

## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH HE DID WRITE AN EARLY DRAFT in his native Russian, Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) chose to publish his first major theoretical statement on painting in German.<sup>1</sup> The statement appeared, consequently, as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, a title typically translated into English as *On [or Concerning] the Spiritual in Art*. Most Anglophone scholars have tended to hear in that title (and in the text's other, frequent references to “spirit”) the root of something like “spiritualist,” with the result that over the last half century or so we have been asked to see Kandinsky's work in light of Theosophy and Eastern mysticism and various obscure forms of the occult.<sup>2</sup> I don't want to deny the significance of such things to the development of Kandinsky's thinking and writing about art—or, rather, even though I *want* to deny their significance, I find I can't entirely. Yet I can and will insist that for many of the early German readers of Kandinsky's text the term “Geistige” would have evoked above all the philosophy of Hegel, and most especially Hegel's *Aesthetics*, in which art had similarly been presented as a vehicle for the developing self-consciousness of spirit or *Geist*. In fact, I suspect that one of Kandinsky's principal motives for writing in German was that he wanted to use the same language—in many passages, even precisely the same phrasing—that Hegel himself had employed. In any case I'm convinced that he intended *Über das Geistige* as a fairly direct response to the *Aesthetics*—a revision of its historical account that would culminate not in the end of art proclaimed by Hegel, but rather in something on the order of Kandinsky's own abstract paintings.

I am convinced, too, that Kandinsky's later writings are every bit as fully, and perhaps even more successfully, engaged with Hegel's philosophy—a fact no doubt connected to the artist's regular communication, beginning in 1929, with his nephew, Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968).<sup>3</sup> From 1933 (the year Kandinsky settled in Paris) until the outbreak of war in 1939, Kojève led a seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the *École des hautes études* that was attended by a veritable who's who of French intellectuals, including Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and André Breton.<sup>4</sup> In 1936—presumably after

having had various conversations on the subject with Kojève—Kandinsky asked his nephew to write an essay about painting, focusing particularly on his own. Unfortunately, Kojève's essay, "Les Peintures concrètes de Kandinsky," was published only in 1985. A shorter, revised version appeared in 1966, but even that was already twenty-two years after Kandinsky's death, and just two years before Kojève's.<sup>5</sup> Had the piece found its way into print when written, in 1936, we might have been left with a very different understanding of both Kandinsky's art and its philosophical implications.<sup>6</sup> This book is intended, however belatedly (and incompletely), to effect that understanding now. It sets out to reexamine Kandinsky's writings and paintings alike within what I believe is their proper and by far most interesting context: as part of an extended, three-way exchange among Hegel, Kandinsky, and Kojève.<sup>7</sup>