

**THE AESTHETICS
OF
PIET MONDRIAN**

By Arthur Chandler

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TO JEANIE

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INTRODUCTION

Rarely have theory and practice been so inseparably allied as in the aesthetic theory and pictorial practice of Piet Mondrian. The last twenty-five years of his life were devoted to realizing on canvas the universal principles embodied in his aesthetic theory. All who knew him personally were awed by the resolute power that directed -- perhaps dominated -- his entire life. Mondrian's personal appearance, his living and working quarters, his diversions and work -- every activity of his life not subject to the inevitable deprivations of nature, were the outward manifestations of a profound, coherent world view.

Mondrian's influence is profound in painting and sculpture, and decisive in architecture. Even those who ignored or were ignorant of his aesthetic intent found Mondrian's asymmetrical geometries endlessly fascinating motifs for industrial and commercial decoration. In the field of aesthetics, however, Mondrian's work has been almost completely ignored. In the light of his influence in other areas it is strange that so little writing on his aesthetic theories exist. It seems to me that now, more than ever, everyone concerned with fundamental questions in art and aesthetics should hear what Mondrian has to say.

I say "now more than ever" in no mere rhetorical way. The twentieth century in the arts is an age of rapidly proliferating schools and styles. There is not, as far as I can tell, one single belief or technique that all painters would agree on about painting. New brands of subjectivism appear in the arts with almost daily regularity, each artist making the tacit demand of his viewer to learn a new, private set of symbols before entering into the unique psychology of

of his paintings.

Even more strangely, the styles of yesterday do not simply grow old and disappear, as Gothic frontality disappeared with the advent of Renaissance techniques of volume representation and anatomical study. Styles accumulate. Impressionism, expressionism, abstract expressionism, surrealism, op art, minimal art, primitivism -- one can scarcely name a past or present school of painting that does not now claim practicing adherents. Anyone who knows the culture of painting could render up a fairly complete list of the "dominant characteristics" of Greek, Renaissance, or Moghul art and stand on unassailable ground. Who would dare attempt the same for modern and contemporary art?

Herein, I think, lies the value of Mondrian's aesthetics. Mondrian, in the course of many essays on the nature of art, made valiant attempts at defining the scope and direction of modern art movements up to and including his own time. Mondrian saw modern art, not as a bewildering mutation, but as a logical and necessary outgrowth of the very culture of art itself. Art could have travelled no other path, Mondrian asserts, than the one laid out for it by the internal evolution of its own forms.

But perhaps even more important than his grasp of the history of art was his struggle to give to painting a philosophical basis that would transcend both the subjectivism and atomization of the twentieth century and the figurative art of preceding ages. And surely, whether he succeeded or not, Mondrian's mighty efforts must be counted as the most constructive force in painting in the twentieth century.

Both his aesthetic theories and his painting are living examples of Wittgenstein's proclamation that "ethics and aesthetics are one"

-- though not perhaps in the sense Wittgenstein imagined. Mondrian believed that painting had the means at hand to represent the essential processes and quality of reality, and for twenty-five years he carefully reiterated his belief that it was possible to represent these processes exactly; and that further, this representation of inner reality was the one true function of the modern painter. Mondrian never believed that he was just one more artist creating just one more style for a select audience of intellectuals and patrons of beauty. He believed that since the eternal principles of nature could be expressed by any artist, and since these principles are at once the most important and the most inexhaustible, it follows that painters, artists of all kinds, science, and finally the whole of man's society should discover, create, and live by these universals. Mondrian's aesthetic theories are based entirely upon these universals and their plastic equivalents in painting. He judged his own work and the work of his contemporaries against his perception of these constants, not always to the good reputation of modern art.

At the outset it must be confessed that many of Mondrian's key terms are, on the first encounter, elusive and vague. Only by encountering such terms as "universal emotion," "balanced relation," and "mutually equivalent" can the reader gradually discern their denotation and connotation. Mondrian was a complete, but not a systematic thinker -- not systematic in the sense of verbally ordering his thoughts sequentially in a single cohesive argument. His written thoughts, like his painted ones, are unified more by the intuitive vision than by rigorous logic. He wrote in blocks of thought, and often allowed transition and definition to fend for themselves. But, as I hope to show, in the end the reader can discover in Mondrian's

writings the constellation of beliefs and assertions which together
comprize a valid aesthetic whole.

THE WAY THINGS ARE

Mondrian's paintings and aesthetics take root in his conception of reality -- or, more precisely, of the unchangeable inner laws of reality. Mondrian, like many thinkers before him, believed in the unity of all things behind a multifarious and even chaotic world of appearances. He was further convinced that, although all we perceive must pass through the filter of our senses, we can still arrive at an objective truth which exists for all things and for all time. He resisted, however, the comparison of his ideas with those of the Greeks. "That is what we are against," Mondrian remarked, speaking for all Neo-Plastic painters, "because that is the key to the classic and tragic finality from which we must free ourselves."¹

Mondrian was well aware of the subjective and relativistic tendencies in the art and thought of his time. This is the other side of the coin, the obverse of Greek perfection and finality. The subjective vision of the Impressionists and the Surrealists, the philosophical retreat from Idealism, the intellectually fashionable (and widely misunderstood) popularizations of Einstein's Theory of Relativity -- all these anti-universalist tendencies permeated the intellectual atmosphere of Paris, London, and New York during Mondrian's lifetime. He was acquainted with these movements and ideas, but rejected all of them as inadequate for creativity and deep thought:

Today one is tired of the dogmas of the past,
and of truths once accepted but successively
jettisoned. One realizes more and more the
relativity of everything, and therefore one
tends to reject the idea of fixed laws, of a

single truth. This is very understandable, but does not lead to profound vision. For there are "made" laws, "discovered" laws, but also laws -- a truth for all time. These are more or less hidden in the reality which surrounds us and do not change. Not only science, but art also shows us that reality, at first incomprehensible, gradually reveals itself, by the mutual relations that are inherent in all things.²

In these words we can recognize Mondrian's deep affinity with the sciences of the twentieth century, especially the physical or exact sciences. The lesson of Relativity Theory, of course, is not that all truth is relative, much less that there is no absolute truth. On the contrary, it "reformulates the laws of physics so that they hold good for every observer, no matter how he moves or where he stands. Its central meaning is that the most valued truths in science are wholly independent of the point of view."³

The laws of nature Mondrian sought after were large, macro-cosmic laws, laws which ultimately come closest to the fundamental properties of mathematical space. The anthropocentric formulations of psychology, history, economics, etc. interested him little or not at all. They were, for Mondrian, parts of a whole, of interest and value because we are human and therefore fascinated by our own affairs, but of a lower magnitude of importance than the all-inclusive properties common to all matter in space.

Mondrian asserted that "reality reveals itself by substantial, palpable forms, accumulated or dispersed in empty space. . .these

forms are part of that space and. . .the space between them appears as form, a fact which evidences the unity of form and space."⁴ These components, then, are the basics of all reality: space, forms, and their accumulation or dispersal -- in other words, their positional relationships to each other. "Accumulation" and "dispersal" may seem somewhat insubstantial in the present context, but they contain the essence of Mondrian's thoughts on unity. We will have occasion to explore more fully the substance of these terms when we come to Mondrian's ideas about balanced relationships in art.

It should be emphasized that Mondrian did not believe he was simply stating his own particular view which might or might not hold true for other artists or thinkers. Mondrian was through and through a believer in the objective truth of his ideas. Each of these "substantial, palpable forms" exist "in categories, and each category has its particular expression existing independently of our perception . . . the elements of form have a particular aspect; every fragment, every plane, every line has its proper character."⁵ It is worth noting here that Mondrian believes that lines and planes, terms which in their purity apply only to mathematical space, actually exist.

As is evidenced by the Euclidean flavor of the above passage, Mondrian perceived the constants of reality as kinds of axioms of form. But it is not form itself which constitutes the unity of reality. If this were so, as Mondrian pointed out in many of his essays, stasis would be elemental. But in fact we see a dynamism in life absent from the perfect but lifeless worlds depicted by mathematics or Platonic idealism. And beneath all the vagaries of living, moving forms "we find that in nature all relations are dominated by a single primordial relation, which is defined by the

the opposition of two extremes."⁶

Much of current scientific thought concurs with Mondrian on this point of the "opposition of two extremes." However, the prevailing notion of contemporary physics, advanced in Mondrian's time by the physicist Gibbs, is to regard the basic process of reality as entropy. According to Norbert Wiener, the best-known proponent of the entropy theory, entropy is the law prevailing, in the large, in any situation, and seems to be the great negative governing force in the physical universe as a whole. According to Wiener, systems run down, lose energy, and finally sink to stasis, the most probable form of all matter. Life, order, complexity -- all are what he calls "enclaves of decreasing entropy" that struggle briefly and tragically against the inevitable current of entropy. Mondrian's intensity of belief in the balance and progress of reality must be seen against the backdrop of this picture of the universe:

Sooner or later we shall die, and it is highly probable that the whole universe around us will die the heat death, in which the world shall be reduced to one vast temperature equilibrium in which nothing really new ever happens. There will be nothing left but a drab uniformity out of which we can expect only minor and insignificant local fluctuations.⁷

We shall have further occasion to speak of Mondrian's almost instinctive horror at this world-view when we come to discuss his views on space and form.

Mondrian's view of opposing extremes cleaves to an earlier view of the fundamental forces operating in reality. Basically his pos-

ition is an elaboration of Newton's third law of motion, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The phrase "equal and opposite" is most apropos to Mondrian's ideas on the immutable laws of nature. For him, it is the balanced relation that is the binding unity within "the opposition of two extremes." "If, then, we focus our attention on the balanced relation, we shall be able to see unity in natural things. However, there it appears under a veil."⁸ We see this man and that woman; what is permanent, though, is the balanced principle in nature of the male-female relationship. We see this man alive and that man dead; life and death, though, are the everlasting forces forever in a process of dynamic balance with each other.

Mondrian constantly reiterated that the first "veil" to be pierced is the particular thing, the individual "substantial, palpable form" apparent to our senses or instruments of measurement. Mondrian had much to say in regards to particular forms in painting, as we shall see. But in all situations in life, including and especially the aesthetic experience, "the universal cannot be expressed purely so long as the particular obstructs the path."⁹ Our ordinary vision, aided and abetted by representational art sees only a world of particulars, a perpetual flux in which there is only temporary stability and rest. Mondrian urges his readers and viewers to understand "what science has discovered: that time and the subjective vision veil the true reality."¹⁰ The "subjective vision" compels us by the very nature of our own senses to see objects only in terms of those senses. Time means change, and thereby it attracts our attention to the mutable and impermanent features of apparent reality. It is only by

means of an "objective vision" that the true inner nature of things, a nature that does not change with time and eludes our sense organs, can be revealed to man.

"Objective vision" might seem to imply pure rationality or complete intellectual detachment, the kind of elusive goal so fervently sought by nineteenth-century historians or twentieth-century logical positivists. Unsympathetic critics have often characterized Mondrian's paintings in this fashion, the most common phrases being "cold," "remote," "sterile intellectuality," etc. Mondrian did believe that it was possible to transcend subjectivity, and asserted that "if objective vision were possible, it would give us a true image of reality."¹¹ But he also believed that art could and should possess emotion in portraying this true image. Furthermore, he asserted that intuition, and not rationality, was the mind's instrument in achieving, as far as was possible, an objective, and therefore true picture of reality:

Only through intuition does a work rise above more or less subjective expression. Different periods produce different feelings and conceptions, and in each period men differ. Consequently different art expressions even in a single period are not only logical but a tribute to the general development of art. Intuition always finds the way of progress, which is continuous growth toward a clearer establishment of the content of art: the unification of man with the universe.¹²

Mondrian nowhere defined exactly what he means by "intuition"; but the import of the term becomes clear in the contexts in which it is employed. Intuition is a kind of understanding that grasps the essence of reality without the intervention of symbols. Rationality, or intellectual understanding, comes after the fact. A purely logical act of intellection may well be indispensable in organizing materials for creation; and, as we shall see, Mondrian placed high value on techniques of rational organization in fashioning a work of art. But rationality by itself cannot produce the primary and indispensable feeling of unity in nature. Intuition, for Mondrian, is the one way subjective man can simultaneously feel and understand objective truth.

Mondrian opposed intuition to instinct, which he saw as the centripetal, self-directed force in the consciousness of man. Mondrian did not espouse the contemporary scientific notion that instinct is a set of unlearned responses that have survival value for the individual, the group, or the species. He simply defined instinct, as well as intuition, by their products and potentials in the behavior of men:

Instinct reveals itself as self-concentrating, self-edifying; it is limitation. Intuition produces self-denial, self-destruction; it is expansion. Culture can develop both. If it develops instinct, animal nature appears. Then culture destroys the intuitive capacity which men have even found in a primitive state.¹³

Mondrian saw, as an instance of the comprehensive universal truth of balanced relations, the dual forces of intuition and instinct operating in human culture. However, he saw instinct as an entropic force, necessary in the total scheme of things, but an opponent in man's struggle for progress:

Human culture reveals an opposition: diminution of the instinctive faculties and development of the intuitive capacity. A cultivation of instinctive faculties produces human degeneration; a cultivation of intuitive capacities creates human progress.¹⁴

Clearly, in Mondrian's thought, intuition serves the whole, while instinct serves the part only. The cultural environment, however, is in and of itself neutral. It can "develop as well as envelop,"¹⁵ or foster the selfish as well as the selfless impulses of our souls. In the realms of art and science, the self-directed impulses of instinct hinder our intuitive perception of the inner truth behind varying appearance. And if our intuition is weak, all the riches of culture and nature serve only to confuse our minds with a bewildering barrage of events and things. "Environment, education, experience, make men conscious of passing reality but overwhelm their intuitive capacity when this is not very strong."¹⁶

But in spite of this neutral character of culture, it is only through culture that man can rise above the particular to the general truth. Primitive art and society, in Mondrian's view, never rise to this perception. In an advanced society with a matured, progressive culture as its heritage, the artist is capable to intuitively

perceiving a reality encompassing all visible, tangible appearances, and sets out, much as the scientist does, to discover and formulate the more fundamental cohesive forces of the universe:

Culture produces relative consciousness of the changeable expression of reality. When this consciousness is attained, a revolt takes place: the beginning of the deliverance from that expression of reality. Destruction of its limitation follows. The culture of the intuitive faculties has conquered. A clearer perception of constant reality is possible. A new realism appears.¹⁷

This new realism will be the task of art.

MONDRIAN'S THEORY OF ART

Thus far I have tried to present Mondrian's views of reality in isolation from his aesthetic theory. In doing so I have attempted to show the cosmological basis for his aesthetic theory. But his cosmology and his aesthetics can be kept apart no longer, for rarely have the two been so inseparably allied as in Mondrian's thought and practice. Mondrian considered his paintings as statements of equivalence for the basic laws of reality, as well as for the basic laws of pictorial composition. They are the visual fulfillment of his thinking and feeling about reality. His pronouncements concerning cosmology and aesthetics are variations -- verbal equivalents, he would call them -- on the same themes: unity, equivalence, and the balance of opposites.

Mondrian also held the unshakable conviction that his art and thought both culminated the past tradition of painting and heralded the future. The "new realism" was for him to be most clearly put forth by Neo-Plasticism, the movement in modern art which seeks to purify painting by lifting its goal from the imitation of nature to the expression of the absolute. In this sense the new realism proposed a task that was entirely new, and which, Mondrian believed, would have repercussions outside the world of painting. But it would be painting itself which, in Mondrian's opinion, would begin the task of transforming our perceptions. Painting would be both the end and the beginning of a new world view, a world view which, in the end, would make painting itself a superfluous human activity.

Mondrian seems to have held two distinct attitudes towards the art of the past. On the one hand, he saw the history of art as

a necessary evolution of forms and content leading to the art of the present age, the twentieth century. In this sense, the past is of course utterly necessary and desirable. But as the art of the past continues to exert its influence in this century, it is a repressive force and harmful to progress. For Mondrian, the development of modern art, of Neo-Plastic or abstract art in particular, should not have to suffer the effects of an overpowering or stifling past. The past exists in the present as constructive foundation on which to build, not as the object of nostalgic longing or a surrogate for the present. Mondrian firmly believed that abstract art is not simply one more movement in art history. Abstract art has an important social mission and, even more importantly, a cosmic mission. "The past," he wrote, "has a tyrannic influence which is difficult to escape."¹⁸ He also realized that our standards of beauty in art have been shaped -- even controlled -- by the past. But the final goal of modern art, the "unification of man with the universe," justified and ennobles its struggle of liberation from past form and content.

However, Mondrian realized that the new art and its aesthetics would be incomprehensible to the untrained eye. "It is not enough to explain the value of a work of art in itself; it is above all necessary to show the place which a work occupies in the evolution of plastic art. For enlightenment, a clear demonstration of the succession of artistic tendencies is necessary."¹⁹

Here, I think, Mondrian touches on the reason why so many people eagerly frequent exhibitions of past and representational art (Impressionism is currently in vogue), but stay away in droves from Abstract Art. One does not need a course in art history to understand and appreciate at least the content of Baroque art. There is no

immediate necessity to demonstrate its gradual emergence from late Renaissance art. As long as people can identify or empathize with representational content, enjoyment is possible, even if the pleasure is not a truly aesthetic one of understanding technique and historical development. For example, most people can relate quite well to Mondrian's early works, such as "Windmill in the Sunlight," "The Red Tree," or "The Dying Chrysanthemum"; but the untutored reaction to any of his later works is invariably bewilderment, and occasionally derision.

Mondrian was convinced that the great art of the past, like great art of the present, strives to achieve universality. Here is the fundamental link between modern art and its progenitors. For though "modern art rejects the methods of expression used in the past," it nevertheless "continues its real content. It continues what the art of the past began: the transformation of natural vision."²⁰ Art, then, must aid the intuitive abilities of man. It can keep him from being overwhelmed by "passing reality" by focusing his attention on a single artistic creation aimed at capturing the essence of significant events in reality.

The art of the past several centuries, according to Mondrian, attempts to present reality in its visible, exterior form. This copying of particulars -- the "imitation of nature" extolled in the Enlightenment as the goal of all great art -- involved the practice of art completely. Even idealized art uses external reality as its model, and the result is always compared to external appearances. Thus, though Michelangelo's "David" is larger and more nearly perfect than

any mortal, his features and proportions are recognizably human, and it is by comparing him with familiar human anatomy that we evaluate the degree of idealization in the work. Without the "objective correlative" with which to compare a work of art, most viewers feel helpless. Perhaps, as Ortega y Gasset suggests, the aesthetic experience is treated by most people the same as a real experience delivered from its painful consequences. In other words, our appreciation of a landscape painting is usually identical in kind with our appreciation of an actual landscape, minus the cold wind and insects. Without the "cue" of natural appearances, we have no apparent means for empathy or sentimental intervention.

This, then, is the major crossroad of past art and present art: the former was bound, in technique and tradition, to external forms, while the latter devotes itself more and more to a purely internal reality, the truth behind or beneath variable external forms. Furthermore, this division between past and present is qualitative and complete. The past tradition, as a living mode of expression, is over. "In art the culture of particular forms is culminated and completed, and that art has undertaken the culture of pure relationships."²¹

Even though the break with the past is complete, like the difference between night and day, "we see the culture of plastic art as consistently progressive; changes in tendencies follow one another in logical succession."²² There are no sudden leaps in the history of art, in spite of the transforming power of individual genius. The results of the change may be (and are, for abstract art) tremendously important, and indicate a fundamentally changed consciousness of an age; but the development is organic, and can be understood fully

only in the light of the forces that preceded it and spawned it.

One of the most decisive forces in determining this logical succession in art has been the artist's fascination with his own enterprise. The artist may choose for his subject a landscape, a Madonna, or a burgher; but when the time comes to put paint to canvas, the artist necessarily becomes involved with the process of painting.

"Unconsciously, every true artist has always been moved by the beauty of line, color, and relationships for their own sake and not by what they may represent."²³ Or, as Aldous Huxley has so aptly remarked:

Artists, it is obvious, have always loved drapery for its own sake -- or, rather, for their own. When you paint or carve drapery, you are painting or carving forms which, for all practical purposes, are non-representational -- the kind of unconditioned forms on which artists even in the most naturalistic tradition like to let themselves go. In the average Madonna or Apostle the strictly human, fully representational element accounts for about ten percent of the whole. All the rest consists of many colored variations on the inexhaustible theme of crumpled wool or linen. And the non-representational nine-tenths of a Madonna or an Apostle may be just as important qualitatively as they are in quantity. Very often they set the tone of the whole work of art, they

state the key in which the theme is being rendered, they express the mood, the temperament, the attitude to life of the artist.²⁴

The inevitable subjectivity of every artistic undertaking insures that every work of art will always be presented from an individual vantage point in space and time, mirroring a unique psychology. This same subjectivity also gives most works of art the stamp of individual style -- the reason why a Rembrandt always looks like a Rembrandt.

Mondrian felt that the logical historical conclusion to the history of subjective impulses acting on external appearances was Impressionism. With the advent of Impressionism, the painter ceased to paint things as they are (their external form), and began to paint them as they appear, or seem. Forms and space become textured in ways that have little or nothing to do with the real world of external forms, even though the basic human and natural forms remain recognizable. The artist, in short, has become dissatisfied with merely copying reality. He desires liberation from the appearance of the object and begins to give free reign to his own subjective impulses, to pay more attention to the process of painting for its own sake. From this extreme turning away from nature, a new art is born that attempts, not to give reign to unbridled fancy by arbitrary use of color and form, but to delve deeper into nature by discovering and portraying eternal nature:

We see the culture of the form ending in a struggle for the deliverance from the limitations of form. We see the movements Futurism,

Dadaism, Surrealism develop this action. We see Cubism bring the great blow to the limiting form. Then we see the different manifestations of a new realism.²⁵

Thereafter, the only way is the way forward, even though the art of the past continues to transfix us with its beauty. "Certainly the art of the past is superfluous to the new spirit and harmful to its progress; just because of its beauty it holds many people back from the new conception."²⁶ But the new had come irrevocably with the new century, and Cubism was to be the harbinger of the art of the future.

Mondrian always held Cubist art in the highest regard. Indeed, he had gone through several years of painting under the Cubist influence in Paris. In this new movement he discovered something more profound than the Impressionists' charming use of color: Cubism was a fundamental reorganization of visual space. Cubism also destroyed the old picture concept by attempting to represent many facets of reality simultaneously with a kind of mobile viewpoint completely new to the visual arts. However, Mondrian became convinced that Cubism, especially early Cubism "intended to express volume. Intrinsicly it remained naturalistic."²⁷ It was as if the old Western oil painting trick of perspective had finally been discarded, only to be replaced by another illusion-producing device. The illusion of volume and motion replaced the illusion of depth in space, but the artist still remained faithful to external appearances, not to inner truth. "Cubism," Mondrian wrote, "did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality."²⁸

Cubism, then, as seen by Mondrian, was an important rung in the ladder, but decidedly not the final goal.

Mondrian had some rather harsh words for the major innovators of Cubism who did not paint the "logical consequences" inherent in their movement. He thought Juan Gris's paintings "much too cold and intellectual"²⁹ -- an accusation which reveals Mondrian's conviction that even the most abstract and universal of art must retain the capability to arouse emotion. Picasso Mondrian accused of both addiction to representation and inability to create purely abstract art of high quality. "People fail to realize how pictorial he is," Mondrian remarked, and added that "He tried to do what we (Neo-Plastic) painters do, but he didn't do so well at it."³⁰

The other modern art movement Mondrian considered seriously was Surrealism. Even more than Cubism, Surrealism was attempting to capture and express states of mind that are above (sur) realism. There was a kind of craziness about the Surrealists, especially Dali, that alternately fascinated and repulsed Mondrian's ordered temperament. "I believe," Salvador Dali wrote somewhere, "the moment is at hand when, by a paranoic and active advance of the mind, it will be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thus to help discredit completely the world of reality." The world as perceived by the Surrealists was accordingly disordered and impulsive, a fun-house distorting mirror of the human mind. Their painting reflected this systematized confusion because, as Andre Gide suggested, disordered things require incoherent statements.

But in spite of Mondrian's occasional sympathy for some of the

goals of Surrealism, he never accepted their world picture, and so was fundamentally at odds with the basic nature of their enterprise. Mondrian would admit that the encompassing disarray of innumerable objects and events comprise our outward existence; but this is only the surface of reality. Even the world of dreams so imaginatively explored by the Surrealists does not lead us to the real truth of things:

As for Surrealism, we must recognize that it deepens feeling and thought, but since this deepening is limited by individualism it cannot reach the foundation, the universal. So long as it remains in the realm of dreams, which are only a rearrangement of the events of life, it cannot touch true reality.³¹

Mondrian's evaluations of Cubism and Surrealism are representative of the tenor of his thought in aesthetics as a whole. He can recognize and appreciate, to some extent, the achievements of past and present schools of art; but throughout his life he remained utterly, perhaps a touch fanatically, faithful to his own principles. Like most strong people with a sense of mission, he judged most things in accordance with the goals set forth by his own beliefs of what is right and important. Abstract art, especially Neo-Plasticism, held the key to the best way to paint, and the only way to paint the inner truth of reality. He envisioned all of man's art, culture, and mind evolving irrevocably in this spiritual direction: the understanding of the real truth, and the attainment of a dynamic equilibrium

everywhere in man's existence. This faith sustained him through two World Wars and a Depression, and infused all his art and thought with a sense of unalterable purpose. Perhaps great achievements are not possible without some tincture of confident exclusiveness, which we label madness or genius according to our fears or admiration.

There has been abstract art before the twentieth century, and not all of it can be dismissed as mere surface decoration. Mondrian was aware that a good deal of primitive art manifested a strong proclivity for abstraction. He was convinced, however, that this proto-abstractionism was qualitatively different from its modern counterpart:

Primitive expression lacks consciousness, the product of centuries of human culture. But this expression is not veiled in all kinds of things. In a primitive state, both the intuitive capacities and the instinctive faculties are strong. However, culture has not developed the consciousness of the intuitive capacity nor diminished the force of the instinctive faculties. Therefore, primitive art in abstract forms differs from abstract art of today, which reveals a relative balance of intuition and instinct. We find the same difference between children's art and Abstract Art.³²

Exactly what is this new art that heralds a new beginning in painting, and ultimately in sculpture, architecture, industrial design,

and even human consciousness as well? "Abstract Art" is the generic name for most non-figurative art. But any artist or non-artist might use abstraction, or radical distortion of reality, simply as a sort of pictorial game, if not as a cover to disguise technical incompetence. Serious and mature Abstract Art, though, aims at capturing the essential truths of reality. Mondrian's own paintings, as well as the entirety of his writing on aesthetics, emanate from his philosophy of Nieuwe Beelding, which translates somewhat roughly into Neo-Plasticism. But if we stay closer to the notion of "beelding" as "building," or construction, we shall come closer to the intent of Mondrian's theories of art.

The first obstacle to establishing the new direction in painting is visible nature. "Nature cannot be copied, and the predominance of our subjective impression has to be conquered. These plastic exigencies produced Abstract Art."³³ No matter how hard the artist tries, or how photographic his paintings become, palpable reality cannot be reproduced, and as a consequence the artist is often unfulfilled by his art, and his work is of necessity imperfect. "Nature is perfect, but in art man does not need perfect nature, precisely because it is perfect. He needs, on the contrary, to represent what is inward. The natural appearance must be transformed to obtain a purer vision of nature."³⁴

Clearly, then, Mondrian does not believe that the abstract artist is not turning away from nature because he finds it inadequate or illusory. He looks into it more deeply to discover what has hitherto been hidden from ordinary perception:

To love things in reality is to love them

profoundly; it is to see them as a microcosmos in the macrocosmos. Only in this way can one achieve a universal expression of reality.

Precisely on account of its profound love for things, non-figurative art does not aim at rendering them in their particular appearance.³⁵

In fact, the reality of appearances is necessary to the artist as a balance to his individualism. Even the abstract artist must draw on nature as a source for his non-figurative art:

All that the non-figurative artist received from the outside is not only useful but indispensable, because it arouses in him the desire to create that which he only vaguely feels and which he could never represent in a true manner without the contact with visible reality and with the life which surrounds him.

It is precisely from this visible reality that he draws his means of expression: and, as regards the surrounding life, it is precisely this which has made his art non-figurative.³⁶

Mondrian's own actions somewhat qualify his pronouncements on the artist's necessary love of nature. He came to dislike Holland for its profusion of meadows, and Paris for its romantic, tree-lined avenues. The only reminder of nature Mondrian would allow in his own studio was a single plastic tulip painted a pure white. He vastly preferred the man-made environment of New York City to any-

thing nature had to offer. Inner reality always held a deeper significance than external reality for Mondrian; and as he grew older, he came to believe that an attachment to external forms hinders much more than it inspires.

Along with a love and understanding of inner nature, the artist, in Mondrian's view, must have a complete knowledge of the laws of his art, and an ever-increasing control over its techniques. In fact, the would-be lover of modern art must also possess this knowledge if he is ever to understand the new art. "If one is not an artist oneself one must at least know the laws and culture of plastic art."³⁷ Of the culture we have already spoken. Mondrian's discovery of the laws of plastic art represents one of the few qualitative changes in the history of art.

Mondrian's profound belief that painting has laws as definite and fundamental as those of physical reality governed his painting and aesthetic theory for the last quarter-century of his life. Mondrian believed that the purpose of the new art sustains a cause and effect relationship with the inherent laws of art. Furthermore, these two phenomena have their exact equivalents in life itself. Mondrian's position regarding the function of art is highly moralistic: Abstract Art could (and should aim to) release us from the bonds of ephemerality, and could (and should) ultimately restructure the very society that produced it:

Art today, after a secular culture of limited form, has succeeded in establishing this plastic expression: it is the clear realization of liberated and universal rhythm distorted and hidden

in the individual rhythm of the limiting form.

The way toward the creation of a new plastic expression, that of liberated rhythm, in literature as well as in sculpture and painting, has been prepared by different movements in art, above all, by Cubism, Futurism and Dadaism.³⁸

The key terms in this new art are "equilibrium" and "balanced relation." By equilibrium Mondrian does not mean stasis (recall his rejection of the stasis postulated by Platonic thought) or immobility, but rather the kind of harmony resulting from two balanced forces acting on or with each other:

It has become progressively clearer that the plastic expression of true reality is attained through dynamic movement in equilibrium. Plastic art affirms that equilibrium can only be established through the balance of unequal but equivalent oppositions. The clarification of equilibrium through plastic art is of great importance for humanity. It reveals that although human life in time is doomed to disequilibrium, notwithstanding this, it is based on equilibrium. It demonstrates that equilibrium can become more and more living in us.³⁹

Reality, however, does not evince equilibrium and harmony on the surface. On the contrary, it appears unordered, savage, chaotic -- "nature red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson put it. It is this

part of our lives that is "doomed to disequilibrium." It must be the creative artist in the twentieth century who will show us the inherent order and inner logic of the world:

If, then, we focus our attention on the balanced relation, we shall be able to see unity in natural things. However, there it appears under a veil. But even though we never find unity expressed exactly, we can unify every representation. In other words, the exact representation of unity can be expressed; it must be expressed, for it is not visible in concrete reality.⁴⁰

By giving us this undistorted picture of inner reality, the artist calls forth the intuitive faculties in our minds to perceive that because we are part of an all-encompassing unity, we are unified ourselves, unified beneath the veil of confusion cast over our minds by old habits of perception that lead us to pay attention to passing ephemera instead of constant truth. "The balanced relation is the purest representation of universality, of the harmony and unity which are inherent characteristics of the mind."⁴⁷ The unity of painting, the unity of the mind, and the unity of all reality -- these three truths are the source and the goal of Mondrian's art and thought. His is a positive, progressive belief, for it holds that mankind can advance under the guidance of art:

Plastic art establishes the true image of reality, for its primary function is to "show,"

not to describe. It is up to us to "see" what it represents. It cannot reveal more than life teaches. But it can evoke in us the conviction of existent truth. The culture of plastic art can enlighten mankind, for it not only reveals human culture, but, being free, advances it.⁴²

It is, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observed in another context, "What can be shown cannot be said."⁴³ The Abstract artist can simply say, "Here it is," and let the painting, by making its own laws and processes transparent, "speak" for itself.

If art is to abandon the time-worn and futile task of copying external appearances, there are basically three paths open to the contemporary artist. He can simply paint, that is, allow his medium to govern his choice of colors and the direction of his hand (action painting is an example of this style of painting); or he can attempt to portray the subjective (but non-representational) visions, dreams, and fantasies of the mind (Surrealism); or he can look for metaphysical certitude in nature, the mind, or in the very laws of painting (New-Plasticism). For Mondrian, the secret of creating a purely spiritual art lies in the discovery and application of the fundamental laws of painting to demonstrate the fundamental laws of reality.

Just how much room is left in this transcendental theory for individual expression? Does this application of the laws of painting to the laws of reality leave any room for personal style? Mondrian **was** never entirely clear on this issue, and apparently changed his mind as he grew older. At first he affirmed the subjective element in painting:

In terms of composition the new plasticism is dualistic. Through the exact reconstruction of cosmic relations it is a direct expression of the universal; by its rhythm, by the material reality of its plastic form, it expresses the artist's individual subjectivity.⁴⁴

But later in life Mondrian came to feel that Abstract Art had to overcome "individual subjectivity" as a barrier to realizing the universal. This rampant individualism, too limited, inconsequential, or self-centered, was the element in Surrealism Mondrian objected to most strongly. The artist, he came to feel, must subordinate himself in his work to higher truths than those individualism provides for:

The predominance of our subjective vision makes the objective existence of forms more or less relative. Nevertheless, while our perceptions and feelings may change our impressions, the forms conserve their proper expression. This fact emphasizes that in order to establish a true image of form and space, an objective vision is necessary. Consequently, all plastic art shows the importance of the choice of the plastic means and the need to transform the natural aspect.⁴⁵

"To establish a true image of form and space" and "the importance of choice of plastic means" -- these two ideas lead us to the core of Mondrian's concepts of the technique of painting and of the form-

space duality of the basic laws of painting. Let us consider space and form in turn.

Space and form are for Mondrian's aesthetics what space and time are for the physics of Einstein. Space and form define each other. They constitute together the two basic and complementary parts of the same reality. To think of them and separate entities or concepts, Mondrian believed, is to make a fundamental perceptual error, in reality as well as in the visual arts. Accordingly, the artist must structure space as well as form, much as the architect constructs or molds a negative space when he builds walls, roofs, and interior projections.

But if the artist simply renders visible (perceived) space as it appears (such as the horizon of a landscape or the interior of a cathedral), he has only copied it, not structured space itself. And Mondrian feels that space is no more amenable to artistic copying than are forms.

In the course of culture, space determination is not only established by structure and forms, but even by the mechanics of painting (brushwork, color-squares or points -- Impressionism, Divisionism, Pointillism). It has to be emphasized that these techniques deal with space-determination and not with texture. The expression of texture is the establishment of the natural aspect of things. Space-determination destroys this aspect.⁴⁶

Artists of the past dealt only with visible space, discovering

and employing perspective as their main device for representing large spaces, and shading to indicate volume. But for Mondrian, the proper concern of the artist is to determine the space of the picture plane, the actual surface defined by the edges and corners of the canvas itself. As Nathan Knobler puts it, the painter

has the choice of filling the space or leaving it empty. He may vary the size of the forms and the spaces between them. He may vary their shape and, of course, their color. All this activity occurs on the surface of the picture plane. There is little or no extension from the surface of that plane, nor is there usually a penetration through it.⁴⁷

Just as space and form are the basic building blocks of the new art, color and line are the primary means of shaping and directing space and form. In fact, since there can be no form without color and shape, space-form-line-color are actually the tetrarchy of all painting.

Plurality of forms, lines, colors and empty spaces creates relationship. In single forms, the proportions of the different parts of these forms represent the relations that create rhythm. It should be emphasized that forms, colors, lines, spaces are as important as the relationships, and conversely, all means of expression determine the character of the rhythm. The same

is true in social life; the constituent elements are as important as their mutual relations.⁴⁸

Mondrian's emphasis on the existential importance of the formal elements of painting was no mere intellectual exercise. Space determination was particularly important to him. He felt a kind of horror at the thought of empty space, a horror reminiscent of Pascal's famous declaration of fear, "When I consider the brief duration of my life, absorbed in the eternity preceding and following; the small space that I fill, and even that I see, swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces that I am ignorant of, and which are ignorant of me, I am frightened and astonished. . .The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." For Mondrian, the horror vacui was no less overpowering, and would have decided consequences in his abstract art:

Plastic art cannot be the simple expression of space. Empty space has no other function than to make life possible. Plastically it does not represent life. It leaves us isolated with our thoughts and feelings. Reciprocal action between us and the environment is not possible and without this action, human development (culture) cannot exist. For our feelings empty space is unbearable. Think of the solitude one feels in the desert and on the ocean. It evokes all kinds of subjective sensations and fantastic images. Contact with the plastic expression of reality is lacking. Even limited spaces and

forms of great size displease us. Churches, factories, etc., can depress us; objects and creatures can awe and frighten us when the space determination is incomplete.⁴⁹

This passage, which expresses an almost hallucinatory fear of space, underlines Mondrian's urgent emphasis on control by the artist. For Mondrian, that which is not under control is out of control, threatening. His canvases manifest this completeness of control and precision to a degree greater, I think, than in the work of any other artist. In his aesthetic theories as well. Mondrian was quite precise as to how the artist goes about determining the space of his painting:

Space-determination is here understood as dividing empty space into unequal but equivalent parts by means of forms or lines. It is not understood as space limitation. This limitation determines empty space to particular forms. Through this action the empty space obtains a more or less definite expression, but the limited space of these forms remains vague. In order to make concrete the dynamic movement of reality and to annihilate the particular expression of the limited space, division of these forms is necessary.

The metropolis reveals itself as imperfect but concrete space-determination. It is the expression of modern life. It produced Abstract Art; the

the establishment of the splendor of dynamic movement.⁵⁰

We shall have occasion to discuss the social implications of this passage at another point. Here it is necessary to note exactly what Mondrian means by "space-determination." The "unequal but equivalent parts" are the final, two-dimensional "reality" of the canvas, and as a unity attain the balance of the artist's intuitive division of space and form. And as the equivalent parts of the painting draw our attention to the dynamic balance of the whole, the presentation of pictorial unity by clearly exposed laws of plastic composition focuses our attention on the equivalent equilibrium in reality itself:

Art makes us realize that there are fixed laws which govern and point to the use of the constructive elements, of the composition and of the inherent interrelationships between them. These laws may be regarded as subsidiary laws to the fundamental law of equivalence which creates dynamic equilibrium and reveals the true content of reality.⁵¹

Within space and form there exists the binding truth of positional relation, the spacial definition of one form with respect to another. Mondrian attached great importance to these relations as qualities of the laws of painting. Since any form or color needs another form or color to define its existence, their relationships, particular and general, are of paramount importance:

All things are parts of a whole. Each part

receives its visual value from the whole, and the whole receives its visual value from the parts. Everything is constituted by relation and reciprocity. Color exists only through another color, dimension is defined by another dimension; there is no position except by opposition to another position. That is why I say the relation is the principal thing.⁵²

Mondrian observes further that the relation of position "lies not in the size of lines and planes, but in the position of lines and planes with respect to each other."⁵³ In Mondrian's ideas on relations in art we can detect a Platonic (though we would undoubtedly reject the term) absolutism, as opposed to a relativist stance; for the relation of position does not depend solely upon the point of view of the observer. Mondrian was instead attempting to establish relations that will hold true regardless of the observer's point of view. Painting, Mondrian is saying, is itself a world with its own laws of structure that hold true regardless of the individual painter's temperament, style, or any other personal proclivities. Of course, it is possible to paint in ignorance of these laws, just as one might drive a car with no knowledge of mechanics. But if one wants to construct an engine, a knowledge of mechanical principles is, on some level, necessary. The major difference inherent in this analogy, however, is that whereas the engineer must know the physical principles of mechanics, the painter can work through and from an intuition of the basic principles of his art. But in both cases, the sense and import of the basic relations of material must be operative.

The relation of position of forms in space represents, when all goes right with the artist's intuition and technique, a kind of dynamic visual rhythm. "The rhythm of relations of color and size make the absolute appear in the relativity of time and space."⁵⁴ This sense of rhythm is important, for without it the painting remains lifeless -- a perfect two-dimensional equation, not a true work of art.

As might be expected, Mondrian believed that only Abstract Art can fully exploit the rhythmic potential of painting. The art of particular appearances necessitates a static equilibrium or, at the very least, disguises the real dynamic rhythm of the composition. "Non-figurative art is created by establishing a dynamic rhythm of determinate mutual relations which excludes the formation of any particular form."

The implications of dynamic rhythm lead Mondrian to discover just what specific shapes, colors, and positions would best represent the "Absolute" in painting. His conclusions on this fundamental issue are what give his canvases and his aesthetics their unique (Mondrian would undoubtedly prefer the term "universal") stamp:

The fundamental law of dynamic equilibrium gives rise to a number of other laws which relate to the constructive elements and their relations. These laws determine the manner in which dynamic equilibrium is achieved. The relations of position and those of dimension both have their own laws. Since the relation of the rectangular position is constant, it will be applied whenever the work demands the expression of stability; to destroy this stability there is a law that relations of a changeable

dimension-expression must be substituted. The fact that all the relations of position except the rectangular one lack stability, also creates a law which we must take into account if something is to be established in a determinate manner. Too often right and oblique angles are arbitrarily employed. All art expresses the rectangular relationship even though this may not be in a determinate manner; first by the height and width of the work and its constructive forms, then by the mutual relations of these forms. Through the clarity and simplicity of neutral forms, nonfigurative art has made the rectangular relation more and more determinate, until, finally, it has established it through free lines which intersect and appear to form rectangles.

As regards the relations of dimension, they must be varied in order to avoid repetition. Although, as compared with the stable expression of the rectangular relationship, they belong to individual expression, it is precisely they that are the most appropriate for the destruction of the static equilibrium of all form. By offering him a freedom of choice the relations of dimension present the artist with one of the most difficult problems.⁵⁵

Though we live in an Einsteinian universe of curves and relativ-

ity, Mondrian envisioned painting as a Euclidian world in which the rectangle is the truest expression of the inner unity of reality because of its stability and strength. All of Mondrian's compositions (how well the word fits) from 1917 until his death reflect his steadfast adherence to his belief in the unalterable consequences of these laws. However, as the above quotation shows, Mondrian believed he was describing all art, not just Abstract Art in general, or Neo-Plasticism in particular. But it is clear why Mondrian vastly preferred modern art with its clarity of form and purpose to the art of the past, which only partially recognized the basis of its own undertaking. It is also clear why Mondrian split with van Doesberg, a fellow countryman and Neo-Plastic artist who, in order to infuse more drama into his canvases, painted the rectangles balancing on their corners at 45-degree angles. Van Doesberg, Mondrian insisted, employed the rectangle, only to subvert its basic stability by tilting its position.

From his ideas concerning the basic nature and plastic function of the rectangle and the rectangular position, Mondrian derived his corollary ideas concerning the function of line. From a strictly aesthetic standpoint, every work of art which employs line as its only or basic element takes its meaning or meanings from the ways those lines have been combined. Mondrian felt that the history of art has always manifested the tendency to purify composition by making progressively clearer the function of line. In the evolution of plastic art, "gradually form and line gain in tension. For this reason the straight line is stronger and more profound than the curve."⁵⁶ He also refers to the straight line as "the curved line

brought to its maximum tension."⁵⁷

Mondrian's almost fanatical insistence on the primacy of the straight line is not as bizarre or arbitrary as might first be imagined. Mondrian agreed with Antonio Gaudi (though to radically different purposes) that there are no straight lines in nature, thereby associating the 90-degree and 180-degree angles with man exclusively. As Mondrian puts it:

Now, the straight line is a "fulfillment" of the curve, which is much more in conformity with nature . . . In art, as well as in conscious contemplation, the curve must be corrected by the straight line.⁵⁸

"Correction" and "tension" are the key terms for understanding Mondrian's ideas about the straight line. By "correcting" the tangle of arbitrary (visually) curves and bends in visible nature, the artist, "using the rectangular opposition -- the constant relationship -- established the universal individual duality:unity."⁵⁹ The rectangular relationship is defined as a plane by the dynamic (tension-producing) interplay of the straight line meeting in "a balance of equivalence of opposites" -- namely, the pure horizontal and vertical positions. Position defines the form of lines and spaces, and gives direction to the whole composition:

We can distinguish forms as closed and open forms. We may consider closed forms as those in which the circumference has neither beginning nor end, such as the circle. When the circumference shows a beginning and an end, it can be considered an open form, such as a

a segment of a circle. It is clear that the open form is less limiting than the closed form. Forms composed of straight lines are more open than those in which the circumference is a curved line. They are established by intersection and not by continuation.⁶⁰

Mondrian treats color in an analogous fashion with line. Just as the straight line is the artist's correction of the curve of nature, primary color is the correction -- instensification is a better word -- of the relatively impure colors of nature (whether or not they are "impure," they definitely evoke natural, objective reality more readily than synthetic colors).

Mondrian felt that the artist must be especially careful with his use of color because color, of all the basic components of painting, is most apt to initiate representation of external nature:

To be sure, color as such animates everything, and it is possible to be carried by the pure vision of color to the loftiest heights, indeed, to contemplation of the universal. But one must add that color as such speaks to us so insistently of external things that we run the risk of remaining in the contemplation of what is external and vague, instead of seeing the abstract.⁶¹

This insistent representationalism Mondrian thought inherent in the very nature of color occasionally led him to exclude color altogether from his canvases. But, since color is clearly a part of the

world of painting as well as of the universe, he usually utilized color in his work, though never, in his mature work, anything other than one or a combination of the three primary colors, red, yellow, and blue. These colors, Mondrian believed, were primary in the same sense that the relations of position and dimension are primary. Bordered and balanced as they are in his paintings by black lines and white planes, these areas of color add the realms of color value, hue, and intensity to the pictorial world of Neo-Plastic art.

According to Mondrian, these concepts concerning space, form, line, the rectangular position, color, and their mutual relations are the source of all painting, abstract or not. But it is only the dedicated abstract artist who explores in the greatest depth the processes and materials of painting, and who can thereby "create pure reality plastically." If he is successful his art should arouse "universal emotion" in the observer who perceived in the painting the truth he knows intuitively, the truth of unity and order behind the veil of appearances. However, since the vast majority of people needs representation for comprehension and empathy, the abstract artist will continue to encounter indifference or hostility. But even if all Abstract Art fails to arouse emotions, this is no argument against the goals of Abstract Art itself:

In all art it is the artist's task to make forms and colors living and capable of arousing emotion. If he makes art into an "algebraic equation," that is no argument against the art; it only proves that he is not an artist.⁶²

On the other hand, Abstract Art has certain advantages over rep-

representational art, over and above the nature of their respective contents. If the abstract artist succeeds, his art will possess a timelessness and endless fascination beyond the reach of naturalistic art:

You don't get tired looking at a Neo-Plastic picture, let alone at a Neo-Plastic room. In naturalistic pictures, the individual element is the dominant one; that is why they cannot satisfy us all the time. An emotion of beauty in which the individual element is more or less dominant is a temporary emotion. Only the pure plasticism of the universal can satisfy us without tiring us.⁶³

This is a lofty hope for a notoriously fickle human race; but Mondrian's own life should count as proof (or hope) that things can be otherwise.

ART AND SOCIETY

Though Mondrian usually only addressed himself to matters of general, universal truth and aesthetics in his essays, he was sensitive to the social implications of his theories. The artist, Mondrian feels, is the vanguard and prophet for the future society -- a society to which he already belongs in spirit. But the true artist "belongs" to his immediate society only in the sense that Plato's philosopher in the Republic belongs to the cave. His real allegiance is not to any race, nation, or society, but to the universal truth of his art. Mondrian himself felt equally at home in Amsterdam, Paris, London, and New York. New York was especially congenial to Mondrian, who felt in its stone, steel, and jazz a rude but exuberant beginning of the city of the future.

As might be expected, Mondrian believes that the major forces in human social life could be perceived as a metaphysical balance of opposites. Actual "human life in time is doomed to disequilibrium"⁶⁴ -- the chaos of natural and human forces which bring unhappiness, decay, and death to individuals and societies. Compounding these ubiquitous evils is the human perversity that draws us to disequilibrium like a magnet. Mondrian always felt that people inevitably display "the unconscious love of tragic, disequibrated feelings."

The key to tragedy and disequilibrium lies in "uncorrected nature." In the following passage, Mondrian pits a naturalistic painter (named X) and his love for the external appearance of nature

against Z, the painter of Abstract Art and Mondrian's own spokesman:

X: For my part, I always prefer to follow
nature.

Z: By the same token you will have to accept,
then, whatever is capricious and twisted in
nature.

X: The capricious is beautiful.

Z: Beautiful, but tragic; if you follow nature
you will not be able to vanquish the tragic
to any real degree in your art. It is certainly
true that naturalistic painting makes us feel
a harmony which is beyond the tragic, but it
does not express this in a clear and definite
way, since it is not confined to expressing
relations of equilibrium. Let us recognize
the fact once and for all: the natural
appearance, natural form, natural color,
natural rhythm, natural relations, most
often express the tragic. . . Every feeling,
every individual thought, every purely human
will, every particular desire, in a word,
every sort of attachment, leads to the
representation of the tragic, and makes it
impossible to express pure repose.⁶⁵

This passage clearly shows the deep affinity between Mondrian's
thought and the doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, and stoicism. It

affirms the old truth that panta rei, everything changes, but affirms even more emphatically the opportunity for man to escape from seemingly inevitable tragedy. Abstract Art, as a sharpener of our intuitive perception of inner reality and universal truth, shows us that although we, as individuals, are "doomed to disequilibrium," "notwithstanding this, life is based on equilibrium."⁶⁶ Abstract Art demonstrates "that equilibrium can become more and more living in us."⁶⁷ How?

Progress for humanity consists in the conquest of oppression; it parallels the progress of art. Oppression destroys itself but not without humanity's continual struggle against it. At present, we see the facts of mutual oppression: political, economic, domestic. Art suffers from the ignorance of the public, educated by incompetent writers, critics, teachers, museum committees, etc. By the study of the forms and relationships that art and life show, the complicated causes and consequences of all oppression can be understood. Then we can see the necessary function of oppression.⁶⁸

Mondrian was convinced that in the future mankind would have ways of balancing his existence. It is a testament to the strength of Mondrian's belief in the ever-increasing perfectability of man that he remained optimistic through two world wars and a depression. "Social and economic life today," Mondrian wrote in 1942, "already demonstrates this effort toward an exact equilibrium. Material life

will not be forever menaced and made tragic. Nor will our moral life always be oppressed by the domination of material existence."⁶⁹

Like every visionary convinced of the absolute veracity of his own perceptions, Mondrian makes some predictions. The basis of his beliefs about the future direction of man and society are based on his progressive belief in the development of man's mind. "We might say that in cosmic perspective, man is now evolving in an inverse sense: from matter to mind."⁷⁰ The human mind, in which developed intuition is overcoming self-centered instinct, is developing by the inner logic of evolution. "The changing conditions of human life in experience, education, science, and technics are reducing the brutish, primitive forces of Man and are transforming it into a real human force."⁷¹

Mondrian clearly feels that the creative and stabilizing power of the human mind could establish dynamic equilibrium in all human affairs. He was a Utopian in his social thought because he believed in attainable perfection in art.

Mondrian was sensitive to the criticisms that the world of pure relations he envisioned might well be as desert's peace. And, indeed, passages like the following give some support to these criticisms:

It is thus clear that man has not become
a mechanic, but that the progress of science,
of technique, of machinery, of life as a whole,
has only made him into a living machine, capable
of realizing in a pure manner the essence of
art. In this way, he is in his creation

sufficiently neutral, that nothing of himself or outside of him can prevent him from establishing that which is universal.⁷²

Mondrian was fairly definite about the metaphysical spirit of man's future, but necessarily vague about particulars. But as with his aesthetics theory and his painting, it is the inner spirit and the basic truth that counts, and not the particulars. His ideas are like floor plans for the new mansion of society. The operative, three-dimensional reality, as presented by Mondrian, are rendered as surface, picture-plane features in the Neo-Plastic style. Accordingly, the new society will be inspired by the same principles that produced its herald, Abstract Art:

The pure plastic vision should set up a new society just as in art it set forth a new plasticism. This will be a society based on the equation of the material and the spiritual, a society composed of balanced relationships.⁷³

The new world of balanced relationships will be such that we might exclaim with Mondrian's imaginary naturalistic painter X, "Your new age is beginning to annoy me: it requires that we pay attention to everything!"⁷⁴ And in fact, since the urban environment of man will, as a totality, express pure plastic values, art as a separate activity will cease to exist:

In the future, the realization of pure plastic expression in palpable reality will replace the work of art. But in order to achieve this, orien-

tation toward a universale conception and detachment from the oppression of nature is necessary. Then we will no longer have the need of pictures and sculpture, for we will live in realized art... "Art" is only a "substitute" as long as the beauty of life is deficient. It will disappear in proportion as life gains in equilibrium.⁷⁵

Mondrian was not the only painter who believed in or hoped for this union of art and environment. Art Nouveau artists were attempting to transform even the most mundane articles of human use into beautiful objects. Miro believed that painting had already become obsolete:

The painter, as we know him today, is already a figure of history, destined to disappear. There will no longer be painters, but rather men who express themselves by three-dimensional means and who participate in other arts, such as architecture, which are more direct in their effects, more in contact with society.⁷⁶

Insofar as the aesthetic concepts of the past continue to hold people, however, the future fulfillment of Neo-Plastic principles will be a struggle, eventually triumphant, against the tyrannical influence of the past. But Mondrian was confident that the same evolutionary force which guides the development of the mind and the metamorphosis of art will also bring about "Nieuwe Beelding" --

a new constructivism -- in human culture:

It is the ripened culture of a form that is about to die. This culture is visible everywhere in all its beauty, but on the other hand it everywhere obstructs the path of that to which it has given birth, I mean, the bright and balanced plastic art of limitation and expansion considered as equivalents -- i.e., the artistic expression of the new stage which vital human force has reached.⁷⁷

Mondrian's attitude towards the society and culture of his own era was mixed. He believed that Abstract Art was above the commonplace distinctions of class, nation, or race. He was aware, however, that many critics, especially Marxists who promoted "socialist realism," were sorely annoyed with Abstract Art. The Nazi regime also objected to what it termed "Degenerate Art," and officially discouraged the production or purchase of what it considered to be inferior art by inferior people. To such critics, Abstract Art is but another decadent bizarrierie for jaded palates. Mondrian replies to such criticism, here put in the mouth of Y, a visitor to the studio of Z, the abstract painter:

Y: I have heard Neo-Plasticism called "a typical product of the dying bourgeoisie.

Z: Now that is quite surprising! There is nothing in Neo-Plasticism that in the slightest way suggests the bourgeoisie.

Isn't the bourgeois characterized by the predominance of individualism, and by close attachment to material things?⁷⁸

On the relation of the artist to "the masses," Mondrian was explicit. Rejecting the elitist notions that art is only for the few, Mondrian wrote that "art is not made for anybody and is, at the same time, for everybody."⁷⁹ Art can be -- and will be -- all-pervasive when it is embodied in urban environments. But whether or not the masses understand the developments in art is irrelevant to the true purpose of art, the revelation of inner truth. It would be a mistake, Mondrian felt, for the avant garde to reduce the intellectual level of their work to the lowest common denominator. Here is Mondrian's account of the relationship of the pioneers in art to the masses:

At a time when so much attention is paid to the collective, to the "mass", it is necessary to note that evolution, ultimately, is never the expression of the mass. The mass remains behind yet urges the pioneers to creation. For the pioneers, the social contact is indispensable, but not in order that they may know that what they are doing is necessary and useful, nor in order that "collective approval may help them to preserve and nourish them with living ideas." This contact is necessary only in an indirect way; it acts especially as an obstacle which increases their determination.

The pioneers create through their reaction to external stimuli. They are guided not by the mass but by that which they see and feel. They discover consciously or unconsciously the fundamental laws hidden in reality, and aim at realizing them. In this way they further human development. They know that humanity is not served by making art comprehensible to everybody; to try this is to attempt the impossible. One serves mankind by enlightening it. Those who do not see will rebel, they will try to understand and will end up by "seeing." In art the search for a content which is collectively understandable is false; the content will always be individual. Religion, too, has been debased by that search.⁸⁰

He adds, by way of a caveat, that "it is a mistake to try to go too fast" in bringing everyone to the same level of universal awareness at the same time. The mental evolution of man's intuition must proceed rightly, not necessarily quickly. But in the end, Mondrian saw the masses and the vanguard as part of the same social unity, just as he saw horizontal and vertical, form and space: both are necessary, and each needs the other for the definition of its own makeup:

Is it really to be believed that the evolution of the mass and that of the elite are incompatible? The elite rises from the mass; is it not therefore its highest expression?⁸¹

Mondrian was interested in all facets of society, especially American society, where he felt the Neo-Plastic principles he believed in were being actualized. Once, at a party in New York City, Mondrian expressed a desire that he could have grown up in America, where he would have developed faster. "The hell you would have," was the American painter Stuart Davis' reply.

Architecture held a particular fascination for Mondrian. He sensed that it would be through architectural design that Neo-Plasticism could become a tangible force in transforming mankind. In this expectation he was not disappointed. Whole architectural movements, like the International Style, as well as influential individual architects, like van Doesburg and Frank Lloyd Wright, owe a debt of inspiration to the principles Mondrian set forth in his aesthetic theories and painting.

Mondrian delighted in the thought that individual peculiarities might be transcended in architecture. As universal principles become incorporated in the great buildings of the twentieth century, individual buildings will be as anonymous as the great Medieval cathedrals, and reflect the spirit of the new age rather than the ego of one man:

In Neo-Plasticism the personal factor is becoming more and more superfluous. The more Neo-Plastic painting becomes reality, that is to say, the more Neo-Plasticism becomes part of architecture, the more will the individual personality be relegated to the background.⁸²

And again:

While Neo-Plasticism now has its own intrinsic value, as painting and sculpture, it may be considered as a preparation for a future architecture. It can complete existent new architecture in the way of establishment of pure relationships and pure color. Modern industry and progressive technics show parallel if not equal developments.⁸³

But after painting, the art Mondrian most enjoyed was music. He prophesies that "the closer music comes to a pure expression of balanced relations, the more it will feel the limitations of existing instruments. Then other instruments will be sought -- or machines."⁸⁴ But until that time, he would listen and dance to jazz. The spirit of jazz satisfied for Mondrian the impulse to move in a way compatible with the pace and rhythms of the twentieth century city. Old music, with its old instruments, old harmonies, and salon etiquette, did not attract him. It was the rhythm of jazz that moved him, and its destruction of traditional harmony and melody that satisfied him intellectually. The chord changes, the harmonies built on blue notes, the syncopated rhythm and furious tempo give the music the dynamism with logic that Mondrian and other European artists admired so much. The perpetual attraction that jazz held for Mondrian has been happily immortalized in a photograph showing the artist in his painting smock turning on the radio to listen to jazz. Apparently he liked to work with the syncopated rhythms of Swing and Dixieland and Boogie-Woogie ordering the air as he ordered the canvases.

For some time it was fashionable for French intellectuals to take notes during a jazz performance, then discuss the music

analytically after the session was over. But Mondrian could not sit still with the new music pulsing around him. He loved to dance. Opinions of his accomplishment in dancing varied widely; but no one questioned his serious pursuit of this art of the whole person. Mondrian even named three paintings after jazz dances, including his last two masterpieces, Broadway Boogie-Woogie and Victory Boogie-Woogie. Naturally, Mondrian saw the new dance as a manifestation of pure Neo-Plastic principles in action:

Today the dance, the dance which has some subtlety, as well as the music, to which, or rather, against which one dances, expresses a duality of two equivalent elements. The straight line is the plastic expression of this fact. In music, the various rhythms oppose each other, as they oppose the melody, and as the steps of the dance oppose each other.

Mondrian felt that the rhythm of the new music adumbrated the perfection of the machine, and indeed of life itself:

In our time, rhythm is more and more accentuated, not only in art, but in mechanized reality and in the whole of life. Marvelously determined and full of vitality, it is expressed in real jazz, swing, and Boogie-Woogie music and dance.

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RETROSPECT

In an important sense, Mondrian's aesthetics are not aesthetics at all, but an entire metaphysical and religious life view. This is why it is easy to talk about Mondrian's views on architecture, jazz, or reality in general, and never stray from the subject. Throughout his entire life Mondrian strove for the unity he never ceased writing about or painting. And gradually, his separate ideas on the problems presented by his work and his thought fused into a remarkably coherent world view.

Michel Seuphor aptly sums up Mondrian's religious thought thusly: "His Calvinism was replaced by theosophy, then theosophy itself was absorbed (after 1916) by Neo-Plasticism, which for him was to be capable of expressing everything without words."⁸⁷ There are few lives, in the history of art or anywhere else, which evidence such complete integration of belief, purpose, and action. Mondrian lived fully his own lofty, austere ideals by (he would put it) conditioning his intuition, his technical skill, and his perception of the real unity of the universe. By doing what he believed in most firmly, he hoped to transfer the fruits of his discoveries to all mankind. And with the new vision of reality, man might at last find what he is looking for. "All expressions in life," he wrote, "like science, philosophy, and all abstract creations like art, may be regarded as only so many means to attain equilibrium."⁸⁸ Not equality, for equality is impossible in a world where men are endowed unequally with powers and weaknesses, or in a universe where all forces exert different strengths in different directions for varying durations.

For Mondrian, only equilibrium, the balance of unequal opposites, can reveal pure reality, regardless of the circumstances. And it is the duty of all artists to aid all men in perceiving this unchangeable and profound truth.

Of course, it is unlikely that Mondrian's hope will ever be totally realized in society, for a thousand obvious and an infinity of obscure reasons. But he has offered us a picture of what painting, at its origin, is, of what reality is, in its very makeup, and what our social reality might be like if we choose to heed his words and art.

"We all pay homage to clarity."⁸⁹

NOTES

The vast majority of the quotations in this book come from two sources: Michel Seuphor's excellent book, Piet Mondrian, published by Abrams; and Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art and Other Essays, by Mondrian, published by Wittenborn and Co., in 1945.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations will be from the volume published by Wittenborn. For purposes of brevity, I shall use the following system of abbreviations for these essays: "True Vision" for the essay "Toward the True Vision of Reality"; "Liberation" for "Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life"; "Plastic Art" for "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art."

- 1) Carl Holty, "Mondrian in New York: a Memoir" in Arts, Sept., 1957, p. 20.
- 2) "Plastic Art," p. 52.
- 3) Gerald Holton, "Modern Science and the Intellectual Tradition," in Science, Vol. 131, p. 1187.
- 4) "A New Realism," p. 18.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) "De Stijl #1," published in Seuphor's Piet Mondrian (New York, no date), p. 143.
- 7) Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings (New York, 1967) p. 45.
- 8) "De Stijl #1," Seuphor, p. 143.
- 9) Ibid.
- 10) "True Vision," pp. 14-15.

- 11) "Abstract Art," p. 28.
- 12) "A New Realism," p. 17.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Ibid.
- 16) Ibid.
- 17) Ibid., p. 18.
- 18) "Liberation," p. 41.
- 19) "Plastic Art," p. 54.
- 20) "Liberation," p. 42
- 21) Ibid., p. 40.
- 22) "Abstract Art," o, 28
- 23) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 31.
- 24) Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception (New York, 1954), p. 31.
- 25) "A New Realism," p. 18.
- 26) "Plastic Art," p. 61.
- 27) "A New Realism," p. 26.
- 28) "True Vision," p. 10.
- 29) Holty, "Mondrian in New York," p. 18.
- 30) Ibid.
- 31) "Plastic Art," p. 59.
- 32) "A New Realism," p. 18.
- 33) Ibid., p. 19.
- 34) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," in Seuphor, p. 314.
- 35) "Plastic Art," p. 60.
- 36) Ibid., p. 62.
- 37) Ibid., p. 54.

- 38) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 31.
- 39) "True Vision," p. 15.
- 40) "De Stijl #1," in Seuphor, p. 143.
- 41) Ibid.
- 42) "Liberation," p. 39.
- 43) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus, (New York, 1963), p. 51.
- 44) "De Stijl #1," Seuphor, p. 143.
- 45) "A New Realism," p. 19.
- 46) Ibid., p. 26.
- 47) Nathan Knobler, The Visual Dialogue (New York, 1966), p. 100.
- 48) "Liberation," p. 44.
- 49) "A New Realism," p. 19.
- 50) Ibid., p. 20
- 51) "Plastic Art," p. 53
- 52) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 306.
- 53) Ibid., p. 304.
- 54) "De Stijl #1," Seuphor, p. 143.
- 55) "Plastic Art," p. 57.
- 56) Ibid.
- 57) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 32.
- 58) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 314.
- 59) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 32.
- 60) "A New Realism," p. 18.
- 61) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 305.
- 62) "Plastic Art," pp. 59-60.
- 63) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 340
- 64) "True Vision," p. 15.

- 65) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 309.
- 66) "True Vision," p. 15.
- 67) Ibid.
- 68) "Liberation," p. 40.
- 69) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 31.
- 70) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 316.
- 71) "Liberation," p. 40.
- 72) "Plastic Art," p. 62.
- 73) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," p. 322.
- 74) Ibid., p. 350
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p. 178.
- 77) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 346.
- 78) Ibid., p. 349
- 79) "Plastic Art," p. 52.
- 80) Ibid.
- 81) Ibid., p. 62.
- 82) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 343.
- 83) "True Vision," p. 14.
- 84) "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Seuphor, p. 344.
- 85) Ibid., p. 320
- 86) "Liberation," p. 47
- 87) Seuphor, p. 58.
- 88) "Pure Plastic Art," p. 32.
- 89) "Plastic Art," p. 58.

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