

[typescript Sweeney]

[letter to James. J. Sweeney – June 7, 1943]

[Mondrian's handwritten corrections are indicated with indications used for documentary editing; typewriter corrections are inserted]

A NEW REALISM //

It is comprehensible that some abstract artists have objected /
to the name Abstract Art. Abstract Art is concrete and, by its de- /
termined means of expression, even more concrete than naturalistic /
art. In spite of the fact that the denomination "Abstract Art" is /
right (abstraction means reducing particularities to their essential /
aspect) both names are equivocal; naturalistic art is also concrete. /
"Non-figurative Art" - another denomination - is equivocal because abstract /
forms are figures as well as naturalistic forms. The intention of /
indicating the destruction of the particularity of forms, which this /
name expresses exactly, may not be understood. It is the same with the /
name "Non-Objective Art," which indicates that objects are not the means of /
expression, while Abstract Art strives for objective, that is, universal /
expression. "Constructivism" might also be misunderstood, since Abstract /
Art requires destruction of particular form. //

Evidently every denomination is relative. However, it can be /
stated that all art is more or less realism. Men are conscious of life /
by the manifestation of reality. Reality here is understood to be the /
plastic manifestation of forms and not of the events of life. //

Compared with such tendencies as Symbolism and Romanticism, Realism /
reveals itself as more objective, thus a purer expression of reality. /
But viewed in relation to our time, the plastic expression (the action /
of forms and colors) is weakened by the naturalistic representation (<+ ;> /
the objective vision is more or less obscured by par(it → ti)cular feelings. /
Therefore, the culture of plastic art (<- ,> <+ (> the continuous and reciprocal ///

action of life and art ⟨+ ⟩ produce ⟨+ d⟩ greater transformation and abstraction /
of the natural aspect of reality. However, the confusion caused by the /
particular feelings and the use of naturalistic means, is not ended. /
The fact is logical. Art is not only the expression of the plastic /
manifestation of reality, but also an expression of men. Only through /
intuition does a work of art arise above more or less subjective expres- /
sion. Different periods produce different conceptions and feelings, /
and in each period men differ. Consequently different art expressions /
even in a single period are not only logical but a tribute to the general /
development of art. Intuition always finds the way of progress, which /
is continuous growth toward a clearer establishment of the content of /
art: the unification of man with the universe. //

It is important to observe that art is not a manifestation of /
instinctive faculties but arises through intuitive capacity. The ex- /
pression of intuitive capacity is not similar to that of instinctive /
faculties. We can state that instinctive faculties are of animal nature /
while intuitive capacities are human. In animals, ⟨- is⟩ instinct is pure. /
Through confusion with the human faculties it becomes impure in men. //

Instinct reveals itself as self-concentrating, self-edifying; it is /
limitation. Intuition produces self-denial, self-destruction; it is /
expansion. Culture ⟨+ can⟩ develop ⟨- es⟩ both. If it deve ⟨+ l⟩ops instinct, animal ⟨+ nature⟩ /
appears. Then culture destroys the intuitive capacity which men have ⟨+ even⟩ /
in ⟨+ a⟩ primitive state. Both actions are unified, but they should not /
be confounded. //

Human culture reveals an opposition: dimin ⟨iching → ution⟩ of the instinctive /
faculties and development of intuitive capacity. A cult ⟨ure → ivation⟩ of instinctive /
faculties produces human degeneration: a cult ⟨ure → ivation⟩ of intuitive capacities /
creates human progress. ///

Culture develops as well as envelops: environment, education, /
 experience, make men conscious of passing reality but overwhelm(- s) their /
 intuitive capacity when this is not very strong. //

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

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

All this is manifested in the course of the culture of plastic art. /
 We see the culture of the form ending in a struggle for the deliverance /
 from the limitations of form. We see the movements Futurism, Dadaism, /
 Surrealism develop(- e) this action. We see Cubism bring the great /
 blow to the limiting form. Then we see the different manifestations /
 of a new realism. //

Limiting form is here understood as limiting our vision by the in- /
 dividual character of objects, creatures, etc. in such a way that this /
 character appears predominant to us. Evidently all forms are limiting /
 to a certain degree and thus deliverance from thei(+ r) limitation is re- /
 lative. However, we can distinguish forms as closed and open forms. We /
 may consider closed forms those in which the circumference has ///

neither beginning nor end, such as the circle. When the circumference / shows a beginning and an end, it can be considered an open form, such as a / segment of a circle. It is clear that the open form is less limiting / than the closed form. Forms composed of straight lines are more open / than those in which the circumference is a curved line. They are estab- / lished by intersection and not by continuation. //

The new realism shows a greater consciousness of the plastic exigencies / in art. Being more objective, it endeavors to be a clearer expression of / intrinsic reality. Therefore it can be called "New". Through its clearer / means and determined structure, it is a new kind of plastic. For this / reason, its ultimate establishment appear(s → ed) as "neo-Plasticism". //

In plastic art, the reciprocal action of determined forms and deter- / mined space establishes the objective expression of reality. This action / constitut(+ e)s the dynamic movement that expresses intrinsic life. The object- / ive representation evokes (- a) universal emotion, indescribable and there- / fore constant. //

Only insofar as Abstract Art, Cubism, and Surrealism are objective / expressions, in other words, insofar as they are pure(+ ly) plastic, can they / be considered to be New Realism. //

Abstract Art is its purest plastic expression. It is conscious of / the importance of an objective manifestation. It is conscious of the fact / that reality reveals itself by substantial, palpable forms, accumulated / or dispersed in empty space. It is conscious that these forms are part / of that space and that the space between them appears as form(- s), a fact / which evidences the unity of form and space. Here it is important that / the forms are in categories and that (+ each) category has its particular expression / existing indepen(+ d)ently of our perception; that decomposed, the elements of / form have a particular aspect; that every fragment, every plane, every / line has its proper character. Evidently the objective appearance of / forms can change through transformation of the position in which they are ///

or through the changing of our position. A square placed standing on /
 one of its corners appears to have a diamond shape. And this shape /
 can be reduced to square form by standing it on one of its side(+)s or by /
 changing our position. //

The predominance of our subjective vision makes the objective /
 existence of forms more or less relative. Nevertheless, while our per- /
 ceptions and feelings may change our impressions, the forms conserve /
 their proper expression. This fact emphazezes that in order to establish /
 a true image of form and space, an objective vision is necessary. Con- /
 sequently, all plastic art shows the importance of the choice of the /
 plastic means and the need to transform the natural aspect. For nature /
 cannot be copied and the predominance of our subjective impression has /
 to be conquered. These plastic exigencies produce(+ d) Abstract Art. //

Abstract Art has grown out of the abstraction of forms but is not /
 a simple abstraction. It is rather construction after decomposition of /
 forms. Avoiding the formation of limiting form, it can approach an ob- /
 jective expression of reality. //

For a quarter of a century, Abstract Art and New Architecture have /
 been defined as “space-expression” from which aesthetic is excluded. /
 However, a work of art is not exclusively produced by perception or /
 construction. Aesthetic emotion is a factor in art. Both the plastic /
 expression and the way a work is executed constitutes that “something” /
 which evokes our emotion and makes it “art.” It must be emphasized, /
 however, that art is expressed through universal emotion and is not an /
 expression of individual emotion. It is an aesthetic expression of /
 reality and of men realized by universal perception. //

In practical architecture aesthetic has to be largely excluded. /
 But architecture as art, like all other plastic arts, has to reveal the /
 new aesthetic conceptions of our time. //

The term “space Expression” is right insofar as it annihilates ///

traditional aesthetics arising from subjective conceptions and brings /
 art to pure plastic problems. But at the same time the use of this term /
 shows that natural expression of space is transposed in abstract form. /
 In architecture and sculpture (three dimensional) construction is inevitable, but in painting three dimensional space has to be reduced to two-dimensional appearance. This is necessary not only to conform with the canvas but /
 to destroy the natural expression of form and space. Only then is the /
 equivalent space determination which abstract art requires possible in /
 painting. //

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

It must be noted that empty space can evoke universal conception, /
 create mental and moral activity. But this activity is in the abstract /
 domain and always requires the remembrance of the world of oppositions. //

The action of plastic art is not space-expression but complete /
 space-determination. Through equivalent oppositions of form and space, it /
 manifests reality as pure vitality. Space-determination is here understood as dividing empty space into unequal but equivalent parts by /
 means of forms or lines. It is not understood as space limitation. ///

This limitation determines empty space to particular forms. Through /
 this action the empty space obtains more or less definite expression, /
 but the limited space of these forms remains vague. In order to make /
 concrete the dynamic movement of reality and to annihilate the particular /
 expression of the limited space, division of these forms is necessary. //

The metropolis reveals itself as imperfect but concrete space-deter- /
 mination. It is the expression of modern life. It produced Abstract /
 Art: the establishment of the splendor of dynamic movement. //

Landscape painting expresses the movement as it is manifested in /
 the natural aspect of reality; it can be seen as a product of the revolt /
 against the wrong side of town life. In its landscape painting Impression- /
 ism affirms this strongly. //

The expression of pure vitality which reality reveals through the /
 manifestation of dynamic movement is the real content of art. The ex- /
 pression of life in the surrounding reality makes us feel living and /
 from this feeling art arises. But a work of art is only "art" insofar /
 as it establishes life in its unchangeable aspect: as pure vitality. /
 After centuries of culture, this fact produced Abstract Art in modern times. /
 Plastic art developed a more concrete manifestation of its content. /
 Greater consciousness of the plastic expression of natural forms produced /
 purer means of expression. //

Since the unchangeable expression of life is established by means /
 of forms with their colors, the proper character of these forms determines /
 largely the expression of the composition and of the whole work of art. /
 In plastic art, an objective representation of varied forms can produce /
 a clearer expression of the natural aspect of reality, but cannot establish /
 a clear expression of pure vitality. For this expression is then ob- /
 scured by the proper character of the forms. The objective expression of /
 forms limits their appearance to particularities as men, plants, objects, etc. ///

In order to establish a clear expression of pure vitality, the objective /
 expression of the limiting forms has to be destroyed as well as the sub- /
 jective expression. //

Subjective vision can transform the objective expression of things /
 but cannot destroy this expression. All plastic art annihilates to a /
 certain degree the objective expression of forms. But when this is realized /
 through subjective transformation, other limiting forms appear. The pure /
 plastic way is thus the transformation of the limiting form(- s) into a more /
 or less neutral form. Destruction of limiting form is necessary for a /
 clear expression of life as pure vitality. //

All plastic art and particularly Abstract Art shows the importance /
 of the fact already emphasized that forms with their colors have a proper /
 expression which is independent of our vision. The same fact is to be ob- /
 served concerning the elements of these forms. It is not superfluous to /
 realize that a square is not a circle, a straight line is not a curved line. /
 The more neutral the plastic means are, the more the unchangeable expression /
 of reality can be established. We can consider all forms relatively neutral /
 that do not show any relationship with the natural aspect of things or with /
 any "idea." Abstract forms or dislocated parts of forms can be relatively /
 neutral. Appearing as volumes, planes or lines, they have to become com- /
 pletely neutral in the composition. //

In all plastic art we observe a reduction of the natural form and /
 color to a more or less neutral state, a relative annihilation of their /
 particular expression, even when the intention is to express a certain /
 particular form. For art always is intuitively an establishment of beauty, /
 that is of intrinsic reality, and not a simple representation of men /
 or things. //

In order to express universal reality, traditional conception starts ///

from individual, limiting forms; modern conception starts from the perception of universal reality. The forms become really $\langle + \text{“} \rangle$ means $\langle + \text{”} \rangle$. //

$\langle - \text{The} \rangle \langle l \rightarrow L \rangle$ limiting forms are the plastic expression of the particular aspect of reality, but their individual character $\langle - s \rangle$ obscures the universal expression which reality reveals through them. //

Abstract Art emphasizes the fact that in plastic art the expression of reality cannot be similar to that of palpable reality. The dynamic movement established by the opposition of forms and their colors constitutes the expression of universal reality. In single forms, dynamic movement reveals itself through the continuous opposition of their composing elements: volumes, planes, determined by lines and colors. For this reason, the work appears as “living.” But in relation to the environment, simple forms show a static balance. They appear as entities separated from the whole. In order to establish universal unity, their proper unity has to be destroyed: their particular expression has to be annihilated. In plastic art, the static balance has to be transformed into the dynamic equilibrium which the universe reveals. //

It must be emphasized that it is important to discern two sorts of equilibrium: (1) a static balance and (2) a dynamic equilibrium. The first maintains the individual unity of particular forms, single or in plurality. The second is the unification of forms or elements of forms through continuous opposition. The first is limitation, the second is extension. Inevitably dynamic equilibrium destroys static balance. Opposition requires separation of forms, planes or lines. Confusion produces a false unity. In art as in reality, the plurality of varied $\langle - [xxx] \rangle$ and similar forms annihilates the existence of forms as entities. Similar forms do not show contrast but are in equivalent opposition. Therefore they annihilate themselves more completely in their plurality. //

Not only in abstract art but in all plastic art, the expression of ///

form is subordinate to the expression of dynamic movement. Form appears / only as means of expression. Throughout its development, the culture of / plastic art has progressively revealed that the more determined the / expression of dynamic movement becomes, the more the particular expression / of form disappears. It is logical that the most neutral form is the most / adequate to express dynamic movement in a clear way. //

Intrinsic reality - dynamic movement - is established in abstract art / by the exact determination of the structure of forms and space, in other / terms, through the composition. In painting, structure is established / through the division of the canvas by means of forms (planes) or lines. / Thus structure produces the plastic means and these in turn produce struc- / ture. All art shows that through undetermined structure a work of art / is less clear. The clarity of the function of the structure is in propor- / tion to the degree of abstraction. The more structure manifests itself, / the more natural expression disappears. Structure has the function of / determining the equivalent expression of form and space. //

In abstract art, space determination, and not space expression, is the / pure plastic way to express universal reality. In this way, art develops / from the domain of fantasy and accident to the solution of technical problems. / Intuition discerns the plastic laws veiled in nature's aspect. Technical / problems cannot be solved a priori by theory: action and experience produce / the consciousness of the laws which reality imposes upon us. Abstract art / is in opposition to the natural vision of nature. But it is in accordance / with the plastic laws which are more or less veiled in the natural aspect. / These laws determine the establishment of equilibrium, opposition, proportion, / division, relationships, etc. They are more or less clearly established / proportionate to the development of plastic art. //

Every tendency in art manifests space determination in accordance / with the same laws but in different ways of execution. In the course of ///

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

Painting can be a purely abstract expression. In painting reality / is established within the limited space of the canvas which can be com- / pletely determined by planes. In sculpture and in architecture, the / work is a composition of volumes. Volumes have a naturalistic expression. / Seen, however, as a multitude of planes, sculpture and architecture can / be an abstract manifestation. Moving around or within a rectangular / building or object, it can be seen as two dimensional for our time / abandons the static vision of the past. By moving around, the impression / of a two dimensional aspect is directly followed by that of another / two-dimensional aspect. The expression of the structure, form and color of / the planes can have a continuous mutual relationship which produces a / true image of the whole. This fact shows the intrinsic unity of painting, / sculpture and architecture. //

The conception of a mobile view-point appeared first in early Cubism. / Already in that tendency, the need for a truer and more concrete expression / was felt. But this Cubism intended to express volume. Intrinsically / it remained naturalistic. Abstract Art attempts to destroy the cor- / poreous expression of volume: to be a reflection of the universal aspect / of reality. //

Piet MONDRIAN //

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