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Everything In Its Right Place: Frantisek Kupka's Oeuvre As A Pioneer In Abstract Art

by Vanessa Bruce

Pioneers of abstraction Piet Mondrian, Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Frantisek Kupka gave a new direction to the art in the 20th century. Unlike the other artists, however, Kupka has not gained the amount of recognition he deserves, even though it has been more than forty years since his death in 1957. The opening of the Washington D.C. collection of Jan and Meda Mladek in 1996 marked the first large exhibit of Frantisek Kupka's work in the United States; the exhibition brought this pioneer of abstraction back into the public eye. Jan and Meda Mladek established their collection using Kupka's letters, writings, and his credo as a framework of exploration into his aesthetic philosophy and creative process.

In order for the new ways that art has opened up in the 20th century to be better defined, theoretical reflections critical to the artist's oeuvre need to be written. Kupka believed written expression is an integral part of the artist's work, and expressed his position with regard to theory very clearly: "A theory as such is only worth something if it becomes realized in the work of art."

Kupka's writings—including his main theoretical work, *Creation in the Plastic Arts* (1923), and letters written to good friend and art critic Arthur Roessler—are personal visions of his inner world; in this paper, these first hand sources are combined with critical secondary sources, and used as tools of exploration into Kupka's aesthetic philosophy and creative process; as a result, the highly diverse influences leading to the creation of his artwork are revealed.

Kupka consistently separated himself from categorization in any "ism" of the period; in a letter to Arthur Roessler, dated February 2, 1913, Kupka expresses dissatisfaction at being labeled: "In the last Salon d'Automne I had a beautiful place of honor, unfortunately in the room with the Cubists with whom I am almost on a parallel. It is with me as it was with Degas, who was classified as an Impressionist."

The modernist canon stressed the polarization of essential categories such as geometry and biology—as demonstrated in Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich’s art theories, which were essentially based on one single theory. For instance, these artists’ visions were inspired solely by idealistic theories of the superiority of the spirit over matter—Steiner’s anthroposophy was crucial to the formation of Kandinsky’s opinions, theosophy to Mondrian, and neo-Hegelian philosophy to Malevich. Kupka’s work, however, could not be reduced to the influence of one or two great thinkers: his philosophy of artistic creation grew out of an assimilation and synthesis of many different types of information and this made it both more empirical and more original.

Kupka created a holistic vision based on the notion of interconnectedness, and sought to bridge those opposites. Kupka’s opulent and formally complex work defies classification in terms of the standard categories of expressive, geometric, or biomorphic abstraction. This is why Kupka’s oeuvre is hard to interpret using modern categories and concepts and why modern commentators often have not known what to make of him.

Concepts found throughout Kupka’s body of work correlate with the ideas expressed in Guillaume Apollinaire’s famous lectures on Orphism. It is not known whether he attended the lectures, but in a letter to critic Andre Warnod, Kupka objects strongly to his work being linked with Orphism. Yet, Kupka’s creative principles have a powerful affinity with Orphism in the original sense of the word, and Orphism’s ideas about “mutual or reciprocal impact of all forms in Nature” dictate the evolution of his art. According to Dorothy Kosinski, instead of finding a straightforward transition from one theme or style to another, “what we find in Kupka’s art is an accumulation and cyclical development of several fundamental themes, which in many cases can be likened to a movement in a spiral or circle.”

The first comprehensive pictorial manifestations of Kupka’s credo were revealed in *Amorpha*, *Fugue in Two Colors*, and *Amorpha, Warm*

Chromatic, both shown at the 1912 Salon d'Automne; they were the first entirely abstract compositions he exhibited. The *Amorpha* paintings introduce three themes essential to Kupka's oeuvre that reveal the multiplicity of his interests and aspirations: the pictorial analysis of movement and the fascination with rhythm, the attraction to music as a non-figurative art form, and the imagery of astronomy and the cosmos.

His pictorial analysis of movement in the *Amorpha* paintings can be traced to an earlier departure, *Girl with a Ball*, completed in 1908. "Transitional in its combination of fauve and neo-impressionist treatments, [the painting] surprises with its awkwardness and lack of dynamics." Kupka tried to capture the kinetic dimensions of both the ball in the air and the girl at play, yet it ended in frustration. *Disks of Newton*, completed in 1911, as well as schematic sketches completed before, describe the fictive trajectory and give an analysis of the color of the same ball if it were displaced in space.

In the *Amorpha* paintings, Kupka produces a "transcription of time and movement on the flat surface of the canvas through a language of pure forms dramatically distant from the original subject." This exploration in art was influenced by the inventions of stop-motion photography and chronophotography, which both paved the way to cinematography; Kupka, like most artists who lived in Paris during the late 1890s, could not have been ignorant of the photographic revolution.

Kupka saw the beauty of completed observations found in drawings and paintings because, like photography, when the work is finished, it already belongs to another time. Perception and depiction, to him, are processes in which relationships are delimited and energy is exchanged; everything happens in relation to another thing, and forms are "the results of the relationship between the dynamism of a given organic entity and other entities." The environment exercises in a "rapport of resistance and reciprocal tension," that impacts the dynamism, or essence, of the organism. Kupka believed the artist and his art participate in the continuous activity of nature, and nature appears as an absolute, integral value.

When addressing the relation of time and space, Kupka came to the conclusion that music, as well as other performing arts, are narrated in time, whereas plastic arts are narrated in space. Kupka's works are often viewed in relation to music, yet the remarks he made in *Creation in the Plastic Arts* about the issue may have led to oversimplified parallels. Kupka writes that music is a "remarkable stimulus for the colorist" because "listening to a piece of music evokes in everyone different images [...] from the reserves of his own visual memory." With the subtitle *Fugue* in the *Amorpha* paintings, Kupka considers the metaphorical value of the chromatism in music and the musicality in colors. In *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors*, the complex interplay of colors and intricately interwoven forms are emphasized more than the integration of background and foreground, which expresses his idea of "compenetration" of figure and atmosphere. Central to Kupka's evolving notions about color, space, and light, "compenetration" is not an isolated function, a mere fascination with color theory, but another expression of his broader themes and concerns: morphogenesis, atavism, and vital force (which are elaborated upon later in the paper).

The dominant presence of a contrapuntal rhythm within the composition of the *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors* paintings and studies present Kupka's interest in and reference to the astronomical and cosmological. The rhythm exists between elements of contrasting forms and colors: the smaller, tighter, quicker moving, brightly colored red and blue forms, and in contrast, the slower rotating disks and arcs of black and white, or muted grays and ochres. Both the color groups and the large circular forms in the background relate distinctly to a slightly earlier work, *First Step*, which contains visual elements reminiscent of the lunar surface and orbits of a cosmological scene. In addition, the resonance of the *Amorpha* images in connection with early works such as *The Beginning of Life* and *The Water-lilies* reveals the thematic and iconographic coherence of Kupka's work.

"The waves of the sea, the little ripples on the shore, the sweeping curves of the sandy bay between headlands [...] all of these are many riddles in form, so many problems of morphology, and all of them

the physicist can more or less easily read and adequately solve by referencing to their antecedent phenomena, in the material system of mechanical forces to which they belong and to which we interpret them as being due." Kupka's study of morphology, or the processes and principles of creation, led to the study of morphogenesis, the processes and principles of artistic creation and the role of artist in relation to them. This passage from *Creation in the Plastic Arts* demonstrates that development, movement, and creation are inseparably linked in Kupka's oeuvre.

During the end of the 19th century, physiologists explored dynamic natural processes of the universe by photographing muscular, respiratory and circulatory activity of the human body, minute patterns of insects in sight, and accumulation and disintegration of cloud formations, to name a few. Kupka, who was exposed to these experiments, used the images to create new metaphors of expression. He recognized that a network of mutual relationships, which contemporary science calls processes of self-organization, links all systems microcosm to macrocosm. He used a microscope and a telescope often, to construct his work around invisible forms existing in nature so he could share with us his admiration for the marvelous images of natural life of which we are unaware.

Intensely interested in natural sciences, he was an avid reader of mechanics, physics, optics, chemistry, biology, physiology, neurology, and astronomy. In addition, he worked in a biology lab at Sorbonne and attended physiology lectures there. Kupka recommended that his colleagues take a microscopic view of "all those marvels of the human body and organs whose function is to think and to feel." Scientific positivism, he believed, was responsible "not only for intellectual progress, but also, indirectly, for much clarification in art." He also felt, if physiology and biology became compulsory grammar for every artist, the findings "would help artists throw off the shackles of tradition and end their dependence on conventions and stereotypes."

His fields of study were by no means restricted to the natural elements; his disciplines included history, philosophy, and

mythology, as well as purely spiritual subjects that were fairly commonplace among the wider public at the beginning of the century—subjects such as theosophy, anthroposophy, hermeticism, alchemy, astrology, magic, and theories about the fourth dimension. Never underestimating the importance of science and technology for art, he saw what they had in common, and he regarded their differences as two forms of cognition that could inspire and influence each other.

“Man is nature aware of itself;” Kupka’s favorite quote from ElisÈe Reclus, describes how he felt “the motions and events of the entire universe” from within. After studying physical and chemical processes of organisms, he began to study the influence of metabolism on perception; he did studies on the effect of consuming foodstuffs such as tobacco, wine, and curd. He also stresses the necessity of physical hygiene for the artist; good digestion and free breathing of the lungs, for instance, “are rhythms and harmonies which for their part regulate expression.” It was the duty of the artist to possess physical and mental hygiene because the art must be “organically articulated and pregnant with poetry.” Kupka was a vegetarian, and was known to take daily ‘air baths,’ a cathartic way for him evaluate his cosmic place within nature.

Expressing the concept of atavism, Kupka states being an artist requires “lasting work on oneself, in order to arrive at an understanding of one’s own perception and a confirmation of one’s capacity for self-realization.” If a work of art is an organism arising from the process of creation and forming a new reality, the artist must know the art inside and out through his or her own efforts. There are essentially two groups of determining factors that shape an artist’s perception of the world. The first group of determinants includes tradition, education, and background, and the individual bears the stamp of these constituent factors from childhood, be they positive or negative. The second group of determinants includes the knowledge that has been passed into the subconscious, even before birth. The artist “has an inborn, atavistic need to create,” and carries in himself the “stigma of being different.” Thus, the artist can only depend on himself by trusting in the realities that he has constructed,

from his harmonious unison with the archetypal ancient rhythms and forms of the universe.

The artist is often opposed to society, and is described as an isolated being; it is the observer with whom he forms a “spiritual community.” “The form and color compositions that he [the artist] offers the observer are not destined exclusively for the retina but also for his inner world. That is where he touches him, impresses, fascinates him [...] artist and observer communicate in understanding face to face with the Cosmic Will.”

His masterpiece works *The Cosmic Spring I and II*, are often interpreted as a synthesis of the artist’s preceding important works, the previously mentioned Amorpha paintings. Taking atavism to a new level, *The Cosmic Spring I and II* present an analogy between the processes within the crust and on the surface of Earth that create animate and inanimate forms, and the thought processes within the cortex of the brain. It may also be noted, there is a remarkable similarity between drawings of the retina and *The Cosmic Spring I and II*. Both depict spherical formations on whose surfaces networks of energy emerge from a circular shape and spread over the entire sphere. In the case of the retina, it is the network of vessels and nerves, and in the case of the planetary body, it is crater grooves reminiscent of a network of magnetic fields. In *The Cosmic Spring I and II*, this analogy between the eye and planetary bodies merges the formal analogy of the brain and the globe. These paintings demonstrate most comprehensively the enormous theatre of nature, and in connection—the vast amount of theories discovered through the process of creation.

In a letter to Arthur Roessler in 1897, Kupka wrote, “Yesterday I experienced a state of split consciousness in which I had the impression of viewing the Earth from outside. I was in a large empty space and I could see the planets silently turning.” This experience was the inspiration for *The First Step*, and eventually *The Cosmic Spring I and II*. In these paintings, Frantisek Kupka shows an amazingly broad understanding of the world. The spiritual experience Kupka had while creating these paintings must compare

to the spiritual experience an astronaut has upon first seeing Earth from above. By changing his relationship to Earth, like the astronaut, Frantisek Kupka was able to create metaphors for the new models of thinking embraced by modern day revolutions in ideas. A prime mover of abstract art, the significance of the problems and phenomena he presented in his art we can only fully appreciate today.

Notes

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