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ABSTRACT ART: ITS ORIGIN, NATURE, AND SIGNIFICANCE

To define abstract art, which occupies such an important place in contemporary aesthetics, merely as a plastic mode of expression that makes no attempt to seek its own forms among those already existing in reality is to give a very inadequate notion of it. The term "non-figurative art," which is sometimes used to describe it, arbitrarily restricts its range by stressing as peculiar to it this elementary fact alone and by characterizing abstract art solely as a controversial or even as a revolutionary art, as opposed to traditional aesthetics, which is itself figurative. Abstract art at times has also been called "concrete" or "non-objective" art. All these definitions have as little validity in themselves as those that are made use of in the history of art and are acceptable only at their "face value," to use the monetary term, because they have no absolute value but merely a conventional one based on the principle of exchange (Baroque, Gothic, Rococo, Cubist). However, they are not to be ignored, since they do express the state of uncertainty, uneasiness, and indecision that afflicts most amateurs and even historians of art in

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regard to abstract art. At the same time, these definitions also indicate an awareness that we are dealing with a very important and complex phenomenon, enriched by extensive projections into the domain of social psychology, sociology, and probably even metaphysics.

Usually the contrast between figurative and non-figurative art is resolved in an oversimplified and unsatisfactory way by stressing the nature of the forms reproduced by the painter or sculptor. This is such a common point of view, even among artists, that some of them refuse to consider as abstract those works in which a trace of the natural form subsists, in which there is even an allusion to a reality prior to that of the initial and absolute reality of artistic creation. Others even claim that any emotion that might be awakened by nature should be eliminated; this is in contradiction to Kandinsky's famous remark: "I love nature even more since I have stopped painting it."

It seems, then, that the artist's relationship to external reality—or, let us say, to nature—undergoes a radical change from the moment that he begins to paint abstractly. The determining characteristic of the abstract would therefore be that *ex nihilo* creativity which owes nothing to objective reality and which, as regards both forms and emotions, is totally detached from any relationship with nature. If one accepted this point of view, which is that of the strict, non-figurative school (the most abstract), a painter would produce strictly non-natural forms; he would use geometrical figures, for example, contenting himself with two-dimensional space, a plane surface, and rejecting any spatial illusionism or even any allusion at all to a third dimension. The champions of rigid abstraction seem to extol an art that is as little sensuous and as much intellectual as possible.

Few terms in the vocabulary of the history of art lend themselves so much to confusion and equivocation as the word "abstract." This is because no valid definition of it actually exists and, even more so, because there is no agreement about the nature of the works to which one can apply the term. It always takes a little while to fix, state, and apply the terms of the language of aesthetics. Even today we are not sure that there is agreement about the meaning of the word "Baroque" or about the existence of "Rococo" of and by itself—whether it may be something autonomous rather than just a "phase" of the Baroque. Would the other classifications that are employed to characterize abstract art be more valid? Certainly not. All art is concrete; every work of art, even a naturalist one, results from a certain labor of abstraction.

Hence an artist who ceases to reproduce landscapes, people, still-lifes, or "figures" does not become an abstract painter merely because of this. For abstract art has always existed, either in the absolute sense in the form of rigidly non-figurative representation; or partially and relatively in pictures whose purpose is not the reproduction of the forms of nature but where, nevertheless, these are utilized; or, finally, in the kind of distortion produced even in figurative art by the selection of figures, by the way they are arranged and freely handled. One might say that any form of art that is not conventionally photographic is abtract to a certain degree. Even in naturalist painting the abstract artist separates, isolates from nature, the forms that he wants to produce in his picture according to a concept that already is intellectual.

The best way to determine the characteristics of abstract art morphologically and spiritually is to study the different processes that have led to non-figuration either among contemporary artists, where we discover highly instructive evidence, or in the representational forms of the past, the interpretation of which is not yet certain. I have in mind the Elamite pottery of the third and second millenniums, for example, and of the second-degree abstraction which it attests. Indeed, any attempt at stylization, at schematization, whether it be for religious motives and magical purposes (archaic civilizations, the art of "nature's peoples") or for aesthetic ends, as, for example, in purism, must be regarded as a tendency toward abstraction or at least toward a certain quality of the abstract. The case of Cubism is extremely equivocal in this respect; but one cannot deny that, although it is not abstract art, it accustomed the spectator not to expect, necessarily, a reproduction that conformed to a reality with which he was already familiar.

Wilhelm Worringer's famous book, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich: Piper, 1921), the publication of which coincided exactly with the initial appearance of abstract works at the beginning of this century, suggests an antinomy which we cannot accept as readily today as we would have done fifty years ago. Nevertheless, Worringer performed a service by clarifying a certain notion of abstraction; he contrasted it with the idea of *Einfühlung*—a word that has no satisfactory equivalent in French. Perhaps this explains why his book has never been translated into French, although it was so important at the time and, in many essential respects, continues to be so even today. *Einfühlung,* which the English translated as "empathy," supposedly was the basis of plastic realism, while abstraction made the claim that it was

composed of entirely invented forms, or at least of figures of nature so thoroughly belabored that they became unrecognizable. One of Worringer's dominant ideas, while not absolutely accurate, nevertheless contains a large measure of truth; and, like all rules, it is also valuable because of its exceptions. This idea consists in locating the art of empathy, or realism, in southern countries (Worringer was thinking mainly of art derived from Greek civilizations) and in placing abstract art in northern countries.

This geographical definition, like all the others, should be viewed with caution. But it is obvious that, in studying the constant factors in Nordic art (Germanic, Scandinavian), one does not encounter those elements of harmonious union with nature that we find in Mediterranean art; on the contrary, we see a state of pathetic antagonism that reveals dramatic external and internal conflicts. This is as true of Viking sculpture as it is of the aesthetics of the Irish *scriptoria* or of German twentieth-century Expressionism. And even if Italian Futurism may be regarded as one of the contemporary "sources" of today's abstract art, nonetheless, the principal sources remain Mondrian's Dutch Neo-plasticism, the "Blaue Reiter" of Kandinsky and Marc, Arp's and Kurt Schwitters' Dadaism, the Suprematism of the Pole Malevitch, the Constructivism of the Russians Pevsner, Tatlin, and Gabo, and the Abstractionism of the Czech Kupka. The fact that abstract art has become, within a few years, a generalized international language (yet differentiated, nonetheless, because this abstract vocabulary seems to have preserved, perhaps temporarily, a few racial characteristics in Japan, the United States, and South America) tends to reverse Worringer's theory. But the reasons for the tremendous diffusion, in Latin countries like Italy or in semi-Latin ones like France, of this abstraction, which Worringer believed to be typically Nordic, are extremely complex and variable and would in themselves require prolonged study. The diffusion and the regional distribution of aesthetic forms are often conditioned by factors that are not, properly speaking, artistic; thus trading in works of art—an excellent as well as a dangerous means of diffusion—does, at times, play an important role.

In the current state of expansion of abstract art, Worringer's theory, a half-century old and formulated at a time when such expansion could not have been foreseen, is valid solely as regards the knowledge and elucidation of the early examples of this art form. As the formal vocabulary becomes generalized and internationalized, the racial com-

ponents grow less and less isolated and persistent, to say nothing of the inevitable phenomenon of imitation, derivation, and influences.

For, far from remaining a kind of accident, localized in time and space like Futurism, Fauvism, Cubism, Dadaism, Orphism, Purism, and appearing only for a moment—a major moment, I admit, but still a mere moment in the history of European painting and sculpture—contemporary abstract art (which is not to be confused with abstract art itself) is already a half-century old, and its fecundity is constantly increasing. At times even its most ardent champions are concerned about this because a good many painters seem to set themselves up in abstractionism as if it were a kind of "easy school." Actually it is a very strict one, mainly because of its rigid requirements. Many artists are tempted by the "suspect" advantages that it offers in experimentation, in improvisation more or less brilliantly executed, or by the pleasant decorative effects that can be derived from it. Contrary, however, to a widespread notion, abstract art is not a decorative art. It might even be said to be the opposite of decorative art—and we will see the reason for this shortly. Can Islamic art, which, in its religious traditions, really is a pre-eminently abstract form, be considered "decorative"? It would be dangerous and arbitrary to proclaim a parallelism or an equivalence between Islamic art and contemporary Western abstract art. The extreme subjectivity that obtains in Western art, whose practitioners, without any prior datum, create in their entirety the forms in which they express their emotions, is alien to the Moslem artist. The latter, on the contrary, tends toward a complete objectivity in which any perception of individual emotion is obliterated in favor of absolute obedience to the pre-established laws of harmony. These laws are both spiritual and physiological, as satisfying to intelligence as to feeling—a feeling which, to a certain extent, is mystical as well as synesthetic. Not all the Moslem countries have been so rigidly docile to the dictates of non-figuration laid down in the Koran and confirmed and developed by tradition. Persia, for instance, has remained attached to an unorthodox figuration for complex reasons, impossible to set forth here.

Although history and chronicles have preserved the names of famous Moslem artists (mainly "figurative" ones), the scrupulous objectivity of the "abstract" Moslems is conducive to anonymity; in the play of their fretwork, wherein they displayed an extraordinary virtuosity, it is impossible to discover the presence of a "personal" genius. Much less

personal, too, is the work of Leonardo da Vinci—the "knots" of the Da Vincian pseudo-academy and the labyrinth of branches and ribbons of the Sala della Asse at Castelo Sforzesco, as well as "Saint Anne," the "Gioconda," or the "Virgin on the Rocks."

While Moslem geometricism is entirely objective and totally anonymous, Piet Mondrian's geometricism, on the contrary, always bears the imprint of an entirely individual genius, unique in the conception and execution of a work. The extreme simplicity of the plan of neoplasticist compositions, their pronounced economy of form and color—straight vertical and horizontal lines dividing the surface into unequal rectangles, some of which are painted in an elementary color—might remind us of the objectivity of Moslem sketches if, in the execution itself, the relationship between the dimensions of lines and the areas they delimit, the inequality of lengths and widths, and, above all, the intense saturation in the substance of the impasto and of the color—a white, a red, a yellow—did not reveal the direct activity of an entirely individual genius, individualized in each of his works. To emphasize Mondrian's geometricism in order to compare it with the pathetic dynamism of some other painter is to misjudge the intimate and essential value of the excitement, the tremulousness, the peril existing in these compositions that appear to be so "wise," so "cold." Although few observers are capable of perceiving the dramatic nature of Mondrian's painting, this is the quality, nonetheless, that constitutes its essential nobility, seriousness, and gifted oneness.

It is understandable that an elevated conception of religious purity might have deemed presumptuous and even sacrilegious, as in the case of Islamic art, the desire to represent the non-representable, arbitrarily giving form to that which cannot have form, the transcendent. Every history of religious art illustrates these successive and opposing waves that flow from naturalism to irreality, from the familiar anecdote to abstraction. It is only right that non-figurative painting should find a place in contemporary religious art. The main reason is that all forms representing sacred episodes in the Christian repertory of both Testaments as well as in the lives of the saints have been used and exhausted, and it is hard to envisage how they could be revivified today. A painter of religious pictures is therefore led to repeat what has already been done and re-done—the hieraticism of Byzantium, the pious intimacy of the Middle Ages, the dramatic realism of the Baroque, and even Von

Unde's curious experiment in clothing evangelical characters in the style of the 1900's.

A form can be renewed solely by the feeling with which it is imbued. The great plastic currents of the first half of this century—Cubism, Fauvism,[1] Futurism,—could not be factors in the revivification of religious art precisely because they were devoid of this feeling. On the other hand, abstract art emerges as a pre-eminently religious art because it expresses a pure state of sentiment devoid of the intervention of figures which often distort this sentiment by the very manner in which they portray it. Extreme and absolute trends like Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Reformation are explicable because of their manifest hostility to the idea of giving corporeal reality to spiritual situations. Any figure, even though it expresses emotion, at the same time limits and, to a great extent, depreciates it. The contemplative state transcends form and representation. With the exception of Saint Jean de la Croix's extraordinary "Christ plongeant," no evidence of mystical vision could be reproduced by a religious painter. This would be so even if he were endowed with the technique and talent required to make possible a sharing of the vision by someone not privileged to experience it directly.

It is no less true that a religious emotion can be expressed with the help of certain visible forms just as it can with the aid of auditory ones. And, to a great measure, the abstract painter employs the same emotional means as the musician in order to create, in his audience, that state of communion with the sacred that has no need for figures or anecdotes. A feeling for the sacred will be all the more intense and satisfying because the passage from the artist's creative emotion to the consequent emotion of the spectator will be quicker and more direct. In a series of lithographs, Manessier portrayed—I use the word for want of a better one—scenes of the Passion in such a way that no object could remind the viewer of a person or a gesture. And in spite of this, or because of it, the pathos of each scene is manifest, certain, and unequivocal for anyone who views these compositions in the same spiritual state of mind he would be in when listening to a Passion by Schütz or Bach or to a liturgy by Messiaen.

This very characteristic phenomenon of religious abstract art should be reassuring to all those who fear that abstract art in general is becoming dehumanized. This apprehension stems from the fact that ab-

1. Rouault was a great religious painter in spite of Fauvism, not because of it.

stract art no longer portrays the human figure and its concomitants—landscapes, still-lifes—those things that suggest man's presence, his life. People are also concerned that, since it addresses itself only to the intellect, it is purely cerebral. Thus in France the term "abstract" is almost immediately associated with the word "intellectual," as if it were necessarily a synonym. There is a doubt that non-figurative painting can appeal to the senses, to feeling or emotion, as effectively as figurative art. The enemies of abstract art accuse it of addressing itself exclusively to a small group of initiates, a kind of intellectual elite. For this reason they question its vitality, its capacity for renewal and growth. Perhaps they are right in the sense that only those artists whose paintings convey a truly human message, whose work possesses, as a point of departure and foundation, a profound and ardent internal life, can break away from the decorative and the gratuitous play of "formlessness."

The early twentieth-century writings of the masters of abstract art: Malevitch's *Le Monde, sans objets,* Kandinsky's *Spirituel dans l'art,* Klee's *La Conférence d'Iéna* and his notebooks, Franz Marc's letters, Theo van Doesburg's *Les Eléments fondamentaux d'un nouvel art formel,* and Mondrian's *Le Principe général d'un équilibre formel*—to mention only the most typical—unquestionably constitute major evidence concerning knowledge of the artist's internal life and the spiritual principles that direct his creativity. Very rare, on the other hand, are the writings of figurative painters of the same period, writings that formulate similar spiritual requirements and reflect the profound movements of an internal life which, more than any other, is concerned with great human problems. Art is not necessarily human because it portrays a nude woman on a couch, a table set for dinner, or a suburban street. It is actually far more so when, rejecting the traditional concomitants and utilizing only forms and colors, it awakens human emotions that are not necessarily associated with this or that picturesque anecdote. An abstract painting must be pregnant with feeling; it must reach a peak of emotional intensity in order to elicit a corresponding emotion in the spectator. The latter's emotion is not necessarily of either the same nature or degree as that of the artist. What matters most is that the emotional shock occurs; that the spectator, in his personal interpretation of the work, draws more or less away from the feeling the artist experienced when painting is in itself not enormously important. Indeed, everyone interprets what he sees or hears in terms of his own personality. A Madonna by Botticelli or Titian might evoke secular

delight in a sensualist, while a religious man would sense only the pious sentiment. Yet both men see the same painting. The public's reaction to a figurative painting is infinitely varied. To verify this, one has but to listen to the exclamations and comments of museum-goers: in a Chardin still-life one person would see only its architectural structure, while for another it would have exclusively tactile, olfactory, or gustatory sensory associations.

I admit that the latitude for interpretation which exists in figurative painting is even more pronouncedly present in non-figurative painting where the spectator's response is no longer guided by the evidence of objects. It would be no exaggeration to say that an abstract painting furthers and even seeks this personal interpretation on the part of the spectator; for, while the picture is determined plastically because colors and forms are combined in such an inevitable order that no possibility of doing it differently exists, yet the painting is not necessarily associated with a given effective determinant. The fact that these forms have just been created out of an absolute and not drawn from painful experience or memory endows them with a greater and more varied emotional effectiveness than those objects which constitute the store of wares that figurative painters possess. No matter how sharp or precise the methodological determination of the forms might have been, a certain spiritual indecision at times subsists in the artist's sensitivity. Very rarely, if ever, does he bluntly tell you: "I wanted to express this."

A figurative painting is a plastic accomplishment which, to a certain extent, depends upon the elements of the composition which have been selected beforehand. An abstract picture is the reflection of a state of mind of which the artist himself is more or less clearly aware and in which the unconscious is all the more active. I believe that Novalis's famous remark about a poem applies completely to this kind of abstract painting: it "must be conceived wholly in the unconscious and executed entirely in the conscious." The merit of the abstract painting by virtue of its being the direct outpouring of a moment in the inner life of the artist, without any utilization of predetermined forms, confers upon it the value of a message and a testimony considerably more important than that of a figurative painting whose meaning we can immediately and unerringly assess. Thus in abstract art the content and the means of expression, although they can be dissociated elsewhere, are closely interwoven and harmonized to the point of perfect homogeneity.

The question of the "subject" no longer arises. Since the days of Impressionism, it had given rise to a reaction greatly emphasized by the last important figurative movements at the beginning of this century—Fauvism, Futurism, and Cubism. These movements, rejecting the obligation of "having to express" something, held that a painting was a pure plastic fact, an absolutely autonomous pictorial phenomenon. The liberties that were taken with a prior reality that could still be the subject or the point of departure of a painting demonstrated that one could dispense with it. However, although these movements ventured to interpret this reality in unheard-of ways, they did not have the supreme courage to abolish it entirely. Nor did they go back to the inner world of the painter in order to discover in it the painting's prefigure, contemplated by a glance within and then planned in perfect harmony with the initial design, in terms of objective non-reality as pure invention; all the elements of the picture would then seem to be a spontaneous, unique phenomenon, without any precedent.

Abstract art has not become the great and powerful impetus for an unequaled aesthetic revival merely because it refuses to portray already existing objects but rather because the emotional datum, viewed as a plastic factor, is all that matters to it. The figurative painter frequently had difficulty harmonizing his inner emotion with the realistic forms in which paradoxically—for now we realize how very paradoxical is what traditionally seemed normal and even necessary—he was obliged to portray them. Here resides the source of the conflict among all the great emotional artists, whether they be Rembrandts or Van Goghs. From Isenheim to Colmar, Christ resurrected, his face dissolved in light until it ceases to be form and is transformed into pure radiance, masterfully illustrates this transition from a material to a spiritual condition. Mathias Grünewald, who, of course, could not think in terms of abstract painting, took the first step on the road whose terminus Manessier was to reach.

Abstract art, in order to liberate the inner life from the constraints and limitations imposed by the preconceived images of figurative painting, and not merely because it regarded as exhausted all possibilities of renewing the figurative means of expression—and Cubism is the last of these rather than the beginning of another movement—has accomplished the divorce from the representation of nature. I say "representation" rather than "nature" because the latter greatly inspired such painters as Tal Coat, Bazaine, Winter, Ubac, and Estève. But it in-

spired them as an element of terror, as a cosmic emotion, not as a fragmentary aspect of the universe, carved from the world and transplanted in a painting. Because they paint the earth's soul, the soul of the elements, rather than fortuitous aspects, abstract painters achieve a conception of universal reality, a communion with the plenitude of matter itself. To localize this or that landscape is to create an obstacle to this endeavor, just as to portray the human body, the fact, is to hinder the intimate and total apprehension of the inner man.

Therefore abstract art, in its essential trends, is neither a revolution nor a reaction against an existing state of affairs, as was Cubism or Fauvism. It is a departure, all moorings cut, all bridges burned, toward an entirely new reality, toward a mode of representation that had no precedent during some two thousand years in the history of Western painting—a departure toward a new conception of the artistic fact as such. It is interesting to note that the "fathers" of contemporary abstract art followed this road independently and almost simultaneously, on their own initiative and without being swept along by one another; each one went his own way, imbued with his personal philosophy, aesthetics, and technique. This was around 1910; these men were animated by varying concepts, but all were equally convinced of the need to create a non-figurative art, one that would portray only the inner world. Kandinsky, Malevitch, Delaunay, Mondrian, Kupka, Klee, Pevsner, Gabo, and van Doesburg explored this new continent and revealed its unsuspected resources.

Their paintings are their most important testimony, but they have also left writings in which the vicissitudes of their aesthetic experience are recounted. These contribute invaluable insights into the creative process. All of them express a dissatisfaction at being obliged to employ old, outmoded means that hinder their desire to depict the inner world. They all aspire toward liberation from these means. Contrary to a widespread notion, their aim was not at all to create a new aesthetics, a new ism that would be added to already existing ones; they were far less concerned with aesthetics than their predecessors. Rather, they were imbued with a kind of messianism, a "Johannism." This stands out sharply in *Le Monde sans objets* and in *Du Spirituel dans l'art*. According to these writings, art was to be the vehicle for a great philosophical message.

This, too, is one reason why it seems obvious that abstract art is not, as its blind detractors hoped, a mere "moment" in the history of art—

like one of those moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when painting was revivified. Rather, it was a radical change in man's relationship to things, in the relationship of the internal and external world. Never before had so many means of expression, so rich and varied, been made available to the painter.[2] Never had such freedom been proffered, requiring, in return, that necessary discipline which confers upon freedom its ethical and aesthetic value. Everything can now be expressed in any manner: we might sum up thus the unlimited field of possibilities opened up to the abstract painter. The layman might even believe, in his unawareness of the imperatives of any art, that it is not necessary to know how to paint in order to execute this or that painting. Indeed, in museums one constantly hears the bombastic and ignorant remark: "I could do it just as well." This is how the philistine, ill at ease and indignant, manifests his hostility and his suspicions about an art where he does not have the usual guideposts for appreciation.

The resemblance between the thing painted and the initial model, even viewed in terms of a concept broader than the notion of photographic resemblance, and regarded as an element of value, does not exist in the case of an unprecedented[3] painting that forces the spectator to make a tremendous effort to identify himself with the work of art. Confronted with abstract paintings, the viewer is literally bewildered because he cannot relate them to anything he knew previously; he recognizes nothing in them.

To educate the public, to make a real experiment in non-figurative painting acceptable, is a slow and difficult process. The highly individual, subjective nature of the painting establishes a distance between the creator of the painting and the man who contemplates it that is difficult to traverse. This distance causes considerable misunderstanding which leads the spectator to declare, in good faith, that the "hermeticism" of abstraction is impenetrable. Thus he shuns the real effort he should make in order to establish an identity between himself and the picture —not an effort of comprehension, or of intellectual identity, as is mis-

2. A long and complete account of abstract sculpture would require a special study.

3. Precedents exist today, in the sense that the most famous abstract painters are often imitated because of the success of their works. Thus, "schools" for their followers have already been established. These imitators take the line of least resistance and the road to material success which, chimerically, they consider an assured one for the sole reason that they are copying an "expensive painter."

takenly believed, but one of emotional communion and spiritual identification.

It was probably inevitable that such a profound metamorphosis of the very notion of form would lead to an extreme position—the temptation to reject form itself. From this temptation arose that extreme point in abstract aesthetics called "formless painting." This term is inaccurate because the concept of form is quite broad; even painters who use the "spot" technique end by employing forms, whether they want to or not. The revolutionary nature of non-figuration could lead to the extreme position that stigmatizes form as being a regulating element of emotion. As a consequence, the absolute freedom of this form, which, paradoxically, claims the right to be formless, is thwarted.

Here we come upon something far more serious than a confusion arising from semantic vagueness and the inexact connotations of the words "formed" and "formless." The misuse of this notion of freedom is not complete unless it includes the free choice of nothingness; in terms of the latter, these changes in form from the figurative to the non-figurative must inevitably culminate in formlessness. Curiously enough, the extremists in abstract art are in agreement with their opponents on this point. The latter locate formlessness at the point where form begins to abandon figure. How and to what extent can we establish—other than by manifestoes and doctrinaire writings—the boundary between formal and formless abstract art?

I have said that any artistic creation produces a form, whatever it happens to be. The term "formless" would therefore represent one of the many and dangerous aberrations which the language of the critics and historians of art readily multiplies. In order to solve this major problem—the nature and significance of form[4]—there would first have to be agreement about the importance attributed to the word itself. Since, as yet, we have no history of form or forms, we will have to be satisfied with the entirely relative value that applies to a given situation. It is less important to perceive why works belong to the domain of either the formed or the formless than to study what aesthetic conception lies at the root of the desire to paint the formless as proclaimed by certain artists.

For such artists, to go to the end of the non-figurative experiment would mean to liberate themselves from both figure and form. It is

4. This would require a "morphology of morphology" upon which, primordially, the entire history of valid art should be based.

true that one might attempt to discover an already present desire for formlessness in Malevitch's Suprematism; he hoped to find some way to eradicate all obstacles to thought. But, although he rejected color in his ambition to paint white on white,[5] he never did reject form. His paintings consisted of geometric figures that are incontrovertibly the most severe and inclosed forms. Casimir Malevitch knew that, when the mind is truly free, no form can inclose or constrain it: the mind roams wherever it chooses. In a painting like his "White on White" in the Metropolitan Museum of New York City, the outlines of form become pure suggestion, almost indecipherable; their ultimate function is to prevent the mind from dissolving and becoming destroyed in the void. Here, form is an obstacle to nothingness.

The attitude of today's painters of "formlessness" can be contrasted with that of the "father" of abstract art, Malevitch (1878–1935), in that it rejects the very principle of construction which remains dominant for the creator of Suprematism. Seeking to be "explosive," in accordance with a tradition that can be traced back to Expressionism, and pushing to the extreme the aesthetics of its masters, Munch and Van Gogh, this mode of procedure rejects, naturally, the controls of intelligence and reason. It wishes itself to be pure instinct. The bursting-forth of emotion, its crude projection on a canvas—at any rate, a theoretical "crudeness" because it is often knowingly effected—in a gush of unco-ordinated spots proclaim that the picture is no longer merely a freely composed and autonomous being, as is true in the case of formal abstract painting, but also that each element of the painting, each stroke, each speckle, is, in itself, an independent whole. According to the intention expressed by the painters of formlessness, the cohesiveness of the painting's elements, their connection, their relationships, are but outmoded and tyrannical imperatives from which one must free one's self. A picture is as unformulated as an outcry might be because, according to the followers of this aesthetics, everything that is not an outcry already constitutes a distortion of pure, initial emotion.

Perhaps it might be helpful to say that the painter's "artistic feeling" —whatever meaning one attributes to this phrase—controls and directs his emotion despite the power and immediacy of the latter. It does so

5. A Suprematist composition, probably dating from 1918 and belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of New York. The slope of the smaller square contained in the larger one represents a determination for motion which, in Malevitch, is always the manifestation of the mind.

to the detriment of pure instinct's intransigence; thus, of course, formlessness is not constructed in the same way as formal art, but nevertheless it is constructed. This is perhaps the moment to recall that the Dadaist movement, which offered a negative doctrine in 1917, and which should have culminated in failure, nonetheless promoted works of art. Some of these constitute very important landmarks in the contemporary history of art. The negation to which Dadaist artists aspired assumed, in the perspective of time, the value of a true asceticism, in the sense that it implies the sacrifice of what is supposed to be art. Some, however, would call this a denial of art. Anxious to be a *tabula rasa,* Dadaism imposed a cult of the absurd, abandoning aesthetics and traditional forms. But this asceticism mainly benefited the artists for whom Dadaism cleared the way rather than the faddists. As to abstract art, Dadaism demonstrated that one could validly dispense with figurative forms and create a "fresh beauty" based essentially on the importance of surprise and the stimulation caused by the shock and indignation which these manifestations evoked in the public. The effectiveness of shock, preferably of an unpleasant kind, was the mainspring of this Dadaist anti-aestheticism which, in spite of itself, became in turn an aesthetics.

But the beginnings of Dadaism go back only to 1917, whereas the first abstract paintings[6] date from around 1910. This makes it impossible to regard Dadaism as one of the sources of abstract art. However, like Cubism and Futurism, it did confirm the legitimacy of breaking away from the figurative form and likewise emphasized the value of the non-figurative. We must also stress the fact that the first abstract painters of 1910 did not dream of justifying their rejection of the figurative by making use of historical precedents. In this their movement is entirely novel. They did not investigate past periods or areas of civilization, where the art of abstraction had been cultivated merely in order to proclaim their findings. Extremely daring, they were the explorers of an unknown world, the great adventurers in an aesthetic experiment that no one before them had attempted. They had the fixed determination to go on to the end. But to the end of what?

For each of the "fathers" of contemporary abstract art, the end (which could also mean the goal, but not always, since many ventured along this road without knowing where they were going) must have represented something different, depending upon the artist's temperament

6. I mean those of our contemporary period.

and character, the quality of his inspiration, and the depth of his aspirations. At the core of Suprematism there was a religious mysticism; a social mysticism at the point of arrival of Neo-plasticism; and one encountered in Franz Marc a mysticism of cosmic communion that is naïvely, if not formally, abstract. To look upon art no longer as a means of portrayal but as the vehicle for an increasingly deeper plunge into the secret core of things, as a magical achievement—in the strongest sense of the term—was for Klee an opportunity to transcend the figure, to transfer it from the level of representation to that of the hieroglyphic, of the key word. Metamorphoses are organized around form, created out of form itself; and crystallizing around form are the forces of surrounding space: the efflorescence of a universe of colors and motion in which the memory of natural objects is erased, Kandinsky's plastic and spiritual imperative, instinct directing creative will.

This explicit freedom was conquered and the postulate accepted that emotion would no longer require a reference to natural objects in order to communicate itself a priori or a posteriori. The consequence of this was that each artist would use this freedom as he saw fit, on the prior condition that his work would be controlled by the exigency of strictness. During the first decades of abstract painting, when severity was spontaneously acknowledged as the only means of achieving this revolution with order, there could be no question of formlessness. Had it not restricted itself in the beginning to manifestly severe structures (Mondrian) or hidden ones (Kandinsky), had it accepted the explosions of instinct, in all probability it would not have lasted longer or been any more effective than Futurism. Despite all the manifestoes and all the theories that it tried to formulate, Futurism constituted but a very brief moment in the history of art. On the other hand, abstraction in its present forms, with the rich past of the last fifty years, attempted major experiments, accomplished and realized them in works that are landmarks in the aesthetic history of that period. It is inaugurating "a beginning" because its modes of expression are practically unlimited. These modes themselves are but the tools of a creative conscience, for the last fifty years perpetually in a state of transformation and of becoming. Abstraction represents the evolution of this creative conscience, the awareness it possesses of its technical and spiritual possibilities, present and future, and, consequently, of its involvement in the perpetual innovation of all the modes of expression which, even more than aesthetics

itself, attest the considerable importance and the absolute value of non-figurative art in the historical continuum of the plastic style.

We cannot enumerate today, when our present connects this fifty-year past with an unpredictable future, all the directions toward which the countless fan of abstract painting can open up. But, at the junction where the branches of the fan converge, we can assess the major aspects of the creative conscience and its most productive imperatives. First of all, there are the two opposing currents: one which constructs the work of art in accordance with intellectual patterns, and the other whose basis is passion.

Intelligence demands the authority to organize a non-figurative universe according to the precepts of logic, reason, and numbers, lest freedom might become anarchy and the independence of form might force it to become formless. It demands such authority also in order to respond to the aspirations of a certain social functionalism. All art is both objective and subjective (no matter how rigidly objective it desires to be, it cannot help being subjective as well). But it stresses either one or the other of these two elements, depending upon its position in regard to sensation, emotion, imagination, and "ideas," in the Platonic sense of the word. The painter can believe that the world is his "representation," according to Schopenhauer's precept, and therefore he can portray his inner world, the world of his emotions, his passions. On the other hand, he might attempt to discern the essential structures of the objective universe, the ideal forms, by using his intelligence and his sensitivity. He could also give a plastic interpretation of it in which the creative self and the object-universe would overlay each other in transparency. In no instance, and this we must remember, can the dominance of the intellect entirely eradicate the factor of passion, of sensitivity, in a work of art. But it subordinates these to creative reason and to explicit logic.

Constructivism and Neo-plasticism resist this tide of emotional potentialities which non-figuration encourages. For a long time abstract, constructivist, geometric painters claimed the title "abstract" for themselves alone. For a long time, too, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles accepted as new realities only the structural, to the exclusion of the emotional. In their opinion, to abstract is to draw as close as possible to ideas, by rejecting any naturalist impression, any reference to what would not be ideal. They are the puritans of abstract art, the uncompromising votaries of pure form, of integral and honest objectivity. The formless begins, in their opinion, with non-intellectual, emotional form.

No artistic creation exists in which intelligence does not have its say, its eminent or modest role to play. For artists who construct their work according to patterns of passion, extreme subjectivity is the rule. It would even seem as if there could be no question of objectivity, since the object exists solely at the moment of creation and is realized only when the creation is finished. The question of discovering the essential forms that correspond to the structures of the universe is no longer what matters, but rather the problem of inventing, with passionate creative impetus, the artist's emotional image of his inner self. What is required in this connection is complete identity between subject and object because it is the subject which, in and by means of the work of art, becomes the object. The subject expresses and contemplates itself within the framework of this expression. We are speaking of identity on an emotional, not an intellectual, level, because intelligence is relegated to a secondary role—that of participating in the organization of the elements created by emotion. From more or less rigidly structured form to the "formless," from inclosed form to free form, all the possibilities in the use of modes of expression constitute a plastic vocabulary in which even the language of the *Naturphilosophen* of painting is not lacking: what Goethe called "the alphabet of the world's spirit," recovered and acknowledged by means of emotion rather than intelligence—Novalis' "great cipher writing." This is no longer a neo-Pythagoreanism inherited from the Renaissance, with its patrimony of the "golden section," of "perfect proportions," of mathematical "series" according to Fibonacci, but a visionary lucidity, a lyrical intuition, a poetic embrace of the cosmos, a prophet's headlong plunge into the "soul of the world."

To renounce the forms of nature in order to possess more fully its soul is equivalent, aesthetically, to the kind of philosophical speculation that puts aside the phenomenon in order to comprehend the idea and to contemplate it in its absoluteness. Until the advent of abstract art, painting had to struggle against the opacity and weight of phenomena that yielded only superficial answers. It had to be content to convey those internal vibrations of nature it could perceive and remember in its landscapes, its still-lifes—the objects-phenomena from which the essential light sometimes shone despite the hard shell of nature. Contact with nature is more intense, more subjective as well, and freed from the superficially picturesque; it interprets organic pressures, vegetable gestations, the invisible life of minerals, in the context of an in-

ternal experience, of an alchemy of emotion and passion.[7] This is a problem that traditional figurative painting would rarely encounter, so greatly was the artist's attention seduced and held by accidents. In order to "know" the nature of a landscape, Cézanne felt that he had to have some intuition about its geological formation. Since he had no knowledge of mineralogy to guide him scientifically, the painter from Aix, by a kind of prophetic vision, reconstituted within himself the history of the metamorphoses of the Sainte Victoire Mountain. He did so in order to possess it, not for a mere moment but permanently, believing that the actual form was intelligible only if it were the sum of all the telluric adventures that assailed it in the course of the millenniums. And this dissolution of form by the light and vibrations of shifting movements, which preoccupied Cézanne during the latter part of his life, represents a very important step toward abstraction. The desire to go beyond form, to transcend the visible and to unite the invisible with the visible, became painting's *raison d'être.*

When one understands that abstract painting makes for a closer communion (because less fortuitous) with nature, as well as a more direct, more "cosmic" expression of its strength and energies, of the currents that traverse, elaborate, and transform matter, the indignation of the naïve seems comical. The latter do not admit that any school of painting besides the figurative one is possible; and they accuse non-figurative painting precisely of "not taking nature into account at all." The same detractors of today's art complain that abstract painters "turn away from the human" because they no longer portray the external appearance of man. Actually, his passions, emotions, concerns, and discoveries manifest themselves to us directly in the painting—in their pure state, with all man's free ardor and with the immediate sincerity of a confession.

Figurative forms in a painting are what words are in space, in an operatic aria, or in a religious hymn: the elucidation of a message that music might not be able to transmit clearly. Left to itself, without a text, music permits each listener the freedom to allow his own emotions to awaken and to mingle with the feeling expressed by the music, even

7. The German abstract painter Fritz Winter painted an entire series of gouaches in 1944 in a very short time. They were executed in a state of cosmic communion, and they are very representative of those shoots, whose germinations, those torrents of matter in a state of fusion, those explosions of buds, those mysterious growths of crystals, which the *Naturphilosophen* as well as the pre-Socratics experienced. Significantly, Winter entitled this series of painting "Triebkräfte der Erde."

if they have no necessary relationship with the initial emotion of the composer. The interaction between a symphony or quartet and the man who listens to it is certainly entirely different in kind from that which occurs between a poem and the reader; the poetic emotion is always illuminated by the dialectics of imagery. The vocabulary of figurative painting is not (or is, intentionally, as in the case of the Surrealists or painters of fantasy) susceptible of equivocation. It is in use everywhere, as a general currency. Each abstract painter, on the contrary, creates his own personal vocabulary, which does not lend itself to translation because it has no accurate equivalents. The abstract painter's solitude, his inability to make his work comprehensible to a spectator who does not feel it, does not actually experience it, is not synonymous with the isolation or the unpopularity of the artist who uses modes of expression that are too new or are unpredictable. Rather, he is like the explorer of a marvelous country who, in telling about his trip, speaks in the language of the country itself, a language that is entirely alien to people who have never been there. It is hard to understand why Rembrandt's contemporaries could not accept "Night Round," why the Parisians of 1877 burst into laughter when they saw the Impressionists' landscapes, or why the critics of his time considered Cézanne's work as "the painting of a drunken night watchman."

On the other hand, the misconceptions and distrust of a large section of the public in regard to abstract painting are quite understandable, for this is not merely a matter of painting in a different way (as was true for Rembrandt, the Impressionists, and Cézanne) but rather of painting *something different*. This something different remains inaccessible, naturally, to those who do not know how to perform the experiment of entering into a picture in the same way that one would "enter into" a Chinese landscape of the Sung Dynasty. This is why abstract painting never became popular,[8] even though the last fifty years have given us time to accustom our eyes as well as our feelings to it. Perhaps it never will become popular because it demands a move toward an act of effective and, in a way, creative participation on the part of the spectator, which the lazy habits of the eye, the heart, and the mind often paralyze. We look at a landscape by Ruysdael; we "take

8. A great many critics, historians of art, and museum curators prove to be as incapable of knowing what abstract art really is as the unlettered masses might be. At least the latter are not previously ruined or immobilized by some arbitrary and incorrect notion about "taste."

a walk" in a composition—mountains, rain, fog—by Tong Yuan, Kouo Hi, or Ma Yuan. To recognize nature in paintings where it is not portrayed but is expressed by elemental energies is possible only for the man who can himself experience the upward thrust of rocks, the rumblings of subterranean waters.

Abstract art is not hermetic, as it is sometimes said to be. A hermetic text, like a coded language, is perfectly intelligible to anyone who has the key, the pony; the elucidation of a cryptogram is a labor of the intellect. In order for a novice of good will to penetrate into this mysterious world of non-figurative painting, which cannot be explained or demonstrated, we would have to give him the advice that the wise Taoist, Tchouang-tseu, gave to his disciples: "Vomit up your intelligence." Intelligence is not the best avenue of approach to any work of art, figurative or otherwise. So far as abstract art, or even the most constructivist, objective, "strict" art, is concerned, intelligence does not lead to the true core of the painting. Actually, it leads nowhere unless emotion, the ability to experience a thing,[9] enlarges it, relays it at the very point beyond which it cannot go. A painting by Mondrian containing a minimum of geometric forms and pure colors is enchanting to the mind that discerns in it subtle relationships, prodigiously delicate structures; but its intimate vibrations, like those that are present in Malevitch's "White on White," can be perceived solely by one's sensitivity. Therefore the man who does not approach this picture with sensitivity sees but the least important part of it.

Each individual who approaches a picture re-creates it within himself, in terms of his own personality and thanks to a sensitivity that is unique, since it is his own. This picture will therefore become as many different pictures as there are people who view it dynamically, while still remaining entirely itself. Thus in every picture-spectator relationship, a state of absolute uniqueness will be created because intelligence unifies experiences as much as sensitivity makes them varied. Therefore, Tchouang-tseu's precept would have the following meaning: to approach a work of art, do not take the common path (that of intelligence) but the one that is uniquely your own and along which you alone can travel—the only path where you will encounter the perfect

9. To experience something is the faculty for *erleben,* for living with, or just living—a state. It is a total human experience, for which all of man's faculties are equally active and equally necessary: a total apprehension of the object seen by the viewer. The object continues to live within the spectator and acquires a new life, associating the personality of what is perceived with that of the perceiver, and thus creating a new personality each time.

conjunction between the self and the non-self. For the non-self needs the self in order to exist, and you yourself will not be complete unless you are identified, at that very moment and in front of that precise object, with the non-self; you will be completely fused with it as it will be fused with you.

There is no need to fear an error of interpretation, because what matters is to experience something, not to understand it. And, after all, it matters little that a spectator experience exactly the same emotion as the artist. If the union of the artist and the spectator, by means of a painting, is complete, so much the better. But what counts above all is the connection between the spectator and the painting; the latter inevitably becomes transformed as it "penetrates" the spectator, just as he changes in receiving it. The wish to make the spectator participate was pushed to an extreme by certain artists;[10] they purposely composed works (it is hard to call them paintings) whose elements are mobile; the owner of the painting can change the position of these elements by hand, according to his whim, his mood of the moment, or, if such be the case, his own faculty for artistic creativity. The extreme result of this method is that the painting ceases to be a unit, since it lends itself to practically unlimited transformations, and this would challenge its very existence as a work of art—unless, of course, one holds that the excellence of a work of art resides in its great capacity to become metamorphosed by the spectator's manipulation. This would be true, for example, of the capacity of a Calder "mobile" to become transformed or of the glance given by the inner eye which questions and reconstructs as it views that conjunction of forms and colors which a painting actually is—a new world, a unique world, open to whoever will risk the great adventure of communion.

The ultimate goal of a work of art is that the spectator should perceive it totally as such, such as it is by virtue of the genius of the artist. This goal also consists in the possibility it offers everyone to immerse himself in the work of art. The purpose of such immersion is not to add something to the painting but rather to add something to the spectator: to reveal to him that part of the unknown of which he became aware only because of this painting—a part which was within him in the first place but which he would not have perceived had it not been for the painting. The timidity that so many people manifest when confronted with an abstract painting stems from the fact that they sense

10. Agam, for example.

the many metamorphoses it suggests to them and hestitate to run the risk of confronting them. This is far more often the deterrent than are ignorance, prejudice, or indifference. Doubtless men of the Stone Age took a long time to become accustomed to the pictures of animals which the witch painters portrayed in their sanctuaries. Perhaps the thousands of years which elaborated the plastic habits of present-day society have not yet completely prepared us to accept, unreservedly and unequivocally, the current forms of abstract art.