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METHOD AND TERMINOLOGY OF ART CRITICISM

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This task of clarification is all the more necessary as the terms used by the critics live and develop - as we tried to demonstrate at the Dubrovnik Assembly - in accordance with current trends in art. This is therefore true of the problem involved in the use of the term "abstract art", a problem made still more difficult by the fact that the term was used in criticism before the birth of a truly abstract form of art. I should like to refer you to the fact that the masterly and disturbing work of Wilhelm Worringer, "Abstraktion und Einfühlung", dates from the year 1907, at least three years before the appearance of what we are now accustomed to call "abstract art". The most interesting theory put forward by Worringer opposes abstraction, the Promethean and orderly power of man, to that other tendency of art, devoted to and admiring existing creation, which is manifested in figurative art. Therefore, a necessary preliminary to the creation of such abstract art is to try and start from any existing figure whatsoever, to attempt to create an altogether independent form of order, designed to be distinct from nature as it exists.

We therefore see that - before the birth of abstract art - we are in the very middle of the controversy between the two tendencies of abstract art that we have nevertheless become accustomed to describing under the same name. The first of these is to start with an object or the fragment of an object and to proceed with the true method of abstraction, i.e. by eliminating the qualities and properties attached to the object and achieving a geometric figure in

which the original idea of the object is lost. The second is to start in the mind itself by inventing, creating syntheses and harmonies of form that are completely new. The latter form of art - nevertheless described as abstract art - has no connection with abstraction in the true meaning of the term. It is perhaps because of this that Picasso opposed it and said: "There is no abstract art. It is always necessary to begin with something. We can later take away all appearance of reality, there is no more danger of abstraction, for the idea of the object has left an imprint that cannot be erased. Man is the tool of nature; she gives him his character and his appearance." Here is a sentence that Worringer could very well have quoted in support of his idea of "Einfühlung", of that feeling of immanence and communion with creation.

The problem becomes more complex if we examine closely the origins of the different trends in abstract art. Mondrian, the great master of abstraction in Worringer's sense of the term, derives his art from cubism "by going beyond it", as he used to say. His art, which he called "abstract-real", is rooted in the cubist pictures that he painted in Paris between 1911 and 1914. But cubism is a form of art which is inspired by objects. It is a form of art of which Joan Gris was able to say "from a cylinder, I make a bottle". And Mondrian has arrived at a stage where the object, from which he set out in his pre-war pictures, is completely eliminated and nothing remains but the great austere harmony of the laws and forces governing the universe. It is of this form of art that Jean Arp and Theo van Doesburg are speaking when they use the term "concrete". Arp wrote: "I can understand that a cubist picture can be called abstract, for its parts have been extracted from the object which served as a model for the picture. But in my opinion, a picture or piece of sculpture which have had no object as a model are just as concrete and sensual as a leaf or a stone." And van Doesburg said: "Our painting is

concrete and not abstract, for we have gone beyond the period of research and speculative experiment. In their search for purity, artists were compelled to abstract the natural forms which cloaked plastic elements, to eliminate the forms of 'nature' and replace them by the forms of 'art'. This is concrete and not abstract painting, because nothing is more concrete or more real than a line, a colour, a surface. It is the concretization of the creative mind."

Then we have the example of Kandinsky who himself confesses to the influence of Monet's work, of a form of painting which was immaterialized to the maximum degree compatible with impressionism, on his first abstract researches. For example, the "Nymphs" are merely the starting point in the search for colour harmony. Along this route Kandinsky discovered abstraction: "One day I knew for certain that 'objects' were doing harm to my painting." Nevertheless, this great creator of abstract art painted works during that same period - between 1911 and 1914 - where the memory of objects is still entire.

But it is he who, in his book on "The Spiritual in Art" truly grasped the meaning of the term "abstract", and its meaning for our time. Abstraction, both in Worringer's sense of the term and in that of Arp, is derived from the creative activity of the human mind. Such spirituality is abstract in the same way as mathematics and is not harmed by truly concrete results.

Here, then, are some aspects of the oscillations in the meaning of the term "abstract" in modern art, the changing use of the term being due to the various tendencies manifested in contemporary art. The problem becomes still more difficult when the art of earlier periods has to be considered from the abstract angle, as in Moslem art for example, where the aversion to objects is due to a religious tradition and, at the same time, to a traditional leaning in favour of signs full of mystic symbolism, or the abstract content

in the art of Piero della Francesca whose highly developed intellect recognized the importance of numbers and figures. What we are proposing is that we study the terms and their meanings. On studying them, we may reach results, revealing and interesting to the same degree as the masterly study that our President, Mr. Venturi, has devoted to the history of art criticism. Moreover, in this way we shall do better than merely look into the meaning and content of these terms which we now handle sometimes too loosely and carelessly. Our responsibility as intermediaries between art and the public, our task as servants of contemporary and bygone art, can only profit greatly.