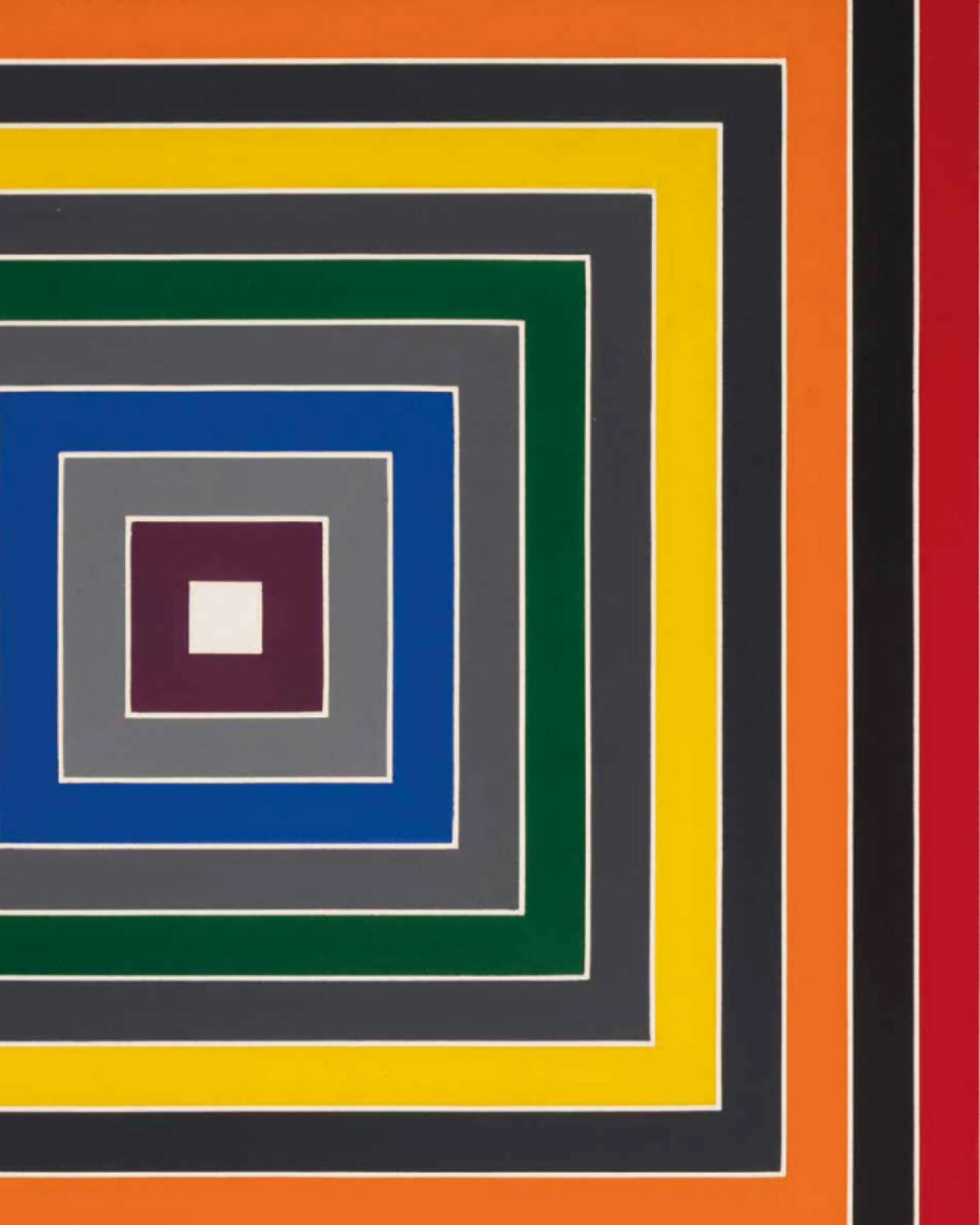
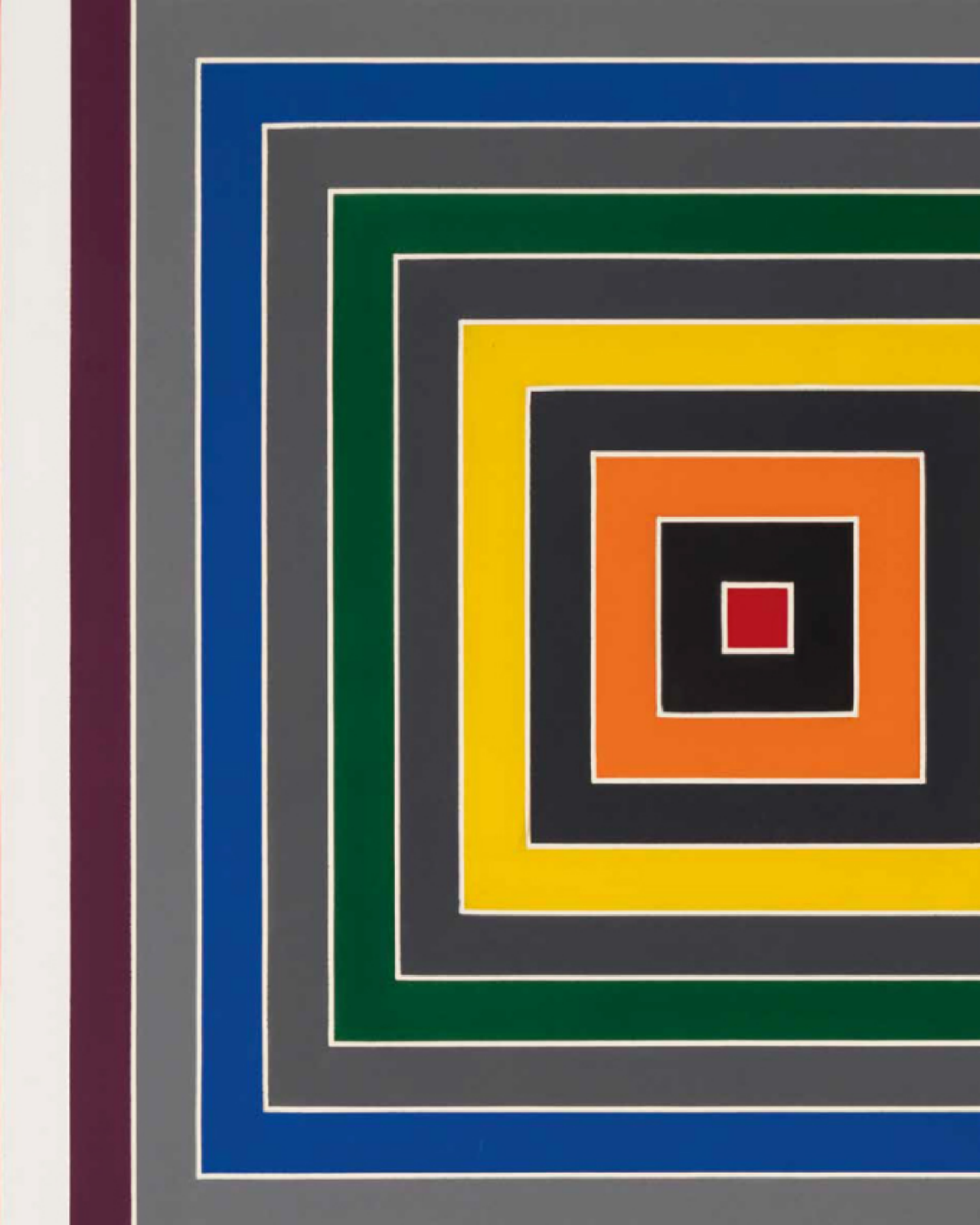


MUSEUM BARBERINI

POTSDAM









Geometric Abstraction in the Twentieth Century **Kandinsky's Universe**

Exhibition and catalog:
Sterre Barentsen

Assistant curator:
Anna Heling

Edited by:
Ortrud Westheider
Michael Philipp
Nerina Santorius

With contributions by:
Sterre Barentsen
Max Boersma
John E. Bowlt
Altair Brandon-Salmon
Anna Heling
David Max Horowitz
Jeremy Lewison
Chen Min Loh
Céline Véronique Marten
Maria Mileeva
Nicoletta Misler

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Foreword

The history of geometric abstraction has generally been recounted as a series of episodes. Constructivism, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, Abstraction-Création, Hard Edge Painting, and Op Art have been interpreted as isolated movements, defined by national boundaries. The exhibition *Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction in the Twentieth Century* sets a new course, tracing lines of connection in the history of geometric abstraction. Running through it like a common thread are the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, which inspired multiple generations of artists worldwide. His doctrine of the "spiritual in art," formulated in 1911, continued to exert an influence even into the 1970s.

Until now, only a few exhibitions in the United States have focused on the connection between European and American geometric abstraction. *Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction in the Twentieth Century* spans a wide arc: beginning with Constructivist works, the show explores artistic exchange in Eastern and Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, includes Great Britain for the first time, and traces the migration of ideas to the United States under the conditions of exile. It surveys a period of sixty years during which artists reduced painting to fundamental forms, sought to transcend pictorial boundaries by means of grids and color fields, and expanded their painterly possibilities and the imaginative space of their viewers again and again.

Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction in the Twentieth Century illustrates the exchange of ideas and examines Kandinsky's seminal role. His painting *White Sound* from 1908 marks the beginning: painted in the style of the Blue Rider group, it shows how he already exploited the great promise of an isolated area of white in his Expressionist phase. As he wrote in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, "It is an absence that is not dead, but rather full of potential. White sounds like silence, a correlation that is easy to fathom. It is a nothingness characterized by youth or, more precisely, that void that comes before the beginning, before birth."¹

To this day, geometric abstraction is sometimes accused of lacking content. Yet in the course of its history, it served as a vehicle for ideas ranging from the rise of the October Revolution in Russia, to Kandinsky's "great spiritual" as a level of cognition, to notions of collective authorship in the 1960s. Even in purity, even in negation, a statement is communicated. Repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, geometric abstraction offered a counterpoint to the Expressionist emphasis on the individual self: in 1915, the Constructivists bid farewell to the pathos of the Expressionists, while in the late 1950s Hard Edge Painting superseded Abstract Expressionism with its focus on subjective trauma. Even the juxtaposition of realism and abstraction was echoed in the counterplay of the Bauhaus versus New Objectivity or Pop Art versus Color Field Painting.

Artists of differing generations used the elemental formal vocabulary of geometric abstraction to allude to the discoveries of the natural sciences. For them, experimental and theoretical forays into the transcendental, into the tiniest particles and the furthest galaxies, legitimated their enthusiasm for nonobjective art: the first generation witnessed the discovery of the space-time continuum in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, while Op Art artists lived through the moon landing of 1969, experiencing it on television. As Kandinsky wrote in 1914, "The crumbling of the atom was to my soul like the crumbling of the whole world. Suddenly the heaviest walls toppled."²

Geometric forms were reassuring; experiments on the canvas were a new kind of realism. Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements*, published in 1926 in the Bauhausbücher series, continued to influence painters into the 1970s. Nowadays, the point, line, and plane are parameters for geometric modeling, better known as geodata. Although the technology behind it is highly abstract, it achieves the desired result. Kandinsky's universe gave rise to painting and sculpture that prefigured our present-day reality. The aim of these artists was not to do away with content, but to create paintings that offer new experiences of space and time, even to this day.

Daniel Zamani, curator at the Museum Barberini from 2018 to 2024, conceived the idea for this exhibition. In 2021 he had already devoted a show to the phenomenon of gestural abstraction with *The Shape of Freedom: International Abstraction after 1945*, presented at the Museum Barberini, the Albertina in Vienna, and Munchmuseet in Oslo. For *Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, he collaborated with Sterre Barentsen, who took over the project as curator. She organized the catalog and was able to secure loans from major German and international museums and private collections for the exhibition. Together we would like to thank the lenders for their trust.

The earnestness and vigor with which the development of geometric abstraction was accompanied by hundreds of authors in countless magazine and catalog articles is documented by the essays in this book. We would like to thank Sterre Barentsen, Max Boersma, John E. Bowl, Altair Brandon-Salmon, David Max Horowitz, Jeremy Lewison, Maria Mileeva, and Nicoletta Misler for their contributions. The chronology, initiated by Sterre Barentsen and compiled together with Anna Heling, Chen Min Loh, and Céline Véronique Marten, juxtaposes the pioneering exhibitions with the most important scientific discoveries of their day. The universe of art thus takes its place in the Space Age: like the magazines, the exhibitions recorded in the chronology transcend generational and national boundaries and constitute first-rate and hitherto undervalued sources for the project of geometric abstraction.

We are grateful to the Hasso Plattner Foundation and to our museum founder for their support, which enables us to realize such ambitious projects. We hope that all of our visitors will enjoy immersing themselves in the spaces of abstraction. After all, it was a painting by Claude Monet—a *Grainstack*, as can be seen in the Hasso Plattner Collection—that prompted Kandinsky to create his first nonobjective image.

Ortrud Westheider
Director of the Museum Barberini
Potsdam



1 Wassily Kandinsky
White Sound, 1908
Private collection

Lenders

ASOM Collection
Galerie Berinson, Berlin
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Nationalgalerie, Marzona Collection
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Neue Nationalgalerie
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop
Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,
Düsseldorf
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève
Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt,
Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale)
Hamburger Kunsthalle
University of Hertfordshire Art Collection
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź
Courtauld, London
Royal Academy of Arts, London
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
D. Wigmore Fine Art, Inc., New York
Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia,
Norwich
Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght,
Saint-Paul de Vence
Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen
MOMus—Museum of Modern Art—Costakis
Collection, Thessaloniki
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
ALBERTINA, Vienna—Private collection
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Haus Bill, Zumikon
Camille Graeser Stiftung, Zurich
Kunsthaus Zürich
Verena Loewensberg Stiftung, Zurich

Estate of Richard Anuszkiewicz
Collection of David and Kathryn Birnbaum
Estate of Carmen Herrera
Studio Paul Huxley
Richard Paul Lohse-Stiftung
Mercedes-Benz Art Collection
Nahmad Collection
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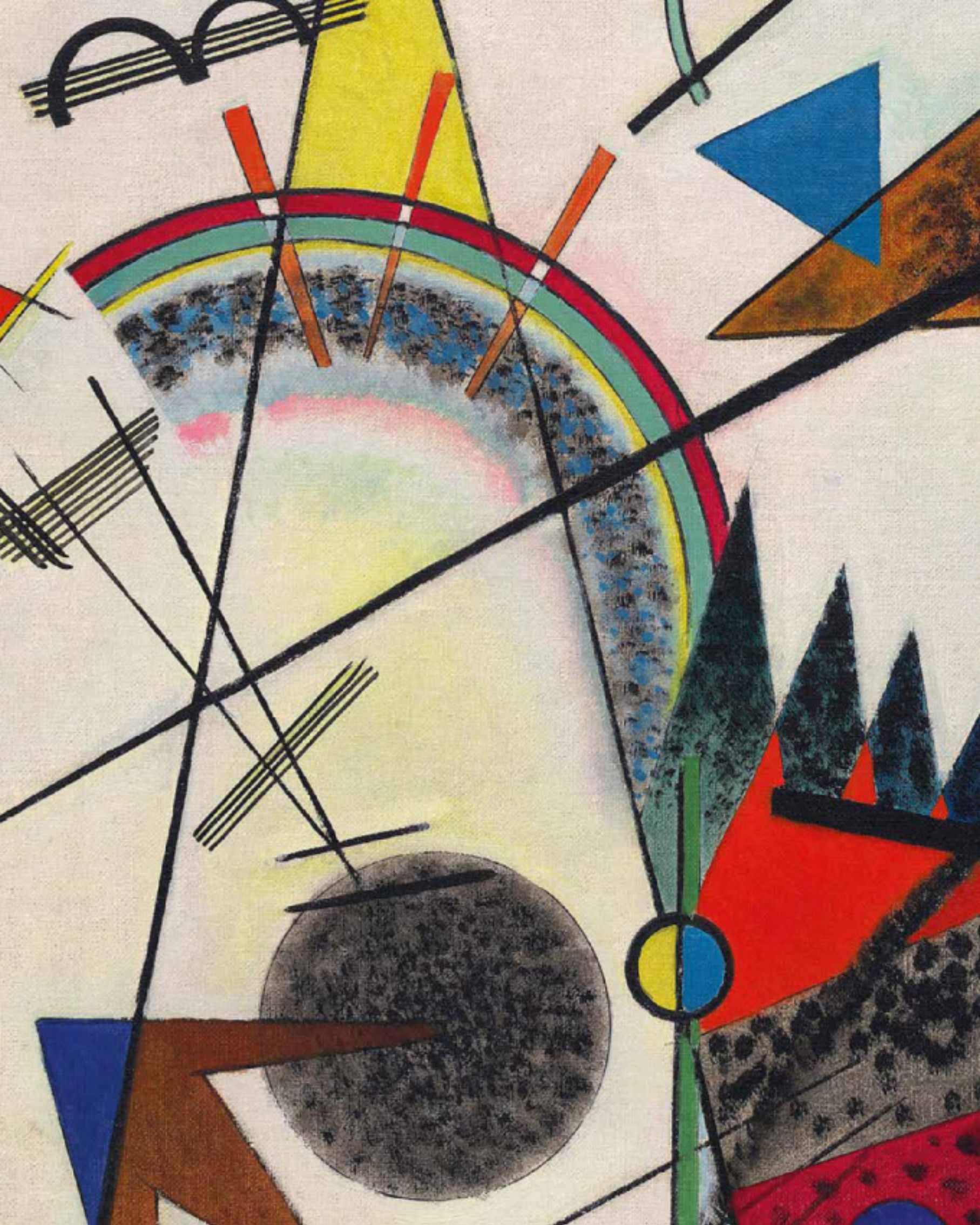
as well as numerous private collectors
who wish to remain anonymous

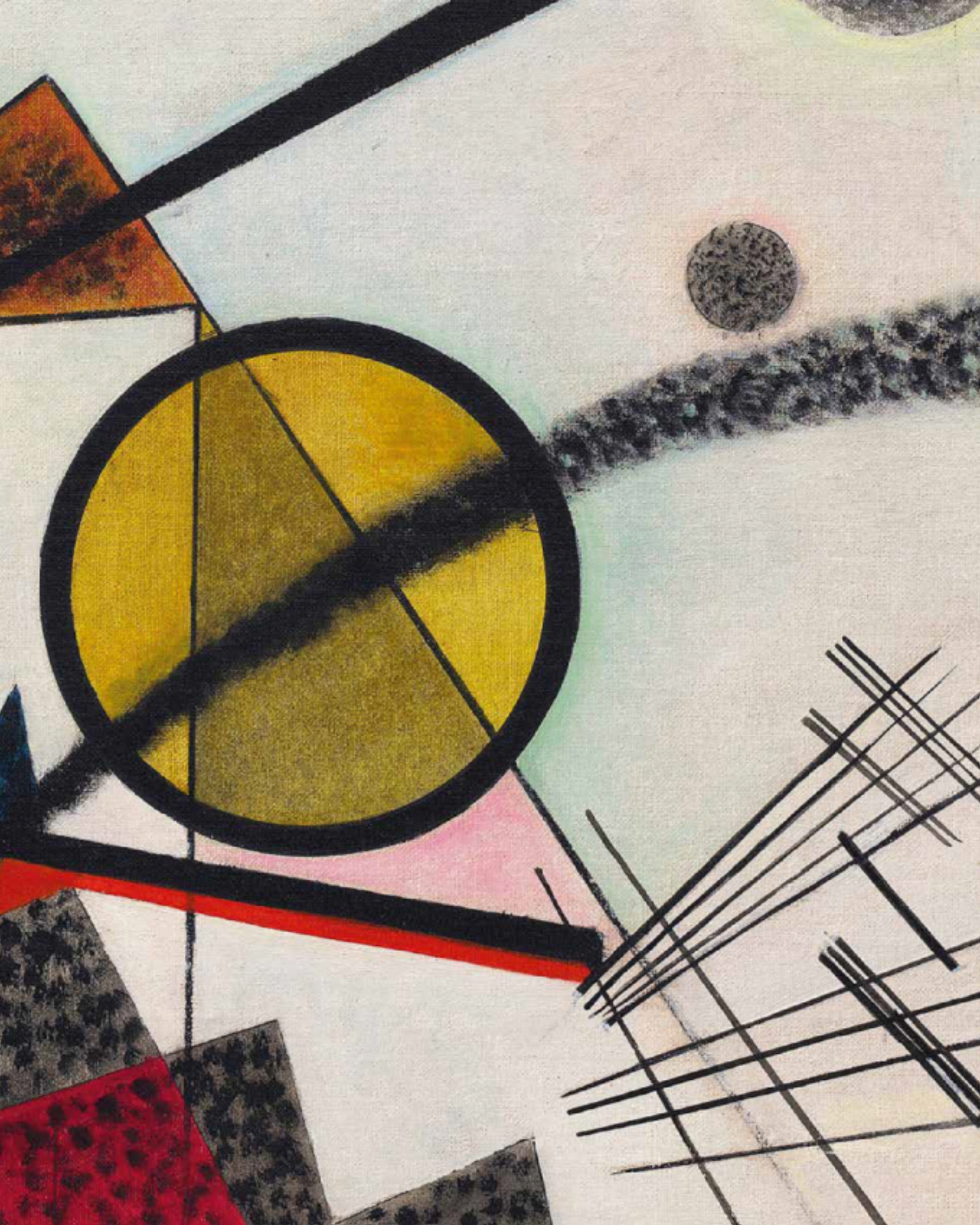
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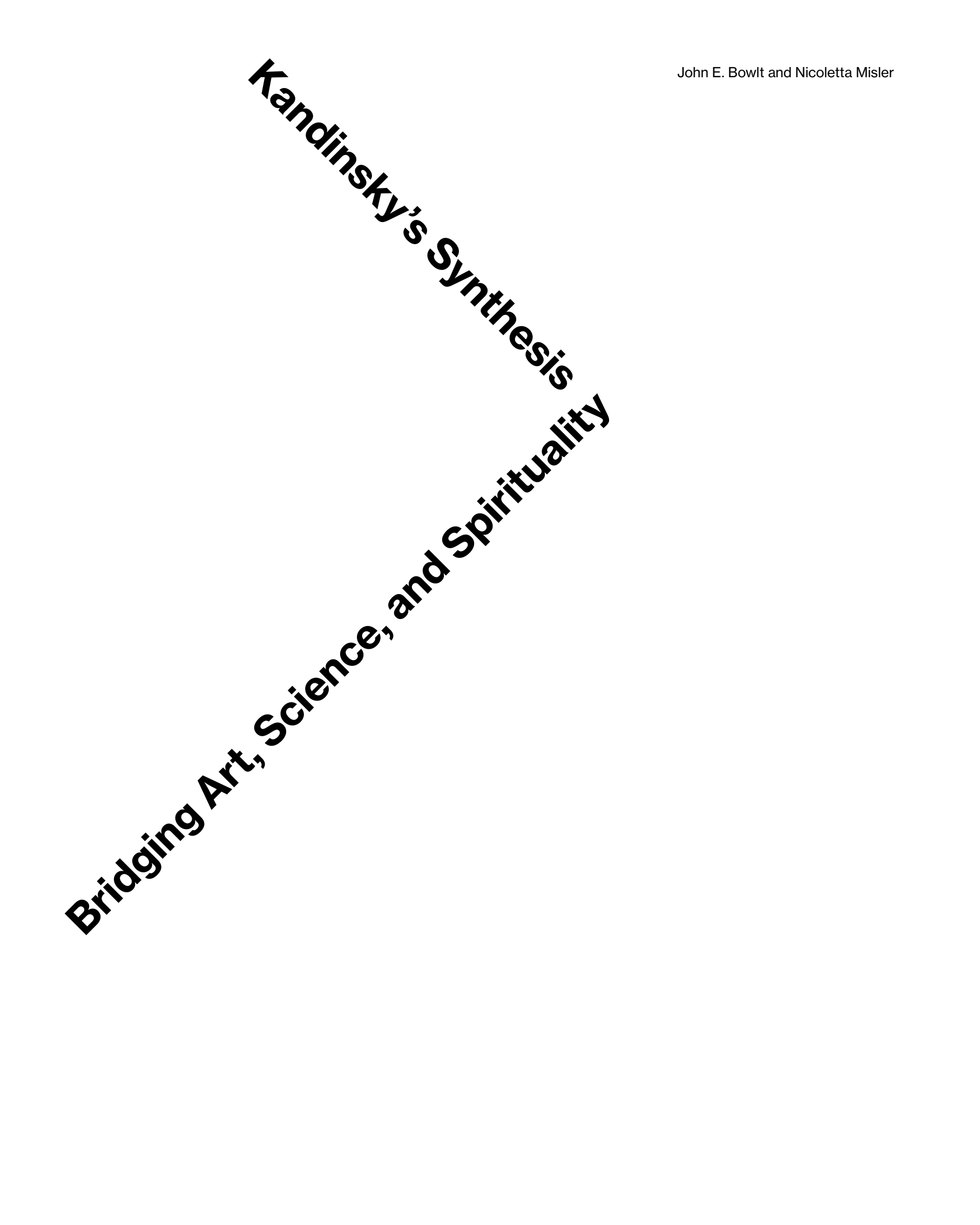
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and especially Daniel Zamani, who initiated the exhibition.







Kandinsky's Synthesis Bridging Art, Science, and Spirituality

A major paradigmatic shift in twentieth-century Western art was the departure from figurative representation in favor of abstraction, a shift often reduced to a precarious, almost neurotic, bipolarity: on one side, the strict geometrization of forms; on the other, the flowing abstraction of internal visions and extrasensory ideas. One of the leading protagonists of this tendency was Wassily Kandinsky, whose work highlights the synergies between art and science. Associated with diverse cultural and intellectual circles of Europe, Kandinsky had access to pioneering artistic and scientific experiments. His early treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* already drew on neuroscience and spiritual concepts to suggest that geometric planes and colors possess universal, interrelated qualities. His engagement with scientific principles deepened in 1921 at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences in Moscow (RAKhN), where he collaborated with experts in fields such as psychology and crystallography, further probing the formal and psychological dimensions of art.

Kandinsky's paintings as well as his theoretical writings reveal that the abovementioned polarities—between geometric precision and lyrical abstraction, science and spirit, and the organic and inorganic—are far less rigid than assumed.¹

THE SCIENCE OF ART

On December 29 and 31, 1911, Nikolai Kulbin, a painter, physician, and friend of Kandinsky, delivered *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* on Kandinsky's behalf. At the time, Kandinsky was living in Munich, where he had just published the German edition of his treatise.² The reading took place at the Second All-Russian Congress of Artists in St. Petersburg, a three-day gathering of painters, sculptors, art historians, and teachers that featured a wide variety of lectures and discussions. Kandinsky's contribution was among the most radical and provocative.

In the three-volume edition of the congress's transactions, a single full-page color illustration appeared (fig. 1): a triad of yellow triangle, blue circle, and red square. Kandinsky used this image to demonstrate the effects of different backgrounds on colors and to suggest that specific shapes and colors have intrinsic, universal relationships. This diagram serves as a

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Elementary Life of the Primary Color and Its Dependence on the Simplest Locale*, in *Transactions of the All-Russian Congress of Artists*, St. Petersburg 1914, vol. 1, table 4

