THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF KANDINSKY'S ABSTRACT ART: A POLEMIC WITH HENRY'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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The French phenomenologist Michel Henry sees a similarity between the primordial experience of what he calls 'Life' and the aesthetic experience occasioned by Wassily Kandinsky's abstract art. The triple aim of this essay is to explain and assess (1) how Henry interprets Kandinsky's abstract art and theory; (2) what the consequences of his interpretation mean for the theory of the experience of abstract art; and (3) what doubts and questions emerge from Henry's interpretations of Kandinsky's theory and practice. Despite its containing many interesting ideas, Henry's phenomenological approach is insufficient to describe the aesthetic experience of Kandinsky's abstract art. For Henry, aesthetic experience is corporeal, primordial, non-intentional, and independent of knowledge and culture. By contrast, I believe that it is possible and more suitable to connect the direct, corporeal, and affective character of the aesthetic experience of abstract art with intentionality and embeddedness in culture and knowledge.

The French phenomenologist Michel Henry's (1922–2002) discussions concentrate on corporeality and what he calls 'Life'. Henry sees a similarity between the primordial experience of Life and the aesthetic experience of Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) art.

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the sense of aesthetic experience in abstract art from a phenomenological perspective. The aim is actually threefold. It seeks (1) to explain and assess how Henry interprets Kandinsky's abstract art and theory, (2) to determine the consequences of his interpretation for the theory of the experience of abstract art, and (3) to identify doubts and questions which emerge from Henry's interpretations of Kandinsky's theory and practice. It is my conviction that, despite its including many interesting ideas, Henry's phenomenological approach is often insufficient to describe the aesthetic experience of Kandinsky's abstract art. For Henry, aesthetic experience is corporeal, primordial, non-intentional, and independent of knowledge and culture. I put forth the view that it is not only possible but also more suitable to connect the direct, corporeal, and affective character of the aesthetic experience of abstract art with intentionality and embeddedness in culture and knowledge.

The first part of the article presents the main categories of Henry's phenomenology (especially corporeality and Life), whereas the second part indicates the similarities between his phenomenology and Kandinsky's theoretical and artistic output. The third part identifies the consequences for

the sense of aesthetic experience, which follow from these considerations. The fourth, polemical part of the paper touches upon the problems and antinomies arising from Henry's perspective concerning the aesthetic experience of abstract art.

I. MICHEL HENRY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF CORPOREALITY AND LIFE

The main categories in Henry's thinking are corporeality and Life. He analyses these categories from both a religious and a phenomenological perspective. Religious and phenomenological aspects may be interrelated in Henry's considerations, but my paper concentrates on the phenomenological analysis.

In his considerations, Henry differentiates between the sensual body (*le corps*) and corporeality (*la chair*).[1] The sensual body is a visible object among other objects in the world. It is something that can be explored and described from a distance (for example, in science). Henry writes:

> An inert body [is] like those we find in the material universe – or that we can construct using material processes torn from it, by organizing them and combining them according to physical laws – such a body senses and feels nothing. It does not sense itself and does not feel its own feeling, it neither loves nor desires itself. Even less does it sense or feel or love or desire any of the things around it. (*IPF*, p. 3)

The sensual body is equipped with sensual qualities. It has colours, odours, tastes, and is sonorous or may sound when it is rapped. Such sensuous experience of the body can be found in traditional, down-to-earth knowledge about the body and the empirical sciences.

Corporeality, by contrast, is invisible, and is experienced from an internal perspective. It cannot be treated as a physical object because one cannot distance oneself from it in any way. Corporeality is experienced without any mediation. It is of an affective nature: it loves, suffers, and rejoices. It is not 'directed towards external objects', but experiences itself. Henry states that one property of corporeality is that

> it senses every object that is close to it; it perceives each of its qualities, it sees its colours, hears its sounds, breathes in a scent, determines the hardness of the soil with a foot, and the smoothness of a fabric with a hand. And it senses all of this, the qualities of all these

[1] Michel Henry analyses two dimensions of the body (*la chair* and *le corps)* and the category of Life in his *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). Published in English as *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015). Hereafter: *IPF*. Although in the English version, *la chair* is translated as *the flesh*, *la chair* actually has a different meaning in everyday language and phenomenology. For this reason, I believe that *corporeality* is a more suitable translation.

> objects that make up its environment, it feels the world that presses on it from all sides, only because it feels its own feeling first, in the effort it exerts to ascend the lane, and in the impression of pleasure that sums up the cool of the water or wind. (*IPF*, p. 4)

Corporeality is the most intimate and immediate sphere of one's personal life, making people individuals. Self, auto-affection, and corporeality are interrelated. Suffering, delight, sadness, and joy, which experience themselves, always carry an 'I' with them, without which no suffering is possible.[2]

In Henry's view, *la chair* is of a primordial nature and is a condition of *le corps* being possible. There is a chasm between *la chair* and the sensual body. *La chair* is alive, whereas the body is numb matter. As Henry writes, 'The analysis of the body can never become an analysis of our flesh, or eventually its explanatory principle; rather, the contrary is true: our flesh allows us to know, within the limits prescribed by this inescapable presupposition, something like a "body"' (*IPF*, p. 5).

These two aspects of the body are connected with two dimensions of existence. Corporeality (*la chair*) belongs to the invisible Life whereas the sensual body (*le corps*) belongs to the world. An attempt at capturing corporeality from the perspective of the world means its derealization and even 'death'. This kind of attitude to corporeality occurs in the empirical sciences or down-to-earth knowledge about the body. Paradoxically, it is the world that derealizes what appears in it (*IPF*, p. 44). Live corporeality is a principle of the constitution of the sensual body and the world. In Henry's view, the world and the body deprived of live experiences become an illusion. We live in such an illusion when we turn away from our affectivity and corporeality. Phenomenologically, Henry's analyses constitute an attempt at capturing corporeality from the perspective of Life rather than the world.

The category of Life is crucial to Henry's phenomenology. The thinker stresses the transcendental and even religious dimension of Life (equating it with God) and differentiates it from the biological sense of life. In Henry's thought, Life has an absolute character and is directly experienced by corporeality. It may reasonably be said that the central category of Henry's phenomenology is live corporeality, which reveals Life. As Henry puts it, '"To live" means to undergo experiencing oneself. The essence of life consists in the pure fact of undergoing experiencing oneself, and, on the contrary, everything pertaining to matter, or more generally to the "world", is devoid of this' (*IPF*, p. 19). Life reveals itself in

[2] 'There is no Self that in the possibility of its carnal, phenomenological effectuation would not be this one or that one, yours or mine. No flesh, consequently, that would not be that of a particular Self (the flesh of no one, of the world), an anonymous and impersonal flesh, unconscious, feeling nothing and not feeling itself, an impossible flesh!' (*IPF*, p. 124).

every living object regardless of the world's horizon. It is experienced directly, with no distance. It is a pure and primordial experience of itself, in which the experiencing and the experienced become one. As opposed to the visible world, Life is invisible. Life is not – it becomes. It is processual. As such, it keeps on giving birth to itself. Life is something more than an individual. Affective subjectivity is born out of absolute Life: 'The flesh is precisely the manner in which life is made Life. No Life without a flesh, but no flesh without Life' (*IPF*, p. 121).

Henry attempts to describe Life, although he ascertains the considerable difficulty related to reflecting on it.[3] But, in the philosopher's opinion, Life is not entirely imperceptible. We gain access to Life through experiencing ourselves and through auto-affection. A description brings us closer to Life only when it is supported by its experience. The comprehensible and visible is conditioned by the invisible (*IPF*, p. 92). The place where Life is experienced is absolute subjectivity. Life is available to us in its affective experience. Such sensations as pain, joy, delight, suffering, and pleasure are characterized by the fact that they are not directed externally, yet they experience themselves. Life itself is manifested in corporeality. The property of Life and corporeality is the fact that they stimulate themselves and experience auto-affection. There is nothing external and dual in Life and corporeality:

> For life is nothing other than what undergoes experiencing itself without differing from itself, in such a way that this trial is a trial of itself and not of something else, a self-revelation in a radical sense […] Life undergoes experiencing itself in pathos; it is an originary and pure Affectivity, an Affectivity that we call transcendental because it is indeed what makes possible experiencing undergoing itself without distance, in the inexorable submission and the insurmountable passivity of a passion. Life's self-revelation takes place in Affectivity and as Affectivity. *Originary Affectivity is the phenomenological material of the self-revelation that constitutes life's essence*. (*IPF*, pp. 61–62)

The direct and affective experience of Life settles us in the eternal present. Life can only be present, because the future and the past are associated with closeness and remoteness, which are already categories of the world, rather than Life (*IPF*, p. 125).

Henry reverses the traditional phenomenology. He wants to substitute the phenomenology of Life for the phenomenology of the world or Being. For Henry, the subject of phenomenology is not the phenomenon or what appears,

[3] 'From now on, in reflection (whether it's a matter of transcendental, phenomenological reflection, or of simple natural reflection), whenever thought turns to life, in an attempt to grasp it and know it in its vision (in the *sehen und fassen* that belongs to it in principle), thought does not uncover the reality of life in its "originary presence", but only the empty place of its absence – its blackout, its disappearance' (*IPF*, p. 72).

but the act of appearing (*IPF*, p. 22). He writes: 'appearing is in no way limited to making appear that which appears in it; appearing must itself appear, as pure appearing. […] The appearing that shines in every phenomenon is the fact of appearing and that alone; this pure appearing is what appears, an appearing of appearing itself, and its self-appearing' (*IPF*, pp. 24–25). Henry, who refers to the Cartesian tradition, believes that experience and appearing associated with it precedes being. It is appearance that all being and existence depend on. Appearance precedes and reinforces being. Phenomenology precedes ontology. This French phenomenologist is proposing a radical version of Husserl's phenomenological reduction.[4] As a result of the radical phenomenological reduction, one may move from intentional phenomenology to the non-intentional phenomenology of Life and corporeality. According to Henry, 'Intentionality is the "relating to" that relates to everything we can access as something held in front of us' (*IPF*, pp. 35–36). It is connected with distance and reification. Yet Henry keeps on asking: '*How is the intentionality that reveals all things revealed to itself?*' (*IPF*, p. 36) Introducing another intentionality would lead to infinite regress. In his considerations Henry introduces the category of sensational consciousness (*conscience sensible*), which experiences itself non-intentionally without any distance. For Henry, the first non-intentional impression of live corporeality is direct, non-intentional, and devoid of distance. It comes from Life and is primordial. Before we experience the external, we must first experience ourselves. Direct experience of Life and corporeality is not given to us in a perception directed outwards, but in a live impression and internal immanence. All perception assumes distance and intentionality, whereas in a live impression there is no separation and object.[5] It is fair to say that Life has no objects. Life constitutes the basic condition of the world and intentionality. It is the most absolute and invisible reality, transcending dualisms such as object–subject and internality–externality.

[4] For Husserl, 'phenomenological reduction' means 'bracketing' (*epochē*) the existence of a psycho-physical 'I' and the world. The consequence of the reduction is the revelation of transcendental consciousness as the basis of the constitution of all sense. Husserl, who refers to Franz Brentano, emphasizes that the characteristic of consciousness is intentionality. Overall, intentionality means that consciousness is directed at an 'object' (irrespective of being real, irreal, immanent, or ideal). The aim of Husserl's phenomenology is to consolidate knowledge. He sought to find an answer to the question of how consciousness recognizes a transcendent 'object'. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 1, *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Fred Kersten (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982). Philosophers such as Michel Henry, Henri Maldiney, and Jean-Luc Marion perceived the limitations of Husserl's intentional phenomenology. They proposed a new draft of a non-intentional phenomenology.

[5] Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, vol. 1, *De la phénoménologie* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 61.

Corporeality, unlike the body, is not sensuality (*sensualité*), but it has an affective character (*affectivité*).[6] It is felt and experienced from an internal perspective in absolute immanence and connected with such feelings as suffering, sorrow, enjoyment, love, and so forth. Interestingly, Henry compares two seemingly opposite feelings, joy and suffering. He writes: 'To suffer and to enjoy, the suffering and the joy in their originary potentiality, together and inseparably, create and show the appearing of life in its own appearance, the effectiveness of its parousia.'[7] In affectivity and self-experiencing there is no intentionality, unlike the sensual body, the sensuality of which is *ek-static*.[8] Everything that is only sensual or intellectual can appear because of corporeality and Life. Henry writes about a corporeal subject that has an affective and dynamic character.

In Henry's opinion, everything connected with the world is external and different, whereas affective Life connects people at the most basic level. Paradoxically, corporeality, which makes us individual, is something that we have in common with other people and enables us to communicate with them. This is because corporeality is connected with Life, which – in Henry's opinion – is a condition of all communications. But, for Henry, the true community of people has a transcendental character, rather than a social one. Henry talks about the 'transcendental community', which is rooted in invisible Life. He writes that

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6 In section 20 of *IPF*, Henry refers to 'the Ambivalence of the Concept "Sensible"'. He writes that the sense of the worldly body is intentional. Seeing, hearing, and touching refer to something. Contesting, as Merleau-Ponty did, the duality of the experiencing/experienced body, Henry states that this duality is conditional upon live corporeality: 'The transcendental body, which opens us to the sensual body (whether it is a question of our own or of things), rests upon a corporeality far more originary, which is transcendental in a final, non-intentional, non-sensible sense, the essence of which is life' (*IPF*, p. 117). Further, we read: 'The flesh is not the result of the touching/touched chiasma and cannot be correctly described by it. The flesh comes before the chiasma as the condition of the power-to-touch and thus of touching as such. It comes before the power-to-touch itself as that which installs this power in itself, making an effective power of it. But as we have seen […], flesh arrives in itself only in absolute Life's arrival in itself, in the Arch-Flesh of an Arch-Power' (*IPF*, p. 137). For this reason, there should be a difference between the invisible and transcendental sensibility and affectivity associated with corporeality and, on the other hand, intentional sensuality related to the sensual body.

7 Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, 150.

8 '*Yet the structure of each of these senses is an ek-static structure*. Each sense is a "sense at a distance". Sight, for example, looks in the distance, beyond the first houses along the river, across the field, to the top of the hill, to the trees that cover it, and even further, to the sky and the furthest star. The closest objects, those that surround us, are held in the same distance. […] The same is true for all of our senses: They all throw us outside, in such a way that everything sensed by us is already outside us, different from the power that senses in as much as this power is one of distancing, the Ek-stasis of the world' (*IPF*, pp. 111–12).

'community is an underground stream of affections and everybody drinks the same water from this source and from this well, which is one'.[9] Henry thus emphasizes that so-called intersubjective relationships are conditioned upon the experiencing of Life experiences, which is our common reality.

According to Henry, people in everyday existence usually forget about the direct experience of corporeality and cling to material, pragmatic, and incidental things. Consumerist, pragmatic, scientific, and even intellectual attitudes, typical of the modern world, are not appropriate to experiencing Life. But this does not mean that people in the pre-modern world were more mindful of Life and affectivity. There is no simple analogy between Henry's Life and, for example, Heidegger's history of forgetting being. We cannot think about Life (as we should think about being in Heidegger's view); we can only feel it from inside us in a direct way (without any distance between subject and object). Paradoxically, Henry wants to describe Life, which cannot be expressed in words, not even in poetry. In everyday existence, Life and corporeality are present, but they are not seen. The philosopher proposes an attitude that enables us 'to see' invisible Life. It is possible if we 'close our eyes' to the external world.[10] Henry is convinced that art (especially Kandinsky's abstract art) allows the experiencing of Life and, at the same time, transcendental communication. Abstraction enables 'seeing' the invisible sphere of Life because it is not focused on objects (and the external world) but on the way of feeling.

II. ABSTRACT ART FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky analyses the internal tensions and energies related to points, lines, and planes. These forms have an internal (invisible) and external (visible) aspect. Kandinsky focuses particularly on their internal and emotional impact. For example, a point leads to concentric tension. In human imagination, it is an expression of the greatest accuracy and self-constraint. A line, however, is caused by forces that influence the point and push it in a particular direction. A line, as opposed to a point, is related not only to tension, but also direction. A horizontal line is the simplest form of line, which is associated with coldness and passivity in human imagination. A vertical line, however, is linked with warmth and activity. A diagonal, in turn, can have either a cold or a warm nature.[11] Kandinsky examines internal tensions and tonalities related to a painterly plane in a similar manner.

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9 Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 178.

10 According to Henry, 'life comes in itself, sheltered from every gaze, and in the absence of "world"' (*IPF*, p. 72).

11 See Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (New York: Guggenheim, 1947).

In the work *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky analyses the emotional power of every colour. He notices that different colours stimulate different inner energies. Yellow, for example, is an external colour, disquieting to the spectator. Kandinsky compares yellow with the brighter tones. He says that yellow 'sounds like a shrill horn, blown constantly louder, or a high-pitched flourish of trumpets'.[12] Black, by contrast, sounds like internal silence without future and hope. It is the most toneless colour. Similarly, Kandinsky examines the emotional and dynamic affection of shapes. He has in this work introduced the idea of interaction between colours and forms. In his view, colour cannot exist alone, only with form. For him, the effect of yellow is emphasized by a sharp form, for example, a triangle. Similarly, the effect of a calm, deeper colour – like blue – is reinforced by a rounded form, for example, a circle. All the elements that Kandinsky analyses may be combined in all kinds of constellations. He calls groups of forms arranged in this way a composition.

Although he sees abstract forms in every kind of art, Kandinsky often emphasizes that music in particular reaches a high level of abstraction. He was especially inspired by Arnold Schoenberg's creativity, which, as he writes, 'leads us into a new realm, where the musical experiences are not acoustic, but soul inspiring'.[13] Absolute music in particular is the freest because it expresses inner Life and feelings, rather than imitate nature. In Kandinsky's view, music is the art most freed from objects and the outside world, and one can see the evolution to abstraction in every kind of art in which artists examine the spiritual meaning of the elements in order to use them in their arts. It is important to note that Kandinsky had a particular capacity for synaesthetic experience, associating colours with sounds and other elements.[14] In *Point and Line to Plane*, he creates a 'theory of harmony for painting', comparable to harmony in music. Music and painting, he argues, are linked by the fact that each of them expresses suffering, joy, and pain, what Henry would call affective Life.

In Kandinsky's opinion, art should be based on pure, spiritual law, which he calls 'internal necessity'. It should be the guiding principle of all artistic activities. In abstract art an artist does not link the basic elements (such as colour and form) arbitrarily. Yet he or she is free from external models, such as nature, the period style, and his or her own psychology; nevertheless, an artist depends on inner impressions, which are universal. Kandinsky believes that the decisive factor in

12 Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Guggenheim, 1946), 63.

13 Ibid., 31.

14 Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky, 1866–1944: The Journey to Abstraction* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007), 8.

the genesis of a picture should be 'inner necessity'.[15] He views the spiritual, inner voice as the ultimate authority of his art. The emotional power of every colour and form is sufficient reason for using it. Kandinsky claims that every element makes its effect in one pre-determined way. Painters do not paint the world but express the 'inner sounds' of the world, which can be felt. Nevertheless, painters act according to an inner, spiritual, and universal law. In their compositions, artists do not express their states of mind, but reach universal laws according to which both the work of art and the cosmos originated.[16] One of these laws is the 'harmony of opposites', which corresponds to the principle of contrast in painting and the principle of dissonance in music. Paradoxically, this inner necessity is connected with inner freedom. As Henry writes: 'The freedom of purely artistic form is identical to the principle that Kandinsky assigns to all true painting, namely, the principle of "Inner Necessity". […] Internal necessity is, first of all, the necessity of form insofar as it is determined by invisible life – by the internal – by it alone and not in any way by the world' (*SI*, pp. 24–25). In abstract art, Kandinsky believes, the artist should not create under the pressure of culture, convention, fashionable trends, or suggestions from other people, but should open up to his or her inner experiences. Both the artist and the recipient should be freed from everything external and incidental. For this reason, each of them can reach the universal source of art and its universal content.

Let us move now to Henry's phenomenological interpretation of Kandinsky's theory. In *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, Henry treats Kandinsky's theory and practice as contributions to the phenomenology of Life like his own writings. He considers Kandinsky's writings to be phenomenological analyses, and states that Kandinsky's art theory is not merely about painting, but touches on the nature of all art, including music, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and dance, to name just a few (*SI*, p. 59). For Henry, the essence of all art is Life, which reveals itself in live corporeality. The essence of Life, Henry argues, is expressed in all art, which is manifested in Kandinsky's paintings and supported by his theoretical writings.

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15 With Kandinsky in mind, Henry writes: 'The artist should be blind to the importance of "recognition" and "non-recognition" and deaf to the teaching and demands of the time. His eye should be directed to his inner life and his ear should harken to the words of the inner necessity.' *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009), 58. Hereafter: *SI*. Originally published as Michel Henry, *Voir l'invisible: Sur Kandinsky* (Paris: Bourin, 1988).

16 In his *Reminiscences*, Kandinsky writes: 'Painting is like a thundering collision of different worlds that are destined in and through conflict to create that new world called the work. Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos – by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments, that symphony we call the music of the spheres.' Quoted in Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky*, 101. Henry, too, writes: 'All the forces in our being […] are also the forces of the cosmos' (*SI*, p. 56).

Kandinsky – as Henry maintains – created extremely diversified compositions corresponding to the different modalities of Life. The dynamism of Life is expressed by a movement of imagination brought about by diversified forms and colours. Kandinskian 'vibrations of the soul' are interpreted by Henry as 'modalities of Life'. As Henry writes: 'Kandinsky calls this living subjectivity "the soul" and its affective modalities, its concrete emotions "vibrations of the soul". This is why Kandinsky writes: "the inner element created by the soul's vibration, is the content of the work of art. Without inner content, no work of art can exist"' (*SI*, p. 23).

According to Kandinsky, art expresses the source and the essence (*eidos*) of our life experience. It may be said, in the language of phenomenology, that the artist uses the phenomenological *epochē* to free art from everything that is only incidental, past, conceptual, material, scientific, and pragmatic. As Henry writes: 'Kandinsky's analysis operates in the same way as does Husserl's eidetic analysis. It proscribes the foreign properties from the essence of art in order to perceive art in its purity. With the elimination of objective representation, the pure essence of painting is laid bare' (*SI*, p. 40). Seeking the essence of art, Kandinsky first and foremost wants to free art from the object and all references to the external world, mainly focusing on forms of expression in painting (lines, points, planes, and colours). In Henry's interpretation of Kandinsky's art, the phenomenological reduction in abstract art consists in freeing forms of painting from the meanings that they have in practical existence, and, further, in revealing their belonging to the invisible sensibility and affectivity. In Henry's view, carrying out a precise analysis of forms of painterly expression (points, lines, planes, and colours) Kandinsky (in his writings) identifies their two aspects: the external (visible) and the internal (invisible). For example, colours in their external aspect cover the external surface of things. Their internal aspect, however, is related to tension and tonality.

As Henry interprets it, the source of painting forms is corporeality and affective Life. The invisible and emotive sources and tensions that belong to colours and forms are materializations of the internal body and Life. Expressing those emotive forces, true art is an expression of Life. Abstract art, according to Henry, originates in internal, radical, and affective subjectivity, in which there is no distance, intentionality, or any sign of the external world. Henry writes: 'Kandinsky just showed us the point of departure for painting – it is an emotion, a more intense mode of life. The content of art is this emotion. The aim of art is to transmit it to others. The knowledge of art develops entirely within life; it is the proper movement of life, its movement of growth, of experiencing itself more strongly' (*SI*, p. 18). In Henry's view, Kandinsky's art enables one to perceive the invisible. It refers to the sources of all creation, because it shows that

the invisible, the internal, and the non-intentional constitute the principle of the external and the intentional, that is, the world.[17] Henry does not deprecate the visible (objects, the world) as far as it is dependent on the invisible (corporeality, Life). It is the invisible Life that is the principle of the visible world, not the other way round. Henry claims that the internal Life and the external world are not on a par. The external depends on the internal. According to him, Kandinsky's art expresses the truth. As Henry puts it:

> 'Abstract' no longer refers to what is derived from the world at the end of a process of simplification or complication or at the end of the history of modern painting; instead, it refers to what was prior to the world and does not need the world in order to exist. It refers to the life that is embraced in the night of its radical subjectivity, where there is no light or world. (*SI*, p. 16)

Analysing Kandinsky's art against his own theory, Henry equivocates: 'Interior = interiority = invisible = life = pathos = abstract content = abstract form' (*SI*, p. 27). Painterly forms and colours are derived from the affective Life, rather than from the world.

In a practical and utilitarian approach, Henry argues, we usually concentrate on external objects, treating painterly forms and colours as their aspects only. Kandinsky, however, frees forms and colours from their dependence on the world. Henry assumes they become an aim in themselves and no longer rely on objects. Kandinsky thereby shifts the viewer's attention from the external object to the way it is felt.

In Henry's interpretations of Kandinsky's art, 'composition consists of the subordination of all the forms to a principle form that communicates its own tone to the entire work' (*SI*, p. 98). The compositional elements comprise colours, lines, a painterly plane, but also objects.[18] All of them are interrelated and

[17] In *SI*, Henry notes an analogy between Life and Schopenhauer's Will. He writes: 'Schopenhauer claimed that the world is only a secondary representation, an illusory double and an objectification of the true reality of Being. This non-objectifiable, inner and hidden reality is what he calls the Will, and it is only another name for life' (*SI*, p. 113). Further, we read that, for Schopenhauer, 'The metaphysical power of the supreme art of music is that it immediately reveals this nocturnal Will […]. Here Schopenhauer formulates a surprising proposition – one in which we can also understand what God is: "Music could exist even if the world did not exist"' (*SI*, p. 114). Whereas Schopenhauer sees music as privileged art that reveals the Will, Henry sees the expression of invisible Life in abstract art. But the difference between the two philosophers is not that stark here because Henry – like Kandinsky – sees a deep resemblance between music and abstract art. That is why there is a strong relationship between Schopenhauer's theory and Henry's.

[18] It is interesting that Kandinsky and Henry also see objects as compositional elements. But they do not mean objects based on models that are external to them; rather, they mean objects whose reality consists in exciting internal energies and their impacting other elements.

generate an internal resonance. Their diversity is unified around the dominating tonality: 'To be dominant here means to be completely full of life – a life that cannot be divided or separated from itself – to give it a particular but unitary tone that runs through it and completely characterizes it, because it is nothing but the way in which this life is experienced at that very moment' (*SI*, p. 91). According to Henry, it is impossible to perceive and represent dynamic Life. From his phenomenological perspective, Kandinsky, in his abstractions, intensifies Life, which pulsates in live corporeality.

III. THE SENSE OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF ABSTRACT ART

Henry asserts that in the aesthetic experience of abstract art both the recipient and the artist go beyond the conceptual level and feel the vibrations stimulated by the play of abstract colours and forms. Henry claims that the aesthetic experience of abstract art constitutes the ecstatic harmony amongst the corporeality, soul, and abstract forms in the picture:

> Because the content that painting seeks to express is Life, art is situated within a process of becoming. It belongs to and coincides with the drive of Being within us. Art has the task of supporting and carrying it to the extreme point, to this 'paroxysm of life', where life experiences itself on its own basis, in which it is lost in this 'impossible happiness' that Kandinsky calls 'ecstasy'. (*SI*, p. 19)

Art reveals to us something that is hidden from our common perception and, at the same time, allows us to feel the rules that govern the world and the cosmos. It does not imitate reality (it is not mimesis) but it expresses internal force and reveals a pure sphere of corporeality (*la chair*) and affectivity. According to Henry's interpretation, abstract art enables this pure expression of Life.

Henry treats the experience of abstraction as the most original fundamental experience, thanks to which truth or, in other words, what is authentic and primordial, can be attained. In contact with abstraction, we can refresh our feeling and experience in the way that is natural to children experiencing things for the first time. This type of experience has no external goals. Its value is the feeling of joy associated with Life itself. In Henry's view abstract art awakens our sensibility, which is necessary for achieving deeper contact with the present time and for seeing the inner value of each and every thing. Both Kandinsky and Henry lead us from presentation to sensation. Henry often observes that the meaning of Kandinsky's art is directly incorporated into Kandinsky's means of expression as a painter. There is no distance between the means of experiencing and the aim of experiencing. Consequently, there is no separation between the means and ends often encountered in experiences other than aesthetic (for example, in

politics, science, and everyday life). In abstract art 'how we experience' is more important than 'what we experience'.

In *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky writes that the 'inner sound' of a work of art causes a resonance in the soul of the viewer. And he states: 'Therefore, colour is a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul. Colour is the keyboard. The eye is a hammer, while the soul is a piano of many strings. The artist is the hand through which the medium of different keys causes the human soul to vibrate.'[19] This quotation indicates that Kandinsky sees a strong connection between the soul and corporeality. Colours and shapes cause affective and direct vibration both in our corporeality and in our soul. Their impact on a human being as a whole is not only physical, but also, indeed mainly, spiritual. According to Kandinsky, it is very important that there be no dualism and no distance between corporeality and soul.[20] What is more, there should also be no distance between the recipient and abstraction. We feel the vibration of colours and other elements of abstraction directly, before they are perceived. In a similar vein, Henry claims that abstract art is closer to Life and corporeality than figurative art is because no object can be perceived intentionally. Abstraction expresses Life rather than present it. In Henry's interpretation Kandinsky's play of colours and forms intensifies the connection with Life at the most basic level. It is important to note that, for Henry, aesthetic experience is only possible while maintaining a disinterested, direct attitude. Between a maker of art and a recipient of art, there is no distance, no concept, and no category that can separate them from Life and the present time. In this experience, the recipient, the work of art, and the way of feeling art are one.

Both Kandinsky and Henry claim that abstract art has a moral and even religious character. It is moral because it enables experience and connection with Life.[21] According to both of them, people often forget about this connection because in their existence they focus mainly on outward, pragmatic, material, and incidental affairs. Only affective experience can refresh this connection. Art becomes an ethical and even religious experience when it enlivens this radical connection with Life and awakens affective energies within us. Henry writes:

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19 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 47.

20 Henry, too, rejects the dualism of body and soul: 'Man does not know dualism. The Self thinks where it acts, where it desires, where it suffers, where it is a Self: in the flesh. […] If I and Flesh are one, it is because they both come from Life, and because they are nothing other than the originary and essential phenomenological modalities according to which life arrives in itself and happens to be life' (*IPF*, p. 124).

21 In *SI*, Henry writes: 'Because the truth of art is a transformation of the individual's life, aesthetic experience contracts an indissoluble link with ethics. It is itself an ethics, a "practice", a mode actualizing life. This internal connection between the invisible aesthetic life and the ethical life is what Kandinsky calls the "spiritual"' (*SI*, p. 19).

'Art is the resurrection of eternal life' (*SI*, p. 142). According to Kandinsky, the development of art is a struggle between the objective and the subjective.[22] The artist should listen only to the voice of 'internal necessity'. Kandinsky writes: 'All means are sacred when called upon by innermost necessity. All means are a sin and lacking virtue if they do not come from this source.'[23] Moreover, the painter and the philosopher treat the experience of abstract art as spiritual, aesthetic, moral, transcendental, affective expression that transcends dualisms such as object–subject, internality–externality, sensuality–reflectivity, and soul–corporeality. This experience of art is the most original; it has an affective character and is connected with such feelings as pain, sorrow, suffering, happiness, and love. It expresses the most basic level of our Life.

Kandinsky and Henry assert the special transcendental aesthetic ability that is connected with corporeality and feeling. What, however, are the differences between their approaches to abstract art? It seems that, in contrast to Henry, Kandinsky's theory and practice demonstrate the intentional nature of the aesthetic experience in abstract art. What is more, Kandinsky's art, I believe, is not as independent of the outside world as Henry claims. I develop these points (among others) in the next, polemical part of my essay. I do not agree with Henry's interpretation of Kandinsky's art and theory, and maintain that aesthetic experience of abstract art is intentional; furthermore, I argue that this kind of experience rather than being universal and unconditioned as both Kandinsky and Henry claim, instead implies embeddedness in a certain culture.

IV. THE ANTINOMIC CHARACTER OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN ABSTRACT ART: SEVERAL REMARKS

An antinomic character of an aesthetic experience emerges from Henry's interpretation of Kandinsky's works. On the one hand, the experience is universal, discovers objective laws, and enables intersubjective communication; on the other, it has a direct, corporeal, subjective, individual, and emotional character. Moreover, Henry writes about 'non-intentional communication', which at first sight seems contradictory. Yet the feeling of antinomy may arise in relation to superstitions cultivated in the past (for example, in philosophical positivism) which contrast intentionality, universality, and communicability (combining them with rationality and reflexivity) with what is corporal, non-intentional, individual, and non-communicated. Let us, however, discuss some doubts and questions which Henry's deliberations raise.

[22] Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 57.
[23] Ibid., 58.

First of all, I doubt that Kandinsky's abstract art has the non-intentional character perceived by Henry. From the standpoint of Henry's phenomenology, one can speak of a non-intentional experience of Life and corporeality that can only be felt directly. For Husserl, who Henry refers to, intentionality is a way of directing one's attention to an object, regardless of whether it is real, irreal, transcendent, or immanent. It can therefore be compared to the light cone that makes it possible for the 'something' to which we pay attention to appear. According to Husserl, intentionality thus understood is characteristic not only of reflexive but also of volitional and emotional consciousness. In certain interpretations of Husserl's concept, even moods are somehow intentional, but their intentionality is hidden and unclear.[24] Husserl paid attention to various dimensions of intentionality, but did not always associate it with reflection. Perhaps there is no clear juxtaposition of intentionality and non-intentionality, and instead there are different levels of 'clearness' of intention.[25] Intentionality is always accompanied by non-intentionality, just as consciousness is accompanied by unconsciousness. It seems that for Husserl the strength of intentionality is gradable according to different kinds of experience, but this does not mean that intentionality can achieve the highest level of 'clearness' in reflection. We can be aware of our feelings and corporeality without thinking about them. In his phenomenology, Husserl therefore considers pre-reflexive and objectless intentionality. For this reason, one can act intentionally (in other words, in a conscious, oriented, and selective way) without the involvement of reflection. But Husserl linked non-intentionality with sensual data as well as some mental states. In *Ideas I*, he writes that non-intentional hyletic data seem to constitute a building material for intentional actions. For example, colours, noises, and scents, as well as corporeal sensations, such as pain, itching, and burning, can be felt directly and non-intentionally. They appear without conscious effort and attention. The feeling of the sensual data is, however, already intentional and direct.[26] It is direct because in an experience of this kind the subject and the object are the same, and it is intentional because it demands conscious effort and attention.

Unlike the earlier phenomenological tradition, Henry claims that intentionality makes direct experience impossible. He argues that intentional phenomenology

[24] See Nam-In Lee, 'Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Mood', in *Alterity and Facticity: New Perspectives on Husserl*, ed. Natalie Depraz and Dan Zahavi (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), 103–20.

[25] See J. N. Mohanty, 'Husserl's Concept of Intentionality', in *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 3, *The Nexus of Phenomena: Intentionality, Perception and Temporality*, ed. Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota (London: Routledge, 2005), 3–30.

[26] Husserl, *Ideas*, 236–40.

is naive because it focuses on phenomenon and moves away from its sources. In contrast to Husserl, Henry is interested not in the phenomenon but in the essence of phenomenalization, which he finds in the non-intentional, direct experience of corporeality. He consequently proposes a radical reduction, going beyond Husserl's *epochē*. And he poses a question about the conditions of an appearing phenomenon. He calls this new approach 'non-intentional phenomenology'.[27] Henry invariably links intentionality with the distance between the subject and the object, reification, reflection, and perception. It seems that he does not realize that intentionality could also be linked with corporeality and affectivity. It is also possible, however, that there is only a terminological difference between Henry's and Husserl's view and that Henry's sensational consciousness (*conscience sensible*) is the same as Husserl's pre-reflexive intentionality.[28] Nevertheless, there is an irreducible difference between *conscience sensible*, which is passive in character, and Husserl's intentionality, which demands some kind of activity. It seems, however, that Henry's criticism of Husserlian intentionality does not consider its various dimensions which are not always associated with reflection and reification.[29] In my opinion, it is possible that the experience can be direct and intentional (if we assume similarly that intentionality is not necessarily connected with reflection but is always connected with consciousness) and that this kind of experience occurs in abstract art. The aesthetic experience of abstract art is direct because the subject and the object in this kind of experience are the same, and it is also intentional because it demands conscious activity and attention.

Questions arise as to whether limiting aesthetic experience to what is non-intentional (in Husserl's meaning) would not impoverish it. Would an experience of art, based on pure, passive sensationalism, not be a chaotic and impulsive reaction to the sensory and emotional data felt directly? If so, then how would art and its experience differ from a spontaneous facial grimace resulting from an inner experience such as pain? Henry's non-intentionalism may well be a correct theory of some aesthetic encounters, but, in my opinion, it is insufficient to be universal and is inadequate with regard to Kandinsky's art.

It seems that Kandinsky's art is not devoid of intentionality, although it is predominantly objectless. His art, I think, requires some intentional state to be

[27] See Marek Pokropski, 'Husserl i Henry: Spór o intencjonalność' [Husserl and Henry: A dispute about intentionality], *Przegląd filozoficzno-literacki*, no. 34 (2012): 236. Henry broadly criticizes Husserl's intentional phenomenology in *Phénoménologie matérielle* and in *IPS*.

[28] Pokropski, 'Husserl i Henry', 249.

[29] Ibid.

accessed. Is, then, intentional consciousness not directed at a particular object even possible? In Husserl's view it is. Objectlessness does not necessarily imply non-intentionality. Consciousness of this kind would be pure objectless attention focused on the quality of perception. Maybe this type of objectless intentionality is visible in Kandinsky's mature works. For him, qualitative thinking takes precedence over objective thinking. He also acts consciously, selectively, purposefully, and intentionally, but is guided by intelligence (inner necessity) without intellectual reflection.

Artistic expression as exemplified by Kandinsky's painting seems to be intentional even in the sense that it expresses meaning using properly selected tools. As Henry stresses, it is the artistic means of expression that Kandinsky concentrates on and they become the end in themselves. A painter uses colours and elements such as points and lines just as a musician uses sounds. As opposed to natural expression in which, for example, feelings show directly on somebody's face, expression in art seeks modes of expression. To some extent such expression is 'artificial' or selective and found. It is not accidental, spontaneous, and chaotic, but it is oriented and seeks to be fulfilled. Kandinsky's expression is not non-intentional, because it is not merely a reaction to stimuli, but an artistic creativity and a form of communication that creates intentional meaning. By the same token, the aesthetic experience of Kandinsky's painting is intentional, because, for example, it requires a suitable attitude, openness, and concentration. It is simply about being conscious of one's way of experiencing, which does not assume a distance between the subject and the object. In aesthetic experience, intentionality is directed towards itself rather than towards external objects. Kandinsky's art stimulates inner energies and causes the body to become aware of itself. The aesthetic experience of Kandinsky's art has its own purpose and is fulfilled in itself.

To sum up this point I would say that Henry's concept of aesthetics experience is not completely wrong. I agree with him that aesthetic experience is direct in nature (it is objectless and without distance between the subject and the object). Nevertheless, I think aesthetic experience is both direct and intentional if we assume (like Husserl) that there need not necessarily be a link between intentionality and reflection.

Second, the question arises whether Kandinsky did in fact express the internal, making his art free from references to the world. Or did he transform the external into internal forms, moving from the visible to the invisible (which could be demonstrated by the evolution of his art)? Henry believed it was the former. According to him, what substantially differentiates Kandinsky's abstract art from, say, Kazimir Malevich's or Piet Mondrian's is that Kandinsky expresses the essence

of Life rather than the essence of the world.[30] On the other hand, the world relies on Life, which means that Life constitutes the world's essence.[31] Henry ultimately had to claim that we cannot exist without the world that cannot exist without Life. So, if Life is the essence of the world, real art also expresses it. That is why we can legitimately say that Mondrian and Malevich also somehow express Life, but they do not do so as directly as Kandinsky.[32] The essence of the world and of Life is one, which Henry comments on as follows:

> The surprise is the unity of the world, the unity that, in spite of everything, exists in its diversity. Such a unity is due to the fact that this world would not exist if it were not experienced inwardly – in a subjectivity that is the internal experience that the world has of itself at each instant: its affectivity. That is why every external aspect of reality – every 'external element' – implies a tonality in its interiority as a sensation, the auto-impression of colour without which colour would not exist. (*SI*, pp. 83–84)

As much I agree with Henry that internal, affective, and corporeal experience reveals the essence of the world, the theory that such an experience constitutes the world seems highly contentious. Kandinsky and Henry were right to claim that the world is hollowed out, when it only becomes the object of perception and is not felt from inside. An empirical, objectifying view on the world is an undoubtedly simplistic reductionism. It does not mean, however, that when the world is not felt, it ceases to exist and becomes an illusion. It is questionable, too, whether the artist may separate his or her art work from the external world.

To say that experiencing is the basis of the world's constitution is, to my mind, too bold a thesis, and it leads to many aporias. The absolutization of transcendental affectivity is worrying. Such an assumption entails solipsism with all its aporias. A similar problem is experienced by Husserl, who equates the world

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30 'The abstraction that releases the creative genius of Kandinsky has nothing to do with this type of abstraction that dominated the history of artistic creation starting from the second decade of the twentieth century and periodically returns under various guises. It would even be a contradiction, of the worst kind, to define it against these attempts – such as Cubism, Orphism, Futurism, Surrealism, Constructivism, Cinetism and Conceptualism – that never cease to relate to the visible as their sole object. They seek only to grasp the object's true nature and ultimately to grasp the true nature of visibility, whether it is sensible light (Impressionism) or transcendental (Mondrian, Malevich)' (*SI*, pp. 14–15).

31 There is a parallel between Henry's and Schopenhauer's views. The latter claimed that Will constituted the essence of the world. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969).

32 Interestingly, Crowther suggests that Schopenhauer's world view was a significant philosophical inspiration for Malevich, which shows, I believe, that there is greater affinity between Malevich and Kandinsky than Henry thought. See Paul Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 76–86.

with transcendental and absolute consciousness in his *Ideas I*.[33] Overall, phenomenology, which favours a subjective immanence, does not do justice to the experience of an external world. In art (including abstract art) we can, I believe, find an aporetic connection between internal and external experience. Art, I would contend, shows us that it is difficult to draw a definite line between internality and externality.

Thirdly, questions can reasonably be posed whether Kandinsky's or any other abstract art in its content does indeed enable intersubjective communication and whether the most subjective, intimate, and invisible sphere like corporeality can be communicated. Henry writes about communication made possible by subjective experiencing:

> If communication takes place between the artwork and the public, it is on the level of sensibility, through the emotions and their immanent modifications. It does not have anything to do with words, with collective, ideological or scientific representations, or with their critical, intellectual or literary formulations, in short, anything that is called culture. It is totally independent from that type of culture. This is why it is addressed to the group of people who 'lack culture'. It is popular in the sense that it leads to what is most essential in each human being: one's capacity to feel, to suffer and to love. (*SI*, p. 73)

An interesting paradox is that works of art belong to a common, cultural, and intersubjective space, yet they affect what is the most intimate, inexpressible, and personal. Kandinsky's paintings are located on the border between the apparent and the hidden, the visible and the invisible, the spoken and the unspeakable. For example, the colours that he uses are not only physical in nature; they also objectify and externalize internal, invisible tensions. Kandinsky the artist has access to the internal world, and artistic forms make it possible to communicate that world, despite its being inaccessible to discursive language. The poet, the musician, and the painter distance themselves from what is external and worldly, reach the most primordial sphere, and express it while guided by the internal force that Kandinsky calls internal necessity. It seems that art is the privileged discipline that finds its place in the public space by expressing what is most personal and even intimate and invisible.[34] A question arises as to whether Henry (by treating culture as an enemy of art) does not overlook the fact that art is inevitably deeply rooted in a social and cultural context. Henry wants to apply

[33] See Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Mohanty, 'Husserl's Concept of Intentionality'.

[34] The game between the visible and the invisible is also touched upon in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 187–88, and John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 43–44.

a phenomenological reduction to cultural conditions and reveal the primordial sphere of communication. But is such a reduction possible? Is it possible to communicate beyond social and cultural conditions? Even if the source of all communication is common Life, I would argue that it needs a social and cultural space to manifest itself.

Fourth, a doubt arises concerning the universal character of Kandinsky's art. This doubt concerns both Kandinsky's theory and Henry's interpretation of it. Does the 'theory of harmony for painting' have a universal meaning? Will, for example, blue and yellow cause the same affective vibrations among people from different cultures? Do these elements of Kandinsky's art have a universal or a cultural character? Do Kandinsky's compositions indeed allow one to sense the universal laws that govern the cosmos?

Like Husserl, Henry assumed that consciousness is independent of cultural conditions. It is consciousness that is the condition and foundation of culture, and not the other way round. According to Henry, real art expresses the essence of Life, which has a universal character. Culture of course impacts on the external references of art and its meanings. Yet it has no effect on what is most important in art and independent of the context. Obviously, someone who built and decorated a Gothic church attributed meanings to it which are different from ours. What used to be a place of worship is today generally perceived mainly as a work of art. Nevertheless, regardless of external meanings, the church builder, Henry claims, felt its colours and forms the way we do today. In his view, the most crucial thing in art is universal, expressed in the pathos of Life. Kandinsky also assumes that our way of experiencing art is independent of the cultural context we live in.

It may be possible to identify the universal nature of basic emotions and the universal means of expressing them mimically and by recognizing them, but whether the language of art can be universal and supracultural in its expressive aspect remains debatable. As Paul Crowther correctly notes: 'The problem is that in order to "read" art in Kandinsky's terms, we need specific external knowledge of which colours and forms are associated with which spiritual states. Cultures do make associations of this kind, but they differ from and are much looser than those envisaged by Kandinsky.'[35] Cultural associations related to the meaning of particular colours and tones are bound to impact on the way in which they are experienced. Kandinsky suggested that it was possible to notice the same internal sound in art regardless of time and place: Real art was supposed to be independent of fashion and cultural conditions. While visiting a collection in Munich, he was fascinated by various works of art in which he noticed the same

[35] Crowther, *Language of Twentieth-Century Art*, 27.

internal sound and objective laws, though they varied in appearance.[36] The question of the universality of art remains open to discussion.

Fifth, the question arises whether knowledge does not determine experience of abstract art or at least does not have a considerable influence on it. Is not a prerequisite for experiencing Kandinsky's art previous knowledge of the elements he used, for example, colours, points, lines, and planes? Could we tell one colour from another and experience their meaning if we did not know the concepts?[37] Although Kandinsky's works were often misunderstood and criticized by his contemporaries, Henry dispels the popular misconception of abstract art as incomprehensible and strange. He believes that the obscurity of Kandinsky's art can be explained by the fact that people have lost direct contact with Life. And he writes about direct experience in abstract art:

> Painting does not use language. Abstract painting teaches us this, and this is what gives it its power of expression. If colour does not relate to the feelings of our soul through an external relation but finds its true being in them – as a pure sensation and a pure experience – then it does not even need to translate, through a means, the abstract content of our invisible life. (*SI*, p. 72)

Yet Kandinsky's abstract art may be difficult to understand without his theoretical considerations. Why did he create and teach art theory? Is abstract art not self-sufficient? Elsewhere in *Seeing the Invisible* Henry writes: 'But, whether a composition is based on agreement or contrast, on strengthening and increasing their effects or on moderating and weakening them […] a prior knowledge of the element's specific tonalities is always necessary' (*SI*, p. 87). Is knowledge prior to art not related to intentionality and interference? Using knowledge while creating is, I am convinced, always linked with intentionality, as we have seen. A fundamental problem remains – namely, how does one reconcile knowledge with immediateness. This problem can be solved if one assumes that indirect knowledge and reflection can precede an even deeper immediate aesthetic experience. I suppose that Kandinsky in creating his theory did not wish

[36] Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky*, 46–47: 'During this period Kandinsky also eagerly absorbed influences and stimuli from non-European art. In a series of reviews written for the Russian magazine *Apollon*, he reported enthusiastically on the Eastern – and in particular Japanese and Persian – art to be seen in exhibition in Munich. With regard to Japanese art, he was especially excited by a series of woodcuts in which he sensed an "inner sound". In the Persian miniatures featured in an exhibition of Islamic art he recognized everything that he himself was attempting to achieve: "complete detachment from reality, 'primitive use of colour', and 'perspective … calmly set at naught' with simple compositional means."'

[37] Crowther too writes about the role of knowledge in the experience of abstract art. See Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of Visual Art (Even the Frame)* (Standford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 107.

to eliminate objective knowledge and content, but wanted to suggest a change in attitude from attending to objects to a specific way of experiencing them. Theoretical knowledge, as long as it is treated instrumentally, need not be an obstacle to direct experience.

Sixth, doubt also arises as to whether Henry's theory of art expresses the essence of all art in general, or whether it is but one of the many alternative concepts of art. Is equating the essence of all art with abstraction (as understood by Kandinsky) not its impoverishment? Both Kandinsky and Henry stress the universality of their respective theories, which is a more problematic claim. Equating many contemporary trends in art (for example, conceptual art, engaged art, critical art) with the expression of Life would constitute a negation of their underlying ideas.[38] Henry could of course claim that these forms are simply not art, that it is merely a sociological fact that they are called so. But, I would assert that it is useful to evoke them here, especially since, in their light, Henry's universal aspirations seem problematic. Contemporary art does not want to be merely an expression; it also wants to become involved in social, philosophical, and political matters, and be responsible for the problems of its time. Contemporary art also wants to be thought provoking. Moreover, contemporary artists have demonstrated that every kind of art is somehow embedded in ideology and politics. The question arises whether Henry's and Kandinsky's respective theories leave no room for social and political significance in art. Subjecting different art tendencies to a single theory is also an ideological approach because it is exclusive and oppressive. Yet both Kandinsky and Henry see freedom in artistic creation as an indisputable value.

Seventh, the question arises whether Kandinsky's abstract art is the most immediate experience of Life. It seems that an immediate experience of Life appears more vividly in body language, dancing, and performance (especially body art). Is body language not a more immediate experience than abstract art? Although Henry does not mention body art or performance, his interpretation of Kandinsky's art underlines and appreciates the role of corporeality in the experience of all kinds of art. Henry writes: 'The objective conception of the body totally conceals the metaphysical condition of the hand: it is neither a thing nor a movement but the infinite capacity to produce movement; it is *power as such*. But, abstract painting – as well as dance, when its true essence is recognized – represents this power' (*SI*, p. 44). Henry's attention to the corporeal aspect of abstract art shows that corporeality is an inalienable and even basic

[38] See Arthur C. Danto, 'Painting, Politics, and Post-historical Art', in *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 135–52.

dimension of all aesthetic experience. It is in line with Henry's arguments to claim that the body is a medium not only for such arts as dancing or body art, installations, or new media art, but also for painting, music, literature, and sculpture. Like the brush, the chisel, and musical instruments, the creations of modern technology also constitute extensions of the human body. Interestingly, Kandinsky noticed basic elements of painting (for example, lines and their directional tensions) in the dynamics of the human body.[39] He depicted the dynamics of the human body by translating the movements of the dancer Gret Palucca (1902–1993) into schematic diagrams, thus showing the expression of her body.[40] As Merleau-Ponty claimed, a body and a work of art have a lot in common: they are situated on the border of the visible and the invisible.[41] Replacing an art object with corporeality (that we can observe in dancing and body art, for example) is, I would argue, a perfect realization of Henry's phenomenology and a continuation of Kandinsky's approach to art. Petr Štembera's or Marina Abramović's performances provide good examples of Henry's phenomenology of corporeality and Life. In their actions, these artists often inflict physical pain upon themselves and touch upon an extreme experience in which they cannot separate themselves from their body. They each treat their body as both a subject and an object. By going beyond their psycho-physical limitations they show us that, on the one hand, our body is mysterious and unrecognizable and, on the other, that the experience of the body is primordial. This kind of art transforms the invisible and most intimate sphere of Life into something which can be seen and we can participate in. During the performance, a recipient enters a symbolic relationship with the artist, thanks to which, the recipient experiences dimensions of the body which are hidden by objects in everyday existence. It is fair to say, using Henry's words, that this kind of art enables us to 'see the invisible'. Performances reveal live corporeality, which

39 'In the dance, the whole body – and in the new dance, every finger – draws lines with every clear expression. The "modern" dancer moves about the stage on exact lines, which are a significant element introduced in the composition of his dance (Sacharoff). The entire body of the dancer, right down to his fingertips, is at every moment an interrupted composition of lines (Palucca). The use of lines is, indeed, a new achievement but, of course, is not an invention of the "modern" dance: apart from the classic ballet, all people at every stage of their "evolution" work with line in the dance.' Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, 100.

40 Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky*, 150–51.

41 Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The body is to be compared not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art. […] A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms.' Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 174.

is connected with Life. The aesthetic experience in performance art enables intersubjective, transcendental communication rooted in the common sphere of corporeality and Life. It is also fair to say that abstractionism largely contributed to the development of neo-avant-garde art (for example, various forms of performance and body art), for which the artist's body becomes a means of expression. Contemporary art goes a step further than Kandinsky. It eliminates not only the object, but also the work of art itself.[42] It can be legitimately argued that in contemporary performances the work of art disappears, incorporating itself directly in the medium of expression, the body.

V. CONCLUSION

By distancing itself from the world, abstract art is situated on the border of the visible and the invisible. Although Kandinsky's mature compositions point to no object, they are not devoid of content. According to Henry, an unintentional and direct experience of art is connected with unintentional content that cannot be contained in conceptual language. Henry is convinced that aesthetic experience reveals to us primordial, corporeal, and emotional contact with Life, which remains obscured by objective everyday thinking. Though Henry and Kandinsky emphasize the status of corporeality and feeling, they also sublimate it and infuse it with spirituality by showing the oneness that corporeality and feeling share with soul. For a soul, the corporeality felt from the inside is spirituality itself, rather than a prison or a medium. Another significant point is that this theory treats the experience of art as communication. It is communication not only between people but also with something that is bigger than reflective, individual consciousness – namely, Life (to use Henry's term) or even God. The sphere that is revealed by abstract art has its own content beyond reflective consciousness, and requires that we open up to the affective Life and live corporeality.

In my polemics with Henry's analysis I have reached the following conclusions. First, it is my conviction that the aesthetic experience of Kandinsky's art is both intentional and direct. It is intentional because it demands attention and it is direct because there is no distance or dualism between the object and the subject in it. Second, Kandinsky's art, it is fair to say, is not as independent of the outside world as Henry claims. In art (including abstract art), it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between the internal experience of Life and the experience of external world (and between the experience of corporeality and the body). Third (and this is linked with the second point), Henry, I would argue, overlooks the fact

[42] See Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

that abstract art is inevitably deeply rooted in a social and cultural context. Even if its source is Life, abstract art needs a social and cultural space to communicate its content. Fourth, unlike Henry and Kandinsky, I have serious doubts whether the language of Kandinsky's abstract art is universal. I think, instead, that it is conditioned culturally. Fifth, I also believe that objective knowledge, and cultural associations, are involved in the experience of abstract art. Unlike Henry, I believe that cultural conditions are not irrelevant to art itself, its meaning, and the way of experiencing it. Qualitative meanings related to corporeality and feelings are, however, more fundamental than objective meanings associated with reflection and culture. Sixth, I do not agree with Henry that abstract art is the essence of all art. In my opinion, to treat abstract art as if it were the essence would be putting further restrictions on the world of art. I do agree with Henry, however, that the experience of abstract art is a basic experience because it touches upon what is primordial in the human condition, that is, Life and the experience of living corporeality. Seventh, I think that the immediate experience of Life appears more vividly in performance art and body art than in Kandinsky's abstract art, yet Henry does not mention these kinds of art in his considerations.

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