

## Ian Maleney

### *From Line to Flesh*

Written in response to **Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca**, *Swinguer*

*Be liberal in what you accept, and conservative in what you send.* – Postel’s Law, or ‘The Robustness Principle’

In 1926, Wassily Kandinsky made four drawings of German dancer Gret Palucca. The drawings are essentially transcriptions: they have their root in four photos of Palucca taken by Charlotte Rudolph. Kandinsky’s renderings of Palucca’s dramatic poses are spare, forceful line drawings, just as bold as their source material, and invested of an equal or perhaps even greater sense of velocity; movement and direction. Kandinsky abstracts Palucca’s body, skins her bones, leaves a linear, binary impression where once there was breath, curve and fold. What is lost and gained in that transformation from flesh to line?

There is a better word for Kandinsky’s approach to Palucca’s body: he vectorised her. A vector is a geometric object with both magnitude and direction. All of Kandinsky’s lines in these drawings, the few that make up each ‘portrait’, are directional. They have no arrows, no pointers, and yet they seem to move in a specific direction, towards something unseen. It has something to do with how the lines puncture space, rather than demarcate it; the ‘figures’ in the drawings seem to burst outward.

Vectors are a key concept in linear algebra, and so one of the fundamental building blocks of machine learning. The algorithms that classify and categorise an ever-increasing proportion of life today are built on this same process of vectorisation—skinning the complex down to the simple, joining lines, discovering the connections and the core nature of whatever object is under scrutiny: its shape, denomination, direction of movement.

Analysing one of Rudolph’s photos of Palucca with Microsoft’s Azure Computer Vision software, the computer’s best guess at understanding the contents of the photograph resulted in the following description: “a person jumping into the air to catch a ball”. (It had a confidence rating of 0.45799580123045225, where 1 is total certainty and 0 total uncertainty.) It did, however, tag the photo “dance” with a confidence of 0.97, while some of the other descriptive tags included “woman”, “girl”, “man”, “female”.

Given Kandinsky’s drawing of the same photograph, the software placed the image in the “abstract\_nonphoto” category, understood that it was a sketch or drawing (and possibly “child’s art”), but ultimately decided that it was “a close up of a whiteboard”. The only indication that one might be looking at a figure is a single descriptive tag: “man”.

The software, like all such programs, relies on a vast trove of pre-classified information which has been fed into it over time. If a pattern emerges in a new piece of information that matches a pattern it has been taught from its training data, then it ‘recognises’ the new information. In computer vision, these patterns are shapes and colours: eyes, bodies, brands, objects. If the software had been trained on a set of art historical images, it could possibly have ‘recognised’ that it was ‘looking’ at a drawing by Kandinsky. That it returned the suggestion of a whiteboard implies that it was trained on

a trove of indistinguishable stock photos; men and women in anonymous offices, much like the men and women who likely wrote the code in the first place.

The blindnesses of software like this – its sometimes comedic, oftentimes tragic lack of humanity – is an outcome of the processes, both human and computational, which give rise to it. Computational thinking, which is mostly linear algebraic thinking when you get down to it, is a way of seeing and handling the world; a manner of understanding focused on inputs and outputs, which is to say, on translations, transcriptions, transformations. Effective, reliable transformations come about when all the possible inputs and outputs are well-defined and well-understood. Predictable, in other words.

When the form you fill provides two options instead of an open-ended input; when navigation is strict and hierarchical; when the pattern that is “man” and the pattern that is “woman” is restated and reinforced a hundred thousand times so that a computer can say, with some chance of certainty, that an image is one or the other—this is the limiting of inputs to create more predictable outputs; correct perhaps for the majority case but completely dead to alternative possibilities. Every time a decision can be made to say, ‘this input must be like this’, a step is taken towards creating a more predictable, coherent, maintainable system.

Humans are humans, however, and the world rarely conforms to such expectations: there will be gaps, holes, corner-cases; what is coming at you will not comply with the rules and limitations you’ve set out. No matter how thorough and insightful your definitions, you can’t foresee everything. Hacking, from the brute-forced to the gloriously subtle and arcane, is the art of exploiting the gaps in other people’s definitions, their mistakes, oversights, blindnesses; it is the art of turning a system against itself, using its own tools. It is saying, always, this could go another way; asking, always, what happens if?

Kandinsky said that ‘there is no must in art because art is free.’ Free always to put flesh on the line, which is nothing less than the freedom to be both, either, neither, nor.

**Ian Maleney** is a writer based in Dublin. His first book, a collection of essays entitled *Minor Monuments*, was published in 2019 by Tramp Press and shortlisted for the Michel Deon Prize and Butler Literary Award. He received the Arts Council Next Generation Bursary for Literature in 2019. He is the online editor of the *Stinging Fly*, and founding editor of *Fallow Media*. His work has been published in *The Guardian*, *Esquire*, and the *New Statesman*, and he is the Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Commissioned Writer 2020.

The **Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Writing Commission** aims to expand ideas around writing about art by inviting Irish authors to create a series of pieces inspired by the exhibitions at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios. In 2020, TBG+S has commissioned Ian Maleney to make a piece of writing inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

Previous TBG+S Writers include Sara Baume (2015), Claire-Louise Bennett (2016), Gavin Corbett (2017), Doireann Ní Ghríofa (2018), Annemarie Ní Churreáin (2020)

The texts are available to download from [www.templebargallery.com](http://www.templebargallery.com) and printed copies are available in the gallery.

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios is supported by:

