

see but one thing in both: the plastic expression of relationship. If from *the point of view of gaining* you can thus see beauty in one mode of expression, you will also see it in the other. [...]

## 7 Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) *Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence*

Mondrian returned to Paris in 1919. The present essay was written in 1920 and marked the first exposition of his ideas in French. Mondrian himself considered it definitive, claiming in 1932 to have done 'nothing further' in writing. Mondrian was included by Léonce Rosenberg in his exhibition 'Masters of Cubism' of 1921, and the essay was published as a pamphlet, *Le Néoplasticisme: Principe général de l'équivalence plastique*, by Rosenberg's Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris, January 1921. The present extracts are taken from Holzman and James, op. cit., pp. 132–47.

Although art is the plastic expression of *our* aesthetic emotion, we cannot therefore conclude that art is only 'the aesthetic expression of our subjective sensations.' Logic demands that art be the *plastic expression of our whole being*: therefore, it must be equally the plastic appearance of the *nonindividual*, the absolute and annihilating opposition of subjective sensations. That is, it must also be the *direct expression of the universal in us* – which is the *exact appearance of the universal outside us*.

The universal thus understood is that which *is* and *remains constant*: the more or less *unconscious* in us, as opposed to the more or less *conscious* – *the individual*, which is repeated and renewed.

*Our whole being* is as much the one as the other: *the unconscious and the conscious, the immutable and the mutable, emerging and changing form through their reciprocal action*.

This action contains all the misery and all the happiness of life: misery is caused by *continual separation*, happiness by perpetual rebirth of *the changeable*. The immutable is beyond all misery and all happiness: it is *equilibrium*.

Through the immutable in us, we are united with all things; the mutable destroys our *equilibrium*, limits us, and separates us from all that is other than us. It is from this *equilibrium*, from *the unconscious*, from *the immutable* that art comes. It attains its *plastic expression through the conscious*. In this way, *the appearance of art* is plastic expression of *the unconscious and of the conscious*. It shows *the relationship* of each to the other: its appearance changes, but *art* remains immutable.

In 'the totality of our being' the individual or the universal may dominate, or equilibrium between the two may be approached. [...] In all the arts objective fought against subjective, universal against individual: *pure plastic expression* against *descriptive expression*. Thus art tended toward *equilibrated plastic*.

*Dis-equilibrium* between individual and universal creates the *tragic* and is expressed as *tragic plastic*. In whatever exists as form or corporeality, the natural dominates: this creates the tragic...

The tragic in life leads to artistic creation: *art*, because it is abstract and in opposition to the natural concrete, can anticipate the gradual disappearance of the tragic. The more the tragic diminishes, the more art gains in purity.

The new spirit can manifest itself only in the midst of the tragic. It finds only the old form, for the new plastic is yet to be created. Born in the environment of the past, it can be expressed only in the *vital reality of the abstract* . . .

Because it is part of the whole, the new spirit cannot free itself entirely from the tragic. The *New Plastic*, expressing the *vital reality of the abstract*, has not entirely freed itself from the tragic but it has ceased to be dominated by it.

In contrast, in the old plastic the tragic dominates. It cannot dispense with the tragic and tragic plastic.

So long as the individual dominates, tragic plastic is necessary, for that is what creates its emotion. But as soon as a period of greater maturity is reached, tragic plastic becomes insupportable.

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For let us not forget that we are at a turning point of culture, *at the end of everything ancient: the separation between the two is absolute and definite*. Whether it is recognized or not, one can logically foresee that the future will no longer understand tragic plastic, just like an adult who cannot understand the soul of the child.

At the same time as it suppresses the dominating tragic, the new spirit suppresses *description* in art. Because the obstacle of form has been destroyed, the new art affirms itself as *pure plastic*. The new spirit has found its *plastic expression*. In its maturity, the one and the other are neutralized, and they are coupled into unity. Confusion in the apparent unity of interior and exterior has been resolved into an *equivalent duality forming absolute unity*. The individual and the universal are *in more equilibrated opposition*. Because they are merged in unity, description becomes superfluous: *the one is known through the other*. They are plastically expressed without use of form: *their relationship alone (through direct plastic means) creates the plastic*.

It is in *painting* that the New Plastic achieved complete expression for the first time. This plastic could be formulated because its principle was solidly established, and it continues to perfect itself unceasingly.

*Neo-Plasticism* has its roots in Cubism. It can equally be called *Abstract-Real painting* because the *abstract* (just like the mathematical sciences but without attaining the absolute, as they do) can be expressed by plastic reality. In fact, this is the essential characteristic of the New Plastic in painting. It is a composition of rectangular color planes that expresses the most profound reality. It achieves this by *plastic expression of relationships* and not by natural appearance. It realizes what all painting has always sought but could express only in a veiled manner. The colored planes, as much by position and dimension as by the greater value given to color, plastically express only *relationships* and not forms.

The New Plastic brings its relationships into *aesthetic equilibrium* and thereby expresses *the new harmony*.

The future of the New Plastic and its true realization in painting lies in *chromoplastic in architecture* . . . It governs the interior as well as the exterior of the building and includes everything that plastically expresses relationships through color. No more than the 'New Plastic-as-painting,' which prepares the way for it, can chromoplastic be regarded as 'decoration.' It is *entirely new painting* in which all painting is resolved, pictorial as well as decorative. It unites the *objective* character of decorative art (but much more strongly) with the *subjective* character of pictorial art (but much more

foundly). At this moment, for material and technical reasons, it is very difficult to foresee its exact image.

At present each art strives to express itself more directly through its *plastic means* and seeks to *free* its means as much as possible.

*Music* tends toward the liberation of *sound*, *literature* toward the liberation of *word*. Thus, by purifying their plastic means, they achieve the *pure plastic of relationships*. The degree and mode of purification vary with the art and the epoch in which they can be attained.

In fact, the new spirit is revealed by the plastic means: it is *expressed through composition*. Composition must express *equilibrated plastic as a function of the individual and of the universal*. Dominating tragic must be abolished by composition and plastic means together: for if plastic appearance is not composed *in constant and neutralizing opposition*, the plastic means would return to the expression of 'form' and would be veiled anew by the descriptive.

Thus *Neo-Plasticism* in art is not simply a question of 'technique.' In the New Plastic, and *through it*, technique changes. The touchstone of the new spirit, next to composition, is precisely what is so often lightly called 'technique.'

'It is by *appearance* that one judges whether a work of art is really pure plastic expression of the universal' . . .

Because sculpture and painting have been able to reduce their primitive plastic means to *universal plastic means*, they can find effective plastic expression *in exactness and in the abstract*. Architecture by its very nature already has at its disposal a plastic means free of the capricious form of natural appearance.

In the New Plastic, painting no longer expresses itself through the *corporeality* of appearance that gives it a naturalistic expression. To the contrary, painting is expressed plastically by *plane within plane*. By reducing three-dimensional corporeality to a single plane, *it expresses pure relationship*.

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. . . *The new spirit* must be manifested *in all the arts without exception*. That there are differences between the arts is no reason that one should be valued less than the other; that can lead to *another* appearance but not to an *opposed* appearance. As soon as one art becomes plastic expression of the abstract, the others can no longer remain plastic expressions of the natural. The two do not go together: from this comes their mutual hostility down to the present. The New Plastic abolishes this antagonism: *it creates the unity of all the arts*. [ . . . ]

Sculpture and architecture, until the present, destroy space *as space* by dividing it. The new sculpture and architecture must destroy *the work of art as an object or thing*.

Each art possesses its own *specific* expression, its *particular nature*. 'Although the content of all art is one, the possibilities of plastic expression are different for each art. Each art discovers these possibilities within its own domain and must remain limited by its bounds. Each art possesses its own *means of expression*: the *transformation* of its plastic means has to be discovered independently by each art and must remain limited by its own bounds. Therefore the potentialities of one art cannot be judged according to the potentialities of another, but must be considered independently and only with regard to the art concerned . . .'

'With the advancing culture of the spirit, all the arts, regardless of differences in their expressive means, in one way or another become more and more the plastic creation of determinate, equilibrated relationship: for equilibrated relationships must purely express the universal, the harmony, the unity that are proper to the spirit.'

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... Through the new spirit, man himself creates a new beauty, whereas in the past he only painted and described the beauty of nature. This new beauty has become indispensable to the new man, for in it he expresses *his own image in equivalent opposition with nature*. THE NEW ART IS BORN.

## 8 Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) 'Non-Objective Art and Suprematism'

Malevich claimed that Suprematism began in 1913. Its first exposition took place, however, in December 1915; the works of 1913 to which he refers were set designs (involving squares) for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, which he saw as significant in the genesis of Suprematism. The *Black Square* of 1915 had served as a zero point from which Malevich could develop a vocabulary of coloured forms, mostly rectangular and often giving the appearance of 'flying' in pictorial space. By 1919 he believed he had burst through colour into white, the 'colour' of infinity. This text was originally published in the catalogue to the 10th State Exhibition, Moscow 1919, at which Malevich exhibited his 'White on White' canvases. The present translation is taken from Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910–1920*, London, 1982, pp. 282–3. (For other texts by Malevich, see IIA16, IIC9 and IVD1.)

The plane which formed a square was the progenitor of Suprematism, the new colour realism, as non-objective art (see the pamphlet *Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism*, 1st, 2nd and 3rd editions, 1915 and 1916). [See IIA16.]

Suprematism arose in Moscow in 1913 and the first works which appeared at an exhibition of painting in Petrograd aroused indignation among 'papers that were then in good standing' and critics, as well as among professionals – the leading painters.

In referring to non-objectivity, I merely wished to make it plain that Suprematism is not concerned with things, objects, etc., and more: non-objectivity in general has nothing to do with it. Suprematism is a definite system in accordance with which colour has developed throughout the long course of its culture.

Painting arose from the mixing of colours and – at moments when aesthetic warmth brought about a flowering – turned colour into a chaotic mix, so that it was objects as such which served as the pictorial framework for the great painters. I found that the closer one came to the culture of painting, the more the frameworks (i.e. objects) lost their systematic nature and broke up, thus establishing a different order governed by painting.

It became clear to me that new frameworks of pure colour must be created, based on what colour demanded and also that colour, in its turn, must pass out of the pictorial mix into an independent unity, a structure in which it would be at once individual in a collective environment and individually independent.