



Василий Кандинский, *Композиция VI* /
Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*
1913

In Praise of Shadows – Adrian Ghenie in Conversation
with Dimitri Ozerkov

Dimitri Ozerkov:

My PhD was in Russian Formalism, so I was always intrigued by Kandinsky's *Composition VI* in the Hermitage, how it's done and what it's about. Is it only about the flood? When I look at your works I'm always thinking, okay there should be a subject behind them but that is not what really takes me. I'm intrigued by how a painting can motivate me without understanding what it is really about. It's about an energy that you have invested it with, and that is what I feel when I look at it. It's hard to place, this energy. It's somewhere between light and colour, and I think that's what I would love to talk to you about.

Adrian Ghenie:

The notion of subject is a tricky thing. The subject is both relevant and irrelevant at the same time. It's like a bone... something that you have to chew on.

D.O. Like a title for example?

A.G. Yeah, because in the end it's never really about a subject. If you go back to the Renaissance, for example, the subject was generic, everyone was painting the same crucifixion, it was already given so they were not really pressured by the subject. That's probably why we had such good art, the subject was more important for the entity that commissioned the artwork but I think the artist felt less triggered by it. Now, I actually think that we have regressed a bit. It's in a weird way an involution. Now we are bombarded by subjects, everyone thinks that their own self is very interesting. For example, if you think of Picasso, what he did was revolutionary for art but the subject matter was really banal.

D.O. Even the Harlequins?

A.G. When is the tyranny of the subject going to stop? You know, I taught art students for a while and they were so preoccupied with explaining the subject of the painting that they were not really bothered with the actual medium of painting itself. They were so excited that they would come up with a very complicated subject, with all kinds of historical or psychological references... It was somehow more important than the work. But great art has such irrelevant subjects.

- D.O. It's interesting to consider what looking is and how recognition happens. To me it's a kind of enigmatic construction. That is what painting is, it's a trap in some way.
- A.G. For painting the best analogy is opera singing. You can sing opera in the shower but, in order to reach the kind of quality to perform three hours of Wagner, you need to be taught, you cannot just do it automatically, even though it may be based on a natural gift. In order to reach a certain level, you need to understand the process. It's similar with painting: you can use colours and express yourself on a canvas, that's fine, but if you don't understand this very intricate process that's connected with painting, the results are lacking.
- D.O. I have a different theory. My theory is that the format of a painting is very much dependent on the homes that we have. Because painting is initially intended to decorate a wall, that's its main purpose. Whether it's a church wall, a chapel wall, a domestic wall, in any case that is what painting is used for. It's an object. And I think as long as we live in homes that have flat walls we will always have paintings.
- A.G. You know there's this rule in medicine that the function creates the organ. Well, Italy has this warm climate, so you can build high walls and for only three months a year you need a little heat inside, so you can build large spaces. Automatically, you will have a lot of walls, since the climate allowed for this architecture. But take Russia, for example, Russia in the Middle Ages with its harsh climate and the wooden architecture and the smaller interiors that you have to heat consistently... Of course in Italy, with its ambitious architecture and many walls, it's just a matter of time until the Pope, for instance, says 'this one is empty, I need someone to do something on it.' So he commissions the first artist who does the work, then another artist does it, and by repetition you start to have a style and a technique. And of course it's just a matter of time until Michelangelo shows up. You need surfaces and people to do it over and over again and, through this kind of repetition, eventually something brilliant will emerge. There are so many good Italian frescoes because there are so many other walls where they actually failed. A lot of them were banal or boring. But they learned a bit more with every attempt, and you need generation after generation to be commissioned to do it again and again. Painting is a medium based on failure, it evolves through failure.

- D.O. When we stand still our mind is instructing our body eight times a second for it to be stable because the Earth is moving, everything around us is moving, you're moving, and we need this interior balance biologically. The same should apply to painting.
- A.G. There is this series on the BBC called *The Code* which is basically a documentary made by a mathematician. One of the episodes explains why we like Jackson Pollock. The subject is whether there's a mathematical code in nature, and it documents a few cases where you can actually say, yes, there is a code. The most simple one is Pi. No matter which circle you look at, whether it's this one or another, if you do the equation it always ends up being 3.14. But they had a really interesting theory about why we like Pollock, and it's because if you photograph a detail of a painting and then you photograph the whole, and you showed someone both photographs asking which one is the detail and which constitutes the whole, they couldn't tell one from the other. So, this is the fractal in mathematics, when a fragment of something looks like the whole, or your eyes read it as the whole.
- D.O. That's a good point, yes.
- A.G. So when you look at a Pollock, you might recognise something that you always see in nature, like the branches of a tree, perhaps...something like that, it's something we know, it's in our memory bank. A good painting is a fractal related to a whole that already exists in our brains at the most basic level.
- D.O. Fractals and balance are both good points. Artists definitely have an inner feeling of equilibrium. So they know how to create a problem and then how to solve it.
- A.G. You've seen my desk. Well, basically I have these surfaces – like pages from magazines, books, sometimes an image or whatever, and then I cut out other fragments, and then I put them together; sometimes I just do it like that and create a kind of agglomeration, and I look at it and I don't like it. Then, after a few moves like that, I reach another version. I don't know why, but I like this one and I want to photograph it and then I collect these images and slowly build a bit of an archive. I look at them, and say, 'you know what, this actually looks like a nocturnal landscape, maybe this kind of shape can be turned into a figure. Let's find a subject for that.' But it's not like I have a subject prior, this process is 60% of the time spent on a work.

- D.O. Do you ever find inspiration in nature? For instance, you walk home at night, and something triggers you?
- A.G. If I do, I would photograph a tree or a detail of the sidewalk. Then I print that detail, I put it on my desk and I just mix it in with images from other sources and slowly I have something like the beginning of a landscape or a weird blend of colour.
- D.O. So basically as an artist you collect situations?
- A.G. Yep. The concept will come later when, you know, I have this solved.
- D.O. So it's all about collecting today. Collecting images, situations, colours, combinations of colours. Just like poets who collect words, sounds, how two words sound next to each other. That's what happens to the poet. You like alliteration, you like this sound combination, and so on. Basically art can be divided into either composition or illustration: you either compose as a music composer does, or you illustrate.
- A.G. We had a teacher at the Art Academy in Cluj, who asked us to take different charcoals of different sizes as well as normal pens and try all kinds of lines and all kinds of combinations. 'Do a thick charcoal line, do it like that. Do a thin one with a pencil, you know, play around, just for a month. You don't have to draw a figure or anything, just do this.' Everybody was very intrigued and kind of disappointed because of course as a young artist you want results, you want to do something amazing to impress your classmates: 'Look at how good I am.' This was so boring for us, only now do I understand this guy – he was saying 'play with the medium.' After you do this two thousand times, you will discover some lines you like, you will discover a pattern that you actually go back to, and then do a drawing with that, but nobody was patient enough and humble enough to actually go through this process; we only did it for two days. And then 'oh this is boring, let's do a portrait. Let's be like Leonardo.'
- D.O. It's about training your hand, which trains your brain.
- A.G. You know what's one of my favourite places in the world to see works? Venice. The churches, especially when they don't have lights. It's like seeing an animal at dusk... sometimes when you look at a Tintoretto, it's very brown. When looking way up there, you have this weird angle and it's dark, so you realise it's not just the painting, it's more like a presence. Yes, it's also an object. If you remove the work

from that obscurity and put it in a white cube, it's a different experience. You know the Caravaggio paintings in Rome, there's always someone there who puts in a coin to see it lit up, but I'm always waiting for that light to turn off, and then I really see it. I feel the darkness of it. You switch the light on, then it's just an image.

- D.O. There was this Japanese 1930s novelist called Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. He wrote a text titled *In Praise of Shadows*, which is about Japanese aesthetics; to be in the shadow, you know, to hide, to not switch the light on, and also about the girls who would cover their teeth with charcoal so they wouldn't shine. And then the Americans came and brought the shining light with all those polished nickels and other shining stuff such as bottles. Tanizaki wrote about that contrast and praised the shadow that was disappearing...
- A.G. Maybe it depends on everybody's nature. I like this kind of shadow. For me, this is the ideal context to see a painting, that obscurity – because then I see it even if I can't see the details, but I feel the mystique around it. This is how I want to see paintings.
- D.O. So these shadows are normally warm, and they enter your palette as well.
- A.G. Yes, I remember walking through the Hermitage, in this historical building, the palace, and the light was not very strong, there was enough light but it was not brightly lit. And I saw that Velázquez up there, which is kind of obscure. But there was this red part, it was exactly how I remembered it from reproductions, and there was such a strong feeling when I looked at that red.
- D.O. When you come next time, I will take you to the museum with the lights off, you might like it.
- A.G. It would add an extra layer... I had the same sort of thing, I never wanted to find explanations about things. When I go to a museum, I like to find a painting and look at it from a distance. Like, just look at it. I don't want to know anything about it. For centuries there was not much explanation, art was just hanging there, so it's almost like viewing a ruin.
- D.O. For me there are paintings that give me information, and those that give me emotion. They can't give both, it's either this or that. They are two different kinds of artworks.

Berlin, August 5, 2019