NOTES ON MONDRIAN AND CHIRICO

1942

The following notes are excerpts from a work on the direction of modern painting which I have in preparation. They are by no means in the final form I intend, but since it may be some time before I can again set my hand to them, I am presenting them as they are, in the hope that they may be of interest to at least a few persons. My preoccupation with the direction of painting accounts for the particular emphasis the notes have; they are taken from an article which was originally meant to be a chronicle of the season's exhibitions, hence their reference to the recent exhibits of Mondrian and Chirico; and though they appear without the other reviews, which would have given them more points of reference and comparison, perhaps they are able to stand alone.

I. THE ART OF ABSTRACTION: PIET MONDRIAN

it is not worthwhile suffering so much if he is not to go far
Jean Hélion

The most exact, and at the same time comprehensive description of science's work is that it has consisted of the formulation of relations and abstract relational structures. In the most exact sense, therefore, Mondrian's work[1] can be called scientific, since it consists of just the formulation of color-relations, and more important, spatial relations arising from a division of space. The scientific analogy is further confirmed by the fact that Mondrian clearly employs a hypothesis about the nature of reality, of which his work is an attempt at experimental confirmation. His hypothesis holds that it is possible to fulfill the artist's function, which is the expression of the felt quality of reality, with concrete color-spaces which contain no reference to the external world, either through representation or through the more condensed and ambiguous meanings of the image. After this preliminary statement, important things to say about Mondrian are these: 1. For many years he has indomitably and

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"Notes on Mondrian and Chirico," *VVV* 1 (June 1942): 59–61.

VVV, or Triple V, as it was called, was a review founded by André Breton. It appeared from June 1942 until February 1944. Motherwell was for a time on the editorial board, along with Nicholas Calas, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Breton. Written for the inaugural issue of *VVV,* Motherwell's notes on Mondrian followed his viewing of the first solo exhibition of Mondrian's work at the Valentine Gallery in New York and "The Masters of Abstract Art" at the New Art Center, New York, in 1942. Motherwell's notes on de Chirico followed his viewing of the artist's solo exhibition at the Perls Gallery, New York, in March 1942.

tenaciously maintained the freedom of the artist, both in permitting his work to be less subject to the pressures of the outside world than any other 20th century painter of comparable consequence, and in freeing every artist, if he liked, of any felt necessity for representation or the image. 2. Moreover, as Meyer Schapiro had remarked of modern art in general, Mondrian's work has the value of a *demonstration.* He brought abstract art into being at a moment when its nature was the object of much speculation, based on the unsatisfactory data of trying to view representational art of the past abstractly. His work has the value, like that of the experimental scientist, *whether it is successful or not,* of showing us with permanent objectivity what lies in a certain direction. 3. But in seizing the laboratory freedom of the scientist, Mondrian has fallen into the natural trap—loss of contact with historical reality; or, more concretely, loss of the sense of the most insistent needs (and thus of the most insistent values) of a given time and place. He has spent his life in the creation of a clinical art in a time when men were ravenous for the *human;* he created a rational art when art was the only place where most men could find an irrational, sensual release from the commonsense rationalism and disciplines of their economic lives. 4. Furthermore, and this is painful to say, Mondrian's experiment is a failure in its own terms. His terms were, remember, that it is possible to express the felt quality of reality (reality being just what we are aware of) in non-referential spatio-color structures. The premise cannot be proved false *a priori,* for we know that color and space are able to communicate feeling, as when, to take banal instances, a green room is felt as more cool and peaceful than an orange one; or as when certain activity is felt more appropriate in a small room than in a large one. But is it possible to say *a posteriori* that Mondrian failed, with his restricted means, to express enough of the felt quality to deeply interest us. The aesthetic grounds of his failure are plain:[2] a bare abstraction, like the simple wooden cross of the church triumphant, is *too* bare, insufficiently concrete and specific to determine a complete mental-feeling state in the observer. Nor does the perfectly valid proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ in itself interest anyone long. Neither the abstract aesthetic presentation nor the bare mathematical proposition are complex enough *even to suggest* the complexities of that reality with which we are overwhelmed. No one denies that the artist's function involves giving form (i.e., intelligibility, a form being just what is intelligible to us) to that complexity; but after a certain degree of abstraction the form becomes simpleminded, no matter how perfect. No one can meet hostile reality with the simple proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$. The proposition is true, but it is not enough. Yet it must be insisted that it is still not *a priori* demonstrable that mere spatio-color relations cannot express the full felt quality of reality, as pitch relations in music of course do.

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Later on, viewing the exhibition of "The Masters of Abstract Art" at Mme Rubinstein's establishment, one wonders if this judgment of Mondrian is not too harsh.

Even after one has admitted the purity and integrity of his intention, perhaps one has not admitted enough. His actual accomplishment is extraordinary too. With one or two exceptions, the best artists in the exhibition are not abstract artists, in the common and strict sense of the term. But besides Mondrian, there are many strictly abstract painters; and beside him they seem dark and confused. He alone among the completely abstract painters holds his own with the other great painters there. Despite his lack of the image reinforcing his meanings, despite the simplicity of his hypothesis, despite the dehumanized treatment of his pictures (as though they had been made with a mechanical tool), despite the arbitrariness of his self-imposed limitations, despite all this and more, a definite and specific and concrete poetry breaks through his bars, a poetry of constructiveness, of freshness, of tenacity, of indomitability, and, above all, of an implacable honesty, an honesty so thoroughgoing in its refusal to shock, to seduce, to surprise, to counterfeit, that in spite of one's self, one thinks of Seurat and Cézanne. Beside Mondrian the other abstractionists seem dull and gray.

2. THE ART OF REACTION: THE LATE CHIRICO

a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment

Aristotle, *Poetics,* XIII

Standing before these late (1939) gouaches[3] *à la mode,* who finds any stimulus to remembrance of Chirico's early scenic stage? Not the empty stage of his subsequent imitators, where the tragic action has already taken place, and we are presented with no more than the scene of the crime; but Chirico's stage, where the strange symbols have an irresistible attraction for one another, where if they do not interact before us, they will after we are gone. They are filled with incredible potentialities. Or, more specifically, what remains now of the expressiveness in that work of 1914 symbolizing the content of *The Child's Brain,* with its father-image? Yes, the father! Shockingly naked but unrevealed, hairy, immovable, inescapable, standing like a massive rock on the silent shore of the unconscious mind, a rock unseeing, with its closed eyes, but a rock resisting all attempts to pass beyond, a rock to burrow into, if that is the only possibility of getting beyond, but a rock eternally waiting, waiting for when it will be at once judge and executioner, judge of the guilt inherent in killing the origin of one's being in order to be, and executioner by virtue of one's fear of being free.[4] What remains of that? Nothing. Nothing but the problem of how this awful degeneration came about. Was it, as I suppose, the consequence of a tragic action, the result of choice between irreconcilable values; or was the actual circumstance as banal as Dalí's? Mr. Soby's otherwise admirable *The Early Chirico* (1941) gives us no hint. Certainly the conventional thesis (which holds that Chirico's genius simply burned itself out) explains nothing; it merely remarks the phenomenon to be ex-

plained . . . The evidence of his works suggests a hypothesis which, if not complete, does dispel the mystery in part; and the hypothesis has the advantage of being tested, just as it is suggested, by the works themselves. From them the central fact is plain enough: c. 1910–1917 young Chirico produced a quantity of pictures, of which the majority are indubitable masterpieces, pervaded by a binding poetry: the paintings after that date are filled with meaningless classic paraphernalia, and a plasticity expressly designed for contemporary taste. The few other relevant facts are well known: Chirico's great period corresponds to cubism's great period, of which Chirico was either in ignorance, or to which he was indifferent. At any rate, his own historical influence came (c. 1920) as the poetic opposition to cubism's architectonics; and he was made influential largely through the interest in his work of Breton, critic and poet, and Ernst, painter and poet, which is not surprising in view of Chirico's essentially poetic, rather than essentially plastic gift. His particular plastic inventions, like the shadow cast by an object unseen in the picture (a device later to be exploited by Dalí), *derive from poetic insight,* i.e., the remarkable intensity of feeling in the early work arises more from the nature and juxtaposition of his symbols than from their formal relations to one another, adequate as the latter may be. The emphasis on his poetry has important outside evidence: years after the decline of his painting into an incredible academicism, Chirico was still able to produce his superbly poetic novel *Hebdomeros* . . . Now it is scarcely plausible to suggest, as Mr. Soby does, "that Chirico's genius died a lingering death, that at times, as in certain paintings and his novel *Hebdomeros,* it has raised itself in bed." It is more plausible to suppose that *something happened to alter Chirico's conception of painting,* something radical enough to cause the poetry to disappear from it. It so happens that Chirico first became interested in Parisian painting at a moment when it was turning from many years of experiment to a normative authoritarianism, to a painting relying on the weight of traditional images understood by everyone, as in the "classic" period of Picasso, Derain, and so on. It is not difficult to suppose that Chirico was ravished by the "objective" authority of such painting, and determined to participate in its creation. His pictures after 1918, being failures, are generally ignored by critics, but they afford the clue. The intention of the later pictures is *authoritarian,* the observer from below *up* to white horses, as he must look up to an equestrian monument; *traditional,* the subject-matter being reminiscent of antiquity, with its "classic" columns, and its treatment of personages and horses in shades of white, like ancient statues; *normative,* being intelligible to any normal person, since it depends on neither personal sensitivity nor insight, but on associations commonly known in the occident; and (no doubt most important in Chirico's mind) *plastic,* the attempt to have the painting itself constitute the "meaning," as in cubism, not poetic insight, hence the fat impasto, the simplification of forms, the color by local areas, the importance of contour, the emphasis of surface texture, and the other devices in the contemporary taste. Of course he was foredoomed to failure in his effort to create such painting, because his gift was not normative, authoritarian, and plastic, but in actuality the precise opposite, unique,

personal, and poetic. And it is unforgivable that these later works are not even an honest attempt to enlarge his experience, and ours; they are instead deliberate attempts to cater to the luxury trade. Like all such works, they are unnecessary; they fulfill no genuine need.

If this later work is the result of a deliberate choice, as I suppose, the choice represents a moral action, the choice between two irreconcilable values; and where the action becomes tragic is in his pursuit of that thing Chirico chose as the final good, to the necessary exclusion of other goods, so that whatever value the original good may have had for him ends in a final evil, as other goods are vanquished in the struggle. His tragic flaw reveals itself as his arrogance, his refusal, in relation to his true gift, to accept his limitation, and admit his error. He defended himself against the bitter attack of the surrealists in the '20s by replying that at least he painted like the old masters. He was bound finally to dupe himself. He grew to believe in the authoritarian; the petrifaction of his talent, plus his alliance with those states which alone could accept his later work, represent the material consequences of his action. Understood so, Chirico becomes one of the clearest examples of the historic issues of our time. His sterility and that of the authoritarian state have the same origin, fear and contempt of the human. It is only just that, as that state will, so has Chirico brought about his own ruin.

NOTES

1. Valentine Gallery. *VVV* 1 (June 1942): 59–61.

2. The late Bosanquet has fully treated the point in one of his aesthetical essays—the devastating one on Croce, if I remember rightly.

3. Perls Gallery, 30 March–25 April 1942.

4. But cf. Robert Melville's *Apocalypse in Painting:* "Even the naked man in 'The Child's Brain' is a wax-work, with a wig and false moustaches," etc. So it is, when regarded plastically; but the real meaning is in the poetry: there is no question of what Chirico himself means by the picture; he has described his most important dream in these terms: " . . . It is my father who thus appears in my dream, and yet when I look at him, he is not at all as he was when I saw him alive, in the time of my childhood. Nevertheless, it is he. There is something far-off in the whole expression of his face, something which perhaps existed when I saw him alive and which now, after more than twenty years, strikes me with full force when I see him again in a dream." *La Revolution Surrealiste,* no. 1, 1924 (quoted by Sobey).

REVIEW OF *ART OF THIS CENTURY*

ca. 1943

This volume, considerably the most important on contemporary art to be published recently in America, contains biographical information about, personal statements by, and reproductions of the work of nearly every artist in our time preoccupied with *l'art moderne.* It contains, moreover, three introductions, by Breton, Arp, and Mondrian respectively; and as appendices the first publication in this country of the texts of *"Manifesto of the Futurist Painters"* (1910), the *Realistic Manifesto* (1920) of Gabo and Pevsner, Max Ernst's *Inspiration to Order* (1932), and Ben Nicholson's *Notes on Abstract Art* (1941). Knowledge of the book's contents is important to anyone interested in the nature and intentions of the great international collaboration which has, as its main task, the crystallization and clarification of the character and direction of the modern spirit.

I should like to say a few words about the three introductions, which constitute the book's most original contribution to our knowledge. I shall take them in reverse order, because I find it more convenient to do so.

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Mondrian's short introduction, *Abstract Art,* reiterates ideas he has stated elsewhere at length. His general position may be perhaps adequately summarized by the beliefs that works of art in the past have contained values other than plastic values, as well as plastic values, that the abstract artist can isolate and retain only plastic values, that these plastic values are not "subjective"—mere self-expression—but objectively expressive of the nature of reality itself, just as a formula in physics is; (a) that the step abstract art has taken is a logical one; and (b) that abstract art's particular form of expressiveness is most in "conformity with modern times."

Handwritten in two parts: on three sheets of drawing paper; on one and a half pages of graph paper.

A draft of a book review of *Art of This Century: Objects, Drawings, Photographs, Paintings, Sculpture, Collage, 1910–1942*, edited by Peggy Guggenheim (New York: Art of This Century, 1942). This was the first catalogue published by Peggy Guggenheim. André Breton researched each artist in the collection and was responsible for the selection of statements and manifestoes by the Futurists, texts by Gabo and Pevsner, and Ernst's 1932 text, "Inspiration to Order," which were included at the back of the catalogue. Motherwell is writing about three texts included in the front of the catalogue: Arp's "Abstract Art—Concrete Art"; Breton's "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism" (1941), in which Breton discusses Duchamp's early work and its relation to Futurism; and Mondrian's "Abstract Art." Mondrian's text was written especially for this catalogue. (See "Parisian Artists in Exile: New York 1939–45," pp. 298–99, for an expanded historical context of the volume.)

Previously unpublished.