

PIET MONDRIAN PROCESS

For the people of the future

Reviews

Review by Dagmar von Freytag-Loringhoven

*„Perceiving the idea within reality is true human communion.“
Dr. Rudolf Steiner (1887)¹*

Elmar Schrepfer here offers in all modesty what is surely a groundbreaking work in the study of the painter Mondrian (1872-1944). His earlier book on Mondrian, *New York City Process – A Picture is Deciphered*², published by Urachhaus back in 2011, was an in-depth study of a late work by the artist which revealed the author's patient, investigative approach. Entirely in keeping with Goethe's phenomenological method, he showed there in every detail how the picture had arisen, giving readers access to Mondrian's abstract, linear creations with a depth and scope never previously undertaken.

In the present, substantially expanded book, he takes us on a deep foray into the painter's developing ideas – and into the experience of his unswerving realisation of these ideas in pictures. In so doing he makes new discoveries which convincingly demonstrate the underlying aim behind Mondrian's seemingly so abstract formulations, whose radical implications here come to clear and definite expression. A fascinating, clearly articulated essay on deciphering Mondrian's late work leaves us free, does not insist on its interpretations, and for that very reason casts its spell on the interested art lover.

Through a series of works, Elmar Schrepfer leads his readers into Mondrian's artistic development in such a way that we can follow and empathise with his artistic path towards radical abstraction. We learn, at first hand as it were, how Mondrian gradually detached himself from representational forms and arrived at the formulation of relationships that become apparent in the dissolution of such forms and their compression into horizontals, verticals and planes. Thus we journey "from depiction of the visible to an experience of the invisible".

Altogether, the book offers interested readers much stimulus for approaching Mondrian the artist in a variety of ways. One important moment in his biography seems to be his embrace of theosophy, with which he increasingly felt connected from the age of 28 (1900). The few books still in Mondrian's possession by the time of his death in 1944 included the transcript of a series of lectures given by Rudolf Steiner in Holland in 1908 under the auspices of the Theosophical Society. Though Mondrian spoke only sparingly about his preoccupation with theosophical and anthroposophical themes, they were very important to him, informing his outlook and playing a key part in his works. It seems almost tragic that a letter which Mondrian wrote to Steiner in 1921 and to which he attached a small booklet about his ideas, *Le Neo-Plasticisme*, along with a request for Steiner's view of it, unfortunately remained unanswered.

The essay by Michael Debus, containing reflections on "The Letter from Piet Mondrian to Rudolf Steiner", engages with this incident and places it in a broader context. Here too, Mondrian becomes (more) understandable in his inner journey, in which spiritual questions were a major preoccupation. The pictorial ideas that take shape through Mondrian's philosophy appear here in a new light in relationship to theosophy and anthroposophy. They are dedicated to the "people of the future" for "Art is the means to be spiritual".³ The universal and the individual, spirit and nature touch upon one another and interpenetrate in the painter's formulation.

In several key encounters with his contemporaries, recorded for posterity, it becomes apparent how intensively Mondrian engaged with spiritual questions. Several striking statements by him illustrate how he engaged with the ideas of the mathematician and theosophist M. H. J. Schoenmaeker (1875-1944). The Dutch art movement *De Stijl*, founded in 1917, brought together artists who developed a new, mathematically-based pictorial language reduced to only a few pictorial elements, a rigorous school that exerted great influence on the Bauhaus in Weimar and an approach which Mondrian realised in his pictures with great consistency.

Subsequently the author examines two exemplary pictures in detail. *Lozenge Composition with two lines (1931)* and *Composition II with Black Lines (1930)*, created in black on white, dispense with colours altogether and are so reduced in scope that, to a cursory view, their expressive power is due only to their severity and the balance of their lines. In his previous analysis of the picture *New York City III*, Elmar Schrepfer had elaborated and illustrated numerical relationships; now he ascribes occult, numerical meanings to the dimensions of planes and lines, which strongly suggest an intentionally executed pictorial idea underlying the abstract image.

Following this absolute reduction of means, which appears as a turning point in Mondrian's oeuvre, Elmar Schrepfer leads his readers on to the painter's use of colour in his late works. The chapters, "Three Rhombi, Wisdom through Inner Development" and "Meditative Reflection on the *New York City III*-Process in Seventeen Steps" show how Mondrian takes up colours again and integrates them in his compositions while still retaining the severity of his designs: here non-colour (the immutable, spiritual principle) and the colour elements (the mutable and natural) play into one another and give rise to pictorial works that seem almost buoyant and musical.

A concluding essay by Gabriele Arndt, "An Example from Contemporary Art – from the painting studio of Reinhard Martin Rumpf", describes ways of approaching the colour relationships used, alongside the constructional language of lines and planes, as design elements in Mondrian's abstract pictures. She traces the deciphering of the painting *New York City III* in terms of Goethe's theory of colours and Rudolf Steiner's spiritually extended teachings on colour, revealing the key significance of the colours used by Mondrian. Drawing on several works by the painter R. M. Rumpf, she develops a broader understanding for the rigour of the artist's choice of colours.

Where do we stand as readers by the end of this fascinating journey through the world of the painter? It becomes keenly apparent that levels of perception and insight have shifted. Our gaze is redirected from the dismantling of representational elements into abstraction – which appears somewhat austere initially in the sparseness of Mondrian's pictorial language – to his underlying development of thoughts and ideas. Our understanding is awoken for forms of art which, emerging from this mode of thinking, now appear consistent and coherent. Besides a felt equilibrium, the few lines and planes in each picture now reveal to us the painter's whole philosophy: "By turning away from the surface of things, we come closer to the inner laws of matter, which are also those of the spirit." sind.⁴

This book activates and enlivens us; it takes us with it on a fascinating art trip with a surprising outcome. Surveying all the separate steps of insight leads us to a whole; the ideas assume form within us, and in attentive tracing of the path outlined here, we ourselves become investigators.

Dagmar von Freytag-Loringhoven
Art therapist M. A. BVAKT/DFKGT
Social care supervisor

¹ Steiner, Rudolf (1887): GA 1 Goethes naturwissenschaftliche Schriften ['Goethe's Scientific Writings'], Dornach 1987, 4. Auflage, S. 111.

² Schrepfer, Elmar: [Piet-Mondrian New York City-Process](#), Stuttgart 2011

³ Piet Mondrian, quoted in: www.brainyquote.com/quotes/piet_mondrian_718927, accessed on 3.8. 22 by D. v. Freytag-Loringhoven. Translation (into German) by D. Hornemann-v. Laer, 2019 in: Bockemühl, Michael: "Kunst sehen. Piet Mondrian." Info 3 Verlag

⁴ Piet Mondrian, quoted in: www.brainyquote.com/quotes/piet_mondrian_718906, accessed on 3.8. 22 by D. v. Freytag-Loringhoven. Translation (into German) by D. Hornemann-v. Laer, 2019. Ibid.

A reflection by Heide Metzdorf

For a good while now I have followed Elmar Schrepfer on his journey of deciphering compositions by Piet Mondrian.

I too have been gripped by a fascination for Mondrian, but have never been able to fully credit what art historians say about him.

Reading these texts, in conversations and during sometimes vehement discussions, I have come to be fully convinced that Elmar Schrepfer has indeed put his finger on the secret of these undoubtedly fascinating works: a small revolution in the closed shop of the art world and therefore a project well-worth supporting.

Heide Metzdorf, Aichtal
Artist

Review by Dr. med. Johannes Reiner

1. Subject and content of the book
2. Success of the authors
3. Importance of the book

1.

This volume follows on from a 2011 publication by the author, Elmar Schrepfer: *Piet Mondrian: New York City-Process: A Picture is Deciphered*, Urachhaus 2011. *New York City 3 (unfinished)* 1938/ 1941/ 1977 (restored) is a late work by the painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). The author first encountered this picture in 1998 when he visited the Thyssen-Bornemisza art museum in Madrid and found himself facing an enigma. In subsequent years of intensive preoccupation with this work – a canvas measuring 110×117 cm – consisting of stick-on coloured strips, charcoal, pencil and oil, he gradually discovered how this work has been composed, and its inner lawfulness and structure, describing these steps in an accessible and phenomenologically reproducible way in his 2011 book.

After this book was published, the author's attention was drawn to a letter from Piet Mondrian to Rudolf Steiner, dated Paris 25.2.1921 in Kugler, Walter, *Rudolf Steiner, wie manchen ihn sehen und andere wahrnehmen*, ['Rudolf Steiner, How Some See Him and Others Perceive Him'] Verlag Freies Geistesleben, Stuttgart 2001. Accompanying this letter was Mondrian's booklet *Le Neo-Plasticisme*, and the request for Steiner's "response to this theme". No reply was forthcoming from Steiner. In his letter Mondrian refers to "the two extremes" of the universal and individual principles, harmony between which arises through manifestation of the first and deduction of the second. The subtitle

of this volume by Schrepfer, "For the People of the Future", comes from Mondrian's dedication of his essay on Neoplasticism, which he had sent Steiner for comment.

The letter forms the focal point of this book, the culmination to which the Foreword, Introduction and the selection from Mondrian's oeuvre leads, this prelude subtly tracing Mondrian's path of inner and artistic development under the heading, "From Depiction of the Visible to an Experience of the Invisible".

The following essay, by Michael Debus, containing reflections on "The Letter from Piet Mondrian to Rudolf Steiner", takes up the theme of Mondrian's question to Steiner in differentiating the two concepts of "universal" and "individual", and connects these with Steiner's remarks on the supersensible and the sensory world, a "cardinal question for humanity's view of the world". It was this question which led Steiner, via study of Goethe's scientific approach ("Goetheanism") to anthroposophic spiritual science. Mondrian's "Neoplasticism" describes for art what Steiner saw as the overall, central task for human evolution.

Two further, detailed accounts of Piet Mondrian's creative process ("Three Rhombi, Wisdom through Inner Development" and a "Meditative Reflection on the New York City III-Process in Seventeen Steps") are followed by an essay by Gabriele Arndt: "An Example from Contemporary Art". Here, engaging with paintings by R. M. Rumpf, she adds general thoughts on choices of colour and form, drawing partly on Goethe's theory of colours and partly also on Rudolf Steiner's remarks on the nature of colours. This gives deep insight into Mondrian's choice of colours and his radical self-restriction to black, white, grey, red, blue and yellow.

In addition, the book considers the influence on Mondrian of the mathematician and theosophist MHJ Schoenmaeker, who formulated the sculptural and philosophical principles of the *De Stijl* movement, to which Mondrian temporarily belonged. His book, "Faith in the new Human Being" is examined here.

Likewise, based on Wolfgang Held's book *All Is Number – What the Numbers Tell Us* (Verlag Freies Geistesleben, Stuttgart 2017), a connection is established between Mondrian's pictures and the secrets of numbers.

In the chapters "For the People of the Future" (parts 1 and 2), drawing on certain works by the artist, Mondrian's central dictum that "In composition the immutable (the spiritual) comes to expression through the straight line and the planes of non-colour (black, white, grey) while the mutable (the natural) is expressed in the colour planes and in rhythm" comes to the fore in a very clear, tangible and understandable way.

2.

The achievement of the author Elmar Schrepfer, in this follow-up book to his initial volume analysing a work by Piet Mondrian, is to have now encompassed this artist's whole creative endeavour and his underlying spiritual outlook. His approach and mode of description always keeps closely to each artwork itself, starting from observable

phenomena which he then elaborates in a sensitive and comprehensible way, thus leading readers into an active accompaniment and grasp of the contexts presented. The content of the book opens up completely new aspects of Piet Mondrian's creative work, especially his spiritual sources and their realisation in his whole oeuvre.

In a sense Michael Debus offers something like the answer to Mondrian that he never received from Steiner in response to his letter, explaining Steiner's Goethe-inspired science and showing its connections with Mondrian's theoretical remarks in his *Le Neo-Plasticisme*.

Gabriele Arndt expands on remarks relating to the mathematical structure of the compositions with an illustrative survey of the effect of colour fields, drawing here, once again, on Goethe's and Steiner's accounts of colour.

3.

This volume leads us in a unique way from single pictures to Piet Mondrian's whole oeuvre, artistic creativity and spiritual background. It is exemplary in its pursuit of a Goethean and phenomenological approach to uncovering the spiritual reality and content in Mondrian's works. It is a workbook in which the reading viewer and viewing reader is gradually led to inner self-activation and to an accompaniment of steps of developing insight. It is a milestone in cultural research.

Dr. med. Johannes Reiner
www.anthropych.de