

# Art in Theory

## 1900–1990

*An Anthology of Changing Ideas*

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the language of prose, but this does not violate the principle of 'roughened' form.

Her sister was called Tatyana.  
For the first time we shall  
Wilfully brighten the delicate  
Pages of a novel with such a name.

wrote Pushkin. The usual poetic language for Pushkin's contemporaries was the elegant style of Derzhavin; but Pushkin's style, because it seemed trivial then, was unexpectedly difficult for them. We should remember the consternation of Pushkin's contemporaries over the vulgarity of his expressions. He used the popular language as a special device for prolonging attention, just as his contemporaries generally used Russian words in their usually French speech (see Tolstoy's examples in *War and Peace*).

Just now a still more characteristic phenomenon is under way. Russian literary language, which was originally foreign to Russia, has so permeated the language of the people that it has blended with their conversation. On the other hand, literature has now begun to show a tendency towards the use of dialects (Remizov, Klyuyev, Esenin, and others, so unequal in talent and so alike in language, are intentionally provincial) and of barbarisms (which gave rise to the Severyanin group). And currently Maxim Gorky is changing his diction from the old literary language to the new literary colloquialism of Leskov. Ordinary speech and literary language have thereby changed places (see the work of Vyacheslav Ivanov and many others). And finally, a strong tendency, led by Khlebnikov, to create a new and properly poetic language has emerged. In the light of these developments we can define poetry as *attenuated, tortuous* speech. Poetic speech is *formed speech*. Prose is ordinary speech [...]

### 3 De Stijl: 'Manifesto 1'

The De Stijl group was founded in Holland in 1917, dedicated to a synthesis of art, design and architecture. Its leading figure was Theo van Doesburg. Other members included Gerrit Rietveld and J. J. P. Oud, both architect-designers, and the painters Georges Vantongerloo and Piet Mondrian. Links were established with the Bauhaus in Weimar Germany, and with similar projects in Russia, particularly through contacts with El Lissitzky. The 'Manifesto', principally the work of van Doesburg, was composed in 1918. It was published in the group's journal *De Stijl*, V, no. 4, Amsterdam, 1922. The present translation by Nicholas Bullock is taken from Stephen Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, London, 1974.

- 1 There is an old and a new consciousness of time.  
The old is connected with the individual.  
The new is connected with the universal.  
The struggle of the individual against the universal is revealing itself in the world war as well as in the art of the present day.

- 2 The war is destroying the old world and its contents: individual domination in every state.
- 3 The new art has brought forward what the new consciousness of time contains: a balance between the universal and the individual.
- 4 The new consciousness is prepared to realize the internal life as well as the external life.
- 5 Traditions, dogmas, and the domination of the individual are opposed to this realization.
- 6 The founders of the new plastic art, therefore, call upon all who believe in the reformation of art and culture to eradicate these obstacles to development, as in the new plastic art (by excluding natural form) they have eradicated that which blocks pure artistic expression, the ultimate consequence of all concepts of art.
- 7 The artists of today have been driven the whole world over by the same consciousness, and therefore have taken part from an intellectual point of view in this war against the domination of individual despotism. They therefore sympathize with all who work to establish international unity in life, art, culture, either intellectually or materially. [...]

#### 4 Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) from *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art*

This was van Doesburg's main statement of the principles of De Stijl. It was begun as early as 1915, first published in Dutch in 1919, and subsequently issued in German by the Bauhaus, as *Grundbegriffe der Neuen Gestalten Kunst*, Bauhausbuch, vol. 6, Munich, 1925. The present extract is taken from the English translation by Janet Seligman, London, 1969.

**XX** If an object of experience as such enters visibly into the work this object is an auxiliary means within the expressional means. The mode of expression will in this event be inexact.

**XXI** When the aesthetic experience is expressed directly through the creative means of the branch of art in question, the mode of expression will be exact.<sup>1</sup>

#### Example 5

When we look at old paintings, e.g., one by someone like Nicolas Poussin, we are struck by the fact that the human figures are portrayed in physical attitudes which we are unaccustomed to see in daily life, yet their corporeality is convincingly reproduced; the landscape too has clearly been improved. The leaves on the trees, the grass on the ground, the hills, the sky, all are true to life and yet the painter did not intend all this to be so. The attitudes and gestures of these people, the exact spot on which the individual figures stand and the relationship of the groups of figures to the surrounding space and the areas of space in between are far from being fortuitous or natural. Stress has clearly been laid upon attitudes and relationships. Everything has obviously been

carefully pondered. Everything is governed by fixed *laws*. Even the light, uniformly strong over the whole canvas, differs from natural light.

Such a painting is in a high degree true to life and yet, as a result of definite intentions on the part of the painter, it differs from nature. Why? Because the artist was working according to artistic and aesthetic laws (constructively organizing) and not purely from the point of view of natural objective legibility. The painter was more concerned about aesthetic purposes than about natural forms.

Instead of allowing the picturesque fortuitousness and diversity of nature to predominate, he seeks to achieve expression of a universal idea by purposeful organization of the figures and subordination of the details. Thus he appears to neglect the laws of nature in favour of those of artistic creation. He uses natural forms only as a means of attaining his artistic aim.<sup>2</sup>

The aim is: to create a harmonious whole in which the equilibrium of the whole, an aesthetic unity, is achieved by means of multiple exchanges and by cancelling out the positions and postures of the figures, the areas of space and masses and lines of movement in the picture (by relationships).

Indeed up to a point this artistic harmony is achieved. Up to a point, because the artistic aim is not sought directly through the artistic means, but only indirectly, obscured behind natural forms. Neither colour nor form appears in its pure state as colour and form. Rather colour and form are used to assist in producing an illusion of some other thing, e.g., leaves, glass, limbs, silk, stone, etc.

Such a work of art is the artistic idea expressed by naturalistic means.

It is an aesthetic-naturalistic work of art.

It deviates from external nature in so far as it is aesthetic (more inward); it deviates from the aesthetic idea in so far as it is naturalistic. It is, so to speak, split and is thus not an *unambiguously and exactly* formative work.

The aim of the formative artist is simply this: to give form to his aesthetic experience of reality or, one might also say, his creative experience of the fundamental essence of things. The visual artist can leave the repetition of stories, fairy-tales, etc., to poets and writers. The only way in which visual art can be developed and deployed is by revaluing and purifying the formative means. Arms, legs, trees, and landscapes are not unequivocally painterly means. Painterly means are: colours, forms, lines, and planes.

Taking the development of visual art as a whole, we can, in fact, see the means becoming increasingly clearly defined and providing the possibility of purely formative expression for the artistic experience. Since these formative means have made their appearance as the principal visible factor, everything in painting, sculpture, and, to some extent, in architecture which has no immediate place among the purely expressional means has been relegated to the background.

It is unnecessary to record every stage in the development of their importance in the evolution towards an exact artistic expression. We may summarize all these various currents, whether or not they belong to systems as: the conquest of an exact expressional form of the aesthetic experience of reality.

The essence of the formative idea (of aesthetics) is expressed by the term *cancellation*.

One element cancels out another.

This cancelling out of one element by another is expressed in nature as well as in art. In nature, more or less concealed behind the accidents of the particular case, in art (at least in the exact, formative kind), clearly revealed.

Although we cannot grasp the perfect harmony, the absolute equilibrium of the universe, each and everything in the universe (every motif) is nevertheless subordinated to the laws of this harmony, this equilibrium. It is the artist's business to discover and give form to this concealed harmony, this universal equilibrium of things, to demonstrate its conformity to its own laws, etc.

The (truly exact) work of art is a metaphor of the universe obtained with artistic means.

We saw in example 5 that artistic equilibrium was achieved in the work of art of an earlier age by the repeated cancelling out of one figural position by another, one dimension by another, etc.; by, therefore, a reciprocal cancelling out of *means borrowed from nature*.

The great step forward made by the exact formative work of art consists in the fact that it achieves aesthetic equilibrium by pure artistic means and by these alone.

In the exact, formative work of art the formative idea is given direct and actual expression by continual cancelling out of the expressional means: thus a horizontal position is cancelled out by a vertical one, similarly dimension (large by small) and proportion (broad by narrow). One plane is cancelled out by another which circumscribes it or one which is related to it, etc., the same applies to colour: one colour is cancelled out by another (e.g., yellow by blue, white by black), one group of colours by another group of colours and all coloured planes are cancelled out by non-coloured planes and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> In this way (according to Piet Mondrian: 'Neue Gestaltung' in the *Bauhausbücher*, Vol. 5), by means of a constant cancelling out of position, dimension, proportion and colour, a harmonious overall relationship, artistic equilibrium, is achieved and with it, in the most exact manner, the aim of the artist: to create a formative harmony, *to give truth in the way of beauty*. The artist no longer embodies his idea by indirect representation: symbols, slices of life, genre scenes, etc.; he gives form to his idea directly and purely by the artistic means available for the purpose.

The work of art becomes an independent, *artistically alive* (plastic) organism in which everything counterbalances everything else.

<sup>1</sup> The artist is, of course, entirely free to make use of any science (e.g., mathematics), any technique (e.g., printing-press, machine, etc.) and any material whatever, to achieve this exactitude.

<sup>2</sup> What the decadents of Cubism with their 'superrealism' are now almost without exception aiming at is exactly the same thing: a classical, painterly harmony achieved by means borrowed from nature. That in this process the natural forms are not intended as such but are to be regarded only as objective phenomena, makes, from the artistic point of view, no fundamental difference.

<sup>3</sup> One might label this movement Neo-Baroque.

In Impressionism this cancelling out was expressed intuitively. In order to achieve a harmonious impression one colour was cancelled out by another. Hence the expression: colour-relationship.

## 5 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 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.

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 *demands* 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. [...]

## 6 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 version is taken from Holzman and James, op. cit.

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.

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

manner. The colored planes, as much by position and dimension as by the greater value given to color, plastically express only *relationships* and not forms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

The plane which formed a square was the progenitor of Suprematism, the new colour realism, as non-objective art (see the pamphlet *Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism*, 1st, 2nd and 3rd editions, 1915 and 1916). [see IIA14]

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

In referring to non-objectivity, I merely wished to make it plain that Suprematism is not concerned with things, objects, etc., and more: non-objectivity in