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Mondrian

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MONDRIAN
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"I believe your lordship has been to many schools:
what science did you learn?"
"The science of knight-errantry," Don Quixote
answered, "which is as good as that of poetry and
can even surpass it by two or three inches."
"I don't know of any such science," said Don
Lorenzo.

(MIGUEL DE CERVANTES: *Don Quixote de la Mancha*)

In 1924 Piet Mondrian gave up the membership of the De Stijl movement. In a pathetic letter to Theo van Doesburg we are told about the reason of the breach: Theo van Doesburg had introduced a diagonal line into one of his paintings. At that time, for more than six years, Mondrian had been painting only rectangles resulting from the intersection of perpendiculars which enclosed areas of primary colours: yellow, red and blue. Van Doesburg's diagonal (Mondrian wrote that one cannot deny the naturalistic and frivolous expression of the diagonal line) was a heresy in the pure Cartesianism of neoplasticism. After your arbitrary "correction of neoplasticism," the letter reads, "I feel bound to cease any collaboration."

For almost twenty years — until he died — Mondrian went on painting his neoplastic rectangles, all resembling one another and yet altogether different.

This strange "polemic concerning the diagonal" is one of the most incredible aspects of historical *avant-gardism*. However, this is only the second stage of an incredible earlier phenomenon: the emergence of abstract painting at the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century.

Renouncing the object, which became prevalent in the European art of those times, can be classed with "decorativism" or "gratuitousness" only because it was quite convenient to do so, or on account of an utter failure to understand the disquieting spiritual motive underlying Kandinsky's *Improvisations*, Mondrian's *Compositions* or Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square on a White Ground*.

We believe that an honest attempt at revealing the causes that led to the appearance of abstract art could help us approach, in a less biased manner, the art of the century which is still ours.

As is well known, it was not Mondrian who "invented" abstract painting, which was "in the wind" as early as the first decade of the century one might say. Kandinsky — who by common consent was considered the first abstractionist — made his "first abstract watercolour" in 1910, while Mondrian presented his first composition without an object in 1914. Meanwhile, in Russia, Malevich had created the "non-objective world" somewhat tangential to Mondrian's vision.

The paths the three initiators of abstract painting followed are completely divergent, though they were all contemporaries. Each of them offered a different solution for a problem common to the entire cultural atmosphere of the time: seeking a human justification and, implicitly, stating the role of art in contemporary society. This serious examination of the roots, this obsession with primary motivations brings about an apparent separation of the artist from everything that transcends his immediate creative activity. It was held, in a famous indictment of modern art, that the latter is an "artistic art"¹ *par excellence*, i.e. an art made not only *by* but also (only) *for* artists. The public are turned away, almost against their will, from a phenomenon which they no longer understand, which becomes alien to them, as art had given up "human problems" (hence the so-called "dehumanization of art") in the name of a perpetual investigation of its specific laws.

There is a step only from the above assertions to the accusation of "breaking with reality"; but a closer examination of the artists clearly shows that the promoters of abstract art do not give up asking questions about reality; on the contrary their thinking reveals the fact that they are interested in the essential problems of reality. It is true that they no longer examine the world according to some specific laws: art is no longer a simple "representation" of reality but a mode of investigating its primary status. The solutions of the artists show they proceed cautiously, uncertainly. However,



Self-portrait

these are in fact the incertitudes of intellectuals who witnessed the preparation and development of the first great aberration of contemporary history — "The Great War" — who also witnessed the upsetting of the traditional values of Europe, the revolutionary discoveries of sciences which called in question the traditional image of reality from the Atom to the Universe.

Kandinsky came to the first abstract work by a conscious and pragmatic devaluation of traditional art and not by "discarding the object". His attitude seems to have been typical of *avant-garde* mentality; with the only difference that if Duchamp's adding moustaches to the *Mona Lisa* has preserved the external value of a symbol, Kandinsky's meditation reaches indisputable depths.

There is extremely valuable evidence, in the hand of the artist himself, very often quoted too, whose real significance was perhaps never well grasped. We reproduce it here, almost in full, for it seems to us it could explain to a large extent — Kandinsky admits it himself — the leap of the artists towards the abstract image. This experience dates from 1908, a period in which he was still in possession of a figurative manner of painting. It reads as follows:

"It was twilight, I was returning, immersed in thought, from my sketching, when on opening the studio door, I was suddenly confronted by a picture of indescribable and incandescent loveliness. Bewildered, I stopped, staring at it. The painting lacked all subject, depicted no identifiable object and was entirely composed of bright colour-patches. Finally I approached closer and only then recognized it for what it really was — my own painting standing on its side on the easel. The following day, by daylight, I tried to recapture the impression I had experienced the day before, but I couldn't do so entirely."

This passage has almost always been interpreted as an anticipation of the disappearance of the object in Kandinsky's painting. The artist himself intimates that this was the moment when he felt that "the object was harmful to painting." However, we should perhaps emphasize the fact that "the disappearance of the object" is a *consequence*; it is not the *cause* which made the painting look so new in the eyes of the artist: in the painting standing on its side a formal equilibrium is upset, which tries to fix an aspect of reality in a harmonious composition. Thus the artistic value of the laws that have governed painting for centuries is ignored, denied, refuted. The emotional force of traditional art is questioned: only when standing on its side the painting appears to be "of an indescribable and incandescent loveliness." The entire previous

in its basic equilibrium. According to Kandinsky, a new mode of artistic expression should completely give up *the traditional manner in which form was conceived*. The work of art should be the result of a new mode of conceiving formal equilibrium. This is the beginning of a period of great creative intensity — "the period of his genius" as Kandinsky's main biographer calls it² — in which both pictorial and theoretical experiments combine. The expressive and symbolic valences of colour, the role of the line and of the dot, the combination of elements on the surface, all these aspects are obvious in Kandinsky's work, for he seeks the most suitable means that could express "inner necessity". In all this context the "object" becomes lost, it is true, but this does not occur through the devaluation of the real but through the intention of going beyond traditional art.

The contemplation of the painting "standing on its side" destroys the *form* laden with its entire historical substance, i.e. the evolution of painting from the Renaissance to expressionism. Expressionism itself, to which Kandinsky was indisputably linked, had attempted a revaluation of painting by attacking the real image of the world. Kandinsky upset it; and once form was destroyed, the means of expression too were pulverized waiting to be used anew; a *second consequence* was the loss of the object to be represented.

The relation of the *non-objective artistic image* to nature — the way Kandinsky saw it — did not go beyond the stage of questions. The concomitant crucial developments in physics and the philosophy of nature greatly explain the historicity of Kandinsky's stand. The division of the atom was for the artist an event that marked him for life. The crux of the new problems regarding human cognition, problems resulting from this discovery, was the question whether it was possible or not to form a true image of reality. At the time when abstract art was about to appear, the philosophy of science had reached the conclusion that "if one can envisage an image of nature in keeping with the exact sciences of modern times, this should mean in fact the image of our relationship with nature instead of the image of nature itself (. . .) Thus it is not nature itself which is the object of cognition, but nature subjected to human questioning."³

On an artistic plane, Kandinsky's abstracticism coincides with the new type of dialogue between man and nature. He no longer applies to reality the mental pattern of a possible harmony of the world, as the physics of the time had demonstrated the importance of the image of a reality possessing a *particular* status of unity. The traditional artistic form the same as the classical scientific laws prove to be man's constructions, unrelated to reality. This does not mean that through his painting Kandinsky replaces the belief in a Universe viewed as Cosmos by the belief in a Universe viewed as Chaos. He seeks new laws in a world in the making, which — Kandinsky holds — should not distort reality but present it to the onlooker with a Heraclitean gesture.

This goes to explain the artist's ardent advocacy of the equivalence between abstract painting and genuine realism⁴; besides, his paradoxical assertion according to which "as a rule there is no problem of form" can be explained in the same way. Art, with Kandinsky, is a problem "of contents" *par excellence*, a problem of the "inner necessity", of the echo roused in man's consciousness by the aspects of the world of phenomena.

The desire only to express "inner necessity" could not seem to be very "original". Kandinsky was not the first artist in history to have felt it. What is new, however, is the manner in which "necessity" is understood. And we could say it is an utterly tragic manner.

In the conditions of the modern world, the urge towards transforming "inner necessity" into a work of art is, somehow, attempting the impossible: in order to be authentic and true the work of art can no longer accept a form which distorts it, organizes and harmonizes it in keeping with some laws (considered biased) of the concordance between Man and the World. "Necessity" is regarded as an interaction rather than a concordance.

The work of art is neither an image of nature "the way it is", nor can it be an illusory pattern of a harmony that does not exist. With Kandinsky "inner necessity" is a problem, a conflict and consequently its genuine expression will be "in form" *par excellence*. Owing to Kandinsky's abstractionism, it is communication that becomes the most tragic problem of modern art, i.e. communication in the absence of any "problem

of form". Literary confession, the artist's "self-explanation" can justify one thing only: the onlooker's impossibility to perceive the work of art in its entirety. All this makes Kandinsky feel the tragedy of modern art which Thomas Mann embodied in the composer Adrian Leverkühn. Let us remember the symbolic "flagellation of form" which is Leverkühn's famous discussion with the devil (or rather with his own fiendish part) and we shall realize there is a historical motive that led to Kandinsky's formula of abstractionism. And let us also remember a detail: the composer's harrowing profession of faith is written on a musical score (Mann's irony here is quite obvious): words appear instead of notes and sentences *about* chords instead of musical chords...

"In the solemn vastness of cosmic space I proclaim the white world of the suprematist non-objective representation to be the manifestation of revealed nothingness." Those are the words concluding the first part of Kasimir Malevich's main theoretical work. A few years before his painting representing a black square in a white ground⁶ had been exhibited. Was it a mere nihilistic display or the significant moment of a crisis? Or, to put it more plainly, how did Malevich come to abstract painting?

Malevich aspired after reaching the maximum representative power of art. This means that the painter will no longer try to represent this object on the canvas, or that one, or any other..., but all of them taken together, merging into one another, existing under the sign of the infinite and of eternity. The representation of one object only or of one aspect of reality means — in Malevich's opinion — "the arbitrary tearing away of a fragment from the whole." In fact, what should be represented is the Whole, that is cosmic reality. But in such a perspective the Whole is apt to be confused with nothingness. What can be important on a cosmic scale? Do objects and beings retain their finality when time means eternity and space infinity? Malevich answers in the negative, for "in a totality considered to be absolute, any individual part loses its particular distinctive value." Traditional art has come under the supremacy of the Church or under that of the ruling classes, he adds. A completely free art must give up pedestrian illustration to become a real image of the universe. The creative act will no longer preserve anything of the servitude of the past: the artist will become integrated into a free existence, the existence of the "non-objective world". The universe is aimless, a "universal" art should be its very picture, and a real human life is the one in which activity does not mean flight from cosmic reality and immersion in the treadmill of petty aims, but a concordant pulsation with the Universe. This full existence, Malevich holds, belongs to the suprematist artist and, in a near enough future, it will belong to everybody.

It is easy enough to detest, underlying Malevich's demonstration, a very important spiritual heritage which at the time meant first of all a revolt against what was "human, too human" in bourgeois society: it is Nietzsche's thinking who discerned in the aesthetic contemplation of the-world one of the most genuine attitudes of man. Art, said Nietzsche, is the most suitable manner of penetrating into the core of the sacred play of the Universe by becoming integrated into an absolute lack of finality. Of all human activities it is art alone which can tend towards the Universal, art alone is pure activity devoid of any practical aim, art alone can give man the a-teleological dimension of the universe.⁸

Such being the case, Malevich's abstractionism appears as the second important solution of the problem of art in modern times, while with Kandinsky abstract painting is the outcome of his revolt against form built by tradition, with Malevich it is the proclamation of a universal image of "the rhythm of Cosmic emotion." The road the *Black Square on a White Ground* opened up follows a precise course; after the *Blue Triangle and Red Square* or *Yellow Rectangle on a White Ground* the inevitable conclusion was soon to appear: in 1918 Malevich exhibited a *White Square on a White Ground*. "Rhythm" the artist explains, "cannot be found only in sounds, it is present in silence as well."

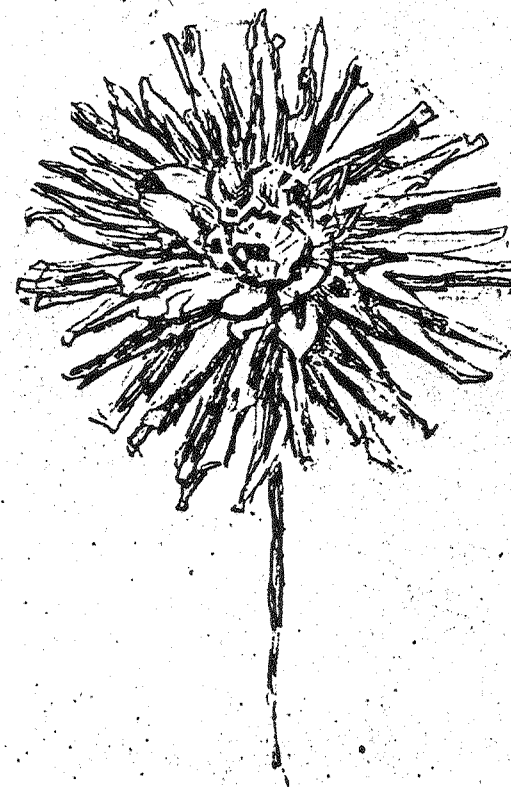
Neither Kandinsky's nor Malevich's painting evince any progressive process of "abstraction" from the real. With the former painter abstract art appears by completely breaking away from the "artistic form" as conceived previously, with the latter it does not appear — one might say — by *destroying* the object of the image but by amplifying it from the concrete *this* (object) has to the abstract *whole*. A painting by Malevich purports

to be an image of the World, yet of the World seen from such a distance that it becomes a "non-objective world." In this way the "object" of the representation, the World, fills the space of the image to such an extent that the only form that is able to correspond to it is the *Zero Form* as Malevich himself puts it. This is in fact the "nothingness revealed" the artists had mentioned: reality, in all its amplitude, becomes *nothingness*, for — according to the artist — the only possible equivalent of totality is nothingness. Thus, the status of art is dramatically called in question again.

Wassily Kandinsky destroys form in his attempt to free art from an illusory equilibrium and to make it express an inner resonance of the real which — if it is to remain genuine — can be only *formless*. In his desire to achieve maximum representation, Malevich chooses the *zero form*. Faced with the same problem, Piet Mondrian, one of the fathers of abstract painting himself, purified the real until it became *essential form*. That is why he can be considered the most "traditionalist" of the three, as his work is the outcome of a long artistic evolution whose most important echoes can be found in Cézanne and in cubism.

Nevertheless Mondrian's extremism is obvious. It consists not only in the fact that "the essential form" can be ultimately identified in the rectangle divided into areas of primary colours, but especially in the fact that, owing to the "traditional" belief in the possibility of equating form with reality, the impending danger of the *reversibility of terms* is sure to appear. In other words, there is not only one possible equivalence but two: artistic form-reality and reality-artistic form; or, to put it more clearly, *the essence of the real is apt to become form*.

Dahlia



With such a starting point it is easy to understand why Mondrian is the only artist of the "trio" in whose work one can easily notice a progressive abstraction of the object to become completely "essentialized".⁷

Mondrian's beginnings are related to expressionist painting, to its anticipatory variant represented by Munch and Van Gogh.⁸ However, he intuited in good time the tragic core of the unlimited experiencing of reality which Van Gogh was fated to go through. During the last and most difficult period of his life, the thin boundary between the Ego and the world gave way and the two spheres merged violently in the pure act of perception in order to destroy one another. The only, the unique and great conclusion the artist can draw is his ecstatic exclamation: "Reality exists!"⁹

With Munch the exclamation became a cry; a cry starting from the monadic solitude of each consciousness in its attempt to fill space with the concentric waves manifesting its own existence. At the same time, through Kierkegaard's thinking, the Northern spirituality comes to proclaim that Fear is the only authentic attitude of man to his life condition in the 20th century, through Heidegger, taking over "the concept of anguish", it was to endow it with the attributes of the basic interest of the human being in "the world as such".

Abstractionism, the way Kandinsky viewed it, is the most genuine artistic expression of the interaction between man and the universe. Starting from almost identical cultural premises, Mondrian tried to find a lesson in expressionism: the complete breaking of the limits between the ego and the world can be the source of the fear reality makes man experience. Fear is indeed a genuine attitude, but it looks like the first awakening from a life lost in everyday space. If the path leading to the experiencing of any moment is found in a total response to the universe, this "response" will no longer be confused with anguish, on the contrary it will secure the perfect harmony between the laws of the real and those of human existence. It is man's artistic activity which has always endeavoured to assert the communion between the world and the man. But the frantic pulsation of the world-in-man and of man-in-the-world, as Van Gogh felt it can be nothing but a prelude to self-destruction. If there is indeed a correspondence between Man and the Universe, *this cannot be an equivalence of existence* (temporary is not tantamount to eternal, or limited to unlimited) *but one of the essence*. The mission of the artist is to seek the *unity* of everything that exists, the *essential* form of the objects of the world. All through these quests, the response to the world will replace *Fear* by *Equanimity*, the only legitimate emotional attitude towards the unity with the world and with his own self.

"The figurative art of our times is the *result* of the figurative art of the past, while non-figurative art is the *product* of the figurative art of the present. It follows that the unity of the evolution of art is preserved."

Piet Mondrian's above assertion, which we come across worded in many other ways in almost all his writings, is no doubt the creed of a *homo culturalis*, of an artist to whom the iconoclastic attitude of *avant-garde* painting was completely alien. His art — Mondrian states it quite clearly — is only the product of a long evolution. It is moreover — he was to state it somewhere else — the *last* possible expression in art history.¹⁰

Abstract painting — the way Mondrian conceives it — is a consequence of the distillation of previous figurative solutions in his search of a unique, eternally valuable formula. If the break his abstractionism represents can be found in the area of expressionism, it is in cubism that we find the connecting link. Meeting cubism was certainly one of the crucial events in Mondrian's evolution; however, he was to find his ultimate solution, neoplastic painting, only after reducing the cubist interdependence of volumes to an intersection of lines on a surface.

Through this deductive operation the artist sought to eliminate the last remnants of "naturalism" that were to be found in cubism, i.e. corporality, materialness. Painting becomes a pure manifestation of the spirit: the surface fixes the chromatic areas within its perpendicular lines. It is true that the colours Mondrian uses "spatialize" the image, yet they do it in an *undetermined* way. The volume becomes surface, surface becomes line, and the colours of the spectrum are reduced to three unmixed primary colours. At times he uses grey — as a non-colour — and white, the colour potentially containing the whole solar spectrum.

on *culture*, one must not forget that his artistic creation is also rooted in his meditation on *nature*. "New art", Mondrian writes, "resumes what the art of the past had already started: the transformation of the natural vision." What the painter means by the words above can be traced in parallel both in his works and in his theoretical writings.

As early as the series of the *Trees* (1909–1912) one can notice the progressive schematization of the natural object until it becomes completely lost. Mondrian often calls it "denaturalization". Its motivation belongs historically to the old dispute between nature and spirit. Mondrian's effort to discover what is spirit in nature leads him — as an ultimate solution — to abstract painting, which *starts* from nature but loses the



Tree

external features of its phenomena to find its ordinating valences: "the universal is not to be found as such in nature but in the relations existing in nature." It is those very valences the artist was to dwell on, so that the image of the "relations existing in nature" should aspire after universality. This context reveals the key to the ultimate expression of Mondrian's art: neoplastic rectangles. "While observing the sea, the sky, the stars and the trees, it occurred to me I could indicate their plastic function by means of a series of vertical and horizontal intersecting lines." This does not mean that a vertical line in a composition will represent the line of the trees, the horizontal line the sea, blue the vault of the sky and yellow the sand on the beach. The representative quality of the image will aim higher: at a harmony-model of the visible world. This is art, in fact the spiritual side of nature, the only one which can be the object of a spiritual operation.

While Malevich comes to abstract art by stating that "the only possible form of reality as a whole is the zero form", Mondrian conceives abstract painting as an essential equivalence with reality as a whole. One might say that Mondrian's problem is of a pre-Socratic simplicity. His art tries to recover an original status related to a reality conceived as perfect harmony, as the Cosmos in the Hellenic acception of the word. In this attempt, the artist goes beyond a facile symbolism, to adopt a rigorously hermetic vision which may limit its accessibility justifying once more a critical approach, interpretation, hermeneutics.

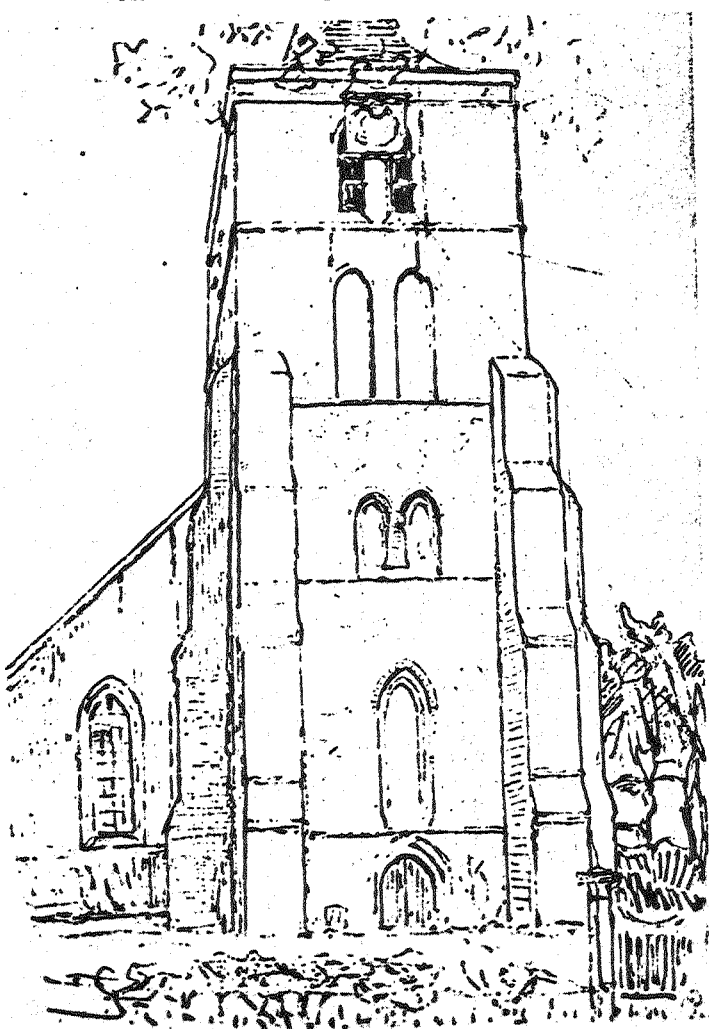
A note in Mondrian's diary points to the road to be followed in order to transpose the harmony of the visible on another plane: "The masculine principle,"

Mondrian writes, "represented by a vertical line, will be recognized by man in the trees of a forest. Equilibrium will result (for instance) from the horizontal line of the sea. A Woman will recognize herself in the vast lines of the sea rather, and will find her equilibrium in the vertical line of the forest."

This is perhaps the first evidence of what one may call the "Universal Eros" of Piet Mondrian's philosophic and aesthetic vision. To him the essence of the *real* appears to be a metaphysical-erotic nature through which contraries become equilibrated, tensions are annihilated, the *multiple* finds its harmony in oneness. The artistic image, through its essential equivalence with the real in its entirety, will have to represent the very play of contraries from which the calm unity of the world with its own self arises.

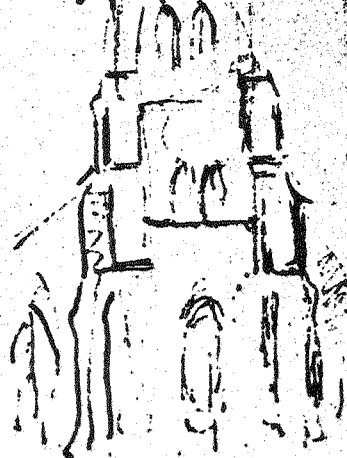
Of course the roots of this conception can be traced back to a schematic form of mythical thinking. Mondrian's return to the earliest domains of man's spiritual existence may be viewed from the angle of the "primitivism" of modern art. But we must emphasize the fact that it is doubtlessly an exceptional "primitivism". Mondrian does not seek plastic solutions in the art of the beginnings. As a representative — he

The Church in Domburg



Page from a Sketch-book

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means to be one — of the ultimate possible expression of art, the painter closes the circle of the possible representations of the world by bringing into focus again a "symbolic form" which exists beyond the very beginning of art.¹¹ This "symbolic form" is Unity regarded as a *bieros gamos*, as the harmonization of the contraries, as a sacred marriage. The myth of cosmic hierogamy is one of the most widespread original representations of unity. It assumes the most different forms: from the abstract-philosophic representation of the Chinese, to whom the world appears as the result of an interaction between a feminine principle (*Yin*) and a masculine one (*Yang*)¹², to the figurative representation of the "Marriage" between the Sky (*Uranus*) and the Earth (*Gaea*) as in the theogony of the ancient Greeks.

For the mythical mind, the symbolic representation of the original communion meant the re-creation of the cosmic harmony. With Mondrian it was the artistic act which was to allow the direct and continuous contact with the harmonious essence of the universe.

It has been often remarked that all the works of Mondrian belonging to a particular period of artistic creation "resemble" one another, for they are all in fact the resumption and recalling of the same motifs with slight variations. The remark is correct, but the "resemblance" of a work with another conceals the very mythical substratum of Mondrian's art. The repetition of the same plastic pattern may be compared to some ritual gestures. Artistic creation, as seen by Mondrian, is nothing but the road to equilibrium and cosmic peace. There is an obvious similarity here between Mondrian's position and that of a Byzantine or Indian artist to whom servitude to an iconographic pattern meant his integration into and ascetic elevation to the domain of the spirit. (An Indian thinker, for instance, used to say that "there is no other road than the creation of images, not even the direct and immediate vision of a real object, which makes it possible to become deeply immersed in meditation."¹⁸

Each of the series of *Trees*, *Dunes* and *Cathedral Façades* includes interpretations of one and the same motif. It was only in the series of the *Ovals* that the variations of an original form appear.

The oval irrevocably recalls the primary unity of the "cosmic Egg", the unity still non-differentiated into contraries. The egg is the *origin* of totality, it is not a reflex unity. Cubism had already used the oval form as a frame. And it is quite possible that its knowledge of cubism helped the artist find his first plastic solutions. In modern art, the egg has other significances as well, definitely symbolic this time. Thus, with Klee, the egg can be regarded as a symbol which has its plastic equivalent in the dot as origin of form; with Brancusi it appears as "The Beginning of the World"; with Ion Arbuz it confirms the "dogmatic" equivalence between beginning and end: "*The innocent new egg! Both palace for the wedding and burial vault.*"

We meet this key-motif for the first time in the evolution of Mondrian about 1910, in a sketch for a *Seascape* showing the union of sky and water. Then, beginning with 1914, the oval was to appear as a strictly abstract representation until it eventually became the compulsory frame of the compositions called *Plus and Minus*. Now, inside the perfect form, the contraries, still maintaining a compensating harmony, make their appearance: "the positive and the negative are the cause of any action (. .) they are the cause of eternal, vertiginous motion and of successive changes. They explain the possibility of happiness in Time. Positive and Negative are the cause of the "break unity," Mondrian used to write at the time. Once the unity is broken it will have to be restored.

Almost all Mondrian's *Ovals* are interrupted at their extremities by the limit of the frame. Their infinity is thus obviously emphasized. The oval is complete *somewhere* inside the image-space, both at the "plus pole" and at the "minus pole". This can claim the fact that the artist who craved for perfect forms never used the circle in geometrical compositions. The monocentrism of the circle excludes the existence of *traires*. The circle is perfect but *sterile*. On the other hand the ellipse has two *tres*. It is a perfect form, but its perfection depends on the existence or rather on the existence of two in One. The egg lies beyond beginnings but it is the very possibility of the beginning. This is where Mondrian meets Klee.

With Mondrian the *ovals* are a prelude — the same as the egg was with Klee, smaller scale —, a prefiguration of the form in the dot. With Mondrian, the ideal proper, the one he always sought and discovered late enough, was the square.

The oval signifies the existence of unity before the separation of the rectangles of the last stage reveal the unity he had regained.

However, we must first dwell for a while on another very important series in the painter's artistic creation, on the *Trees* (1909–1912) which may be considered to be the best expression of his cosmologic outlook and of his specific relationship with nature. This is — we have said it above — the series of progressive abstracting, of the transmutations of the three-dimensional representation into a plain one and — the artist believes — of “denaturalization”.

In mythical thinking the tree was a key-motif. It is the link between the earth and the sky, it establishes the contact between inferior and superior, terrestrial and celestial. It is a unifying totalizing force.¹⁴ Therefore Mondrian's trees appear as a symbolic representation of utmost importance, despite the peculiar character these representations assume. Unification is not obtained through the mere verticality of the tree. Its branches bend down towards the earth producing incipient oval forms.

The earth — in point of origin — possesses a feminine cosmic character. At first myths always described it as an androgynous unity. In the Greek cosmology for instance The Earth-Gaea begets The Sky-Ouranos all alone. At first, glorious Gaea gave birth to the star-studded Sky, like herself, and made it envelop her on all sides.¹⁵ It was only after the birth of the sky that the usual disjunction between masculine and feminine occurred. The tree restores the primary unity between sky and earth, which Mondrian emphasizes by bending the branches in the direction of their origin. We were greatly surprised to find the poetic illustration of the same theme in the work of the Romanian poet Ion Barbu who in his geometric and cosmologic hermetism, was at one with Piet Mondrian: “Hypnotized by the deep and limpid light of the vault spreading on high, the Tree | Wishes to smash the zenith and madly drink, | Through thousands tight-contracted branches, the opal liquid, || ... ||. But, when majestic autumn envelops it anew | In twilight-shaded tones, and the autumn | hangs beautiful fruit under its verdant crown | Joining the simple and general harmony, | At peace with everything that limits and ties it down | The autumnal tree bows low to the furrowed land. ||”

The same as with Barbu, in Mondrian's vision, the skyward élan of the tree is annihilated by the attraction of the earth. The spiritual loses in favour of the natural. The “denaturalization” Mondrian suggests will be the very transposition of the “wedding” from the terrestrial to the celestial space. Passing through the series of *Ovals* Mondrian was to reach the pure abstraction of his last period of artistic creation in which the intersecting of the perpendicular lines on a plane surface is the image of a metaphysical Eros, not of the laws of time and of the Earth.

Mondrian's aversion for the natural — which can be analysed psychoanalytically — finds one of its most telling expressions on the painter's obvious dislike for the colour green during the last period of creation. Green is the colour on nature *par excellence*, the colour of the “vital hysteria”, as poet Barbu would have said. Cosmic harmony, as Mondrian viewed it, was not instinctual but rational. Nature is frightening through its irrational attraction.

No matter how strange it will appear, this exacerbated intellectualist vision has its roots in romanticism. In *The Dialogue of Nature with an Icelander*, by Leopardi, one of the basic texts for the study of romantic spirituality, nature is personified in “the huge figure of a woman seated on the ground (...) her back and elbow leaning against a mountain (...), her face beautiful and frightening at one and the same time.”¹⁶ The Icelander, a cold defender of the pure spirit, fails in the end in his attempt to treat nature with rational arguments. Intellectual harmony within nature is impossible. Shelley's poetry, belonging to another area of romanticism, rounds off this attitude to nature: it is not the communion with material beauty that can save man's soul, but the philosophic ascension towards intellectual beauty (*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*). A Baudelaire as well as a Mallarmé never forgot this intellectualist lesson of romanticism. Mondrian's poetic thinking reflects the same continuity with the romantic spirit, to which it is quite probable that the oriental lesson on nature as illusion (*māyā*) is added.

With Mondrian, the classical motif of the “sacred” Eros passes through the romantic filter and, firmly opposed to the “profane” one, generates the angelic ideal of the neutral artists too, maintaining a symbolic equilibrium between masculine and feminine, like the initial hermaphroditism of the universe: “To obtain an emotion born from a purely plastic expression it is necessary for the artist to refrain from figuration

are in a man, the happier the man will be. All these features are more powerful in an artist. Both the masculine and the feminine.”

The series of *Trees* makes us conclude that the *concordia discors* the artist lucidly sought in order to become integrated into the perfection of the universe is not the carnal, natural eros, but the spiritual one; it is not — as poet Barbu would have put it — to take the plunge into “the throbbing orgy” of nature, but the craving after “The Lofty Balance” of unity conceived as a “necessary marriage” between Hermes and Aphrodite.

Mondrian's trees are the pictorial transposition of an original motif, the unit, with oneself as a process, an “individuation”. The unitary character of the tree stems from the existence in its very body of the “reconciliation of contraries”, the tree is both subterranean and superterrestrial, and it is both masculine and feminine through the flowers it bears. The trunk brings “right” and “left” together, along the “up-down” axis. We believe that the evidence abysmal psychology offers does not exaggerate too much the archetypal substratum underlying Mondrian's artistic creation at the time.

In a famous confession, Paul Klee, a contemporary of Mondrian did not hesitate to state that the tree is a symbol of the artistic “self”: “From the tangled paths of life experience the root carries the sap which lends force to the artist as the trunk.

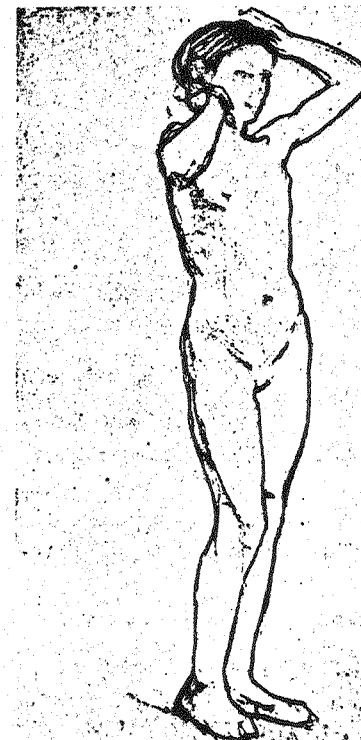
“From the root the sap rises up into the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye.

“He is the trunk of the tree.

“Overwhelmed and activated by the force of the current — we quote almost in full — he conveys his vision into his work.

“In full view of the world, the crown of the tree unfolds and spreads in time and space, and so with his work.

“Nobody will expect a tree to form its crown in exactly the same way as its root. Between ‘above’ and ‘below’ there cannot be exact mirror images of each other.”



Nude

Mondrian's peculiar position when he meditates on the relationship between art and existence appears most clearly when the *Trees* are closely examined from the angle of psychological symbolism, for the artist's deliberate intuition seems to be the illustration of the equivalence between root and crown, a thing which Klee found impossible.

With Mondrian the crown is the reflected image of the root. The trunk — the individual existence of the artist — tends to disappear completely: it diminishes, it becomes stunted for there must be no separation between existence and art. "Below" and "above" become unified. In the end the trees will be swallowed up by the oval. Unity becomes perfect.

This helps us understand — as far as possible — the evolution of Mondrian's attitude towards the world as well. After his first years of apprenticeship, in the best tradition of the 19th century, followed a period of deep crisis in the years 1903—1904. He may have remembered now his vocation for preaching (the hidden link with Van Gogh makes its appearance once more) which had animated him in his youth. But he remained faithful to art. The choice he made was clear: devotion to form. However, what Mondrian demands from art is to mediate his contact with the essence of the world. It seems to him that introspection is the first step on the path to regaining *the unity with his own self*. From the domain of archetypes, the trees offer him a solution, a solution which the mediaeval seekers of the "philosophical gold" had also intuited when they had chosen the Tree as a symbol of the Work.¹⁷

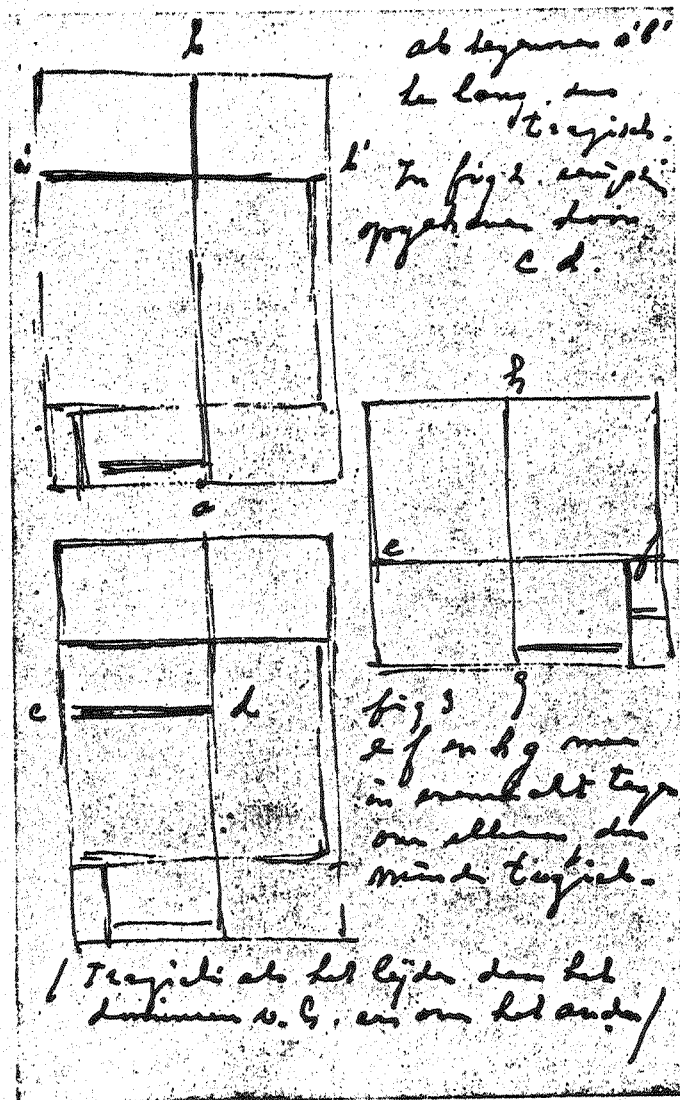
After this first step follows the recomposition in the mind of the *unity of the world*. The series of the ovals, resorting to the *forma ovi* of the hermetic vessel is a first identification of a perfect original form in the *diffuse matter* of the external world. The unity of the artist is the unity of the tree. The unity of the world has the primordial egg as a starting point. Having reached this stage, the creative consciousness is already prepared for the next step, the fundamental one: the re-creation through art of the essential unity of the world, which the artist — a privileged individual — already possesses and offers it now to the others.

With Pythagoras the soul was square in shape while with the ancient Chinese the open square was the symbol of the infinite. In Mondrian's art, the last period sets the canons of a limit-image, the final conclusion of the work of a life-time.

Mondrian's final formula can produce many historicist filiations, starting from the Gothic stained glass and the Byzantine mosaic to the secret geometry of a Vermeer or Saenredam.¹⁸ It is, however, useless to opt for any of the elements that make up the historical content of the synthesis the painter achieved during his period of maturity. For Mondrian's last works contain — considering his intention when producing them — *all* the figurative culture that preceded him. Much more important to our mind is the attempt to clear up the new elements this programmatic conclusive work contributes to the development of art.

As early as symbolist poetics, a painting had become a surface "covered with colours arranged in a particular order." This definition could also apply to Mondrian's painting. Except that a brief, yet very important explanation is absolutely necessary here. With Mondrian a painting was not a *surface* but a *plane*. It is thus possible to understand the basic difference between the decorativism implied in the symbolist definition of the painting and the *still* figurative conception of Mondrian.

The plane is a pure section of the volume or of the bidimensional projection of depth. It is the consequence of a linear movement of translation and it generates the volume through the same translation movement. The plane, the way Mondrian conceives it, is both the result of the relationship between perpendiculars on the one hand, and of the spatial reduction of cubist volumetry on the other. Thus the image is no longer placed *beyond* in an illusory pluridimensional space, it is *here* on the plane coinciding with the surface of the canvas. While the volume is reduced to the plane, the differences in shape and colour of the objects of the visible world are reduced to zones of primary colour. Through this extreme concentration the work becomes a *manifest presence of the order of the world*. It is "pure reality", as Mondrian puts it. As it has become a reality without relation to time and space, painting will be a manifestation of universal reality in the form of *now — here*.



Sketches on a
Page from a
Letter

The intersecting of perpendiculars that mark the limits of the chromatic area follows the laws established by the psychology of form: the right angle is the only one that can divide the space — through repetition — into qualitatively equal areas. The angular tensions are thus annulled. The combination of vertical-horizontal contraries and the balance of colour are evident in every work by Mondrian according to the classical law of *catharsis*. The neo-plastic rectangles are first of all painting and they will always be so. They will always be first-rate painting, in which it is not the "manner" but the wide scope of the composition that are uppermost, the epiphany of harmony not the symbolic substratum. We must once more admire the great gift of the painter who makes us visualize the innermost recesses of the spirit. Mondrian's painting is not symbolic, not is it allegorical: it is archetypal. It cannot be completely "decoded" with the help of some text or other, or by referring it to some cultural root or other or to the theosophical tradition. All these references—quite frequent in critical literature—can be nothing but equivalent metaphors.

... with theosophical thinking. It shows the contact — historically — with the philosopher M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, the author — among works — of *Beginnselen der beeldende wiskunde* (Principles of Plastic Mathematics) and *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* (The New Image of the World). According to Dr. Jaffé it is in the latter work that the "cosmological justification of Mondrian's neoplastic vision could be found. "The two fundamental contraries," Schoenmaekers writes, "on which the existence of the Earth and of everything that exists on the Earth are modelled, are the horizontal line of energy, i.e. the orbit of the Earth round the sun and the vertical motion — intimately spatial — of the rays which originate in the center of the Sun (...). Contraries are various aspects of a unique reality. Moreover, they are real only in their mutual relationship. The line is a line only when related to a line (...). The figure which concentrates the conception of a pair of absolutely original entities is the cross, the absolute rectangular construction." Based on these plastic elements of the cosmos, Schoenmaekers elaborates the central thesis of his thinking: the fundamental importance of the cross as a prefiguration of the universe.¹⁹

We have taken the liberty of reproducing the above long quotation in order to underline — beyond any apparent affinity — the independence, in point of principles, of Mondrian's plastic thinking from any strictly theosophical illustrativism. The cross — as modern psychology has convincingly demonstrated — is one of the most important archetypal forms. It signifies "order opposed to disorder, to chaos, to shapeless amorphous multiplicity. It is one of the earliest symbols of order (...). It is a natural symbol which through its origin is different from any dogmatic form and from which obscurity is deliberately excluded."²⁰

Thus one can explain the fact that the adoption by Christianity of this symbol as the centre of its history is a consequence. The intersecting of perpendiculars is "a natural symbol". Various filiations — mythical, mathematical, plastic — can derive from it. They do not explain one another (thus the frequent reference to Descartes we come across in the exegeses of Mondrian's work are pointless), but each separately can be explained by this common archetypal root. Neither Cartesian rationalism nor theosophical speculations can help an integrative examination of Mondrian's artistic creation which — in its innermost essence — is meant to reveal the roots of form. Suffice it to mention — as an evidence of the basic pictorial character Mondrian's adoption of the rectangular formula conceals — his frequent reference to previous art which — the artist argues — may have always concealed, under some garb or other, the pattern of the intersecting perpendiculars as an intimate law of painting.

But even this reference reveals Mondrian's attempt to place his work beyond the garb in which this archetypal motif is clothed, beyond the beginning of the history of religions, art and science.²¹

The whole of the above context also justifies the dispute concerning the appearance of the diagonal line in the variant of Theo van Doesburg's "elementarism". For such a rigorous conception as Mondrian's, the diagonal line meant the destruction of the formal essence of a work and, implicitly, in the spirit, the destruction of the harmony, i.e. of the World, for the work of art was nothing but its reflection.

Those who were acquainted with Mondrian tell us that the painter did not work according to some pre-established geometrical lines. He did not use any special instrument but only his "eye and intuition". "The rectangular plane," he wrote, "should be considered rather as a resultant of the plurality of the straight line in rectangular opposition." The fact that subsequent analyses have proved the invariable existence of the "golden section" in the works belonging to his last period of creation confirms Mondrian's exquisite rhythmical sensitiveness. Asymmetry, counterbalanced by the weight of the colours and the rhythm of the perpendiculars, lends his work "the calm and serenity of the Universe." The harmonizing of the contraries reaches its highest stage in the series of "neoplastic" rectangles: "pure plastic beauty", an artistic equivalent of "what Truth is in philosophy."

It must seem that by this perception of "pure plastic beauty", neoplasticism has reached the utmost limit of the estrangement of the public from art, of the "dehumanization of art" characteristic of modern times, according to Ortega y Gasset.

was brought against the painter by one of the most competent critics of the *De Stijl* movement and of Mondrian's art.²² It is the more paradoxical as it was occasioned by the equivalence between art and a game, which is so frequent in the writings of the members of *De Stijl*. "Art is a game, and games have their rules," writes Mondrian; but, through this assertion, the artist is far from stressing the "gratuitous" character of art. When viewed in the spiritual context of the movement, Mondrian's assertion makes us conclude that there is not only a simple communion between the two activities, between art and the game, on account of their gratuitousness; there is in fact a much more profound affinity. Mondrian does not say, "art is playing a game", "but art is a game". Mondrian also makes it clear for us that nothing but the rules bring art nearer to games. The rules transform chance into necessity. At this level the game — as an activity which makes chance and necessity concordant, for they both submit to rules, — retraces the progress of the universe. The ancient Greeks gave the name of "Aion" to the progress of the World: a child playing games, the realm where the child is ruler. We have seen that the entire evolution of Mondrian's art leads to the transformation of the work of art into a manifestation of the Cosmos. What makes it possible to bring the universal into the plastic image is the concept of "*coincidentia oppositorum*," of the "reconciliation of contraries" to form a supreme harmony. Thus art appears as a game indeed, but as a "second game" as poet Barbu would have put it, the "first game" being the World itself.

Once again the immediate roots of Mondrian's theoretical thinking refer us to romanticism. In his "*Philosophische Briefe*" (Letter 14, on man's aesthetic education), Schiller discerned in the "instinct of playing" (*Spieltrieb*) the reconciliation between two antagonistic tendencies: the "material instinct" (*Stofftrieb*) and the "formal instinct" (*Formtrieb*). The game, as Schiller conceives it, brings together in fact art and existence and elevates the existence plunged in materiality. By identifying art with a game Mondrian makes use of the suggestions he finds in romanticism, in the sense that he brings to a conclusion the evolution of European art. He renounces the "traditional" work of art through the essentialization of form. The work of art becomes an essential form of the real by isolating the relations that "maintain" the world and by banishing the objects. Through the repeated act of creation, through "forming", as Klee would have put it, the artist joins a game of reflexes with the universe.

The existence of the artist becomes a spiritual existence of perpetual equilibration of the "lofty balance". Through the spatial and the temporal reduction of the real, an invisible bridge is thrown over what the Romanian poet Lucian Blaga called "the ontological chasm", in order to span the two domains of the aesthetic and of existentialist existence.

In "traditional" art the artistic space was illusory, a space that "did not exist". As early as the beginnings of human culture the game was an existential action meant to integrate the unreal into the real and the real into the unreal, to secure the interpenetration of "profane" reality and "sacred" ideality. According to Huizinga²³, it is "in the form and in the function of the game that the idea of our integration into a cosmos, i.e. into a sacred order, found its first and supreme expression." By resorting to the game, Mondrian tried to "humanize" art through the perpetual interaction between human existence and artistic form. In this way he creates a typically Utopian vision in which art plays the important role of a deliverer. However, one cannot deny the fact that it does not originate in a sectarian conception, such as that of art for art's sake but in a meditation on the mission of art.

If we examine a vaster territory of the art of our century we can notice that, more often than not, whenever the game is resorted to as a connecting link between art and existence, the following step would be entering the Utopia. With Schiller already the "*Spieltrieb*" was considered to be a premise on which the formation of a possible "aesthetic stasis" was based. In contemporary art this is corroborated by three different cultural areas, yet united under the sign of the same meditation on art.

Together with the Russian constructivists, Mondrian was to come to the conclusion that art would cease to exist when it had completely merged into existence. Then, the artist said, the "civilization of pure relations" was to be born. With Herman Hesse, *Playing with Glass Marbles*, the cultural synthesis based on music, mathematics and "a drop of the wisdom of the travellers in the East," guarantee the existence of

Castalia, an actualization of Schiller's "aesthetic state" and of Goethe's "pedagogical province". With Ion Barbu it is the "dream of the simple straight line" that was to correspond to the "second game", i.e. "the white, straight Isarlik", the city lost "at the bottom of the airy sea". The selection of Isarlik as the seat of Barbu's "Turkish" Utopia is quite significant from the symbolic point of view. Hissarlik is today the name of the hill on which ancient Troy stood. The first historical city war corresponds to the last city of contemplative peace where people will live "in everlasting glory."

Mondrian's utopia is the natural consequence of his starting point: the belief in a possible equivalence between artistic form and reality. In the context of the artistic experiments at the beginning of the century, Mondrian's obvious selection of the essential form was to lead him to what we have described as the inevitable reversibility of the terms reality — form. As the essence of the real claims to be form, it means that formal perfection can be transferred to the real.

Mondrian considers art to be a means of "eliminating the tragical from life". However, nowhere does he make sufficiently clear what he considers to be "the tragic component of life", but the general tone of his writings is imbued with the motifs of Oriental spirituality regarding the "emergence from the sea of sufferings". After having perused all his writings, we manage at last to make clear the concept of "the tragic" with Mondrian. In fact, the tragic with him is "the impossibility of happiness in time." Therefore it is the mission of art to suspend time in the existential and to project life into a limitless time: "Art", Mondrian writes, "is nothing but a simple means as long as an equilibrium is not somehow attained. Only then will art have completed its mission; harmony will be achieved by itself, both in the external ambience and in inner life and the tyranny of the tragical will then come to an end." Art will therefore no longer exist, for it will entirely merge into life. A comparison with Schiller's assertions in his letters seems quite necessary here: "...man," Schiller contends, "begins with pure vitality to end in form. Only the aesthetic experiment leads to the unlimited (...) only the aesthetic is a whole in itself (...). Only here do we feel as if torn away from time (*our italics*); and only here does humanity manifest itself in all its purity and integrity."

Mondrian's dream, "the civilization of pure relations", will guarantee the fusion between form and existence. To this effect it is necessary that "art should descend into the street." There will no longer be any distinction between a house, a street and a town in the architecture of the future. Man will be an inhabitant of the Cosmos. The concordance of rhythm with the pulsation of the universe will be a guarantee of happiness. Until now, Mondrian argues, concordance has been the exclusive privilege of the artist, a creator of forms; tomorrow, when it becomes a way of life for everybody, the distinction between life and art will inevitably disappear. "The more man advances, the rhythm present in his innermost core asserts its influence and — in like manner — it enhances the power of creation of the equivalence between this rhythm and the physical rhythm which in its turn has changed. Thus a 'rhythm of man' will come into being, both material and immaterial. When following the rhythm based on the contrasting oppositions of the straight line, we can argue that real life in man's innermost self is nothing but a section of balanced oppositions which confront and complete one another at one and the same time. This balanced rhythm will be achieved in the material sphere only in integral man, i.e. with man who has reached the climax of human civilization. Art has already proved able to manifest this rhythm as it precedes life in liberty..."

The relation between art and life, as Mondrian imagines it, resumes along romantic lines — yet in other terms — one of the fundamental problems of the "aestheticism" at the end of the 19th century. The theme of the existential space as an aesthetic space dominates the whirling sinuous lines of the *Art Nouveau* which Mondrian had studied in his young years. All through this late romantic atmosphere the aesthetic mode of existence had been embodied in the type of the dandy. A dandy is the man who creates a particular form for himself. The dandy lives in an "artificial paradise." Perhaps the most problematic figure of such an "artist of life" is the one created by Kierkegaard already in the mid-nineteenth century, a figure which — though not intentionally — brings up for philosophic discussion the problem of "dandyism".

However, the meditation of the philosopher regarded the "aesthetic stage" of human existence, a stage which had to be transcended through ethic options.

Mondrian's Kierkegaard-like opposition to "aesthetic experience" is obvious and can be accounted for through the artist's belief in the fact that the human spirit belonged to a "cosmic Eros." "The profane love" of Kierkegaard's Don Juan is the consequence of the degradation of the aesthetic in existence; with Mondrian the "new life" is the result of a sublimation of existence in the aesthetic exercise of a harmonious conjugation on a universal scale. This makes man "end in form" (to use Schiller's words). The phrase "to end in form" appears to be the result of the craving of the spirit after transformation. This is not the "form" the dandy discovers for himself, neither is it an "artistic form", for at this stage the problem is no longer of any interest. It is the genuine form of existence, a form recovered through the lesson given by art. It is an attempt to deny what is devoid of form, the "illusion of time and death".

In his apology of rhythm — which we have reproduced above — Mondrian proclaims the projection of human existence into a perfect space. It was not only Schiller or Baudelaire ("rhythmic, cadenced sorrow fills the hearts with quiet joy") who preceded him in the vision of this equivalence between existence and art. The remotest roots should be sought perhaps in the Greek *paideia*, the maker of universal man through music (the "inner rhythm" Mondrian would put it), gymnastics ("exterior rhythm") and the free practice of philosophy. We think that Hölderlin's Hellenic mind has found for it its most telling transcription: "It is only when rhythm has become the one and only manner of expressing thought that Poetry can exist. In order to become poetry the spirit should carry within itself the mystery of an inborn rhythm. It is only in this rhythm that the spirit can live and become visible. And any work of art is nothing but one single rhythm always the same. Everything is rhythm. Man's destiny is a unique celestial rhythm similar to that of the work of art."

The suggestions Mondrian derives from the oriental techniques of "living outside time" help him work out his pan-aesthetic vision. In *Upanishad*, for instance, what guarantees immortality — a privilege of the gods — is the integration into an artistic-ritual rhythm: "As they were afraid of death, the gods entered the Three Vedas. Enveloped in the metre of the song (...) they became immortal, fearless."

Mondrian's perfect state was to be a state in which the tragic is absent. The artist foresees the renunciation to private ownership ("an obvious example of theft"), general disarmament, life in the future towns built in the air. But the main problem is still human individuality. Time is *inside* us. Tearing oneself away from time and "eliminating the tragical" can be achieved only by a philosophical depersonalization, by losing one's individual appearance and by attaining — each individual separately — human essence. The oriental influence is once more obvious here: "What about man?" — Mondrian asks himself — "he will be only a part of the Whole and only then, after having lost the petty, mean vanity of his individuality, will he be happy in the Paradise he has created."

The American metropolis seems to him to be a first step towards this "artificial paradise." The enthusiasm Mondrian was seized with in his later years, when he found refuge in the neo-hypodamic rhythms of New-York, is disturbing: "The metropolis," he writes, "is an imperfect but concrete determination of space. It is the expression of modern life. It produces abstract art: the assertion of the splendour of dynamic movement." It makes of jazz and dance the symbol of the "coincidence of contraries" as "forms of pure vitality".

Mondrian seems to be rather rash in tracing a philosophical depersonalization in a simple alienation. In this period were created the highly disputed works *New York City*, *Broadway*, *Boogie-Woogie*, *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, in which sparks of red and yellow prevail, luminous compositions which illustrate the American atmosphere at the end of the "jazz age". Besides the optimism they breathe, these last works contain an inevitable tragical core which is partly due to the shock produced by the impact between the Occidental and the New World. These works ought to be placed in an ideal museum together with *Limelight*, the film by Charlie Chaplin, and "The Great Open Air Theatre in Oklahoma", the paradisaical-infernal utopia in Kafka's *America*.

Owing to the power with which the chaotic dynamism of the metropolis is cast in a "form of pure vitality", Mondrian's last compositions are the most precious gift European painting offered America in the early forties. In fact the way was already paved for it. The American aesthetic sensitivity was already familiar with the debunking of art in the sense Dewey had shown in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), Mondrian's

arrival in New York, in 1940, is both an argument against Dewey's assertions and their completion. He adds to "art as experience", his belief in "experience as art". The traditional barrier separating art from life is thus removed, which goes to explain the artistic boom in post-war America. No matter how paradoxical at first sight, *Action Painting* finds one of its first motivations in Mondrian's last period of creation. With Pollock, experiment and art merge until they become identical. The painter lives in the act of painting — Pollock argues — and, implicitly, form exists in experience.

This is the heritage Mondrian left mankind, a debatable heritage, no doubt, which, in the post-war period, was to contribute to the perpetual tensioning of the limits of the aesthetic act. Viewed from a historical angle, Mondrian's Utopian tenets obviously belong to a particular trend in the theory of European art which stems from Morris and the English Pre-Raphaelites to become quite "modern" with the flourishing of *Art Nouveau*. When trying to discern the historical reasons of the Mondrian "moment" in European art, one can of course seek them further, in romanticism and in illuminism, and farther in the oriental and Greek cultures which Illuminism introduced into the European circulation of ideas.

Starting from these premises, Mondrian was to try to solve the great problems of the contemporary world, shifting the conflict on to an exclusively speculative and theoretical ground. He believed that a particular attitude to art based on the most solid European tradition, — but exacerbated in its function as social palingenesis (rebirth, regeneration) — can guarantee a revolutionary turning point for the modern world. "The civilization of pure relations" is a paradox which can be found only in the realm of the imaginative: it is an aesthetic society in which the very aesthetic object is absent. However with Mondrian, that is at the level of pure theory, there is no contradiction here.

The painter considers that art is the ultimate possibility of fully expressing the real. Together with philosophical exercise and ritual concentration, art is a last chance in defending the conquests of culture and civilization. As a complete spiritual activity, art — with Mondrian — is tantamount to value. Nevertheless the absolutization of the role of art is a temporary solution — the artist himself admits it. Once having merged with existence, it is the latter which will take over all the attributes of value.

This is the goal Piet Mondrian's life and work try to attain, and the path he mapped out was the path traced by an artist; it never goes beyond the stage of an image and it should be regarded as such. No general solutions must be sought — in fact they could not be found in Mondrian's thinking. His work as such was a key-phenomenon for the moment it represented and, despite the limited scope of its aesthetic Utopian tenets, it holds a prominent place in the development of the arts. It is a place, which metaphorically speaking, we have always associated in our mind with the destiny of Archimedes, the scholar who on the borderline between two worlds — the world of the *logos* and that of the weapons — found his death while tracing his everlasting geometrical figures on the sand.

- 1 José ORTEGA y GASSET, *La deshumanización del arte* (1925), Madrid, 1967.
- 2 Will GROHMANN, *Wassily Kandinsky*, Köln, 1958, p.103 and sq.
- 3 W. HEISENBERG, *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*, Bucharest, 1969, p. 33—34
- 4 In the article "The Problem of Form" in the *Blau Reiter Almanac* (1912)
- 5 In 1915, in the "0.10" exhibition. The exact date of the work is still unknown (1913?)
- 6 Compare with MALEVICH, *Suprematismus. Die Gegenstandslose Welt* (1927): "The fact that man watches the stars instead of producing useful objects, entitles us to entertain the hope that he will find a way to lead him from his animal state to a real humanity... Man will attain the level of existence that corresponds to his essence: existence as a unity without any aim and without objects."
- 7 Together with Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, other artists came to abstract art in the same period. We believe this is not the place to dwell on the dispute regarding "the priority of invention." It is much more important to distinguish the basic lines which — we believe — can be traced, in the last analysis, to the three outlined above. Delaunay, for instance, in his attitude follows evidently in the wake of Kandinsky, even if he does not start from expressionism, but from cubism. "The destruction of form", characteristic of Kandinsky's work, finds expression in France, in an open war waged against classical drawing. Kupka, the same as Delaunay, joined the *Orphic* movement from the very beginning, even if his first abstract paintings (1911—1912) evince a constructivist tendency. Paul Klee, a personality hard to describe as a mere "abstract painter" holds a place apart. In his case the concept of "formation" is fundamental.
- 8 This is perhaps the most important experience during Mondrian's youth. His début proper was made under the influence of the 19th century realism; then he tarried for a while in the atmosphere of the *Art Nouveau*, in the variant of the painter Jan TOOROP. Finally cubism made the artist turn to abstractionism.
- 9 See G.C. ARGAN, *Progetto e destino*, Milan, 1963, p. 286.
- 10 In the interview to the *Cahiers d'Art* magazine in 1931, Mondrian says: It is possible today to develop any artistic tendency and to continue it in the direction of pure plastic art. Once created pure plastic art cannot go any further.
- 11 Mondrian's contact with theosophy may have played an important role in acquainting him with the most important motifs of mythical thinking. The first contact seems to have taken place as early as 1899 (see SEUPHOR, *op.cit.*, p.58). It is a fact that the artist was only 37 when he joined the Dutch Theosophical Society, but in 1917 he seems to have broken with it or, in any case, to have become estranged from it. We believe that it is only a specialist in theosophy who is able to contribute to clearing up the relationship between Mondrian and theosophy. However there are details in this respect in the H.L.C. JAFFÉ, *De Stijl 1917—1931*, Amsterdam 1956; C. L. RAGGHIANTI, *Mondrian e l'Arte del XX Secolo*, Milano, 1962, p. 421—430; S. RINGBOM, *Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 1966, pp. 386—418; R. P. WELSH, *Mondrian and Theosophy*, in *Piet Mondrian, 1872—1944*, New York, 1971.
- 12 The diagram illustrating the perfect unity between Yin and Yang in the circle, a from Mondrian has never used in his paintings.
- 13 Shakārya, noted by A. COOMARASWAMY, *The Dance of Śiva*, Bombay-Calcutta, 1948, p. 32.
- 14 Cf. M. ELIADE, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris, 1968, pp. 231—236 and C.G. JUNG, *Les racines de la conscience. Etudes sur l'archétype*, Paris, 1971, pp. 327—464.
- 15 HESIOD, *Works*.
- 16 Giacomo LEOPARDI, *Small Moral Works*; see also M. PAPAAGI's interpretation in *Exercises in Reading*, Cluj-Napoca, 1976, p.48 and sq., which has offered us more than a simple suggestion.
- 17 Modern studies have fully demonstrated that alchemy itself was more often than not a mere symbolic expression of the integration into unity of the "process of individuation" (See M. ELIADE, *Forgerons et Alchimistes*, Paris, 1956 and C.G. JUNG, *Psychologie et Alchimie*, Paris, 1969). Certain similitudes between the purification alchemy suggests and the one illustrated by the hermetism of modern art appear with Mallarmé already (*les alchimistes, nos prédecesseurs*) and they continue to exist in the works of Barbu, Brancusi, Mondrian.
- 18 Recently, when looking for the sources of Mondrian's art, some researchers have gone beyond the European area believing they could find in Japanese art the secret of the last

CHRONOLOGY AND CONCORDANCES

- phase of the painter's painting. The entire evolution of painting until neoplasticism would thus appear to be a "sham prehistory, in which one cannot find any justification for the continuity of neoplasticism. Insufficiently demonstrated so far, the relationship between Mondrian and the Japanese art of ornamental architecture does not seem conclusive enough. (See D. GIOSEFFI, *La falsa preistoria di Piet Mondrian e le origini del neoplasticismo*, Trieste, 1957 and C.L. RAGGHIANI, *op.cit.*, pp. 345-362.
- 19 See H.L.C. JAFFÉ, *op.cit.*, p.98 and sq.
- 20 C. G. JUNG, *Les racines de la conscience*, pp. 312-313 (*Jung's italics*).
- 21 In the same way one can explain that Mondrian's classical vision is in harmony with the Hindu symbolism of the mandala. In the Buddhist thinking, the liturgy of mandala is a means of melding with unity. Its primary form is a complex representation of the drama of disintegration and reintegration. "Mandala marks the limits of a given surface, but it does more than that. It is a cosmogram, it is the whole universe in its essential form. To draw a mandala is no simple thing: it is a rite which aims at the palingenesis of the individual." (G. TUCCI, *Teoria e pratica del Mandala con particolare riguardo alla moderna psicologia del profondo*, Rome, 1969, p. 52).
- Drawing the graphic symbol of mandala on the ground or sand changes terra into a diamond through consecration and purification. Once a "pure" surface is obtained, the fundamental divisions are traced with the help of two lines (Brahmasûtra), one from north to south, the other from east to west (TUCCI, *op.cit.*, p. 101). This is in fact the sanctification of space, the operation through which any *templum* is made.
- 22 See H.L.C. JAFFÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 166
- 23 J. HUIZINGA, *Homo ludens*.

- 1872 March 7, Birth of Piet Cornelis Mondrian in Amersfoort (Holland).
- 1876-1888, Birth of Brancusi, Malevich, Klee, Picasso, Theo van Doesburg, Delaunay, Vantongerloo, Archipenko, Le Corbusier, De Chirico.
- 1886 *Seurat exhibits Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte*.
- 1888 *Ensor paints Entrance of Christ into Brussels*.
- 1889 Earns his first diploma in drawing for teaching in secondary schools. Earned a second diploma in 1892.
- In Paris Gustave Eiffel builds the Tower for the World Exhibition.*
- 1890 The Mondrians move to the village of Winterswijk. Young Piet makes the acquaintance of his uncle Frits Mondriaan, landscape painter.
- Death of Vincent Van Gogh at Auvers-sur-Oise.*
- 1892 Leaves for Amsterdam where he attends for five years the regular classes of the Academy. Becomes friends with Jan Sluyters.
- 1893 *Victor Horta, The House in Turin Street, Brussels.*
- 1894 *Le Donanier Rousseau paints La Guerre.*
- 1895-1907 The "naturalist period".
- 1899 Becomes friends with Albert van den Briel who introduces him to the problems of theosophy. Decorates the ceiling of a private-owned house in Amsterdam.
- 1901 Travels to Spain with painter Simon Maris.
- Tony Garnier designs a project for the Cité industrielle.*
- 1902 *Auguste Perret builds the apartment house in the rue Franklin in Paris.*
- 1903 Together with Hebert van den Briel Mondrian visits Brabant.
- Death of Paul Gauguin in the Marquesas Islands.*
- 1904 Sells all his possessions and leaves Amsterdam to go and settle in the village of Uden, near S'Hertogenbosch, where he stays until 1905.
- Birth of Dali, Jean Bazaine, Maurice Estève, Hans Hartung. Brancusi arrives in Paris.*
- 1905-1911 Returns to Amsterdam. Every summer he travels all over Holland. Meets Toorop. Experiments in the field of chromatics. His painting is characterized by symbolistic touches.
- 1905 *Josef Hoffman builds the Palais Stoclet in Brussels.*
- 1906 *Death of Paul Cézanne.*
- First exhibition of the association "Die Brücke", in Dresden.*
- The "official" birth of Fauvism at the Salon d'automne in Paris.*
- 1907 *Picasso completes Les demoiselles d'Avignon.*
- Gaudi builds the Casa Milà in Barcelona.*
- 1909 In January Mondrian exhibits with Jan Sluyters at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Almost all the critics attack his work.
- Marinetti's futurist manifest.*
- The first performances of Sergei Djagilev's "Ballets russes" in Paris.*
- 1910 Takes part in the "Luminists'" exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. A Failure. Critic Conrad Kickert, one of the few to appreciate Mondrian, organizes the *Moderns Kunstkring* (Circle of Modern Art) and asks him to sit on the Executive Committee.
- Kandinsky executes his first abstract watercolour. The manifests of futurist painting and sculpture (Boccioni, Carrà, Severini, Russolo, Ballo).*

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- 1911 October, First exhibition of the "Modern Art Circle", devoted to Cézanne. Picasso, Braque, Derain, Dufy, Vlaminck, Redon send some of their canvases. Mondrian has six paintings on show. Mondrian's first contact with cubist painting.
 December. Leaves for Paris where he stays until 1914. Comes under the powerful influence of cubism.
 Publication of the first and only issue of the *Blaue Reiter* almanac.
- 1912 Mondrian begins to practise graphic arts, which he will do to the end of his life.
- 1912 *Kandinsky publishes Concerning the Spiritual in Art.*
Birth of Jackson Pollock.
Futurist exhibition in Paris.
The Kiss by Brancusi.
Delaunay paints La Ville de Paris and Les Fenêtres.
- 1913 *Duchamp has on view Nu descendant un escalier.*
Die Brücke group is disbanded.
- 1914 Mondrian comes nearer and nearer to the horizontal and vertical lines. Goes back to Holland. The war breaks out and he has to remain at home. Makes studies for seascapes until 1916. Sant'Elia writes the manifesto of futurist architecture.
 Walter Gropius replaces Henri de Velde as headmaster of the Fine Arts School in Weimar.
- 1915–1919 Mondrian remains in Holland. It is the stage when he works out the principles of neoplasticism. Contact with the philosophy of Schoenmaekers. Makes the acquaintance of Theo van Doesburg and Bart van der Leek.
- 1916 *The Dada movement is founded (Tristan Tzara, M.Iancu, Arp, etc.).*
- 1917 The journal *De Stijl* is founded on the initiative of Theo van Doesburg. Founders: Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leek, Vilmos Huszár, G. Vantongerloo, Jan Wils and poet Antonie Kok.
Death of Rodin.
- 1918 *The first Dada movement, in Zürich.*
- 1919 November. Publication of the *De Stijl* manifesto. Mondrian returns to Paris.
Malevich teaches at the Moscow Academy of Fine Arts.
Kandinsky is appointed director of the Moscow Museum of Pictorial Culture.
Chagall is commissar for Fine Arts for Vitebsk.
Gropius founds the Bauhaus school in Weimar.
- 1920 Publication of *Le Néoplasticisme* in Paris.
Van Doesburg and architect De Boer build workers' dwelling houses and a school at Dragen (Holland).
- 1920 *Tatlin, Project for the Monument to the 3rd International.*
- 1921 *Van Doesburg tours Central Europe. Lectures at the Bauhaus. Paul Klee teaches at the Bauhaus.*
- 1922 *Relationships between Dada and De Stijl. Common issue of the Dada magazine "Mécano" and "De Stijl".*
An exhibition of Soviet art is held in Berlin: Malevich, Gabo, Pevsner, El Lissitzky, Kandinsky. Kandinsky teaches at the Bauhaus.
- 1923 *A De Stijl exhibition in Paris.*
At Schiedam Oud builds a group of workers' houses, inspired by Mondrian's principles, and the façade of the De Unie café in Rotterdam.
- 1924 *Publication of the first surrealist manifesto signed by André Breton.*
- 1925 The Bauhaus publishing house brings out Mondrian's *Die neue Gestaltung*. Van Doesburg publishes the manifesto of *Elementarism* in which he asserts the importance of the diagonal line. Mondrian breaks with *De Stijl*.
Bauhaus moves to Dessau. Kandinsky publishes Punkt Linie zu Fläche.
The Ornamental Art Exhibition opens in Paris. Le Corbusier designs the Pavillon L'Esprit Nouveau.
- 1926 Mondrian holds his first exhibition in America.
- 1927 *The Bauhaus publishing house brings out Die gegenstandslose Welt by Malevich.*
- 1928 *Theo van Doesburg, Sophie Täuber and Hans Arp build the interior of the L'Alouette café, according to the principles of neoplastic architecture.*
Breton publishes Le Surréalisme et la Peinture.
Gropius resigns his position as director of the Bauhaus school.
Le Corbusier builds the Villa Savoye at Poissy.
- 1929 Mondrian becomes a member of the group *Cercle et Carré* founded by Michel Seuphor and Joaquim Torres-Garcia. Exhibits with this group in 1930.
- 1930 *Mies van der Rohe is appointed director of the Bauhaus. Rythmes by Delaunay.*

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1931 The group *Abstraction and Creation* is founded, it comprises most of the abstract painters in Paris. According to Seuphor Mondrian is the "pivot of the movement."

Death of Theo Van Doesburg.

1932 *The Bauhaus school at Dessau is closed down.*

1935 *Death of Kasimir Malevich.*

1936 *The "Society of American Abstract Art" is founded.*

F.L. Wright builds the Villa Kaufman (The Waterfall House), at Bear Run, Pennsylvania.

1937 *Exhibition of "degenerate art" in München.*

Brancusi makes the sculptures for the town of Tirgu Jiu.

Guernica by Picasso.

1939 Mondrian leaves for London. Meets Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth.

1940 The bombing of London drives him to New York. Beginning of the "Boogie-Woogie" period.

Breton, Léger, Ernst, Dali, Tanguy, Matta etc. arrive in the United States.

1941 *Death of Robert Delaunay in Montpellier.*

1943 *Pollock exhibits at the Guggenheim Galleries in New York.*

1944 February 1, Mondrian dies of pneumonia in New York.

In the text:

SELF-PORTRAIT

1913
charcoal on paper, 49.5×72.5 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)

DAHLIA

1907
charcoal on paper
New York, Ch. von Wiegand Collection

TREE

1910–1911
charcoal on paper, 56.5×48.5 cm
Hilversum, M. J. Heybroek Collection

THE CHURCH IN DOMBURG

1910
charcoal on paper, 41.5×28 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum

PAGE FROM A SKETCH-BOOK

NUDE
c. 1904
charcoal on paper, 47×30.5 cm
New York, Holtzman Collection

SKETCHES ON A PAGE FROM A LETTER
1928

Plates:

1. HOUSE ON THE SHORE OF LAKE GEIN
1900
oil on canvas, 42×31 cm
New York, Carl H. Gans Collection
2. SELF-PORTRAIT
1900
oil on canvas, 49×38 cm
Washington, Phillips Collection
3. TREES
c. 1906
oil on canvas, 43×48.5 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
4. TREES ON THE SHORE OF LAKE GEIN
1902 or 1905
oil on cardboard glued on wood, 31×33 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum
5. TWILIGHT
1890

- oil on canvas, 26.5×43 cm
New York, E.V. Thaw's Collection
6. SELF-PORTRAIT
c. 1908
charcoal on paper, 80×55 cm
Blaricum, S. B. Slijper Collection
7. CHRYSANTHEMUMS
1908 (?)
oil on cardboard, 45.5×33 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
8. TREES ON THE SHORE OF LAKE GEIN IN THE MOONLIGHT
1907–1908
oil on canvas, 79×92.5 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum
9. FARM AT DUIVENDRECHT
1908
oil on canvas, 87×109 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
10. THE RED CLOUD
1907
oil on cardboard, 64×75 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum
11. TREES
c. 1906
oil on cardboard, 69.5×79 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
12. PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE GIRL
1908
oil on canvas, 53×44 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
13. LANDSCAPE
1902–1903
drawing
Blaricum, S. B. Slijper Collection
14. FOREST NEAR OELE
1908
oil on canvas, 128×158 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
15. THE LIGHTHOUSE
1909
oil on cardboard, 39×29.5 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum (S. B. Slijper Collection)
16. THE LIGHTHOUSE
1909–1910
oil on canvas, 135×75 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum
17. THE LIGHTHOUSE
1908
oil on canvas, 71×52 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum
18. THE STEEPLE OF THE CHURCH IN DOMBURG
1910–1911