

Abenteuer Abstraktion: Radikale Moderne im MoMA

Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925.

Museum of Modern Art, New York,
23. Dezember 2012–15. April 2013.
Catalogue: **Inventing Abstraction.**

**How a Radical Idea changed
Modern Art.** Ed. by Leah Dickerman.
London, Thames &
Hudson 2013. 376 p., 489 ill.
ISBN 978-0-50023-902-5. £ 48,00

The fascinating exhibition *Inventing Abstraction*, organised by curator Leah Dickerman at the MoMA, first confronts the visitors with a wall-size diagram that can be seen also on the front endpaper of the catalogue (fig. 1). This diagram presents the network of relationships among the artists represented in the exhibition and catalogue from 1910 to 1925. Documented acquaintances between artists are marked by lines from name to name. Names with the most connections are printed in red and marked with a large red dot, while the names of persons with fewer contacts are given in black and marked with a small black dot. The network extends from Germany and France in the center to Moscow in the east, to New York in the west, to England in the north, and to Italy in the south.

DIAGRAMS

Dickerman's network diagram is best discussed in relation to the famous diagram in red and black that was designed by Alfred H. Barr Jr. for the dust jacket of his catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* for the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (fig. 2, see *Inventing Abstraction*, 358–363).

Barr placed his system of key vectors from top to bottom between two vertical columns of chronology ranging down from 1890 to 1935. At the top of 1890 he placed Japanese prints and van Gogh, Gauguin and Synthetism, Cézanne, Seurat and Neo-Impressionism. These artists had been the protagonists of his 1929 exhibition at the MoMA entitled *The Museum of Modern Art First Loan Exhibition New York, November 1929: Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*. The arrows pointing downward in the 1936 diagram refer to new movements and criss-cross the page, indicating other movements and ultimately ending in 1935 with the opponents "non-geometrical abstract art" and "geometrical abstract art". Barr's diagram is definitively not a family tree of abstract art; rather it is derived from the art historical notion of "influence". Moreover, it is an astonishing revocation of the astrological origins of this concept still too often misused in the history of art.

Astrologers tried to make people believe that they were subjugated to the power of the stars. Barr's diagram clearly defines the heaven-inspired artistic stars from 1890 until 1935. In the introduction to the 1936 catalogue Barr repeatedly refers to the influence concept. To quote only one example: "Cézanne influenced the pioneers of Cubism both through his art and his theory" (*Cubism and Abstract Art*, 26). This critical remark is not intended, however, to deny the importance of Barr's exhibition that he began to work on shortly after his visit to Germany in 1933 when he was one of the first to realize the catastrophe of the criminal Nazi regime (see *Inventing Abstraction*, 364–369).

Leah Dickerman's 2012 network diagram obviously challenges the precedent established by Barr's 1936 astrological model. She leads us to expect that the concept "influence" could eventually be replaced by a more adequate analysis

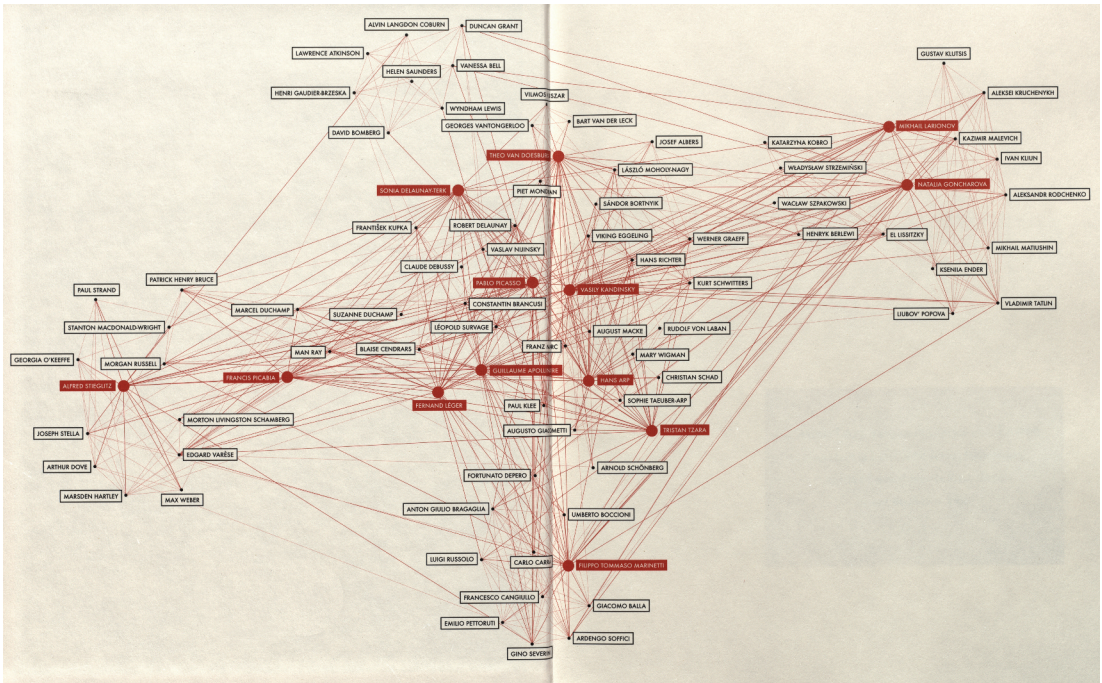


Fig. 1 Leah Dickerman, Network among artists. Front endpaper in the Catalogue *Inventing Abstraction*, 2012

of the relationships and connections between artists and movements. Already in 1985, Michael Baxandall had strongly criticized the concept of “influence” widely misused in art history to suggest a causal relationship between an artist X and an artist Y. He proposed a reverse-investigating process that begins with concepts like “choice” or “election” to analyze young artists’ attitude towards, and reaction to, the past (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, New Haven/London 1985, 58–62). Similarly, in literary criticism, Harold Bloom defined his famous concept of “anxiety of influence” (*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York 1973). Dickerman’s network diagram shows the routes of communication between artists from Russia to the United States, and from Great Britain to Italy, in the years 1910 to 1925. This network of communication can give an explanation for the astonishingly fast reception of the new method of artistic creation. Therefore Dickerman’s network diagram looks like an airline route map with airports in black and protagonist airline hubs in red.

In 1936 Barr had criticized the use of the misleading term “abstract” writing: “This is not to deny that the adjective ‘abstract’ is confusing and even paradoxical” (*Cubism and Abstract Art*, 11). In

the same year Wassily Kandinsky wrote about “Abstract art,” which he believed to be an unpopular expression: “And rightly so, since it says little, or at least has a confusing effect” (Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, ed. K. C. Lindsay/P. Vergo, New York 1994, 785). Since then, art history has made little progress in elucidating this problem. All other propositions concerning painting and sculpture that opposed the concept of mimesis or denied representation and narration (such as “non-objective”, “non-figurative”, “pure painting” or “art concret”) have failed to be widely accepted. One of the problems is that “Abstraction” or “Abstract art” lacks a common denominator of style, unlike movements that had been named with some term and the ending -ism.

ABSTRACT ART/ABSTRACTION

The literal understanding of abstraction as ‘drawing out of’ or ‘away from’ was demonstrated in this exhibition by some examples of the famous tree-series by Piet Mondrian and by the cow-series by Theo van Doesburg (*Inventing Abstraction*, cat. nos. 252, 276–283). Both of these instructions on abstraction show equally that “abstract” painting was not the aim of Mondrian or Doesburg’s artistic research. The main aim for these two artists instead

was to define the elements of painting: the horizontal and the vertical as the elementary directions, with the primary colors, white, and black as the fundamental opposite. Many other artists may have undertaken the adventure of abstraction with a similar intention to build up their art on a new base of valuable elements. In 1916 Hans Arp used the title *Construction élémentaire* (*Inventing Abstraction*, nos. 328–329). Evidence of the search for elements and construction laws is also given in the publications by Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee (see the recent publication of Klee's Bauhaus courses “Bildnerische Gestaltungslehre”, *Meister Klee! Lehrer am Bauhaus*, Bern/Ostfildern 2012). Artists of the next generation like Aleksandr Rodchenko or El Lissitzky and many others were then able to make use of these elements for images and constructions (see *Inventing Abstraction*, nos. 298–299, 303–308). Abstraction is therefore an artistic method.

Artists, art critics and art historians have created another misleading term with “abstract” and “abstraction” along with “gothic”, “baroque” and others. However, unlike the latter terms, “abstract” or “abstraction” were fortunately not believed to be suitable for the definition of an epoch by belittling other movements that did not believe in “abstraction” as a central method. The critical questions of the beginning of “abstraction” and its

contexts still remain. In recent years these discussions have tended to investigate the connection between “abstraction” and esoteric movements or between “abstraction” and ornament. Most recent was the proposition to identify proto-abstract tendencies in different fields, from painted marble imitations to amorphic representations of the initial chaos of universal creation to chromatic studies (see *Inventing Abstractions*, note 3, p. 35 with reference to the recent literature). Leah Dickerman argues that all these images “may resemble abstract art” but “these are not art at all”, for they “were intended to produce meaning in other discursive frameworks” (*Inventing Abstractions*, 13–14). Instead of talking about “meaning” it would be preferable to say that

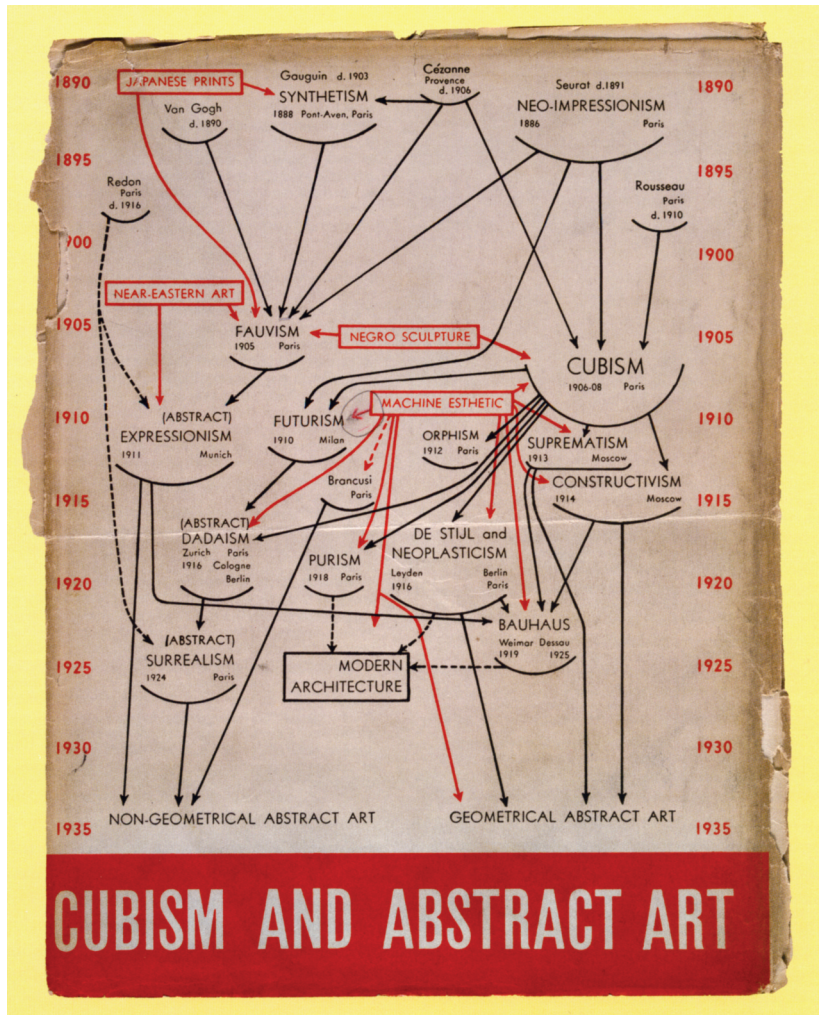


Fig. 2 Alfred H. Barr Jr., Diagram for Cubism and Abstract Art, front-cover dust jacket of the Exhibition Catalogue, New York 1936 (Cat. fig. 452)



Fig. 3 Wassily Kandinsky, *Impression III (Concert)*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 77,5 x 100,5 cm. Munich, Lenbachhaus (Cat. fig. 13)

representation of these objects could not avoid being materialistic, and were therefore opposite of the “spiritual” that was defined as the realm or aim of the new art.

these works, despite their resemblance to abstract art, imitate objects or represent something other than themselves – even the amorphic chaos of the world’s beginnings represented by Matthäus Merian as a black square for Robert Fludd’s book on the two cosmos in 1617.

KANDINSKY’S CONTRIBUTION

The MoMA exhibition and the accompanying catalogue confront us with several simultaneous explorations and artistic experiments, for instance Picasso’s works dating from the summer of 1910 in Cadaqués, Spain, František Kupka’s *Nocturne* of 1910–11, and Kandinsky’s *Komposition V* of 1911. Henry Kahnweiler did not accept Picasso’s latest paintings but sent photographs of them to Kandinsky in Munich before October 1911. In his paramount book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in December 1911 in Munich under the title *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Kandinsky reveals two major reasons for his invention of abstract art. The first is that he felt much surfeit in the conventional art genres shown in the Paris Salons and in other exhibitions. He described the boring paintings representing animals, naked women, portraits, landscapes and still-lives. All these works remained without any impact on the public, according to Kandinsky’s observation (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, London 1914, 3). The second reason was his suspicion that all the

Kandinsky, to whom the exhibition and catalogue (50–61) rightly ascribe the greatest “catalytic role in the emergence of abstraction”, had a strong affinity for music and especially for the compositions of Richard Wagner and Arnold Schönberg. On the 2nd of January 1911, a “Kompositions-Konzert” was performed in Munich with works by Schönberg; during the performance Kandinsky made sketches, and afterwards he painted the *Impression III (Konzert)* (fig. 3), which (without excluding figurative associations) through a contrast of yellow, black, red and blue planes suggests a dynamic movement from bottom left to top right. The exhibition offered the chance to follow Schönberg’s compositions under an acoustic umbrella while studying his autographs and Kandinsky’s painting.

Kandinsky tried to make a clear distinction between impression, improvisation and composition, reserving only for the latter a complete distinctiveness from the world outside the image. By the summer of 1911, Kandinsky had already predicted that painting after music “will be the second of the arts to be unthinkable without construction” and will therefore, like music, “attain to the higher level of pure art” (*Im Kampf um die Kunst. Die Antwort auf den „Protest deutscher Künstler“. Mit Beiträgen deutscher Künstler, Galerieleiter, Sammler und Schriftsteller*, München 1911, 73–75; Kandinsky, *Complete Writings*, 107).

ABSTRACT ART IN ITS DIVERSITY

Once it was realised in Munich, Paris and New York, the idea of “abstraction” and “abstract art” found interest among artists in Europe and the USA with the speed of light. Marsden Hartley bought Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* in Paris at the Galerie Clovis Sagot, and on his recommendation, Alfred Stieglitz published in New York a full page of extracts in his *Camera Work: a photographic quarterly* (Nr. 39, p. 34) in July 1912. During his sojourn in Munich during the summer of 1912, Marcel Duchamp tried to decipher Kandinsky’s book.

After painting colour streaks, František Kupka tried to open the image into infinity by repeating irregular forms and reducing the size of the pictorial window. Francis Picabia designed dancing forms in red, brown and blue for *The Spring* and *Dances at the Spring* of 1912 in two versions (*Inventing Abstraction*, nos. 85–87). Together with Kupka’s *Amorpha, fugue in two colors*, Picabia’s kaleidoscopic movements of forms were shown in the Salon d’Automne exhibition in Paris in 1912, from which a photograph was reproduced in the French journal *L’Illustration*. In February 1913, Picabia travelled to New York and presented himself in the *Armory Show* as ambassador of the new art: “I have come here to appeal to the American people to accept the New Movement in Art” (Picabia, *Art Rebel, Here to Teach New Movement*, in: *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1913, p. 9, see M. R. Taylor in: *Inventing Abstraction*, 111).

Why was Abstraction accepted with an astonishing speed among artists? Was it because most of the public and the art dealers rejected it? Was it because Abstraction itself included a radical rejection of the doctrine of imitation and all art produced previously? Was it because Abstraction offered to the artists a wide field of experimentation, a newfound freedom of invention and

creation? Was it because Abstraction promised a thorough reformation of art without recourse to a past ideal, unlike the Renaissance, the Classicisms or the Pre-Raphaelites? The keywords for the new creative freedom were “composition” and “construction” – notions borrowed from musical and technical creations and inventions. Unexpectedly, it was not at all easy for artists to abandon all forms of representation and narration and to navigate an unexplored visual ocean despite the new possibilities it presented.

The exhibition presented an abundance of visual experiments that turn in all imaginable directions and show the artist’s overwhelming enthusiasm for exploration. Several rare original publications and documents were exhibited in showcases. The arrangement of works in a chronological and geographical order made visible once more how quickly artists between Moscow and New York picked up the new possibilities and tried to carry out their own experiments. There is a big difference between Picasso’s research through visual destruction and Kandinsky’s free use of colors for planes, lines and points, or between Picabia’s and Léger’s dancing forms and the dancing bodies

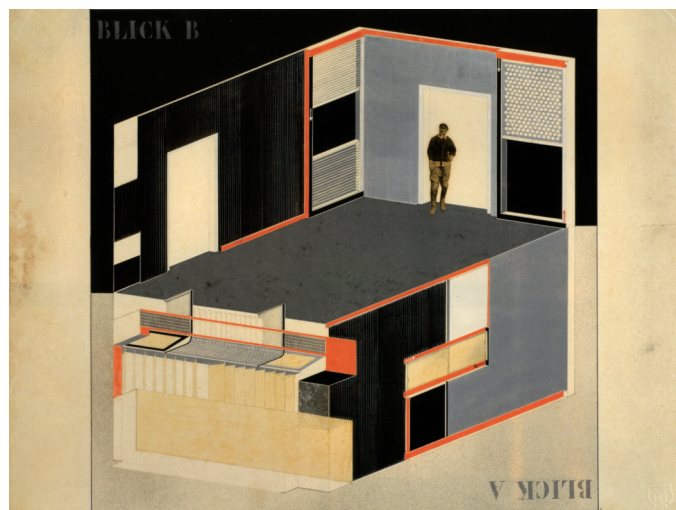


Fig. 4 El Lissitzky, *Rendering of the Abstract cabinet*, 1926–27. Gouache and collage. Hannover, Sprengel Museum [Cat. fig. 381]

in the choreography by Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman. The catalogue and exhibition do not hesitate to discuss and show the connection between “Abstraction” and decoration – a nightmare for many artists – and the use of “Abstraction” in architecture or book design (*Inventing Abstraction*, 182–187, 310–323; fig. 4). One of the many highlights in this exhibition was Sonia Delaunay-Terk’s marvellous vertical panorama of 1913 for Blaise Cendrars’ *La prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (see *Inventing Abstraction*, nos. 39–42 and pp. 82–85). Cendrars’ prose could be heard beautifully recited under an acoustic umbrella. The catalogue offers

high quality reproductions and 37 excellent essays on nearly all the relevant artists and experiments by renowned art historians and critics. It is not an exaggeration to say that both exhibition and catalogue stand as landmarks.

PROF. DR. OSKAR BÄTSCHMANN

Emil Nolde im Netzwerk der Moderne

Emil Nolde und Max Sauerlandt. Aspekte einer Freundschaft.

Tagung der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg und der Stiftung Moritzburg – Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 14./15. Februar 2013

Programm: http://www.ikare.unihalle.de/tagungen/kunstgeschichte/2013_nolde-sauerlandt

Moritzburg unter der Leitung von Olaf Peters und Katja Schneider eine Tagung, die das Verhältnis zwischen Emil Nolde und Max Sauerlandt umfassend untersuchte. Zugleich bildete die Veranstaltung den Auftakt für eine Nolde-Ausstellung in der Stiftung Moritzburg *Emil Nolde. Farben – heiß und heilig* (21.4.–28.7.2013). Das legendäre *Abendmahl*, 1937 aus der Sammlung beschlagnahmt, wird für die Dauer der Ausstellung aus dem Statens Museum in Kopenhagen ausgeliehen.

Da mit dem Ausstellungsprojekt gerade auch an die Verbindungen zwischen Nolde und dem Museum in Halle erinnert werden soll, ist es eine gute Entscheidung, die überarbeiteten neun Tagungsbeiträge mit verschiedenen rezeptionshistorischen Schwerpunkten im Ausstellungskatalog abzdrukken. Denn für Emil Nolde, zu dem eine Fülle von Publikationen vorliegt, ist ein solcher sammlungshistorischer Ansatz neu und sinnvoll. Angesichts der ästhetischen Kraft seiner Bilder wird nämlich nur allzu gerne die historische Ein-

Im Jahr 1913 erwarb der Kunsthistoriker Max Sauerlandt Emil Noldes Gemälde *Abendmahl* (1909; Abb. 1) für das Kunstmuseum in der Moritzburg in Halle. In Erinnerung an dieses mutige Bekenntnis zur Moderne vor 100 Jahren organisierten die Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg und die Stiftung