

A Critical look at Kandinsky

Will Karp

Alberti talks about *istoria*, a word for which there is no translatable equivalent. He looks at painting as a type of divine force, and the vehicle that affects our soul.

Kandinsky talks about “*stimmung*”, also a word for which there is no translatable equivalent, but really not all that far away from Alberti – He looks at painting as the essential spirit of nature.

Introduction

I’m going to approach my discussion of this assignment – and react to it - on a very personal level. And on a couple of personal deficiencies that affect how I view this treatise. First of all, my reading comprehension levels in general are exceedingly low. (For example, I recall my GSAT exam putting me in the 30th percentile for reading and 90th percentile for math.) So understanding Alberti’s and Kandinsky’s “philosophical” discourses were severely limited for me (and really were excruciatingly frustrating for me, and painful.) For that reason, I admit I may have totally missed the mark in understanding just exactly what they were saying. Having degrees in Engineering and in Business, the authors and I definitely do not speak the same language, and thus I did quite a bit of self-reflection on it all.

To see where I’m coming from, I’ll explore three aspects of this reading:

1. Triangle Mania and the “obstinate carload of humanity”
2. The “universality” to the emotional effect of color
3. The “spiritual nature of art” and that no piece of art can apply to any future path of art

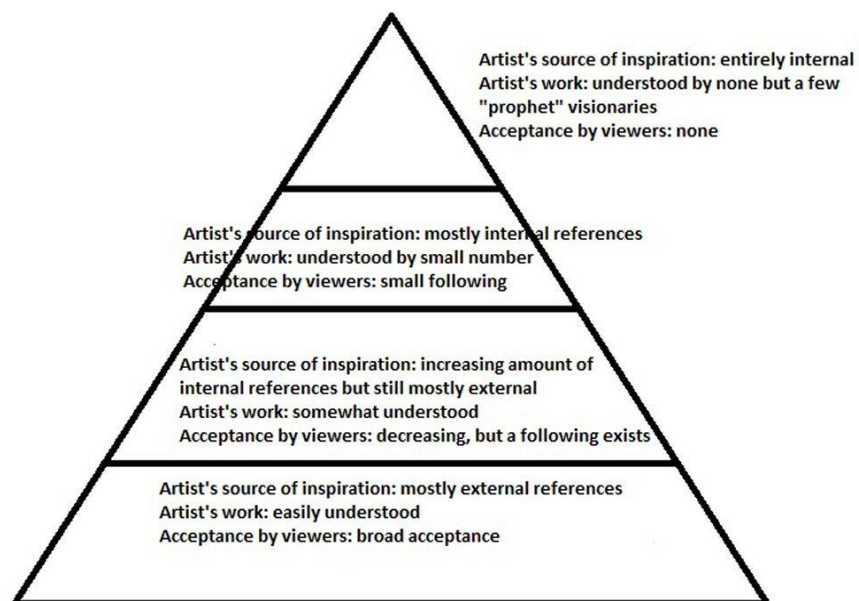
1. Triangle Mania and the “obstinate carload of humanity”

I love Math and Geometry; and I love Triangles too, so we’ll get that on the table right now. However..... I can only relate to Kandinsky’s contention from the perspective of personality preferences. And I’ll use the Myers-Briggs principles to look at it.

(See the Appendix for more info about Myers-Briggs)

As an ISTJ (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) I do not consider myself a “philosopher” and have little patience for what I interpret as Kandinsky’s sense of elitism and self-importance, his convoluted wandering (and often negative) diatribes. By the way, Kandinsky has been classified as an INFP or ENFP, at completely the opposite end of the personality spectrum from me, according to Jung’s Personality Typology or Myers Briggs assessments which understandably explains why we may clash and see things differently. So...as I considered his “Moving Triangle” theory, I

related my background and training in organizational behavior to understanding and interpreting what he was saying. The words were gibberish, but this diagram helped me visualize what he was saying. Here's the problem - I contend that personality types, cultural and ethical beliefs and norms, mental and physical state, educational background and exposure to the arts - are just a few of the factors that influence where one might fall on the scale. If I interpreted correctly what Kandinsky said, he did not address this at all. These considerations are critical! For me....I'm at the bottom of the scale. I'm not a "prophet." I want my art to be "in my face." And I'm not going to "internalize." Nor try to get inside the mind of the artist. I want to be on the bottom rung, and if that's OK with Kandinsky, then all's well with the world – and Oh yes, I must be part of that "obstinate carload of humanity." His view that each person can fit neatly into a slot in the Triangle is not valid.



2. The universality to the emotional effect of color

Again, another sensitive issue for me. Being significantly color blind, I am acutely aware of the challenges involved in relating to the gross assumptions made by the art community in general (and Kandinsky in particular in this case) that everyone physically sees artwork and colors and compositions the same way. This is not the case! One in 12 men have color blindness to some degree (to a much lesser degree, 1 in 200 women.) But what about other factors as well – How is art perceived by the aged and the young, by the vast majority of individuals from cultures other than Western cultures, by psychotics and mentally challenged, and by those who are sight or color challenged – just to name a few. He just tosses everybody into the same lump. I contend they are not going to react to (nor see) colors the same way as Kandinsky would like. And for me, this is personal affront. And kind of touchy!

Yes, I understand that warm colors advance, cool colors recede. Colors in foregrounds have higher contrast, saturation, and sharpness while those in the background get more muddled and vague. I get that different emotions might be evoked from fields of blue, red, and yellow. People paint houses, rooms, and select colors for their clothes and furnishings that may evoke a reaction. But what's wrong with selecting colors that may merely be pleasant to look at or complement their preferences without necessarily relating to their senses?

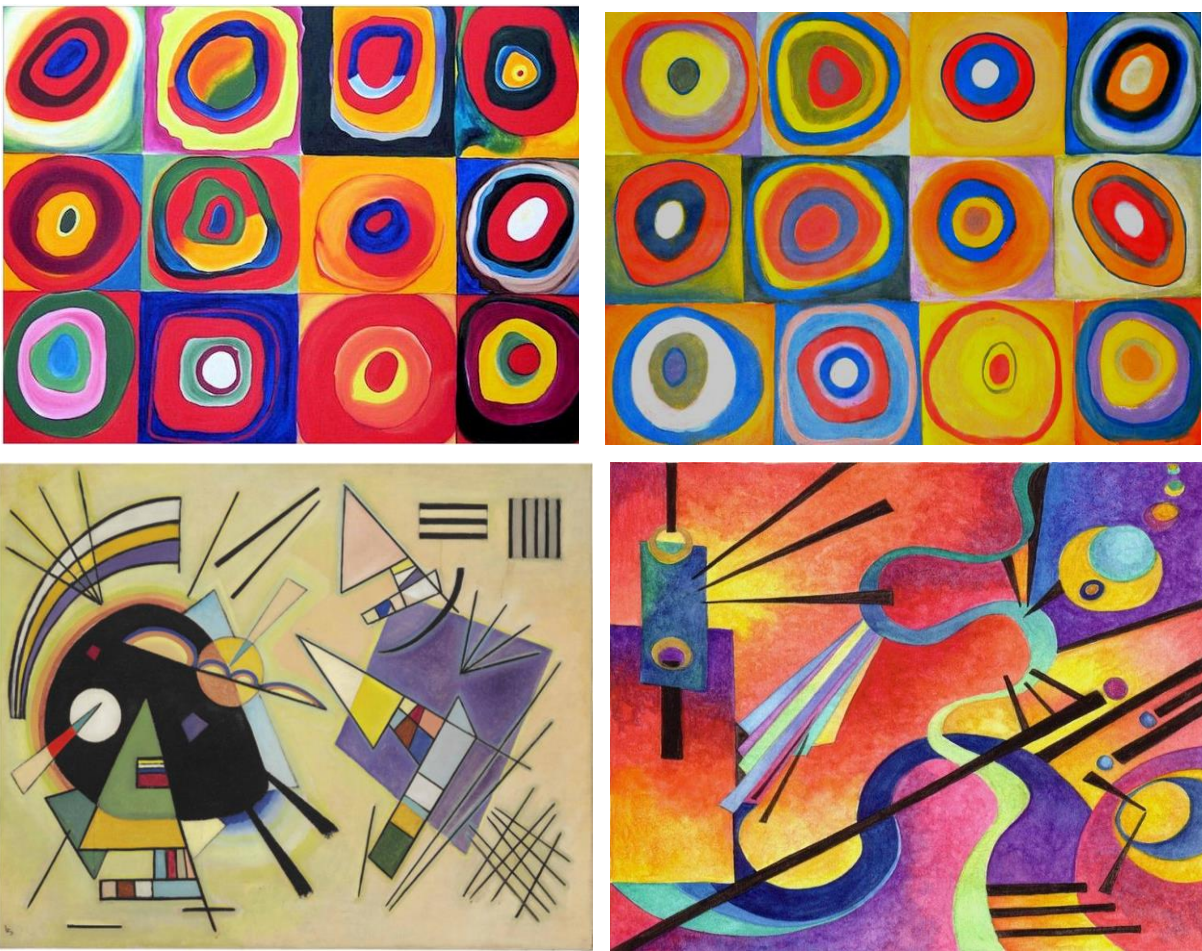
For me, my range of colors is limited. For example, dark reds, greens, browns, maroons, etc. all look the same. Light greens, pinks, grays are the same. Shades of blues and purples are the same, as are shades of greens and yellows. My range of visible hues is significantly diminished. Understandably I have lots of challenges, both professionally and otherwise, and denoting subtle or even not so subtle variations in artwork is the very least of my problems. In preparing this paper, I was spurred on to do some additional research in which I learned more about my own situation and through on-line testing found that I was classified as a "Strong Protan."

"Protans are people with protanomaly, a type of red-green color blindness in which the red cone doesn't detect enough red but is too sensitive to greens, yellows, and oranges. As a result, greens, yellows, oranges, reds, and browns may appear similar, especially in low light. It can also be difficult to tell the difference between blues and purples, or pinks and grays. Red and black might be hard to tell apart, especially when red text is against a black background."

So, all in all, I'm a little sensitive when a discussion ensues about how colors affect your senses, when I can't even be sure I'm seeing and feeling what others are seeing.

But...what about Kandinsky's stuff – I love it! The colors happen to be great for me – If I'm correct, seems like a lot of Primary colors which I see quite well, and they are just plain pleasing to look at. Being color blind means artwork with lines and shapes, and graphics are everything. Van Gogh's works are perfect – bright colors and shapes. And by the way – it has been pretty much determined that Van Gogh was himself color blind. And additionally, I personally suspect he had cataracts. Before I had my surgery a few months ago, street lights and headlights looked exactly just like the halos he depicted in Starry Night. So back to Kandinsky.....These pieces are amazing – but do they deeply affect my emotional senses or have a spiritual nature to them? No! And yet, while I'm not a fan of most abstract art, these are very graphical and appealing.

See the Appendix for more info about color Blindness



3. The spiritual nature of art, and that no piece of art can apply to any future path of art

As a rule, abstract, non-representational art provides no sense of a spiritual experience for me. And it's wrong to make that gross assumption for the Universe as Kandinsky would have it. Again, this may go back to personality styles or background. It seemed that Kandinsky was trashing ancient art, and for that matter, any art preceding his period. What I have found is that each period of art has in fact influenced the direction of those following. And more importantly, that if we are talking about spiritual art, what I'm looking for is art that is "in your face." Egyptian tombs, Gislebertus' Last Judgement, The Eisenheim Alterpiece, the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa – now there are just a few examples of "in your face" art. And for me – those are what you call Spiritual! There's no doubt as to the story they are telling, and if you are in tune with those cultures – you get it!! And it has an indelible impact on you, and your beliefs.

For art to be literal is not a bad thing, and should not be necessarily considered to be catering to the uneducated and undereducated. I may be biased in this viewpoint, because my own art tends to be very literal, and I have been criticized on occasion for being so. But the point I am trying to make, is that the literal nature of art creates a clear path for understanding the culture upon which it was built, gives an undeniably explicit message. What is bad about that? And it

provides insight on how to portray future pieces of art and make advances in how it is portrayed – in any style. The path is there.

Conclusion

I told you this would be personal. And I recognize that I may have totally missed the boat on what Kandinsky was saying, but regardless, it made me reflect on my own experience and I kind of felt I was being excluded and part of the “other” in my own personal approach to appreciating and understanding art. I challenge the concept of universality in the way art is perceived. To address the three points I critiqued:

- 1. Why can't we each look at a piece of art without being judged or classified into fitting into a layer on a triangle?*
- 2. Why can't we respond to the sensation of color in whatever manner we wish without a set of “rules?”*
- 3. Why should we not clearly see the connection and growth from one form of art to another, and appreciate it?*

Let Kandinsky stick to his art, and forget the writing.

Appendix

Myers-Briggs Summary

"The purpose of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory is to make the theory of psychological types described by C. G. Jung understandable and useful in people's lives. The essence of the theory is that much seemingly random variation in the behavior is actually quite orderly and consistent, being due to basic differences in the ways individuals prefer to use their perception and judgment.

Perception involves all the ways of becoming aware of things, people, happenings, or ideas. Judgment involves all the ways of coming to conclusions about what has been perceived. If people differ systematically in what they perceive and in how they reach conclusions, then it is only reasonable for them to differ correspondingly in their interests, reactions, values, motivations, and skills.

In developing the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the aim of Isabel Briggs Myers, and her mother, Katharine Briggs, was to make the insights of type theory accessible to individuals and groups. They addressed the two related goals in the developments and application of the MBTI instrument:

The identification of basic preferences of each of the four dichotomies specified or implicit in Jung's theory.

The identification and description of the 16 distinctive personality types that result from the interactions among the preferences."

PERSONALITY TYPES KEY



Extroverts

are energized by people, enjoy a variety of tasks, a quick pace, and are good at multitasking.



Introverts

often like working alone or in small groups, prefer a more deliberate pace, and like to focus on one task at a time.



Sensors

are realistic people who like to focus on the facts and details, and apply common sense and past experience to come up with practical solutions to problems.



Intuitives

prefer to focus on possibilities and the big picture, easily see patterns, value innovation, and seek creative solutions to problems.



Thinkers

tend to make decisions using logical analysis, objectively weigh pros and cons, and value honesty, consistency, and fairness.



Judgers

tend to be organized and prepared, like to make and stick to plans, and are comfortable following most rules.



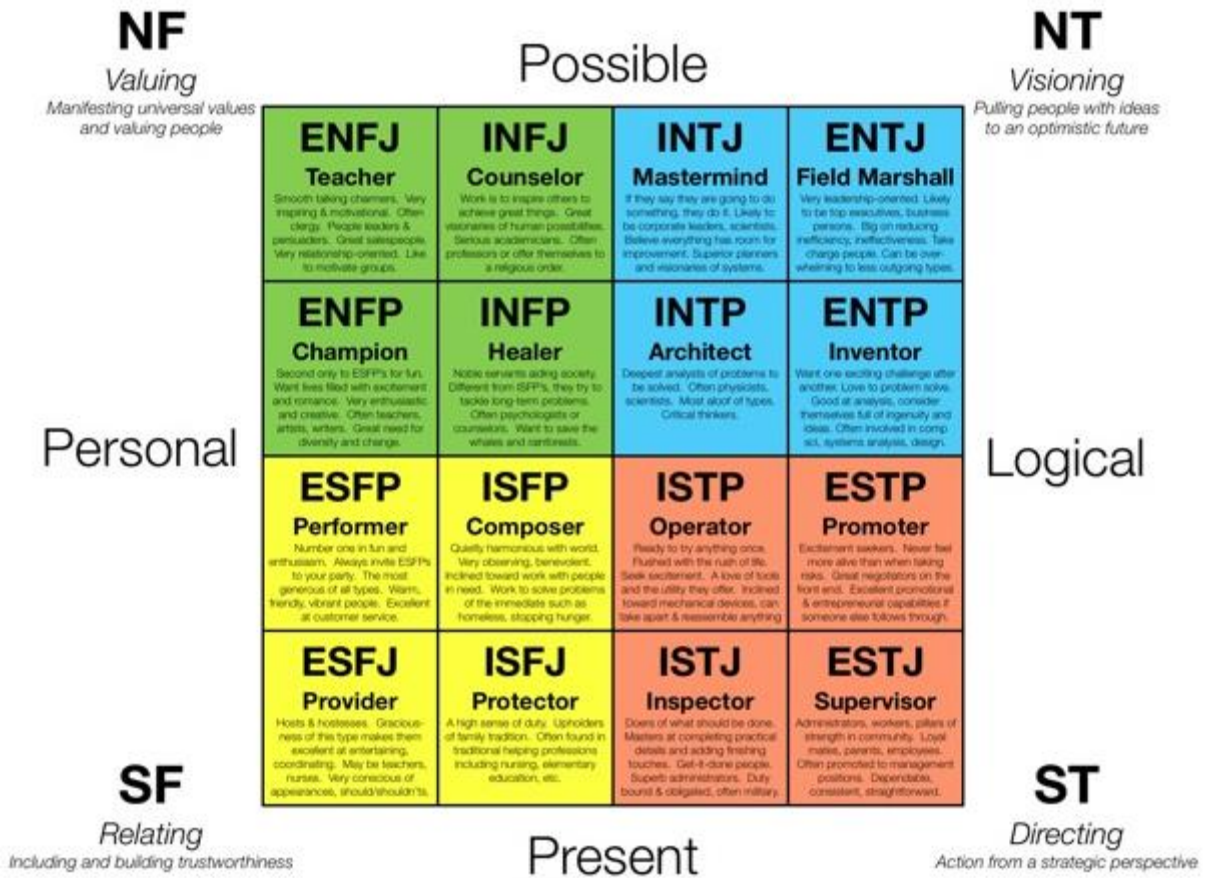
Feelers

tend to be sensitive and cooperative, and decide based on their own personal values and how others will be affected by their actions.



Perceivers

prefer to keep their options open, like to be able to act spontaneously, and like to be flexible with making plans.



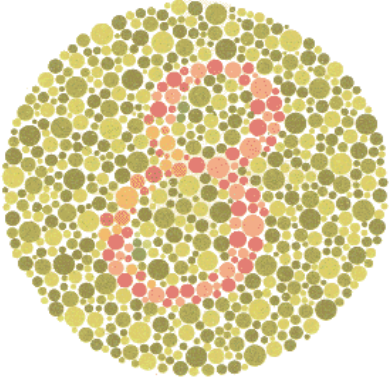
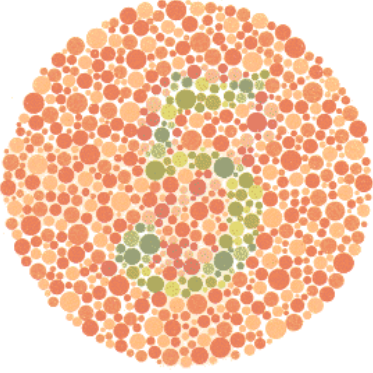
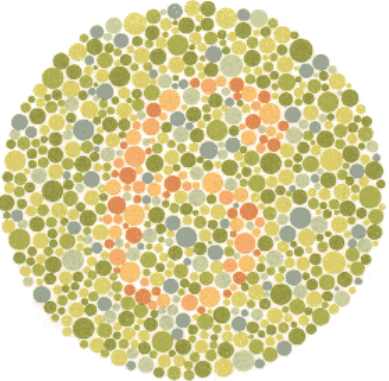
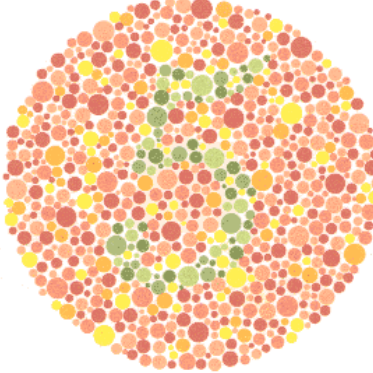
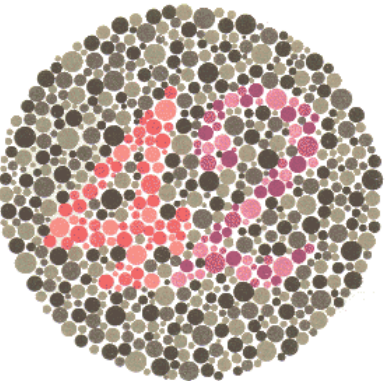
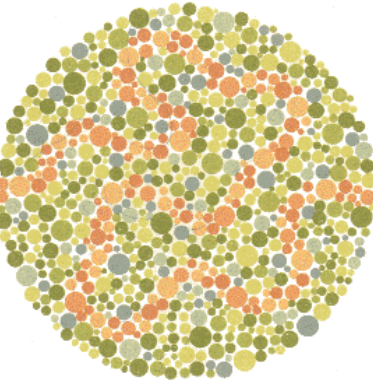
Appendix

The Ishara Test for Color Blindness

The Ishihara test is a color perception test for red-green color deficiencies. It was named after its designer, Dr. Shinobu Ishihara, a professor at the University of Tokyo, who first published his tests in 1917. The test consists of a number of colored plates, called Ishihara plates, each of which contains a circle of dots appearing randomized in color and size. Within the pattern are dots which form a number or shape clearly visible to those with normal color vision, and invisible, or difficult to see, to those with a red-green color vision defect, or the other way around. The full test consists of 38 plates

I've copied a sampling of these plates for you to see.

www.colour-blindness.com/colour-blindness-tests/ishihara-colour-test-plates/

	<p>Normal see "8"</p> <p>Red Green Blindness see "3"</p> <p>Total Color Blindness see "Nothing"</p> <p>(I see a 3)</p>		<p>Normal see "8"</p> <p>Red Green Blindness see "3"</p> <p>Total Color Blindness see "Nothing"</p> <p>(I see fragments of something but not sure what it is)</p>
	<p>Normal see "6"</p> <p>Color Blindness see "Nothing"</p> <p>(I see nothing)</p>		<p>Normal see "5"</p> <p>Color Blindness see "Nothing"</p> <p>(I see random bright yellow dots)</p>
	<p>Normal see "42"</p> <p>Color Blindness see faint "2"</p> <p>(I see fragments of a possible 2)</p>		<p>Normal see a "squiggly line"</p> <p>Color Blind see "nothing"</p> <p>(I see nothing)</p>

Appendix

Famous Triangles (Kandinsky and Alberti)

