–9, and on his return had been struck by the first American exhibition of work by Picasso, which Stieglitz had hung at 291 in 1911. The show included a drawing Picasso had made the winter before (fig. 4), which appears like a talisman of things to come in a number of photographs showing him or his friends seated proudly below it (fig. 5). The photographer Edward Steichen, who had participated in the selection of the works for this show, described it as “certainly ‘abstract’ nothing but angles and lines that has got [to be] the wildest thing you ever saw laid out for fair.”41

And then the flow of events thickened: toward the end of 1912, Léger began his defiantly abstract *Contrastes de formes* series (Contrasts of forms; plates 92–95). *La Femme en bleu* was probably one of two works he sent to the Armory Show, which opened in New York in February 1913.42 The Americans Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright showed abstract works at the Munich *Neue Kunstsalon* in June 1913 and at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, Paris, in October of that year, preludes to Russell’s grand contribution to the Salon des Indépendants the following spring, a canvas bounded by a border of painted stripes more than eleven feet high (plate 77); and in March 1913, Apollinaire described a series of pictures, distilled from images of trees (plate 252), by a Dutch artist working in Paris, Mondrian, as “a very abstract Cubism.”43 Each of these early efforts stood as a manifesto, a proclamation of the viability of abstraction.
The invention of abstraction is usually told through stories about individual actors, stories contained in discrete narrative silos, each with some claim to priority. One example is Kandinsky’s famous reminiscence, often repeated in the literature: he tells of seeing one of his own paintings leaning on its side, at dusk, sometime after his arrival in Munich in 1896. Incapable of discerning its content, he was nonetheless captivated by the forms and colors of this mysterious work—an event prompting the realization “that objects harmed my pictures.” Yet despite the epiphanic quality of this story, it took Kandinsky years more to produce an abstract picture himself. And it is perhaps more significant that he recounted the tale in 1911, just as abstraction had become a public fact.

It was this drive to speak of individual priority in invention that led the makers of so many of the early works in this exhibition and catalogue to backdate them, sometimes to several years earlier than they were actually made (plates 22, 30, 35, 129, 135, 136, 310). Indeed, there is something else misleading about speaking of the invention of abstraction through stories of solitary protagonists: what we have already heard here suggests that abstraction was incubated, with a momentum that builds up and accelerates, through a relay of ideas and acts among a nexus of players, those who make these artistic gestures and those who recognize and proclaim their significance to a broader audience. It was an invention with multiple first steps, multiple creators, multiple heralds, and multiple rationales.

In its emergence within a rich social network, abstraction resembles many other intellectual developments studied by sociologists. In his book The Sociology of Philosophies, Randall Collins looks at the social dimension of innovation, countering the Romantic ideal of the genius as an inspired loner. Instead, he argues, innovation is found in groups: it arises out of social interaction—conversation, sharing ideas, validation and competition. Moreover, the right sort of group, Collins suggests, can radicalize intellectual innovation, prompting individuals to take positions far more extreme, far more convention defying, than they would alone. This sort of productive sociability may also lead to multiple, almost simultaneous inventions of the same or related things: many investigators converging on the same finding is a common pattern of scientific discovery, as the sociologist of science Robert K. Merton has suggested. Abstraction, with almost simultaneous “first” pictures appearing in a scattering of places, would seem to follow this model. The answer to the question “How do you think a truly radical thought?” seems to be: you think it through a network.

Abstraction’s pioneers, despite being far flung, are far more interconnected than is generally acknowledged. Certain recognized points of contact suggest this: the revelatory exhibition of Italian Futurism organized by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, Paris, in 1912, whose visitors included Duchamp, Picabia, the Russian artist Aleksandra Ekster, and the American artist Joseph Stella, even before the show traveled to London and then around Europe; the huge International Exhibition of Modern Art held at the New York Armory on Lexington Avenue in 1913, which mixed European and American artists and pulled in the crowds; Vladimir Tatlin’s visit to Picasso’s Paris studio in March 1914, where he saw the Spanish artist’s constructed sculptures and then returned home to display “assemblages of materials” of his own in his studio in May, more than a year before exhibiting his famous Ugloye kont-relej (Corner counter-reliefs; fig. 16, plate 219) at the a.to exhibition in Petrograd in December 1915; the arrival of Marinetti in Russia in 1914, to simultaneous acclaim and disparagement so divisive as to precipitate the dissolution of Russian Cubo-Futurism and the formation of its radically innovative successor movements; and later,
in 1922, the Erste Russische Kunstausstellung (First Russian art exhibition) at the Van Diemen gallery in Berlin, organized by David Shterenberg and El Lissitzky, which introduced a Western audience to the Soviet avant-garde after the borders had been closed to the cultural products of the new Bolshevik state in the years since the Russian Revolution of 1917.

There are also many less-well-rehearsed examples of the dissemination of ideas in the history of early abstraction. The Russian literary scholar Aleksandr Smirnov, for example, an old friend and distant cousin of Delaunay-Terk's from her native St. Petersburg, visited Delaunays in France during the summers of 1912 and 1913, spending time at their country house in Louveciennes. Returning to St. Petersburg, Smirnov spread the word of the new art he had seen in France, lecturing in July 1913 at the Brodickaia Sobaka (Stray dog), an avant-garde gathering place in the years before the Revolution, on Robert and Sonia Delaunay's work and the theory of simultaneous contrasts. "L'ESSAGE" by Delaunay-Terk, which combined bright arcs of color with an array of verbal fragments, hung on the walls, and Smirnov showed a copy of La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of little Joan of France, 1913: plate 41) that he had brought with him. Some nonmetings had a charged signification too: Mondrian, it seems, was so eager to avoid Picasso's charismatic influence—and insistence that painting represented things—that he would recall taking pains to avoid meeting the Spanish artist in the years 1912–14, when he lived in Paris. "Let them call it too abstract," he wrote of his work in a letter to Theo van Doesburg, his defiance belying the strength of his feelings on the subject. It is a distinctly modern interconnectedness that emerges here—one that is decidedly international, facilitating intellectual dialogue between established cultural capitals like Paris, host to an international community of intellectuals, and centers in Central and Eastern Europe and the United States.

Abstraction's network was fostered in the years immediately before World War I by a new modern culture of connectivity. In trains, automobiles, and steamships, people were travelling internationally in numbers far greater than ever before. National boundaries became porous as people crossed them with new ease—and until the outbreak of World War I, most European countries had minimal passport requirements. Telegraphs, telephones, and radio relayed news of events quickly across the globe. The sinking of the Titanic in 1912, thanks to wireless telegraphy, was not only followed achingly by those on ships just out of reach of the ocean liner but was also one of the first news stories to be reported virtually simultaneously with the event. These same communication technologies allowed for the synchronization of times and clocks across distance, which facilitated the establishment of coordinated international markets and set the stage for the vertiginous growth of a modern speculative economy and commodity culture. In Paris in 1912, Henri Poincaré hosted an international conference that established a method for transmitting accurate radio time signals around the world, and on July 1, 1913, the first time signal to be broadcast globally was sent from the Eiffel Tower, a key step in adopting a universal standard time. All of this fed a more international, global sense of one's world. The network of sociability built by transit pathways, the proliferation of print media, and new forms of communication allowed for the movement of ideas and images across a broad terrain, a development crucial in abstraction's incubation.

Within the art world specifically, the idea of a transnational avant-garde was fostered by the rampant proliferation of journals. Art historian David Cottington estimates that there were approximately 400 "little reviews" of art and culture in Paris alone in the decade preceding World War I. Certain forums were particularly significant, one such being the Blaue Reiter almanac (fig. 6), founded by Kandinsky and Marc and first published in Munich in May 1912, then again in a widely distributed second edition in 1914. Marc wrote in the prospectus for the publication that it would "show the latest movements in French, German and Russian painting. Subtle connections are revealed between modern and Gothic and
primitive art, connections with Africa and the vast Orient, with the highly expressive, spontaneous folk and children's art, and especially with the most recent musical developments in Europe and the new ideas for theater of our time. In its very conception, then, the almanac aimed at a dissolution of boundaries—between national schools, temporal realms, and media. Kandinsky declared it his goal to "show that something was happening everywhere." An emergent modern exhibition culture—for this was the dawn of international loan shows—played a parallel function: pictures moved across borders to new audiences; images were distributed through print media; people took off in trains and cars. Kandinsky and Marc conceived the Blaue Reiter this way, with almanac and exhibiting society as complements to each other. By September 1911, Kandinsky was corresponding with artists in cities throughout Europe, soliciting both pictures for exhibitions and essays and images for publication.

In bringing people into contact, some figures play a disproportionate role. The author Malcolm Gladwell uses the term "connectors" to describe charismatic, socially adept people with contacts dispersed among many different social pools, and he stresses their importance in understanding how certain ideas may become suddenly, precipitously popular. Connectors do the social work of many, facilitating relays of ideas among their broad acquaintance. One key actor in the development of abstraction was Kandinsky himself; another was certainly Apollinaire. The poet began to publish art criticism in 1910, following a long line of French writers who had done so, including Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Stéphane Mallarmé, and the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. Apollinaire quickly established himself as a formidable master of the new print-media world. In the period from 1910 to 1914, he wrote a column that appeared most days in Untranigent, a paper with a daily print run of about 50,000 copies; and another for Paris Journal, with a daily run of 40,000 copies. In 1912, with friends, he launched a review of his own, Les Soirées de Paris, which published poetry and cultural commentary of all sorts—reviews, feuilletons, and Apollinaire's polemical pieces on the direction of painting.

With these combined forums, Apollinaire played a key role in publicizing the incremental developments in the new modes of artistic abstraction. And in some respects he may have precipitated them: in the Francophone context, even before Kupka's and Picabia's audacious showings in the fall of 1912, it was Apollinaire who threw down the gauntlet, declaring in the first, February 1912 issue of Les Soirées de Paris that "the new painters paint
pictures which no longer have any real subject matter" (sujet vérifiable). On the subject of Apollinaire, Delaunay wrote coyly to Kandinsky in a letter of April 3, 1913, "I will speak to you sometime about the subject in painting, about an exciting conversation at the home of Apollinaire, who has begun to believe in us."³⁴

For all Apollinaire's media savvy, his personal social reach was perhaps more remarkable. Picabia's wife, Gabrielle Buffet, considered Apollinaire "the most social, the most well-known, the most far-reaching man of his time."³⁵ He was a close friend of Picasso's, the one who introduced him to Georges Braque in 1907.³⁶ He recommended that Kupka read the color theory of Paul Signac.³⁷ He often accompanied Picabia on road trips in one of the latter's magnificent fleet of cars, and Buffet recalls the pair's endless discussions of abstraction.³⁸ He lived for a while with the Delaunays in late 1912, a key moment for our topic, and it was he, too, who introduced Sonia Delaunay-Terk to the poet Blaise Cendrars, an encounter that would result in their collaboration on La Prose du Transsibérien (plate 41).³⁹ In January 1913, he traveled with Robert Delaunay to Germany for the painter's show there at the Sturm gallery in Berlin, where he held court with the German Expressionists and gave an influential lecture on modern painting.⁴⁰ For the occasion, the duo published a catalogue of Delaunay's paintings, prefaced with a dedication (reproduced in the present volume on the half title page) and a poem, "Les Fenêtres" (The windows), by Apollinaire. When a delegation of Italian Futurists made an extended visit to Paris, he put up the poet-painter Carlo Carrà in his offices at Les Soirées de Paris, and the two saw each other almost daily,⁴¹ then produced graphically innovative free verse in quick succession—Apollinaire the first calligramme (fig. 7), Carrà parole in libertà (plate 112).⁴² (He even managed to broker a gallery contract between the Italian and Kahnweiler.)⁴³ Through Picabia, Apollinaire met the Mexican artist Marius de Zayas, who was scouting for Stieglitz in Paris in 1914, and whose rapturous report of the meeting prompted Stieglitz to begin an exchange of journals with Apollinaire through the mail. Not surprisingly, Stieglitz's journal 291 (fig. 8), appearing in 1915, was modeled in part on Les Soirées de Paris (fig. 7).⁴⁴

The network through which the idea of abstraction spread is suggested in this book in a diagram (front endpapers), made with a tip of the hat to the famous chart that graced the cover of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s catalogue for his Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition, at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (plate 452). Vectors link individuals who knew each other, suggesting the unexpected density of contacts among abstraction's pioneers. Key
connectors can be discerned: they appear at the center of a burst of rays and include Kandinsky, Apollinaire, Stieglitz, Marinetti, and Tristan Tzara. Perhaps not surprisingly, at least on reflection, what many of these individuals have in common is the fact that they served, among their other roles, as editors of little reviews, building a network in their cross-border correspondence, commissioning manuscripts, requesting reproductions, and soliciting support.

IV

APOLLINAIRE WAS PERHAPS THE FIRST to give a name to this new phenomenon, distinguishing it from a generalized Cubism just weeks after Kupka displayed his *Amorphia* paintings at the Salon d’Automne, though he did not mention Kupka by name. The term he bestowed — Orphism — was both awkward and decidedly anachronistic: it paid homage to the mythical Greek poet/musician Orpheus, who had appeared in one of Apollinaire’s poems of 1911 as an avatar of “pure poetry.” Evoking too the Orphic cults and the Alexandrians, the writers of the classical period who fascinated Apollinaire, it suggested a fusing of ancient mystery and modern image. A spate of appellations for this new form of picture-making soon followed: pure painting (Apollinaire, Delaunay, Kandinsky, and the critic Maurice Raynal), new pictorial realism and variations thereof (Delaunay, Léger, Malevich, and Mondrian), objectless painting (Klee and Malevich in German and Russian respectively) — each indicative of subtle shifts in philosophical orientation. The artists pursuing nonrepresentational painting splintered into an array of grouplets with neologicist self-nominations like “Rayism,” “Synchromism,” “Suprematism,” “Unism,” and so forth. Even so, as abstract pictures began to appear, the difficulty that observers and participants apparently had in finding a suitable name for them suggests how they continued to defy easy categorization.

The word that we have come to use as shorthand for painting that jettisons the depiction of things, the one that I use here — abstraction — had been in existence long before this moment. Georges Roque and Jean-Claude Lebensztejn have recently traced its evolution from early senses as a verbal act meaning “to remove,” “to isolate.” By the sixteenth century, the word had the sense of “considering in isolation,” of “separating accident from substance” (Lebensztejn), so that one might, for example, begin to define the “abstract sciences” as those removed from practical application or empirical study — that is, from real-world concerns. Here abstraction functions as an operation, the act of abstracting one thing from another, and this understanding is still present in early abstract works in which traces of descriptive subject matter abound. At times the figure seems to be aggressively effaced, layered under paint applied in a different mode (Kupka’s *Mme Kupka dans les verticales* [Mme. Kupka among verticals, 1910–11; plate 25] or Léger’s *Femme en bleu*); at others, shattered fragments of recognizable elements emerge as if to maintain ties between the artwork and things in the world (Delaunay’s *Fenêtres* or Kandinsky’s *Komposition V*), or vestiges of a natural or figurative motif seem to provide an armature for a new type of painting (Picabia’s *Source*, Morton Schamberg’s *Figure (Geometric Patterns)* [1913; plate 80], Mondrian’s “The Trees” [1912; plate 252]). These elements are common enough to suggest that evacuating all ties to the natural world was not key to the models of abstraction first proposed around 1912.

When the term “abstraction” does appear in the sphere of art, in the nineteenth century, it was often deployed pejoratively to mean overly intellectual or theoretical. Charles Clément, for example, writing in 1868, described the work of the followers of Jacques-Louis David as characterized by “a tense style, an overspecialized search for shape which can only lead
to a kind of abstraction—to a coldness inevitable in conceptions which are determined by completely false and rigid pictorial ideas. Yet in an essay of the same year, Charles Baudelaire broached a new sense of abstraction as a language separate from nature, humanly created and therefore essentially artificial: “In nature there is neither line nor color. Line and color have been created by man. They are abstractions…. The pleasures we derive in them are of a different sort, yet they are perfectly equal to and absolutely independent of the subject of the picture.” Wilhelm Worringer’s book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and empathy), of 1908—actually written in 1906, as a doctoral thesis—reintroduced the term at a moment in which it resonated with conversations within the international avant-garde. Although Worringer did not speak of contemporary art, he described a “will to abstraction” in both primitive and modern societies, a common expression of anxiety and vulnerability in relation to an external world not confidently mastered. The “aim of abstraction”—here Worringer picked up on the meaning of the word as an isolating operation—was “to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value.” The text had great impact, especially in German avant-garde circles around Berlin’s Sturm gallery; its importance for Kandinsky is signaled in his declaration of “our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives” on the opening page of *On the Spiritual in Art,* and his use of the term “abstraction” in that essay probably also shows its influence. Some of the connotations Worringer found in the “will to abstraction”—separation from the world, purity, arbitrariness, ideas of the absolute—have likewise lingered.

**V**

**THE PUBLIC APPEARANCE OF THE FIRST ABSTRACT PAINTINGS** was matched by equally momentous developments in other spheres. New types of music celebrated sound, independent of compositional or harmonic development; Futurist *parole in liberta* (words in liberty), Russian *znam* (transrational poetry), and Dadaist sound poetry privileged the graphic and aural quality of language over communicative comprehensibility; and dance abandoned its traditional grounding in costumed narrative to stress the kinesthetic movement of the body. Scholars have long noted the historical coincidence of these phenomena but not often the fact that they were deeply linked, not only through their similar challenges to the conventions of their respective genres but also through important relationships among key figures in these different disciplines, relationships that facilitated the movement of ideas across media.

Marc tells a famous story about Kandinsky’s embrace of abstraction. He first met the Russian artist in Munich, at a New Year’s Eve party celebrating the incoming year of 1911. That night they began an intense and productive friendship that would include the cofounding of the *Bläue Reiter* group and the publication of the *Bläue Reiter* almanac. Two days later, on January 2, 1911, these new friends, along with Aleksei Jawlensky, Marianne Werefkin, and Kandinsky’s companion, Gabriele Münter, attended a concert of music by the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg. The crowd was dumbfounded but the artists were dazzled; over drinks after the concert, they excitedly discussed the congruence they recognized between Schoenberg’s music, his theories (his writing had been published in the program), and Kandinsky’s painting. On January 14, in a letter to the artist August Macke, Marc wrote of the evening, “Can you imagine a music in which tonality [that is, the adherence
to any key) is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky’s large Composition [likely Komposition II, now destroyed], which also permits no trace of tonality."

For Kandinsky, Schoenberg’s music seems to have meant something more. Although he had developed the philosophical foundations for an abstract practice in his manuscript for On the Spiritual in Art, he had been hesitant to abandon representation. With the concert, though, his work took a new direction. The very next day, he made some quick sketches of the performance (plates 11, 12), then radically distilled their forms until only traces of the original subjects remained in a work called Impression III (Konzert) (plate 13). Moreover, and at much the same time, he asked Schoenberg for the full text of Harmonielehre (Theory of harmony), the book excerpted in the concert program. Without waiting for the composer’s response, he obtained an offprint, translated part of the text into Russian with annotations of his own, and published it in the catalogue of an exhibition in Odessa that spring (figs. 9, 10). The experience seems to have served as a catalyst: by the unusually hot summer of that year, Kandinsky began work on Komposition V, a monumental tableau that almost thoroughly effaced referential content, its scale an announcement of the artist’s ambitions for abstraction. "Since that time," he reflected, "I know what undreamed-of possibilities... color conceals within itself"—a revelation that "tore open before me the gates of the realm of absolute art." Scores of preparatory sketches exist for the work; instead of the quick sketches that he had used as an armature in composing Impression III (Konzert), Kandinsky now began with diagrams—a distinctly modern form that plots the world without seeking to reflect it (fig. 11).

There is a story about Picabia too—a road trip story, one of the first of many in the history of art." One Paris evening in late July 1912, after much drinking at the Bar de la Paix, the gregarious artist proposed to two companions that they take one of his cars, drive to Boulogne, and catch the boat to England, where his wife, the dancer Gabrielle Buffet, was vacationing. During the return from England, Buffet reports, the three men heatedly discussed "pure painting." "Are blue and red unintelligible?" stumped Picabia, rallying against the hesitations of his friends. "Are not the circle and the triangle, volumes and colors, as intelligible as this table?" The conversation was transformative: Picabia completed La Source and two paintings titled Danse à la source in its wake. Who were his companions? Apollinaire and Claude Debussy. The narrative functions as parable: take a modern artist, a poet, and a composer, put them in a car, rumble along, and what do you get? Abstraction.
In 1915, Malevich retrospectively located the development of abstract pictures in his own collaboration with the composer Mikhail Matiushin and the experimental poet Aleksei Kruchenykh on the 1913 staging of the modern opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory over the sun)—an effort to revolutionize Russia’s naturalist theater (the last “stronghold of artistic weakness”) as a synthesis of all the arts. From this vantage of two years later, Malevich claimed his drawing of the set for the opera’s second act as a prototype for his Suprematist pictures, a first version of the black square (fig. 12). If the proscenium stage gave him the device of a windowlike opening onto an illusionary world, he countered its effects by designing the backdrop as a perspectival box, then inserted a plane—bisected along the diagonal and colored black above and white below—to block visual access to its depth. Now, two years later, on May 29, 1915, just weeks before he would announce the invention of Suprematism, he wrote to Matiushin, “That which was done unconsciously is now bearing extraordinary fruit.” Its germination resulted in his determination to develop a new theory of *bespredmetnost* in art—literally the quality of being “without object”—which would “go beyond zero.” That summer Kruchenykh stayed with Malevich at his dacha, discussing a project for a new journal to be called *Null* (Zero) that would serve as a platform for their efforts. Meanwhile the artist was preparing the Suprematist pictures he would unveil for the first time in Petrograd in December of that year, at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* (plate 205). These works, he announced, offered a new “painterly realism” in opposition to painterly illusionism.

Art historians and critics have often described abstraction in terms of a quest to define and purify the medium of painting itself. But the stories told by abstraction’s pioneers about their embrace of the new possibilities for image-making (and the accounts of close allies bearing witness) suggest something quite different: rather than a rebuff to the influence of other media, abstraction was conceived in the fertile conditions of cross-media exchange. Despite their mythic qualities, these narratives of invention also suggest how these simultaneous medium revolutions—the development of atonal music, the loosening of signifier and signified in poetry—fueled each other: composers, poets, and artists borrowed liberally across fields, transforming ideas to apply them to their own art forms, pushing each other to greater audacity in venturing into new territory. They testify to the crucial role that network thinking plays in innovation.
Music in particular was often invoked as a way of rationalizing abstraction to a public, as a way of explaining how it might be understood. When a New York Times correspondent covering the “latest of painting cults” visited Kupka’s Neuilly studio in October 1913, the artist explained, “Music is the only art of sounds that are not in nature and almost entirely created. . . . [Man] created writings, he created the aeroplane and the locomotive. Therefore, why may he not create in painting and sculpture independently of the forms and colors of the world about him?”

Actual structural borrowings from music occur less frequently in the art of these years than analogies between music and art do in critical explanations of abstraction; yet at a moment when no rules for this new form of picture-making had yet been established, music played a key role for several of the first-generation abstract artists in suggesting how an abstract picture might be organized. Knowing the importance of Richard Wagner for Kandinsky, for example, it is easy to imagine that the informe idiom making its debut in Komposition V, where unbounded patches of color are loosely held together by whiplash lines, took its cue from the composer’s punctuation of melting forms with repeating leitmotifs.

Klee, himself a gifted musician for whom Bach was central, gravitated to grid forms that present the artwork as pattern, a nonhierarchical matrix of discrete units: here, repetitions, inversions, mirrorings, and intervals resonate with the structure of a fugue (plate 369).

Poetry likewise offered insights. It is far more than coincidence that so many of abstraction’s pioneers wrote experimental or sound poetry: the list includes Kandinsky, Arp, Lewis, Picabia, Malevich, Van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, and Olga Rozanova. Malevich collaborated with avant-garde poets from 1909 on, and the period shortly before and after his invention of Suprematism in June 1915 was a time of particularly intense poetic experimentation for him. In one hand-drawn visual poem, likely made in 1916, with the inscription “prografabuk” (graph-drawing), he arrayed word fragments across a sheet of graph paper, containing them within a square frame that evoked pictorial space (fig. 13). Underlining the congruence between this and other poems and both music and painting, he wrote to Matischin, in a letter enclosing an example, that he had created “notes-letters [that] express masses of sound” and had “distributed them freely in space just like in painterly Suprematism.”

The image begins to suggest that he was thinking of poetry when he plotted his new paintings: the sonic properties of phonemes, the graphic appearance of letters, and pictorial form began to take on a kind of interchangeability. Tatlin directed and designed the sets for Klebnikov’s play Zangezi in 1923 (fig. 14), and spoke of the poet-playwright’s shattered syntax as a motivating model: “The performance of Zangezi is based
on the principle: the word is the building unit, the material is the unit of organized space…. Parallel to his word construction I decided to introduce a material construction.10. The approach in each case is different, but all of these artists used poetic experimentation as a way of pushing the boundaries of communication, testing the elasticity of representation, and creating links between verbal play and visual practice.

VI

WHAT CHANGES? Why is an abstract picture conceptually impossible in 1910, then by 1912 embraced by a handful of protagonists? What accounts for this historical shift?

Of course it is difficult to establish truly causal relationships between historical events and cultural phenomena, though it is plausible to say that social, political, and economic shifts established the terrain in which abstraction might thrive. And it’s a good cocktail-party game to ask students of modernism why abstraction happened at this moment in time. The answers are vastly different, inherently partial, and revealing of the proclivities of one’s respondents. Cars, photography, relativity, and the death of god haunt scholarly explanations of the emergence of abstraction, and together reveal a broader sense of modern culture in dramatic transformation.

At one level we might speak of broad epistemological shifts in the structure of modern thinking. The nature of perception was being redefined across many disciplines; by 1912, one’s ability to describe the world in terms of a firm correspondence between what was seen and what was known had been thoroughly shaken. New physiological theories of vision pointed to the fissure between the external world and our internal corporeal and psychological representations of it. In a related philosophical move, Edmund Husserl challenged the Cartesian idea that perception takes place in the mind of the observer, whose experience is universal, and argued instead that it is embedded in the relation between the perceiver and the thing perceived. Such theories herald the disappearance of the idea of an objective, detached observer who can watch phenomena unfold at a distance.

In science, empirical methodologies were supplemented by new, nonempirical ones, most notably the theory of relativity and quantum physics. As Peter Galison has described, non-Euclidean mathematics, which provided a foundation for Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity, suggest a model for these fundamental structural changes in modern thought.11 Euclidean mathematics describe real or plausibly real objects in the world. Non-Euclidean mathematics no longer do so, but rather create a structure of relations articulated in a formula: one can speak, for example, of the twelfth dimension, a concept that is a mathematical progression rather than a descriptive tool. If the early twentieth century is the end of the era of substantive thinking, it is the beginning of an era of relational thought.

13. KAZIMIR MALEVICH. Prografachnik (Graph-drawing). 1916. Pencil on graph paper, 4 7/16 x 6 5/8" (10.6 x 16.8 cm). Khardzhiev-Chaga Foundation, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

14. VLADIMIR TATLIN. Stage design for Velimir Khlebnikov’s play Zangezi. 1923. Charcoal on paper, 21 5/8 x 29 11/16" (55 x 76 cm). The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Similarly, the semiotic theories of language developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and published posthumously by his students in 1916, offered a radical critique of the conception of language as an act of naming—applying one word to one thing, and assuming that there was a natural link between the two. For Saussure, the relationship between the component parts of the sign—the phonic or graphic signifier and the ideational signified—was arbitrary. He instead described language as a system: meaning was made in the relation between units. Russian formalist critics, whose work emerged from the artistic avant-garde as much as from academic disciplines, and who had great influence on the artists in their midst, developed congruent principles around literature, conceiving texts not as unmediated content but as formal systems structured by interdependent devices. The influence of these broad intellectual developments on the artists who would make abstract pictures was not necessarily direct, though they often showed keen interest in such topics. But such shifts in the structure of thinking offer some sense of why, in the second decade of the twentieth century, it may have seemed plausible that images would no longer be naturally linked to things in the world, but might operate instead as units within the system of a practice, or as statements within a larger discursive field—as “signs circulating without a ‘convertible’ base in the world of nature,” as Rosalind Krauss has put it.9

The emergent modern media culture heightened common awareness of the artificiality and pliability of codes of representation. Telegraphy produced a radical reduction of communication to binary system.10 “The gramophone transformed auditory experience, severing the voice from the body of the speaker, allowing the listener to hear a voice that could not hear in return, mixing music with ambient noise on an equivalent plane.”11 Cinematic effects put on exuberant display the malleability of time and space, reversing action by running film backward, using parallel editing to show simultaneous responses to an event, and moving inanimate objects through forms of pixilation. Photography was dramatically changing the way people represented and experienced both their personal and their collective history—indeed many commentators on the emergence of abstraction have focused on the permeation of the public sphere by photographic images during these years. The logic offered is a theory of displacement: since painting no longer had to do mimetic work, this function being usurped by the camera image, it was liberated for other tasks.12 But mechanical reproduction may also have put the artifice of mimetic representation on full display, undermining it as a source of authority, certainty, and authenticity.

In the sphere of art itself, perhaps the key precipitating factor for the development of abstraction was Cubism. While Picasso himself refused to accept the idea of an abstract painting, for many painters and critics abstraction was the lesson of Cubism. Looking at pictures by Picasso and Braque on exhibit in London in the crucial year of 1912, the year in which the ground was ready, Roger Fry wrote, “They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life…. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality. The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form—a visual music; and the later works of Picasso show this clearly enough.”13

Mondrian’s understanding of the logical implications of Cubism provoked in him a form of oedipal disappointment with the Cubist artists’ inability to see the path forward as clearly as he did. “For a time I was much influenced by them,” he wrote. “Gradually I became aware that Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal: the expression of pure reality.”14 Yet among those who pioneered abstraction, Mondrian was hardly alone in saying that Cubism provided its conceptual foundation. For Malevich, Cubism clarified the arena for new work: “Regarding Cubism the brilliant solution to our problems, the liberation from objectness, we move into space, color and time,” he wrote. “It is with these three worlds that we will
explore our new tasks." Other tributes to the legacy of Cubism came in pictorial form. A Klee work of 1914 is entitled Hommage à Picasso (Homage to Picasso; plate 365); its oval shape—it is one of many ovoid works in this show—declares its genetic link to Picasso's and Braque's Analytic Cubism. Yet the work resolves what Klee saw as the "inconsistencies" of Cubism—its simultaneous indifference toward and promotion of the object—through abstraction: the scaffolding of Cubist works appears here transformed into a frank grid of colored squares, lacking referential content.

What did Cubism allow these critics and artists to see? It launched the most radical assault yet on the traditional relationships in painting between figure and surrounding space, solid and void, sky and ground plane—relationships fundamentally maintained even by the Fauves. It used an unnatural palette, evacuated of color, and a compressed space of shifting open planes, defined by burst contours and intermittent grids, in which fragments of naturalistic details barely emerge. Yet as Krauss has pointed out, the slight representational information Cubism provided was consistently read by contemporaries as giving more rather than less information about the world." Gleizes's and Metzinger's Du Cubisme, for example, a prescriptive and influential book of 1912, sets Cubism's "profound realism" of the mind against the "superficial realism" of the eye." The radicality of Cubism was understood to derive from the premise that vision was no longer a reliable ground for pictorial realism; its gridded scaffolding of flickering references seemed to ask instead how we know an object. This turning away from the world as seen to the world as understood was revelatory for abstraction's early practitioners. In undermining the criteria of resemblance in painting, Cubism served as a crucial step in painting's rebirth as idea around 1912. With few exceptions, abstraction's pioneers worked through Cubism in developing their practices, absorbing its revelations and at the same time devising strategies to supersede it.

**VII**

**AS ABSTRACTION EMERGED FROM CROSS-MEDIUM EXCHANGE.** It put pressure on traditional medium categories, particularly painting. In playing out the terms of painting, the makers of abstract works inventoried and interrogated its properties—color, composition, surface, support, frame, relationship to the wall—in such a way that each was fundamentally transformed. In doing so, these artists challenged a series of premises long associated with painting and the way it was judged.

In the Western tradition of art, painting had been tied to the perspectival codes formulated during the Renaissance, and to their implicit metaphor that a picture should function like a view through a window onto an illusory world. Equally important were the metaphysical implications of Renaissance perspective, which assumes a discarnate gaze on a scene external to the beholder. Certain premises were embedded in perspective's long dominion: the sublimation of the physical materials of painting in an image whose surface, though opaque, appeared to be transparent; the primacy of the visual; the illusion of a coherent recessional space; the separation between the work and its beholder; the immobility of the image; and the bounded frame of the picture were among the key assumptions. These postulates became focal points for abstraction's pioneers, who investigated and tested them to generate new propositions about the nature of painting. The propositions were many, and at times contradicted each other, but in their aggregate they marked the demise of painting in its traditional form and its opening to the practices of the century to come.
The new ideas included:

*Matter and Death*

Rodchenko’s systematic inventorying of the properties of painting—texture, point, and line—concluded with color. In 1921 he produced his famous monochrome triptych, a trio of canvases of identical dimensions, each painted in an unmodulated primary: *Chisty krasoty tvet, chisty zhelty tvet, chisty sini tvet* (Pure red color, pure yellow color, pure blue color; plate 290). The work defined painting as a deadpan inventory of the basic colors from which all others can be made, and also as a material surface, dumb matter—paint applied to a support with a brush. “Painting is dead,” announced the critic Nikolai Tarabukin on seeing this radical distillation. “Rodchenko the murderer and suicide.” Tarabukin’s words point to a paradox of modernist abstraction: in the desire to reveal the essence of a medium lies that medium’s ultimate demise. Rodchenko saw this too, later asserting in a now famous statement, “I took painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, yellow. I affirmed it’s all over. Primary colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation.” In replacing illusion with materiality, abstraction made visible the tautology of the real. Rodchenko’s monochromes marked the first of many twentieth-century announcements of the end of painting.

*Tactility*

The attention to matter in early abstract painting emerged in the work of some artists as a heightened focus on *faktura*, literally “facture” or “texture” and understood as the sort of self-evident handling of material seen in Malevich’s *Suprematicheskaya kompozitsiia beloe na belom* (Suprematist composition: white on white) or Rodchenko’s *Bespredmetnaya zhivotopis’ N° 80: cherno na chernom* (Non-objective painting no. 80: black on black) both of 1918 (plates 247, 248). Lissitzky’s *Proun 191D* (1920 or 1921; plate 309), made just a few years later, offers a remarkable inventory of materials with different tactile characteristics, all applied to a plywood board: transparent varnish, chalky gesso, cardboard, metallic paint, and graph paper. The artist offered an antivisual slogan to describe his Proun works of this period: “not a way to see the world [mirosvedenie] but a real world [mirorealnost].” A similar tactile impulse emerged in both Arp’s reliefs, in which the work’s surface becomes literally three-dimensional (plates 335, 336, 339, 340), and his paper collages, which make their layering of material readily apparent (plates 323, 328–32). In 1917, in the second issue of *Dada* magazine, Arp published a collage—a teetering tower of squares of cardboard and of shiny blue and silver metallic paper (plate 331) — titled not *Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance*, as works of this kind would later become known, but *Tableau en papier,* or “painting in paper,” an oxymoron heralding a challenge to the medium. All of these works offered an implicit rebuff to the primacy of the visual in painting, as the appeal to touch ruptured the semblance of a homogenous illusionistic surface. Perhaps this concern also related to the intense interest in the photogram that emerged around 1922 among figures such as Lissitzky, Man Ray, and László Moholy-Nagy (plates 400–404). Made without a camera by laying materials of varying degrees of transparency on light-sensitized paper, the photogram offered not an image of things seen but a trace of physical presence.

*Perspectival Critique*

Abstraction’s assault on perspectival assumptions appears at times as a flat-out rejection of spatial illusionism. Tatlin’s work, for example, is governed by the precept that focusing on the intrinsic properties of materials—opacity, translucency, smoothness, roughness, tensility—disallows illusionism. His three-dimensional reliefs occupy real rather than pictorial space (fig. 16, plates 218, 219, 222). Other artists make perspective the focus of
critical exploration, structuring work in hyperbolic form. Lissitzky's Prouns are rooted in an exercise he called ebkartatn (ex-painting—a term that highlights the sense of assault on that medium), which he designed to retrain his eyes so that he could liberate drawing practice from the assumptions of gravity.13 He began by drawing a geometric figure according to the laws of conventional perspective, then rotated the canvas ninety degrees, adding new volumes that corresponded to the work's new orientation, then rotated it again and then once again, shattering the single coherent viewpoint implicit in Renaissance perspective as he proceeded. Lissitzky announced his use of this practice in his lithographic rendering of his first Proun; four possible orientations for the work are marked with a “n,” for Proun 1 (fig. 15). Proun 15D also seems to be the product of such a process (plate 309).

Mobility

An impulse to mobility underlies early abstraction from its beginnings. Swirling forms in the works of Kupka, Giacomo Balla, and Umberto Boccioni (plates 28, 29, 103–5, 108) represent their attempt to show human sensory input over time, and the Delaunays held up simultaneous experience as the paradigmatic mode of modern life and therefore the foundation for their practice (plates 31–32). Almost as soon as abstraction was invented, too, artists began to try to make abstract works that would move. Léopold Survage, a Russian artist working in avant-garde circles in Paris, prepared sheet after sheet of abstract watercolors (plates 56–72) in an attempt to work in “the mode of succession in time,” as he announced in 1914 in Apollinaire’s journal Les Soirées de Paris. “An immobile abstract form does not do so much of anything.”14 His first goal was to “animate my painting,” the second—one on the edge of technological possibility at the time—to create an abstract color film.15 In 1914, the English painter Duncan Grant read a newspaper account of a performance of Alexander Scriabin’s Prométhée (written in 1908–10, performed in London in March 1914), which its Russian composer, in an unrealized plan, intended to be accompanied by colored lights. Inspired by this ambition, Grant began a work whose title announced his own, multi-modernist intentions: Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound (plate 171). This was a fifteen-foot-long sheet covered with metallic paper squares and abstract calligraphic forms. Its showing was to be accompanied by a slow movement from one of Bach’s Brandenburg concertos, and it was also to be seen “by degrees,”16 its slow unrolling achieved by its unwinding from mechanically turned spools within a camerakite box holding a framing viewing aperture. The kinetic drive evident in so much early abstraction was ultimately realized in the abstract films of Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, and others (plates 440–41), which began to appear around 1922.
Medium Transgression

Monumental canvases by David Bomberg, the Delaunays, Kandinsky, Kupka, Léger, Marc, Picabia, and Russell from abstraction’s inaugural years (e.g., plates 24, 77, 85), grand statements for exhibition, speak to their makers’ ambitions for abstraction and at the same time their operation within the tradition of salon painting. Yet from these points one can trace a number of simultaneous narratives of abstraction’s diffusion: from the tableau to Gesamtkunstwerk theatrical and operatic productions (plates 194–204, 312–22); from painting into the new modern media—photography, film, graphic design, and typography—embraced by some Russian Constructivists and artists in the circles around G (fig. 17, plate 380) and Veselyb’ magazines; from a two-dimensional picture on the wall to abstract spatial environments that the viewer could enter, a space of which were made in Germany around 1923 (plates 371–80), and to three-dimensional objects intended as conceptual prototypes for new forms of architecture or urban planning (plates 293, 296, 297, 303–5, 308–12); and from a precious object in an exhibition space or domestic interior into the public space of the street, where abstraction, in the form of both propaganda and the monument, was briefly offered up as an unlikely language of revolution in cities such as Moscow and Vitebsk (plates 291, 301, 306, 307). Even Mondrian, an abstract painter who never moved into another medium, believed that his Neo-Plastic works might function in the larger world as seeds of ideal perfection motivating the redesign of the interior, of architecture, and of society itself. Tested by abstraction, the boundaries of painting and other media began to dissolve, to engage in a novel kind of expansiveness, extending beyond the frame to a different kind of experience.

VIII

IN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY OF 1913, Kandinsky asked, “What is to replace the missing object?” This was the problem posed by abstraction in a nutshell, and artists and their allies betrayed a great deal of anxiety on this score. First was the fear that the art object might be seen as merely decorative, and therefore insignificant. Hugo Ball’s doubts about abstraction seem to have been of this sort; he responded to the enthusiasm for it among many of his fellow Dadaists in Zurich by asking whether it would produce “more than a revival of ornament and a new access to it?” Kandinsky’s decorative curves—are they possibly only painted carpets (that we should sit on, and not hang them on the wall, as we do?) And then there was the fear that the object might fail to signify at all. On this score too, artists were among abstraction’s harshest critics: Macke, aiming at Kandinsky in a letter to Marc of 1913, called his work “unbelievably complicated but absolutely shallow color-spot-composition.” The concern that abstract work might in the end be seen as simply a random arrangement of pictorial elements structured its practice. A central question percolated throughout its early history: how to make a picture that would defy such arbitrariness? A picture that would be understood to mean?

Faced with the fear that abstract work might be seen as simply arbitrary, its proponents compensated with words. Abstract pictures rarely if ever existed in isolation; rather, many words circulated within their orbit—titles, manifestos, statements of principle, performative declamations, discursive catalogues, explanatory lectures, and critical writing by allies. With almost each came a proliferation of text, a parallel papery world. In the landmark 0.10 exhibition in Petrograd (today’s St. Petersburg) in 1915, a famous first moment in which reference to the external world was fully abandoned, Malevich tacked the handwritten
slogan “Suprematism zbiroci” (the Suprematism of painting), a list of titles, and numbers indexing those titles to the wall—the installation as three-dimensional catalogue (plate 205). He also both distributed a free handbill and sold a brochure, *Ot kubizmu k suprematismu: novyi zbirociyi realizm* (From Cubism to Suprematism: new painterly realism). A less-known photograph of Tatlin’s famous display of two counter-reliefs in an adjacent gallery in the same exhibition shows that next to one of these works he pinned to the wall two copies—one recto, one verso—of a booklet published by the magazine *Novyi zhurnal dlia vsekh* (fig. 16); the booklet featured reproductions of his recent three-dimensional constructions and a statement in which he denied any group affiliation (in counterpart to Malevich’s self-positioning as the founder of a new “ism”) and listed the assertively non-art materials of his works (plates 220, 221). These examples suggest how abstraction exists in relation to the proliferation of archival material inherent in modernism: the makers of abstract pictures and their allies did not let them stand alone, but sent them out into the world accompanied by a torrent of words.

One might speak of an apparatus for abstraction, of texts in its ambit. Certainly abstraction made it more incumbent on the artist to write: in its first years, we see a variety of ambitious artist-driven publication projects—including Malevich’s plans for *Nul’, De Stijl*, the first journal dedicated to abstract art, launched in 1917; and, in Berlin, *G*, dedicated to a form of technological abstraction (fig. 17)—as well as scores of manifestos and theoretical treatises. Mondrian wrote consistently beginning in 1917, penning multipart treatises and even a Socratic dialogue—a conversation between a “layman,” a “naturalistic painter,” and an “abstract-realist painter”—in an effort to present his ideas publicly; many of his texts would find a home in the pages of *De Stijl*.

Beyond the proliferation of journals, the problem of how to develop structures for the delivery of text became one of great immediacy for the first generation of abstract artists. Nowhere is this more fully articulated than in the *Proun Portfolio*, which Lissitzky produced in 1920—an inventory of the first eleven Proun works, reproduced as lithographs in Vitebsk, where the artist was head of the print workshop, then assembled in Moscow. In a copy of the portfolio that Lissitzky inscribed to Malevich, he added three supplementary pages: two sheets on which the word “Proun” was first written in bold block letters, then defined in careful handwriting, more verbosely in Russian than in German; and a title page on which the dual delivery of images and texts inherent in abstraction was articulated in a quasi-mathematical formula—“*Prouny litografii + neskol’ko slov k rabotam*” (Prouns. 11 lithographs + a few words about the works; p. 12 and fig. 18). The graphic presence of these manifesto
sheets within the framework of the portfolio, a container for artwork, suggests how short a step it was from here to the presentation of text as image.

This structure — of images and words existing in parallel spheres, the two held at a distance — suggests a division in modernism itself. With narrative and the descriptive connection to the external world evacuated from the picture, image-making and writing emerge as simultaneous and interrelated practices with a displaced relationship to one another. Long-held ideas of abstraction as the assertion of painting’s autonomy are at the very least made more complex.

As Thierry de Duve has suggested, no one played out the implications of abstraction in his practice more than a figure not conventionally understood as an abstract artist: Duchamp. He seems to have intuited the stakes almost immediately. In 1912, Duchamp spent almost four months away from Paris: he passed July and August in Munich, where he acquired a copy of Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, annotating it with minute notes in the margins; then in October he took off on what seems by all accounts to have been a revelatory trip to the Jura with Apollinaire, Picabia, and Bufet. Upon his return, Duchamp began working with a new sense of the project he would pursue for the rest of his career: a critique of art’s visual sensuality, of what he called “retinal art,” manifested in the production of readymades, diagrammatic images of fantastic machines, and the compilation of cryptic notes, themselves presented as artwork. Picabia’s presence during the preceding months seems to have buoyed Duchamp’s capacity for such a paradigm shift: “The rest were either for or against Cézanne. They had no thought of anything beyond the physical side of painting.”

Duchamp’s claim that a readymade — a selected object signed by the artist — might serve as a work of art, an idea he began testing in 1913 and announced two years later, depended on the reordering initiated by abstraction: it involved a break with picturing, an understanding of art not as illusion but as idea. In defining the readymade, he also stressed the importance of the inscription he often applied to an object he chose: “that sentence instead of describing the object like a title was meant to carry the mind of the spectator toward other regions more verbal,” he would later write. The readymade was thing plus text. Similarly, the extravagant production and compilation of textual commentary that accompanied Duchamp’s practice from then on, and that he periodically rendered in exacting reproductions and boxed for presentation and sale, seems to diagnose the divided nature of abstraction itself: the way words circulate around a work, both necessary to its functioning and held at a distance. Duchamp’s earliest effort to assemble and publish his notes in reproduction was the Box of 1914, produced in four copies containing sixteen photographs of manuscripts, notes, and a drawing, all mounted on cards and housed in a commercial box for photographic plates. He intended it to be seen alongside his *Large Glass* (1915-23; plate 165): “I wanted that album to go with the ‘Glass,’ and he consulted when seeing the ‘Glass,’ because as I see it, it must not be ‘looked at’ in the aesthetic sense of the word. One must consult the book and see the two together. The conjunction of the two things entirely removes the retinal aspect that I don’t like.” The texts relate to the image obliquely, as Duchamp stressed — “I thought I could collect ... some calculations, some reflections, without relating them.” They served, he suggested, to put painting at the service of the mind.

Duchamp’s work makes clear that the fact of abstraction would change the terms of artistic practice for the century to come. In its inscription of artwork as idea, its expansiveness across media, and its divided structure, in which work and text are integrally linked but held apart, and the artist is a producer of both images and words, its implications are vast. In all of these senses, abstraction is a form of ur-modernism: it serves as a foundation for what follows. Today, when we see an obdurate object, an encompassing media installation, the frank surface of a monochrome, text presented as image, or a conceptual script, we see the legacy of the invention of abstraction.
18. EL LISSITZKY. Prouny (Prouns). 1920.
Handdrawn unique colophon for a copy of the Proun Portfolio dedicated and given to
Kazimir Malevich. Gouache and ink on paper, 17 1/16" x 13 19/32" (43 x 35 cm). Galerie Gmurzynska,
Cologne

16 The works Kandinsky exhibited were Improvisation 24 (Troika 1), Improvisation 25 (Jardin de l'amour), and Improvisation 26 (En rampant). See Pascual Rousseau, "Prouny," in Robert Delaunay, 1906-1943, de l'impressionnisme à l'abstraction, exh. cat. (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1999), p. 166, n. 3.


19 Ibid., p. 167.

20 Delaunay, "Letter to Kandinsky (1912)," p. 112. Translation modified by the author.


25 See Baetcke and Blum, "Biographische Notes," p. 25.

26 Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger seem to have served as opposition to this direction before the installation of the 1912 Salon des Indépendants, though it was a venue that was by definition jury-free, Gleizes, who was a member of the judging committee, asked Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon to persuade their brother Marcel Duchamp to withdraw his Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2 (1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art), an image that obscured a figurative subject in dynamic mapping of its path. See William A. Camfield, Frank Kupka: His Art, Life, and Times (Princeton: at the University Press, 1979), p. 28.

27 In addition to The Source, Camfield states that Danses à la source (plate 88) was shown at the Salon d'Automne. Camfield, Frank Kupka, pp. 3, 33. Danses à la source was reproduced in a review of the Salon d'Automne by Claude-Roger, "Au Salon d'Automne, maîtres cubistes," La Comédie artistique, Paris, October 5, 1912, pp. 62-65.


32 Arthur Dove's works in the 291 show included Cow (before February 1912), now in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Nature Symbolized No. 2 (before February 1912), now at the Art Institute of Chicago.


37 Examples of backdated works in this exhibition and volume include: Kandinsky, Untitled (1913), inscribed verso on "Aquarelle 1910 (abstraction)" (plate 22); Delaunay, Soleil (tune, simultaneity) (Sun, moon, simultaneously 2, 1912), dated on painting 1912 (date 35); Delaunay, Le Disque (The first disk, 1913), exhibited in the Galerie Paul Guillaume, Paris, in 1912 dated 1912 (plate 30); Natalia Goncharova, Rayism, blue-green forest (1913), dated on reverse 1913 (plate 135); Mikhail Larionov, Stereol (Glass, 1912), dated 1909 on painting (plate 132); Larionov, Rayism, Circular Composition of red (1912-13), dated on painting 1911 (plate 31); Malevich, Architecton Elfa (Alpha architecture, 1923), signed and dated "K. Malevich 1920" (plate 310).
Kandasmy, On the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, p. 29. Kandinsky also speaks of "pure abstraction" ("den rein Abstrakten") and "purely abstract forms" in "On the Spiritual in Art," in Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, pp. 169, 207, among others. In a letter to Delaunay that circulated widely in Parisian artistic circles, Kandinsky described Cubism as "one of the roots of pure art, a sprout still young, but capable of growth..." "(Le DC' abstrait)"
