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Delimit / De-limit: Barbara Guest at Kandinsky's Window

ABSTRACT

This essay reads Barbara Guest's poem "The View from Kandinsky's Window" from her 1989 collection *Fair Realism* alongside Wassily Kandinsky's own theories of form and abstraction. It argues that Guest's poetic reinvention of historic avant-garde aesthetics on the page can be taken as an exemplary case for new feminist theorizing of the avant-garde as a set of decentered, provisional, and heterogenous practices. Guest's engagement with Kandinsky is initially situated in the context of Clement Greenberg's criticisms of the painter throughout the 1940s. According to Greenberg's formalism, Kandinsky is shown to have "failed" due to his provincialism, eclecticism, and disharmonizing of scale. Guest's poem can be seen as valuing and accentuating each of these qualities and in so doing it presents a subtle defence of Kandinsky's aesthetics and becomes an example of the kind of intermedia contamination which Greenberg's theorizing on "pure" modernist painting had attempted to delimit. Guest's counter interest in "*de-limiting*" the work of art—removing boundaries imposed by period, style, and media—is contextualized within debates on the "limit" within avant-garde aesthetics.

Keywords: Barbara Guest, avant-garde, weak modernism, poetics, New York School.

“What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to have *no beginning and no end*, so that it overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page.” (Guest, *Forces* 100)

“Only by feeling, are we able to determine when the point is approaching its extreme limit and to evaluate this.”
(Kandinsky 30)

“Works of art attract by a resembling unlikeness.”
(Pound 42)

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How to write about a poem’s use of visual phenomena? Does this use amount to anything other than description, citation, ekphrasis, or allusion, “a mimesis of mimesis” (Burwick 159): an attempt at likeness or a borrowing of forms and techniques that accentuate unlikeness? These questions, along with their ethical, epistemological, and stylistic implications, have animated work on the New York School of poetry for a generation, with critics following poet James Schuyler’s suggestion that “if you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for the New York poetry, the main connection gets missed” (2). This “main connection” between poetic experimentalism and visual art in the case of the New York School seems self-evident: the school took its own name, with a wry sense of its own inferiority, from the painters, who had in turn styled themselves on the School of Paris. Canon formation of the school tended to go hand in hand with scholarship, led by Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri, that took up the question of its painterly poetics, its leaps into abstraction, the plasticity of its verse. The associations delineated by this consensus are elastic enough: each poet can be positioned somewhere within a set of relations, with each new narrative realigning one axis or another, shifting the margin an inch at a time. Yet the result is often a kind of all-or-nothing assessment of the New York School’s authenticity (or not) as avant-garde, a perspective facilitated by a narrowing of definition that has produced its peculiar status as both the first and, as David Lehman put it in 1998, “the last authentic avant-garde movement that we have had in American poetry” (1). What might be gained by stepping back from strong claims such as this? How close were the poets themselves to such claims in their practice? How to theorize the full range of shifting perspectives across media, cultures, and forms that the New York poets adopted?

Barbara Guest was born in 1920. Dada was about to make its way back to Europe after a fleeting appearance in New York, with Man Ray stating in a letter of 1921: "All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival" (65). It would be fifteen years before a carefully staged return. The exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* opened at the MoMA in December 1936, the inauguration delayed due to "the great number and variety of the art" arriving from Europe ("Press release"). In the interim, the institution had begun its inexorable annexation of the historic avant-garde. In the aftermath, surrounded by declarations of the new American avant-garde, Guest would begin work as an editorial assistant for *Art News*, her first poems published in 1960 by a small gallery press. She wrote of how she "grew up under the shadow of Surrealism" (*Forces* 51) and again, in an interview with Catherine Wagner: "I grew up in the febrility of modernisms. I love constructionism and cubism, all those isms" (176). Responding to such comments, here I want to take Guest as a representative case of what happens when any "main connection" with a *single* tradition is deliberately skewed and weakened. In place of "connection," with its suggestion of a certain fixity, this "febrility" of "all those isms" is felt in Guest's poems as an inconclusive dialogue, a questing after correlations, a cross-contamination of intermedia practices, period styles, and artistic cultures. To read Guest alongside an artist like Wassily Kandinsky is therefore to approach obliquely authenticity, connection, and influence as codependent terms which an avant-garde poetics is always and already intent on destabilizing.

Interest in Guest's work this century has developed in parallel to feminist reassessments of avant-gardism. Guest's own reading (and viewing) of "all those isms" remained a constant theme of her critical writing as well as an inexhaustible source of renewal across her poetry. Indeed, Robert Kaufman's suggestion in 2000 that Guest represented "A Future for Modernism" was prophetic not simply since she extended modernism well beyond its classic periodization but because the reflexivity and openness with which her poetics returns to past "isms" itself anticipated scholarly reassessments of avant-gardism in this century. Whereas earlier classifications of the avant-garde presented "a limited and predetermined set of possibilities" that homogenized what may have been "very diverse projects" (Strom 38), more recent scholarship by Griselda Pollock, Susan Rosenbaum, Suzanne W. Churchill, and Linda Kinnahan has sought to open up a plurality of avant-garde constellations as traversed and reshaped by marginalized participants. The result, as Pollock describes, is "a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions where the sense of breaking new ground is always a relative variable subject to the context rather than categorical absolutes" (796). Guest's poetics can provide us

both with an exemplary case of this situated and provisional avant-gardism, as well as representing an intervention in debates about “all those isms” from her own time, an intervention which can ground this scholarly move towards a looser and more permeable definition of avant-gardism.

In what follows, I take the poem “The View from Kandinsky’s Window” from *Fair Realism* as one occasion for reading avant-gardism with and through Guest. To do so is to suggest that her sampling of past artistic gestures and her sense of a belated modernity—a topological puzzle of a future made present in the past—together constitute a poetics that unfolds a proliferation of possible relations with *and within* the historic avant-garde. Such a reading is necessary if new theorizing of the avant-garde is to find a historical basis in the poetic practice of actors such as Guest. Seen in this way, the single poem is not “proof” of Guest’s avant-gardist credentials according to this or that hard classification. Rather, the poem becomes a site within which problematics of avant-gardism, its radical dissolution of stylistic, temporal, and formal boundaries, are recuperated and particularized.

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NEW YORK, OLD LIMITS

Reception of the avant-garde resists the idea of completion or continuity. Looking back to the historic avant-garde means returning to go forward, a reparative move that counters the presumed progress of aesthetic periodization: the neo-avant-garde, as in Hal Foster’s schematic, *comprehends* but does not complete the projects of its forerunners (15). But Foster’s critique of Peter Bürger’s theory was also a reckoning with the failure of these movements to realize their projects on their own terms, a failure which prefigured and then allowed for their absorption into dominant cultural narratives of post-war America. As Bürger subsequently acknowledged: “The paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes lies without a doubt in the musealization of their manifestations as works of art, that is, in their artistic success” (“Avant-Garde” 705). In many respects, recent feminist reformulations of avant-gardism as provisional and situated begin by facing up to this failure. The *En Dehors Garde* that orbits rather than advances, that marks and amends the centre even as it resists its pull (as proposed by Churchill et al.), is a concept that becomes essential as soon as we recognize that voices on the margins of the historic avant-garde had always understood the limitations of utopian projects which appropriated and replicated violent, reactionary, and misogynistic rhetoric. It follows that the avant-gardism of such actors is to be interpreted as a discrete set of discursive strategies rather than as the naïf echoing of the manifesto’s monologic blast.

Guest, arriving in New York in 1946, would have been alert to one particular use of the avant-garde which, rather than configuring it as a challenge to stylistic or political limits, explicitly associated it with a harmonizing of aesthetic limitations and the legitimization of American exceptionalism. In the influential essays of Clement Greenberg, the avant-garde (a term which he used more or less interchangeably with modernism) was understood as a working through of the possibilities of a given media in order to delimit art's domain:

Guiding themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, by a notion of purity derived from the example of music, the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. ("Laocoon" 32)

Greenberg's polemics, published throughout the 1940s in the *Partisan Review*, were explicitly presented as part of his "historical justification" of "the present superiority of abstract art" in America ("Laocoon" 37). Greenberg posits strong limits: the avant-garde perfects its activity through the acceptance of "limitations" and "legitimate" boundaries." It is worth pausing over the quotation marks that Greenberg places around "legitimate" since this is where later reformulations of the historic avant-garde would set out from, taking this hint of unease—"legitimate" in what sense, for who, and under what conditions?—and amplifying it tenfold. The supposition of a limit would come to be theorized not as the proper ambit of the historic avant-garde but as its antagonist, overturning Greenberg's argument. In the work of Poggioli, the avant-garde was to be thought of as a position "beyond" limits, a critique of society from without, with an "annihilation of all the past, precedent and tradition" as its aim (47). In this model, the avant-garde represented either an attempt to reject the notion of limit or, in a weaker form, posited the transcendence of limits so as to make way for the new. In the second theoretical model, following the work of Bürger, the avant-garde is positioned as working against limits—political, social, cultural—by presenting a revolutionary critique which "cannot be separated from society, but is inescapably implicated in it" (Poggioli 109) and taking the institution as terrain on which to carry out this struggle.

For Poggioli and Bürger, the limit constructs a field of intelligibility or interpretation: a selection of instances (the poem, the painting) that fall within the limit are taken as paradigmatic. This selection is itself contingent

on a paradigm (the poetic, the aesthetic). The significance of the historic avant-garde was its *resistance* to this function of the limit and the strategies it developed to unveil the paradoxes that sustain it. As Ann Gibson describes, it did so by “interrupting the sense of continuous development in the arts by its transgressions against anything established as a given” (205). In Greenberg’s earlier theorization, continuity and receptivity remain the watchwords; rupture and resistance almost entirely absent. The limit is not a construct with which categories such as “art” and “life” are organized, but simply a structuring principle inherent in the materiality of each category. The legitimacy which the limit confers (and, in a circular fashion, the limits which a legitimate paradigm allows for) is not therefore put in question. In Greenberg this legitimacy is merely the by-product of “essential norms or conventions” (“Modernist Painting” 311). And that this “essential” could fast become essentializing was the initial target for later revisions of avant-garde histories that took issue with mid-century formalism.

Greenberg’s writings on Wassily Kandinsky are particularly revealing of how notions of continuity, progress, centre and limit were to be strongly defended as the foundations for New York’s mid-century artistic flourishing. Before turning to Guest’s poem, it is worth rehearsing aspects of Greenberg’s analysis of the painter, so as to understand the ways in which the poem’s dialogue with Kandinsky represents a break with his reception in the New York of the 1940s. Greenberg’s assessments are set out in two reviews for *The Nation* (for exhibitions at the Nierendorf gallery in 1941 and 1945), as well as articles for *Partisan Review* (where Guest later worked as poetry editor), followed by references peppered to Kandinsky in later essays. The importance of Kandinsky for the New York painters was, according to Greenberg in “‘American-Type’ Painting,” ascribable to “the accessibility of a large number of early Kandinskys in what is now the Solomon Guggenheim Museum. All in all, this marked the first time that a generation of American artists could start out fully abreast—and perhaps even a little ahead—of their contemporaries elsewhere” (qtd. in Taylor 5). The teleology of Greenberg’s argument is unmistakable: the American artist could advance from positions taken up by earlier avant-gardes. Yet if these early Kandinskys were a welcome resource for the uptown group of New York artists, in his earlier reviews Greenberg also attacks Kandinsky’s post-1914 works as failures which set a “dangerous” example to younger painters (“Obituary” 6). His critique is organized around three major claims: firstly, Kandinsky mistakenly turned to music as a theoretical basis for his abstraction; secondly, he remained “provincial” with respect to the School of Paris and so unable to build upon the example of Cubism; finally, and as a consequence, he failed to develop a cohesive style in his mature phase. From this thumbnail sketch it is possible to discern Greenberg’s strong attachment to a formally pure, centred,

and unified development of style. Examining each claim a little more closely provides a context for the treatment of Kandinsky in Guest's poem.

In his earliest review from 1941, Greenberg speculates that post-1914, Kandinsky had been misled by "some false analogies with the mathematics of music, with music as an art of self-expression, and with Platonic notions of essential form" ("Review" 64). Greenberg here is referring to the influence of Arnold Schönberg's atonal experimentation, which Kandinsky had first encountered in May 1913 at a concert in Munich. As Roger Rothman has shown, Greenberg's privileging of French modernism over German modernism amounted to a refusal to recognize "the split between the reduction of the figure to the ground on the one hand, and, on the other, the gradual collapse of the ground to the point where what remained were figures-without-a-ground." Greenberg's championing of Cubism and critique of Kandinsky emerges from this distinction, and can be traced back through several similar accounts of Cubism's vital and radical "groundedness"—that is, the exploitation of the canvas and the materiality of paint as its primary principles of organization—to Apollinaire's writing on Cubism: "the object is the inner frame of the picture and marks the limits of its profundity, just as the actual frame marks its external limits" (74). Kandinsky's first "mistake" was therefore to overstep such limits, and to take atonal music not only as weakly analogous to abstraction in art but as showing the way towards an entirely new conception of art that could be freed *both* from representation *and* the limits of its own materiality. To Greenberg's mind, this meant neglecting the advancements proposed by Cubism: the capacity of avant-garde art to double down on the substance of its media. In order to explain this neglect, Greenberg's second critique, elaborated in a later review from 1945 which also served as an obituary, called attention to Kandinsky's "provincialism" in relation to Paris (where the artist had died two weeks before):

Kandinsky was very quick to perceive one of the most basic implications of the revolution cubism had effected in Western painting. Pictorial art was at last able to free itself completely from the object—the eidetic image—and take for its sole positive matter the sensuous facts of its own medium. . . . But Kandinsky erred in assuming that this newly won freedom exhausted the meaning of the cubist revolution and that it permitted the artist to make a clean break with the past and start all over again from scratch—something which no art can do without losing all sense of style. ("Obituary" 4)

This loss of style was Kandinsky's final failure, according to Greenberg, and could be seen in the late paintings as an "eclecticism" of "stylistic and thematic ingredients . . . as diverse as the colors of Joseph's coat:

peasant, ancient, and Oriental art, much Klee, some Picasso, surrealism protoplasma, maps, blueprints, musical notation, etc.; etc.” (5).

If we keep the broad strokes of these critiques in mind, it is possible to see in Guest’s poetics a response to Greenberg, perhaps even a defence of Kandinsky’s “eclecticism,” “provincialism,” and “impurity” as the basis for a different interpretation of the historic avant-garde. It is in this vein that Guest writes in a late essay: “What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to *have no beginning and no end*” (*Forces* 100). Guest’s striking use of “delimit” here, with original emphases, suggests not the imposition of limits—“to mark or determine the limits of” (“delimit, v.”)—but their elimination, a call to *de-limit*, which would be the removal of limits as such, aiming at the limitlessness of “*no beginning and no end.*” Her poems enact this de-limiting, inhabit a “febrility of modernisms” which ranges across artistic forms, and deconstruct the notion of a unified style or a linear progression of innovation. They therefore take up a threshold position: they anticipate the theoretical debates on avant-gardism which Poggioli and Bürger would inaugurate, whilst also attending to Greenberg’s interpretation of the avant-garde that preceded them. They are poems that seem to wait, as it were, within the limits proposed by the historic avant-garde, limits which would later be expanded and theorized alongside their active reappropriation. Another way of expressing this would be to say that in Guest’s earliest collections, avant-gardism usually presents itself as a question of style—producing texts that seem deliberately shaped according to aesthetic principles borrowed from one of the many “isms”—as can be seen in “In the Middle of the Easel,” from 1960’s *The Location of Things*:

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My darling, only
 a cubist angle seen after
 produces this volume in which our hearts go
 (tick tick)

(*Collected* 4)

The poem sets up a bricolage of visual sensations, recalling Kenneth Rexroth’s characterization of Cubist poetry as “the conscious, deliberate, dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient by its rigorous architecture” (253). It thereby offers a comment on the “cubist angle” of perception as well as hazarding a Cubist style in poetry. This reading keeps Guest more or less aligned with Charles Altieri’s demonstrations of poetic adaptations of the grammars developed by modernist painting (see *Painterly Abstraction*). The force of the semantic rearrangement of the visual field enacted by Cubism is “carried over” by Guest. Yet, extending Altieri’s argument, we might also

ask if such a resampling and reinvigoration of radical modernist style is itself an avant-gardist gesture. What Jeff Dolven calls “the first irony of style”—“to itemize a style is to disable its spontaneous charisma, and even to turn it into something else. (Method, perhaps.)” (59)—succinctly captures a certain avant-garde orientation. First, the itemization of (and attack on) a *period style*, then the dissociative rearrangement of personal style, and finally the move to overcome style and replace it with method, praxis. The first irony of the avant-garde? The need to codify an anti-style, to, as it were, “out-style” style. This would, of course, run in direct opposition to Greenberg’s insistence on the codification of a period style and its continuation through gradualist adaptation.

What then might the mature work of Guest suggest about such debates? How is Greenberg’s strong theory of limits tempered and troubled? 1989’s *Fair Realism* is a collection which extends a liquidation of stylistic limits to the historic avant-garde, with poems that move freely between the aesthetics and problematics of Dora Maar and Picasso, Kandinsky, Symbolism, and Surrealism. Eclecticism is part of Guest’s resistance to a “main connection,” to any firm intersection of period styles and their precedents that could be plotted as a convergence or a continuation. These styles pass through Guest’s poems, and as such they look back and forward, opening pathways that are analogous to the breaches in aesthetic conventions which were the avant-gardes’ original achievements. It is the visual field that then becomes a problematic for a poetics that ranges across numerous avant-garde efforts to *de-limit* the work of art. To read Guest with this in mind is to understand her to be extending these efforts, without ever posing a new limit. In place of the New York School of poets as a receptive conduit for painterly innovation, it is to ask, as Wai Chee Dimock has done with different material, what alternative networks might look like, networks that operate by “taking more time to unfold, not quite done even at the end, but perhaps making up for it with the negative illumination of obliqueness and incompleteness?” (745).

VIEWS FROM KANDINSKY'S WINDOW

Obliqueness and incompleteness could well describe much of what readers have found to be difficult in Guest’s work. Can these qualities be read as emerging from her unfolding relations with “all those isms”? Do they connote not only a stylistic inclination but also a poem’s relation to the visual, and to the problematization of the visual by the historic movements which Guest repeatedly quarried? *Fair Realism* begins at the centre of this problematic: its title is a swipe at the idea that the aesthetic can be

defined with reference only to its mimetic capacities. If “realism” has any need of qualification, if it can be shaded as fair or unfair, then its founding premise—any claim to naturalized objectivity—is, in a stroke, troubled. The collection expands upon the title’s opening gesture, with three poems that directly address the limits of the aesthetic in the work of Picasso, Italian futurist Giacomo Balla, and Kandinsky. In doing so, they move against the Greenbergian conception of an art that is “safe now” due its “willing acceptance” of boundaries (“Laocoon” 32). They ask us to see, with Guest, what this “acceptance” of each medium’s limits necessarily occludes. In place of acceptance, Guest suggests that the boundaries of the aesthetic can be troubled and contested through an attempted translation of one medium (visual material) into another (language).

In illustration of this, “The View from Kandinsky’s Window” is particularly representative, demonstrating the qualities of Guest’s poetics that I have been seeking to emphasize here, in opposition to Greenberg’s critique of Kandinsky. Firstly, it signals overtly its return to a marginalized moment of the historic avant-garde which projected itself forward to the future. Next, it transposes another time frame onto this moment, the present, and its mobile perspective inhabits this conjunction of past, present, *and the future of the past*, thereby confounding a linear chronology of artistic progress. Thirdly, it attempts to regulate this relation by zeroing in on its appearance in visual phenomena, in so doing extending an avant-garde disposition (in this case, one that can be traced back through Kandinsky’s own theorizing and interest in music) to the blurring of distinctions between language and the visual. It is, in short, an avant-gardist *vision*, with all of the mystical latencies that this word holds: “the overcoming of instrumental knowledge and, therefore, the de-empowerment of the subject, the entrusting of the subject to the rhythm of the real, de-constructing itself” (Dal Lago 125). The poem begins with a vision of the Russian painter at his window in Moscow and progresses with the grafting of New York’s Union Square onto this distant site:

The View from Kandinsky’s Window

An over-large pot of geraniums on the ledge
 the curtains part
 a view from Kandinsky’s window.

The park shows little concern with Kandinsky’s history
 these buildings are brief about his early life,
 reflections of him seen from the window
 busy with preparations for exile
 the relevance of the geranium color.

Partings, future projects
exceptional changes are meant to occur,
he will rearrange spatial decisions
the geranium disappears, so shall a person.

His apartment looking down on a Square
the last peek of Russia
an intimate one knowing equipment vanishes.

At Union Square the curtains are drawn
diagonals greet us, those curves and sharp city
verticals he taught us their residual movements.

The stroke of difficult white finds an exit
the canvas is clean, pure and violent
a rhythm of exile in its vein,

We have similar balconies, scale
degrees of ingress, door knobs, daffodils
like Kandinsky's view from his window
distance at the street end.

(Collected 212)

The poem unfolds through a double-sightedness. First, there is Kandinsky's view *from* his window over Moscow, on the verge of leaving the city for exile in 1921, "busy with preparations for exile," casting ahead to "future projects." In choosing this moment, Guest situates her engagement with the artist around the same period which Greenberg identified as signaling Kandinsky's artistic "falling off," and she overtly draws attention to his marginality, and his immanent exile, as generative of, rather than damaging to, his future projects. Secondly, the poem is also a "view" *of* this moment, one that looks back with the knowledge of these "exceptional changes." It is a doubleness insinuated by the switch of the title's definite article ("*The* view") to an indefinite one in the third line ("*a* view"), and established by the disjuncts of the opening stanza, which seem to place the perspective as both looking up (from the second stanza's park) and looking down, through the parted curtains. This doubleness—looking back / looking forward, looking up / looking down—itself constitutes a precise poetic restaging of a Kandinskian technique. In his introduction to *Point and Line to Plane*, first published in English in 1947 for New York's Museum of Non-Objective Painting (precursor to the Guggenheim), Kandinsky begins by describing how "[e]very phenomenon can be experienced in two ways":

“Externally—or—inwardly.

The street can be observed through the windowpane, which diminishes its sound so that its movement become phantom-like. The street itself, as seen through the transparent (yet hard and firm) pane seems set apart, existing and pulsating as if “beyond.” (17)

The image of the window then opens Kandinsky’s treatise on the two “basic elements” of painting—the point and the line—which he wrote during his time in Berlin as a contribution to the “science of art” (76). Kandinsky’s text begins from the window-as-point, a fixed position that does not yet have significance (since it is without coordinates, contingencies, a syntax), and moves on to the vertical and horizontal lines of the street, lines which enmesh the window within a series of coordinates of urban living, and which ultimately draw the view towards a perception that is “beyond” observed reality. This, as we shall see, is also a question of upsetting scale and degrees. It is a poem, like much of Guest’s work, which chips away at the false façade which sight presents us with.

The window remains the centre-point of this exploration, and the “point” in Kandinsky’s theorizing is first understood as an element of language: “In the flow of speech, the point symbolizes interruption, non-existence (negative element) and at the same time it forms a bridge from one existence to another (positive element)” (25). It is a fundamentally spatial element, which is arranged temporally only with the introduction of line. The combination of point and line in painting, argues Kandinsky, makes for an art capable of exactly the spatiotemporal “totality” which pre-Romantic aesthetics had kept apart (since writing was understood as operating primarily through time and the plastic arts in space). This art “transgresses the boundaries within which the time would like to confine it and so forecasts the content of the future” (133). Kandinsky’s method, which can only be briefly sketched here, informs the arrangement, texture, and tonalities of Guest’s poem. But this “informing” is returned in kind with a poetic renewal of Kandinsky’s axioms. The window looking out onto the street is their (shared) departure point, and the poem *parts* from there: de-parting into Kandinsky’s future and splitting the initial clarity of vision into constitutive points. The exchange between poet and painter is expressed at the poem’s close: “We have similar balconies, scale / degrees of ingress.” The “scale degree” describes Guest and Kandinsky’s perspectives as visions, points, illuminations, understandings which take their measure from the “distance at the street end,” extending indefinitely with the poem’s end, looping around the distance between poet and painter which is both enclosed and left parted in the poem’s composition. The

derangement of scale and harmony were, as we have seen, one target for Greenberg's criticism of Kandinsky. But a recent reassessment by Brandon Taylor has emphasized the "new conception of relatedness and scale" as "Kandinsky's best intuition both early and late" (6). Relatedness and scale are central to Guest's text, from the "over-large pot of geraniums" to the veiled pun of "peek," which ties together the act of looking with its high-up vantage point (perhaps also recalling Greenberg's suggestion that the artist had peaked in the 1910s). The use of "ingress" in the final stanza returns us to precisely this relation of distance and perception. It is a position on the threshold, the action of entering but not entering itself, corresponding to a poem that hovers sympathetically on the edge—the ledge—of Kandinsky's aesthetic programme.

Guest had come across at least passages quoted from Kandinsky's treatise. In 1986 she described finding "one book that quoted him on the necessity in art for 'inner sound'" and beginning the poem's composition shortly after:

One day looking down on Union Square from the apartment, the sudden realization arrived that Union Square looked remarkably like the Moscow park seen from Kandinsky's apartment.

Several years passed and I moved near the south side of Union Square. I walked over to Union Square one day and looked up at my former apartment. The building now seemed to resemble the old photograph of Kandinsky's apartment. That evening I began to write a poem about the last evening Kandinsky had spent in Moscow before going into exile. (*Forces* 54)

Doubleness is present too in this account: Guest looking down on Union Square, then looking up at the apartment. The poem holds such points in tension and thereby underscores the "residual movements" that Kandinsky's avant-garde theorization might bring to poetics. Guest's poem is not quite a "Kandinskian vision" nor a "vision of Kandinsky." It is an attempt to place both of these adjacent to one another, and in doing so it runs against the purism dictated by Greenberg in her own time. There is a traceable reading of Kandinsky's geometries, or, perhaps, an attempt to make them legible, to enact them, in poetry. The poem thereby insists on a renewal of the historic avant-garde, a renewal that is worked through as a poetic process, one that poses a proliferation of possible relations with past attempts to investigate the porous binaries of word/image, painting/poetry, distance/scale. This processual working-through goes beyond a "main connection" with one form of visual representation, one -ism or another. Instead, Guest's poetics suggests that the promise of the avant-garde lay in its capacity to entangle

such connections, confounding the very Greenbergian notions of pure style, its sharp periodization, and its studied unification. In place of this strong theory of the avant-garde, we find a playful and indeterminate exploration of avant-gardism, as a process of removing limits rather than building new ones. Guest is an exceptional part of this story, and its writing.

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