LEAH DICKERMAN

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

MATTHEW AFFRON
YVE-ALAIN BOIS
MASHA CHLENOVA
ESTER COEN
CHRISTOPH COX
HUBERT DAMISCH
RACHAEL Z. DELUE
HAL FOSTER
MARK FRANKO
MATTHEW GALE
PETER GALISON
MARIA GOUGH
JODI HAUPTMAN
GORDON HUGHES
DAVID JOSELIT
ANTON KAES
DAVID LANG
SUSAN LAXTON
GLENN D. LOVRY
PHILIPPE-ALAIN MICHAUD
JAROSLAW SUCHAN
LANKA TATTERSALL
MICHAEL R. TAYLOR

INVENTING ABSTRACTION 1910–1925
HOW A RADICAL IDEA CHANGED MODERN ART

Thames & Hudson
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

2013 103989

INHA
ON THE MOVE

HUBERT DAMISCH

72

THE ISSUE OF ABSTRACTION and the decisive role it plays in the generation of concepts was debated for over two thousand years in the schools and universities of the West without achieving much resonance in the so-called artistic literature, unless in order to denounce the hold that abstract thought may have on a wide variety of forms in the field of art. Whereas in all its guises, abstraction has always been, and is still, at work in countless human activities, from the most commonplace to the most sophisticated, one had to wait until the twentieth century to admit that, notwithstanding its substantial and operative dependency on the senses, art is no exception to the rule; and yet rare are those still today who lend their attention to, for just one example, the conceptual aspects of Piet Mondrian's work on what amounts, in mathematical terms, to the graph of the "tree" (the "graph" and not the "sign," as will later be the case with Matisse), a charged motif from the logical point of view as much as from the pictorial one, after his discovery of Cubism in Paris in 1912. The result is that the rhetoric of the "passage to abstraction" most often goes nowhere, despite criticism's fondness for identifying pathways that might have been those of abstraction, and thus of art, at a moment in history when, contrary to appearances, nothing was definitely played out on the formal level. Forty years later, in the darkness of World War II, Matisse would take up the problem from his own perspective, as if nothing had happened, in an early move toward a semiotic approach of art under the banner of the "sign" that is all the more interesting, historically speaking, in that an artist of Matisse's stature was responsible for it. 3

A classic text, widely discussed today, gives an example of how abstraction is integral to conceptualization. When that singular, all-purpose humanist Leon Battista Alberti, in the first lines of his little treatise on painting, De pictura (1436), mentioned the mathematician's consideration of the basic geometric terms—points, lines, planes—as separate from matter, as if they had no extension or thickness of their own, he did not limit himself to paraphrasing one of Aristotle's founding texts on abstraction without citing his source. 3 Unlike the mathematician, he argued, the painter had the role of making visible, and to do this needed a "fleshier Minerva" (una più grossa Minerva, a phrase borrowed from Cicero). That is, the painter had to make these terms—points, lines, and planes—as fine as they could or should be while nevertheless allowing them the minimum of consistency that would permit them to reach the threshold of visibility in painting. Every time Alberti returns to the differences, or the analogies, between the position of enunciation that is the prerogative of mathematicians and that to which painters are reduced (parlo come pittore: I speak as a painter, or as a painter would), it is to reiterate, on the eve of the great age of classical representation, the connection that European art had formed with geometry in their shared moment of origin as it was described in eidetic terms, with no direct concern for the historical process that led to the rise of geometry,
by the master of phenomenological studies, the philosopher Edmund Husserl, in his famous essay *The Origin of Geometry*. 4

"There is no such thing as phenomenology," Wittgenstein asserted firmly in his *Remarks on Colour*, only to immediately add, "but there are indeed phenomenological problems." As far as titles go, another little book, *Punkte und Linie zu Fläche* (Point and line to plane, 1926), published by Vasily Kandinsky for the use of his Bauhaus students, and also the many *Fenstres* (Windows) painted by Robert Delaunay after 1912 (plates 31–33), might lead one to think that their respective works still took part in the tradition ruled by Alberti's window, the idea that the painting is like a window on the world, a window through which one looks at what is painted there. 5

The present exhibition assturesly associates this model of open- ing and framing with the dynamic established in František Kupka's studies for *Amorphe* (plate 24), in which drawing and color work together while remaining independent of each other. This is so even in works imbued with an obvious desire for rupture, a desire that takes an explosive turn in Kandinsky's Improvisations such as *Komposition V* (Composition V, 1911; plate 18), a good number of which count, on the eve of World War I, among the most precious and best-thought-through manifestations of a conceptual implosion that could only be translated through an unprecedented escape of color and movement. Through that escape, color was henceforth freed from the constraint that Jean-Paul Sartre would describe in *L'Imaginaire* (1940), his masterpiece of "phenomenological psychology," where he adopts the principle that one can imagine no color unless it is the color of something. To this assertion Delaunay had from the beginning opposed a mode of pictorial composition based no longer on figures standing out from a ground but on chromatic configurations—disks, spirals, and helices—that were identifiable as such, that cut short the distinctness of the figure, and that in the end had colors only through their regulated conjunctions, in which color and movement were invited to shore each other up, one becoming the support or vehicle for the other. It remained for Sonja Delaunay to display on the blank screen of the museum, and then to close in the silent recesses of the library, the double lyrical accordion-folded book of Blaise Cendrars's *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Joan of France, 1913; plates 37, 39–42); and, last but not least, for the arrival of the monochrome (plate 39), which might have seemed the last stage in the process of abstraction, one in which color is no longer reduced to a mere attribute while at the same time Wittgenstein's daring notion of a "geometry of color" attains its full resonance in historical as well as anthropological terms.

"Can we imagine people having a geometry of colours different from our normal one?... The difficulty is obviously this: isn't it precisely the geometry of colours that shows us what we are talking about, i.e. that we are talking about colours?"6 knowing that the logic of the concept of color is just much more complex than it may seem. "Tragic" as it is according to Socrates, the definition of color that Plato assigns to the Sophists in the Meno dialog (76d-e) nevertheless deserves attention for the link it traces between color and figure conceived as the limit opposes to color's spread. The original pact sealed in the West between art and geometry has for its flip side a game that is no longer only a matter of languages put in parentheses, under cover of a form of abstraction that has all the outer trappings of a phenomenological reduction, color is set free to play its own game, no longer as a secondary quality (René Descartes) or an accident of light (Isaac Newton), but as the very substance of painting as a means of expression.

**Inventing abstraction:** to conclude, we should note the importance for thought, in its relationship with art, of the injunction implicit in a name involving the performative term that the English language deploys in applying the gerundive form "painting" to what we may as well, substantively speaking, call a "picture" (in French, *une peinture*, or *un tableau*), or to the art of painting (l'art de peindre) itself, seized at the moment of its execution and in the actuality of its operation, whether or not it passes through abstraction of one form or another. How does something with the appearance of a concept come to sink into, become an integral part of, what art, and most of all painting, gives us to see? Formulated in these terms a century after the appearance of the first paintings that claimed kinship with abstraction, the question makes sense as soon as the division between two forms of plastic thoughts—one held to be figurative, the other nonfigurative—can be considered achieved. It is the responsibility of criticism to take stock of the challenge, altogether logical and historical, that is constituted on both formal and historical levels by the undisguised return to modernist teleology and the vested interest in abstraction in the agenda of art openly declared "conceptual."