

The dialectics of vision: Oskar Kokoschka and the historiography of expressionistic sight

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For is this not my vision? Without intent I draw from the outside world the semblance of things; but in this way I myself become part of the world's imaginings. Thus in everything imagination is simply that which is natural. It is nature, vision, life.¹

– Oskar Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 1912

First delivered in January 1912 as a lecture at Vienna's Akademischen Verband für Literatur und Musik, Oskar Kokoschka's canonical essay 'Von der Natur der Gesichte' ('On the Nature of Visions') speaks to the decisive role of visions – both optical and inner, conscious and unconscious – in the development of modern art. Although only twenty-five years of age at the time, Kokoschka spoke with the authority of an artist who had long recognized the stakes involved in defining one's art (and one's self) as avant-garde within the milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna. As a burgeoning young expressionist painter and playwright, he equally understood the importance of establishing a theoretical basis in which to root the iconography of

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Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

¹ Oskar Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', in *Kokoschka, Life and Work*, ed. Edith Hoffmann, London: Faber and Faber, 1947, 287. The English edition of Kokoschka's text was the earliest printed version of his essay, though he later transcribed the work into German for print in 1956. The German text reads: 'ich ziehe aus der Welt absichtslos etwas als Dinge empor. Dann aber werde ich nichts mehr sein, als eine, Ihre Einbildung'. See Oskar Kokoschka, 'Von der Natur der Gesichte', in *Oskar Kokoschka: Schriften 1907–1955*, ed. Hans Maria Wingler, München: Langen Müller, 1956, 341.

his developing style. This personal prescription, which shares affinities with Wassily Kandinsky's contemporaneous theorization of the spiritual in art, has likewise become a foundational text in the current understanding of Viennese, or Austrian, expressionism and its emphasis on the aesthetic primacy of inner emotions over corporeal vision.² At the close of his address, Kokoschka acknowledged that the very catalyst for his work, and that which inspired the visions of his inner imagination, was the 'semblance of things' that he observed and collected from the daily, optical stimuli of his contemporary surroundings. More precisely, Kokoschka argued that the awareness of these inner visions, or *Gesichte*, could not materialize solely through a state of remembering on the part of the viewer, but operated on 'a level of consciousness' that allowed the viewer to experience visions within his or her own self.³ Kokoschka further posited that this awareness on the part of the viewer was part and parcel to the act of living, or optically collecting images from the material world. He writes:

The effect is such that the visions seem actually to modify one's consciousness, at least in respect of everything that their own form proposes as their pattern and significance. This change in oneself, which follows on the vision's penetration of one's very soul, produces the state of awareness, of expectancy. At the same time there is an outpouring of feeling into the image, which becomes, as it were, the soul's plastic embodiment The life of the consciousness is boundless. It interpenetrates the world and is woven through all its imagery.⁴

This passage is significant not only for its contextualization of emotive feeling in the image forming process, but for the supposed psychological affect that visions have on the respective mind of the agent. Kokoschka suggests that this affect transpires not through an involuntary psychic activity though, but through the active awareness (or consciousness) of the viewer in whom the vision arises. But here Kokoschka also indirectly posits two different ways of thinking about consciousness. On one level, he offers that consciousness is one's awareness of the external world and its visual stimuli. On the other hand, he quite specifically defines consciousness as 'the source of all things and of all conceptions. It is a sea

² Concerning Kokoschka's relationship to Kandinsky, it is known that both men were good friends and collaborators on a number of *Blaue Reiter* projects in 1912 when each of these artist-writers would publish their respective essays on expressionism. For Kandinsky's theories concerning the spiritual in art, see Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei*, München: R. Piper & Co., 1912. With regard to Kokoschka's and Kandinsky's joint involvement in *Der Blaue Reiter*, see Klaus Lankheit, 'A History of the Almanac', in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1974, 32-34.

³ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 285.

⁴ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 285.

ringed about with visions'.⁵ In this regard, consciousness is not merely awareness on the part of the agent; instead, it is something akin to one's 'inner core' or one's fundamental understanding of all things external and internal.⁶ One might infer that the simple act of remembering a material image would be equivalent to a thoughtless act, given that this process, according to Kokoschka, would occur beyond the consciousness (read here as 'awareness') of the agent who creates, experiences, and draws inspiration from the alleged vision. What is more, if the agent lacks consciousness on both levels, then the vision will fail to materialize, in so far as Kokoschka implies that an unconscious vision is indistinguishable from a mere memory of the outside world. Should the viewer fail to acknowledge the presence of the vision, the self would be denied this particular image of the soul. The suggestion that consciousness solidifies meaning in a vision is therefore seemingly contradictory, in so far as visions are typically understood as psychic entities; and yet the conscious awareness of *Gesichte* is blatantly fundamental to Kokoschka's conceptualization of the semblance of things. Rather than proposing an inconsistency in Kokoschka's theory – given that his formulation of artistic vision advocates the centrality of both inner and outer processes in the development of this sensorial construct – the present study offers that this rather radical handling of the role of opticality in the development of expressionism implicitly elucidates expressionistic sight as a process formed through the dialectical tension that arises from these two prevalent, though oppositional, views of artistic vision. This multivalent understanding of vision and its relationship to the historiography of expressionism has, until now, eluded the current scholarship on this style.

Vision/Visions

On the whole, early German theorizations of artistic vision were extremely important to artists and critics working congruently at the fin de siècle, and arguably persist today as the central tenets surrounding the genesis of both German and Austrian expressionism in the extant literature. From a historical perspective, inner vision singularly dominates this discourse, thereby positioning corporeal vision as a contestable and peripheral construct. Charles Townsend Harrison has recently suggested that this historical bias toward inner, expressive vision highlights the contemporary attitudes held by many expressionist artists, critics, historians, and theoreticians who 'assumed that the demand for fidelity to appearances was in conflict with the demand for fidelity to feeling'.⁷ Harrison's

⁵ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 287.

⁶ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 286.

⁷ Charles Harrison, 'Abstraction', in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, eds Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison, and Gill Perry, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, 208. In many ways, Harrison's examination of expressionism builds upon Peter Selz's scholarship in this area, as Selz was arguably the first, late twentieth-century art historian to provide an overview of the historical, critical discourse surrounding the role of vision in German

analysis nicely condenses turn-of-the-century notions of vision (again, both inner and optical) and their function in a work of art; though more significantly, it underscores the manner in which scholars have tended to approach expressionism as a style that was wholly interested in revealing the artist's inner emotions as a means of uttering, or at least openly, rejecting any allegiance to purely optical processes.⁸ To appreciate the uniqueness of Kokoschka's position in this debate over the role of corporeal sight in the development of expressionistic painting, it is all the more important (and necessary) to recognize how his vision model differs from other, more prevailing theories written in the early years of the twentieth century.

As previously stated, the supremacy of inner vision was historically endorsed and propagated in the vast majority of turn-of-the-century writings on expressionism, including the immensely influential book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*, 1908), written by the Munich-based art historian Wilhelm Worringer. In the opening pages of *Abstraction and Empathy*, Worringer – in contrast to Kokoschka's later writings – readily admonishes 'the visible surface of things' in the external world when compared to iconographies employed in abstract and 'primitive' painting.⁹ Worringer argues further that an autonomous work of art should be devoid of any connection to this visible surface (read here as 'nature') as a means of denouncing the historical importance placed on natural beauty in determining the aesthetic value of a work of art. For Worringer, the aesthetics of natural beauty and the laws or dogma of art were themselves autonomous principles. Rather than perpetuating realism/naturalism as the highest attainable goal in the domain of the plastic arts, his theory instead posits that the movement toward abstraction, and away from realism, was a continual evolution throughout the history of artistic production. Concerning the psychological inner vision of the artist, then, Worringer writes:

Now what are the psychic presuppositions for the urge to abstraction? We must seek them in these peoples' feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude toward the cosmos. Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the

expressionism. See Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957, 3-11.

⁸ In addition to Harrison's analysis, Robert Jensen has equally argued that a review of the primary, critical literature and secondary, biographical scholarship collectively posits that 'expressionist rhetoric sacrifices the artist's conscious agency to compulsive psychological forces'. See Robert Jensen, 'A Matter of Professionalism: Marketing Identity in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna', in *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, ed. Steven Beller, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001, 199.

⁹ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, München: R. Piper & Co., 1948, 15. The original German reads: 'die sichtbare Oberfläche der Dinge'.

outcome of a greater inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions.¹⁰

As with Kokoschka's theorization of the semblance of things from the outside world and their relationship to the inner visions of the artist, Worringer here argues that phenomena of the external world play a role in formulating the 'inner unrest' of the modern artist. In this respect, Kokoschka's theory might deceptively be seen to align itself with Worringer's principles of abstraction, suggesting that the latter was not fundamentally attacking the 'visible surface' of external phenomena in his treatise. As underscored by Harrison's earlier assessment, however, Worringer's theory ultimately favours the 'inner unrest' of modern painting, arguing that the feelings, psychic attitudes, and inner emotive responses of the corresponding agent unequivocally take precedence over the 'happy' (read here as 'superficial' and 'non-transcendental') visual stimuli of the external world. Although the principal aim of Worringer's book was to question the hegemonic classifications that surrounded abstraction and realism (or what he calls 'empathetic art'), he essentially articulated and helped to establish as doctrine a number of the foundational principles of German expressionist painting, including the supremacy of inner vision over mere opticality that surrounded the critical rhetoric of this style in the early twentieth century. Worringer's denunciation of the visible surface of things furthermore allowed him to develop a theory of (German) expressionism that opposed (French) impressionism and the latter's reliance on optical vision and natural beauty. For Worringer, this visible surface, or *sichtbare Oberfläche* – which could equally imply the superficiality of corporeal sight – had to be destroyed, abandoned, transcended, or at the very least, challenged, in order to move beyond realism's non-instinctive approach to painting. By contrast, the importance given to psychological images in Kokoschka's (Austrian) model did not seek to overshadow the significance placed on the semblance of things in formulating visions from the outside world.

Worringer's attitudes concerning the hegemony of outer vision in constructing the tenets of expressionistic sight are similarly to be found in a slightly later book titled *Der Expressionismus* (*Expressionism*, 1914), written by the Berlin art critic and theatre feuilletonist Paul Fechter. Although not as well known today as *Abstraction and Empathy*, Fechter's *Expressionism* was perhaps the earliest work to uniformly discuss modern artists like Kokoschka and Kandinsky in terms of a collective, German expressionist style. Fechter, like Worringer, was quick to admonish impressionism in favour of expressionism's anti-decorative approach to art-making, and adopts – in an avant-gardist manner typical for the period – the belief that the latter style had the ability to convey 'emotional sensations' and

¹⁰ Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 16.

spiritual truths to the German people.¹¹ He does not, however, fill his pages with a lengthy debate over the advantages of inner vision over corporeal optics, though he does offer the following observation: 'The depiction of the outside world will be left to photography and cinema; in its place enters the emotion-filled vision of the artist'.¹² What is most interesting about this passage is Fechter's belief that impressions of the outside world should be left to mechanical forms of optical reproduction, such as the camera, whereas a work of art, in drawing upon the emotions and inner vision of the artist, must derive from the artist's soul or imagination. Even though Fechter never specifically mentions the 'visible surface of things', he nevertheless makes clear to his readers that descriptions of the outside world amount to mere mimesis when compared to the catalyst for an expressionist painting.

The rather negative connotation afforded to the 'visible surface' in German expressionism, as initially proposed by Worringer and later adopted by Fechter, thus stands in stark contrast to Kokoschka's subsequent theory of the semblance of things within Viennese expressionism. According to Kokoschka, these semblances, which subsist as recollections of the outside world gathered through corporeal sight, are the genesis of inner, expressionistic visions. One can confidently deduce that within Kokoschka's notion of the semblance of things, optical vision cannot be abandoned in favour of inner visions, since the latter invariably rely upon the former, and through which the latter would not be possible. With this equation in mind, it would appear that Kokoschka quite deliberately utilizes the atypical German word *Gesichte* to mean 'visions' in order to suggest that these entities are tied to both inner and optical processes. More typical would be the use of the words *Visionen* or *Traumbilder* ('dream pictures'), or even adding the modifier *innere* to *Gesichte* to denote images that originate in the mind's eye and therefore exist apart from an optical visualization of the outside world. Instead, Kokoschka's use of *Gesichte*, which more commonly denotes 'faces' in German, creates a rather deliberate double entendre with the word *Gesicht*, which, in its formal (though uncommon) handling, connotes physiological vision or optical sight, and in its more common usage, denotes an individual's face or visage.¹³ One thus witnesses the

¹¹ Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1914, 28. Fechter employs the phrase: 'Seelisch-Sensuellen in ein allgemein geistiges Weltgefühl'.

¹² Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, 27. The original German reads: 'Die Darstellung der Außenwelt wird der Photographie und dem Kino überlassen; an ihre Stelle tritt die gefühlerfüllte Vorstellung des Künstlers'. Fechter employs the German words *Vorstellung des Künstlers* to connote artistic vision here, though this phrase could equally be translated as the 'imagination of the artist'.

¹³ Carl Schorske has briefly commented upon the semantics of the word *Gesicht*, noting that 'the German word *Gesicht* denotes both "vision" or "image" and "visage" or "face," thus embracing both the subjective and the objective side of visual perception. The double meaning is integral to Kokoschka's conception of the artist's consciousness, but compels us in English to stress now one side, now the other, of the complex'. See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York: Vintage Books, 1981, 340n.

same dialectic expressed in the very semantics Kokoschka employs to connote the dualism of *Gesicht/e*, or vision/s, as in his prescription for modern painting.

The subtleties and nuances that exist between these Austro-German variations on vision, sight, and visions are important, as they highlight the dialectical nature of the semblance of things, and reinforce the contention that the interplay between inner and outer vision was a key component of Kokoschka's understanding of expressionistic sight. In his manifesto on vision, this tension is evident in the contention that inner visions (*innere Gesichte; Visionen; Traum*) are plastic embodiments of the soul and the self, and are otherwise unattainable without the aid of optical sight (*Sehen; Gesicht*). In light of the fact that *Gesicht* typically denotes one's 'face', it is equally apparent that the substance and content of *innere Gesichte* are dependent upon the *Gesicht* and its corporeal eyes to acquire their formative images. Given the role of opticality in the construction of visions, Kokoschka does not negate the importance of outer over inner vision, but instead suggests that these two modes of seeing exist in a symbiotic, and thus inextricable, relationship. It is through this relationship, then, that the semblance (or inner vision) of a thing (observed through outer vision) is able to inform the content of an expressionist painting by providing a plastic embodiment of the artist's soul. This re-evaluation of artistic vision moreover negates the hegemony of inner vision and emotive feeling in determining expressionist iconographies. Significantly, this power struggle between outer vision (so touted in impressionism) and inner vision (so central to symbolism and expressionism) was largely due to the impact of other influential, early twentieth-century texts on art, such as Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*. Kokoschka's essay, on the other hand, quite remarkably stands apart in its support of physiological opticality in relation to the iconography and semiology of expressionism, particularly when viewed alongside Worringer's and Fechter's respective denouncement of optical vision in this developing style.

What is the nature of vision?

Kokoschka's theory of artistic vision was not only unique in relation to German historiographies of expressionism, but equally so among contemporaneous theories developing in his native country in the early twentieth century. Two years after Kokoschka delivered 'On the Nature of Visions' at the Akademischen Verband, the prominent Viennese playwright, theatre director, and art critic Hermann Bahr completed a manuscript for his widely-read book *Expressionismus (Expressionism, penned in 1914, first published in 1916)*. Concerning the nature of visions, Bahr states simply that 'every history of painting is invariably the history of vision'.¹⁴

¹⁴ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 51. The original German reads: 'Alle Geschichte der Malerei ist immer Geschichte des Sehens'. R. T. Gribble alternatively translates this passage as: 'The history of painting is nothing but the history of vision – of seeing'. See Hermann Bahr, 'Expressionism', in *Art in Theory*,

This prescriptive statement, extracted from a section of *Expressionism* titled 'Sehen' (or 'Vision'), offers the following thoughts on the dialectical nature of expressionistic vision:

And if the beholder vehemently retorts that the painter should express nothing but what he sees, the Expressionist assures him: We too only paint what we see! But on this point they cannot agree, as they cannot agree on the meaning of vision. When they speak of vision, each of them means something different. What is vision? Every history of painting is invariably the history of vision. Technique changes when vision changes; and technique changes because vision [or the mode of seeing] has changed. It changes in order to oblige the changes of vision. But vision changes according to man's relationship to the world, since man views the world according to his position towards it.¹⁵

Although it is unclear as to whether Bahr was here responding to Kokoschka's ideas on the awareness of visions, given that Kokoschka also states that their 'history can never be delimited', Bahr's assessment of the changing modes of vision at the fin de siècle do appear akin to Kokoschka's understanding of inner and outer vision, as well as Heinrich Wölfflin's understanding of the role and history of vision in the history of art.¹⁶ Bahr's use of the word *Sehen* undeniably implies the use of one's corporeal eyes to observe natural forms, though Kokoschka's dialectic should not be lost here. For Bahr, vision foremost implies the inner imagination of the expressionist artist and the belief that art could perform a spiritual function for the creator, as well as the receptive viewer, of that particular work of art. Contrary to Bahr's seeming interest in optical *Sehen* in the preceding passage, *Expressionism* ultimately offers that a total reliance on corporeal vision will lead the modern artist dangerously back to the passé art of the Impressionists.¹⁷ Within Bahr's formulation of expressionism, this new style openly confronts and challenges its binary – impressionism – which Bahr tellingly considers 'the final

1900-1990: *An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, 117.

¹⁵ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 50-51. The remainder of this passage reads: 'Die Technik verändert sich erst, wenn sich das Sehen verändert hat. Sie verändert sich nur, weil sich das Sehen verändert hat. Sie verändert sich, um den Veränderungen des Sehens nachzukommen. Das Sehen aber verändert sich mit der Beziehung des Menschen zur Welt. Wie der Mensch zur Welt steht, so sieht er sie'.

¹⁶ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 286. Bahr's theorization is interestingly akin to Heinrich Wölfflin's understanding of vision's history in his work *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Principles of Art History, 1915)*, in which he states: 'Vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history'. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger, New York: Dover Publications, 1950, 11.

¹⁷ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 92.

word in classical art'.¹⁸ Like Worringer eight years earlier, Bahr implies that this inversion of the corporeal eye was accomplished through the Expressionists' favouring of the mind's eye, so that their style could distance itself from the opticality of impressionism. Bahr's analysis of expressionism moreover reinforces the hegemony of inner vision as a natural by-product of symbolism, while simultaneously highlighting the avant-gardist nature of an artistic movement free from any strict adherence to the pitfalls of 'classical' models of optical sight, such as mimesis, proportion, perspective, and the effects of lights.¹⁹

One can further surmise, as in Worringer's prior history of expressionism, that Bahr believed impressionism was inextricably (and thus unfortunately) tied to optics, whereas Austrian modern art necessarily rejected French physiological vision for a deeper and more personal approach to art making.²⁰ Bahr's diatribe against impressionism was not, however, a prevalent attitude held among artists affiliated with the Vienna Secession, who continued to favour, to varying degrees, the opticality and gestures employed in post-impressionism. Instead, Bahr's notion shares greater affinity with Worringer's denouncement of impressionism, given that the contemporary critical literature surrounding German (rather than Austrian) modernism more vehemently rejected the French tradition of impressionism for a more Germanic expressionism.²¹ When applied to Viennese modern visual culture, Jonathan Crary's recent discussion of the discourse surrounding the primacy of physiological vision in French painting of the 1870s and 1880s suggests that these Austrian artists may have been displacing the earlier 'rupture' in visual representations initiated by Manet, the Impressionists, and even the Post-impressionists.²² Although Crary is quick to question the hegemony of this particularly French narrative of avant-gardism, his initial observations do speak to the historical attitudes held by Expressionists and their critics, who collectively believed that the German art world was initiating a definitive break with French

¹⁸ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 92. The original German reads: 'Der Impressionismus ist ja nur das letzte Wort der klassischen Kunst'.

¹⁹ Even though 'classical' here can be read as the academic treatment of optical models developed during the renaissance period, Bahr's use of the word 'classical' primarily connotes the flawed tenets of impressionism and its failure to break with the notion of optical truth.

²⁰ Building upon the contemporary literature on Viennese expressionism (including Bahr's work), Carl Schorske was perhaps the first scholar to reassert that this style was primarily concerned with exploring the inner feelings and psychological forces of Viennese artists, writers, and intellectuals. See Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*.

²¹ For a discussion of German expressionism's strong opposition to French modern art, including impressionism, created in the first decade of the twentieth century, see Geoffrey Perkins, *Contemporary Theory of Expressionism*, Bern and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1974; and Jensen, 'A Matter of Professionalism', 203.

²² To clarify, Jonathan Crary's analysis, which is extremely relevant to discourses surrounding vision in nineteenth-century French art and visual culture, does not address vision in Austrian expressionism. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, 3-4.

opticality and impressionism's model of modernity. Robert Jensen, whose research has investigated the art market in fin-de-siècle Vienna and subsequent promotional strategies employed by Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, additionally offers that this break was instituted as a marketing ploy to distance Viennese expressionism from the "major" artistic language of Parisian modernism'.²³ Jensen examines the potential dialogue that existed between a highly marketable post-impressionism and the burgeoning expressionist style, though he understandably does not discuss the discourse surrounding vision in these two particular articulations of modern art. Regardless of the impetus for expressionism's opposition to impressionism, the end result was the same: a strong dichotomy was created between these two styles. In this regard, and given his somewhat ironic formulation of impressionism as the final word in classical art, Bahr would likely have called expressionism the final word in modern Viennese painting.

Unlike Worringer and Bahr, who saw Expressionist artists rejecting the opticality favoured by impressionism for the act of embodiment advocated by expressionism, Kokoschka contrastingly took issue with *Jugendstil*, so touted by the Klimt-group, the Vienna Secession and the *Wiener Werkstätte*, given its tendency to only highlight the decorative surface of a work of art. According to Claude Cernuschi, this distrust in the ornamental surface of things aligned Kokoschka with the prominent Viennese architect and polemicist Adolf Loos, whose essay 'Ornament und Verbrechen' ('Ornament and Crime', 1908) argued for a style of art and architecture centred on austerity and practicality, rather than excessive decoration.²⁴ Cernuschi suggests that Loos' artistic patronage of Kokoschka, who the architect saw as an ally and purveyor of his theories, was built upon a system of reciprocity, given that the younger artist was simultaneously seeking to replace his previous mentor (Gustav Klimt) with a new, more radical one (Loos). To support this claim, Cernuschi examines how Kokoschka's style began to change in 1909 when the artist, now a member of Loos' intellectual circle, rejected the 'decorative patterning, and flattened surface' of the Secession-style, for 'an art of physical immediacy, [and] visual distortion'.²⁵ Cernuschi's assertion brings to the fore the notion that Kokoschka's vision dialectic might additionally parallel the relationship between physicality and psychology – or the body (optics) and embodiedness (inner visions) – by suggesting that these two entities work congruently to bring material form to the inner content of a vision. It is important to remember, however, that the aesthetics of the Klimt-group had initially fostered Kokoschka's early articulations of modernism, and as such, his interest in the semblance (or visible surface) of things reinforces the notion that his development as an Expressionist was formed

²³ Jensen, 'A Matter of Professionalism', 202-03.

²⁴ See Claude Cernuschi, *Re/casting Kokoschka: Ethics and Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2002.

²⁵ Cernuschi, *Re/casting Kokoschka*, 25.

around the dialectical tension that existed between Klimt's (older) style and Loos' (newer) aesthetic.

The spirit, the soul, and vision

This discussion of the artist's body and its relation to the mind is subsequently found in Kokoschka's ideas concerning the role of the spirit, the soul, and the body in the image-forming process. Concerning the spiritual in a work of art, Kokoschka writes:

The enquiring spirit rises from stage to stage, until it encompasses the whole of Nature. All laws are left behind. One's soul is a reverberation of the universe. Then too, as I believe, one's perception reaches out toward the Word, towards awareness of the vision.²⁶

In this quote, the artist's reference to 'the Word' is an allusion to an earlier section of his essay where he directly quotes from the New Testament of the Bible, stating that, "'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'"²⁷ When read together, these two passages collectively suggest that one's conscious perception of a vision is made complete when the Word (or the spirit) inhabits the body (or flesh) of the artist. The body is thus a container or vessel for the soul, which in turn, feeds off of the spirit that allows the mind to become aware of, and then interpret, the nature of the vision. Just as the substance and content of *innere Gesichte* are dependent upon the *Gesicht* and its corporeal eyes to acquire their formative images, so is the mind contingent upon the body to provide it with a 'plastic embodiment' of the soul.

Kokoschka's personal musings on the interplay of corporeal sight, mental images and the spiritual nature of vision/s additionally underscores the close dialogue that existed between German Expressionists, particularly the Munich-based *Der Blaue Reiter* group, and their Austrian counterparts. As previously mentioned, Kandinsky's thoughts on the spiritual basis of expressionism, as articulated in writings like *Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1911)* and *Über die Formfrage (On the Question of Form, 1912)*, share certain affinities with Kokoschka's theory of expressionistic sight, though Kandinsky's texts, like Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, tend to elevate inner vision in relation to the spirit, while relegating optical vision to a lesser role. This belief likewise resonates throughout Bahr's concurrent analysis of expressionism, which maintains that impressionism only separates man from his spirit, and in so doing, impedes the Impressionist from truly expressing himself.²⁸ Building upon Goethe's

²⁶ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 286.

²⁷ Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 286.

²⁸ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 112-13.

earlier observations on the relationship between vision and painting, Bahr concludes:

The eye of the Impressionist only beholds, it does not speak; it hears the question, but does not answer. Instead of eyes, Impressionists have another set of ears, but no mouth But the Expressionist tears open the mouth of humanity; the time of its silence, the time of its listening is over – once more it seeks to give voice to the spirit's reply.²⁹

Kandinsky's and Bahr's respective analyses of the inner spirit uniformly suggest that the Expressionist has been privileged with the responsibility to create works of art through the use of emotions, as opposed to visual observation, and can either abuse this advantage through vanity and greed, or exalt it through the plastic embodiment of the spirit's inner meaning. In this regard, Kandinsky's interest in the primacy of inner meaning is relatable to Kokoschka's rhetoric on visions, in that both he and Kandinsky respectively believe that an outpouring of feeling – and that which originates in the soul of the artist – could reciprocally produce images of these inner meanings. When speaking of the obstacles that hinder artists from moving toward this goal and the spiritual life of art, Kandinsky reminds his readers that the secret 'power of "vision"' will undoubtedly rescue the artist from such fetters.³⁰ By contrast, Kokoschka argues that the full potential of a vision, and that which leads to the physical embodiment of the soul's yearning, must be recognized on a purely conscious level. Carl E. Schorske, in his seminal work *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, tellingly refers to this very process as Kokoschka's 'vision-consciousness'.³¹ To reformulate Schorske's words, then, Kokoschka's vision model essentially maintains that the search for the material form of inner content is attainable only through the synthesis of optical and inner vision, rather than the hegemonic displacing of one for the other.

Diverging notions of artistic vision in the early twentieth century helped to construct the dichotomy that exists between Kokoschka's understanding of the formative tenets of expressionistic sight and the other prevailing theories of artistic vision offered by Worringer, Fechter, Bahr, and Kandinsky, who respectively reinforced inner vision's dominance of optical sight. Whereas Kandinsky continued to argue that the inner spirit exists as the driving force for creative energy leading to avant-garde, artistic output, Kokoschka instead manoeuvred away from a

²⁹ Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 113. The original German reads: 'Das Auge des Impressionisten vernimmt bloß, es spricht nicht, es nimmt nur die Fragen auf, antwortet aber nicht. Impressionisten haben statt der Augen noch ein paar Ohren, aber keinen Mund....Aber der Expressionist reißt den Mund der Menschheit wieder auf, sie hat lange genug nur immer gehorcht und dazu geschwiegen, jetzt will sie wieder des Geistes Antwort sagen'.

³⁰ Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, 9. The original German reads: 'Kraft des "Sehens"'.

³¹ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 342.

discussion of the supremacy of spiritualism – or mystical/psychic processes – in order to give equal weight to both psychological and physiological functions. In Kandinsky's theory, this privileging of inner feeling is reinforced and made apparent in contrast to Kokoschka's attempt at balance and equilibrium among divergent concepts. This is possibly due to the fact that Kokoschka presupposed that the outer and inner conditions of the human spirit do not materialize as a dialectic of opposition, as in Kandinsky's handling of vision, but as a dualism of necessity. The inner and outer condition, as well as consciousness and unconsciousness, are therefore collectively needed in order to successfully arrive at form. In this regard, Kokoschka's notion of vision might be thought of as the prototype for Hal Foster's more recent theorization of the interplay between vision and visuality, the latter of which Foster views as a culturally-contingent reality with multiple permutations involving both 'the body and the psyche'.³² Rather than rejecting the corporeal aspect of visuality, as in Worringer's, Bahr's, or Kandinsky's respective handling of this concept, Kokoschka's novel conceptualization of vision/s instead proposes that the physical nature of optical vision is not so easily divisible from the contested and changeable boundaries of visuality. To be sure, Kokoschka's notion of vision (singular) was understood as a physiological operation, while visions (plural) were primarily of the mind. It can be observed, then, that the allegiance to optical sight and the reciprocal criticism of it were closely allied ideas within the developing history of expressionism in both Germany and Austria. Certainly not the only deviation among the two Germanic schools of expressionism, this formulation of artistic vision ostensibly persists as the greatest difference between Kokoschka's theory of expressionistic sight and those theories offered by his contemporaries in the fin-de-siècle German-speaking art world.

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³² See Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay View Press, 1988, ix.