

Nature of Abstract Art

by Meyer Shapiro

Before there was an art of abstract painting, it was already widely believed that the value of a picture was a matter of colors and shapes alone. Music and architecture were constantly held up to painters as examples of a pure art which did not have to imitate objects but derived its effects from elements peculiar to itself. But such ideas could not be readily accepted, since no one had yet seen a painting made up of colors and shapes, representing nothing. If pictures of the objects around us were often judged according to qualities of form alone, it was obvious that in doing so one was distorting or reducing the pictures; you could not arrive at these paintings simply by manipulating forms. And in so far as the objects to which these forms belonged were often particular individuals and places, real or mythical figures, bearing the evident marks of a time, the pretension that art was above history through the creative energy or personality of the artist was not entirely clear. In abstract art, however, the pretended autonomy and absoluteness of the aesthetic emerged in a concrete form. Here, finally, was an art of painting in which only aesthetic elements seem to be present.

Abstract art had therefore the value of a practical demonstration. In these new paintings the very processes of designing and inventing seemed to have been brought on to the canvas; the pure form once masked by an extraneous content was liberated and could now be directly perceived. Painters who do not practice this art have welcomed it on just this ground, that it strengthened their conviction of the absoluteness of the aesthetic and provided them a discipline in pure design. Their attitude toward past art was also completely changed. The new styles accustomed painters to the vision of colors and shapes as disengaged from objects and created an immense confraternity of works of art, cutting across the barriers of time and place. They made it possible to enjoy the remotest arts, those in which the represented objects were no longer intelligible, even the drawings of children and madmen, and especially primitive arts with drastically distorted figures, which had been regarded as artless curios even by insistent aesthetic critics. Before this time Ruskin could

say in his *Political Economy of Art*, in calling for the preservation of medieval and Renaissance works that "in Europe alone, pure and precious ancient art exists, for there is none in America, none in Asia, none in Africa." What was once considered monstrous, now became pure form and pure expression, the aesthetic evidence that in art feeling and thought are prior to the represented world. The art of the whole world was now available on a single unhistorical and universal plane as a panorama of the formalizing energies of man.

These two aspects of abstract painting, the exclusion of natural forms and the unhistorical universalizing of the qualities of art, have a crucial importance for the general theory of art. Just as the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry gave a powerful impetus to the view that mathematics was independent of experience, so abstract painting cut at the roots of the classic ideas of artistic imitation. The analogy of mathematics was in fact present to the minds of the apologists of abstract art; they have often referred to non-Euclidian geometry in defense of their own position, and have even suggested an historical connection between them.

Today the abstractionists and their Surrealist offspring are more and more concerned with objects and the older claims of abstract art have lost the original force of insurgent convictions. Painters who had once upheld this art as the logical goal of the entire history of forms have refuted themselves in returning to the impure natural forms. The demands for liberty in art are no longer directed against a fettering tradition of nature; the aesthetic of abstraction has itself become a brake on new movements. Not that abstract art is dead, as its philistine enemies have been announcing for over twenty years; it is still practiced by some of the finest painters and sculptors in Europe, whose work shows a freshness and assurance that are lacking in the newest realistic art. The conception of a possible field of "pure art"—whatever its value—will not die so soon, though it may take on forms different from those of the last thirty years; and very likely the art that follows in the countries which have known abstraction will be

affected by it. The ideas underlying abstract art have penetrated deeply into all artistic theory, even of their original opponents; the language of absolutes and pure sources of art, whether of feeling, reason, intuition or the sub-conscious mind, appears in the very schools which renounce abstraction. "Objective" painters strive for "pure objectivity," for the object given in its "essence" and completeness, without respect to a viewpoint, and the Surrealists derive their images from pure thought, freed from the perversions of reason and everyday experience. Very little is written today—sympathetic to modern art—which does not employ this language of absolutes.

In this article I shall take as my point of departure Barr's recent book¹, the best, I think, that we have in English on the movements now grouped as abstract art. It has the special interest of combining a discussion of general questions about the nature of this art, its aesthetic theories, its causes, and even the relation to political movements, with a detailed, matter-of-fact account of the different styles. But although Barr sets out to describe rather than to defend or to criticize abstract art, he seems to accept its theories on their face value in his historical exposition and in certain random judgments. In places he speaks of this art as independent of historical conditions, as realizing the underlying order of nature and as an art of pure form without content.

Hence if the book is largely an account of historical movements, Barr's conception of abstract art remains essentially unhistorical. He gives us, it is true, the dates of every stage in the various movements, as if to enable us to plot a curve, or to follow the emergence of the art year by year, but no connection is drawn between the art and the conditions of the moment. He excludes as irrelevant to its history the nature of the society in which it arose, except as an incidental obstructing or accelerating atmospheric factor. The history of modern art is presented as an internal, immanent process among the artists; abstract art arises because, as the author says, representational art had been exhausted. Out of boredom with "painting facts," the artists turned to abstract art as a pure aesthetic activity. "By a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance" just as the artists of the fifteenth century "were moved by a passion for imitating nature." The modern change, however, was "the logical and inevitable conclusion toward which art was moving.

This explanation, which is common in the studios and is defended by some writers in the name of the autonomy of art, is only one instance of a wider view that embraces every field of culture and even economy and politics. At its ordinary level the theory of exhaustion and reaction reduces history to the pattern of popular ideas on changes in fashion. People grow tired of one color and choose an opposite; one season the skirts are long, and then by reaction they are short. In the same way the present return to objects in painting is explained as the result of the exhaustion of abstract art. All the possibilities of the latter having been explored by Picasso and Mondrian, there is little left for the younger artists but to take up the painting of objects.

The notion that each new style is due to a reaction against a preceding is especially plausible to modern artists, whose work is so often a response to another work, who consider their art a free projection of an irreducible personal feeling, but must form their style in competition against others, with the obsessing sense of the originality of their work as a mark of its sincerity. Besides, the creators of new forms in the last century had almost always to fight against those who practiced the old; and several of the historical styles were formed in conscious opposition to another manner—Renaissance against Gothic, Baroque against Mannerism, Neo-classic against Rococo, etc.

The antithetic form of a change does not permit us, however, to judge a new art as a sheer reaction or as the inevitable response to the spending of all the resources of the old. No more than the succession of war and peace implies that war is due to an inherent reaction against peace and peace to a reaction against war. The energies required for the reaction, which sometimes has a drastic and invigorating effect on art, are lost sight of in such an account; it is impossible to explain by it the particular direction and force of the new movement, its specific moment, region and goals. The theory of immanent exhaustion and reaction is inadequate not only because it reduces human activity to a simple mechanical movement, like a bouncing ball, but because in neglecting the sources of energy and the condition of the field, it does not even do justice to its own limited mechanical conception. The opposite-ness of a reaction is often an artificial matter, more evident in the polemics between schools or in the schemas of formalistic historians than in the actual historical change. To supply a motor force to this physical history of styles (which pretends to be

antimechanical), they are reduced to a myth of the perpetual alternating motion of generations, each reacting against its parents and therefore repeating the motions of its grandparents, according to the "grandfather principle" of certain German historians of art. And a final goal, an unexplained but inevitable trend, a destiny rooted in the race or the spirit of the culture or the inherent nature of the art, has to be smuggled in to explain the large unity of a development that embraces so many reacting generations. The immanent purpose steers the reaction when an art seems to veer off the main path because of an overweighted or foreign element. Yet how many arts we know in which the extreme of some quality persists for centuries without provoking the corrective reaction. The "decay" of classical art has been attributed by the English critic, Fry, to its excessive cult of the human body, but this "decay" evidently lasted for hundreds of years until the moment was ripe for the Christian reaction. But even this Christian art, according to the same writer, was for two centuries indistinguishable from the pagan.

The broad reaction against an existing art is possible only on the ground of its inadequacy to artists with new values and new ways of seeing. But reaction in this internal, antithetic sense, far from being an inherent and universal property of culture, occurs only under impelling historical conditions. For we see that ancient arts, like the Egyptian, the work of anonymous craftsmen, persist for thousands of years with relatively little change, provoking few reactions to the established style; others grow slowly and steadily in a single direction, and still others, in the course of numerous changes, foreign intrusions and reactions preserve a common traditional character. From the mechanical theories of exhaustion, boredom and reaction we could never explain why the reaction occurred when it did. On the other hand, the banal divisions of the great historical styles in literature and art correspond to the momentous divisions in the history of society. If we consider an art that is near us in time and is still widely practiced, like Impressionism, we see how empty is the explanation of the subsequent arts by reaction. From a logical viewpoint the antithesis to Impressionism depends on how Impressionism is defined. Whereas the later schools attacked the Impressionists as mere photographers of sunshine, the contemporaries of Impressionism abused it for its monstrous unreality. The Impressionists were in fact the first painters of whom it was charged that their works made as little sense right side up as upside down. The movements after Impressionism take different directions, some

toward simplified natural forms, others toward their complete decomposition; both are sometimes described as historical reactions against Impressionism, one restoring the objects that Impressionism dissolved, the other restoring the independent imaginative activity that Impressionism sacrificed to the imitation of nature.

Actually, in the 1880's there were several aspects of Impressionism which could be the starting points of new tendencies and goals of reaction. For classicist painters the weakness of Impressionism lay in its unclarity, its destruction of definite linear forms; it is in this sense that Renoir turned for a time from Impressionism to Ingres. But for other artists at the same moment Impressionism was too casual and unmethodical; these, the neo-Impressionists, preserved the Impressionist colorism, carrying it even further in an unclassical sense, but also in a more constructive and calculated way. For still others, Impressionism was too photographic, too impersonal; these, the symbolists and their followers, required an emphatic sentiment and aesthetic activism in the work. There were finally artists for whom Impressionism was too unorganized, and their reaction underscored a schematic arrangement. Common to most of these movements after Impressionism was the absolutizing of the artist's state of mind or sensibility as prior to and above objects. If the Impressionists reduced things to the artist's sensations, their successors reduced them further to projections or constructions of his feelings and moods, or to "essences" grasped in a tense intuition.

The historical fact is that the reaction against Impressionism came in the 1800s before some of its most original possibilities had been realized. The painting of series of chromatic variations of a single motif (the *Haystacks*, the *Cathedral*) dates from the 1890's; and the *Water Lilies*, with their remarkable spatial forms, related in some ways to contemporary abstract art, belong to the twentieth century. The effective reaction against Impressionism took place only at a certain moment in its history and chiefly in France, though Impressionism was fairly widespread in Europe by the end of the century. In the 1880s, when Impressionism was beginning to be accepted officially, there were already several groups of young artists in France to whom it was uncongenial. The history of art is not, however, a history of single willful reactions, every new artist taking a stand opposite the last, painting brightly if the other painted dully, flattening if the other modelled, and distorting if the other was literal. The reactions were

deeply motivated in the experience of the artists, in a changing world with which they had to come to terms and which shaped their practice and ideas in specific ways.

The tragic lives of Gauguin and Van Gogh, their estrangement from society, which so profoundly colored their art, were no automatic reactions to Impressionism or the consequences of Peruvian or Northern blood. In Gauguin's circle were other artists who had abandoned a bourgeois career in their maturity or who had attempted suicide. For a young man of the middle class to wish to live by art mean a different thing in 1885 than in 1860. By 1885 only artists had freedom and integrity, but often they had nothing else. The very existence of Impressionism which transformed nature into a private, unformalized field for sensitive vision, shifting with the spectator, made painting an ideal domain of freedom; it attracted many who were tied unhappily to middle class jobs and moral standards, now increasingly problematic and stultifying with the advance of monopoly capitalism. But Impressionism in isolating the sensibility as a more or less personal, but dispassionate and still outwardly directed, organ of fugitive distinctions in distant dissolving clouds, water and sunlight, could no longer suffice for men who had staked everything on impulse and whose resolution to become artists was a poignant and in some ways demoralizing break with good society. With an almost moral fervor they transformed Impressionism into an art of vehement expression, of emphatic, brilliant, magnified, obsessing objects, or adjusted its coloring and surface pattern to dreams of a seasonless exotic world of idyllic freedom.

Early Impressionism, too, had a moral aspect. In its unconventionalized, unregulated vision, in its discovery of a constantly changing phenomenal outdoor world of which the shapes depended on the momentary position of the casual or mobile spectator, there was an implicit criticism of symbolic social and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these. It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860s and 1870s; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of free-

dom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated *rentier* was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owed his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the "accidental" momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenade and the refined consumer of luxury goods.

As the contexts of bourgeois sociability shifted from community, family and church to commercialized or privately improvised forms—the streets, the cafes and resorts—the resulting consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more an estrangement from older ties; and those imaginative members of the middle class who accepted the norms of freedom, but lacked the economic means to attain them, were spiritually torn by a sense of helpless isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass. By 1880 the enjoying individual becomes rare in Impressionist art; only the private spectacle of nature is left. And in neo-Impressionism, which restores and even monumentalizes the figures, the social group breaks up into isolated spectators, who do not communicate with each other, or consists of mechanically repeated dances submitted to a preordained movement with little spontaneity.

The French artists of the 1880s and 1890s who attacked Impressionism for its lack of structure often expressed demands for salvation, for order and fixed objects of belief, foreign to the Impressionists as a group. The title of Gauguin's picture—"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"—with its interrogative form, is typical of this state of mind. But since the artists did not know the underlying economic and social causes of their own disorder and moral insecurity, they could envisage new stabilizing forms only as quasi-religious beliefs or as a revival of some primitive or highly ordered traditional society with organs for a collective spiritual life. This is reflected in their taste for medieval and primitive art, their conversions to Catholicism and later to "integral nationalism." The colonies of artists formed at this period, Van Gogh's project of a communal life for artists, are examples of this groping to reconstitute the pervasive human sociability that capitalism had destroyed. Even their theories of "composition"

-a traditional concept abandoned by the Impressionists—are related to their social views, for they conceive of composition as an assembly of objects bound together by a principle of order emanating, on the one hand, from the eternal nature of art, on the other, from the state of mind of the artist, but in both instances requiring a “deformation” of the objects. Some of them wanted a canvas to be like a church, to possess a hierarchy of forms, stationed objects, a prescribed harmony, preordained paths of vision, all issuing, however, from the artist’s feeling. In recreating the elements of community in their art they usually selected inert objects, or active objects without meaningful interaction except as colors and lines.

These problems are posed to some extent, though solved differently, even in the work of Seurat, whose relation to the economic development was in many ways distinct from that of the painters of the Symbolist and Synthetist groups. Instead of rebelling against the moral consequences of capitalism he attached himself like a contented engineer to its progressive technical side and accepted the popular forms of lower class recreation and commercialized entertainment as the subjects of a monumentalized art. From the current conceptions of technology he drew the norms of a methodical procedure in painting, bringing Impressionism up to date in the light of the latest findings of science.

There were, of course, other kinds of painting in France beside those described. But a detailed investigation of the movement of art would show, I think, that these, too, and even the conservative, academic painting were affected by the changed conditions of the time. The reactions against Impressionism, far from being inherent in the nature of art, issued from the responses that artists as artists made to the broader situation in which they found themselves, but which they themselves had not produced. If the tendencies of the arts after Impressionism toward an extreme subjectivism and abstraction are already evident in Impressionism, it is because the isolation of the individual and of the higher forms of culture from their older social supports, the renewed ideological oppositions of mind and nature, individual and society, proceed from social and economic causes which already existed before Impressionism and which are even sharper today. It is, in fact, a part of the popular attraction of Van Gogh and Gauguin that their work incorporates (and with a far greater energy and formal coherence than the works of other artists) evident longings, tensions and values

which are shared today by thousands who in one way or another have experienced the same conflicts as these artists.

The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art by which Barr explains the more recent change rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing on abstract art: that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws. The abstract painter denounces representation of the outer world a ... mechanical process of the eye and the hand in which the artist’s feelings and imagination have little part. Or in a Platonic manner he opposes to the representation of objects, as a rendering of the surface aspect of nature, the practice of abstract design as a discovery of the “essence” or underlying mathematical order of things. He assumes further that the mind is most completely itself when it is independent of external objects. If he, nevertheless, values certain works of older naturalistic art, he sees in them only independent formal constructions; he overlooks the imaginative aspect of the devices for transposing the space of experience on to the space of the canvas, and the immense, historically developed, capacity to hold the world in mind. He abstracts the artistic qualities from the represented objects and their meanings, and looks on these as unavoidable impurities, imposed historical elements with which the artist was burdened and in spite of which he finally achieved his underlying, personal abstract expression. These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what a representation is. There is no passive, “photographic” representation in the sense described; the scientific elements of representation in older art—perspective, anatomy, light-and-shade—are ordering principles and expressive means as well as devices of rendering. All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand, there is no “pure art,” unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns. This is clear enough from the example of the Impressionists mentioned above. They could be seen as both photographic and fantastic, according to the viewpoint of the observer. Even their motifs of nature were denounced as meaningless beside the evident content of romantic and classicist art. In

regarding representation as a facsimile of nature, the abstract artist has taken over the error of vulgar nineteenth century criticism, which judged painting by an extremely narrow criterion of reality, inapplicable even to the realistic painting which it accepted. If an older taste said, how exactly like the object, how beautiful!-the modern abstractionist says, how exactly like the object, how ugly! The two are not completely opposed, however, in their premises, and will appear to be related if compared with the taste of religious arts with a supernatural content. Both realism and abstraction affirm the sovereignty of the artist's mind, the first, in the capacity to recreate the world minutely in a narrow, intimate field by series of abstract calculations of perspective and gradation of color, the other in the capacity to impose new forms on nature, to manipulate the abstracted elements of line and color freely, or to create shapes corresponding to subtle states of mind. But as little as a work is guaranteed aesthetically by its resemblance to nature, so little is it guaranteed by its abstractness or "purity." Nature and abstract forms are both materials for art, and the choice of one or the other flows from historically changing interests.

Barr believes that painting is impoverished by the exclusion of the outer world from pictures, losing a whole range of sentimental, sexual, religious and social values. But he supposes in turn that the aesthetic values are then available in a pure form. He does not see, however, that the latter are changed rather than purified by this exclusion, just as the kind of verbal pattern in writing designed mainly for verbal pattern differs from the verbal pattern in more meaningful prose. Various forms, qualities of space, color, light, scale, modelling and movement, which depend on the appreciation of aspects of nature and human life, disappear from painting; and similarly the aesthetic of abstract art discovers new qualities and relationships which are congenial to the minds that practice such an exclusion. Far from creating an absolute form, each type of abstract art, as of naturalistic art, gives a special but temporary importance to some element, whether color, surface, outline or arabesque, or to some formal method. The converse of Barr's argument, that by clothing a pure form with a meaningful dress this form becomes more accessible or palatable, like logic or mathematics presented through concrete examples, rests on the same misconception. Just as narrative prose is not simply a story added to a preexisting, pure prose form that can be disengaged from the sense of the words, so a representation is not a natural form added to an abstract design. Even the schematic

aspects of the form in such a work already possess qualities conditioned by the modes of seeing objects and designing representations, not to mention the content and the emotional attitudes of the painter.

Then the abstractionist Kandinsky was trying to create an art expressing mood, a great deal of conservative, academic painting was essentially just that. But the academic painter, following older traditions of romantic art, preserved the objects which provoked the mood; if he wished to express a mood inspired by a landscape, he painted the landscape itself. Kandinsky, on the other hand, wished to find an entirely imaginative equivalent of the mood; he would not go beyond the state of mind and a series of expressive colors and shapes, independent of things. The mood in the second case is very different from the first mood. A mood which is partly identified with the conditioning object, a mood dominated by clear images of detailed objects and situations, and capable of being revived and communicated to others through these images, is different in feeling tone, in relation to self-consciousness, attentiveness and potential activity, from a mood that is independent of an awareness of fixed, external objects, but sustained by a random flow of private and incommunicable associations. Kandinsky looks upon the mood as wholly a function of his personality or a special faculty of his spirit; and he selects colors and patterns which have for him the strongest correspondence to his state of mind, precisely because they are not tied sensibly to objects but emerge freely from his excited fantasy. They are the concrete evidences, projected from within, of the internality of his mood, its independence of the outer world. Yet the external objects that underlie the mood may re-emerge in the abstraction in a masked or distorted form. The most responsive spectator is then the individual who is similarly concerned with himself and who finds in such pictures not only the counterpart of his own tension, but a final discharge of obsessing feelings.

In renouncing or drastically distorting natural shapes the abstract painter makes a judgment of the external world. He says that such and such aspects of experience are alien to art and to the higher realities of form; he disqualifies them from art. But by this very act the mind's view of itself and of its art, the intimate contexts of this repudiation of objects, become directing factors in art. Then personality, feeling and formal sensibility are absolutized, the values that underlie or that follow today from such attitudes suggest new formal problems, just as the

secular interests of the later middle ages made possible a whole series of new formal types of space and the human figure. The qualities of cryptic improvisation, the microscopic intimacy of textures, points and lines, the impulsively scribbled forms, the mechanical precision in constructing irreducible, incommensurable fields, the thousand and one ingenious formal devices of dissolution, punctuation, immateriality and incompleteness, which affirm the abstract artist's active sovereignty over objects, these and many other sides of modern art are discovered experimentally by painters who seek freedom outside of nature and society and consciously negate the formal aspects of perception—like the connectedness of shape and color or the discontinuity of object and surroundings—that enter into the practical relations of man in nature. We can judge more readily the burden of contemporary experience that imposes such forms by comparing them with the abstract devices in Renaissance art, especially the systems of perspective and the canons of proportion, which are today misunderstood as merely imitative means. In the Renaissance the development of linear perspective was intimately tied to the exploration of the world and the renewal of physical and geographical science. Just as for the aggressive members of the burgher class a realistic knowledge of the geographical world and communications entailed the ordering of spatial connections in a reliable system, so the artists strove to realize in their own imaginative field, cyan within the limits of a traditional religious content. The most appropriate and stimulating forms of spatial order, with the extensiveness, traversability and regulation valued by their class. And similarly, as this same burgher class, emerging from a Christian feudal society, began to assert the priority of sensual and natural to ascetic and supernatural goods, and idealized the human body as the real *locus* of values-enjoying images of the powerful or beautiful nude human being as the real man or woman, without sign of rank or submission to authority—so the artists derived from this valuation of the human being artistic ideals of energy and massiveness of form which they embodied in robust, active or potentially active, human figures. And even the canons of proportion, which seem to submit the human form to a mysticism of number, create purely secular standards of perfection; for through these canons the norms of humanity become physical and measurable, therefore at the same time sensual and intellectual, in contrast to the older medieval disjunction of body and mind.

If today an abstract painter seems to draw like

a child or a madman, it is not because he is childish or mad. He has come to value as qualities related to his own goals of imaginative freedom the passionless spontaneity and technical insouciance of the child, who creates for himself alone, without the pressure of adult responsibility and practical adjustments. And similarly, the resemblance to psychopathic art, which is only approximate and usually independent of a conscious imitation, rests on their common freedom of fantasy, uncontrolled by reference to an external physical and social world. By his very practice of abstract art, in which forms are improvised and deliberately distorted or obscured, the painter opens the field to the suggestions of his repressed interior life. But the painter's manipulation of his fantasy must differ from the child's or psychopath's in so far as the act of designing is his chief occupation and the conscious source of his human worth; it acquires a burden of energy, a sustained pathos and firmness of execution foreign to the others.

The attitude to primitive art is in this respect very significant. The nineteenth century, with its realistic art, its rationalism and curiosity about production, materials and techniques often appreciated primitive ornament, but considered primitive representation monstrous. It was as little acceptable to an enlightened mind as the fetishism or magic which these images sometimes served. Abstract painters, on the other hand, have been relatively indifferent to the primitive geometrical styles of ornament. The distinctness of motifs, the emblematic schemes, the dear order of patterns, the direct submission to handicraft and utility, are foreign to modern art. But in the distorted, fantastic figures some groups of modern artists found an intimate kinship with their own work; unlike the ordering devices of ornament which were tied to the practical making of things, the forms of these figures seemed to have been shaped by a ruling fantasy, independent of nature and utility, and directed by obsessive feelings. The highest praise of their own work is to describe it in the language of magic and fetishism.

This new responsiveness to primitive art was evidently more than aesthetic; a whole complex of longings, moral values and broad conceptions of life were fulfilled in it. If colonial imperialism made these primitive objects physically accessible, they could have little aesthetic interest until the new formal conceptions arose. But these formal conceptions could be relevant to primitive art only when charged with the new valuations of the instinctive, the natural, the mythical as the essentially human, which

affected even the description of primitive art. The older ethnologists, who had investigated the materials and tribal contexts of primitive imagery, usually ignored the subjective and aesthetic side in its creation; in discovering the latter the modern critics with an equal one-sidedness relied on feeling to penetrate these arts. The very fact that they were the arts of primitive peoples without a recorded history now made them all the more attractive. They acquired the special prestige of the timeless and instinctive, on the level of spontaneous animal activity, self-contained, unreflective, private, without dates and signatures, without origins or consequences except in the emotions. A devaluation of history, civilized society and external nature lay behind the new passion for primitive art. Time ceased to be an historical dimension; it became an internal psychological moment, and the whole mess of material ties, the nightmare of a determining world, the disquieting sense of the present as a dense historical point to which the individual was fatefully bound—these were automatically transcended in thought by the conception of an instinctive, elemental art above time. By a remarkable process the arts of subjugated backward peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those who renounced it. The imperialist expansion was accompanied at home by a profound cultural pessimism in which the arts of the savage victims were elevated above the traditions of Europe. The colonies became places to flee to as well as to exploit.

The new respect for primitive art was progressive, however, in that the cultures of savages and other backward peoples were now regarded as human cultures, and a high creativeness, far from being a prerogative of the advanced societies of the West, was attributed to all human groups. But this insight was accompanied not only by a flight from the advanced society, but also by an indifference to just those material conditions which were brutally destroying the primitive peoples or converting them into submissive, cultureless slaves. Further, the preservation of certain forms of native culture in the interest of imperialist power could be supported in the name of the new artistic attitudes by those who thought themselves entirely free from political interest. To say then that abstract painting is simply a reaction against the exhausted imitation of nature, or that it is the discovery of an absolute or pure field of form is to overlook the positive character of the art, its underlying energies and sources of movement. Besides, the movement of abstract art is too compre-

hensive and long-prepared, too closely related to similar movements in literature and philosophy, which have quite other technical conditions, and finally, too varied according to time and place, to be considered a self-contained development issuing by a kind of internal logic directly from aesthetic problems ... ears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture. The avowals of artists—several of which are cited in Barr's work—show that the step to abstraction was accompanied by great tension and emotional excitement. The painters justify themselves by ethical and metaphysical standpoints, or in defense of their art attack the preceding style as the counterpart of a detested social or moral position. Not the processes of imitating nature were exhausted, but the valuation of nature itself had changed. The philosophy of art was also a philosophy of life.

1. The Russian painter Malevich, the founder of "Suprematism," has described his new art in revealing terms. "By Suprematism I mean the supremacy of pure feeling or sensation in the pictorial arts ... In the year 1913 in my desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world I fled to the form of the Square and exhibited a picture which was nothing more or less than a black square upon a white ground ... It was no empty square which I had exhibited but rather the experience of objectlessness" (Barr, pp. 122-23). Later in 1918 he painted in Moscow a series called *White on White*, including a white square on a white surface. In their purity these paintings seemed to parallel the efforts of mathematicians to reduce all mathematics to arithmetic and arithmetic to logic. But there is a burden of feeling underlying this "geometrical" art, which may be judged from the related paintings with the titles *Sensation of Metallic Sounds*, *Feeling of Flight*, *Feeling of Infinite Space*. Even in the work labeled *Composition* we can see how the formal character of the abstraction rests on the desire to isolate and externalize in a concrete fashion subjective, professional elements of the older practice of painting, a desire that issues in turn from the conflicts and insecurity of the artist and his conception of art as an absolutely private realm. Barr analyzes a composition of two squares (Fig. 1. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square & Red Square*, 1915), as a "study in equivalents: the red square, smaller but more intense in color and more active in its diagonal axis, holds its own against the black square which is larger but negative in color and static in position." Although he characterizes this kind of painting as pure abstraction to distinguish it

from geometrical designs which are ultimately derived from some representation, he overlooks the relation of this painting to a work by Malevich reproduced in his book—*Woman With Water Pails*, dating from 1912 (Fig. 2 Kazimir Malevich, *Woman with Water Pails: Dynamic Arrangement*, 1912-13). The peasant woman, designed in Cubist style, balances two pails hanging from a rod across her shoulders. Here the preoccupation with balance as a basic aesthetic principle governing the relations of two counterpart units is embodied in an “elemental” genre subject; the objects balanced are not human, but suspended, non-organic elements, unarticulated forms. Although the human theme is merely allusive and veiled by the Cubist procedure, the choice of the motif of the peasant woman with the water pails betrays a sexual interest and the emotional context of the artist’s tendency toward his particular style of abstraction.

The importance of the subjective conditions of the artist’s work in the formation of abstract styles may be verified in the corresponding relationship between Cubist and pre-Cubist art. Picasso, just before Cubism, represented melancholy circus acrobats, harlequins, actors, musicians, beggars, usually at home on the fringes of society, or rehearsing among themselves, as bohemian artists detached from the stage of public performance. He shows in one picture two acrobats balancing themselves, the one mature and massive, squared in body, seated firmly on a cubic mass of stone shaped like his own figure; the young girl, slender, an outlined, unmodelled form, balancing herself unstably on tiptoes on a spherical stone (Fig. 3 Pablo Picasso, *Acrobat on a Ball*, 1905). The experience of balance vital to the acrobat, his very life, is assimilated here to the subjective experience of the artist, an expert performer concerned with the adjustment of lines and masses as the essence of his art—a formalized personal activity that estranges him from society and to which he gives up his life. Between this art and Cubism, where the figure finally disappears, giving way to small geometrical elements formed from musical instruments, drinking vessels, playing-cards and other artificial objects of manipulation, there is a phase of Negroid figures in which the human physiognomy is patterned on primitive or savage faces and the body reduced to an impersonal nudity of harsh, drastic lines. This figure-type is not taken from life, not even from the margins of society, but from art; this time, however, from the art of a tribal, isolated people, regarded everywhere as inferior and valued only as exotic spectacles or entertainers, except by the

painters to whom they are pure, unspoiled artists, creating from instinct or a native sensibility. In the light of this analysis we can hardly accept Barr’s account of Malevich’s step to abstraction: “Malevich suddenly foresaw the logical and inevitable conclusion towards which European art was moving” and drew a black square on a white ground.

2. In his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, published in 1912, the painter Kandinsky, one of the first to create completely abstract pictures, speaks constantly of inner necessity as alone determining the choice of elements, just as inner freedom, he tells us, is the sole criterion in ethics. He does not say that representation has been exhausted, but that the material world is illusory and foreign to the spirit; his art is a rebellion against the “materialism” of modern society, in which he includes science and the socialist movement. “When religion, science and morality (the last through the strong hand of Nietzsche) are shaken, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze away from the external and towards himself.” In his own time he respects, as interests parallel to his own and similarly motivated, occultism, theosophy, the cult of the primitive and experiments of synesthesia. Colored audition is important to him because perception is then blurred and localized in the perceiver rather than identified with an external source. His more aesthetic comments are usually of a piece with these attitudes. “The green, yellow, red tree in the meadow is only ... an accidental materialized form of the tree which we feel in ourselves when we hear the word tree.” And in describing one of his first abstract pictures he says: “This entire description is chiefly an analysis of the picture which I have painted rather subconsciously in a state of strong inner tension. So intensively do I feel the necessity of some of the forms that I remember having given loud-voiced directions to myself, as for instance: ‘But the corners must be heavy’. The observer must learn to look at the picture as a graphic representation of a mood and not as a representation of objects” (Barr, p. 66). More recently he has written: “Today a point sometimes says more in a painting than a human figure ... Man has developed a new faculty which permits him to go beneath the skin of nature and touch its essence, its content ... The painter needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects ... How silent is an apple beside *Laocoon*. A circle is even more silent” (*Cahiers d’Art*, vol. VI, 1931, p. 351).

3. I will now quote a third avowal of artists

tending toward abstraction, but this time of aggressive artists, the Italian Futurists who can hardly be charged with the desire to escape from the world. "It is from Italy that we launch ... our manifesto of revolutionary and incendiary violence with which we found today *il Futurismo* ... Exalt every kind of originality, of boldness, of extreme violence ... Take and glorify the life of today, incessantly and tumultuously transformed by the triumphs of science ... A speeding automobile is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Barr, p. 54).

Barr, who overlooks the moral, ideological aspect in Malevich and Kandinsky, cannot help observing in the Italian movement relations to Bergson, Nietzsche and even to fascism; and in analyzing the forms of Futurist art he tries to show they embody the qualities asserted in the manifestos. But if Futurism has an obvious ideological aspect, it is not a pure abstract art for Barr. It is "near-abstraction," for it refers overtly to a world outside the canvas and still retains elements of representation. Yet the forms of "pure" abstract art, which seem to be entirely without trace of representation or escapist morbidity—the Neo-Plasticist works of Mondrian and the later designs of the Constructivists and Suprematists—are apparently influenced in their material aspect, as textures and shapes, and in their expressive qualities of precision, impersonal finish and neatness (and even in subtler informalities of design), by the current conceptions and norms of the machine. Neither Futurism nor the "purer" mechanical abstract forms can be explained, however, as a simple reflection of existing technology. Although machines have existed since ancient times and have had a central place in production in some countries for over a century, this art is peculiar to the last twenty-five years. In the middle of the 19th century when the machines were already hailed as the great works of modern art, superior to the paintings of the time, the taste of progressive industrialists was towards a realistic art, and Proudhon could celebrate as the real modern works the pictures of Courbet and the newest machines. Not even the personal preoccupation with machines necessarily leads by itself to a style of mechanical abstract forms; the inventors Alexander Nasmyth, Robert Fulton and Samuel Morse were fairly naturalistic painters, like Leonardo, one of the fathers of modern technology. The French art of the period of mechanistic philosophy, the 17th century, was dominated by idealized naturalistic human forms. And the conception of man as a machine current in France during the predominance of the unmechanical rococo style was

identified by its defenders and critics with a matter-of-fact sensualism. The enemies of La Mettrie, the author of *Man the Machine*, were pleased to point out that he died of over-eating. More significant, however, is the fact that in recent times the advanced industrial countries with the most developed technologies, the United States and England, did not originate styles of mechanical abstraction; they are also the most backward in functionalist abstraction of forms in architecture. On the other hand, the development of such arts takes place in Russia, Italy, Holland and France, and only later in Germany. Hence the explanation of the arts as a reflection of existing machines is certainly inadequate. It could not explain, above all, the differences in "machine-styles" from place to place at a moment when technology has an international character. In Detroit, the murals of machines by Rivera are realistic images of the factory as a world operated by workers; in Paris Leger decomposes the elements of machines into Cubist abstractions or assimilates living things to the typical rigid shapes of machines; the Dadaists improvise a whimsical burlesque with robots or reconstructed men; in Holland the Neo-Plasticists construct their works of quasi-architectural units; in Germany the Constructivist-Suprematist forms ape the drawings and models of the machine designer, rather than the machines themselves. And the Futurists, in distinction from all these, try to recapture the phenomenal aspect of moving mechanisms, of energy and speed.

These differences are not simply a matter of different local artistic traditions operating on a common modern material. For if this were the case, we should expect a Mondrian in Italy, the country of Renaissance tradition of clarified forms, and the Futurists in Holland and England, the pioneer lands of Impressionism. A similar criticism would apply to the corresponding derivation of abstraction in art from the abstract nature of modern finance, in which bits of paper control capital and all human transactions assume the form of operations on numbers and titles. Here again we observe that the United States and England, with the most highly developed financial capitalism, are among the last countries to produce abstract art. Mechanical abstract forms arise in modern art not because modern production is mechanical, but because of the values assigned to the human being and the machine in the ideologies projected by the conflicting interests and situation in society, which vary from country to country. Thus the modern conception of man as a machine is more economic than biological in its accent. It refers to the human robot rather than to the human animal, and

suggests an efficient control of the costly movements of the body, a submission to some external purpose indifferent to the individual-unlike the older mechanistic views which concerned the passions, explained them by internal mechanical forces, and sometimes deduced an ethics of pleasure, utility and self-interest.

Barr recognizes the importance of local conditions when he attributes the deviations of one of the Futurists to his Parisian experience. But he makes no effort to explain why this art should emerge in Italy rather than elsewhere. The Italian writers have described it as a reaction against the traditionalism and sleepiness of Italy during the rule of Umberto, and in doing so have overlooked the positive sources of this reaction and its effects on Italian life. The backwardness was most intensely felt to be a contradiction and became a provoking issue towards 1910 and then mainly in the North, which had recently experienced the most rapid industrial development. At this moment Italian capitalism was preparing the imperialist war in Tripoli. Italy, poor in resources yet competing with world empires, urgently required expansion to attain the levels of the older capitalist countries. The belated growth of industry, founded on exploitation of the peasantry, had intensified the disparities of culture, called into being a strong proletariat, and promoted imperialist adventures. There arose at this time, in response to the economic growth of the country and the rapid changes in the older historical environment, philosophies of process and utility—a militant pragmatism of an emphatic antitraditionalist character. Sections of the middle class which had acquired new functions and modern urban interests accepted the new conditions as progressive and “modern,” and were often the loudest in denouncing Italian backwardness and calling for an up-to-date, nationally conscious Italy. The attack of the intellectuals against the provincial aristocratic traditions was in keeping with the interest of the dominant class; they elevated technical progress, aggressive individuality and the relativism of values into theories favorable to imperialist expansion, obscuring the contradictory results of the latter and the conflicts between classes by abstract ideological oppositions of the old and the modern or the past and the future. Since the national consciousness of Italy had rested for generations on her museums, her old cities and artistic inheritance, the modernizing of the country entailed a cultural conflict, which assumed its sharpest form among the artists. Machines as the most advanced instruments of modern production had a special attraction for

artists exasperated by their own merely traditional and secondary status, their mediocre outlook in a backward provincial Italy. They were devoted to machines not so much as instruments of production but as sources of mobility in modern life. While the perception of industrial processes led the workers, who participated in them directly, toward a radical social philosophy, the artists, who were detached from production, like the *petit bourgeoisie*, could know these processes abstractly or phenomenally, in their products and outward appearance, in the form of traffic, automobiles, railroads, and new cities and in the tempo of urban life, rather than in their social causes. The Futurists thus came to idealize movement as such, and they conceived this movement or generalized mobility mainly as mechanical phenomena in which the forms of objects are blurred or destroyed. The dynamism of an auto, centrifugal motion, the dog in movement (with twenty legs), the autobus, the evolution of forms in space, the armored train in battle, the dance hall—these were typical subjects of Futurist art. The field of the canvas was charged with radiating lines, symbolic graphs of pervading force, colliding and interpenetrating objects. Whereas in Impressionism the mobility was a spectacle for relaxed enjoyment, in Futurism it is urgent and violent, a precursor of war.

Several of the Futurist devices, and the larger idea of abstract and interpenetrating forms, undoubtedly come from Cubism. But, significantly, the Italians found Cubism too aestheticized and intellectual, lacking a principle of movement; they could accept, however, the Cubist dissolution of stable, clearly bounded forms. This had a direct ideological value, though essentially an aesthetic device, for the stable and clear were identified with the older Italian art as well as with the past as such.

Outside Italy, and especially after the World War, the qualities of the machine as a rigid constructed object, and the qualities of its products and of the engineer’s design suggested various forms to painters, and even the larger expressive character of their work. The older categories of art were translated into the language of modern technology; the essential was identified with the efficient, the unit with the standardized element, texture with new materials, representation with photography, drawing with the ruled or mechanically traced line, color with the flat coat of paint, and design with the model or the instructing plan. The painters thus tied their useless archaic activity to the most advanced and imposing forms of modern production; and precisely

because technology was conceived abstractly as an independent force with its own inner conditions, and the designing engineer as the real maker of the modern world, the step from their earlier Expressionist, Cubist or Suprematist abstraction to the more technological style was not a great one. (Even Kandinsky and Malevich changed during the 1920s under the influence of these conceptions.)

In applying their methods of design to architecture, printing, the theatre and the industrial arts they remained abstract artists. They often looked upon their work as the aesthetic counterpart of the abstract calculations of the engineer and the scientist. If they admitted an alternative art of fantasy-in some ways formally related to their own-it was merely as a residual field of freedom or as a hygienic relaxation from the rigors of their own efficiency. Unlike the Futurists, whose conception of progress was blindly insurgent, they wished to reconstruct culture through the logic of sober technique and design; and in this wish they considered themselves the indispensable aesthetic prophets of a new order in life. Some of them supported the Bolshevik revolution, many more collaborated with the social-democratic and liberal architects of Germany and Holland. Their conception of technology as a norm in art was largely conditioned, on the one hand, by the stringent rationalization of industry in post-war Europe in the drive to reduce costs and widen the market as the only hope of a strangling capitalism threatened by American domination, and, on the other hand, by the reformist illusion, which was especially widespread in the brief period of post-war prosperity during this economic impasse, that the technological advance, in raising the living standards of the people, in lowering the costs of housing and other necessities, would resolve the conflict of classes, or at any rate form in the technicians habits of efficient, economic planning, conducive to a peaceful transition to socialism. Architecture or Revolution! That was in fact a slogan of Le Corbusier, the architect, painter and editor of the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*. With the approach of the crisis of the 1930s critics like Elie Faure called on painters to abandon their art and become engineers; and architects, in America as well as Europe, sensitive to the increasing economic pressure, though ignorant of its causes, identified architecture with engineering, denying the architect an aesthetic function. In these extreme views, which were shared by reformists of technocratic tendency, we can see the debacle of the optimistic machine ideologies in modern culture. As production is curtailed and living standards reduced, art is renounced in the name of technical progress.

During the crisis the mechanical abstract styles have become secondary. They influence very few young artists, or they tend toward what Barr calls "biomorphic abstraction," of a violent or nervous calligraphy, or with amoeboid forms, a soft, low-grade matter pulsing in an empty space. An antirationalist style, Surrealism, which had issued from the Dadaist art of the 1917-23 period, becomes predominant and beside it arise new romantic styles, with pessimistic imagery of empty spaces, bones, grotesque beings, abandoned buildings and catastrophic earth formations.

Notes

1 Alfred J. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York 1936). 248 pages. 223 illustrations. It was published by the Museum of Modern Art as the guide and catalogue of its great exhibition held in the spring of 1936.

"Nature of Abstract Art" was firstly published in *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 1, January-March 1937, pp. 77-98.
<http://abstractpossible.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Nature-of-Abstract-Art-Schapiro-i.pdf>