

6 Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) 'Dialogue on the New Plastic'

Mondrian absorbed the lessons of Cubism during a stay in Paris before the First World War. He returned to Holland in 1914. There he developed both the practice of a new abstract art and the theoretical principles underlying it. One of the most extensive early attempts to explain the principles of his new art took the form of a dialogue with a doubting critic. By the device of identifying this critic as a singer, Mondrian was enabled to use musical analogies in his explanations. The essay was originally published as 'Dialoog over de Nieuwe Beelding' in two issues of *De Stijl*, Leiden, February and March 1919. (It should be noted that the Dutch term *beelding* carries connotations of forming and making which are absent from the more basically material sense of 'plastic'.) The present extract is taken from the English translation in Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (eds. and trans.), *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Boston, 1986, pp. 75–81. (For a later text by Mondrian see IVA10.)

A: A Singer

B: A Painter

A: I admire your earlier work. Because it means so much to me, I would like better to understand your present way of painting. I see nothing in these rectangles. What are you aiming at?

B: My new paintings have the same aim as the previous ones. Both have the same aim, but my latest work brings it out more clearly.

A: And what is that?

B: To express *relationships* plastically through oppositions of color and line.

A: But didn't your earlier work represent *nature*?

B: I expressed myself *by means* of nature. But if you carefully observe the sequence of my work, you will see that it progressively abandoned the naturalistic appearance of things and increasingly emphasized the plastic expression of relationships.

A: Do you find, then, that natural appearance interferes with the plastic expression of relationships?

B: You must agree that if two words are sung with the same strength, with the same emphasis, each weakens the other. One cannot express both natural appearance as we see it and plastic relationships with the same determinateness. In naturalistic form, in naturalistic color, and in naturalistic line, plastic relationships are veiled. To be expressed plastically in a determinate way, relationships must be represented only through color and line. In the capriciousness of nature, form and color are weakened by *curvature* and by the *corporeality* of things. To give the means of expression of

painting their full value in my earlier work, I increasingly allowed color and line to speak for themselves.

A: But how can color and line as such, without the form we perceive in nature, express anything determinately?

B: To express plastically color and line means to establish *opposition* through color and line; and this opposition expresses plastic *relationship*. *Relationship* is what I have always sought, and that is what all painting seeks to express.

A: But painting always used nature for plastic expression and through the beauty of nature was elevated to the ideal.

B: Yes, it rose to the ideal *through the beauty* of nature; but in *plastic expression* the ideal is something other than the mere representation of natural appearance.

A: But doesn't the ideal exist only in us?

B: It exists in us and *outside* of us. The ancients said that the ideal is everywhere and in everything. In any case, the ideal is manifested aesthetically as beauty. But what did you mean a moment ago by 'the beauty of nature'?

A: I had in mind, for example, an ancient work, an image said to contain all the beauty of the human form.

B: Well, think for a moment of masterpieces of the so-called realistic schools, which show none of this ideal beauty and nevertheless express *beauty*. Comparing these two types of art, you will already see that not only the beauty of nature but also its so-called ugliness can move us or, as you say, elevate us toward the ideal. Neither subject matter, the representation, nor nature itself creates the beauty of painting. They merely establish the *type* of beauty by determining *the composition, the color, and the form*.

A: But that is not how a layman thinks of it, although what you say seems plausible. Nevertheless, I cannot imagine relationships expressed otherwise than by means of some subject matter or representation and not just through a composition of color and line *alone*; just as I can't appreciate sounds *without* melody – a sound composition by one of our modern composers means *nothing* to me.

B: In painting you must first try to see *composition, color, and line* and not the representation *as representation*. Then you will finally come to feel the subject matter a hindrance.

A: When I recall your transitional work, where color that was not true to nature to some extent destroyed the subject matter, I do see more clearly that beauty can be created, even far more forcefully created, without verisimilitude. For those paintings gave me a far stronger aesthetic sensation than purely naturalistic painting. But surely the color must have *form*?

B: Form or the illusion of form; anyway, color must be *clearly delimited* if it is to represent anything plastically. In what you call my transitional work, you rightly saw that the subject matter was neutralized by a free expression of color. But you must also see that its plastic expression was determined by form that still remained largely true to nature. To harmonize color and form, the subject matter of the painting, and therefore the *form*, was carefully selected. If I aimed, for instance, to express *vastness and extension*, the subject was *chosen* with this in mind. The plastic idea took on various expressions, according to whether it was a dune landscape or the sea or a church that formed the subject. You remember my flowers; they too were carefully

- 'chosen' from the many varieties there are. Didn't you find that they had yet 'another' expression than my seascapes, dunes, and churches?
- A: Indeed! To me the flowers conveyed something more intimate, as it were; while the sea, dunes, and churches spoke more directly of 'space.'
- B: So you see the importance of form. A closed form, such as a flower, says something other than an open curved line as in the dunes, and something else again than the straight line of a church or the radiating petals of some other flowers, for example. By comparing, you see that a particular form makes a particular impression, that line has *plastic* power and that the most tensed line most purely expresses immutability, strength, and vastness.
- A: But I still don't understand why you favor the *straight line* and have come *entirely* to exclude the curved.
- B: The search for the expression of vastness led to the search for the *greatest* tension: the straight line; because all curvature resolves into the straight, no place remains for the curved.
- A: Did you come to this conclusion suddenly?
- B: No, very gradually. First I abstracted the capricious, then the freely curved, and finally the mathematically curved.
- A: So it was through this abstracting that you came to exclude all naturalistic representation and subject matter?
- B: That's right, *through the work itself*. The theories I just mentioned concerning these exclusions came afterward. Consistent abstracting led me to exclude the visible-concrete completely from my plastic expression. In painting a tree I progressively abstracted the curves: you can understand that very little 'tree' remained.
- A: But can't a tree be represented with straight lines?
- B: Perfectly true. Now I see something is lacking in my explanation: *abstraction alone* is not enough to eliminate the naturalistic from painting. Line and color must be *composed otherwise* than in nature.
- A: Then what the painter calls composition also changes too?
- B: Yes, an entirely different composition, more mathematical but not symmetrical, is needed in order to achieve pure plastic expression of equilibrated relationship. Merely to express the natural with straight lines still remains *naturalistic* reproduction even though the effect is already much stronger.
- A: But won't such abstracting and transformed composition make everything look alike?
- B: That is a necessity rather than a hindrance, if we wish to express plastically what all things have in common instead of what sets them apart. Thus the *particular*, which diverts us from what is essential, disappears; only the universal remains. The depiction of objects gives way to pure plastic expression of relationship.
- A: Our talk yesterday showed me that Abstract Painting grew out of naturalistic painting. It became clear to me mainly because I know your earlier work. Then Abstract Painting is not just *intellectual* but also the product of *feeling*?
- B: Of both: deeper feeling and deeper intellect. When feeling is deepened, in many eyes it is destroyed. That is why the deeper emotion of the New Plastic is so little understood. But one must *learn to see* Abstract-Real painting, just as the painter had to *learn to create* in an abstract-real way. It represents the *process of life* that is

reflected in the plastic expression of art. People too often view the work of art as a *luxury*, something merely *pleasant*, even as a decoration, as something that lies *outside* life. Yet art and life are *one*; art and life are both expressions of truth. If, for instance, we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just*, then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the time is ripe.

A: I am very sympathetic to the unity of art and life, yet *life* is the main thing!

B: All expressions of life – religion, social life, art, etc. – always have a common *basis*. We should go into that further; there is so much to say. Some have felt this strongly and it led one of us to found *De Stijl*.

A: I have looked at *De Stijl*, but it was not very easy for me to understand.

B: I recommend repeated reading. But the ideas that *De Stijl* expounds can give you no more than a *conception* of the *essence* of the New Plastic and its connection with life: the content of the New Plastic can be *seen* only in the *work itself*. Only through intuitive feeling, through long contemplation and comparison, can one come to complete appreciation of the new.

A: Perhaps so, but I still feel that art will be much impoverished if the natural is eliminated.

B: How can its expression be impoverished if it conveys more clearly what is important and essential to the work of art?

A: But the *straight line* alone can say so little.

B: The straight line tells the truth; and the *significance* you want it to have is of no value for painting; such significance is literary, preconceived. Painting has to be purely *plastic*, and in order to achieve this it must use plastic means that do not signify the individual. This also justifies the use of rectangular color planes.

A: Does this hold for classical painting, in fact for all previous painting, which always represented appearance?

B: Indeed, if you really understand that all pure painting aimed to be purely *plastic*, then the consequent application of this idea not only justifies *universal* plastic means but *demand*s it. Unintentionally, naturalistic painting gives too much prominence to the particular. The *universal* is what all art seeks to express: therefore, the New Plastic is justified relative to all painting.

A: But is the New Plastic justified in relation to *nature*?

B: If you understood that the New Plastic expresses the *essential* of everything, you would not ask that question. Besides, art is a duality of *nature-and-man* and not nature *alone*. Man transforms nature according to his own image; when man expresses his deepest being, thus manifesting his *inwardness*, he must necessarily *interiorize* natural appearance.

A: Then you don't despise nature?

B: On the contrary. For the New Plastic, too, nature is that great manifestation through which our deepest being is revealed and assumes concrete appearance.

A: Nevertheless, to *follow* nature seems to me the true path.

B: The appearance of nature is far stronger and much more beautiful than any *imitation* of it can ever be; if we wish to reflect nature, fully, we are *compelled* to find *another* plastic. Precisely for the sake of nature, of reality, we avoid its natural appearance.

A: But nature manifests itself in an indefinite variety of forms; do you show nothing of this?

- B: I see reality as a *unity*; what is manifested in all its appearances is *one and the same*: the *immutable*. We try to express this plastically as purely as possible.
- A: It seems reasonable to take the immutable as the basis: the *changeable* provides nothing solid. But what do you call *immutable*?
- B: *The plastic expression of immutable relationship: the relationship of two straight lines perpendicular to each other.*
- A: Is there no danger of *monotony* in so consistently expressing the immutable?
- B: The danger exists, but the *artist*, not the *plastic method*, would create it. The New Plastic has its *oppositions*, its *rhythm*, its *technique*, its *composition*, and these not only give scope for the plastic expression of life, of movement, but they still contain so much of the *changeable* that it is still difficult for the artist to find pure plastic expression of the *immutable*.
- A: Nevertheless, in what little I have seen of the New Plastic, I noticed just this monotony; I failed to experience the inspiration, the deep emotion that more naturalistic painting gives me. It is what I fail to hear in the compositions of modern music; as I said earlier, the recent tone combinations without melody fail to stir me as music with melody does.
- B: But surely an equilibrated composition of *pure* tone relationships should be able to stir one even more deeply.
- A: How can you say that, not being a musician!
- B: I can say it because, fundamentally, all art is one. Painting has shown me that the equilibrated composition of color relationships ultimately surpasses naturalistic composition and naturalistic plastic – when the aim is to express equilibrium, harmony, *as purely as possible*.
- A: I agree that the essential of art is the creation of *harmony*, but...
- B: But harmony does not mean the same thing to everyone and does not speak to everyone *in the same way*. That is why it is so easy to understand that there are differences in the modes of plastic expression.
- A: Then this leaves room for naturalistic painting and melody in music. But do you mean they will be outgrown in the future?
- B: The more purely we perceive harmony, the more purely we will plastically express relationships of color and of sound; this seems logical to me.
- A: So the New Plastic is the end of painting?
- B: Insofar as there can be no purer plastic expression of equilibrated relationships – in art. The New Plastic was born only yesterday and has yet to reach its culmination.
- A: Then it could become completely different?
- B: Not completely. But in any case, the New Plastic could not return to naturalistic or form expression, for it grew out of these. It is bound to the fixed law of art, which as I said, is the *unity of man and nature*. If in this duality the New Plastic is to create *pure* relationships and therefore unity, it cannot allow the natural to predominate; therefore, it must remain abstract.
- A: I now see more and more that I thought of painting as representation of the visible, whereas it is possible in painting to express beauty in quite another way. Perhaps one day I will come to love the New Plastic as you do, but so far...
- B: If you see both naturalistic painting and the New Plastic from a *purely plastic* point of view, that is, distinct from subject matter or the expressive means, then you will

see but one thing in both: the plastic expression of relationship. If from *the point of view of painting* 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 Néo-Plasticisme: 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*.

Disequilibrium 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.

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