INVENTING ABSTRACTION
1910–1925
HOW A RADICAL IDEA CHANGED MODERN ART
Hanjin Shipping is delighted to sponsor Inventing Abstraction, 1908–1924 and to be part of sharing this important exhibition with the global audience of The Museum of Modern Art. Hanjin has been a dedicated supporter of the Museum, sponsoring a variety of exhibitions and programs including Monet’s Water Lilies in 2009, Picasso Guitars 1912–1914 in 2011, and Estatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language in 2012.

Hanjin Shipping is Korea’s largest shipping company, and ranks among the top ten major shipping carriers in the world. A proud supporter of the arts, it makes a priority of partnering with museums worldwide. Our Chairwoman, Eunyoung Choi, is passionate about this goal and believes strongly that as our scope of our business extends to every corner of the world, art helps us to communicate with the global community. We are especially grateful to the generous supporters of this project and of the Museum’s programming in general. Inventing Abstraction is made possible by Hanjin Shipping. Major support is provided by the Anne and Hans Kohn Foundation, the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, the Blavatnik Family Foundation, Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, and Sue and Edloe Wachenheim III, and the exhibition is also supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The seminars bringing together scholars in a variety of disciplines in the exhibition’s planning stages were made possible by MoMA’s Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation.

On behalf of the Trustees and staff of the Museum, I wish to acknowledge the leaders—private individuals and museum colleagues—who have entrusted us with the care of their works. Their generosity has in many cases allowed us to exhibit works that have not yet been seen in this country, and in others to provide a new perspective on familiar ones. They have our profound gratitude.

— GLENN D. LOWRY
Director, The Museum of Modern Art
INVENTING ABSTRACTION traces the sweep of a radical new idea as it moved among artists and intellectuals, repressing across nations and across media. The development of abstract art is a prime example of the power of network thinking. This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies were also made possible by the efforts of a far-flung network of individuals, and in working on them both, I was moved by and very grateful for the extraordinary gestures of generosity that made such a collaborative undertaking possible. The makers of those gestures include the many dedicated teams of people at The Museum of Modern Art who use their great skills and make ambitious exhibition projects such as this one. There were also the eighty-four lenders who parted with their great treasures to allow us to show them in our galleries; the twenty-three authors who contributed their ideas and expertise to this volume; and scores of others who helped make this project happen in other ways: generously giving us their advice and support in shaping the checklist, securing loans, figuring out the right recordings, providing financial support. All of us at The Museum of Modern Art are profoundly grateful.

We are deeply thankful for our many generous lenders, listed on p. 375. Many of them have acted as true collaborators on this project, facilitating loans, enlightening us about the works in their care, and making suggestions about other works and collections to be considered. We warmly thank our colleagues in lending institutions: Madeleine Schuppi and Brigitta Vogler-Zimmerli, private collection courtesy of the Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau; Ann Goldstein, Nicole Delisio, and Gert Imame, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Bernhard Mendes Burg, Christian Müller, and Charlotte Gutzwiller, Kunstmuseum Basel; Catherine Amé, René Ratz, and Stephan Dörschl, Akademie der Künste, Berlin; Udo Kittelmann and Dieter Schold, Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Nicholas Fox Weber and Oliver Barker, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany Conn.; Stephen Berg and Volker Adolphs, Kunstmuseum Bonn; Heide-Marie HärTEL, Deutsches Tanzlaboratorium Bremen; Louis Grachos, Douglas Dreishpoon, and Christian Röttger, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven; Jock Reynolds and Jennifer Gross, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Richard Armstrong, Vivien Green, Tracey Bashkow, and Susan Davidson, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, New York; Thomas P. Campbell, Jennifer Russell, Malcolm Daniel, Sabine Rewald, Rebecca Rahm, and Cynthia Iavarone, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Adam Winnberg, Barbara Haskell, Dana Miller, and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lissette Peltier, Evert J. van Straaten, Liz Kreijn, Toos van Kooten, and André Stratmann, Kunsthilfe-Müller Museum, Ostrava; Monique Rauhofer and Laurent Sebillotte, Centre national de la danse, Pantin, France; Bruno Racine and Antoine Coron, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Alfred Parkeentry, Brigitte Leal, Jonna Steurer, Christine Macel, and Philipp-Ahaan Michael, Musée national d’art moderne/ Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris; Fabrice Hergott and Jacqueline de Moulins, Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris; Timothy Rastic, Michael R. Taylor, and Anna Vallée, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Lynn Zelevansky, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Richard Armstrong and Astrid von Aren, Art Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen; Walburga Krupp, Stiftung Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V., Remagen; Mika Lähte and Iveca Devkovska, The Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga; Robert A. Kret, Barbara Buhler Lynes, Carolyn Kastner, and Judy Chiba Smith, Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Jelle Pijaudier-Cabot and Hélène Comesa, Musée d’art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg; Sean Rainbird and Iva Cosen, Staatliche Galerie Stuttgart; Maria Tatsuoanglo, Angelica Charlton, and Olga Fota, State Museum of Contemporary Art –
We extend warm thanks to our colleagues in the Department of Digital Media, who have contributed in key ways, giving special meaning to the idea of this project. They deserve praise and their names should be mentioned more prominently in the catalogue. We wish to thank the curators, educators, and staff who have worked as true collaborators in creating rich interpretative materials and programs that enhance the exhibition’s content.

We extend warm thanks to our colleagues in the Department of Conservation, whose efforts have contributed in key ways to the arrangement of loan issues. Although this project has been a complex administrative and diplomatic undertaking, we have been able to work with those of the highest scholarship. Neither exhibition nor catalogue would be possible without their vital support.

Our great thanks go to the many esteemed writers who contributed to this volume, and who are listed in the Contents. Sara Dickerman, Henry Finder, Hal Foster, and Cara Manes, my sister and trusted friends, were the first to read my texts and offered comments and suggestions that have improved them in both form and content.

In our own Department of Painting, Sculpture, Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator, has been an effective advocate of and sage advisor to this project, and I am very grateful for her counsel in many key moments. Anne Umland, Lauracpak, Richard E. Hough, and Duncan Phillips have provided superior new photography of the collection works and contributed to this volume, and who are listed in the Contents. Sara Dickerman, Henry Finder, Hal Foster, and Cara Manes, my sister and trusted friends, were the first to read my texts and offered comments and suggestions that have improved them in both form and content.

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Must we not then renounce the object altogether, throw it to the winds and instead lay bare the purely abstract?

— Vasily Kandinsky, 1911

ROUGHLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a series of precipitous shifts took place in the cultural sphere that in the end amounted to as great a rewriting of the rules of artistic production as had been seen since the Renaissance. That transformation would fundamentally shape artistic practice in the century that followed. Beginning in late 1911 and across the course of 1912, in several European and American cities, a handful of artists—Vasily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Francis Picabia, Robert Delaunay, Arthur Dove—presented paintings that differed from almost all of those that had preceded them in the long history of the medium in the Western tradition: shunning the depiction of objects in the world, they displayed works with no discernible subject matter. Indeed they abandoned the premise of making a picture of something. “Young painters of the extreme schools,” the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in February 1912, “want to make pure painting, an entirely new art form. It is only at its beginning, and not yet as abstract as it wants to be.”

In the period immediately following, abstraction was proposed many times over, by different artists working in different places and with different philosophical foundations. Its pioneers included Hans Arp, Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Natalia Goncharova, Marsden Hartley, Paul Klee, Mikhail Larionov, Fernand Léger, Kazimir Malevich, Franz Marc, Piet Mondrian, Hans Richter, and Wyndham Lewis. By the eve of World War I, artists producing abstract works could be counted in the dozens. This shift in the frontier of possibility moved so suddenly as to shake the foundations of art as it had been practiced. Observers spoke of the exhilaration and terror of leaping into unknown territory, where comparison with the past was impossible. This evacuation of the object world was, to be sure, hardly a silent disappearance, but rather was accompanied by a shower of celebratory manifestos, lectures, and criticism, a flood of words flung forth perhaps in compensation for their makers’ worry about how the meaning of these pictures might be established.

Scores of earlier images from other Western disciplines—chromatic studies, theological and mediumistic images, cosmogonic images, scientific images (fig. 1)—may resemble abstract art. But these are not art at all, for despite any formal similarity they...
were intended to produce meaning in other discursive frameworks. Within the sphere of modern art, J. M. W. Turner's seascapes (fig. 3), James McNeill Whistler's Nocturnes (fig. 3), Edgar Degas's landscape monoprints, Gustave Moreau's ink drawings and watercolor sketches, and Hermann Ohnes's theater sets, among other images, have been held up as important forms of proto-abstraction. But these works do not declare a break with subject matter, even though, in so rigorously defining it in terms of atmospheric and experiential qualities that it is all but obscured, they provide an important foundation for the emergence of abstraction in the twentieth century (landscape above all; wrote the art historian Henri Zerner, was "a laboratory for abstract art.") This exhibition and book, however, do not, as several previous studies of abstraction have done, attempt to inventory such precedents for abstraction avant la lettre, though of course they have bearing on the story being told.

Before December 1911, when Kandinsky exhibited Komposition V (Composition V, plate 18) in Munich, in the first exhibition of the Räume Reiter, the artist's group he had co-founded, it seems to have been impossible for artists to step away from a long-held tenet of artistic practice: that paintings describe things in a real or imaginary world. In the years preceding, there was some sense of building consternation around this issue, of possibilities tested and rejected and of ideas yet unrealized, but it was only in the annus mirabilis that followed Kandinsky's showing of Komposition V that abstract pictures began to be exhibited publicly as art, and their philosophical justification developed in treatises and criticism. It was only then, one could say, that the idea of an abstract artwork began to make sense. And for some artists and intellectuals, abstraction not only began to seem plausible but took on the character of an imperative.

TWO STORIES from the years immediately preceding 1911 convey some sense of how difficult it was to arrive at the novel idea of an abstract picture. In 1910, while Pablo Picasso was summering at Cadagàs, Spain, he made a small group of strange pictures that looked unlike any that had preceded them. Leaving behind the hillides of reverie cubes that he had made the previous year in Horta, he now worked in an idiom that seemed closer to a diagram (plates 3, 4). His new paintings featured angled planes defined by linear scaffolding that shifted across the work's surface. Only the faintest traces of the structure of the female figure or still life named in the pictures' titles were discernible within. "The Cadagàs images are so difficult to decipher," wrote Picasso's biographer John Richardson, "that even the artist sometimes forget what a particular image represented." These works seem abstract in all but name. Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler could not reconcile himself, it seems, to the terrifying novelty of these new works: he declared them "unfinished." The Picasso scholar Pierre Doré has noted that while Kahnweiler had the right of first refusal of Picasso's paintings, these particular works went to a rival dealer, Ambroise Vollard — suggesting that Kahnweiler had rejected them. And it seems that Picasso himself — the most nimble-minded, radically innovative artist of the first decade of the twentieth century — also struggled with the implications of these works. In a later conversation reported by his wife Françoise Gilot, Picasso asserted that these "pure" pictures required supplements to function as painting. Referring to the fragmented forms of bodies, musical instruments, and words that began to appear in the Cubist pictures he made immediately after his sojourn in Cadagàs (plates 5, 6), he explained, "I painted them in afterwards. I call them 'attributes.' At that period I was doing painting for its own sake. It was really pure painting, and the composition was done as composition. It was only towards the end . . . that I brought in the attributes." In the works that followed those almost abstract images made in Cadagàs, Picasso incorporated the shattered forms of representation as if to tether his paintings securely to the world of things. Failure to do so, it seems, threatened painting itself. He would later declare that abstraction was impossible: "There is no abstract art. You always have to begin with something. Afterwards you can remove all appearances of reality, but there is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark."

Writing in March in October 1911, Kandinsky described Picasso's pictures, which he had seen in photographs sent to him by Kahnweiler, as "split[ting] the subject up and scatter[ing] bits of it all over the picture," an effect that was "frankly false" but nonetheless an auspicious "sign of the enormous struggle toward the immaterial." While Picasso in 1910 could paint a picture approaching abstraction but could not embrace it philosophically, Kandinsky conversely could develop a theoretical rationale for abstraction but could not make the final break. The sheer difficulty of thinking such a radically new idea — thinking within a new paradigm — is evident in the publication history of Kandinsky's hugely influential tract On the Spiritual in Art (plate 10). The manuscript existed in draft form as early as 1909. In the first two published editions, which appeared in December 1911 and May 1912 respectively, Kandinsky sets abstraction as a goal, clearly and effectively advancing a practice that would advance "deeper . . . into this territory." He nonetheless balks in embracing in the present day an art that breaks "the tie that binds us to nature.""Today," he writes, "the artist cannot manage exclusively with purely abstract forms." Indeed, in his paintings of that date, referential form is almost but not quite effaced. But his opinion changed in the next two years (as did his painting), and by 1914, in a manuscript for a planned fourth edition of On the Spiritual in Art that was forestalled by World War I, he edited this paragraph to allow for the possibility of a fully abstract art: "Today the new phrasing read, "only a few artists can manage with purely abstract forms." In a lecture written (but never delivered) some years later, the artist commented on the difficulty of this intellectual passage: "No, objects did not want to— and were not to— disappear altogether from my pictures. First, it is impossible to conjure up maturity artificially at any particular time . . . . I myself was not yet sufficiently mature to be able to experience purely abstract form without bridging the gap by means of objects."

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IN 1911, HOWEVER, THE ASSAULT WAS LAUNCHED.  

That December in Munich, Kandinsky exhibited Komposition V, a monumental manifesto for abstraction that maintained only the most ineradicable traces of figurative references. That same month, he published On the Spiritual in Art, his hagiographic paean to the ineffable. Three Kandinsky works—none quite so ambitious or so determined in their evacuation of referential content as Komposition V—were shown months later in Paris, a pair of Salon des Indépendants, in March-May of 1912. Delaunay, who had been corresponding with Kandinsky since late 1911, and had studied French translations of On the Spiritual of Art made by Sonia Delaunay-Terk and Elisabeth Epstein, understood these works to herald the birth of abstraction.⁶³ This inquiry into the pure painting is the current problem, wrote Delaunay to Kandinsky. “I do not know any painters in Paris who are truly seeking an ideal world.”⁶⁴

On the Spiritual in Art

Y et in Paris, far from being the isolated émigré figure he is frequently portrayed as in the press, Kandinsky was “solved” in a letter from Léger himself on November 3. “And then in October of that year, at the Salon des Indépendants the following spring, a canvas bounded by a border of painted black, mounted on the wall behind him. December 1910. Gelatin silver print, 5 3⁄4 × 4 1⁄4 in. (14.7 × 11.6 cm). Musée Picasso, Paris

Then, should there have been any doubt that something was happening, Paris newcomer Picabia thrust his own stake in the ground of this terrain at the same Salon d’Automne in which Kupka’s Amorpha works appeared. He, too, showed a gargantuan tableau, La Source (The spring, 1912; plate 8), which invoked a figurative reference through its title but was nonetheless an audacious declaration of abstraction. He simultaneously placed a closely related canvas of the same scale — Damas à la source I (Dame à la Source) — at the Salon de la Section d’Or, which also opened that October.⁶⁶ Picabia had made both works the summer before, which he had spent almost continuously in the company of Apollinaire. At the time, the poet was working on his booklets Les Peintres cubistes, on Cubism and its aftermath,⁶⁷ the impact of the 1912 exhibitions led him to make major late-stage changes in the proof of the book.⁶⁸ Divided between a pair of pictures invoked Picabia’s work through their faceted planes and rose-period palette, then seemed to travesty its refinement in their billboard scale, crude paint handling, and pulsing eroticism, as well as through their defiant breach of the figurative tradition, which Picasso had maintained. One critic wrote that Picabia had set “the year’s record for fantasy” with “ugly” works that “evoke inartistic solutions.”⁶⁹ At the same Salon d’Automne, Léger showed his Femme en bleu (Woman in blue, 1912; plate 50), a work that, rather than describing a woman dressed in blue, seems to efface the figure with large dancing planes of that color, so that the only remaining trace of human reference is the painting’s vertical orientation. The work’s indecipherability was played out in the press, the subject of jest, but savored nonetheless; the work was reproduced on the front page of the newspaper Épade, the pub- lic was invited to decipher it, responses were published through October, until the mystery was “solved” in a letter from Léger himself on November 3.

Each of these early efforts stood as a benchmark in the development of abstraction, which would continue to evolve over generations in the years that followed. And then the flow of events thickened: toward the end of 1912, Léger began his Décollage series (Contrasts of forms; plates 92–95). Picabia had made both works the summer before, which he had spent almost continuously in the company of Apollinaire, who was working on his booklet Les Peintres cubistes, on Cubism and its aftermath. The show included a drawing Picasso had made the winter before (fig. 4), which appears like a talisman of things to come in a number of photographs showing him or his friends seated proudly below it (fig. 5). The photographer Edward Steichen, who had participated in the selection of the works for this show, described it as “certainly abstract” but not “abstract enough” that you “could never lay it out for fun.”⁷⁰ And then the flow of events thickened: toward the end of 1912, Léger began his defiantly abstract Contrastes de formes series (Contrasts of forms; plates 92–95). La Femme en bleu was probably one of two works he sent to the Armory Show, which opened in New York in February 1913.⁷¹ The Americans Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright showed abstract works at the Munich Neue Kunstsalon in June 1913 and at the Berneheim-Fein gallery, Paris, in October of that year, preludes to Russell’s grand contribution to the Salon des Indépendants the following spring, a canvas surrounded by a border of painted stripes more than ten feet high (plate 77), and in March 1913, Apollinaire described a series of pictures, distilled from images of trees (plate 224), by a Dutch artist working in Paris, Mondrian, as “a very abstract Cubism.”⁷² Each of these early efforts stood as a manifesto, a proclamation of the viability of abstraction.
In its emergence within a rich social network, abstraction resembles many other intellectual developments studied by sociologists. In his book *The Sociology of Philosophies*, Randall Collins looks at the social dimension of innovation, countering the Romantic ideal of the genius as an inspired loner. Instead, he argues, innovation is rooted in groups: it arises out of social interaction—conversation, sharing ideas, validation, and competition. Moreover, the right sort of group, Collins suggests, can radicalize intellectual innovation, prompting individuals to take positions far more extreme, far more convention defying, than they would have done alone. This sort of productive sociability may also lead to multiple, almost simultaneous inventions of the same or related things: many investigators converging on the same finding in a common pattern of scientific discovery, as the sociologist of science Robert K. Merton has suggested. Abstraction, with almost simultaneous “first” pictures appearing in a scattering of places, would seem to follow this model. The answer to the question “How do you think a truly radical thought?” seems to be: you think it through a network. The network of sociability built by transit pathways, which facilitated the establishment of coordinated international markets and set the stage for the vertiginous growth of a modern speculative economy and commodity culture. In Paris in 1913, Henri Poincaré hosted an international conference that established a method for transmitting accurate radio time signals around the world, and on July 1, 1913, the first time signal to be broadcast globally was sent from the Eiffel Tower, a key step in adopting a universal standard time. All of this fed a more international, global sense of one’s world. The network of sociability built by transit pathways, the proliferation of print media, and new forms of communication allowed for the movement of ideas and images across a broad terrain, a development crucial in abstraction’s incubation.
primitive art, connections with Africa and the vast Orient, with the highly expressive, spontaneous folk and children's art, and especially with the most recent musical developments in Europe and the new ideas for theater of our time.” In its very conception, then, the almanac aimed at a dissolution of boundaries—between national schools, temporal realms, and media. Kandinsky declared in his goal to “show that something was happening everywhere.” An emergent modern exhibition culture—for this was the dawn of international loan shows—played a parallel function: pictures moved across borders to new audiences; images were distributed through print media; people took off in trains and cars.

Kandinsky and Marc conceived the *Bläue Reiter* this way, with almanac and exhibiting society as complements to each other. By September 1911, Kandinsky was corresponding with artists in cities throughout Europe, soliciting both pictures for exhibitions and essays and images for publication.

In bringing people into contact, some figures play a disproportionate role. The author Malcolm Gladwell uses the term “connectors” to describe charismatic, socially adept people with contacts dispersed among many different social pools, and he stresses their importance in understanding how certain ideas may become suddenly, precipitously popular. Connectors do the social work of many, facilitating relays of ideas among their broad acquaintance. One key actor in the development of abstraction was Kandinsky himself; another was certainly Apollinaire. The poet began to publish art criticism in 1910, following a long line of French writers who had done so, including Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Stéphane Mallarmé, and the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. Apollinaire quickly established himself as a formidable master of the new print-media world. In the period from 1910 to 1914, he wrote a column that appeared most days in *L’Intransigeant*, with a daily run of 40,000 copies.

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In bringing people into contact, some figures play a disproportionate role. The author Malcolm Gladwell uses the term “connectors” to describe charismatic, socially adept people with contacts dispersed among many different social pools, and he stresses their importance in understanding how certain ideas may become suddenly, precipitously popular. Connectors do the social work of many, facilitating relays of ideas among their broad acquaintance. One key actor in the development of abstraction was Kandinsky himself; another was certainly Apollinaire. The poet began to publish art criticism in 1910, following a long line of French writers who had done so, including Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Stéphane Mallarmé, and the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. Apollinaire quickly established himself as a formidable master of the new print-media world. In the period from 1910 to 1914, he wrote a column that appeared most days in *L’Intransigeant*, with a daily run of 40,000 copies; and another for *Paris/Journal*, with a daily run of 60,000 copies. In 1912, with friends, he launched a review of his own, *Les Soirées de Paris*, which published poetry and cultural commentary of all sorts—reviews, feuilletons, and Apollinaire’s polemical pieces on the direction of painting.

With these combined forums, Apollinaire played a key role in publicizing the incremental developments in the new modes of artistic abstraction. And in some respects he may have precipitated them: in the Francophone context, even before Kupka’s and Picabia’s audacious showings in the fall of 1912, it was Apollinaire who threw down the gauntlet, declaring in the first, February 1912 issue of *Les Soirées de Paris* that “the new painters paint pictures which no longer have any real subject matter” (ajout visible). On the subject of Apollinaire, Delaunay wrote to Kandinsky in a letter of April 3, 1912, “I will speak to you sometime about the subject in painting, about an exciting conversation at the home of Apollinaire, who has begun to believe in us.”

For all Apollinaire’s media savvy, his personal social reach was perhaps more remarkable. Picabia’s wife, Gabrielle Buffet, considered Apollinaire “the most social, the most well-known, the most far-reaching man of his time.” He was a close friend of Picasso’s, the one who introduced him to Georges Braque in 1907. He recommended that Kupka read the color theory of Paul Signac. He often accompanied Picabia on road trips in one of the latter’s magnificent fleet of cars, and Buffet recalls the pair’s endless discussions of abstraction. He lived for a while with the Delaunays in late 1912, a key moment for our topic, and it was he, too, who introduced Sonia Delaunay-Terk to the poet Blaise Cendrars, an encounter that would result in their collaboration on *La Prise de Toulouse* (plate 42). In January 1913, he traveled with Robert Delaunay to Germany for the painter’s show there at the Sturm gallery in Berlin, where he held court with the German Expressionists and gave an influential lecture on modern painting for the occasion; the duo published a catalogue of Delaunay’s paintings, prefaced with a dedication (reproduced in the present volume on the half title page) and a poem, “Les Fenêtres” (The windows), by Apollinaire. When a delegation of Italian Futurists made an extended visit to Paris, he put up the poet-painter Carlo Carrà in his offices at *Les Soirées de Paris*, and the two saw each other almost daily, then produced graphically innovative free verse in quick succession—Apollinaire the first calligramme (fig. 9), Carrà *parole in libertà* (plate 11). He even managed to broker a gallery contract between the Italian and Kahnweiler. Through Picabia, Apollinaire met the Mexican artist Marius de Zayas, who was scouting for Stieglitz in Paris in 1914, and whose rapturous report of the meeting prompted Stieglitz to begin an exchange of journals with Apollinaire through the mail. Not surprisingly, Stieglitz’s journal *291* (fig. 8), appearing in 1913, was modeled in part on *Les Soirées de Paris* (fig. 7).

The network through which the idea of abstraction spread is suggested in this book in a diagram (front endpapers), made with a tip of the hat to the famous chart that graced the cover of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.’s catalogue for his *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (plate 452). Vectors link individuals who knew each other, suggesting the unexpected density of contacts among abstraction’s pioneers. Key
Apollinaire was perhaps the first to give a name to this new phenomenon, distinguishing it from a generalized Cubism just weeks after Kupka displayed his Amorpha paintings at the Salon d’Automne, though he did not mention Kupka by name. The term he bestowed—Orphism—was both awkward and decidedly archaic: it paid homage to the mythical Greek poet/musician Orpheus, who had appeared in one of Apollinaire’s poems of 1910 as an avatar of “pure poetry.” Evoking too the Orphic cults and the Alexandrians, the writers of the classical period who fascinated Apollinaire, it suggested a fusing of ancient mystery and modern image. A state of appellations for this new form of picture-making soon followed: pure painting (Apollinaire, Delaunay, Kandinsky, and the critic Maurice Raynal), new pictorial realism and variations thereof (Delaunay, Léger, Malevich, and Mondrian), objectless painting (Klee and Malevich in German and Russian respectively)—each indicative of subtle shifts in philosophical orientation. The artists pursuing nonrepresentational painting clustered into an array of grouplets with eclectic self-nominations like “Rayism,” “Suprematism,” “Unison,” and so forth. Even so, as abstract pictures began to appear, the difficulty that observers and participants apparently had in finding a suitable name for them suggests how they continued to defy easy categorization.

The word that we have come to use as shorthand for painting that jettisons the depiction of things, the one that I use here—abstraction—had been in existence long before this moment. Georges Rouge and Jean-Claude Lehembrein have recently traced its evolution from early senses as a verbal act meaning “to remove,” “to isolate.” By the sixteenth century, the word had the sense of “considering in isolation,” of “separating accident from substance” (Lehembrein), so that one might, for example, begin to define the “abstract sciences” as those removed from practical application or empirical study—that is, from real-world concerns. Here abstraction functions as an operation, the act of abstracting one thing from another, and this understanding is still present in early abstract works in which traces of descriptive subject matter abound. At times the figure seems to be aggressively effaced, another, and this understanding is still present in early abstract works in which traces of descriptive subject matter abound. At times the figure seems to be aggressively effaced, layered under paint applied in a different mode (Kupka’s Mme Kupka dans les verticales [Mme. Kupka among verticals, 1910-11; plate 12] or Léger’s Femmes en bleu); at others, shattered fragments of recognizable elements emerge as if to maintain ties between the artwork and things in the world (Delaunay’s Pythie or Kandinsky’s Komposition 15), or vestiges of a natural or figurative motif seem to provide an armature for a new type of painting (Picabia’s Souris, Morton Schamberg’s Figure (Geometric Patterns) [1913; plate 8]), Mondrian’s The Tree [1912; plate 23]). These elements are common enough to suggest that evoking all ties to the natural world was not key to the models of abstraction first proposed around 1912.

When the term “abstraction” does appear in the sphere of art, in the nineteenth century, it was often deployed pejoratively to mean overly intellectual or theoretical. Charles Clément, for example, writing in 1868, described the work of the followers of Jacques-Louis David as characterized by “a tense style, an overspecialized search for shape which can only lead to a kind of abstraction—to a coldness inevitable in conceptions which are determined by completely false and rigid pictorial ideas.” Yet in an essay of the same year, Baudelaire broached a new sense of abstraction as a language separate from nature, humanly created and therefore essentially artificial: “In nature there is neither line nor color. Line and color have been created by man. They are abstractions. . . . The pleasures we derive from them are of a different sort, yet they are perfectly equal and absolutely independent of the subject of the picture.” Wilhelm Worringer’s book Abstraktion und Einfühlung (Abstraction and empathy), of 1908—actually written in 1906, as a doctoral thesis—reintroduced the term at a moment in which it resonated with conversations within the international avant-garde. Although Worringer did not speak of contemporary art, he described a “will to abstraction” in both primitive and modern societies, a common expression of anxiety and vulnerability in relation to an external world not confidently mastered. The “aim of abstraction”—here Worringer picked up on the meaning of the word as an isolating operation—was “to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context; out of the enduring flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value.” The text had great impact, especially in German avant-garde circles around Berlin’s Sturm gallery; its importance for Kandinsky is signaled in his declaration of “our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives” on the opening page of On the Spiritual in Art, and his use of the term “abstraction” in that essay probably also shows its influence. Some of the connotations Worringer found in the “will to abstraction”—separation from the world, purity, arbitrariness, ideas of the absolute—have likewise lingered.

The public appearance of the first abstract paintings was matched by equally momentous developments in other spheres. New types of music celebrated sound, independent of compositional or harmonic development; Futurist parole in libertà (words in liberty), Russian zaum (translational poetry), and Dadaist sound poetry privileged the graphic and aural quality of language over communicative comprehensibility; and dada abandoned its traditional grounding in costumed narrative to stress the kinesthetic movement of the body. Scholars have long noted the historical coincidence of these phenomena but not often the fact that they were deeply linked, not only through their similar challenges to the conventions of their respective genres but also through important relationships among key figures in these different disciplines, relationships that facilitated the movement of ideas across media. Marc tells a famous story about Kandinsky’s embrace of abstraction. He first met the Russian artist in Munich, at a New Year’s Eve party celebrating the upcoming year of 1911. That night they began an intense and productive friendship that would include the founding of the Blaue Reiter group and the publication of the Blaue Reiter almanac. Two days later, on January 4, 1912, these new friends, along with Aleksandr Jawlensky, Marianne Werefkin, and Kandinsky’s companion, Gabriele Munter, attended a concert of music by the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg. The crowd was dazzled but the artists were dazzled, too, after drinks at the concert, they excitedly discussed the congruence they recognized between Schoenberg’s music, his theories (his writings had been published in the program), and Kandinsky’s painting. On January 14, in a letter to the artist August Macke, Marc wrote of the evening, “Can you imagine a music in which tonality (that is, the adherence
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