The works of genius and mediocrity—the latter are justified because they have historic interest.

The painting of those who have long since decayed (who they were is forgotten, a riddle, a mystery)—how you upset the nineteenth century. Until the 1830s, the age of Catherine was enticing, alluring, and delightful: precise and classical.

Savage vulgarization. The horrors of the Wanderers—general deterioration—the vanishing aristocratic order—hoorigans of the palette à la Makovsky and Aivazovsky, etc.

Slow development, new ideals—passions and terrible mistakes!

Since the first exhibition of the World of Art, in 1899, there has been a new era. Artists look to the West. The fresh wind blows away Repin’s chaffy spirit, the bast shoe of the Wanderers loses its apparent strength. But it’s not Serov, not Levitan, not Vrubel’s vain attempts at genius, not the literary Diaghilevans, but the Blue Rose, those who have grouped around The Golden Fleece and later the Russian impressionists nurtured on Western models, those who trembled at the sight of Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne (the synthesis of French trends in painting)—these are the hopes for the rebirth of Russian painting.

NIKOLAI KULBIN

Free Art as the Basis of Life:
Harmony and Dissonance
(On Life, Death, etc.)
[Extracts], 1908

Born St. Petersburg, 1868; died St. Petersburg, 1917. Professor at the St. Petersburg Military Academy and doctor to the General Staff; taught himself painting; 1908: organized the Impressionist group; lecturer and theoretician; 1909: group broke up, dissident members contributing to the founding of the Union of Youth, opened formally in February 1910; 1910 on: peripheral contact with the Union of Youth; close to the Burliuks, Vladimir Markov, Olga Rozanova; ca. 1913: illustrated futurist booklets and other publications; 1914: invited Filippo Marinetti to Russia.
This piece, "Svobodnoe iskusstvo, kak osnova zhizni. Garmoniya i dissonans. (O zhizni, smerti i prochem)," appeared in the miscellany Studiya Impressionistov [Studia of the Impressionists] (St. Petersburg, March 1910), pp. 3-14 [bibl. R224], and these extracts come from pp. 3, 4, 8-10, 13-14. The volume appeared just after the "Impressionist" exhibition [see bibl. R221] and at the same time as Kulbin's exhibition the "Triangle" [bibl. R241] was opened in St. Petersburg (March 1910). It also included poems by David and Nikolai Burliuk; Velimir Khlebnikov's famous poem "Zaklyatie smekhoma" [Incantation by Laughter]; a so-called monodrama, "Predstavlenie lyubvi" [Presentation of Love], by Nikolai Evreinov (to which Kulbin contributed three illustrations); an essay by Kulbin's scientific colleague Aleksei Borisyak, "O zhivopisi muzyki" [On Musical Painting]; and Kulbin's "Free Music" (bibl. R227, a variant of which appeared in Der Blaue Reiter [The Blue Rider], bibl. 96). Essentially Kulbin was concerned with liberating art, literature, and music from conventional patterns and replacing these with the "intuitive principle" in music he followed closely the atonal theories of Arnold Schoenberg and was obviously influenced by the current interest in sound-color relationships manifested by Vasilii Kandinsky, Aleksandr Skryabin, and the St. Petersburg theosophist Aleksandra Unkovskaya; similarly, Kulbin later welcomed Aleksei Kruchenikh's transrational language (zaum) and in painting went so far as to presage the mandala theory by maintaining that "painting is the spontaneous projection of conditional signs from the artist's brain into the picture" [bibl. R101, p. 151]. One of these conditional signs that Kulbin saw as recurrent in history was the triangle, a sign that we can identify, of course, with theosophist philosophy, with Russian symbolist aesthetics, and with Kandinsky's On the Spiritual in Art. The triangle assumed such importance for Kulbin that he organized an artists' group of that name and began to sign his writings with its graphic representation. It was at the "Triangle" exhibition, in fact, and at similar shows organized by Kulbin, such as Sovremennye techeniya v iskusstve [Contemporary Trends in Art] in St. Petersburg in May 1908, that experiments in automatic or intuitive painting were presented: for example, a blind painter submitted canvases to "Contemporary Trends," the peasant primitive Petr Kovalenko ("discovered" by David Burliuk) contributed five canvases to the "Wreath" subsection at the "Triangle," where Kulbin himself was represented by several intuitive works bearing such intriguing titles as Blue on White and White on Green.

The present text echoes the intuitive, symbolist tone of Kulbin's Impressionist group (not to be confused with the French or Moscow impressionists) and of some members of the Union of Youth, one that can be perceived in the art and writings of Pavel Filonov, Markov, Rozanova, and Kazimir Malevich. Before publication, Kulbin had delivered the text as a lecture to the Society of People's Universities in St. Petersburg in 1908, and on February 12, 1912, he gave a similar talk under the title "The New Art as the Basis of Life" at a debate organized by the Knave of Diamonds [see pp. 69-70 and 77-78]. Part of the text is reprinted in bibl. R14, pp. 15-22.
Harmony and dissonance are the basic phenomena of the universe. They are universal and are common to the whole of nature. They are the basis of art.

Life is conditioned by the play of the mutual relationships between harmony and dissonance and by their struggle.

The life of nature, the common life of the House of God, is the life of great harmony, of beauty, of Him.

Complete harmony is Nirvana, and the weary I aspires toward it.

Complete harmony is death.

In music, the plastic arts, and literature, concord calms the spectator, but discord excites him.

From my own researches I am convinced that it is possible to determine concords and discords in the spectrum, in the scales of colors, just as in musical scales.

In view of this, I have drawn attention to the very special significance that
combinations of adjacent colors in the spectrum and combinations of adjacent sounds in scales have for life and art. By scales I mean those with small intervals. . . .

At this point I may mention that by means of these phenomena that I call "close combinations" and the processes of these close combinations, it is possible to depict all kinds of pictures of nature and of subjective experiences in painting, music, and other branches of art.*

The Meaning of the Theory of Art

Many people say:

"The theory of art? What does that have to do with us? That's something dry and bookish. Does it claim to be something? I want art, not arguments. The artist creates because there burns within him a sacred flame. He creates without reasoning, and I want to enjoy art without reasoning. The mortifying analysis of art kills art."

Those who say this do not notice that they have not departed from theory and that what they have said is their own theory of art.

Away as far away as possible from the dry, the abstract, and the mortifying!

We recognize only harmony, dissonance, rhythm, style, colors, joy, and grief!

The theory of art is the artist's song, his word, his music, his plastic art (embodiment, depiction).

So perhaps we don't need any theories then? We'll simply read poems, listen to symphonies, and look at pictures.

No! There are no poems, symphonies, or pictures that are devoid of ideas. Pictures, words, music, and the plastic arts are the artist's expression. Works of art are the living, vivid epistles of art.

Not everyone has the gift of reading these hieroglyphics. Anyone can say whether a photograph or an academic picture resembles his established conception of "nature." But there is no art in this.

In order that the spectator apprehend the real subjects of art and be able to enjoy the poetry that is inherent in them, the ideas of art must be aroused in him. In order that the artist create the subjects of art, the poet must be aroused in him.

The poetry of art is the theory of art.

* Incidentally, from my own experience I advise painters to depict light with the help of discords. The results are convincing.
We, cells of the body of the living Earth, fulfill her desires, but not all of us hear her voice.

It is difficult, very difficult, to read spontaneously the hieroglyphics of life and of the structure of the crystal, the flower, and the beautiful animal.

Not everyone has the gift of reading the rudiments of the art created by the most beautiful of animals—primitive man and our children—although it is simpler.

There are few loving hearts capable of reading artistic ideas in the great works of bygone art. While contrasting the old artists with the new, the mob is still deaf to the ideas of the old artists. Those who love, think, and desire—such are the flower of the Earth. They desire poetry and hear it in the Good Book and in the thoughts of Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Goethe, and other literati great and small: these are the real theory of art.

This theory of artistic creation is the key to happiness because art is happiness. It is the philosopher's stone, the magic wand that turns life into a fairy tale. It is poetry.

This poetry represents the principles of life. Knowledge of them inspires the mood of art, sharpens vision.

He who knows these principles sees poetry in works of sincerity depicted by an artist—persecuted and, invariably, a newcomer; works about which the ignorant say: “Rubbish, daubing!”

Roger Bacon asks: which is better, to be able to draw an absolutely straight line by hand or to invent a ruler with the help of which anyone can draw a straight line?

For the artist this ruler is the theory of artistic creation. Without it every artist would have to remake our creative culture. All his strength would be spent on this, and he would have no chance of speaking his own new word.

But why, then, do we see certified “artists” every day—artists who study anatomy, perspective, and the history of painting in the official academies—remaining bureaucrats of art? Conversely, street urchins and shepherds are sometimes artists and poets. The theory of art provides us with the answer:

The theory of artistic creation is not taught there. (In the academies)

Well-behaved bureaucrats and exhausted artists teach and learn there. They are nice people, but they have no wings, they cannot fly. If a real artist turns up in such an academy, then he suffers the fate of an eaglet amid a brood of hens. Either they will peck him to bits before his beak has developed, or he will hurt somebody himself.

The shepherd Giotto reads the theory of art freely in nature herself, studies color and line while driving his flock from one beautiful picture to another. Moving to the town, he examines works of art and takes from them
their own particular guidelines; he reads, converses about art, and thirstily
imbibes the juice of the fruits of art, throwing away the peel and the mold.
In his own creations Giotto puts into practice artistic truth, the truth of art.

The eagle's wings function not irregularly but by strict laws that represent
the theory of eagles.

This is the **theory of artistic creation**. It is essential both for talent and for
genius.

Tolstoi is the sun. But in his erudition disregards the sciences of Mephisto-
tofeles. And so, to the surprise of many, there are spots on the sun.

Chekhov to a lesser extent, but he studied the sciences of life. A doctor's
knowledge not only did not hinder him from creating, but also lent his
creation an extraordinary force, a humaneness almost evangelical.

Ruisdael manifested artistic ability at fourteen years of age, but he first
became a doctor and only later a painter; this helped him to establish a great
new sphere of painting—the landscape.

The theory of artistic creation has taught man how to compose a poem, to
discover colors, and to discover living harmony. This theory is inherent in
pictures themselves and in discourses about pictures.

### I. Theory

**Ideology.** Symbol of the universe. Delight. Beauty and good. Love is grav-
ity. Process of beauty. Art is the quest for gods. Creation is the myth and
the symbol. Freedom. The struggle of Titans and Olympus. Prometheus and
Hercules. Painting and servitude.

A single art—of the word, music, and the plastic arts.

**Creation.** Thought is the word. Feeling. Will. Individuality. Child. Artist.
Talent. Temperament. Sensation. Contrast. Dynamic principle in
psychology. Growth and decline. Associations. Revelation and
Mastery of unconscious creation. Accumulation of impressions, processing of them (the throes of creation). Outburst of creation
(inspiration). Interchange of creation and self-criticism. Har-
Rhythm, Style.

**Blue.** Thought in word, sounds, and colors. Drawing is melody.

**Red.** Mood. The sounds of colors. The colors of the word. The
colors of sounds. Scales. Ornament.

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**Psicologia esta presente na criação e na cognição**
Yellow. The plastic arts. Free creation. Illusion and form. The psychology of depiction. Mutual creation of artist and spectator.

Cognition. Sight and blindness. The psychology of the spectator. Sympathetic experience. Criticism.

Supplements. The life of the artist, of the picture, and of the spectator.

II. The History of Art


The Present. Contemporary art trends.

New Tendencies. The revaluation of values.

VASILII KANDINSKY

Content and Form, 1910


The text of this piece, “Soderzhanie i forma,” is from the catalogue for the second Salon exhibition, organized by Vladimir Izdebsky in Odessa, December 1910—
NOTES TO THE TEXTS

BURLIUK, pp. 8-11
1. Member of the Wanderers. His initially tendentious exposes of Russian rural life degenerated into sentimental, historical scenes.
2. Famous for his innumerable seascapes.
3. Regarding Isaak Levitan, Valentin Serov, and Mikhail Vrubel', see Introduction.

KULBIN, pp. 11-17
1. In December 1911, at the All-Russian Convention of Artists, in St. Petersburg, Kulbin gave a lecture entitled "Harmony, Dissonance, and Their Close Combinations in Art and Life," which was later published [ibibl. R230].
2. Kulbin was interested in microtone music (what he called "free music") and in the associa-
tions between the color spectrum and the conventional seven-tone scale. The second article in Studio of the Impressionists was, in fact, a piece by Kulbin on "Free Music: The Results of Applying a Theory of Artistic Creation to Music" [bibl. R227]; the main ideas of this article had already appeared in Kulbin's booklet Free Music [bibl. R226], and later appeared in German as "Die freie Musik" [bibl. 96].

3. By profession both Chekhov and Kulbin were doctors.

MARKOV, pp. 23-38
1. "Logic has deprived Nature of the divine." Reference not traced. Probably a quotation from Novalis or the early Hegel.
2. For explanation of lubok see n. 4 to Introduction, p. 298.
3. Presumably a reference to the writer, composer, and painter E. T. A. Hoffmann. Like Novalis and other German romantics, Hoffmann enjoyed a vogue in Russia in the 1900s.
4. Markov's ideas on "texture" [fakura] were scheduled to appear in a subsequent issue of Soyuz molodezhi [Union of Youth], but since the journal ceased publication after the third issue (March 1913), Markov's essay was published separately [bibl. R233]. At the end of his text Markov also indicated that he would be writing on other principles, such as gravity, surface, dynamism, and consonance, but these essays were never published.

SHEVCHENKO, pp. 41-54
1. For explanation of lubok see n. 4 to Introduction, p. 298.
2. Signboards and trays were particularly prized by David Burliuk, who had a large collection of them. Mikhail Larionov was very interested in the lubok and in 1913 organized an exhibition of them [see bibl. R252 and bibl. 132, pp. 33-37, where part of the catalogue, including Larionov's and Natalya Goncharova's prefaces, is translated into French]. Shevchenko collected children's drawings, some of which were shown at the "Target" in 1913, together with signboards and naive paintings by the Georgian primitive Niko Pirosmanashvili.
3. Painter, wood sculptor, and stage designer known for his highly stylized depictions of pre-Petrine Russia.
4. "Grass writing" is presumably a reference to the Chinese ts'ao shu, a hieroglyphic style used in the first and second centuries A.D. In appearance ts'ao shu resembles intertwined leaves of grass.
5. The title "Old Believers" refers to those members of the Russian Church who disagreed with ecclesiastical reforms instituted by the Patriarch Nikon in the mid-seventeenth century. Among the first to condemn Nikon's preference for the Greek Orthodox and hence more Western conception of Christianity was the famous Petrovich Awakum, traditionally regarded as the founder of the Old Believers. The general policy of the Old Believers, who were from all classes, was, despite forceful opposition, to maintain the rich, Byzantine traditions of the Church; this affected considerably the outward appearance of their dress, icons, lubki, etc.
6. See Larionov's articles, pp. 87ff.

GONCHAROVA, pp. 54-60
1. Goncharova was represented at the first and second exhibitions of "Der Blaue Reiter" in 1911-12; she also contributed to Roger Fry's "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition" in London in 1912 [bibl. 106, 107, 142].
2. See Larionov's articles, pp. 87ff.

AKSENOV, pp. 60-69
1. Member of the Wanderers. Known for his scenes of factory and prison life. Regarding Repin see Introduction.
2. For further details regarding the Knave of Diamonds members whom Aksenov mentions, the following references may be consulted: Mashkov [bibl. R323], Kuprin [bibl. R324, R331], Rozhdestvensky [bibl. R343], Lentulov [bibl. R309, R322], Konchalovsky [bibl. R316, R317], Falk [bibl. 105, R260, R346], Exter [bibl. 61, 80, R181].
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