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Equilibrium *En Vogue*?:

Who determines art and its significance in society?

**An essay on the life and impact of
Piet Mondrian in relation to this subject.**

What is art? What qualities imbue a work to move it beyond being simply an object or an image, and give it the hallowed title of “a work of art?” Are there any defining characteristics that can be found in all works of art? More importantly, who or what determines the true meaning and value of a work of art, or can such a thing be determined?

The stoic philosopher Seneca told us, “All art is but imitation of nature,” and Max Eastman went on to say that, “The defining function of the artist is to cherish consciousness.” In the past, it was much easier to determine what qualified as valuable art and what did not. Art was powerful and stirring; art showed evidence of craftsmanship and inspiration; art was a gift from God. Yet more and more, especially moving into the twentieth century, art became more and more abstracted and broken down and simplified until the lines that were once so clear had become blurry.

Does art need to show signs of craftsmanship and evidence that the artist put some amount of effort into his work, the metaphorical “blood, sweat, and tears,” or can it be hastily thrown together in the pursuit of spontaneity? Does art need to have a sense of design, and look like it took creative planning and deep thought, or can it be simple and basic? Does there need to be any sort of message, either concealed or explicit, or can art be purposeless and random?

Humor columnist Dave Barry writes about this phenomenon from the viewpoint of the public:

We Americans tend to assume that the British are more intelligent than we are, because they speak with British accents. That's why we need to know about the Turner Prize. This is a much-publicized prize awarded annually to a British artist. The people who award it say it's "one of the most important and prestigious awards for the visual arts in Europe." Besides prestige, the winner gets 20,000 pounds, which, if you convert it to American dollars, is a large wad of American dollars. To win that kind of money, you'd think the artist would have to produce an actual, physical piece of art -- a painting, a sculpture, a statue of the Queen carved out of cheese -- *something*. Nope. The 2001 Turner Prize went to an artist named Martin Creed, whose entry was entitled: "The Lights Going On and Off." It consists, as the title suggests, of lights going on and off in a vacant room. They go on for five seconds, then off for five seconds. That's it. In other words, this guy got 20,000 pounds for demonstrating the same artistic talent as a defective circuit breaker. Here's the scary part: *He deserved to win*. I say this because, according to BBC News, his strongest competition was an artist whose entry consisted of a dusty room "filled with an array of disparate objects, including a plastic cactus, mirrors, doors and old tabloid newspapers." Some gallery visitors mistook this for an actual storeroom, before realizing that it was art. You should know that the artistry of Martin Creed is not limited to blinking lights. Another of his works is entitled "A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball." It's a piece of paper crumpled into a ball. Perhaps you're thinking: "How come when I crumple paper, it's trash, but when this guy does it, it's art?"

He is writing rather satirically, of course, but there is a ring of truth to what he says, and many other people have asked his final question in one form or another. The public has become increasingly suspicious and cynical of modern art, because they see something that

appears easy and lacking in creativity, something they could do themselves if they were sufficiently bored, and they wonder why the artist is receiving so much praise.

What if the artist and the critics hail something as great art, but the general public, the audience, says that it isn't anything special? Who determines what qualities should be in a work of art, and who has the final say? The artist could declare anything to be art, but then we would probably have a massive influx of household items being passed off as art (or has this already happened?). The audience could decide what counts as art and what does not, but then the artist would be subjected to popular culture and fickle opinions. Is the balance somewhere in between?

This issue is not new to us by any means; it has been around for at least the past hundred years, and probably for centuries before that. The biggest cause of the issue is the trend of artists who move from the traditional representational art towards abstraction and simplification. One such example is Piet Mondrian, best known for his compositions of red, yellow and blue squares separated by straight black lines.

Childhood

Piet Mondrian was born in the Netherlands in 1872. His father was an elementary school principal who was actively involved in local politics and community life and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. His father was also qualified as an art teacher and had illustrated many of his own stories. Mondrian's uncle Frits was a barber but was also a successful Impressionist landscape painter, and other members of the extended family were involved with theater, books, and mysticism.

This atmosphere was clearly favorable to developing Mondrian's artistic abilities. His father taught him to draw when he was still young, and he was painting by age fourteen, after completing his primary schooling. By age twenty, Mondrian had moved to Amsterdam to further his education in painting and drawing. His first works produced during the 1890s were primarily still-lives and portraits, done either as paintings, drawings or watercolors. Even this early on, one could detect a looser, impressionist touch.

Early Art

One of Mondrian's first "important" works is *Village Church*, a watercolor done in early 1898. It depicts a church that was visible from the back garden of Mondrian's home, and although it is fairly realistic (especially compared to some of his later works), it has some abstracted elements. The tree branches, especially, are exaggerated and spindly. They are leafless and angular, and seem somewhat uniform in relation to each other. He also did a watercolor of the *Weaver's House*, which was located across the street, and also has rather abstracted trees and branches.

After the turn of the century, Mondrian painted a series of locations along the Gein River. Using primarily oil on canvas, but also sometimes black chalk and pastel, Mondrian focused especially on the trees that were lining the river and their reflections in the water. Already, his obsession with balance and symmetry was making itself evident, as many objects were positioned parallel to the plane of the picture and the edges of the canvas. The reflections in the water were also a very effective means of achieving symmetry. One of his favorite subjects was the *Geinrust Farm*, which was already shaped in an ideal way to provide horizontal *and* vertical symmetry, because of the shapes of the trees around the buildings.

Geinrust Farm in the Mist, completed towards the end of this period, in 1907, is nearly impossibly to discern on its own. A very symmetrical composition of grays, browns, and blacks, it is hard to interpret until one sees the title. This is a trend that Mondrian would follow for the rest of his life, using less and less easily recognizable objects in favor of vague shadows and shapes.

From Matter to Abstraction

The first significant use of Mondrian's trademark use of the primary colors, red, blue and yellow, occurred in his 1908 oil painting, *Mill in Sunlight*. A drastic change from his previous landscapes with their dark and soothing color schemes, *Mill in Sunlight* shines with a radiant power that either repulsed or astonished the critics of the time. In truth, most of them disdained the work, but several spoke eloquent praise of it.

Soon after this, Mondrian started his ascent (or descent, as some would say) from matter to abstraction. This trend is most evident in his series of studio works that use a gnarled, twisted tree as their subject. *Blue Tree* was painted in 1908, using tempera on cardboard as a medium. It features a black tree against a light blue background. It has a hasty sense to it, as the branches do not have any sense of detail to them, but are instead flowing strokes curving towards the ground. The same tree appears again later that year in the oil painting, *Red Tree*. This time, the background is a much darker and richer blue, and this time the tree's branches are much more detailed and spider-like, twisting and flowing around each other. Most importantly, however, is the red and yellow texturing on the tree trunk and branches, as well as the leaves on those branches and on the ground, showing yet another use of the primary colors in Mondrian's work.

Gray Tree is very similar, showing a twisted and gnarled tree that is roughly the same shape as the first two. This oil painting was very abstract, though, with dark gray and black lines of varying widths curving gracefully in front of a lighter bluish-gray background. Upon closer inspection, the individual brush strokes are very visible, having a sense of the *impasto* technique used extensively by Van Gogh two decades earlier.

The continued evolution towards abstraction is seen in *Flowering Appletree*. Here, Mondrian used an even grayer, featureless background, interrupted only by gently curving black lines, a faintly implied grid system, and blushes of brown or darker gray. Once again, without seeing the title, the casual observer would never guess the true subject of the painting, and would more likely perceive it to be clouds or waves on the ocean.

De Stijl

For the rest of the decade, Mondrian produced a variety of compositions using intersecting horizontal and vertical lines over a single-color background. By 1916, he indicated in several letters that he was struggling towards a new stage in his evolution. The first visible result of this “evolution” was the development of the style known as *De Stijl* (literally, “The Style”) in cooperation with Bart van der Leek and Theo van Doesburg, among others.

The major defining characteristics of De Stijl include red, yellow, and blue surfaces arranged on white backgrounds in two-dimensional space. Some of Mondrian’s more adventurous compositions didn’t place the emphasis anywhere on the work, lacked any specific center, and often drifted off the edge of the canvas, effectively creating a “decomposition.” They strove for harmony and equilibrium, and a balance in their works, that symbolized their desire for a utopian world where even art would no longer be necessary.

In 1917, these artists devised a new kind of painting that they called Neoplasticism, and promoted it in their *De Stijl* magazine through a series of essays titled *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, in which he explained this new system of painting, and its impact.

Neoplasticism

Published in twelve different installments, Mondrian's essays use a "trialogue," that is, a conversation between three characters, to explain the further developments of Neoplasticism. A "naturalist" painter, an layman art lover, and an "abstract-realist" painter (who was probably intended to be Mondrian himself) designated as X, Y, and Z discuss this new system of painting and how it extends to all of society, even politics and metaphysics. "Pure plastic vision must build a new society, in the same way it has built a New Plastics in Art. This new society, made of balanced relationships, will be based on the equivalent duality of the material and the spiritual," Mondrian says.

It wasn't until 1926 that Mondrian completely explained and defined Neoplasticism. The main principles involve turning away from natural form and color to pure composition and plastic expression, and essentially, the image. The primary colors red, blue and yellow are equivalent to the primary non-colors white, black and gray. The equilibrium usually requires a large space of non-color or empty space with only a small surface area of color. Referring once again to the impact on society, Mondrian says that:

"Neoplasticism shows exact order. It shows equity, because the compositional equivalence of the plastic means indicates equal – yet different – rights for everyone. Equilibrium created out of a thwarting and neutralizing opposition annihilates individuals as particular personalities and thereby creates the society of the future as a real unity."

Line Compositions

For several years now, Mondrian had been working exclusively on square and diamond-shaped oil compositions consisting solely of black horizontal and vertical lines separating areas of white, gray, or primary colors. For several years, the colors were extremely de-saturated, giving a pastel look to the works. Then, in 1920, Mondrian finished his first genuinely neo-plastic picture.

Composition A consists of 8 horizontal black lines, 7 vertical black lines, 4 black rectangles, 8 white rectangles, 5 gray rectangles, 3 blue rectangles, 4 yellow rectangles, and 3 red rectangles. At first glance, this is all it appears to be- a collection of rectangles and bold colors. There seems to be no specific subject or focal point, no specific point of the painting to draw the attention of the observer. And that is exactly what Mondrian was trying to achieve. He labored to create this fragile equilibrium, where no element in the painting was more important than any other element. Completely eradicating any sense of depth of field, focal points, or contrast, Mondrian said that, “I have now made a painting that pleases me more than all my previous work...”

For the next twenty years, until nearly 1940, Mondrian continued to use this formula of primary colors contrasted against primary non-colors balanced by proportion and the use of neutral horizontal and vertical intersecting lines. The lines continued to get bolder and the colors got more saturated, but for two decades, the dedication to equilibrium was the dominant force in his work, with no element ever being superior or inferior to any other element in the particular work. Mondrian created a massive amount of these compositions, tableaus, and “lozenges” (diamond-shaped canvas, rather than square-shaped) for those who purchased, or commissioned, and sometimes simply for his own satisfaction.

Public Response

The public was frequently less-than-enthusiastic of Mondrian's work. Although there was sporadic support, especially among his friends, Mondrian also had plenty of opposition in art circles. Instead of focusing on his art, many critics focused on his personal beliefs and convictions. They blasted his concept of Neoplasticism, deriding it as iconoclastic, undermining the foundations of acceptable art, and even went on to accuse Mondrian of being sexist because of some comments he had made, an accusation he never fully denied.

Many critics did support him, however. They hailed his genius, although the reasons they gave showed their ignorance of Mondrian's intent. Instead of criticizing his iconoclastic nature, they praised it, citing Paul Gauguin, who said, "In art, all who have done something other than their predecessors have merited the epithet of revolutionary; and it is they alone who are masters."

The general public loved this opportunity to show how "sophisticated" and "intellectual" they were, because they could form a so-called "elite" of people who appreciated and thought they understood Mondrian's work. They, too, showed their ignorance by saying things like, "I find the limited color palette and rectangular forms very warm and comforting." While that may be true for that particular individual, it has nothing to do with Mondrian's intent to create equilibrium.

Vast portions of the public responded the same way that they would for the next seventy or more years, whenever confronted with art that looked too simple and too casual. "I can do that!" they declared, "What's so special about him?" Dave Barry echoed this in his article mentioned earlier when he said about Martin Creed, "How come when I crumple paper, it's trash, but when this guy does it, it's art?" While he may have a valid point there, in Mondrian's case, the observer often did not realize the delicate balancing process that

Mondrian put into each and every work. While it is possible that the observer could perhaps make a well-balanced work of the same caliber as Mondrian, the fact remains that they did not, while Mondrian *did*.

Still, many people felt as if the new movements in art were trying to hoodwink them and pull the proverbial wool over their eyes. They bristled at other's insinuations that they were simply foolish and uneducated, and retorted that the self-proclaimed "intellectual elite" were in fact deluding themselves by pretending to be cultured. The writer Ron Merrill expressed the frustrations of much of the public when they encounter many contemporary pieces of art or music when he said:

"Any young person who has studied Heidegger; or seen Ionesco's `plays'; or listened to the `music' of John Cage; or looked at Andy Warhol's `paintings'- has experienced that feeling of incredulous puzzlement: But this is nonsense! . . . if it made sense, it could be evaluated. The essence of modern intellectual snobbery is the `emperor's new clothes' approach. Teachers, critics, our self-appointed intellectual elite make it quite clear to us that if we cannot see the superlative nature of this `art'- why, it merely shows our ignorance, our lack of sophistication and insight. Of course, they go beyond the storybook emperor's tailors, who dressed their victim in nothing and called it fine garments. The modern tailors dress the emperor in garbage."

He was referring to some of the more recent assemblages and "shock art," but his general accusation of an 'Emperor's New Clothes' syndrome was used of Mondrian as well.

Mondrian's Response & Further Evolution

For the most part, Mondrian ignored his critics, assuming they simply didn't understand the equilibrium he was trying to propagate in his art, and into the surrounding culture. He showed extreme gratitude of his supporters, however, and appreciated them

regardless of their interpretations of his work. He acknowledged that they might find their own understanding, and that would have an equilibrium of its own, in that it would balance his intent with their interpretation.

In 1940, Mondrian fled the beginning of World War II in Europe and moved to New York City. There, he was plunged into whole new realms of experience and inspiration. He was introduced to boogie-woogie music, which he reportedly described as “Enormous, enormous!”

For the next several years, his style changed to involve the white background and negative space, but the lines themselves now included the primary colors. *New York Boogie Woogie* was produced rather quickly after his emigration, and despite deteriorating health, he produced another of his more famous works, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, in 1943. The solid black lines had been replaced entirely with yellow lines interrupted by gray and colored blocks. He wasn't entirely satisfied with this work, however, and had actually been working on a different lozenge-shaped work called *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which although it satisfied him much more, was never finished. Mondrian died on February 1, 1944.

His latter works had begun to stray from his utopian vision of earlier years, perhaps because of disappointment at the resurgence of another world war, but perhaps also because of another realization: the world in itself is in a sort of chaotic equilibrium: peace balanced delicately with war, neither one becoming dominant over the other.

His vision was never entirely abandoned, though, and is probably in fact a latent desire in all mankind. We all want a sense of balance and “correctness” in the world, where everything fits in perfectly with everything else. Perhaps the world is actually like that, and we don't even realize it, but that is a different subject entirely...

Ultimate Artistic Authority

Once again, we return to our initial question: Who or what determines the true meaning of a work of art, or can such a thing be determined?

Of course, the artist has a large amount of authority over his or her own work. After all, they created it! They have the Authority of Inspiration, in that they were the ones who came up with the idea and concept. They have the Authority of Intent, because they were the ones who created the work for a specific purpose. The artist's authority over their work is the most authentic, because there is only one artist for a particular work. They alone can tell you the reason why the work was created, and for whom. The work would not exist if the artist did not bring it into existence. Regardless of what others thought of Mondrian's works, they ultimately express the equilibrium that he intended them to demonstrate.

The audience, however, does share in the authority over a particular artist's work. Long after the artist is dead and gone, the audience remains. The audience possesses the Authority of Interpretation, because in the vast realm of human experience, the same work can inspire many different thoughts and reactions in different people, which the artist would never have foreseen. In addition, the audience has Authority of Application, in that only they can choose how they will respond to what they have experienced and how they will alter their lives. Art is only as powerful as the receivers of the blessing let it be. In addition, the authority of the audience is only authentic on an individual-to-individual basis. No one person can enforce their interpretation on another person and neither can they expect others to react the same way that they have chosen to react. Mondrian understood this when he mentioned "equal – yet different – rights for everyone."

In the end, Time has the ultimate authority. The painter Henri Matisse said that “Time extracts various values from a painter's work. When these values are exhausted the pictures are forgotten, and the more a picture has to give, the greater it is.” Time holds the Authority of Legacy, because like everything else material in the world, art will pass away. Time is not fickle or arbitrary by any means, because it is not truly conscious, but because of its very nature, only Time will tell whether a work has any lasting value, in the way Matisse mentioned above. When the value of a work fades away, so too will the memory of the work itself. Time also wields the Authority of Replacement, because there is always the possibility that another artist will come along and completely shatter the boundaries set by those who have gone before him, making the former artist completely obsolete. In all probability, some new artist will come along in the next century or two who expands and elaborates on Mondrian’s ideas, pushing Mondrian to the ‘elder-statesman’ fringe, rather than the forefront of innovation.

Ultimately, the authority of Time overshadows both the artist’s and the audience’s, because Time deteriorates passions and promotes conformity. No amount of passion can stand against the endless stream of years and decades and centuries. Men do not live long enough to even try. If allowed to run its due course, conformity will eventually overcome individuality.

Although this sounds bleak, Time is rarely allowed to run its due course. We are created in the image of God, and have been bestowed with a spirit of creativity and uniqueness. Just as Max Eastman said, “The defining function of the artist is to cherish consciousness," inspiration and consciousness defy Time over and over by constantly thinking of new ideas and concepts, beginning the cycle of passion and initiative all over again. Mondrian had inspiration, as have many of the great painters, sculptors, composers,

singers, writers, and leaders throughout history. Regardless of whether a single artist's impact lasts, we can take comfort in the fact that inspiration and individuality come of their own accord, paying no attention to the natural laws of Time. And therein is yet another deeper equilibrium. But that is a subject for another discussion...

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