Foreword

The letters between Wassily Kandinsky and Josef Albers reveal the perpetual hunger for new adventures in painting, as well as the warmth and humor, of two of the most pioneering, groundbreaking artists of the twentieth century.

While most of the people who encountered Kandinsky and Albers at the Bauhaus and afterwards found them to be slightly unapproachable—Albers was thought to be remote, Kandinsky aloof—to each other they were relaxed, vulnerable, alternately content and anxious: in short, deeply human. These letters are unique in revealing such unknown aspects of both men.

Christian Derouet, the keeper of the flame of Kandinsky's legacy in Paris (his title of "Secretaire et Tresorior de la Société Kandinsky at the Centre Georges Pompidou" does not do justice to the extent of his full role, or the acuity with which he performs it) has perceptively pointed out that these letters are also a rare and intimate account of exile. They give an inside view of what happened to two close friends—M. Derouet has wisely called their relationship "brotherly"—whose mutual existence was shattered when the Nazis prompted the closing of the Bauhaus. Each describes to the other how he coped with new and unexpected circumstances in life after being forced to abandon what was familiar and needing to seek a haven. Telling one another how they adjust to their new lives, Albers in the woods of North Carolina, Kandinsky in cosmopolitan Paris, they elucidate the impact of location and community on their lives.

The different milieus in which these two independent, original, determined artists persevered after their brief paradise had been shattered come to life in these letters that were sent between the Paris suburb of Neuilly and the rural town of Black Mountain, site of a progressive new college. So do the realities of normal life—the strain on a marriage when people are unpacking, the health concerns of middle-aged couples. Kandinsky described himself with a cold as being "not much help" to his wife, with a put-down of himself that is totally different from the image conveyed in the usual accounts; he confides to Albers, "I have only been fully human again since yesterday." Similarly, Albers seems much more tender and devoted to *his* wife than he was often perceived to be, writing with excitement that she "eats a lot of grapefruit and is even putting on some weight. I think that is a good sign as regards our situation." In this charming correspondence, two very alert, warm-hearted individuals emerge, with Nina Kandinsky and Anni Albers also very much in the picture.

There are, in addition, numerous interesting facts that come out. Albers thanks Kandinsky for showing his prints to Ben Nicholson. Kandinsky tells Albers he is annoyed that in the Guggenheim collection in New York his work is "in the shade" compared to Rudolph Bauer's. Nina Kandinsky is thrilled to wear a gold lamé dress at a ball where she admires the way Prince Eugene of Anhalt dances a Viennese waltz, but her dream is of dancing with Albers. Albers encounters the French abstract artist Jean Hélion, at the suggestion of Hans (Jean) Arp, and provides details on their meetings. We also learn Kandinsky's views on Hélion—his reasons for admiring the younger artist, along with his evaluation of some of the work as "a bit tedious." These are but a few of the details of a world of dedicated, brilliant artists—their pleasures, their annoyances, their unknown liaisons—that are revealed in Kandinsky's and Albers's rich correspondence.

We are given some startling character portrayals. Kandinsky's take on Philip Johnson, the American museum man (he was not yet a licensed architect) who engineered the Alberses' departure from Germany and employment at Black Mountain College, is a case in point. Kandinsky writes Albers, "Johnson is really an unreliable moneybags. He turns now to painting, then to architecture, and then again to politics. It is true, young people from rich families are often like that. They are used to the lightness of being and think it will always be light and amusing for them. They usually do not know a lot about real work. Money spoils them, if only by giving them too high an opinion of themselves."

In statements like that, written to Albers because Albers was a person with the same values as his and someone equally possessed by the consuming priority of making the best possible art, the dedication to the betterment of the world through creativity, Kandinsky comes alive as he rarely does in what has been written *about* him. Similarly, when Albers, benefiting from the rare ease and comfort afforded because he is communicating with a soul mate, enjoys the luxury of divulging his deepest enthusiasms to someone who understands, he shows his true self. In a letter from 1936, Albers writes Kandinsky, "Mexico is truly the promised land of abstract art. For here it is already 1,000 years old. And very much alive in folk art." This is Albers's true voice: that of a human being intoxicated with what is beautiful, and observant of details. In the same letter, from Black Mountain, he continues, "The fall here is indescribably colorful. Just as the green stays green much longer and stays much more vividly green, and does not go gray, so the fall colors are bright red and bright yellow. And they last longer. ...Our mountains only become really bare late in December—if you disregard the fir trees which still give beautiful patches of green. Otherwise the mountains are a reddish violet in winter, an indescribable, indefinable color. Everything is different here from over there." To no one other than Kandinsky could Albers have bared his soul in this way—on the subjects of nature, and of Europe versus America, two themes dear to him.

That quality of sheer enthusiasm soars through this correspondence. And were it not for these letters, would we ever imagine the side of himself Kandinsky evinces when he writes Albers, in May 1936, "We were quite shattered by the first page of your letter which is just a long list of job offers. Very happily shattered. Long live America, because it values people!" Kandinsky, however, is world-weary and sad about his own surroundings in France. To Albers, he laments, about the gallerists in Paris "who promise me things and are then forever postponing them," that "These people are more or less easily fired up, but cool off even more quickly. ... Abstr. Art is far from being recognized here, it is, rather, resisted. That is partly a money matter, because the art trade has large stocks of earlier periods (impress., cubism, express.) and does not want to allow any 'competition.'" How much we learn from a few sentences like these. There is the charm of Kandinsky's shorthand that removes the "ism" from artistic movements, and the keen awareness of the economics of the art market and of the suffering it imposes on an artist of his creativity. Another pervasive element is the juxtaposing of two milieus, as in a Henry James novel, where rural America has a quality of optimism, and the great capitals of Europe are embedded with rules and customs that complicate life and on some level weigh people down.

In this last chapter of his life, Kandinsky missed some of the support he felt at the Bauhaus, but he remained, above all, a man enthralled with his existence, and always eager to move forward. Christian Derouet, who knows the literature on Kandinsky, and the mythology, as well as anyone does, remarked to me that, because of that ease of someone communicating with a sibling, the result of the way he describes his hopes and disappointments is as intimate a portrait as we will get of him. The two men—twenty-one years apart in age, a Russian in France and a German in America—linked by shared values, and a mutual appreciation of life's wonders, opened themselves up with unparalleled openness as they took pen to paper.

Now that these spectacular letters, in this volume, are translated into English for the first time, thanks to the marvelous skills and understanding of Oliver Pretzel, the feast is rich. Dr. Pretzel has achieved a masterful feat by capturing the lively manner, informal and intellectually brilliant at the same time, of both Wassily Kandinsky and Josef Albers, as well as the serenity and perceptive world vision of Anni Albers, and the more frivolous charms of Nina Kandinsky (the lightweight of the four, but enchanting in her devotion to her husband). Translation is a demanding art, and, with his understanding of the complexities of German and flair for the possibilities of playfulness in English, Dr. Pretzel has evoked the quality of the original texts with rigor and élan. Oliver Barker, of the Albers Foundation, found extraordinary new material in the archives of the Centre Pompidou—especially some photographs that cannot help but rivet the reader—which have greatly enriched this volume; Brenda Danilowitz, also of the Foundation, has, with her deep love for artistic creativity combined

with her remarkable discipline, guided this project with a wonderful mix of thoroughness and panache. Leslie Pell van Breen, publisher and executive director of Hudson Hills Press, has, yet again, been the ideal publisher of Albers-related material. In France, we have, above all, Jessica Boissel, who edited this correspondence for the French-German edition in 1998, to thank, and, most certainly, Christian Derouet, for his generosity, time, and support. Benoit Collier, of the Centre Georges Pompidou, has also been nothing short of angelic in helping this volume move along quickly and easily.

Having had the rare luxury of friendship with Josef and Anni Albers, such extraordinary human beings as well as artistic geniuses, I thank all of these people on their behalf. I cannot help but feel that Wassily and Nina Kandinsky would have been equally delighted to have their beautiful way of thinking now brought into English.

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