Don’t Think, Feel.

The multidisciplinary art project for direct empathy

Ashton Allan
December 15, 2004

Between the late 1890s and the beginning of World War II, a series of German-speaking artists, musicians, and architects explored the possibilities of art as a means of triggering perceptual responses that would directly affect the human psyche. This project began to take form with the writings and architecture of August Endell in Munich. As Endell began to attract attention in the art community, the Viennese composer and music theorist Heinrich Schenker began to examine how the great tonal compositions functioned at a perceptual level, eventually devising a method of analysis for examining “lines” in music and their affect on a listener. Meanwhile, Wassily Kandinsky had moved to Munich and began to develop as a painter and theorist, taking up Endell’s project by examining the affect of form and color on the psyche. By 1911, Kandinsky had begun corresponding with Arnold Schoenberg, the Viennese composer at the forefront of atonal music theory. Kandinsky was enamored by Schoenberg’s work because it was able to achieve many of his and Endell’s desires to transcend all symbolic meaning yet retain the ability to affect the psyche. During this time period, theories in both visual and audio arts informed each other and moved toward a common goal of transcending cultural symbol by directly affecting the human psyche.
August Endell (1871-1925) moved to Munich in 1892 with intentions to fulfill a promise to his architect father by (not becoming and architect, but) becoming a teacher of philosophy and mathematics. Soon after his arrival, he was seduced by the possibilities of integrating aesthetics and philosophy. Frustrated by the “Hegelians and historians” of the old school, Endell found the modern psychology of Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) particularly attractive; in a letter to his cousin Kurt Breysig in 1893, Endell wrote:

I need not play the hypocrite with Lipps. I take, in part, a different position. But furthermore, I can learn a great deal from him.¹

The different position to which Endell refers is likely Lipps’ theory of mood empathy, where physical appearance is suggestive of an inner life. This idea opposes Endell’s assertion that psychological reactions result from the form directly, and not an empathetic projection into the form. Nevertheless, Lipps inspired Endell to apply the psychology of perception to aesthetic experience.² In 1896, he met Hermann Obrist (1962-1927) who encouraged Endell to leave his academic pursuits to become a self-taught artist. Along with Obrist, Otto Eckmann (1865-1902), and others, Endell became a founding member of the Jugendstil, a German version of Art Nouveau style.

By 1897, Endell had begun to consolidate his ideas about perception and aesthetics. In another letter to Breysig, Endell explained the difference between his mentor’s use of lines and his own:

Obrist drafts by starting with simple lines and searches for motifs in nature of equivalent emotional content… I put line to line without a care about nature. The only guiding light is the impression I wish to achieve… For me there are form images which elicit emotional responses, and nothing else. Pure form-art is my aim. Away with every association.³

³ The quote continues, “That this style is neither abstract nor unpopular is shown by the enthusiasm of different people. Form-art as parallel to music.” Buddensieg, 46.
This letter, shortly before the publication of his “Beauty of Form and Decorative Art,” outlined his desire to eliminate all cultural connotations from form and achieve “an art with forms that signify nothing, which arouse our souls as deeply and as strongly as music has always been able to do.” In the article, Endell explains “direct empathy” (in contrast to Lipps’ mood empathy) as not feeling as if a weeping willow is sorrowful, but rather that it awakens a feeling of sorrow within us.

Endell then formalizes direct empathy as a straight line. The straight line can evoke two types of sensation: tempo and effort. Tempo is projected by the length and thickness of a line, a long skinny line being the quickest and a short, thick line being slower. Effort can be understood as direction; the hardest working lines rise vertically whereas the weakest lines drop vertically. These two facets of all straight lines, according to Endell, are also the two constituent parts of all feeling. Since lines and feeling have the same components, lines are then capable of evoking the complete spectrum of feeling from an individual (figure 1).

---

figure 1: Endell’s chart explaining the affects of straight lines.

---

Endell had intended to follow this initial article with two other articles that were to explain the psychological effects of straight lines and straight-line images in greater depth, but those articles were never published. Endell believed that art did not need to symbolize or represent any cultural phenomenon because human interpretation of perception allows for forms to have a direct impact on our psyche. He saw music and the quintessential example of art transcending meaning and cultural associations to pure, mathematical, psychological affect.  

Endell struggled to manifest his ideas in physical form. Not having any formal art training, he depended on artists and craftsmen around him to formalize his desires. After some success designing furniture, he was commissioned in 1896 to design a photographer’s studio in Munich. Hofatelier Elvira (figure 2) was to become Endell’s most famous construction. The most salient feature of the building was a large plaster form Endell put on the front façade to activate an elevation that would be devoid of windows (as required by the photographic studio). However, the execution of the elevation did not completely follow Endell’s plans, leaving him to react to the final product as, “senseless, disharmonious, and agonizing.” Despite his reaction to the façade, Endell was happy with many of the interior details in the building. Endell’s freedom with materials inside the building was a physical extension of his desires to remove cultural readings from forms. His philosophy viewed form as independent from material. The result, surprisingly, was a material rich interior that achieved forms with

---

5 Of course the perception and affect of music certainly does depend on cultural phenomenon. In accordance to ideas of Kandinsky and Giedion regarding continually evolving art culture, sonorities that were considered dissonant a century ago are now commonly perceived as consonant. For example, modal music (before the major and minor scales dominated) associated different affects with different modes that do not necessarily correspond with how we might react to them today. However, it is undoubtedly true that humans do have some natural reaction to music.  
6 Weiss, 34-35.
whatever material could best produce it, whether wrought iron, plaster, carved wood, or metal hardware. Unfortunately, the building was destroyed in World War II.\footnote{Only Endell’s racing track grandstand for Bruno Cassirer in Mariendorf, the Nelson House in Eichenallee, a house on the Steinplatz, and a house in Kastanienallee still exist today.}

figure 2: Hofatilier Elvira

The Hofatilier Elvira certainly attracted its fair share of criticism at the time when the Jugendstil and Art Nouveau were beginning to be overtaken by modernism. One such critic was German architect and teacher Johannes Otzen (1839-1911). Although he was a gothic revivalist for most of his earlier career, his ‘Wiesbaden programme’ would
bring awareness to a building’s function as a determining factor in form; this concept would become a key component to the modernist project. Otzen’s critique, given in a talk to the Society of Architects in Berlin on March 1, 1900, considered Endell’s ornament frivolous:

Modern architecture loves exaggerated scale, it has studied Nietzsche with profit, the superman haunts its structures, and all sound judgement of reality is lost. This superman ornamentation represents no architectural function, is totally arbitrary, subordinated to person whim.

Otzen went as far as to call the entire Jugendstil project childish babble, and that Endell was the incarnation of these dangerous and childish pursuits.

Despite the criticism, Endell’s work inspired other architects to take part in the Jugendstil movement. One such architect that had a great influence on the development of modern architecture was Peter Behrens (1869-1940). Trained as a painter, he settled in Munich in 1890 and became friends with Otto Eckmann. He soon became involved in the art community, and from 1903 to 1907 directed the Düsseldorf School of Applied Arts. In 1906, he was commissioned to design the A.E.G. Turbine factory in Berlin, and in 1907 founded the Deutscher Werkbund with Hermann Muthesius. In 1910, Mies Van Der Rohe worked in Behrens’ office, and his desire to reform the design educational model was picked up by Walter Gropius in his programme for the Weimar Bauhaus.

---


9 Buddensieg, 44.

While Endell was formulating his theories that synthesized perception and visual aesthetics, **Heinrich Schenker** (1868-1935) was developing a theory that could explain music on the basis of natural psychological phenomena. The essence of Schenker’s music theory is the concept of organic musical coherence. He explored this theory in three volumes of texts, the first he published in 1906. The coherence depends on three levels of detail in the composition: the background, middle-ground, and foreground. Each of these depths is independently coherent and coherent with the other layers. Schenker believed that to understand these different depths, one needed an in-depth understanding of three different phases in historical musical composition: counterpoint (specifically Fux’s theories of species counterpoint, thorough-bass (specifically the voice leading and basso-continuo of C.P.E. Bach), and free composition (Schenker’s own method).

Free composition, finally, combines all the others, placing them in the service of the law of organic coherence as it is revealed in the fundamental structure in the background, the voice-leading transformations in the middle-ground, and ultimately in the appearance in the foreground.¹¹

The most important component of Schenker’s theories with relation to the work of Endell is what Schenker referred to as the “fundamental structure.” In the final volume his trilogy, *Der freie Satz* (Free Composition), Schenker described this structure that exists in the background level of compositions, as a melodic and a harmonic line in counterpoint: the *Urlinie* and the *Bassbrechung* (Figure 3). The *Urlinie* is a melodic line that can be traced through the entire piece that descends stepwise from the octave, the fifth, or the third above the fundamental tonic for the piece (in the example, the first *Urlinie* pitch G is five whole steps above the tonic pitch C). The *Bassbrechung* is the fundamental bass

---

arpeggiation of the tonic triad (in the example, tonic root (I) C followed by dominant (V) root G, and returning home to C). Schenker coined the contrapuntal result of these two lines the *Ursatz*.

![Figure 3: Ursatz](image)

In his analysis method, the *Ursatz* is the natural harmony to which all great music can be reduced (for example, Beethoven’s entire 3rd Symphony can be reduced to the background level of an Ursatz in Eb). In the middleground and foreground, Schenker had methods for analyzing the perceptual and psychological affects that distinguished one composition from another. *Der freie Satz* is so devoted to how masterful music creates direct psychological responses that many people have considered the volume to be more a study of music psychology than an analysis textbook. Schenker’s theories sought to explain the direct empathetic affect of tonal music that Endell had used as the inspiration for his own theory of direct visual empathy.

**Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944) decided to become an artist and moved to Munich in 1896, the same year Endell started work on the Hofatilier Elvira. Given their overlapping time in Munich and the parallel’s in many of their theories, it is certain that Endell had an important effect on Kandinsky’s theoretical development, and particularly

---

to his color and form theories. In Peg Weiss’ *Kandinsky in Munich*, she points out several important extensions and appropriations Kandinsky made to Endell’s theories. One such example is the painter’s theory of thorough-bass in painting where Kandinsky extended Endell’s theory of direct empathy to color.\(^\text{13}\) It is important to note that the vocabulary Kandinsky was using to describe the phenomenon was the same music theory term that Schenker associated with the middle-ground of compositions (where much of the perceptible affect in music takes place). As Endell had explained in a letter to Breysig about how Obrist’s search for nature in his drawings contrasted his own beliefs about the inherent differences between art and nature, Kandinsky wrote several years later in his 1913 article “Rückblicke,” “The goals (therefore also the means) of nature and art are essentially different.”\(^\text{14}\) When Kandinsky was teaching at the Weimer Bauhaus in 1926, he appropriated Endell’s theory on the line in the Bauhaus publication “Punkt und Linie zu Fläche.”

Length is a durational concept. On the other hand, the time required to follow a straight line is different from the time required to follow a curved line even if the lengths are the same, and the more animated a curve is, the more it stretches out over time. In line, therefore, the possibilities of using up time are very manifold. The use of time in the horizontal and the vertical has also a different inner coloration in lines even of the same length.\(^\text{15}\) In Kandinsky’s analysis, he chooses to use curvature animation in place of line weight, and replaces the notion of effort with an inner coloration of lines, yet the similarities in the understanding of a lines ability to produce direct empathy are striking.

In 1912, Kandinsky published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a treatise on the evolution of the cultural body of art and its relationship to the perceptual and psychological affects of art. Kandinsky begins by explaining the cultural framework

\(^{13}\) Weiss, 36.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 38.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 37.
within which art exists, what he calls the “life of the spirit” of art. He imagines an equilateral triangle cut horizontally into three sections (figure 4).

At the top of the triangle is one man (or no man in the times of spiritual hunger) whose “joyful vision is the measure of his inner sorrow.”  He refers to Beethoven and Schoenberg as artists who have been at the peak of the triangle. As the triangle widens, it represents the increasing number of people who are capable of understanding the artists at their level. He represents the evolution of art and culture by having the triangle continually grow, putting everyone at a progressively lower level unless they continually struggle to remain at their level. This theory is remarkably like Sigfried Giedion’s cultural notion of space-time, where “the artist, in fact, functions a great deal like an inventor or a scientific discoverer,” and when new discoveries are made that relate us to our surroundings, they are added to the cultural experience, effectively expanding Kandinsky’s triangle.

---

16 Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the spiritual in art and painting in particular (1912), (NY 1947): 27
Kandinsky transitions to the perceptual and psychological affects of art through reference to the Theosophical Society, “a group who seeks to approach the problem of the spirit by way of inner knowledge.” That society saw the solution as a transition from material representations to spiritual representations, as in the work of Materlinck’s plays, Wagner’s leitmotifs, and Schoenberg’s search for a spiritual structure in music.

In his application of the spiritual in art to painting, Kandinsky again parallel’s with Endell’s theories. Making many connections to music along the way, he in effect discusses the topics of the two followup articles to “The Beauty of Form and Decorative Art” that Endell had intended to write. Kandinsky calls form the external expression of inner meaning, implying a transcendence of any external, cultural meaning. At this point, he begins extensive references to color and music, and a synesthetic relationship between the two. It is likely that Kandinsky had synesthesia, a perceptual overlap in senses that, in this case, causes someone to hear colors. In his footnotes, he cites several examples of pitch-color relationships (figure 5).

![Figure 5: various mappings of colors to pitch (some colors interpreted from text descriptions)](image)

It seems by evidence of these examples, that there is no natural or inherent color data contained in pitch. The composers, Scriabin (perhaps synesthetic) and Rimsky-Korsakov (synesthetic) do overlap on some colors, but for the most part, the experience of color is

---

18 Kandinsky, 32.
19 Ibid., 47.
20 Ibid., footnotes 1&2 on pages 44, 45 & 46.
not shared. Wallace Rimington’s color organ is the most artificial mapping, simply applying the color spectrum over the octave spectrum, deciding that C was a low energy, red color, and that B was a high energy violet color.

Kandinsky’s associated specific attributes to colors as Endell had done before with lines. The painter broke colors down into two pairs of antitheses: yellow/blue-white/black, and red/green-orange/violet. The specifics of his color antitheses can best be understood through the diagrams he used in the book (figures 6 & 7). The attributes he supplies to colors include motion (yellow toward the spectator, blue towards the spiritual), sensation (yellow is warm, blue is cold), and resistance (white resists, black conducts). Although Kandinsky’s diagrams are not as totalitarian as Endell’s it is not difficult to see the two artists’ similar desires.

---

21 Of course this assumes that we all perceive colors the same way, which I don’t believe can be proven.
22 This division has a physical basis. The rods and cones in out retinas are organized in color-opponent arrays that increase our ability to define edges and distinguish changes in colors. The color-opponent pairings are for yellow/blue, red/green, and black/white. Bear, Mark F, Neuroscience: exploring the brain. (Baltimore, 1996): 223-227.
Taking yet another step beyond Endell, Kandinsky tied the “internal necessity,” or the direct impact of perception, back to the cultural context of art.

In short, the effect of internal necessity and the development of art is an ever advancing expression of the eternal and objective in terms of the historical and subjective.²³

In an economical way, the quote explains Kandinsky’s understanding of art as an evolving struggle to represent the innate and natural through the limited means of the culture. The statement in many ways expresses his ambivalence for the desire of direct empathy, because at some level, even the most visceral and instinctive responses will be affected by culture. And being affected by culture is not a bad thing, because it is the life

²³ Kandinsky, 53.
of the spirit, and in order to maintain the spiritual in art, there needs to be the cultural context.

The year before Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spirituality in Art was published, he wrote his first letter to Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). Kandinsky
had admired the work of Schoenberg, and decided to alert the composer to the parallels in their works.

What we are striving for and our whole manner of thought and feeling have so much in common that I feel completely justified in expressing my empathy… I am certain that our own modern harmony is not to be found in the ‘geometric’ way, but rather in the anti-geometric, anti-logical [spiritual?] way. And this way is that of dissonances in art, in painting, therefore, just as much as in music. And ‘today’s’ dissonances in painting and music is merely the consonance of ‘tomorrow.’

In Schoenberg’s reply, he enthusiastically reassured Kandinsky that they share a similar artistic project.

Every formal procedure which aspires to traditional effects is not completely free from conscious motivation. But art belongs to the unconscious! One must express oneself! Express oneself directly! Not one’s taste, or one’s upbringing, or one’s intelligence, knowledge or skill. Not all these acquired characteristics, but that which is inborn, instinctive.

Schoenberg’s desire for direct expression through instinctive artistic impulses places him within the bounds of Endell’s project.

Although Schoenberg and Schenker desired similar conceptual results from their music theories, their means of achieving direct empathy could hardly be more different. Schoenberg’s serial method of composition was a reaction against the aggregated cultural basis of Schenker’s theory. Schoenberg removed cultural baggage from his compositions by mechanizing his means for composition.

The basis for Schoenberg’s serial technique is the abstraction of pitches. In the tonal music Schenker promoted, pitches are each weighed differently; for example, in the key of C, C(i) is the tonic pitch and has the most weight, followed by the dominant G(v), then F(iv), then D(ii), etc… In Schoenberg’s theory, all pitches are weighted equally by intentionally thwarting tonal tendencies. In his popular twelve-tone method, each of the twelve subdivisions in an octave is represented by a “pitch class” rather than a

---

note (see the numbers in parenthesis in figure 5 for a translation from pitch class to pitch). A pitch class represents the note at any octave (the lowest C on the piano and the highest C are both pitch class 0). Schoenberg then arranges the twelve pitch classes into a prime row, a specific order that creates the compositional foundation for the entire piece (figure 8).

The prime row can then be transposed, inverted, reversed (retrograde), or be inverted in reverse, allowing 48 different permutations of the same row. Schoenberg then arranged his twelve-tone compositions from these permutations using similar means that a tonal composition would use chords, with the important exception: the rows did not create a hierarchy of pitches (or chords).

Schoenberg believed that this type of composition (and his other atonal developments that eventually led to the mature twelve-tone technique) abstracted music by removing it from the classical fundamental structure of the ursatz, and thereby removing the temporal experience of expectation and resolution that it produces. His technique, in contrast, allowed his compositions to free themselves from cultural associations, giving them greater ability to pass straight from perception to reaction, greater ability for direct empathy.

The relationship between Schoenberg and Kandinsky began as one of great affection and mutual respect. Kandinsky would send the composer portfolios and paintings on a regular basis, and Schoenberg, who was an amateur painter himself, would
do the same. The discussed each other’s publications, and were not afraid to give, at times, hard criticism to one another. For the most part, Kandinsky sent three letters for each of Schoenberg’s, and when it had been a while between receiving a letter from the other they would open their letters with “Are you angry with me.”

In an interesting twist of fate, Schoenberg introduced Adolf Loos (1870-1933) to Kandinsky. In December of 1911, in a letter where Schoenberg was arranging for an exhibition of his own paintings in Budapest, he wrote:

Adolf Loos, the most outstanding architect, has also written you at my suggestions....
What have you arranged with him?

Kandinsky never responded as to what arrangements he had made with Loos. It is likely that although Loos could see how his denial of ornament could be reflected in the atonal compositions of Schoenberg, he did not see how he aligned with Kandinsky, certainly with regard to the jugendstil influence on the painter during his formative years in Munich. Loos would have seen the plaster form on the façade of Hofatilier Elvira as an amoral Papuan tattoo, as a degenerate crime for a modern man to commit. Loos also condemned the German Werkbund for their need to control art culture and their “quality of workmanship [that] creat[es] the style of our times.”

Here Loos is specifically condemning Mathesius, but his degenerate position was certainly shared, and probably influenced by jugendstil alumnus Peter Behrens. Loos and the coming modernist architects would bring an end to the project Endell had started in terms of direct empathy, but would take on the idea of denying cultural reference toward its own ends.

---

During the summer of 1914, Schoenberg and his family were near Kandinsky in Bavaria where the two spent considerable time together until the outbreak of World War I. Kandinsky at that point returned to Russia and Schoenberg joined the Viennese army (but never actually served due to a medical problem). The two artists lost touch until years later when Kandinsky was at the Weimar Bauhaus. The connection between the Jugendstil and the Bauhaus was strong when it was being founded in 1915. In fact, that year Henry Van de Velde had proposed that Endell, Obrst, or Gropius should head the school.\(^{30}\) Also, painter Paul Klee (1879-1940), who joined the Bauhaus in 1920, worked along many parallel trajectories as Kandinsky, with interests in the spiritual in painting, music’s relationship to visual arts, and color theory.

In July of 1922 Kandinsky re-opened correspondence with Schoenberg. Initially, the composer seems pleased to hear from his old friend, and jokes about the rush of artistic movements that have come about in Germany since the end of the war.

I can understand your being surprised by the artistic situation in Berlin. But are you pleased about it? Personally, I haven’t much taste for all these movements, but at least I don’t have to worry that they’ll irritate me for too long… I find it perfectly disgusting, at least in music: these atonalists! Damn it all, I did my composing without any ‘ism’ in mind. What has it got to do with me?\(^{31}\)

Schoenberg’s frustration with the ‘atonalists’ was another sign of the end the artistic project that sought direct empathy. The new atonalists were attracted to the style and avant-garde of atonal music, but had no theoretical basis, certainly as far as Schoenberg could see, for pursuing their compositions.

In 1923, Kandinsky asked Schoenberg if he wanted to head the music school at the Bauhaus.

---

\(^{30}\) Weiss, 29.

How often have I said to myself: ‘if only Schoenberg were here!’ And imagine, now he could perhaps come, since a circle has formed here what has a certain influence on the necessary authorities. Perhaps the decision only depends on you. In Confidence: the music school here is to get a new director. And so we immediately thought of you.\footnote{Kandinsky, Wassily, “15 April 1923,” Schoenberg Kandinsky, (London, 1984): 75-76.}

Schoenberg’s reaction to the letter was less than warm, as the political climate in Europe by this time had already begun to turn sour.

If I had received your letter a year ago I should have let all my principles go hang, should have renounced the prospect of at last being free to compose… But it cannot be. For I have at last learnt the lesson that has been forced upon me during this year, and shall not ever forget it. It is that I am not a German, not a European, indeed perhaps scarcely even a human being, but I am a Jew… I should like the Kandinsky I knew in the past and the Kandinsky of today each to take his fair share of my cordial and respectful greetings. (No signature on Schoenberg’s carbon copy).\footnote{Schoenberg, Arnold, “19 April 1923,” Schoenberg Kandinsky, (London, 1984): 76.}

The two exchanged another two rounds of letter, with each letter from Kandinsky more pathetic and apologetic, and each letter from Schoenberg becoming more bitter and dismissive. The falling out of these two artists marks the end of one of the strongest multidisciplinary art projects in recent history.


Bear, Mark F, Neuroscience: exploring the brain, (Baltimore, 1996).


Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the spiritual in art and painting in particular (1912), (NY 1947).


Audio Tracks:

Track 1: Ursatz in C.

Track 2: Reduced from Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 (Eroica) in Eb Major. This is NOT the Ursatz of the entire work, but is a compression of the most important foreground material involved in the making of the Ursatz. This track contains these moments from the piece: Movement I, measures 37-40, Movement IV, measures 7-11, and measures 463 to the end. Each of these moments can be understood as I, V, I (respectively) of the entire composition.

Track 3: Prime Row for Schoenberg’s “Piano Piece” Op 33a.

Track 4: Prime Row (P=0) played at the same time as another permutation (in this case, inverted and transposed up 5 pitch-classes).

Track 5: Except from Schoenberg’s Op. 31, Variations for Orchestra (1928). This piece is one of his mature twelve-tone compositions.

Track 6: Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 (Eroica) in Eb Major, IV finale.