

The Origins and Meanings of Non-Objective Art

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ABSTRACT

Through my research I wanted to find out the ideas and meanings that the originators of non-objective art had. In my research I also wanted to find out what were the artists' meanings be it symbolic or geometric, ideas behind composition, and the reasons for such a dramatic break from the academic tradition in painting and the arts. Throughout the research I also looked into the resulting conflicts that this style of art had with critics, academia, and ultimately governments. Ultimately I wanted to understand if this style of art could be continued in the Post-Modern era and if it could continue its vitality in the arts today as it did in the past.

Introduction

Modern art has been characterized by upheavals, break-ups, rejection, acceptance, and innovations. During the 20th century the development and innovations of art could be compared to that of science. Science made huge leaps and bounds; so did art. The innovations in travel and flight, the finding of new cures for disease, and splitting the atom all affected the artists and their work. Innovative artists and their ideas spurred revolutionary art and followers. In Paris, Pablo Picasso had fragmented form with the Cubists. In Italy, there was Giacomo Balla and his Futurist movement. In Germany, Wassily Kandinsky was working with the group the Blue Rider (Der Blaue Reiter), and in Russia Kazimer Malevich was working in a style that he called Suprematism. These artists had revolutionary art ideas that dealt with the destruction of figures, rejection of the ideas of the Renaissance, movement and speed, and the acceptance of geometry and machines as influences in art.

More important than the effect of scientific and industrial innovations was the effect and outcome from World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945). Both World Wars had a tremendous effect on societies, people, and the artists of the time. Some artists were drafted to never return or be the same again (Franz Marc, August Macke, and Georges Braque), some were overtaken by the cruelty of war (Kathe Kollwitz), and the war had another effect: dispersal. The wars dispersed millions of people from their native homelands and artists were not immune to this effect. This dispersal had artists leaving Europe and coming to America. This would set the stage for important art movements in this country.

The dispersal of artists from Europe shifted and shattered not only familiar country lines, but also pre-1910 ideas in art. These ideas such as Realism, Impressionism, and Symbolism were all "starting off points" for the art that was to come. According to Gardner's Art through the Ages the Western Perspective, through the trials and tribulations of the 20th century, art evolved and continued in new, exciting, and innovative ways. Artists left behind many of the ideas forged during the Renaissance perspective, three dimensional forms in two dimensional spaces, and tradition in art. Paintings and art were flattened, abstracted, distorted, and broke with tradition and traditional materials. Through these innovations it was a logical step to take the representation of nature and natural forms out of the equation. These artists wanted to make art that represented the artist's inner needs and that could only be judged on its own merits. At first this art would be called abstraction, but eventually it would be called non-objective art.

The rise of abstraction and non-objective art would lead to questions about artistic intent and the ability of the artist. Also, there was great resistance to this style of art.

Critics were often harsh and criticized the artistic merits of the work. Jackson Pollock, the great Abstract Expressionist, was constantly defending his work to critics. Questions arose and symposiums held denouncing the works by Pollock and other modern artists and the opinions expressed ranged from indignant and inconsiderate to harsh. Robert Coates a critic from the New Yorker stated on paintings by Pollock, "...only that they seem mere unorganized explosions of random energy, and therefore meaningless" (Emmerling 68).

This controversy leads to the questions of why artists choose to paint non-objectively and what is their intent, is there a meaning to the works, and how has the work evolved? To answer these questions we will have to discuss ideas that the artists had and the reactions to the ideas from other artists.

Throughout the 20th century ideas were formulated for the groundwork of Modern Art. The pioneers of the movements that would become Cubism, Surrealism, and the Fauves would have their ideas about art become accepted forms of expression. But events were also happening to create a new genre of art, separate from other styles of natural visual representation that would change the face of modern aesthetics and artistic values in the arts. This movement was pioneered by three artists who emphasized the new non-objectivity in their work Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian. These three artists were soon joined by Theo van Doesburg and his concrete art movement in 1930. These artists would take traditional painting content, natural representation, and leave it behind to form the basis of Non-Objective art.

What is Modern Art?

To understand the term Modern Art we have to find and define not only the period of time that influenced the work that is classified as Modern, but also the differences between various artists', critics', and philosophers' thoughts on what it is to be a Modern artist and what art is considered to be Modern Art. According to the 20th century Art Book Modernism is "More of an attitude than a style. Modernism was a phenomenon which first arose in the early twentieth century, and was an affirmation of faith in the tradition of the new" (Phaidon 504). Also included in the definition is a key phrase that other critics have used (to some extent) to explain the scope of Modernism "...artists became more and more concerned with finding a visual equivalent to contemporary life and thought." This idea of finding a visual equivalent to the new technologies plays a key role in finding out what is Modernism. The new ideas and technologies not only provoked a Modernist's viewpoint in the arts, but other changes also affected the rise of Modernism: the rise of the Middle class and the rapid industrialization of Europe, Britain, and the United States. Artists during the Modern era were coming to terms with how to find a way to represent this world in their art. Gardner's Art through the Ages the Western Perspective suggests that Modernism started during the late 19th century.

Another defining concept of Modernism is the ideas pushed by the art critic Clement Greenberg. Gardner's Art through the Ages the Western Perspective explains Greenberg's theories on Modernism and arguments on art include ideas such as flattening the picture plane; he attacked the idea of three-dimensional space in painting (which was an idea held in painting since its discovery during the Renaissance). He believed in kitsch vs. the avant-garde, he promoted purity in painting, the concept of formalism (an idea about how the work looks vs. the idea of content based works which he would advance into an idea of art for art's sake) and finally he promoted a concept that dispensed with realism and illusionist painting that he felt concealed art.

The concept of ridding painting of three dimensional spaces was one of Greenberg's primary ideas about painting. He promoted flatness as essential to the medium of painting. His support of "Post-Painterly Abstraction" proves this point. In this style of work the canvas is stained with pigment. This staining allows the color to saturate the canvas without brushstrokes.

Where in the beginning of the post-war years Greenberg championed the Abstract Expressionists and their all-over approach he found this technique was parallel with his ideas about purity and flatness in painting.

Picasso and the Effect of Cubism on Modern Art

Cubism was an art movement that completely revolutionized ideas about painting. According to Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art the ideas behind Cubism were a direct influence of the work of the artist Paul Cézanne and the influence of African sculpture. The idea of Cubists' art was the dissolution of form. The Cubists continued to investigate the ideas of Cézanne and looked at their world as a series of primal shapes: the cube, square, and circle. The Cubists were no longer representing the natural world in their paintings. They were breaking down the facets of form and limiting the palette to enhance the logical designs of their art. This idea was influential and proved to many artists and critics that art did not have to be related to the environment that they lived in and that the fractured form was completely acceptable in art. The art of Picasso was so influential and progressive that he is often called the most influential artist of the 20th Century. Picasso helped to invent Cubism, and another of his many innovations was the discovery of collage.

Collage allowed the artist a new tool in abstracting the world and abstracting painting. One artist who used the collage technique in a completely non-objective way was the Dada artist Kurt Schwitters. According to Gardner's Art through the Ages the Western Perspective, Schwitters' collages were made completely from the found refuse of modern society. His collages contained the remnants of found papers, broken pieces of furniture, and discarded pieces of metal. Schwitters juxtaposed this refuse into collages that he called merz. Merz was a word that Schwitters made up from the German word kommerzbank (commerce bank). Schwitters' art was a vital starting point for non-objective collage and sculptural collage which would take the name "combine" in Robert Rauschenberg's work and finally assemblage.

The ideas that Picasso and Cézanne pioneered allowed the work of other artists to progress in even more unique ways through their constant innovation. Without these artists other artists who formed the basis for non-objective art may have gone in other artistic directions.

Wassily Kandinsky and Pure Painterly Composition

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866; his father was a successful tea merchant. Kandinsky's early schooling was mainly academic, but did include cello and drawing courses. Kandinsky moved back to Moscow in 1886 to study law at Moscow University. Kandinsky had a successful academic career, but decided that he needed to be a painter and go to Munich to devote his life to art.

Kandinsky's path towards art has certain similarities to other pioneering artists such as Van Gogh and Gauguin. He was drawn late to painting, but after a few years of dedicated work became a great master of painting. Kandinsky's work shows a certain sensitivity to color that is remarkable. Kandinsky was attempting in his work to paint pure painterly compositions and he is commonly called the first Abstract Expressionist.

During his life Kandinsky wrote and published many of his ideas and theories about art. These ideas were published in the texts Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Point and Line to the Plane, Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus and taught throughout his life. Kandinsky also was a great organizer of art movements, his group the Blue Rider is one of the seminal groups in twentieth century art.

Kandinsky's Color Theories

One of Kandinsky's main beliefs about painting was the relationships that it had with

color. Kandinsky always had an attachment to the idea of a connection between painting and music, color akin to notes. Kandinsky established the groundwork for his beliefs in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky believed that color had at first a physical effect, but as we look at the color it causes a psychological effect. Kandinsky also states in the text his ideas about colors and the receding and pulling of some and the emotional qualities of others. As Paul Overy explained in his book, Kandinsky and the Language of the Eye, Kandinsky stated that “If two circles are drawn and painted respectively yellow and blue, a brief contemplation will reveal in the yellow a spreading movement out from the centre, and a noticeable approach to the spectator. The blue on the other hand, moves into itself...” Kandinsky also wrote about the relationships of yellow to white and blue to black. He explained that yellow inclines to white and that it is the easiest color to “dirty” and that to an extent there can be no dark yellow. Blue can also be so dark that it borders on being black. He also stated that blue is a “heavenly” color and yellow an “earthly” one. He had ideas similar to this for many colors. For example red, Kandinsky believed, “had unbound warmth,” green “is the most restful tone..,” and that brown is “unemotional, disinclined to movement.”

Kandinsky also believed, unlike many other artists at the time, that white was a color, more importantly, a very spiritual color. He believed white to be a silencing color akin to a mute or pause in a song or melody. He believed black to be a final silence or pause in music –the final pause before the curtain goes down. He attributed black with motionlessness and death. He believed that other colors reacted predictably when placed next to these two colors. For example, he believed that colors placed next to white or in a field of white would blur and dissolve, but next to black it would stand forward and stand firm. Kandinsky explained his color theories almost always in relationships with music. Kandinsky did not reject color harmony, as he states, “Simple color Harmony is attractive to us in the way that the music of Mozart is...” What Kandinsky wanted was color relationships that relate similarly to the work of the composer Schoenberg. Kandinsky stated that he wanted, “The strife of colors, the sense of the balance we have lost, tottering principles, unexpected assaults, great questions, apparently useless striving, storm and tempest, broken chains, antithesis and contradictions-these make up our harmony...legitimate and illegitimate combinations of colors...” (Overy 48). Kandinsky used these ideas in his paintings and used discordant color combinations to relate his ideas of spiritualism versus materialism. Kandinsky also warned the reader of Concerning the Spiritual in Art that his color theories were general ideas that he believed. He stated that words are hints at the spiritual representation of color and that with explaining his ideas about color there was always something left over that would be the essence of the color or as he stated, “...the kernel of it’s existence” (Overy 48).

Piet Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism

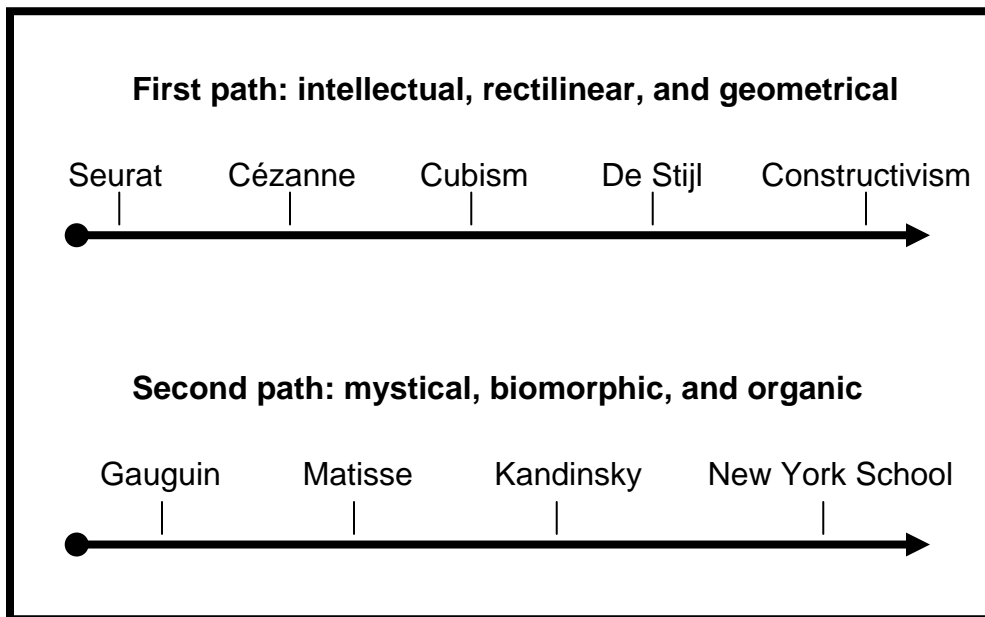
“Art should be above reality; otherwise it would have no value for man.”-Mondrian (Kleiner, Mamiya 780)

Piet Mondrian was a founder of the movement called De Stijl or “the style.” Born in 1872 in Holland, Mondrian was influenced by the disorder of modern life. Like other members of De Stijl, Mondrian wanted to maintain a synthesis with modern technology and art. Mondrian’s art always took into account the effects of space, color, and line to produce pictorial harmony. Mondrian believed that line and primary colors could harmonize a painting.

Mondrian like Kandinsky believed in theosophy but abandoned these ideas to concentrate on his own for harmony in painting. These ideas took form in what he called “pure plastic art.” These ideas were based out of his experience with art. Mondrian felt that all art had the ability to represent pure beauty and harmony, but felt that to produce this vision the artist had to create something that represents the individual, the universe, and his place in it or how the artist relates to the universe.

There is a significant difference between the works of both of these artists. Mondrian is geometric; Kandinsky is biomorphic (Kandinsky is noted to have painted several geometric paintings during his years at the Bauhaus). The art historian Alfred Barr explained his ideas on this topic in a catalog to an exhibition entitled “Cubism and Abstract Art” that took place in 1936. Barr explained that there were two paths present in modern abstraction. The first path indicates the works of Seurat to Cezanne to Cubism and through the work of De Stijl and Constructivism. The second indicates the work of Gauguin to Matisse and the Fauves- to Kandinsky to the New York School. In the first path Barr explained that the work was intellectual, rectilinear, and geometrical. In comparison the second path is mystical, biomorphic, and organic.

Alfred Barr’s Two Paths in Modern Abstraction



Non-Objective Art and the Desire to Turn Away From the Figure

As discussed above, many artists working non-objectively sought to use space and form relationships to design their paintings. But why turn away from the representation of the natural world? To answer this question we have to not only look at the happenings in the art world, but we also have to look at the happenings in the real world. In the art world Picasso and the Cubists had shattered form. The shattering of form led to another discovery, of collage. Many of the rules that artists had followed since the Renaissance were being left behind. The ideas of perspective and rendering the human figure in three dimensional space were being replaced. Artists were now flattening their paintings and rendering the human figure distorted and flat—gone was perspective. One could say it was a logical step that eventually artists would “destroy” the content of their work, and paint pictures that had “nothing” as content. But as Theo Von Doesburg stated in his text Principles of Neo-Plastic Art “The content of all arts is the same. Only the modes and

means of expression are different.” So if we analyze this statement and this is the author’s opinion, we can come to the conclusion that all artists express a need to express an emotional message or idea. All artists want their work to be an emotional or intellectual experience for their viewer. It matters not what the content is, be it an abstraction, figuration, or landscape. For all content is the same, an emotional or intellectual idea, the only difference between the styles of paintings abstraction, figuration, landscape is the mode or means of the act of expression.

For Kazimir Malevich, painting should follow his belief that the artist rely on pure feeling and that this pure feeling cannot be found in objects. Malevich’s paintings were based on geometrical shapes, primarily the square. Malevich based his compositions on the different relationships that the shapes had in relation to their placement in the picture plane and their relation to each other. His belief in this idea also led to his use of pure colors. And to quote Malevich, “...the Suprematist does not observe and does not touch-he feels” (Rickey 20). So, in the work of Malevich feeling and emotion is the most important idea. It is an art with no subject, but an art that still had emotional content, that could stir the soul without representation. This idea will follow us through the ideas of not only Kandinsky (albeit in the exact opposite way of Suprematism) and Mondrian, but will also be influential to the Informalists.

The influence of Malevich and his ideas of Suprematism were immediately felt throughout Russia and Europe. His ideas would influence subsequent generations including the artists Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni. According to Briony Fer and his book The Infinite Line these two artists played a game of one-upmanship with the figure of Malevich. Despite Malevich’s dedication to his ideas he was wary with leaving the physical world as subject in his work. Malevich knew his ideas about art were radical for the time and he felt, “a kind of timidity bordering on fear when I was called upon to leave the ‘world of will and idea’ in which I had lived and worked and in the reality of which I believed” (Rickey 20).

The ideas of Suprematism were defined by Malevich and the main Suprematist concept was the square. His ideas concerning the square were that a plainly drawn square in graphite was the most pure example of non-objectivity. That this art (Suprematism) transcended religions and was the most spiritual form of art, this idea of a spirituality that followed directly in line with the new art forms was also key to Kandinsky’s art practices and theories.

The Rise of Constructivism as the Main Tendency in pre-World War I Russia

“...it’s been said many times in world-art writing that one can find some of painting’s meanings by looking not only at what painters do but at what they refuse to do.”-Ad Reinhardt (Hess 32)

After the Russian Revolution there developed two major artistic tendencies one was Suprematism, the reigning artistic tendency and the other newer Constructivism. According to the book Constructivism; Origins and Evolutions Suprematism can be defined as a truly abstract art relying on geometric forms, especially the square. Constructivism in contrast is an art that celebrates technology and imitates the processes of that technology. It is an art form that “constructs” its art through these processes. Constructivism eventually became an all encompassing term for a style of art through the image and eventually this image became the main concern in what was termed “Constructivism.” The idea of “constructing” the work was still integral to the ideas in the movement, but a geometric tendency arose that encompassed this idea in the subsequent generations that followed in this movement. Where Suprematism is said to have ended, Constructivism has continued through art movements such as “Primary Structures” or Minimalism. Another difference between the two tendencies is the ideological bent of Russian Constructivism. This bent was primarily from the influence of Vladimir Tatlin. Tatlin believed that art should address the needs of the masses and

his position as one of the leaders of the group allowed the movement to be allied with the new Marxism that was taking over Russia at the time. Though an ideological bent has been allied with Russian Constructivism not all the artist's adhered to this ideology and this split in the movement can be seen especially with the Constructivism practiced by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner.

One of the main interests the Constructivists had was the concept of volume of mass and the volume of space and how this idea relates to sculpture. This idea was particularly influential for the artist Naum Gabo. As early as 1915 Gabo created his first sculpture that showed the inside of the space. This concept of the volume of mass and the volume of space was revolutionary and would influence subsequent generations of future artists.

Constructivism was not just sculpture; the movement also allied itself with Russian artists who painted. In a 1920 exhibition of Constructivists work the first Constructivist Manifesto appeared. The Manifesto was important for several reasons first it outlined the ideas that Naum Gabo rejected which included:

1. Color as accidental and superficial,
2. The descriptive value of line in favor of line as direction of static forces,
3. Volume in favor of depth as the only pictorial and plastic form in space,
4. Mass in sculpture in favor of the same volume constructed of planes, and
5. The thousand year old delusion of static rhythm in favor of "kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time."

The Manifesto also signaled the end of the reign of Suprematism as the major artistic tendency in Russia and also asserted the dominance of Naum Gabo. By the year 1920 Suprematism gave way to Constructivism and the ideas forged in Suprematism were synthesized into the movement of Constructivism. The leadership and influence of artists also changed. This allies itself with the constant change in early 20th century arts.

The Rise of De Stijl in Holland, Mondrian and van Doesburg

The art movement De Stijl, also known as "The Style," was founded in Holland by Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian in 1917. The artists started to publish a magazine also by that name to use as a vehicle to express their ideas on an art form they called "Neo-Plasticism." This idea was centered on the concept that nature was expressed in the forms of the square and the cube. This idea, along with purity in color, was thought to harmonize the artist's works.

Mondrian, like many other artists worked in a variety of academic styles before venturing into the foray of non-objective works. But soon Mondrian fell sway to Cubism and started to move away from natural representation. Mondrian began to abstract his landscapes; he then switched to making landscapes out of plus and minus's. Then he took away the content completely to make his works only out of grids and pure colors. He perfected his technique in 1921.

A split occurred between Mondrian and van Doesburg in 1924. At this time, the term Constructivism and/or Constructivist was being applied not only to the artists of its namesake, but also artists from De Stijl and from Suprematism. This term also started to apply to the arts itself, be it painting or sculpture. The thought behind the co-opting of terms was the coincidence of image that the artists were working with. Constructivism was no longer about making art that resembled machines or even "constructing" the work through modern processes. The word was applied loosely to a group of artists working in a strict geometrical style.

It was this strict affirmation of geometry that caused the split between Mondrian and van Doesburg. Mondrian believed in purity in the work of De Stijl and when van Doesburg introduced diagonals into his paintings he denounced his connection to the group.

Kandinsky, “The Concern of the Spiritual in Art,” and Non-objectivity

For Kandinsky, turning away from figurative art was a logical step because he had been thinking and developing an art that was purely abstract since 1908. Many versions of a story about Kandinsky’s realization of non-objective art have been told. The artist recounted the story in his autobiography. Kandinsky tells of coming home to his studio and seeing one of his paintings on its side. Of this experience he wrote, “The painting lacked all subject, depicted no identifiable object and was entirely composed of bright color patches...One thing became clear to me-that objectiveness, the depiction of objects, needed no place in my paintings, and was indeed harmful to them” (Rickey 22).

In the introduction of his text Concerning the Spiritual in Art he is quoted, after seeing an exhibition of Monet’s “Haystacks,” “...I had the impression that painting itself had come into the foreground: I wondered if it would not be possible to go further in this direction” (Sadler v). Kandinsky’s desire to find a relationship between art and music would lead his work into the realm of pure creation. Kandinsky’s idea of creating art is akin to the creation of the universe and would lead him into painting the first non-representational painting in 1911. For Kandinsky, creation was akin to otherworldly godliness. Kandinsky’s work turned form into a visual handwriting which challenged the spectator. For the first time, the spectator was brought into the painting as an equal participant in the discovery of meaning and value in the work not just a viewer. The challenge that Kandinsky made to the viewer of his work was this: That since this expression has no visual relationship with the natural world you are sole judge of the meaning and quality of this expression. So with taking a leap from the confines of tradition, Kandinsky’s art led to new questions and new ideas not only for the artist, but also for the spectator. These questions are vital for the development of the artist and the art.

Other events were happening in the world that would effect the development of Modern art and its creators. These events would be the catastrophic effects of both World Wars and the progression of science and engineering. With both World Wars we can see the arts becoming more and more progressive. For example, the art movements before World War I consisted of Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism. These art movements were based on the new science and technologies that were being created at the time. The Futurists were concerned with speed, the Cubists with new ways of representing objects in pictorial space, and Expressionism with reviving old techniques such as woodcut. After the war we see the rise of art movements such as Suprematism and Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism, and the De Stijl. During and after World War II not only did styles again change, but artists also had been displaced. More so than in any other war, artists left Europe. This dispersal of artists led not only to New York supplanting Paris as the world’s art center, but it also led to the creation of the New York School or Abstract Expressionism.

Abstract Expressionism: The Major Tendency in the United States

Abstract Expressionism, according to Gardner's Art through the ages the Western Perspective was the first major post World War II art movement and the culmination of many of the ideas of Modern Art. This movement includes artists such as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Tobey to name a few. Common ideas were few and the artists' works were highly stylized, but the element of increased size ran throughout almost all the works. Many Abstract Expressionist works were extremely large with a Non-Objective content. Many of these artists worked with a compositional style that encompassed the whole canvas. This all-over approach eliminated a central point of interest and this approach also brought the viewer into the picture. Also notable with the Abstract Expressionist painters was the idea of Action Painting. This idea was coined by the art historian and critic Harold Rosenberg and was based on Pollock's famous quote "that the canvas was an arena in which to act."

Another group of artists included in the New York School were those working in a style known as Color Field. In this style of painting the artists use large areas of color to express feeling and emotion through the color combinations and placements of color. A leading artist in Color Field painting is the artist Mark Rothko (b 1903-1970). Mark Rothko was born in Divinsk, Russia; he immigrated to the United States in 1913. Rothko, like many other Abstract Expressionists, started out as a figure painter but accepted abstraction through a series of work that dealt with mythological themes and surrealist influences. It was in 1946 with the series of "Multiforms" that a bridge was made towards his mature style. Rothko's mature painting style is characterized by rectangular fields of color that are over another larger field of color usually that is the same size as the support. Rothko felt that the human figure could no longer fulfill the spiritual need that he wanted his work to have. The success of Rothko's work lies in the use of color and color alone. Since Rothko's paintings are truly and completely non-objective he has no subject or perceived content. What lies in a Rothko painting is something unique. Rothko used color to make the viewer feel drama, tragedy, and hope. He composed his pictures always with the viewer in mind and wanted his paintings to deeply affect the viewer. Rothko was quoted as saying, "Nothing should stand between my painting and the viewer." (Baal-Teshuva 7) Rothko believed that there was a direct relationship between the viewer and his work. The success of his paintings first relied on the color and the tensions between the colors and second on the placements of the colors.

In the New York School we see that the work is highly individualized. This trend can be attributed to America's ideas of individualization. This idea of the individual led to the complex grouping of the term Abstract Expressionism centered on a group of artists that had different ideas about painting and art in general. One of these ideas is of a purely non-objective painting and one that is a reference from nature. In the first camp we can firmly put Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman and in the second camp the majority of the other painters of the school. Richard Diebenkorn, Theodore Stamos, and David Smith, among others all had an element of landscape at one time surfacing in their non-objective work. Arshille Gorky painted many of his non-objective canvases with a reference to plant forms.

The Rise of Informalism as the Major Tendency in Europe and the U.S.

Abstract Expressionism not only took over the American scene, it also rose in Europe parallel to the American movement. In Europe this movement was called Informalism and/or Lyrical Abstraction. Some of the artists included in this movement were Wols, De Stael, Riopelle, Burri, and Fontana. Informalism was an encompassing categorization that included Tachism and gesture painting.

After World War II it is important to note that the ideas of non-objective art were spreading, at a rapid pace, and were being accepted, at that time, as a major tendency in the arts. We have artists in America painting gestural and artists in Europe painting the same way. Why?

If we look into the earlier paths that Barr laid out in his essays in the catalog for “Cubism and Abstract Art” we will find many artists working in these two paths. Wols, for instance, was working through the path of Gauguin to Matisse to Kandinsky to the New York School with an emphasis on biomorphic shapes. In contrast an artist like Ad Reinhardt, whose paintings have a geometrical element to them, was working out of the Cubism to De Stijl to Constructivism path. Do these paths work for every artist? No, many artist’s work in many different techniques and different subject matter at the same time. Also, is the title of Abstract Expressionist or Informalist, for example, the correct way to classify an artist working non-objectively? No, once again there are so many different artists working in different styles just in the realm of non-objective painting that a broad name is needed to classify them.

Reaction to Abstract Expressionism

The reaction to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism (Informalism) and its subsequent fall into a void of disinterest gave rise to several new art movements. Neo-Dadaism led by Robert Rauschenberg, Pop Art a British import took hold with Andy Warhol at the helm, and also New Figuration which included the artists Francis Bacon and Maryan. During this time non-objective art was being developed and practiced by many artists. Artists like Ad Reinhardt, according to the book Abstract Expressionism, was seen in a new context, not only as Abstract Expressionist, but also as a forerunner to Minimal Art. The 20th Century Art Book states that Minimalism, was an art form that by term of its name reduced the artwork down to its minimal components (Phaidon 507). This art style was predominate during the 1970’s and 1980’s and has been characterized by being a reaction to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism. Minimalist works have also been called Primary Structures or ABC art. Minimalism has been called an heir to the Constructivist ideology (Phaidon 507). Artists working in a Minimalist style put emphasis on the objectiveness of the artworks that they create. Some of their techniques according to the book Constructivism; Origins and Evolution are repetition and the factory quality of the objects they create.

The continuation of non-objective painting and sculpture can be linked directly to the Modern era. People as artists have followed two paths in art post World War II and those are the ideas and paths of construction and expression. After the upsurge of abstraction and non-objective art after and during the war years we can see a tendency towards geometric abstraction. But that tendency was soon dominated by anti-formalist ideas and a return to expression, which was called Abstract Expressionism in America and Informalism in Europe and again when interest in it waned, two opposite tendencies arose as the major trends in art. These tendencies were Neo-Dada and the other a return to pure visual painting or art (hard-edge, post-painterly abstraction, and new figuration).

Methodology

My interest in researching Non-Objective art lies in being a current practitioner of this art form. In researching this topic it has helped me to understand different ways of communicating through this art form. My work is related to the materials I use. I work in ways that are influenced by all the artists who I researched. I work in paint but also in collage; I work in sculpture and also in assemblage.

During the research I wanted to find out what meanings artists try to convey when they work in a way that presents a visible problem to an inexperienced viewer. For example, when discussing many aspects of Modern and Post Modern art one may hear on an occasion that the viewer just did not understand what the artist was trying to convey. I feel that this reaction is due to an idea of trying to relate the artwork to something that the viewer saw or experienced in the real world. Or, in short, the viewer is trying to find a tangible solid idea that relates to the human experience. So, in addressing this idea throughout my research I wanted to find an answer to this problem. Is mark making or frenetic action painting an eloquent expression of the soul or do we

need an image or a figure from the tangible world to communicate our innermost desires, ideas, and feelings?

In facing this dilemma throughout the research process and in my own work the answer for me became clear that a solution was starting to surface. I realized that all this work could be examined in several ways for meaning and artistic integrity. First, the artwork could be broken down strictly into compositional elements and this could prove a source to end the debate on artistic skill and integrity of the work. Since composition is the key element to any work of Art, this technique works as a starting point in judging the work. The second tool to employ in understanding this style of artwork is the idea of repetition. If the artist works in a series repeating elements from one work into another with a sense of artistic growth, the artist could be assumed to be working logically, and with a level of conceptual skill. Also through this repetition the artist is also developing a language that is uniquely their own. This language then can be interpreted by the viewer and assimilated until the work is no longer a mystery. The third tool is to look at the handling of the materials. If an artist displays competent skills with the materials at hand, the work shows a level of finesse that cannot be achieved by the novice.

During the research process I also looked at my own work and my art making process. During this process I realized that I work in an intuitive way that relies on a conversation with the artwork. I initially may put paint directly on the canvas, but throughout the reworking process I may erase the initial painting. I find that I distrust the first brushstrokes, or the first “performance.” I disregard this first “performance” and do not trust it to make a complex and interesting painting. In my work I strive for a painting that is ambiguous, a painting that leads the viewer to find their own ideas and feelings about the work. But through the repetition a signature style appears, one that will lead the viewer into an understanding or realization about the content and meaning of the work.

Examples of the Author’s Original Non-Objective Works



Non-Objective Art and the 21st Century and Conclusion

So the question of intent remains and the reasons why this style of art came into being. Is it as simple as that moment in human history, the rapid advancements in technology, the ideas about spirituality and its relationship to painting and creativity, or was it the great conflicts that occurred during the 20th Century that shaped and shifted art so much that this style of art came

into being? Or, is it as Jackson Pollock felt, (his) work should reflect the time, happenings, and the feeling of the age that he as an artist was living in. To quote Pollock from an interview he gave to William Wright, “It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique” (Hess 17).

Today artists such as Gerhard Richter, Albert Oehlen, and Fiona Rae are all painting non-objectively. An artist such as Gerhard Richter will one day paint realistically and the next paint gesturally. The ideas about non-objective abstraction have changed as explained by Albert Oehlen from the book Art in Theory 1900-2000. In an interview with Wilfred Dickoff and Martin Prizehorn Oehlen explained that, “All painting presents you with an absurd position. It involves the reduction of something three dimensional to something two dimensional, and that’s already an abstraction.” He further states later that, “... a post-non-representational painting is one that is legitimated neither by process of production, nor by virtuosity, nor by an idea, but that can be passed on like a joke, even though it must avoid the anecdotal.” (Harrison, Wood 1165) This idea differs greatly from the ideas that the practitioners of non-objective painting had during the time of Modernism. But this quote proves that abstraction and non-objective art still has a creative drive and did not sink into banality.

Another question can be answered from this quote. Is this style of art good for art? Questions arise from the text The Search for Meaning in Modern Art such as that non-objective abstraction leads art away from some of the best things that it had going for it and that this is succeeded by dropping ideas from the imagery around and with mankind. The book also states that the ideas derived from Abstract Expressionism and Informalism are taken not from culture but only from the artist’s point of view.

In its defense, the text also states that since the rise of non-objective art itself has been liberated from tradition and the creative possibilities are now endless. The author, Alfred Neumeyer, states that just because non-objective art is around is sound enough proof that it is an important creation for the arts. Alfred Neumeyer, also states in his book The Search for Meaning in Modern Art, the idea that this style of art represents the vitality of our age. Non-objective art represents the worst and the best in man and man’s ability to create.

Also, if art is to represent the image of modern man then it also has to represent his detachment from nature and from his fellow man. Man in the modern era is living in an increasingly more urban, technologically changing, and fast paced society. People of the 21st century faces different challenges than man of the 20th century and even more so than man of the 19th century. Therefore, for non-objective art to continue to be a valid form of expression it must be a visual representation of the times, but still follow in the advancements in society to continue to fulfill its role in the evolution of man.

In conclusion, non-objective painting began in a time of great change for humanity and that change was felt throughout the arts. In the arts it was seen first in the art of painting. Some of these artists had a deeply spiritual meaning and connection to their work. This could be a direct result of the times that these artists lived in, and in the authors opinion I believe that this is so. Just by being a still valued form of expression justifies its existence and importance to man and the arts. This work has continued to challenge the artist who create it and that proves its value in our world today.

Appendix A

1900

1903 Wright Bros. invent and fly first airplane
1908 Picasso starts the Cubist Movement with Braque
1911 Kandinsky and Marc form The Blue Rider group
1912 Picasso and Braque invent Collage
1913 Constructivism is founded and practiced by Tatlin, Gabo, and Pevsner
1914 Outbreak of WWI
1915 Malevich founds Suprematism
1917 Mondrian and Van Doesburg form De Stijl
1918 End of WWI
1919 Founding of the Bauhaus in Weimar Germany
1920 Constructivism Manifesto appears
1920 Mussolini takes power in Italy
1929 Stock Market Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression

1930

1930 Rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany
1937 Degenerate Art Show in Germany exhibiting works by Kandinsky, Mondrian, Schwitters, among other Modern Artists
1938 Otto Hahn discovers Nuclear Fission
1939-1944 WWII
1945 Dropping of Atomic Bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima
1945 Art world capital shifts from Paris to New York, Abstract Expressionism is founded by artists including Pollock, Reinhardt, and Rothko
1960 Reaction to the Dominance of Abstract Expressionism and Informalism leads to the rise of Minimalism, Pop Art, Happenings, etc.
1970-present Rise of the Post Modern artists such as Fiona Rae, Albert Oehlen, and Gerhard Richter to name a few continue to paint Non-objectively

Appendix B: Glossary of Artists and terms

Abstract Expressionism: An art movement situated in New York commonly called the New York School. Artists included in this movement are Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem De Kooning to name a few. Also Known as Informalism and Lyrical Abstraction. Also included in this group are artists working in Color Field painting.

Bauhaus: A school formed in Weimar Germany in 1919 by Walter Gropius. Kandinsky taught there from 1922-1932.

Constructivism: An art movement formed in Russia in 1913. Artists included in this movement are Naum Gabo, Vladimir Tatlin, and Antoine Pevsner. Constructivism was an art form that embraced technology and imitated the processes of that technology to make works of art.

Cubism: An art movement founded by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Artists in this movement fractured form into primal shapes: the cube, square, and the cylinder. Influenced by the work of Paul Cezanne and African sculpture this movement started in 1908.

De Stijl: Also known as the “Style”. Formed in Holland by Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg in 1917. De Stijl artists favored purity in color and used the square and the cube to express nature and feelings in their works.

Der Blue Reiter (The Blue Rider): A group formed by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc in 1911. During Kandinsky’s involvement in this group he wrote Concerning the Spiritual in Art .

Naum Gabo: A leading member of the Constructivist movement. In 1920 wrote the Constructivist Manifesto.

Wassily Kandinsky: Considered by Alfred Barr to be the first Abstract Expressionist. He painted the first Non-Objective painting in 1911.

Modernism: Modernism started during the early 20th century and can be characterized by the rise of the Avant-garde and an influx of new ideas in art and the rejection of ideas that had been held since the Renaissance. These ideas included perspective and realism to name a few.

Kazimer Malevich: Founder of Suprematism in 1915.

Minimalism: Also known as Primary Structures or ABC art. Minimalism paired art down to its basic principles. Was anticipated by Suprematism and Constructivism.

Piet Mondrian: Co-founder of De Stijl in 1917.

Non- Objective Art: An art form that has no signs of natural representation or man made representation in it. Works in this vein rely on color, composition, and mark making to express the artist’s ideas in the work.

Mark Rothko: A leading painter in the Abstract Expressionist group. Worked first in a figurative style than switched to a style in the vein of Color Field.

Suprematism: An art form founded by Kazimir Malevich in Russia in 1915. Suprematism was an art form that celebrated the square as the art form's main concept.

Theosophy: A religious movement that believes that all religions hold some truth in their teachings and beliefs about the creation of man. Both Kandinsky and Mondrian followed this religion for a brief time.

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