

*The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader* is a valuable resource for students and teachers of Russian modernism, and a relevant, useful source to add to every syllabus.

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Medvedkova, Olga. *Kandinsky ou la critique des critiques: Écrits russes de Kandinsky*. Dijon, France: Les Presses du réel, 2013. 229 pp. €24.00. ISBN 978-2-84066-454-3

The primary aim of Olga Medvedkova's collection of Kandinsky's Russian articles is to place his critical writings within the wider context of Russian and European arts and sciences of a century ago. Medvedkova contends that Kandinsky was a profoundly Russian, rather than German or French, artist, and that his aesthetic and philosophical preferences often derived from the Russian cultural legacy—such as Symbolism. She focuses on the Russian alliances in Kandinsky's early biography which kept him connected to Russian intellectual life: his training as a lawyer at Moscow University, his collaboration with the ethnographical expedition which introduced him to the local cultures of the Russian hinterland, his contributions to *Mir iskusstva* and *Apollon*, and, in general, his lively interest in things Russian in spite of his long residence in Germany (until his temporary return to Russia in 1915). In this context, of particular note are Medvedkova's references to Il'ia Repin, Alexandre Benois, Aleksandr Skriabin, the social sciences, and, of course, to the "profonde cohérence des sens" (profound sense of coherence) which Russian writers, artists, and musicians identified with Wagner's operas (p. 7).

Of particular importance to the collection are Kandinsky's early critical explorations such as his essays (here in French translation) "Miracles of Photography," "A Criticism of Critics," "Whither the 'New' Art," "Content and Form," and his various letters to Russian newspapers and magazines on European exhibitions, movements, and artists. These often allude both to the need to establish an exact system of artistic appreciation and to the need to retain the metaphysical dimension. From Medvedkova's comparative discussion we learn that Kandinsky, with his highly subjective color-form tabulations, was also seeking a formulaic denominator for the practice and evaluation of art, an investigation which he pursued with particular energy at the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow and then, in the 1920s, at the Bauhaus.

As is clear from Medvedkova's selection and commentary, Kandinsky censured nineteenth-century art criticism as being a species of amateur literature or the crass imposition of personal taste (no doubt, he had critics such as Vissarion Belinsky and Vladimir Stasov in mind). This premise implies that Kandinsky's approach to the work of art was not as exclusively cognitive or spontaneous as his *Improvisations* might indicate and that he felt an increasing attraction to a systemic, codified, and even numerical evaluation of the artifact—an orientation especially manifest during his tenures at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences in 1921 then at the Bauhaus in 1922–33. His "Theses for the Report: 'Work Plan of the Section of Visual Arts'" (1921), which Kandinsky compiled for the Academy, for example, contains forty clauses spread over four rubrics, almost as if he were trying to reduce art to an exact science.

Indeed, at first glance the issue of Kandinsky as art critic, central to Medvedkova's argument, would seem to be a contradiction in terms. After all, he is remembered for his lyrical abstractions, *Improvisations*, "formless" compositions, promotion of the Spiritual in Art, intuitive or subjective dimension of the work of art, and insistence on "content." On the other hand, Kandinsky's continuous engagement with what he considered to be the fundamental elements of form (as indicated in such essays as "Whither the 'New' Art," "On Point," and "On Line") within any objective analysis of painting, literature, and music are concerns which he identified and defined on many occasions and which constituted the basis of what he regarded as a burgeoning science of art—*Kunstwissenschaft*. As Medvedkova explains, Kandinsky gave particular attention to these and other ideas while he was developing a program for the Phalanx group in Munich. Collaborating with an international group

of painters and sculptors there, Kandinsky addressed the basic questions of the perception and reception of the work of art via form, space, color, and time.

Medvedkova is to be thanked for creating a rich and accurate context for the examination of Kandinsky's early, Russian roots. Perhaps the selection should have included "On the Spiritual in Art" and hence references to Theosophy, Helen Blavatsky, and Aleksandra Unkovskaia, but even so, the avenue of enquiry is solid, often provocative, and enlightening.

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