THE PHOTOGRAPHIC APPLICATION OF PIET MONDRIAN'S NEO-PLASTIC PRINCIPLES

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For my parents.

ABSTRACT

Piet Mondrian created elemental geometric paintings that revolutionized the perception of art in the 20th century. Though non-figurative, these works were not abstract in the typical sense; his pure creations resulted from a series of self-imposed guidelines for creating non-representational art that was to be universally appreciated, and that could ultimately elevate the understanding of art—and life—for all humanity. Far-removed from photography and our conventional understanding of it as a representational medium, these Neo-Plastic paintings illustrate principles that, when diligently implemented by the photographer, can help re-order methods of creating and understanding the photographic image. Through intense scrutiny of Neo-Plastic theory, and its adaptation and application in photographic experiments, this project offers a new understanding of the medium's overlooked nature as an abstract means of pure creation.

PREFACE

"Beauty always justifies itself. Ultimately, that's all [something] has to have."
–Kurt Elling, Jazz Musician.

"All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth."
–Richard Avedon, Photographer.

To advance as an artistic medium photography must be freed from its characterization, by artists and viewers alike, as a craft suited only to represent what others have created. It must become an art that does not portray, but rather creates purely. Neo-Plastic photography is an approach to creation that will ultimately advance understanding of the medium.

Perhaps a good way to think of Neo-Plastic photography is "Painting with light." It's the difference between abstract representation and pure creation. It simply seeks to create an abstract beauty universally appreciable without relying on symbol or representation.

Mondrian's work is not abstraction. It is pure creation. The experimental photographs in this project are not intended to look like Mondrian's paintings. They are meant to further the cause of photography as a plastic medium. Photographing a real object in an abstract way—which begs the question, "What is it?"—is simply abstraction. Though the photograph may in fact be non-representational, it isn't necessarily a pure creation. It may achieve a look similar to a Mondrian painting, and may adhere to some of the tenets of his philosophy, but it is not Neo-Plastically purified. Pure refinement of Neo-Plasticism's universal ideal, and ultimately the achievement of pure creation through photography, is the principle pursuit of this project.

CHAPTER ONE: THE NEED FOR NEO-PLASTICISM

Through exploration of the abstract principles of modernist painter Piet Mondrian, this project will attempt to produce non-representational photographic art and in so doing free the medium from commonly held beliefs or misbeliefs regarding its facility. Its creative potential, as well as our understanding of it, may be redefined with a closer association to more typically plastic media.

The straight line and right angle of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism has the potential to be an ideal vehicle for a non-representational approach to photography because these visual structures accentuate the manmade and artist-made while de-emphasizing the idea of a photograph's particular subject. They signal creation over abstraction, the overriding feeling of looking at an image somehow removed from a subject rather than a primordial "subject" of its own. What these photographs will attempt to tell the viewer is that the creation of a pure and universal structure is a means to visual beauty, and that visual beauty is as noble a pursuit of truth in art as any other reason for its creation. Each resulting Neo-Plastic photograph strives therefore to be the sum of all that photography is: the contradictions of truth and falsity, pure creation and representation. These contrasts are the epitome of photography. The Neo-Plastic image should be about truth, as universal beauty, in the only actual important product of any photograph: the photograph itself.

I hope to further legitimize non-representational photography and cast it in a new light—one that gives it importance on the same level as other arts, while at the same time maintaining independence from them. The surface appearance and visual style of a photograph are the valuable and predominant means of content, and therefore a worthwhile fundamental pursuit. As these Neo-Plastic methods relate to style, they remove the importance from the subject as content and reframe it on surface appearance. In many ways, this is the photograph's essence. That is not to say that "technique" is vital to this new type of image making—the end result is paramount. What is critical is the

creation of a distinct visual style, a look, a physical result—the photograph. The symbolic object is nothing; the Neo-Plastic photograph has no need for symbolism.

The imitation of nature—which is prevalent in all forms of art, but nowhere more than photography—does not harness any medium's vast creative potential. Pure creation, although abstract, has the ability to represent the underlying and unifying structure common in all objects (i.e, nature). If done correctly, the process of creating what may appear to be content-less imagery may in fact exalt the natural world. "For in nature the surface of things is beautiful but its imitation is lifeless," wrote Piet Mondrian, defending his art against claims that it was removed from reality. "The objects give us everything, but their depiction gives us nothing" (Milner: 117). What is significant in the visual arts is not the representation of the particular, but the conveyance of feeling. In much the same way painting was revolutionized a century ago, when it was freed from reflecting the external world, contemporary photography may also be free from old perceptions and restrictions. Through constant evolution, all art can eventually be seen as it truly is: fundamentally unified. Mondrian and the artists of De Stijl believed that maintaining an antiquated belief system beyond its usefulness is more than shameful; it is criminal (Holtzman & James: 159).

Although they originated in painting, Mondrian believed that his Neo-Plastic principles were valid in all forms of art, even theater, music, and dance. "The new art is the determinate plastic expression of aesthetic relationships. Not every art can express determinate relationships with equal consistency. These possibilities must be discovered by each art within its own domain and remain limited by its bounds" (Holtzman & James: 29). This is Mondrian's invitation for photographers, and all artists, to follow where he led. Like many artists before and since, he worked within an understanding of the state of his contemporaries, and sought in his own particularly refined way what every artist seeks: "To express harmony through the equivalence of relationships of lines, colors, and planes." For him, however, it was to be "only in the clearest and strongest way" (Holtzman & James: 282). That is the foundation of Neo-Plasticism. Defining photography's own Neo-Plastic bounds is the goal of this research.

Mondrian felt that all art was fundamentally one. He was a forward-thinking philosopher who adjusted the same idea to differing circumstances throughout his career, and he dedicated his great essay, The New Plastic In Painting, "To the men of the future." He hoped that artists would eventually spread his ideas into every creative medium. Toward the end of his life, he even addressed the applicability of his ideas to photography.

> "I think one must not overlook the fact that the "artist," not the "means," creates the work of art. Certainly the means is highly important and closely tied to the plastic expression of a work, but it is the artist who essentially decides whether it is purely plastic and not imitative. Photography, however, seems to me rather more imitative than plastic in character. But it is difficult at present to predetermine the evolution of photography—indeed such great accomplishments have been realized in the realm of pure plastic that everything may also be expected of photography" (Holtzman & James: 216).

Though his belief system is heavily dealt with in the following pages, this project is *not* about Piet Mondrian. He developed a useful structure for artists to follow in order to better apply plastic (non-object-based) principles to their individual expressions. He called it Neo-Plasticism—it is simply an attempt at purified art through the elimination of subject in favor of geometric elements and primary colors, plus black and white. His thoughts act as a vehicle for achieving the freedom for plastic expression in photography. His principles provided hope 80 years ago, and they still do today. Not only is photography capable of pure, non-representational creation—it excels. Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism can provide it with focus.

The information used in developing this thesis comes from a number of sources—primarily personal experimentation and historical research in photography, painting and art theory. Although it was not undertaken with the idea of posing a single question and ultimately finding an answer of mathematical certainty, several authorities on the subjects of photography and non-representational art will be cited, as will many photographs of

historical and contemporary pertinence. These references will provide reasonable academic "proof" that this plastic photographic niche has yet to be fully understood, and that this project offers a unique contribution to photographic discourse and the understanding of the philosophy of contemporary non-representational photography.

How and Why

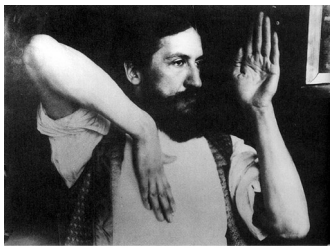
In developing a non-representational method of creation, further distance is put between photography and its use as a tool of derivative artful recreation. Even beyond a photographer's unique way of seeing, which is the most special aspect of photography, the ability to understand a photograph as an original creation is important—photographs need not be derivative. When facing an abstract Mondrian painting, the audience accepts it as a painting and doesn't feel compelled to question its visible physical debtors. Photography, even when it is abstract, is consistently burdened by a simple, yet particularly telling, question: What is it? The chosen language indicates society's visual system of understanding; a painting just is, but a photograph is "of" something. For example, a typical architectural photograph, though it may possess a look reminiscent of a Mondrian painting, is neither plastic nor a pure creation. The structure itself may be Neo-Plastic, and it is certainly the creation—the photograph is simply a reproduction. Neo-Plastic photographs should not be seen as windows or mirrors to look through—they are surfaces to look at. That idea is central to understanding Neo-Plastic thinking, for both the artist and viewer. Neo-Plastic photographs do not seek surrogate status—to replace our ability to experience the world. They lead the way in aiding us to understand what we see.

Neo-Plastic photography, like Mondrian's non-representational paintings, reflects the influence of the "art for art's sake" inspiration. Neo-Plasticism is the simultaneous commingling of form and content. This presents the next, and most principle, question: how does an artist make a pure, non-representational creation in a medium designed to reproduce reality with unwavering precision? This project takes on that challenge and will attempt to unequivocally answer it.

CHAPTER TWO: MONDRIAN AND DE STIJL

Mondrian

Piet Mondrian (Plates 1 & 2) was born March 7, 1872, in Amersfoort, The Netherlands. Upon completing school, in 1886 he began a period of self-training as an artist. He received some guidance from his father, as well as his uncle, the painter Frits Mondriaan. Early in his career, he was certified to teach drawing in primary and secondary schools, and continued his education at the National Academy of Art. Although his work would eventually evolve into purified geometric color compositions, his ability enabled him to paint and draw in almost any style of his choosing. In fact, though his heart remained wholly with Neo-Plastic pursuits, he earned an income throughout his life by selling impressionist-style flower paintings.



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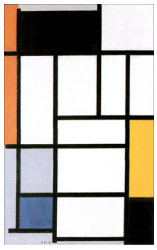
Mondrian's first exhibition was in 1909, with fellow luminist Dutch painters. Around this time, he joined the Theosophical Society, which influenced his approach to painting. "[Theosophists] envisaged a divine motivating force pervading the entire universe, including therefore all space and matter. By means of consciousness and will, humanity had the potential for increased spiritual awareness and development" (Milner: 50). His naturalist paintings would evolve over the next few years, until 1912, when he moved to Paris to pursue further abstraction and eventually the creation of a pure plastic reality in his work.

In 1916, along with Theo van Doesburg and other abstract painters and architects, Mondrian formed the group De Stijl (The Style). They published a magazine of the same name in which Mondrian included his essays on "The New Plastic Art in Painting." At this time, his paintings evolved into the completely abstract compositions that are now

most closely associated with the painter's style. (Plates 3-7). His style evolved over the next three decades, and he spent much of that time creating geometric compositions in only red, yellow, blue, black, and white. Mondrian so firmly believed in his theories and their foundation in the straight line and right angle that he resigned from De Stijl in 1925 when van Doesburg introduced the diagonal line into his paintings.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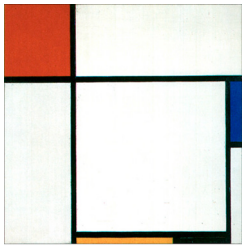
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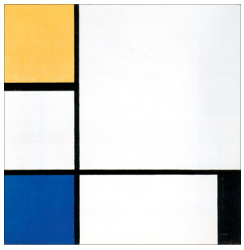
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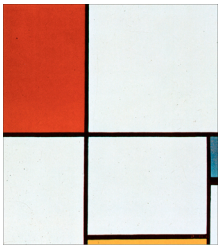
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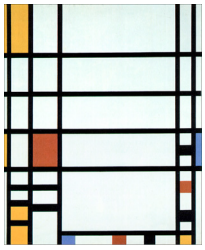
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He continued the prolific publication of his writings throughout his life, often displaying his ideas as much through words as paint. According to Mondrian scholar John Milner, his writing was as important as his paintings. "This enigmatic and impressive man was a philosopher who painted and a painter given to philosophical thought. His influence lay in his thought and the example that his paintings provided" (Milner: 7). Throughout his career, he would associate with other groups such as Cercle et Carre, but ultimately he stood alone in devout adherence to his Neo-Plastic views. He was sure enough of his style that in letters he referred to his paintings as the consequence of all past art (Milner: 109).

He moved to New York to avoid World War II, and was entranced by modern metropolitan life. In his work as in his personal life, man's domination over nature had a powerful attraction for Mondrian. This fascination may have stemmed from a youth spent in The Netherlands (Plate 8), where manmade windmills and dikes turned a water-saturated landscape into farmable, livable earth. The rhythm of the metropolis represented the practical manifestation of his painted world. His work was changed, and he painted the city, "relinquishing the recording of detail for the embodiment of energy" (Milner: 211).


8.

Mondrian's first one-man show was held in 1942, only two years before his death. He contracted pneumonia and died at the age of 71 on February 1, 1944, at New York's Murray Hill Hospital.

Mondrian's Painting Style

Mondrian's Neo-Plastic style finds its impact in sensation rather than logical perception. The simple appearance disguises a wealth of creative thought as revolutionary as perspective in the Renaissance, but individualized in a single artist rather than developed over generations. His approach to painting remains a unique and vital step in the evolution of modern art. Historian H.H. Arnason:

> "The presence and inspiration of Mondrian, more than that of any other single person, enabled abstraction to survive and gradually gain strength. When one examines the more recent tendencies in American abstract painting—hard edge abstraction, op art, color field painting—in almost every case a line may be traced to Mondrian. His impact on the course of twentieth century art may even transcend that of Picasso, Braque or Matisse" (Arnason: 335; Figure 1).

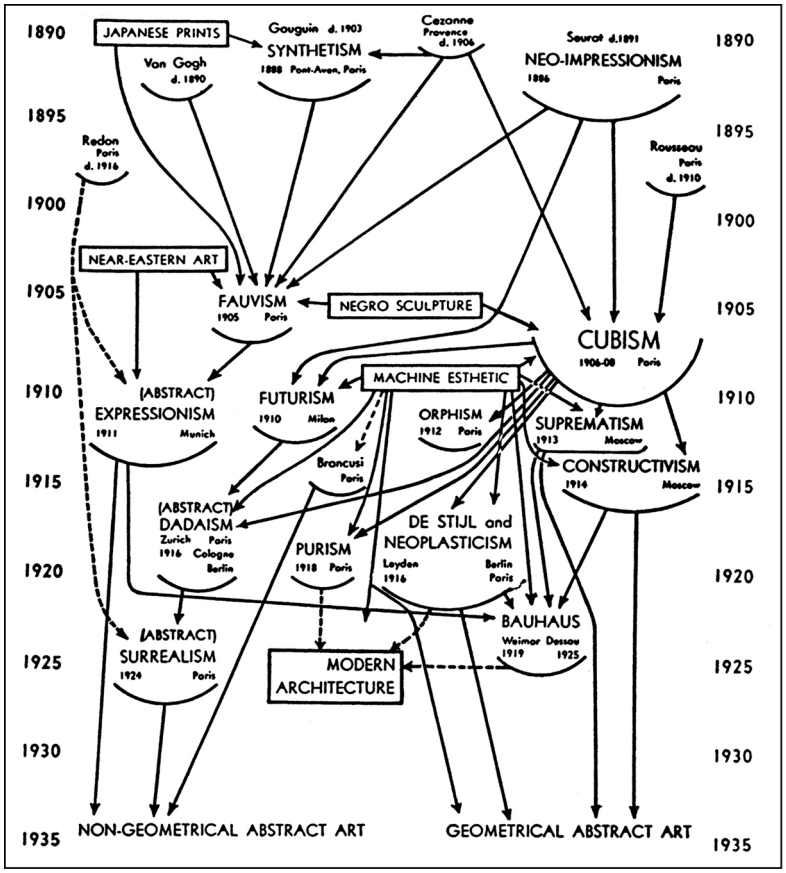
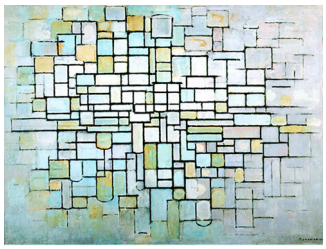


Fig. 1 ALFRED H. BARR'S *Chart Of Modern Art*, 1936.

He found inspiration in a number of areas, but none seems greater than his efforts to change the world: "By rising above the particular (i.e., representational art) to the general (i.e., abstract art), humanity could achieve a new metaphysical synthesis" (Grauer). In his work, as well as his life, he sought to abolish disequilibrium in search of pure harmony. "Since he believed that [the disequilibrium that exists between the individual and the universal] originated in a false perception of reality, he proposed a visual universe that should educate the new society to see according to a purely plastic and rationally demonstrable theme, so that experience thus visualized should be the style and rational norm of behavior" (Tomassoni: 9).

His early work reflects the inspiration of Cubism in his relinquishing of detail in favor of rhythm and the negation of perspective. (Plates 9 & 10). He saw Cubism as "the destruction of the naturalistic and the mimetic" (Holtzman: 8). He believed, however, that

the Cubists did not carry their style to its logical conclusion, and so he sought to evolve the style in search of a universally understood result. By systematically dividing the picture plane, Mondrian eliminated form and any recognizable representation of reality in an attempt to represent the universal structure of life. “To approach the spiritual in art, one must make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual. Thus the use of elementary forms is logically accounted for.…Art should be above reality, otherwise it would have no value for man” (Tomassoni: 19).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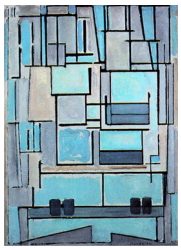
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The Philosophy That Led To Neo-Plasticism

“Mondrian’s plastic language is a result of his conviction that truth is not to be sought in appearances, but is hidden beneath the illusory qualities of the sensible world,” wrote art historian Italo Tomassoni (31). In De Stijl, Mondrian was provided a vehicle for dispensing his radical new plastic painting views, and he was afforded an environment that nurtured those theories—his fellow artists shared in his quest for pure creation. The group was one of the most intensively theoretical of the abstract art movements. Its aim was “to make the whole of life into a complete aesthetic action” (Tomassoni: 8). The harsh realities of life in wartime Europe must have made abstraction and idealism very appealing. As Mondrian wrote in 1941: “If we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision” (Holtzman & James: 341).

De Stijl outlined steps to be taken in order to free all of life, not only artists, from the oppressive nature of industrial modern life. When viewed with the benefit of historical perspective, their words appear very politicized, yet in their time they focused little on political ideals and more on the fundamental benefit for all humanity. Printed in the November 1918 issue of De Stijl’s journal, the group’s manifesto offers eloquent insight into their motives:

1. There is an old and there is a new consciousness. The old centers on the individual. The new centers on the universal. The struggle between individual and universal is manifested in the world war, as well as in contemporary art.
2. The war is destroying the old world and its content: domination by the individual in every area.
3. The new art has asserted the content of the new consciousness: individual-universal equilibrium.
4. The new consciousness is ready to be realized in every area, including material life.
5. This realization is obstructed by tradition, dogma, and domination by the individual (the natural).
6. Therefore the founders of the new art call on all who believe in the renewal of art and culture to annihilate these obstacles—just as in the new art, by abolishing naturalistic form, they annihilated whatever obstructs pure aesthetic expression, the ultimate consequence of all art.
7. Driven by the same consciousness, contemporary artists throughout the world have united in a world war against the dominance of the individual and of the arbitrary. They are therefore in accord with all who are working, spiritually or materially, to create international unity in Life, Art, and Culture (Holtzman & James: 23).

Much of Mondrian's De Stijl can be distilled to a simple pursuit: the quest for truth. His painting style manifested that higher quest as a search for beauty through pure creation expressed in equilibrium, and therefore in universal form. "Beauty is truth aesthetically subjectively perceived" (Holtzman & James: 51). He considered beauty in art a substitute for the lack of beauty in life. That artistic beauty would eventually translate into real life, at which time men could live a truly harmonious existence. To that end, art for Mondrian was like religion, leading the way for life: "Art advances where religion once led" (Holtzman & James: 169). He believed that, much like religion, art was a means for revolution—and that it would supplant religion in modern society. He was painting

toward Utopia, and believed that his work was for the good of mankind—a "model for human harmony" (Milner: 210). Some historians even elevate him to a divine standing, such as Daniel Herwitz wrote in Making Theory, Constructing Art: "Mondrian's example, much like Plato's and Christ's, is belief in the world-transforming power of ideas: he is a Platonist" (Grauer).

There is a fine line between universal and generic, and it is sometimes misunderstood. To the layperson, Mondrian's paintings may appear generic, but they disguise a great amount of preparation behind each brush stroke. He refined his "representations" of reality to their essence, so in that sense they are philosophical abstractions, but not physical abstractions. His work is simple, because by being so it remains universal. As John Milner wrote about the deceptive theoretical depth behind each of Mondrian's paintings, "Simplicity contains diversity, just as silence contains sounds and eternity contains time" (Milner: 130). Mondrian's work is a study in subtlety.

Many critics and historians have misinterpreted his compositions as cold and unfeeling, having nothing to do with reality or the natural world. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Mondrian's first love was nature, and he chose to express that reverence in a universal manner. Fundamentally, he felt that no realistic painting could ever reproduce the glory that exists in nature, and he believed it was sacrilegious to try. "No art has ever been able to express the power and grandeur of nature by imitation: all true art has made the universal more dominant than it appears to the eye in nature" (Holtzman: 8). He felt much the same way as sixteenth-century Dutch reformers who found statues of saints to be a desecration of God's absolute majesty (Jaffe: 41). As Mondrian wrote in one of his sketchbooks, "In nature the surface of things is beautiful but its imitation is lifeless. The objects give us everything, but their depiction gives us nothing" (James: 16-17). "Man does not need perfect nature in art, precisely because nature is so perfect" (Holtzman & James: 92).

Philosophy's Physical Manifestation In Painting

Neo-Plasticism is Mondrian's name for a new plastic style of painting that may be universally understood, unlike the reproduction of reality. By plastic, he is referring to an entirely malleable, synthetic form that he creates in and through his paintings. The extent to which he aggressively enforced the rigid and inflexible rules of his "plastic" style is truly ironic.

> "The universal is plastically expressed as the absolute—in line by straightness, in color by planarity and purity, and in relationships by equilibrium—it is revealed in nature only as a tendency toward the absolute—a tendency toward the straight, the plane, the pure, the equilibrated: through tension of form (line), planarity, intensity, purity of natural color and natural harmony" (Holtzman & James: 32).

In truth, however, his new plastic is devoid of form, and is simply a division of the plane in a particular, plastic manner. There are several primary tenets that make up his thoughtful application of paint to canvas: straight lines, right angles, abstract colors, acknowledging the medium, and continuation beyond the frame. He refined his style to this simple approach in order to make his expression most universal.

> "I construct complexes of lines and colors on a flat plane so as to plastically express universal beauty—as consciously as possible. Nature (or the visible) inspires me, arousing in me the emotion that stimulates creation, no less than with any other painter, but I want to approach truth as closely as possible; I therefore abstract everything until I attain the essential of things (though still in their outward essential!). I am convinced that, precisely by not trying to express anything determinate, one expresses what is most determinate: truth (the all-embracing)" (James: 14-15).

It took Mondrian many years to develop and fully realize his Neo-Plastic style. Prior to his period as a Cubist, he painted realistically—in the tradition of the Old Masters.

Through his almost constant evolution, he finally arrived at a method of painting in which all remnants of visual reality are abolished.

> "In my early pictures space was still a background. I began to determine forms: verticals and horizontals became rectangles. They still appeared as detached forms against a background; their color was still impure. Feeling the lack of unity I brought the rectangles together; space became white, black or gray; form became red, blue or yellow. Uniting the rectangles was equivalent to continuing the verticals and horizontals of the former period over the entire composition. It was evident that rectangles, like all particular forms, obtrude themselves and must be neutralized through the composition. In fact, rectangles are never an aim in themselves, but a logical consequence of their determining lines that are continuous in space; they appear spontaneously through the crossing of vertical and horizontal lines. Moreover, when rectangles are used alone without any other forms, they never appear as particular forms, because it is contrast to other forms that occasion particular distinction. Later, in order to abolish the manifestation of planes as rectangles, I reduced my color, and accentuated the limiting lines, crossing the one over the other. Thus the planes were not only cut and abolished, but their relations became more active. The result was a far more dynamic expression. Here again I tested the value of the destroying of particularities of form, thus opening the way to a more universal construction" (Tomassoni: 46).

Upon breaking with De Stijl, Mondrian published a manifesto of his own, outlining his methodology with six laws that determine the Neo-Plastic means and how they are used.

1. The plastic means must be the rectangular plane or prism in primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) and in noncolor (white, black, and gray). In architecture, empty space can be counted as noncolor, denaturalized material as color.
2. Equivalence in the dimension and color of the plastic means is necessary. Although varying in dimension and color, the plastic means will nevertheless

have an equal value. Generally, equilibrium implies a large area of noncolor or empty space opposed to a comparatively small area of color or material.

3. Just as dual opposition is required in the plastic means, it is also required in the composition.
4. Constant equilibrium is achieved by the relationship of position and is expressed by the straight line (boundary of the pure plastic means) in its principal, perpendicular, opposition.
5. Equilibrium that neutralizes and annihilates the plastic means is achieved through the relationships of proportion in which they are placed and which create vital rhythm.
6. Naturalistic repetition, symmetry, must be excluded (Holtzman & James: 209).

These rules are the answer to the question "Why?" so often posed by viewers unfamiliar with Mondrian's work. Whether they are taken as scripture or inconsequential justification of his simplistic painting style, they form a distinct foundation for constructing a unique type of abstract creation—one that is no abstraction of visible reality, yet contributes to our understanding of the world. They are a legitimate method of achieving pure creation and harmonic equilibrium in the visual picture plane.

The straight line, opposed at right angles, becomes what Mondrian referred to as a dynamic equilibrium. It symbolizes every other physical relationship: "This relation of position is the most equilibrated, as it expresses the relation of one extreme to the other in absolute harmony, comprising all other relations." In fact, the group De Stijl was originally to be called The Straight Line because it stood for clarity, certainty, and order. (Tomassoni: 38). He believed that curved lines represented the closed and the limitation of time and space, whereas straight lines were the plastic expression of extremes—speed, power, and space. Drawing back to his Theosophist days, Mondrian also recalled the right angle's resulting rectangular shape represented the world as unity, and a balance between man and nature. The horizontal line represents the landscape, whereas the

vertical represents the figure; the two literal and figurative forms that all of Mondrian's work sought to harmonize.

This dynamic equilibrium is most fundamental to Mondrian's vision of the Neo-Plastic style: "Equilibrium is a law of nature: by its very nature it is truth; all material manifestations of equilibrium are therefore inherently beautiful. If man seeks equilibrium alone, his products will automatically be beautiful" (Holtzman & James: 102). And if man's products are beautiful (i.e., equilibrated), then they are truth.

As part of his turning away from representing the outwardly visible properties of nature, Mondrian refined his palette to only include black and white, plus three colors at their purest—red, yellow, and blue. He determined that these colors, at their purest, are most impossible to find in nature. He felt that, much like reality, he would be unable to reproduce color accurately on a canvas. He believed, as abstract-realist painter Paul Cezanne wrote, that color and its relationship to line determine beauty—not the objects being represented (Holtzman & James: 63).

Perhaps his most wide-reaching and profound physical painting theory was that of acknowledging the medium's plane—the controlled, abstract organization of picture space. He believed that because he worked with the two-dimensional medium of paint, any attempt to reconstruct a version of three-dimensional reality would be futile. It was a somewhat difficult position: "The implied goal is a space which is both determined (concrete) and unlimited. The more neutral the plastic means are, the more the unchangeable expression of reality can be established" (Grauer). Consequently, he sought to remove any illusion of depth from his work, and to simply divide the plane using his newfound plastic forms for composition. By dividing the frame into a composition of line and color, he abolished form in its normal sense, and therefore banished the illusion of depth from his canvases. He eliminated entirely the concept of figure and ground. His works became "a conscious recognition of the painting as a flat surface" (Milner: 144).

Beyond simply recognizing his painting surface, he saw it as but a part of a more unified whole continued beyond the boundaries of the frame. In the sense that a canvas is too limiting to contain such lofty ambitions, he was careful to purposely maintain open edges (as well as to hang his paintings without traditional frames) to imply that each work continued infinitely beyond what his physical canvas could reveal. It was as if each painting was but a detail of a larger structure; that if many Mondrians were hung together, like a giant puzzle they would form a single, larger Neo-Plastic composition. That whole construction, too, would remain open-edged, and again imply a universal structure that proliferates beyond its edges. The Mondrian-esque structure could continue infinitely throughout the universe. As Victor Grauer wrote in the art review *Critical Review*, "the total design, thoroughly noncentric, does not form a gestalt, but remains open to the space around it."

Attacking The New Plastic

Mondrian's Neo-Plastic paintings are not to be confused with simply decorative art—they carry the weight of extensive theory. Without such philosophical roots, these simple paintings wouldn't have the long-lasting artistic value they do. There is an appreciation that goes far beyond surface beauty, which is ironic because the surface is the end-all be-all of actual creation, as each of Mondrian's theories supports. Knowledge of the artist's inspiration in unnecessary for the appreciation of his work—the attraction to the visual image is justification enough to find beauty, and therefore value, in a painting. Being privy to the artist's intentions simply elevates our ability to appreciate the full complexity of his works guised in simple lines and colors.

Because of the prevalence of Mondrian's writings, and their impact on the contemporary artistic community, some critics have complained that his work—or any abstract creation that the artist is compelled to write about—is too cerebral. Writing in defense of this, photographer Robert Adams disagrees:

> "The main reason that artists don't willingly describe or explain what they produce is, however, that the minute they do so they've admitted failure. Words

> are proof that the vision they had is not, in the opinion of some at least, fully there in the picture. Characterizing in words what they thought they'd shown is an acknowledgment that the photograph is unclear, that it is not art. Of course, if you believe in the merit of your work you reject the accusation of failure that is implied by request to explain it. In this respect all artists are elitists. They are convinced that some viewers lack patience to see what is clear" ("Beauty": 33).

In some ways, the complaint Adams writes of does have merit: a work of art *should* be able to stand alone, without the need for extraneous information to appreciate the visual creation. That is the case with Mondrian's art. Due to its simple beauty, it may be universally appreciated on the visual level alone. A historical critical perspective may enhance a work's poignancy, but the universal beauty remains. Mondrian cites the 17th century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza, who came to Mondrian's defense two-hundred years before his birth, in an early essay on Neo-Plasticism: "Truth reveals itself," said Spinoza, "but knowledge of truth can be speeded and strengthened through the word. That is why the contemporary artist gives explanations about his work, but not of it. Explanation about plastic expression indirectly makes it more profound and more precise" (Holtzman & James: 41).

On first glance at such simple works, many viewers would no doubt argue that Mondrian's beliefs had nothing to do with his paintings. On seeing his vast catalog of grid paintings they would claim that he painted by formula, and that his work was devoid of feeling. "I am against discipline!" he asserted. "I am for necessity!" (Holtzman: 6). According to his friend and colleague Harry Holtzman, "He meant that the passionate refinement of his expression was not the result of an idea of superficially imposed perfection or formula, but was based upon direct perception, the need for unequivocal clarity, unequivocal structure, plastic perception, unity, wholeness, internal consistency" (Holtzman: 6). He did not force it; Mondrian fully lived his philosophy in every aspect of life, and shared his thoughts through his words as well as his paintings.

A third criticism of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic simplicity is that it is too plain, and it all looks uninspiredly similar. These critics, however, misinterpret the universal as the generic. "But won't such abstracting and transformed composition make everything look alike?" Mondrian posed this skeptical question in *Dialogue on the New Plastic*. "That is a necessity rather than a hindrance, if we wish to express plastically what all things have in common instead of what sets them apart. Thus the particular, which diverts us from what is essential, disappears: only the universal remains" (Holtzman & James: 77). So a truly beautiful creation must be universal in construction—whether a photograph, painting, or sculpture. "Beauty," observed Alfred Stieglitz, "is the universal seen" (Adams, "Beauty": 36).

In the book Photographs, Emmet Gowin quotes abstract photographer Frederick Sommer: "A straight line can be as alive as the wildest arabesque or tender embrace; it is a question of who tensions that straight line. Mondrian is as organic as Gaudi, both are very close to life." As an educated viewer of many of Mondrian's paintings, it is often easy to spot a novice attempt at imitating his Neo-Plastic style. Mondrian's paintings have a unique vibrancy, and they express a tangible visual equilibrium that no disinvolved knock-off could embody.

The most persistent challenge to Mondrian's art, and much abstract creation in general, is voiced by many amateur critics. "I could have done that!" Perhaps…but as the oldest defense argues, you didn't. What is Mondrian's reply to this shallow accusation? "Complexity needs to be perfected: simplicity is man's perfect state" (Holtzman & James: 256). Thus, the simplest refinements of form, line, and color are used to represent universal beauty, in the painting as well as the photograph.

CHAPTER THREE: PHOTOGRAPHY

The Traditional Understanding Of Photography

One of the most significant differences between a painting and a photograph is that the former is characteristically perceived as a thing in itself rather than, like the latter, as an image of something else. Although many photographs are abstracted from their subject matter, they usually remain images of things that exist. As we understand them, any lofty ideal of content is based on the physicality of the depicted subject, rather than any intangible "high art" concept that painting is allowed. Stephen Shore illustrates the common perceptual separation of method and content in the description of his book, The Nature of Photographs. He explains that the book's aim "is not to explore photographic content, but to describe the physical and formal attributes of a photographic print that form the tools a photographer uses to define and interpret that content" (3). In fact, those physical and formal attributes *are* the content.

> "The invention of photography provided a really new picture-making process—a process based not on synthesis but on selection. The difference was a basic one. Paintings were made—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were taken" (Zubrick). So wrote John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "The difference raised a creative issue of a new order: how could this mechanical and mindless process produce pictures meaningful in human terms—pictures with clarity and coherence and a point of view? It was soon demonstrated that an answer would not be found by those who loved too much the old forms, for in large part the photographer was bereft of the old artistic traditions. Speaking of photography Baudelaire said: 'This industry, by invading the territories of art, has become art's most mortal enemy.' And in his own terms of reference, Baudelaire was half-right; certainly the new medium could not satisfy old standards. The photographer must find new ways to make his meaning clear" (Zubrick).

Upon its invention, photography was principally used to produce an exact copy of a visible reality, as evidenced by early portraits and landscapes. From its foundations as a duplicator of reality, photography's abilities have expanded, but in many ways our understanding of it has not. All too often, it is still seen as an uninflected record of factual information. "Photography itself," wrote Weston Naef, historian and photography curator at the J. Paul Getty museum, "is usually thought of as the least plastic, least malleable medium, open to few interventions by the artist" (Naef, Moholy-Nagy: 103). Although digital technologies are continually challenging that idea, it may be argued that they also fundamentally change the process of photography. Traditional dogma, however, may prove Naef's comments true prior to the computer's introduction.

Photography is grounded in an inherent usefulness, an ability that no other medium has: to precisely record a moment in time as truth. That gift is utilized in journalism and commercial photography to realistically depict the outward appearance of any given object. Critic John Reader, in writing about a photographic book depicting the African continent's culture, illustrates common beliefs about the medium that existed even at the dawn of this new century. This narrow view has unfortunately become the standard:

> "The camera seduces but rarely delivers more than a souvenir of the passing moment. Few photographs transcend the mere craft of their production in the way that a painting, an etching or a sketch can offer such enduring satisfaction that it deserves to hang on the wall, where the innate spark of a vision skillfully expressed will be encountered anew, time and time again. The value—even the validity—of a photograph is determined by its subject matter. Photography is first and foremost a recording medium, with a reputation for producing accurate representations of reality" (Reader: 1).

Art, in many ways, does not share this easily quantifiable day-to-day function, and it does not need to be true. When photography is brought into the realm of art, its function changes, and artists may capitalize on the public's existing understanding of the medium. "At their worst, photographs are true. The most interesting artists working in photography

today have carefully avoided the pregnant moment, the captive instant, the true. Even some photographers working in a documentary tradition are careful to let us know that theirs is a relative point of view, unless what they are framing is so terrible that the photograph becomes unquestionable as truth—nothing less than every viewer's own big, staring eye, forced unequivocally to witness" (Hirsch: 26).

Many artists, however, do claim that photography is inherently abstract, that it cannot remain precisely factual. A black and white photograph, for example, eliminates all color from a scene, resulting in a unique, and somewhat misleading, interpretation of the captured moment. Even by simply selecting a composition, it may be argued, photographers automatically lie by eliminating some information from the viewfinder that would have been received if the viewing public were actually present at the image's creation. As street photographer Garry Winogrand wrote, "The photograph isn't what was photographed. It's something else. It's a new fact" (Fraenkel Gallery: 12). This idea becomes especially valuable for interpreting the success of a non-representational image as well as defining photographic abstraction.

The Physical Nature Of Photography

Every unique facet of photography is amplified and scrutinized when an attempt is made to redefine the medium's capacity. Instead of using technical trickery to modify an image to render it painterly or abstract, the Neo-Plastic approach challenges the very foundations of photography, beginning with an understanding of the inherent differences between photographic perception and all other modes of visual understanding. Photographer Stephen Shore identifies "four central ways in which the world in front of the camera is transformed into the photograph: flatness, frame, time, and focus. They define the picture's depictive content and structure. They form the basis of a photograph's visual grammar" (17). A more complete understanding of the physical properties that dominate the medium is necessary to fully utilize the Neo-Plastic method.

1. Photography is absolutely dependent upon light interacting with real objects. Unlike the plastic medium of paint, with which artists may from a blank canvas construct any

reality within their creative and technical abilities. Art Scholar Andreas Fiedler: “Unlike the other fine arts, analogue (sic) photography cannot find an alternative to reproduction. The technical possibilities of digitization would allow it to produce images in the phenomenological code of photography, without any outside reference, without an existing reality” (Fiedler: 46). Reinhold Meiselbeck, head of the Department of Photography at The Museum Ludwig Cologne, interprets this restriction differently. “Strictly speaking, we basically do not see actual objects themselves, only the diffraction of visible light waves around these objects,” he says. “Thus photography quite logically does not show the object, but its effects on light” (Museum Ludwig Cologne: 69).

2. Abstraction of a real-world image is possible, but its pure creation on film is not. To photograph the Eiffel Tower, one must go to Paris and train a camera and lens on the structure itself. To create an abstract image, a photographer in Paris may utilize the intricate physicalities of the Tower. If a photographer creates a solid rust-colored negative by photographing only a portion of the Tower’s supports, is it pure creation?

3. Photographers may not completely control the colors before the camera lens. Upon photographing a blue sky, the photographer has chosen his palette. Only through manipulation of that image can he alter how the blue sky is portrayed. He can alter the reality by rendering the sky differently through film and equipment selection, filtration, or digital manipulation, but his scene choices are always limited by visible reality.

4. In the natural world, as well as in our modernized industrial world, organic shapes abound. For a Neo-Plasticist, these are not a part of the palette. Straight lines and right angles are also found in nature—and in abundance in manmade environs—but they do not exist as the sole subjects for a plastic pursuit. For this reason, as much as any other, it would be hard to accidentally turn a camera on a naturally occurring scene reminiscent of a Mondrian painting. “The straight line is the mark of man and his work,” wrote Mondrian, “in contrast to the curved, moving line that is characteristic of nature, of organic growth” (Jaffe: 48).

5. With a single camera and lens able to capture images in a split second, the photographic medium is limited to documenting a single moment in time, from a lone fixed perspective. Cubist painters had the freedom to paint their interpretation of what the human eye actually finds when looking at a scene. We move through time and space, and utilize what in camera terms would be multiple exposures to establish a visible understanding of a scene. Perspectives change with our movements, and our minds use this information when comprehending a visible image. The fact that perspective even exists in a photograph is another obstacle in the way of attaining pure Neo-Plastic creation.

6. Photographers often refer to individual photographs as frames. The view through a lens eliminates peripheral vision, and concentrates our attention on a composition *contained* within the camera's frame. Viewers are not trained to consider any reality that exists beyond the photograph's borders—we assume that this is what the photographer wanted us to see, and each frame becomes its own self-contained, autonomous reality. As if we are looking through a window, we are provided a limited view.

7. Photographs often represent three-dimensional scenes. The photographer may desire false depth, but a camera and lens actually compress a scene and deliver a purely two-dimensional product. Any attempt to portray a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface is futile, just as Mondrian proved in painting.

8. There are "rules" for "good" two-dimensional composition, which all pertain to acknowledging the two-dimensional nature of the medium. Robert Adams places the utmost importance on graphic composition in his photographs: "The structure of an entire picture can suggest that form is beauty" (Adams, "Beauty": 32). Not intended to be followed at all times, compositional rules were developed to help novices understand successful methods for creating pleasing photographs. (Actually, they were reverse-engineered by scrutinizing the elements of successful photography.) Guidelines such as leading lines, the S-curve, and the rule of thirds act as basic principles for composition. These diagonals and curving lines are eliminated from Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, yet he

uses his own graphically oriented guidelines in a similar manner to create visually pleasing works.

It is significant that the rules of photographic composition have strong ties to Mondrian's "rules" for constructing a plastic image. Mondrian sought to eliminate symmetry from his compositions, as do photographic guidelines such as the rule of thirds. (This rule places important elements within the frame at any of the four points created by dividing the picture plane with two equidistant vertical and two equidistant horizontal lines.) And much as Mondrian valued acknowledging the plane, so do photographic rules stress the importance of compositional objects as they relate to each other in two dimensions. Photographic compositional guidelines all pertain to the illusion of depth and the treatment of background space relative to the foreground. They help neophyte photographers to "see as the camera sees," rather than the way our eyes work: in conjunction with our brains to fill in gaps in perception to create in our minds' eye an artificial three-dimensional reality that includes an effective illusion of depth. These compositional rules acknowledge the futility of arranging three-dimensional objects when attempting realistic duplication in a two-dimensional plane, and place the photograph's vital nature on creating a visually pleasing non-subject-based, non-representational two-dimensional image.

The Philosophy Of Photography

Equally important to the quest for Neo-Plasticism as the understanding of photography's physical characteristics is an understanding of its philosophy. The medium's complex physical nature has shaped how photographs are perceived as much as how they are constructed. "Since the photographer's picture was not conceived but selected, his subject was never truly discrete, never wholly self-contained. The edges of his film demarcated what he thought most important, but the subject he had shot was something else; it had extended in four directions" (Zubrick).

Photographers commonly construct photographs that deal with the idea of the known versus the unknown—making the familiar unfamiliar, and vice versa. What to a

contemporary urban viewer may be a beautiful portrait may appear as only a flat image composition of lines, shapes, and colors to primitive man unfamiliar with a photographic reality. The viewer is conditioned to see photographs as containing subjects, rather than as photographs alone. That's very unlike the way we see paintings, noting the brushstrokes and subtle color selections and the very particular way a subject is portrayed by an artist. Even a traditional real-world subject in paint becomes, to the viewer, an exploration into the artists' method of re-creating rather than reproducing the object.

This subject-based way of seeing stems from our societal belief in and use of photography as evidence; a medium designed to report facts. Even when a photograph is artistic, it is still seen as a scientifically accurate form of evidence. "Certainly photography, in the way that it captures, however illusionistically, the outside world, has represented a useful and flexible tool by which artists have investigated the link between art and science" (Brumer: 11). To many viewers, there is a "provable" nature to photography that exists in no other art. But which came first, our perception of the photograph as truth or its implementation in that manner? "The enormous growth and use of photographs in the twentieth century in magazines, newspapers, books, family albums, etc.," wrote Jeffrey Hoone, director of the photography organization Light Work, "firmly established that photographs were genuinely believable slices of reality" (208).

The recent rise of digital media has not only affected the way photographs are made and disseminated, but the way in which they are understood. Presently, much controversy exists regarding the ethics of digitally manipulating "true" news photographs. Perhaps when we come to understand photographs as not being inherently true—because of, among other things, ever-present darkroom adjustments—digital manipulation will find its way into more and more photographs, regardless of their function. Thus the manner in which viewers perceive photography will be naturally and eventually altered. This is not a contention that digital alteration should be acceptable in news photographs, because the audience is in search of whatever amount of truth can be culled from the photojournalistic image. This is simply a hypothesis of the possible effect of digital manipulation's prevalence on future photographic understanding.

Mondrian's Neo-Plastic painting theories also share with news photography the intention of a benefit for mankind. Mondrian was painting us into utopia (in his mind, anyway)—certainly a noble goal. In actuality, his paintings were considered useless to many, except as ornamental decoration. Although photographs may not lead us to paradise on earth, they are constantly put to work for the good of humanity. Whether photography's results are purely positive is beyond the scope of this project, but the idea of news photographs arising from an intent to serve society is unarguable. The original goal was to show the audience things it was not witness to—uncharted regions of the globe, major news events, as well as personalities in the public eye—in an effort to substitute for reality. Though the approaches could not be more dissimilar, much photojournalism and Mondrian's Neo-Plastic painting share the unified intent of social benefit. Whereas all art may be argued to benefit society in one way or another, the argument here is with regard to intentions, and such generalization does not hold up to much artistic endeavor.

Photography and painting are vastly different, however, in the way each artist considers his subject. In painting, the artist may create a reproduction of a real object, or a fantasy creation of an unreal world or intangible subject. In photography, the fictional aspect of "making up" a non-naturally-occurring situation can be considered abstraction—of image content, not physical imagery. Fictionalized photographed situations—such as Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills (Plate 38)—are abstract *in the realm of photography* because they challenge the fundamental idea that a photograph automatically depicts truth. In fact, the medium represents *a* truth, just as painting does. Edward Weston referred to this semi-factual style as "a condition of the moment" (Aperture: 42). Claiming that photography must represent reality is as ridiculous as it would be to claim that painting *cannot* represent reality. A painting certainly can depict more than paint! The ideas are similar; in photography the silver and light are like the oil and canvas.

38.

Photography has long struggled to overcome the stigma that it isn't art—and for some people, it still has a long way to go. My wife, an elementary schoolteacher, asked her third grade students, "What is art?" The discussion was broad and wide ranging. The children often asserted that a photograph was not art because the photographer didn't create what was in the picture; he just pushed the button. All too many adults also share this view. Consequently some photographers, the author included, have struggled with coming to terms with this idea. In this case, it led directly to the pursuit of this project. But that boorish thought is a misinterpretation of what is most special about the art of photography. Prefacing the creation of even the most "normal" photograph is the act of seeing. Photography is "concretized seeing" (Coleman, "Directorial Mode": 249). As Edward Sommer said, "It's really of very small consequence whether you press the button or not" (Glenn & Bledsoe: 13). The camera simply records the unique way in which a photographer views his world. Understanding that the beauty lies in the photographer's unique vision helps one understand photographs as not representing something else, but as an entirely new creation. As Edward Weston eloquently wrote in his daybook, "Man is the actual medium of expression, not the tool he elects to use as a means" ("Edward Weston": 68).

Truth In Photography

In the pursuit of Mondrian's ideal was the quest was for ultimate truth; the elimination of the tragic from life, through beauty. In that fundamental sense, photography, even as a characteristically less-than-plastic medium, is not far from Neo-Plasticism after all. Photography's *perceived* inherent truth lends it to application as a vehicle in the search for visual truth. Even though photographic truth may be philosophically in question, its technical ability to render factual duplicate realities should not follow.

An Argument: Predominant sets of thought on photography as truth—conventional wisdom that it is only truth and a newer understanding that it is anything but truth.

Pro:

Although photographs *may* lie (some lie all the time, some lie almost never), many, such as news photographs, do not. These images simply present *one form* of truth. Photographic truth is not black and white; it is multi-dimensional. Assuming that the camera sees the single true way that an event occurred instills in the medium a false mystical quality. Technical characteristics (dodging, cropping, etc.) do alter the appearance of truth, but they certainly do not mandate that "facts" in photographs are unreliable. Some images act as sterilized records of events, and therefore serve as true, factual documents (even if they are not the *sole* true document and even if small changes would alter that truth).

Manipulations such as brightness, contrast, and cropping are simply selective ways of recording the truth of an event. Using technologically advanced digital tools to remove a product or add a person to a photograph creates a fiction that is more than simply a selective way of seeing. It is a new creation, aside from documentary photography. All news shots are not non-fiction; they are simply a look (if not *the* look) at some real object. News photographs do not represent fictionalized, fake, or set-up events—that type of image is a form of abstract photography because it defies commonly held beliefs about the capacity of the medium. By a fictionalized photograph's nature, it is misleading. By a documentary photograph's nature, it is truth.

Con:

In this dawning digital age, frequent complaints are voiced regarding artists and journalists utilizing technology to alter the fact-telling ability of a photograph. But the removal of incidental objects from a photograph—an erroneous hand entering the frame, a spot on the lens, a competing media source's advertisement—should in fact be acceptable, even in news photographs. Denying digital, or for that matter analog,

manipulation acknowledges that what's important in photography is the machine—it has the power, and the photographer is left an expendable technician.

Even in the fundamental sense of the exposure, a photograph is a series of isolated fragments. Through the various technical fingerprints of the medium, the photograph's subject (if it is of importance) is imbued with *either* an unnatural clarity or an exaggerated importance (or a fictitious reality)—each of these perceptions, although factual, may not be in the broadest sense true. The viewer perceives truth, however, and it is easiest for the photographer to accept this and exploit it, unimaginatively (Zubrick).

Photographers have manipulated images for ages, even in the raw composition of an image. There's no philosophical difference between darkroom dodging, in-camera cropping, and digital cloning. Photography is *not* truth—it is the selective representation of an event or object, which possesses its own varying dimensions of truth. As photographer Janet Malcolm wrote in her essay "Two Roads," the camera is fundamentally unable to tell the whole truth. "If a painter wants to show large objects and surf, this can be arranged: he has only to get himself the right-size canvas. He is the monarch of all he surveys. The photographer, on the other hand, is the slave of his rangefinder. He has to make choices: he is always giving up something, he is always lying a little" (121). The photograph is an alteration, an illustration—a photograph. It is not a record. As forward-thinking photographers we should move for the understanding of all images as illustrations, not factual records. The resulting manipulations that will occur, digitally or otherwise, should be accepted in all photographic outlets.

Resolution:

As John Szarkowski wrote in The Photographer's Eye, the subject and the picture are not the same thing. The photograph is tied to facts, and it is up to the photographer to force the facts to tell the truth (Zubrick).

Just as the writer can choose his printed words to represent both truth and fiction, one must emphasize that in no way do all photographs share a singular unified purpose.

Photographs are true. Photographs are false. This contradiction lends to every photograph, no matter what style or subject, a sense of surreality. Susan Sontag wrote about the work of documentary photographer Diane Arbus: “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision” (Grundberg: 84).

In the end, understanding truth in photography is important to this project simply because, as Mondrian showed in the quest for truth in painting, the artist should turn to universal beauty. As non-representational pure creations, Neo-Plastic photographs may be the most completely “true” photographic form. As it is universal, the Neo-Plastic image is an absolute truth. Yet this truth is controlled entirely by the photographer.

CHAPTER FOUR: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

How Have Photographers In The Past Approached Neo-Plasticism?

Abstract photography is nothing new. Nor is Mondrian's quest for a pure plastic creation, even in photography. Artists have, since the medium's invention in the mid-19th century, experimented with the physical and conceptual limits of photography. After photographers had early on mastered the technical ability to document reality, artists used special techniques and methods of composition in order to abstract the realistic image in efforts to broaden the medium's scope. "Many people were working toward abstraction in different ways, not simply as a way of separating the image from the real world but also as a way of seeing new worlds or pointing to the spiritual," wrote Charles Hagen in In Focus: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Naef, Moholy-Nagy: 94).

Many 20th century photographers worked toward non-representative photography by utilizing two predominant approaches—abstraction of reality and pure "plastic" creation. None of them, however, approached their creations with the structure of Mondrian's plastic art. Consequently, none realized a fully perfected means of universal plastic art. What they did accomplish, though, laid the groundwork for a dawning new understanding of the medium and led to the idea of photography as an entirely new form of art. The techniques and approaches of these pioneers led up to this contemporary application of Neo-Plasticism in photography.

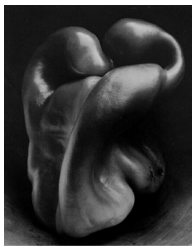
According to photo historian Robert Leggat, turn-of-the-century photographer Alfred Stieglitz "probably did more than any other individual to promote photography as an art at the same level as other arts, and has been dubbed the 'patron saint of straight photography'" (Leggat). Stieglitz believed in simplicity of means for creating his avant-garde works. He founded the Photo-Secession, a group of photographers who promoted realism above all in hopes of providing photography with its own artistic aesthetic, in response to the Pictorialist movement of the late 19th century. Pictorialists (such as Anne Brigman and Gertrude Kasebier) created photographic imagery that emphasized the romantic, painterly results delivered through handwork on negatives and prints. Stieglitz

believed that a photograph should stand on its own merits alone and, although he agreed with the Neo-Plastic ideal of using any means necessary to create the all-important final image, he thought imitating the work of painters was a step backward for the young art form.

Even though he stressed realism, Stieglitz sought to differentiate between the photograph as visual reporting and the photograph as visual expression ("Modernist Conversations"). He vividly saw photographs as representations of the underlying structures throughout life, not simply mechanical documents of subjects and their movements. His ideals helped photographers begin to understand their medium as a unique creative form.

The Abstract Approach

In addition to being one of the most popular American photographers of the early 20th century, Edward Weston was also one of the most prolific. Along with portraits and more traditional-minded landscapes, he produced a substantial body of abstract photographs. Working with organic objects such as shells, flowers, vegetables, and people, Weston created beautifully precise abstract images emphasizing line, form, and shadow (Plates 11 & 12). More than anything, his photographs focused on the intense patterns and symmetry that unites all of the forms in nature—searching for "an essence of what lies before the lens" (Rosenblum: 441).



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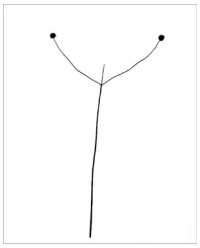
He separated these subjects from their environmental context by photographing them in his studio—this further emphasized their unique forms and aided in his search for precision in representation. He used no technical trickery or special effects to abstract his images, simply an understanding of organic forms and the camera's capacity for creation through perfect, factual documentation. He didn't, however, shy away from the camera as

a recorder of reality. His abstraction came in the universal quality of organic objects. “All basic forms are so closely related as to be visually equivalent. I have had a back (before close inspection) taken for a pear, knees for shell forms, a squash for a flower, and rocks for everything imaginable!” (Bunnell: 158).

Photographers such as Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, and Minor White also created abstract photographs from real-world objects. In the case of Callahan, he studied patterns in the natural world, as well as the man-made environments of large American cities. He created many of his greatest works by having a selective eye for subtle and profound details. He also created a series of high contrast works that could be taken for pencil drawings. These photographs, like many of Weston’s organic forms, studied the similarities in lines between plants and animals (Plates 13 & 14). Most striking was his ability to simulate line drawings with the photographic medium—the opposite approach of many artists who sought to make photo-realistic drawings. He, too, utilized photography as a recording medium, but illustrated how the most truthful image is also a deception.



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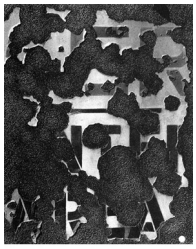
Aaron Siskind studied urban decay—specifically peeling paint and the dissolution of manmade surfaces (Plate 15). His works, while graphic like Callahan’s, were exceptionally two-dimensional. He utilized the picture plane as a perfect forum for reproducing “naturally-occurring” two-dimensional objects. “When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order—(unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder). First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture” (Siskind: 7). In this sense, his work was philosophically much like Piet Mondrian’s. However, he utilized a more organic, free

form method of documenting reality to create abstract photographs. Their unique strength lies in Siskind's understanding of working solely in two dimensions. Unlike Neo-Plasticism, he did not seek to separate his creations from their visible object origins.

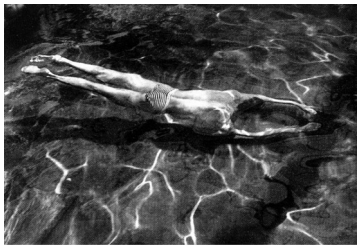

15.

Paul Strand pioneered a photographic style that combined documenting reality with creating pure abstract images—an effort to illustrate the rhythmic beauty in all of nature, as well as the man-made industrial world. He trained his lens on factories and landscapes and detritus and revealed a sameness, yet a profoundly unique and detailed nature, to all the visual world. His photographs emphasize that the artist need not use trickery or specialized technique, simply a refined method of vision, to deliver interesting and important abstract works. He called his style of precise "straight" photo-making organic realism. Even in his images of the busy New York street life, Strand delivered a simple revelation of the form and balance in all of life—an approach Mondrian would certainly have appreciated. His beautifully varied photographs illustrate the ever-present contradictions of photography—that the most "normal" of methods of documentary can movingly reveal an abstracted context, entirely bound to or totally removed from the "facts" of the photograph.

The pictures most closely associated with Minor White come from his entirely documentary style of creating abstract photographs. By approaching rocks and beach scenes from above, he simulates the reproduction of a two-dimensional, graphic, non-organic scene (Plate 16). Although a variety of organic shapes are found in his pictures, the overriding feeling is one of an angular, man-made, and graphic creation. Even understanding that his photographs were often of shorelines and rocks, the viewer finds a hard time orienting himself to the new world of a White photograph, and consequently the feeling of a false reality is further emphasized. In naming his works, however, he did

not try to hide the fact that he was documenting reality, referring to them in an evidentiary manner by recounting their geologic or scientific names, locations, and dates. Simply, he showcased a naturally occurring, abstract reality.

16.



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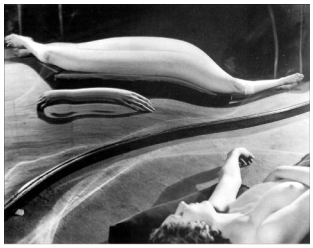


18.

Andre Kertesz used portable 35mm camera equipment in much the same style as documentary and news photographers of the 1930s. However, he utilized his gifted eye for composition to arrange objects in his viewfinder to endow his photographs with powerful visual structures. In images such as the distorted swimmer (Plate 17), his understanding of naturally occurring harmonic and balanced structures is evident. The three-dimensional world that Kertesz is highlighting on film successfully makes the transition into two dimensions, primarily because he understands each picture element as a graphic form, and places them throughout the frame accordingly. Prior to his straightforward documentation of the striking visual forms he saw throughout American and European cities, Kertesz constructed surreal photographs with the aid of malleable mirrors (Plate 18). He utilized these studio apparatuses to contort and distort his subjects—frequently the human form—into flowing organic patterns of light and shadow. As a surrealist, and a street photographer with a flair for plastic construction, Kertesz illustrated, very simply, the universal beauty and rhythm that runs throughout all aspects of modern life.

Other photographers have simulated plastic constructions with abstract representations of manmade environments. In his photograph of the Volkswagen factory (Plate 19), German photographer Peter Keetman created what appears to be a purely abstract creation having little if any connection to reality. In fact, he simply utilized the inherent features of the photographic medium (such as compression and conversion to black and white) and modified the camera with prisms placed before the lens to create rhythmic studies of line

and shadow in the two-dimensional picture space. Their balance is inviting to viewers who shouldn't feel the need to inquire about the subject of images, but the artist chose to reveal through titles—a sort of nod to the fact that every photograph must rely on a known object interacting with light (even if that object is not the "subject" of the photograph).


19.


2.

Arnold Newman, who photographed Mondrian in his studio in 1942 (Plate 2), showed Mondrian's influence on his photography with a study of Massachusetts Shaker homes. When he visited the community, he felt almost as if he was seeing Mondrian's paintings applied to three-dimensional life, and felt compelled to document what he saw. These images were not abstraction or pure creation, simply the factual documentation of an image type reflecting the pure geometric forms of Mondrian's style. Newman utilized photography's omnipresent quality—that of evidence—in producing his Shaker home studies. Although more document than abstract creation, they illustrate the fine line between Neo-Plasticism in appearance and Neo-Plasticism in entirety.

The Pure Creation Approach

Several artists have utilized photography as a non-representational plastic medium with differing levels of success. Perhaps most important to the cause of Neo-Plastic photography were two early 20th century photographers, Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. They created photograms representing a different manner of photography. Like all photographs, their photograms were visual images constructed of light—they simply removed the camera from the process.

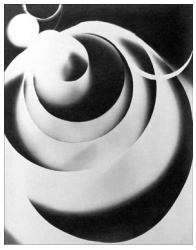
Man Ray began his career as a painter, but found that it had too many shortcomings with regard to his own search for creative expression. He soon found his skill in

photography—the less plastic medium. “I have freed myself from the sticky medium of paint, and am working directly with light itself” (Ware). Many artists find themselves struggling to develop a pure method of creation, without their work appearing as derived from another’s. Although Man Ray’s photographs and Rayographs (as he referred to his photograms) were a very original presence in modern art, even he believed he was not necessarily covering new ground—and that photography had much evolution to come. “The success with which the artist is able to conceal the source of his inspiration is the measure of his originality,” he wrote in the essay “Photography Is Not Art.” “A little research and some determination could prove that whatever was possible in the plastic domain was equally feasible in the optical domain” (Johnson: 50). He believed that his work was breaking new ground; however, he still didn’t seem to fully believe in the medium as a means for plastic expression—as evidenced by his continuation of other modes of creation. He challenged the idea of photography as a limited medium for artistic expression, however, and resisted the idea that it must rely on recording the observable world for its modus of creation (Naef, Man Ray: 14).

Although his work with a camera often involved special techniques for abstracting “normal” images of real objects, he didn’t rely on trickery to set his work apart from “representative” photography. In fact, he placed the utmost importance on the resulting visual image and virtually none on the technique used to achieve it—be it photograph, photogram, solarization, or any number of his other tools for creation. “He had little patience for those who inquired about the nature of his photographic equipment or exposure times,” wrote Katherine Ware, former J. Paul Getty Museum Assistant Curator of Photography, “finding such questions as absurd as asking a novelist what sort of typewriter he or she used” (Naef, Man Ray: 6). This thinking would help redefine photography as a medium not “limited,” but rather blessed, by its technology.

Much like paintings, Rayographs were one of a kind. He felt this rarity instilled an additional value to his images, and further removed them from photography as nothing but a mechanized reality duplicator. Man Ray placed any number of objects on light-sensitive photographic paper and exposed the resulting assembly to light. Processing

these prints like normal photographs, he achieved a fixed record of the light and shadow as it interacted with the objects on top of the paper. (Plates 20 & 21). In a 1924 article on the Dada art movement, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote, "[Man Ray] invents a new world and photographs it to prove that it exists" (Naef, Man Ray: 44). He understood that photography lent itself, not to reproducing reality, but to transforming it.



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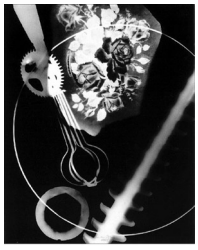


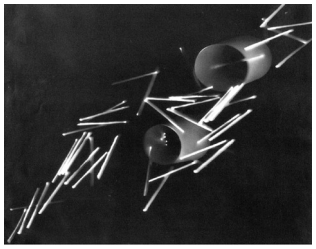
21.

Man Ray's photographic pursuits reflected the differing public opinions of the still young medium. "The Rayograph is the first step in the liberation of photography" (Naef, Man Ray: 112). He regarded representing reality as old-fashioned, and found the fun in playing with the viewer's perception of the real world (Linfield: 13). He insisted that his Rayographs were not like traditional photograms because he introduced depth into the images. Although that may have been his intention, their very success is dependent upon the graphic nature of two-dimensional shadows cast by three-dimensional objects on the light-sensitive picture plane. They did not introduce depth, simply because that would have been impossible.

Working in Germany and the United States around the same time that Man Ray was producing his Rayographs was Bauhaus founder Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. He too made his way to photography after experimenting with other creative approaches. "He regarded the camera as an instrument for extending vision and discovering forms otherwise unavailable to the naked eye. His work was rooted in the Cubist concepts of simultaneity and fragmentation of vision, as well as Mondrian's exploration of non-perspective pictorial space" (Arnason: 324).

Moholy-Nagy referred to his photograms as light modulators. He subverted the traditional method of focusing light reflected from real objects through lens and camera

in favor of working purely with the ability of differing quantities of light to produce different marks on paper. “He strove to eliminate shapes reminiscent of nature and sought to explore the relationships of light, color, and non-objective form” (Naef, Moholy-Nagy: 10). Moholy-Nagy’s photograms acknowledged the two-dimensional plane out of necessity, and therefore produced distinctly plastic images using light (Plates 22 & 23). According to Weston Naef, he was fond of photography’s facility as a copying medium, and would likely have adored the digital photography revolution for its ability to remove any visible handwork from an image and produce a homogeneous surface (Naef, Moholy-Nagy: 105). Like Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy aimed at the construction of an alternate, yet universal, reality; one not at all grounded in the depiction of natural objects.



22.

23.

Several other photographers have approached photography as a plastic medium—some even prior to the photographic revolution of the 1900s. Christian Schad is actually credited with the first use of the photogram as a non-figurative means of artistic expression. A few years before Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, he created what he referred to as Schadographs—photograms that sought to break from photography’s characterization as a representative medium (Plate 24). Photographers such as Francis Burguiere (Plate 25), Pierre Cordier, Carlotta Corpron (Plate 26), Heinz Hajek-Halke, Lotte Jacobi (Plate 27), Nathan Lerner, Barbara Morgan, and Jean-Pierre Sudre have continued Schad’s tradition of leaving behind the camera and lens in favor of modifying and applying light directly to sensitized silver halide surfaces. They created completely original, non-imitative photographs in the photogram tradition (which are now often referred to as “light graphics”). Their experimental attitudes helped remove the emphasis from the photographic mechanism and focus it on the artistic creation.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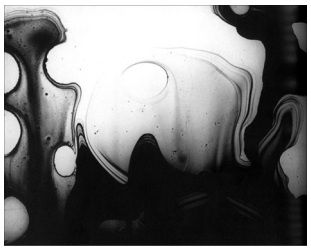
27.

Alvin Langdon-Coburn also sought non-objective photographs. He constructed an arrangement of mirrors, much like a kaleidoscope, which he termed a Vortoscope. Like photograms, Coburn's Vortographs physically altered the photographic process and removed the precision of focusing rays of light to reproduce a visible image of a real object. Though an abstraction, not a pure plastic creation, his work helped set the stage for pushing the acceptance of photography as a unique creative form.


28.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Artists such as Chargesheimer and Frederick Sommer used another popular method for early non-representative photography. They utilized glass plates as negatives, but applied a variety of objects to them in order to subvert the camera as a recorder. Chargesheimer painted his negatives, and in that manner used the photographic process to simply reverse and recreate the actual art object—his painted negative (Plate 28). In that sense, it is much like an etching or woodcut printing process, because the artist must work in reverse. Frederick Sommer viewed photography's gift as "the opportunity to view the world and imagine it at the same time" (Glenn & Bledsoe: 9). He believed that, by its very nature, even the most traditional photograph is never of *a thing*. "What you're essentially photographing is how it related to a great many other things" (Glenn & Bledsoe: 13). He applied paint and smoke to glass plates (Plate 29), then enlarged the abstract negatives to create non-representational images—although by virtue of the process, the final prints are reproductions of his soot assemblage. "It defies its existence

as photograph as much as it captures the total essence of the photographic medium" (Glenn & Bledsoe: 13). Each of these artists sought a pure creation that has led to contemporary artists' freedom to further challenge our understanding of the medium and its perceptions. Although not Neo-Plastic in physical manifestation, their philosophies of pure creation are closely aligned with those of Piet Mondrian.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Defining Contemporary

Contemporary photographers approach abstraction much differently than their predecessors. Many early advances were made by artists working in a society that, while engulfed in a modern technological revolution, had yet to achieve the visual sophistication of living through a century of prolific photographs. Consequently, the role of photography has changed in recent years, as has society's understanding of its scope. Many fossils of belief still remain from a 19th century understanding of the art, but much of viewers' understanding has matured along with photographers' picture-making sensibilities. Dr. Reinhold Misselbeck, Curator for Photography at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, sees photography's evolution as still in the beginning stages:

> "Contemporary Photography is a photography: 1. Which is conscious of the fact that it does not depict the object with which it deals, but is, however, inseparably attached to it through the activation of the shutter, no matter how removed the final photo may be from this act; 2. Which is conscious of the possibilities and problems of its technology and thus does not make itself dependent on this technology but instead transcends it; 3. Which sees not so much a new wealth of technical and structural possibilities in the amalgamation with new media (digitization, video, holography), but rather a new challenge to become active in a broader and more complex area of conflict between the image and artistic conception; 4. With advances in digitization and imperceptible manipulation, the split-second activation of the shutter release will be the only remaining photographic aspect of photography—which, in the end, is what still distinguishes photography from the traditional arts and in the future will distinguish it from purely digital media" ("Contemporaneity": 12).

Contemporary photography does remain successful at reflecting the natural world one decisive moment at a time, but the most promising advances are made in the realm of non-representation. "Photography is turning away from the 'real' towards the 'virtual,'"

writes photo historian Roberta Valtorta on the state of contemporary art, "towards non-existing images that nevertheless still maintain a link to visible reality" ("Contemporaneity": 11). Mark-Haworth Booth, Curator of Photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, writes that much of the unique photography of the last decade "acknowledges—and revels in—the unique properties of the medium as a fascinating mixture of fiction and fact."

Perhaps what most distinctly sets contemporary photography apart from the art of the past 150 years is that, first and foremost, it acknowledges the photograph as part of the image's value. Photographs stand alone—they need not represent an object, or even a tangible visual subject—they exist not as portals, but as surfaces (in much the same way paintings do). The new photographic reality is not based on the illusion of nature; it is the present reality of the photograph itself. Former Curator of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art John Szarkowski very simply sums up the condition of late 20th century photography, regardless of its content: "Whatever else a photograph may be about, it is inevitably about photography" (Malcolm, "Two Roads": 129). This has not always been the case in painting, and is a relatively recent development in the subject-intensive art of photography. Szarkowski continues, quoting art critic Clement Greenberg drawing the same parallel between classic painting and the abstract modernism of the early 1900s: "Modernism used to call attention to art. Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a modernist painting as a picture first" (Malcolm, "Two Roads": 129). Szarkowski attributes the abstract evolution of photography not to following in the footsteps of painting's evolution, but because artists recognized, and scrutinized, the wealth of photographic images that have inundated society throughout this century.

Particularly in Western society, all viewers understand photographs. From an early age, we are inundated with visual imagery that sells us products, delivers our news, and preserves our memories. The prevalence of these photographs has affected each individual's life as much as, or more than, the lives of artists. It has led to the most visually sophisticated society in history. Although viewers flatly understand photography,

it is usually from a dramatically different perspective—family records, news media, and particularly the moving pictures of television. The understanding and appreciation of commercial photographic images lends little to the understanding of art, just as our own experiences as snapshot photographers does not either. “Photography is a foreign language,” said photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia, “that everyone thinks he speaks” (Cembalest: 87).

Consequently, the contemporary artist must factor in and play upon the society’s mass beliefs about photography if he is to be successful. We have one word—photograph—to describe visual images made with a camera that serve any number of purposes: sales, documentary, illustration, editorial, news, fashion, entertainment, art… Not every work must be tailored to fit the over-saturated audience; quite the contrary. Even subtly defying conventional contemporary photographic wisdom can account for some of the most avant-garde work, even if the visual language has yet to evolve into the new plastic language.

In the world of art-specific images, the technical definition of photography has changed, too. Many artists now like to refer to themselves as “artists working with photography” rather than as “photographers.” Signifying more than just a change of name, photographers now assemble photographs in three-dimensional, sculptural presentations. Does the work then remain a photograph? Mixing media—with paint, photographs, found objects—also changes the parameters of photography. Many artists, such as Frank Stella and Edward Ruscha, purposely disregard the accepted definition of their medium specifically for the purposes of broadening its capacity, and breaking free of traditional mores and in fact exploiting them in the actual content of the art. By redefining the photograph, they are able to stretch their creative muscles in new and often uncharted territory. The boundaries will continue to blur as computers find their way into more and more artists’ studios—the glue that holds many disparate art forms together. “Photography,” writes Regis Durand, Director of the Centre National de la Photographie in Paris, “as a specific field of its own hardly exists any more” (“Contemporaneity”: 11).

This unprecedented level of art-wide acceptance signals that it is finally time to cement photography as an entirely plastic medium.

As photography techniques have evolved, so too has the definition of the artist's personal style. Whereas the most significant early photographic artists placed emphasis on less visible (i.e., philosophical) aspects of content, contemporary photography is often based on a unifying physicality (i.e., subject). Man Ray and Andre Kertesz furthered the understanding of photography through personal styles based on ways of seeing—in their cases defined as surrealism—very similar to the manner in which painters have often defined their own styles. Their work was significant because of the ideas they put forth through their own personal content-driven techniques, not because they continually photographed the same type of subjects in the same manner.

Contemporary photography of the past 50 years has seen an emphasis on physical subject, as itself and as symbol—unfortunate because this approach relies principally on photographer as technician, revealing little of interest through his works. This is particularly true in the most commercial of fine art fields. Considered geniuses in many rights, William Wegman photographs Weimaraner dogs in a variety of ways (Plate 30) and Richard Avedon shoots straightforward portraits against white backgrounds (Plate 31). Although in many cases interesting and visually pleasing, this particular type of imagery is indicative of the uninspired condition of "subject as style" plaguing facets of the contemporary photographic community. Whereas Kertesz and other artists of the past illustrated an impressively particular way of seeing as the foundation of their art, much of the work of contemporary "commercial artist" photographers emphasizes a bankable stable of subjects—an unfortunate sameness of execution. The physical, tangible, and easily photographable object can all too often dominate, if not completely obscure, *concept* and result in a shortsighted understanding of what sets photography apart from other arts—the creator's unique *vision*.

30.

31.

Mondrian does not illustrate the only acceptable truth; however, his example of searching for truth away from the replication of physical subject is partially what made artists such as Kertesz and Man Ray so brilliant. It may also be said that Mondrian himself fell into a "sameness of execution," much like many artists do when the breadth of a carefully focused career is examined. The difference, though, is that a sameness of technique or style emphasizes a uniqueness about the artist, rather than the subject. According to Mondrian, an artist's style may be his own and freely associated with him, but no physical subject should be.

In vain attempts to simulate personal style, many artists also substitute technique for vision/concept, relying on the momentary interest of a unique physical appearance rather than the lasting effect of a truly important way of seeing or a purely created visual image. There is a fine line between concretized vision and uninspired technique. Even more damaging to the perception of photography, blind technique and repetitive exploitation of a physical photographic anomaly are easily confused, at the surface, with an artist's creative vision.

Even Man Ray, for example, devoted some of his energy to solarizing images—the effect of re-exposing a partially developed print or negative to light in order to create an abstract effect. These images, although visually interesting, rely on the technique as a cheap trick—a simple way of turning what may otherwise be a typical portrait into an abstract image. They do not fully reveal the vision of the artist, for they simply represent the creator's "wink and smile" acknowledgment that this photograph is not simply a representational image. What Man Ray missed, though, was that these images were not necessarily improved by the solarization technique; they were simply made to be *different*.

Fortunately, any investigation that scratches the surface of these hollow technical devices will reveal little of importance. This is one of the most prevalent and uninspired approaches to photography today, particularly among amateurs and photographers new to the powerful adjustment tools offered by the computer, and can be eliminated through an understanding and application of Neo-Plastic principles.

> "Odd angles, extreme lenses, and eccentric darkroom techniques reveal a struggle to substitute shock and technology for sight. How many photographers of importance, after all, have relied on long telephoto lenses? Instead their work is usually marked by an economy of means, an apparently everyday sort of relationship with their subject matter…only pictures that look as if they had been easily made can convincingly suggest the Beauty is commonplace" (Adams, Why: 65).

The end result of a photograph, the print, must be a stand-alone object. It should be independent of technical or even philosophical explanation. These are of more value to the artist than to the viewer. "Results alone should be appraised," wrote Edward Weston in his daybook. "The way in which these are achieved is of importance only to the maker" (Bunnell: 68-69). Technique is vital to the ease of expression, so that the artist's movements are automatic. Coburn used a technical apparatus to aid in his results, but the results were the singular item of import. He stressed the importance of mastering technique, "leaving the mind free to devote itself to the really important matter: direct contact with what we wish to express" (Leggat).

The constant innovation of digital techniques has the most impact on both the perception and creation of contemporary photography. Prevailing trends point toward a future in which digital tools—for creation and manipulation and dissemination—fuse with traditional photographic techniques, and further alter our perceptions of reality. By its nature, a digitally altered photograph produces an altered reality, even if the manipulations are slight (such as contrast, color, etc.). That altered reality is the ultimate personification of the already alternate reality of photographs.

The ultimate goal of photography has traditionally been producing a finished print. Some purists of straight photography—such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, who insisted that negatives be printed full-frame to show *all* that the camera captured—covet the negative above all else as the finished piece, with the print simply making it available and easy to view. (That is, unless of course the image is destined to be changed in printing, in which case the print assumes the role of finished work of art, and the negative just another step in the process.) But now with powerful digital tools supplanting the negative as the ultimate "original" for producing prints, what item holds the primary artistic value? The hard disk that stores the digital information, the binary code itself, the original computer output? Beyond only these concerns, the print is no longer the default option. Many images are destined for display on the World Wide Web, or in conjunction with music or graphics on an interactive compact disc. New definitions of old terms are bound to continually change over the next decades, and it is unclear where traditional photographic means will find themselves, and how these technologies will impact the creation and comprehension of art. It seems probable, though, that the idea of seeing will remain at the center of photographic art, no matter how it is manipulated or where it is destined to be displayed.

Contemporary Photographers

A major influence on the state of contemporary photography is the artist David Hockney. His interest in photography began as a painter, when he critiqued the medium for paling in comparison to his own. Arguing that it's major problem was that it is fundamentally dull, he said that looking at a photograph is like looking at the world through a paralyzed cyclops' eye, for only a fraction of an instant. He believes a single photograph can't convey motion or time like the cubist paintings he so admires.

> "Cubism was about the destruction of a fixed way of looking. A fixed position implies we are all standing still, that even the eye is still. Yet we all know our eyes move constantly, and the only time they stop moving is when we're dead—or when we're staring. And if we're staring, we're not really looking. That is the

problem with the single frame photograph: all you can actually do is stare at it… Cubism is a much more involved form of vision. It's a better way of depicting reality, and I think it's a truer way. It's harder for us to see because it seems to contradict what we believe to be true. People complain that when they see a portrait by Picasso where, for instance, somebody has three eyes, they say: But people don't have three eyes! It's much simpler than that. It's not that the person had three eyes, it's that one of the eyes was seen twice. This reads the same way in my photographs" (Johnson: 132).

Hockney picked up the camera in order to show photographers how much of the medium's potential they were overlooking. He began by photographing many details of a single subject from one position and assembling the multiple Polaroid prints into a grid-like overall image (Plate 32). That style eventually evolved into a freer style of photographing scenes by moving through them and shooting from multiple positions. He assembled these images in looser, more Cubist arrangements (Plate 33), to recreate the feeling of observing a scene over time. His criticisms still hold true of conventional photography, yet they do not apply to all its forms because perspective and time are abolished in the Neo-Plastic image.

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35.

Following in the long tradition of photograms, Adam Fuss creates large, unorthodox images of recognizable objects, including children and animals (Plates 34 & 35). His one-of-a-kind Cibachrome prints are extremely colorful and graphically simple. They utilize organic forms to create plastic art, yet their impact is more visceral than visual—based on the undeniable associations with the subject, the object making the photogram. The graphic shapes and attention to the surface of the print do lean toward Neo-Plastic

concerns, but the feeling of each composition is very limited to the single frame, typically with a single distinct center of visual interest.

Andreas Gursky creates abstract, Mondrian-like photographs of the urban landscape (Plate 36). His working style is not plastic, but documentarian. Human traces are important to Gursky, and their obvious absence in his images gives his landscapes bleak, surreal overtones. His photographs are not staged, and in fact are designed as objective observations—from a distance—of the human condition. They resemble Mondrian's new plastic, but are inspired by an interest in showing rather than creating.

36.

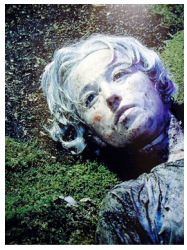
Vik Muniz intends to challenge society's perceptions and definitions of contemporary photography. He creates "drawings" using a number of unconventional materials (including water, chocolate, and dirt) and photographs them to make them permanent. In a plastic sense, the physical construction is the piece of art—he merely uses a camera to document his work. It's not that his work is missing the mark. But from Mondrian's Neo-Plastic perspective, Muniz would be more successful if he were to construct his assemblages in order to create photograms. His work is absolutely pure and creative, but removed from truly challenging our perception of a photograph. It is a document of his pure plastic sculpture.

Two contemporary photographers particularly excel at redefining abstract photography in an intuitive and philosophical manner, Duane Michals and Cindy Sherman. They each utilize photography's truthful documentary tendencies to capture images of pure fictional content. Michals assembles his photographs in groups to tell a narrative, movie-like story through still photographs. In almost every instance, the implied story began long before the first frame, and continues well beyond the last. As viewers, it is almost as if we are

privileged to glimpse these few moments in time when the stories reach critical mass, and a pivotal decision is being, has been, or will be immediately reached (Plate 37). His work carries the photograph's impact well beyond the borders of the frame without adhering to any strict physical structure, and in fact exploiting society's belief in the photograph as fact.

37.

38.



39.

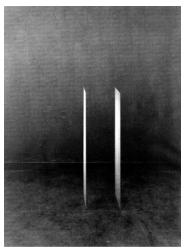
Cindy Sherman only photographs one person: herself. But she is not the subject. Instead of producing variations on typical self-portraits, she assumes the role of any number of characters in the fictional narratives of her images. She gained critical acclaim in the 1970s with her series of Untitled Film Stills (Plate 38), in which she portrays characters momentarily frozen in their fictional movies. Her work has moved beyond simple film stills to more traditional photographic series that continue to imply grander stories, from mundane to dramatic (Plate 39). Again, this abstraction of content implies much grander stories beyond the decisive moment we are shown, and further distorts the idea of photography as truth. We believe the stories she's telling, and spend much more time comprehending her work—even after we've stopped looking at it—than paused in blank stare at a particular subjective mode.

Jay Dunitz approaches a plastic style of creation by way of sculptural abstraction. Starting with large sheets of steel, he files and sands them to add intricate patterns, rich with detailed texture. With careful attention to studio lighting, he then adds color to the works before photographing them. The result is more plastic than if he were simply photographing sculptures, because of the necessity of particular light and photographic special effects, because the image is not finished until it is the photograph. His work began with the inspiration to "take photography to a new stage, a new level of importance" (Bell: 10). Purely abstract, his photographs have little correlation to the

observable world. Consequently, viewers spend more time with each image, allowing their imaginations to do some of the work. Inspired by the idea of separating his work from that of traditional photography, his was very similar to that of the Neo-Plastic ideal: "I wanted not so much to be a hunter; I wanted to be a creator" (Bell: 12).

Exploring the camera's ability to render the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional plane, Zeke Berman creates strongly line-dominated black and white images with few visible ties to reality (Plate 40). Depth is implied through the utilization of photography's documentary skill, but obviously never fully achieved. Similarly, Gerd Bonfert photographs light reflecting off of objects to create images of unidentifiable forms in space (Plate 41). Although his work is definitely the depiction of light interacting with objects in the real world, it epitomizes the idea of photography as inherent abstraction by utilizing the medium's technical shortcomings to create what appear to be pure plastic, non-representational creations.

40.



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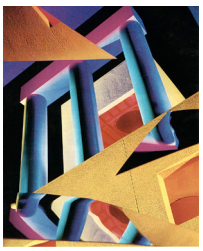


42.

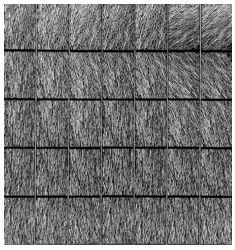
Photographers such as Barbara Kasten, James Casebere, and James Welling produce images that have little connection to visible reality, yet in fact they spring from photography's documentary nature. Kasten not only photographs constructions in her studio, she shoots architecture on location with colored lights and mirrors to transform her subjects into unrecognizable abstractions. Her pictures are cluttered with colors and shapes and textures from the structures, yet their real-word origins are indecipherable (Plate 42).

James Casebere also plays on photography's disorienting abilities to create Cubist-inspired photographs of his own tabletop setups. The resulting images consist of a series of independent, whole, and broken planes of all shapes, yet the feeling remains of the

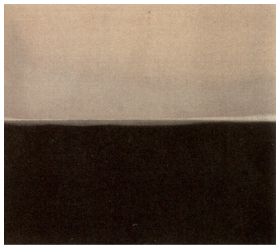
documentation of physical reality—albeit one constructed in a studio for the purposes of the photograph. He resists the idea that photographs should be abstract by trying to look like something else, such as paintings, drawings, etchings, and the like. He challenges the idea that photographs are "believable slices of reality," and his "truthful" images attempt to convey that nothing is what it appears to be (Hoone). His abstract creations are reminiscent of traditional scenes; however, they don't rely on any documentation of those actual scenes to depict them—much like modern abstract painting.

James Welling uses a straightforward documentary approach, along with geometric experimentation with photograms, to deliver photographs rich with abstract texture, pattern, and design. He doesn't necessarily strive for pure abstraction; he is content to show the unique and common rhythms and designs that emerge from virtually any recognizable subject. The unifying nature in his body of work is that it all becomes a comment on and exploration of the nature of photography, as a documentary medium well suited for abstraction (Relyea).

Many artists create abstract images and, through unique compositions, make them appear more plastic. Erich Spahn follows in the current tradition of exploiting photography's specific technical nature to his advantage. He photographs heavily patterned, frequently geometric or linear objects, crops the images to further strengthen their graphic appeal, and arranges them together to further emphasize the patterns he sees through his lens (Plate 43). Some appear quite plastic, whereas others stimulate questions about exactly what object is being abstracted.



43.



44.

Floris Michael Neususs is perhaps one of the most dynamic camera-less photographers since Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy. He is most remembered for his "nudograms" of the

1970s, in which he created life-size shadow outlines of human forms. He creates his artificial landscapes chemically. Although they appear to be excerpted from larger images of natural sweeping horizons, they are in fact perhaps the closest any artist has come to a pure Neo-Plastic photographic creation (Plate 44). He wields supreme control over his images—with synthetic tonalities, lines that tend toward the straight, and the frame-expanding implication that his photographs are mere details of a larger plastic picture.

Where Have These Artists Led Us?

By creatively approaching the camera, and knowingly investigating the manner in which we comprehend their visual documents, these artists have unfailingly illustrated the inherent contradictions that make up the most interesting soul of photography. They have frequently resorted to an overly simplified approach, such as the abstraction of a real object without the intent of removing the object from conscious perception, so they have yet to fully realize the impact of their works. Whether they "create" or "take" photographs, they conspicuously elevate the medium's capacity for all who follow in their footsteps. They have led us down a path with many unmarked forks that all travel new territory, yet arrive at the same place: photography as the epitome of contradiction.

A new understanding of photography is a direct consequence of all past photography—whether "straight" or avant-garde. That new understanding is that photography is fundamentally full of contradictions. Through an attempt at Neo-Plasticised photography, I hope to reveal that what is most special about the medium, what should be cherished and exalted and built upon, is this dichotomy; photography is truth, yet it is also fiction. "If the photographer's frame surrounded two figures, isolating them from the crowd in which they stood, it created a relationship between those two figures that had not existed before. The thing that happens at the decisive moment is not [necessarily] a dramatic climax but a visual one. The central act of photography [is] the act of choosing and eliminating" (Zubrick). Photography is a creation, yet it relies on documenting a visible fact. The photograph is, in the end, "taken."

Through an understanding of the historic tendencies of their medium, photographers may learn whose paths should be followed and which should be abandoned. “The history of photography has been less a journey than a growth. Its movement has not been linear and consecutive, but centrifugal. Photography, and our understanding of it, has spread from a center; it has, by infusion, penetrated our consciousness. Like an organism, photography was born whole. It is in our progressive discovery of it that its history lies” (Zubrick). We can now set off on our own journey of capitalizing on photographic contradiction to more effectively communicate a purified visual beauty.

CHAPTER SIX: APPLICATION OF THE NEO-PLASTIC METHOD

The Theory Of Neo-Plastic Photography

The search for a new plastic approach to photography presents numerous challenges. The goal is a pure plastic photographic creation that meets the physical requirements—if not all the wide-reaching philosophical ideals—laid out by Piet Mondrian 80 years ago, and that therefore achieve a universally beautiful visual work. Although a specific knowable object's beauty may be contested, universally understandable images (i.e., those comprised of universal forms such as the straight line, right angle, and purified color) are by nature true, and therefore unequivocally beautiful. My approach addresses individual sections of the Neo-Plastic concept through different methods of photography, and the desired result is ultimately a cohesive work of purely plastic photographic creation that addresses and successfully meets Mondrian's requirements. Each individual approach that meets one of those guidelines, or a justifiable photographic variation, is a triumph in itself. Each of their strengths and weaknesses will provide a solid foundation for future experimentation, and further refinements of pure photographs.

Beginning from the point at which these other photographers have left off, I have developed 14 individual technical approaches to Neo-Plastic photography. In much the same way Mondrian believed Cubists held the heart of a great mode of creation but did not fully utilize it, I take inspiration and guidance from the photographers who set the stage for this project. Some of these approaches simply utilize previous methods such as abstraction of reality, assemblage, and photograms with an added Neo-Plastic slant—the exclusion of organic shapes, or the introduction of purified form and color. These approaches are important to illustrate how Neo-Plasticism may fit in at any level with all types of photography. Some of these methods are virtually total successes, whereas others are barely passable according to the Neo-Plastic ideals set out for this project. Each approach might be a viable method of abstract photography even if it does not specifically meet the requirements for Neo-Plasticism—this project simply holds them to a separate plastic standard. Each technique attempts to satisfy one or more specific plastic

principles, and the most successful methods address multiple plastic concerns simultaneously. The experimental methods of Neo-Plastic photography are as follows.

1. **Abstraction Of Reality.** By searching out real-world scenes with patterns and non-representative forms that lend themselves to abstraction and photographing in the spirit of Minor White or Edward Weston, a plastic appearance may be achieved. This is the most common approach to abstract photography, and when done poorly appears to be just that—juvenile and devoid of all but the most rudimentary thought. It is all too often be the "easy way" of abstraction without reason; thoughtless selective compositions that express little about anything. Photography's inherent compression of depth aids in this technique's ability to create an exceptionally flat image, without resorting to photographing only two-dimensional surfaces. This approach is likely to become the simple nod to Neo-Plastic thought in an otherwise "normal" photographic image.

2. **Mondrian-esque Reality.** Even when photographing in a traditional manner, many objects—natural or human creations—offer surface appearances that seem to follow specific rules of plastic creation. This approach will emphasize photographic Neo-Plasticism as a way of seeing and documenting reality. Although not typically plastic, this approach is in the spirit of De Stijl with respect to traditional photography. It is tied closely to the first method, yet attempts results that are more closely allied with Mondrian's paintings.

3. **Assemblage Of "Normal" Images.** Presenting photographs together in geometric arrangements can simulate the look of a truly Neo-Plastic work. The constructions may be appealing, but they will likely only resemble Neo-Plasticism on the surface. Unless the individual components of the assemblage meet many of Mondrian's requirements, the overall collage will not be plastically successful. A further refinement of this approach—involving cropping the images to abstract figurative planes—is more successful because it utilizes purified abstract images that become more rigidly geometric through their arrangement together.

4. **Motion-Blurred Reality.** Acknowledging and utilizing a technical mark of the photographic medium, creating motion-blurred photographs may allow abstract images sufficiently removed from reality to be considered pure creations. The technique also offers additional plastic control over form and line. Were the images not identified as motion-blurred photographs, they would simply appear to be pure constructions of typically straight, therefore plastic, lines and forms.

5. **Out-Of-Focus Reality.** Another method that utilizes the camera's unique technical abilities, deliberately out-of-focus photography creates images of the real world so visually removed from it they appear non-representational. It may also be a method of pure creation. This way of seeing is not normal for the eye, so it is therefore ideally suited as a photographic version of purified abstraction that does not represent a specific object, only using it as a tool of the image's creation.

6. **Lensless Photography.** By photographing shaped and colored light with the lens removed from a single-lens reflex camera, real objects entirely vanish from the resulting images. Because the camera is unable to resolve any formal image, this technique offers the ability to simply record tonal changes of light. Visual form is created in the image through exposure, and is a result of the light source's characteristics and relationship to the camera.

7. **Multi-Lens Abstraction.** In the spirit of Coburn's Vortographs and the Cubist desire to capture disparate viewpoints, a multiple-mirrored apparatus is attached to a standard camera in order to create a single image comprised of multiple simultaneous views. The resulting images may not adhere to a plastic visual structure, yet they can succeed in overcoming the medium's inability to look in two directions at the same time. This technique precisely addresses David Hockney's critique, because the resulting images are complex multiple perspectives and allow viewers to study scenes that occurred over time for a long period. It also expands on Cartier-Bresson's idea of the "decisive moment," or the literally split seconds of Harold Edgerton's stop-

motion photographs, because we are now privy to what goes on beyond the viewfinder at the decisive moment. We may now define that moment in an entirely different manner, thanks to the additional visual information. Because the compositions are made almost randomly, the resulting images should possess a heightened sense of purity and universal connection. More particular to a photographic form of abstraction than traditional Neo-Plasticism, this method is intended to aid in understanding what differentiates a straight photograph from a purely plastic one.

8. **Documentation Of Pure Plastic Creation.** By constructing a scene that adheres to the visual and philosophical principles of Neo-Plasticism, it may be directly photographed to create the appearance of plastic photography. The obvious shortcoming is that the pure creation will occur outside the camera, and the photograph becomes simply a tool to document this new reality. Nevertheless, it is acceptable if the physicality of the photograph alters the way the creation is perceived. In the way that the medium's physical characteristics (such as compression) aid in the abstraction approaches, so too do they help turn a plastic sculpture into a plastic photograph.

9. **Digital Alteration.** By utilizing computers to alter a "normal" photograph, pure plastic creation may occur and result in visual works that adhere to Mondrian's principles—to any extent the artist desires. But at what point does this digital alteration replace the photograph as the plastic creation? To Mondrian, this would likely not matter—any means to the end. But it definitely matters to the photographer; it's his medium, after all.

10. **Digital Creation And Appropriation.** With digital tools at the photographer's disposal, creating visually plastic images removed from reality is increasingly viable. These images embrace an idea that Mondrian would certainly have appreciated—the resulting precision and complete lack of evidence of the human touch. Is digital obliteration of a photograph appropriate to this exploration? Can an image that does

not originate in the camera or darkroom still be considered a photograph? Perhaps not, yet this approach may become more pertinent in the future as photography and digital creation are merged into a single new method of creation.

11. **Fictional Content.** Further exploration of the avenues pursued by Cindy Sherman and Duane Michals, creating content abstractions with a visual nod to plastic construction, could further the understanding of photography as a pure plastic medium. Frederick Sommer expressed this idea perfectly: "It is folly to think that we are painting only a house, because we may also be painting a tragedy that is taking place within the house" ("Sommer Words"). In this case, the idea is of the plastic spirit, even if the visual result is not. It may be Neo-Plastic for the artist, if not the viewer, so it is unlikely to be successful according to the terms set forth in this project.

12. **Photograms.** In the spirit of Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, photograms have a great track record and therefore seem to present the most potential for shaping light into plastic photographic constructions that adhere to Mondrian's guidelines. This is the most primitive method of making photographic images, and the resulting images should convey that feeling of raw purity.

13. **Light Painting.** A derivation of the photogram, applying light in predefined shapes and patterns also allows precise control over the arrangement of light on sensitized photographic film or paper. The results will not be as readily controllable as a photogram's.

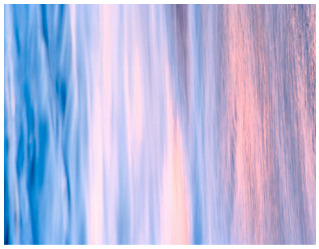
14. **Rigid Photograms.** Slightly different than the traditional photogram, "rigid" photograms apply specifically to Neo-Plastic photography. Precisely shaped shadows are fixed by photographic paper, creating an image that is less organic than a traditional photogram. This method should provide the artist with total control over compositions that may completely adhere to all physical principles of Neo-Plasticism.

CHAPTER SEVEN: INTERPRETING RESULTS

Although an ideal Neo-Plastic photograph would synthesize all of Mondrian's fundamentals in a single creation, these experimental photographs are full of successes and failures. All, however, are beneficial. Most notably, the idea of translating guidelines developed for plastic creation in painting must obviously be interpreted differently when applied to photography. The *ideals* transcend medium, but must obviously be interpreted differently in different mediums—it is folly to think the same rules would apply in painting, architecture, photography, sculpture, and music. By virtue of the medium's technical concerns, some Neo-Plastic photographic successes still contain relics of "straight" photography. In some cases, these relics restrict the realization of the plastic photograph, whereas in others the work remains a success with this qualification. Even Mondrian, knowing that his ideas would be put forth into other arts, understood that each medium must find its own plastic comfort level. "Function can even limit beauty: some utilitarian things (such as factory installations and machinery, or wheels) may require a round form, although the 'straight' expresses the profoundest beauty" (Holtzman & James: 171). "Neo-Plastic work can appear in different ways, varied and renewed by the personality of the artist to which it owes its strength" (Holtzman & James: 239). Each result, even those that are less successful, can inspire and further the cause of the new plastic method. In this case, some artifacts may in fact be desirable because they further signal to the viewer that the photographic method was used—additionally amplifying the predominantly abstract nature of this type of creation.

Abstraction Of Reality

The first approach to Neo-Plastic photography is that of abstracting reality. The visible world is full of abstract patterns and shapes which, when photographed carefully, can become even more removed from reality (Plates 45 - 47). Working in this manner, it is relatively easy to create non-representational photographic images, but the creation is not yet pure because it relies on the representation of physical objects; even though through the camera's devices, colors can become more vibrant and saturated than they appear in reality.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47.

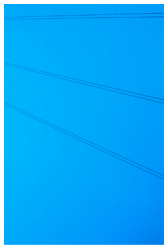
These abstractions feel lyrical, with soft and flowing lines. Although the spirit, as well as the visual result, is of non-representation, the fact remains that the photographer has simply documented a reality that, although visible to anyone who chooses to look, isn't often noticed. The creation is not pure—it remains an abstraction of visual reality. Many viewers will still ask of these images, "What is it?" The results would be more successful in conjunction with another method of abstraction—perhaps utilizing one of the camera's many technical fingerprints—such as focus, motion blur, etc.—to further remove these images from the appearance of the natural world. Although no amount of abstraction can turn them into pure plastic creations.

Mondrian-esque Reality

Similar to creation through abstraction of reality, searching out and photographing lines and shapes in the world that emulate the geometric look of a Mondrian painting is a surprisingly successful approach to Neo-Plastic photography (Plates 48 - 54). Although the process remains fundamentally the documentation of reality and not even its abstraction, it represents a type of Neo-Plastic *vision* that is most particular to the medium of photography. By working within the parameters that make up the common understanding of photography—that it is simply a method for documenting and reproducing the visible world—photographing Mondrian-esque realities employs techniques that are most specific to photography. By emphasizing a way of seeing the world, this approach results in images that, although perhaps not even abstract, de-emphasize the "subject" as content, and place that emphasis on the overall composition of the photographic image. Specific knowable forms cease to represent their real-world counterparts and take on the simple role of a plastic form particular to photography; representative, without describing. Although it may not meet Mondrian's definition of plastic for painting, it creates an understood plastic specifically for photography thanks to

a de-emphasis of reality. No technical novelty is used for abstraction—it is a simple matter of the fundamental forms that man himself has implemented in the world all around him being sought out, studied, and captured accurately on film. This is perhaps a new plastic way of seeing, if not a method for pure plastic visual creation.


48.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51.

Because of its universal and standard photographic nature, this technique is most applicable to all other forms of photography—from journalism to advertising, in that the visual forms evident in a successful, purely Neo-Plastic photograph may in effect be included in "impure" photographs to make them "more plastic." The images meet many of Neo-Plasticism's rigid visual guidelines, placing the utmost importance on the straight line tensioned at right angles, and the utter devotion to the flat picture plane. Because they are named for the objects photographed, they acknowledge their principle plastic flaw—they are abstracted documentation, not pure creation.


52.


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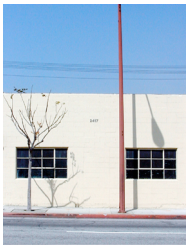
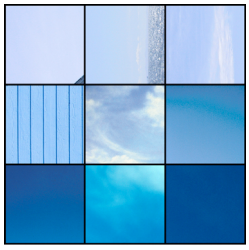

54.

While Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism is being used as a starting point, the photographic approach must refine and determine its own distinct Neo-Plastic scheme. But traces of organic and non-refined shapes are all too evident in these photographs and serve to hinder their plastic manifestation. Perhaps the organic remnants in these images are suitable first steps for expanding the plastic principles into a documentary photographer's vision. Perhaps this style may someday become more plastically pure as our world does

as well, offering more choices for the Neo-Plastic way of seeing in conventional photography. As it is, however, these impure forms cannot exist in such quantity in the most purified of Neo-Plastic creations.

Assemblage Of "Normal" Images

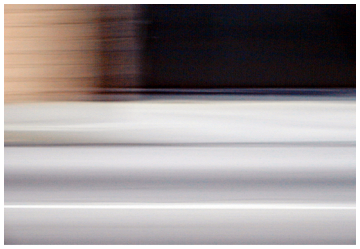
Assembling "normal" photographs into a seemingly Neo-Plastic arrangement was one of my first approaches to this photographic style. To the novice eye it may appear similar to a Mondrian painting, but the actual inspiration and philosophical implications are in no way similar to the true aims of Neo-Plasticism. In most areas, this style does not succeed in creating a pure plastic, or even abstract, photographic creation. As far as Mondrian is concerned, this method is nothing but a way of presenting photographs that is "all bark and no bite." It is all surface and no philosophical depth. It is less Neo-Plastic photography than it is the Neo-Plastic assemblage of images that lend themselves to non-representation—through an abstraction of form and color. As far as Neo-Plasticism is concerned, these images are in fact more successful as plastic arrangements than they are alone. By selectively cropping "normal" photographs down to purified planes of color—perhaps including lines or other non-representational shapes and collecting them in a grid-like arrangement—actual non-representational images may be culled from traditional photographs. The resulting photographs are simple arrangements that emphasize variations of color, line, or abstract form, and as such do not strictly adhere to traditional Neo-Plastic guidelines, yet through their prototypical origins they successfully illustrate the dual capacities of photography as a documentary medium and, through a purified arrangement of formless line and color, a vehicle for pure plastic form (Plate 55).



55.

Motion-Blurred Reality

Utilizing the camera's inherent technical qualities in the quest for pure plastic creation does hold potential for a new style of image making. Because these techniques are particular to photography, they represent an important aspect of this medium's type of pure creation. Motion blur, for example, helps to abstract real-world images and remove them from their actual environments (Plates 56 –58). Colors wash together and create the appearance of colors that do not actually exist in the scene used to create them. Again, because this method relies on training the camera on objects in the visible world, it is not the purest form of plastic creation. However, the resulting abstractions do meet many of Mondrian's plastic requirements, such as straight line, compression of depth, and purified colors, and are therefore at least partially successful. The results are rather unpredictable because they rely on the camera's technical "shortcomings" to produce the visual result. These images do not represent the reality they depict, or rather that they *use* to create rhythms of line, form, and color, so they are moderately successful.



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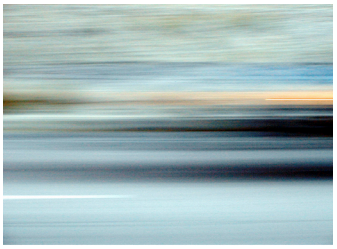
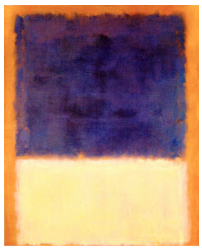


58.

This method, however, does not allow for right angles to be introduced into the frame—form is limited to linear streaks. The right angle is necessary for Mondrian's ideal of equilibrium of opposites, and the resulting universal harmony. The Neo-Plastic photographer, though, is most concerned with pure creation, which this method does not achieve, and purified form, which this method does achieve. Equilibrium is possible without right angles (as evidenced by these images and the way they do appear to continue well beyond their boundaries), and in fact may be considered a more pure, less cluttered form. This compositional matter is entirely open to the artist's interpretation of what elements in fact produce equilibrium. In the end, although these photographs do fulfill some important Neo-Plastic guidelines, they remain simple abstractions, through specialized camera techniques, of natural reality.

Out-Of-Focus Reality

Creating images in the camera without aid of focus results in images of similar success to the previous method. Although the resulting visual imagery is not as precise and rigidly conforming to Mondrian's established plastic style, it is much like the pure and non-representational color field paintings of Mark Rothko. Rothko's color-field paintings owe much to the groundbreaking work of Mondrian and De Stijl, which came decades before him (Plate 59).



59.

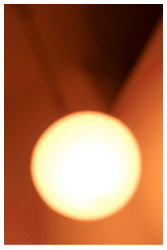
60.

61.

These photographs, perhaps more than any other type, do appear as simple technical abstractions (Plates 60 – 64). Viewers are bound to continue looking for an identifiable subject in these pictures. Lines are not straight and edges are not hard. In fact, they're additionally softened. Color is somewhat purified, because the lack of focus removes its inconsistencies and blemishes, refining, if not purifying, color. They are full of organic shapes, depending on what the photographer chooses as his focus-free subject. The results are not pure creations; rather they are unrefined, though sometimes interesting, glimpses of reality. This avenue is ultimately a dead end in the search for a pure plastic photographic creation.

62.

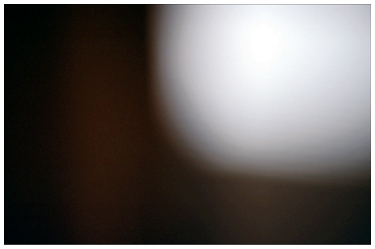
63.



64.

Lensless Photography

Owing its visual style even more to color field painting is the technique of lensless photography. Removing the lens from a single-lens reflex camera creates a device for trapping and fixing—not focusing or even manipulating—light. By training the camera on light sources of different color temperatures and in different environments, entirely non-representational images are created based on a film's color balance as it relates to that of the light source (Plates 65 - 67). Varying the shutter speed changes the density and hues of the colors in the image. Yet complete control over the image forms is, although approachable, virtually impossible. These forms are generally comprised of edges that tend toward the straight and vaguely rectangular shapes; however, transitions between the tonalities are very graduated, and the forms are not well defined.



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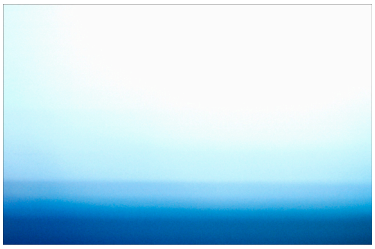


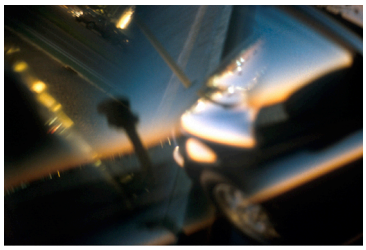
67.

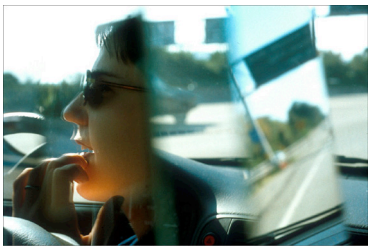
Surprises can, and do, occur when creating these photographs, because of reflections or other optical disturbances caused by the shutter and other moving camera parts. These aberrations can produce hard-edge transitions and slight color variations, but for the most part they are uncontrollable. These color field photographs are plastically pure—the camera simply works as a mechanism to record non-formative light, which can be interpreted much like the pigment in a Rothko painting, and give it form. The method does not guarantee an adherence to the physical guidelines of Neo-Plasticism. In fact, some important features such as right angles and purified lines are almost impossible to achieve with this method. But more importantly, pure two-dimensional photographs are developed out of refined colors and the creation of purified non-representational forms through light.

Multi-Lens Abstraction

With the assistance of a glass and mirrored apparatus placed between camera lens and the natural world, the method of "multi-lens abstraction" produces documentary-like images that successfully apply many of the spiritual aspects of Neo-Plasticism (such as implied continuation beyond the frame), if not the physical, visual ones. The idea of photography's "decisive moment" is that the camera and photographer work together to capture a view of a scene in the blink of an eye. What makes that photograph special is the photographer's ability to actually capture the most important story-telling blink, so that an image that pales in comparison to the human eye's way of seeing can attempt to provide accurate information to eyes unable to actually be on the scene to witness that penultimate moment. But with the assistance of mirrors and glass plates positioned in front of the lens, it becomes possible to capture vignettes of additional viewpoints within a scene that would typically fall outside of the lens's reach (Plates 68 – 70).

68.


69.


70.

The multi-lens apparatus consists of a bellows-like lens shade that extends approximately 10 inches in front of the lens. Suspended within the field of view are two to four glass plates and/or mirrors, positioned at disparate angles to allow the single camera lens to take in multiple simultaneous viewpoints on a single frame of film (Figure 2.) The inspiration for this method is to challenge the idea that photography, unlike the Cubist method of painting or Hockney's collage method, can only provide a single perspective. More importantly, it is an effort to create an abstract image out of the documentary approach and show that even the most straightforward photographic approach is an abstraction. Because of what it is forced to exclude from the frame, it *cannot* tell the whole truth. Theoretically, the painter may construct on canvas *the entirety* of his vision because it originates in his mind. Any image that relies on representing a visible object for its creation is, by definition, a process of selection and elimination. Other events exist

outside of the viewfinder—and ultimately outside of the print—that pertain directly to the visual information the camera provides. This semi-plastic technique allows the viewer a glimpse at information normally outside the realm of photography, which when combined with the standard forward-looking image, creates multiple focal points within a single image—all representing the same decisive moment. The method's inspiration is plastic because it is a challenge to an old way of making and understanding photographs, yet the visible results are only slightly abstract, and utterly non-Neo-Plastic. Were a photographer to apply this same type of multi-lens system to photographing solid-toned planes in the non-representational spirit, a purer plastic result could be achieved.

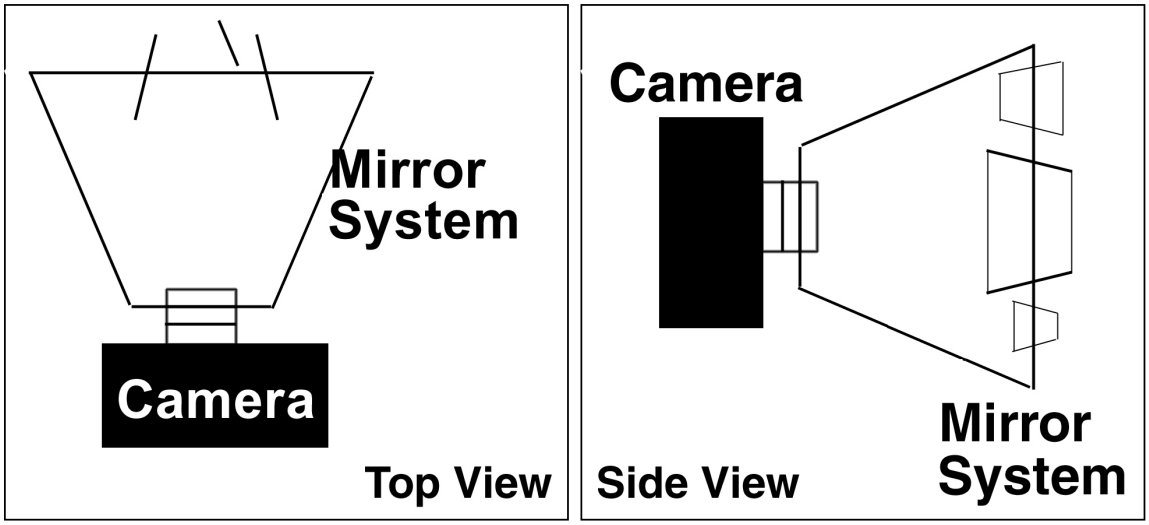


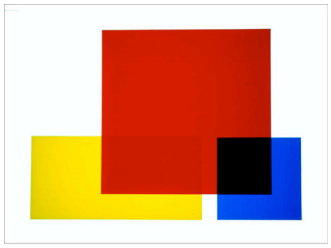
Fig. 2

Documentation Of A Pure Plastic Creation

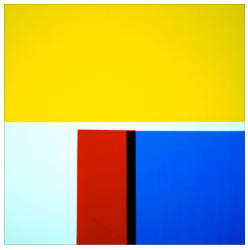
By photographing a plastic creation made specifically for the purposes of the photograph—or even built as a stand-alone work (as in the case of an architectural construction)—the photographer is simply documenting another pure plastic creation, not creating one himself (Plates 71 - 73). For this procedure, colored gelatin sheets were cut in rectangular shapes and placed on a photographer's light table in a rigid Neo-Plastic arrangement. The arrangement was then photographed. The pure creation lies in the assemblage of gels, not the factual documentation of another creation through the means of photography. The results may appear deceptively plastic, meeting many of Mondrian's physical guidelines. However, the heart of the creation lies outside of the photograph, in

the realm of physical collage—an art object on its own, without need for the photograph). If the same construction were to be made as a negative for photographic printing, the resulting photograph would become *more* plastic. Yet, it would still not be a purely Neo-Plastic creation.

71.



72.



73.

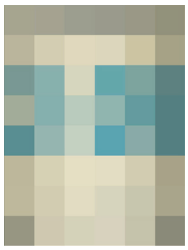
With respect to composition, the photographic process *does* alter the presentation of this documentation of the plastic creation. Because the camera's limited frame requires the deliberate inclusion and exclusion of the arranged gels as they relate to their surroundings, the nature of photographic composition and the photographer's personal vision are featured prominently in this technique and represent the importance of the photographer's eye and composition to the success of all methods of Neo-Plastic photography.

The approach of photographing gel constructions leads to imagery that, fundamentally, is very similar to Mondrian's. The photographed constructions consist of rectangles of red, yellow, and blue (and occasionally black where they overlap) dividing a white rectangular plane, much like Mondrian's paintings. It becomes easy, then, to see the truly special nature of a Mondrian construction; somehow similar constructions that "mimic" his style do not pack the punch of his originals. Most evidently different is the way Mondrian's works seem to appear only as portions of a much larger universal construction; they truly appear to continue beyond the edges of the canvas. The gel construction photographs, though, do not always share this phenomenon. The constructions that tend toward symmetry particularly appear to be contained within the boundaries of the frame, whereas the construction images that tend toward balance without symmetry share the important appearance with Mondrian's works of being but small parts of a greater whole.

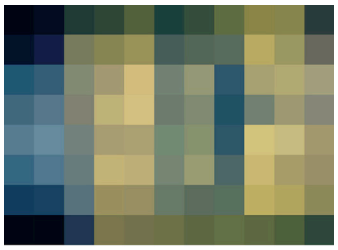
Digital Alteration

Digital alteration of photography has many critics. They frequently claim that the computer automatically transforms a photograph from truth to fiction. In fact, these digital tools can simply be used for the same typical adjustments that have always been performed in the darkroom, such as color, contrast, brightness, etc. They can also be used to create fictions that were previously impossible. In the case of Neo-Plastic photography, the computer can help to completely abstract a normal image into a seemingly pure form. Using Adobe Photoshop software, color and form in these experiments have been refined out of "normal" images to produce rigid plastic creations (Plates 74 – 76) reminiscent of Mondrian's early grid style of painting (Plate 77). The lines are straight, and perfectly tensioned at right angles. Perhaps no other method in this project is so well attuned to creation of purely Neo-Plastic form as precisely as the techniques of digital manipulation.

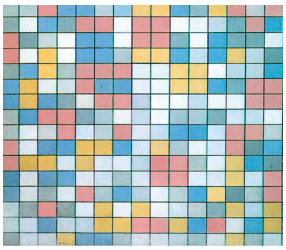
74.



75.



76.

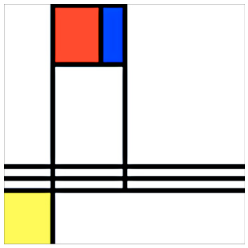


77.

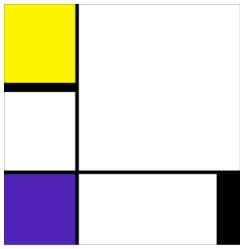
The foundation of the image—no matter how far removed—still remains a photographic abstraction of reality. The resulting images are beautifully reminiscent of Mondrian's pure forms, refined colors, and flat planes. In fact, if the artist so desires, the digital tools make it possible to refine colors even further, ultimately to any extent the artist desires. Broadening the scope of these alterations could conceivably turn *any* image into a photographic duplicate of the most plastic Mondrian paintings. But at what point does the photograph cease to exist, replaced by a pure *digital* creation? It is likely as the camera and computer further merge in the future, this distinction will be unnecessary, and the camera will simply be a method combining photographic and painterly pure creation.

Digital Creation And Appropriation

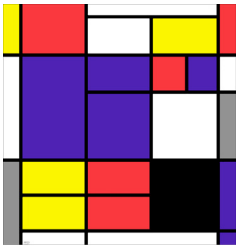
Taking the idea of digital alteration to its logical conclusion is the technique of appropriating Mondrian's paintings for use as templates for pure plastic digital creations. Every Neo-Plastic principle, both physical and spiritual, can in this way be met. The camera and the computer continue to merge into a seamless new form of photography, perhaps unrecognizable to photographers only a decade ago. The computer will certainly continue to affect how photographers deal with each image, of every type. However, as an entirely digital creation, this use of the computer ceases to be considered photography. If at no point in its creation an image depends on light as an image-forming element, it is not a photograph. As in the examples shown (Plates 78 - 80), a creation that entirely emulates the style of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism is possible. But in this case it is simply not photography. Although Mondrian would certainly have embraced the computer's ability to create precise plastic compositions, illustrating the ultimate in purified line and color, that is for a future digital artist to pursue, not a photographer. At some point, it is plausible that the lines separating the two media may be entirely blurred.



78.



79.



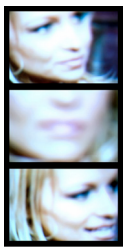
80.

Fictional Content

Like digital creation, photographing a fictional scene may be a promising method for psychological abstraction, yet the results are physically not Neo-Plastic (Plates 81 & 82). Appreciating these images requires some knowledge of the artist's intentions to distinguish them from normal snapshots or everyday street photos. This is frequently delivered by way of titles or artist statements. Understanding that the photographer is intentionally purporting a lie is necessary to appreciate the philosophical abstractions of content that occur. Like Sherman and Michals, these abstractions take place in our imagination. We envision a narrative story that begins and ends outside of the single frame of our privilege, and understand that as viewers we are encouraged to let our

imaginations fill in the blanks of the story being told. This technique is important to Neo-Plasticism in that it illustrates that abstraction and original content can be created through non-plastic techniques in photography. It once again proves that photographs cannot tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The camera is utilized to precisely document the physicality of the angry woman in plate 81, and our imaginations fill in her situation and relationship to the viewer. But the truth that isn't obvious in the print as a stand-alone art object is that the woman is acting, playing a part in a single-frame picture. The appearance of her at that street at that time, while physically true, is false in the implied context because she was placed there specifically for this photograph. Including visual forms reminiscent of a Mondrian painting, as in the first experimental method, may more closely ally this style with Neo-Plasticism, but the physical creation doesn't adhere to Mondrian's plastic guidelines. The avant-garde spirit of these two styles, however, is very similar. It is important in this pursuit primarily for its statement that even when a photograph is intended to be "of" a visible subject, it is still a false "plastic" reality.

81.



82.

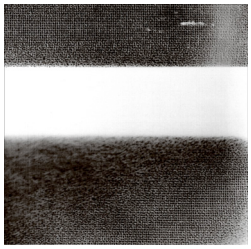
Photograms

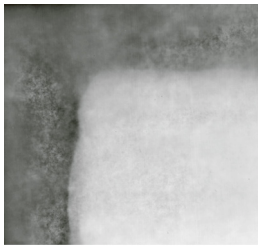
Each of the aforementioned experimental methods relied, at least in part, on the camera as a tool for fixing light on film. Initially, I hoped this project would show how the camera could be used as a reasonable method for creating Neo-Plastic photographs, and as the preceding paragraphs illustrate, it is moderately successful. However, I now realize that, as a means for plastically forming and fixing light on paper, no method can yet compete with the photogram.

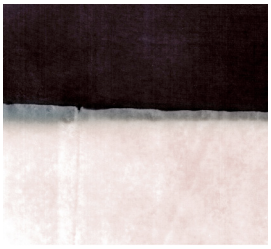
The final three experimental approaches to Neo-Plastic photography all begin with the photogram. The individual variations are based on particular Neo-Plastic methods for

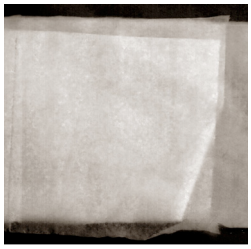
creating images that adhere to both the philosophical spirit and physical methodology of Neo-Plasticism.

The first method of creating photograms for the purpose of Neo-Plastic photography allows the artist almost complete control over the light he applies to sensitized paper. Using opaque and semi-transparent tissues, papers, and textiles laid down in geometric patterns in the spirit of Mondrian's own painting style, very successful plastic photograms can be achieved. They succeed better than any previous photographic approach to this style of pure creation—literally untied to the photographic representation of any actual object. The surface of the photograph successfully becomes the subject, and the work itself stands alone (Plates 83 – 86).


83.


84.


85.


86.

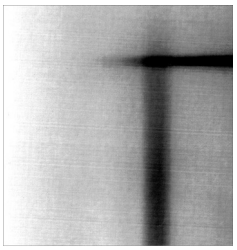
Lines and geometric forms are not absolutely pure, because they show evidence of the process used to make them and the objects whose shadows are plied for the purposes of the photogram. In that sense, these impure results may not be considered Neo-Plastic, and still connected to representing reality. But if that same standard from painting is applied, absolutely no photographic image could ever be purely Neo-Plastic. The painting standard, however, is not entirely applicable to photography—like fitting a square peg into a round hole. With an understanding of a new Neo-Plasticism designed for photography, these images can, and do, meet stringent requirements for purified creations of form.

After the initial creation of these photograms with standard, century-old methods, the prints were scanned into the computer, where adjustments for brightness, contrast, and color may be plastically controlled. This makes the images more strongly adhere to the new plastic ideal. The resulting images appear to have texture, which may by some be

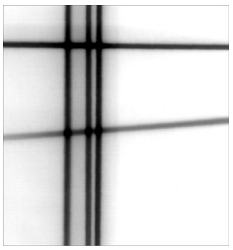
interpreted as the impression of depth. But the photograms remain strongly graphic, and accentuate and adhere to the flat photographic plane. In order to become further purified Neo-Plastic creations, these textures and organic forms may be eliminated. These few shortcomings, however, represent the medium itself—important to any Neo-Plastic type of creation. As much as scanning and computer manipulation is not purified creation, the technique is not purely plastic. However, the argument may be made that physical alteration of the image at will is completely plastic—no matter what the device. Understanding that the photographic medium requires handwork and manipulation at every stage—for dodging in printing, for example—these manipulations are perhaps the most plastic, if not the most visually pure, in the process. It is the desire for further purification that led to the next approaches of light painting and rigid photograms.

Light Painting

Light painting produces visual results on par with the previous method of straightforward photogram creation. By applying light in a particular manner to sensitized paper, with help from opaque forms in the manner of standard photograms, the light-created form as it takes shape on the photographic paper can be more plastically controlled by the artist. The resulting images, although still not perfectly pure, represent the straight lines and right angles, if not the purified colors, for which Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism is famous (Plates 87 & 88). Again, brightness, contrast, and color may be further modified and purified with assistance from digital manipulation.



87.



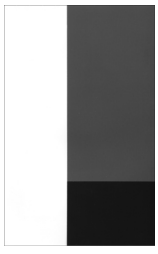
88.

These images in many ways rely heavily on the division of a plane by straight lines, and are therefore quite Neo-Plastically successful. But as far as visual interest is concerned—which is certainly a matter of importance to photographers who search for attention beyond the understanding of a decisive moment—the straightforward photograms are superior to this method of light painting. The previous approach is extremely plastically

refined, and infinitely more interesting. It places an emphasis on pattern and rhythm that light paintings have yet to achieve. Were a photographer to construct a more controlled mechanism for applying the light as paint to the photographic paper, virtual Mondrian copies could be achieved. But would they be as successful as the "impure" photographic creations of straightforward photograms? Probably not. The constructions may be more rigid and adhere to the style of Mondrian's painting, but in fact are less "photographic" in their nature.

Rigid Photograms

For the most controllable and geometric Neo-Plastic creations possible, the method of rigid photograms is unbeatable (Plates 89 & 90). By cutting opaque and semi-transparent papers into rectangular forms to use as light modifiers, photograms in the manner of a Mondrian painting can be created, again to be further purified with the computer. Although these rigid photograms may adhere most closely to Mondrian's precise painting style, they are less interesting than some less-perfect approaches to Neo-Plastic photography. They have the tendency to appear as cheap photographic rip-offs of Mondrian's intensely pure creations—that is the ultimate pitfall for an artist in search of pure creation. Those non-rigid photograms may not adhere strictly to Mondrian's painting guidelines, but they set forth a new standard of what is possible for the Neo-Plastic photographer.



89.

90.

Each of the photogram-based methods has proven to offer the most promise for the Neo-Plastic photographer. A simple method of image-making involving directly modifying light as it is fixed to a sensitized paper is also the most rudimentary method of photographic creation, recalling William Henry Fox-Talbot's first photographic shadow images of leaves and flowers on paper. They are most traditionally plastic, and offer a

firm foundation on which to build the most purified Neo-Plastic Photographic method. Camera-based techniques, however, are not as fully realized. Although they often meet many of Mondrian's requirements, they do not offer the level of complete plastic control that can be had with a photogram. Motion blurs and lensless creations are most plastic—as the photographer uses the camera not to represent an object's reflection, but to simply alter and capture light in moderately controllable ways. Although the camera methods may not be total Neo-Plastic successes, they certainly offer interesting approaches for the artist who does not seek to follow Mondrian's path toward abstraction and pure creation. Even as tangential to the ideal Neo-Plastic pursuit, they are significant means to a non-representational end.

What all of these methods have completely in common is a singular emphasis on the final product: the photographic image. The nature of every image, whether a camera-based abstraction of reality or a further purified creation in the form of a photogram, the nature of Neo-Plastic photography is most fundamentally evident in each image's composition. This is fitting because composition even in "straight" photography is the arrangement of subjects within the frame, and the ultimate result of Mondrian's visual style was the formal division of his canvas. Careful composition, then, is the photographer's greatest tool when approaching Neo-Plastic photography. It elevates the real world to a more universal abstract state, and dictates what forms, lines, and colors will make up the more pure Neo-Plastic photographic compositions. In the end, the most unique aspect of any Neo-Plastic image gets to the nature of photography itself; it is the artist's own unique way of seeing that gives any photograph, representational or purely plastic, its elevation beyond simple recording to profound art. The Neo-Plastic photograph places composition in foremost consideration in order to arrange the picture plane in a Mondrian-esque, more plastic manner.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE NEW PLASTIC IN PHOTOGRAPHY

By way of the different experimental approaches undertaken in this project, the results illustrate many Neo-Plastic successes. Whereas one or more of the methods may have achieved total harmony with the creative ideals that Mondrian set forth in painting 80 years ago, others may in fact be more singularly effective ways of implementing a new plastic method of photography. A new understanding of Neo-Plasticism, as it specifically relates to this medium and no other, is presented here, as are numerous suggested methods for the creation of non-representational photography.

Photographic Neo-Plasticism, as shown in the most successful experiments—such as the photograms for pure visual creations, and real-world abstractions for a deeper philosophical understanding of the camera's ability for pure creations—should not attempt to tread with silver and light where Mondrian laid a path decades ago. The Neo-Plastic photograph must acknowledge, first and foremost, that it is a photograph. It must avoid at all costs the idea of photographing something or "taking" a picture.

As for Mondrian's idealistic approach to art as a replacement for religion and creation with the intent to lead humanity to Utopia, this project was not intended to reveal any provable truth to those lofty ideals. Extremely purified formal creations are certainly universal, and so Neo-Plastic photography can, like Mondrian's paintings, illustrate an undeniable harmony throughout nature and life without duplicating it.

The camera-based techniques show success with regard to the philosophical way of approaching non-representational photographic creation. Although they may not adhere strictly to traditional Neo-Plastic guidelines—because of inherent differences in the media of painting and photography—they are an important step in the evolution of abstract photography because of the questions they raise and statements they make about exactly what is abstract. Photographic abstraction is fundamentally different than abstract painting, given each medium's predilections for pure creation and representation, respectively, but it may still offer glimpses of the universal. These techniques illustrate

the ability of a photograph to stand alone and avoid the frequently asked question, "What is it?" These approaches to using the camera for abstraction, which inherently rely on light's interaction with actual objects to form photographic images, reveal that the camera not only is capable of varying levels of truth and fiction, but that it invariably produces both simultaneously. It is left to the artist, through the creation and composition of purified forms, to illustrate the ultimate truth through purified beauty made visible.

Utilizing the techniques of conventional photograms, successful Neo-Plastic photographs are possible. But although these photograms are generally successful according to both my own and Mondrian's guidelines—they acknowledge the plane, consist of straight lines tensioned at right angles, determine non-representational forms—they are not *entirely* perfected. A total Neo-Plastic photographic success would necessarily result in an image almost identical to Mondrian's own style. But that success comes when the photograph is gauged against the rubric of Mondrian's painting. The new plastic medium of photography necessarily requires a new measure of success. A photographic image that almost entirely emulates a Mondrian painting is of virtually no use. It's already been done, in another medium that's much better at it. In fact the best approach to Mondrian's pure Neo-Plasticism is through the use of precise digital tools. Science has refined their abilities, so that artists may use them for refined visual creations. This project is a quest for not only the pure plastic in photography, but also the *ideal* plastic photographic creation.

Neo-Plasticism advances the idea of the image as ultimate, as does all of contemporary photography. As Geoffrey Batchen wrote, "The photograph no longer simply signifies its subject, transparently and without apparent mediation; now it first and primarily signifies itself: 'Photography'" (Batchen: 49). By treating real-world objects in non-representational ways, and within the scope of the medium's ability, the photographer is creating plastically. Like Mondrian, this artist will surely create images that continue beyond the single frame, that acknowledge that frame as the most importantly flat compositional element, and that illustrate the expression of an idea—harmonic form as content—rather than the imitation of nature, or the representation of any actual object.

It is important to understand the philosophy of photography, but for truly Neo-Plastic creation to be a success the photographs must be able to stand on their own merits. The viewer should not require a personal history of the artist or involved technical explanation to appreciate the work (although, as with fully understanding Mondrian's art, it offers additional insight and the possibility of amplified appreciation). As such, novice viewers may still wonder what tangible subject these photographs represent. This reception would significantly mirror the reaction received by Mondrian to his never before seen purified non-representational paintings. He felt the need to explain his work, which is what led him to be such a prolific writer. In time, however, as society experiences Neo-Plastic photographs it will understand the universal nature of the compositions and will eventually cease with such outmoded inquiries. The photograph has its own unique non-representational ability and should be permitted the same plastic status that abstract painting has achieved—freedom from the question, "What is it?" Robert Adams illustrates the importance of universal beauty: "Successful art rediscovers Beauty for us… The greatest beauty tends to encompass most…A.R. Ammons phrased this well in the poem Sphere, in which he observed that 'The shapes nearest shapelessness awe us most, suggest the god.' This is so, I think, because most of life seems shapeless most of the time, and the art that squares with this powerful impression seems most convincingly to confront disagreeable fact" (Adams, "Beauty": 27). It is important that eventually this change occur to fully appreciate the Neo-Plastic image, but the sheer visual beauty and purity of the image will be enough for it to stand alone. I do not contend that this is the only way to further photography, simply one approach that can lead to an increased understanding of the vast intricacies of the medium.

As a photograph, the Neo-Plastic image requires an element of photography's specialty—truth. The photograph illustrates a fact—in this case, that light did, in fact, affect film and paper. Truth, *not representation*, is photography's ultimate cause. As a Neo-Plastic photograph strives for truth, it must therefore reveal that it is ultimately a record. In the case of these photograms, a record of materials and textures modulating light that has been allowed to strike the sensitized surface of paper. The construction of objects on

paper is not the plastic creation—the entirely original results of that altered and fixed light form the finished plastic creation. If the photograms were nothing but Mondrian copies, as they practically are in the rigid photogram experiments, they cease to be pure creations to become only emulation. Instead, the truly Neo-Plastic photograph, in the case of the photogram, reveals the subtle details, patterns, and textures that make up that "underlying structure" that Mondrian painted. The blurred lines of a Neo-Plastic photogram resemble what Mondrian's imperfect paintings would reveal under a microscope—at that level rough organic shapes make up even the most balanced and purified compositions of a Neo-Plastic painting.

From a distance, Mondrian's lines are as straight as an arrow. At the molecular level, they would resemble a jagged coastline. What the Neo-Plastic photograph is given to illustrate, in the spirit of Piet Mondrian, is that the universal structure inherent in all of nature—although generally represented by the straight line (most pure), rectangular form (most non-representational), and purified color (most abstract)—can be constructed from any shape imaginable. The most important physical aspects of the Neo-Plastic photograph are much broader. Every line need not be purely straight and every color need not be ultimately refined. The artist must simply understand the medium he's working with and exploit it to its fullest, most appropriate extent. He will swim farther if he moves with the tide rather than against it. He must simply start by acknowledging his medium if he is to make the most of it. Along with this planar construction, entirely devoid of depth, the Neo-Plastic photograph must depict non-representational forms in equilibrium. These forms, as Mondrian discovered, are often well expressed by the rectangle, which conveys strength and harmony even at rest. The Neo-Plastic photograph retains all elements of the natural world (organic, geometric, line, and plane) because that is what truly underlies all of nature, and that is what the photograph is best at illustrating—any visible form it chooses. What to Mondrian may be an impure form in painting is, in photography, a marker of the impurities that actually make up all of nature, which are evident in the unblinking scrutiny of the camera's lens, and are therefore photographically pure.

The Neo-Plastic Photography Manifesto

- The old understanding of photography is obsolete. The medium is free from representation, and excels at pure creation. No longer will viewers feel compelled to ask of a photograph, "What is it?"
- Photography represents truth, the human search for truth, and the inability to ever fully know all. To most fully illustrate truth, the visual image must be beautiful. Of necessity for beauty, its forms must be universal—i.e., plastic—and non-representational, balanced in equilibrium.
- The photograph must stand alone, without assistance of explanation regarding technique or inspiration.
- The photograph's subject must foremost be what is most unique and necessary to the photograph—light. The creation must originate through light and some photographic means of capturing that light, rather than initiating in another form, such as paint or pixels.
- The plastic photographic means must tend toward the straight line, in geometric opposition, and purified tonality, whether in color or shades of gray. This is necessary for the creation to appear most universal. Organic forms and patterns remain to indicate to the viewer the medium that they are presented with. These forms represent the camera's artifacts—evidence of the technology left behind by the technology.
- The elements arranged plastically in the photograph must acknowledge the flatness of the picture plane, as well as continue beyond it.
- Symmetry must be avoided, while rhythm and equilibrium proliferate. The image is a balance of visual composition, not mathematical proportion.

The New Plastic Perception

More than 50 years ago Edward Weston summed up what is most special about photography: at the heart of this medium's unique nature lies the reason that this continued and constant evolution is necessary.

> "Photography is of today. It is a marvelous extension of our own vision; it sees more than the eye sees; it renders as can no other medium the most subtle nuances of light and shade, the most delicate of textures…. The trouble with photographers, or those who aspire to express themselves in a creative way, is in their lack of understanding of the medium. They would paint if they could, and of course be poor painters, but lacking technique, subpoena the camera as a means to a very bad end. Yes, lacking technique in painting, they imagine, how easy it should be to focus a camera and snap the shutter…. I can teach a child of ten to expose, develop and print in one day, but I have worked twenty years to be able to record with some degree of surety my feeling for the object before my lens" (Bunnell: 45).

Weston dealt with objects, but his ideas share the same fundamental understanding of the medium as the Neo-Plastic photographer—that technique, while important to the artist, is but the means. The final result—the photograph—ultimately holds all the work's artistic value. That value is strongly tied to truth, and our struggle to comprehend it in the visual object put before us. Truth means any number of things in the realm of photography, from created truths that intend to mislead to spontaneous snapshots that capture and summarize the world that borders that precious moment. "The art of photography lies in recognition of its inability to record things exactly as we see them and, conversely, its ability to show things to us in ways we could not imagine without it. The person who can identify with and manipulate this equation is a photographer" (Bernard: 19).

The attuned photographer can accomplish all in the realm of creation that Mondrian intended, and more, as a useful contribution to humanity. And through the approach of Neo-Plasticism, he can continue to challenge outmoded convention in favor of a new understanding. Mondrian would have been proud. Robert Adams wrote about an understanding of photography as art, and as art for the purpose Mondrian saw.

> "Art is a discovery of harmony, a vision of disparities reconciled, of shape beneath confusion…. John Sloan spoke clearly about these matters: An artist, he

> said, ‘seeks to find order in life, and to invent ways to put that sense of order in his work as a document of his understanding.’ An artist, in other words, ‘invents’ from the confusion of life a simplification, a picture with more order than the literal subject apparently has, so as to suggest by analogy a wider coherence throughout life. The artist intuits this ‘understanding’ of life. Art is not science, and isn’t content mechanically to record just what is objectively verifiable. Art does not in fact prove anything. What it does do is record one of those brief times, such as we each have and then each forget, when we are allowed to understand that the Creation is a whole” (Adams, Why: 181).

Neo-Plastic photography, like Mondrian’s rigorous paintings, is “a journey to the heart, not simply of ‘realism,’ painting or artistic experience, but vision itself, for the first time liberated from the totalizations of thought.” As Mondrian liberated vision from meaning, so too can the new plastic photographer “free visual perception to be experienced more or less completely in its own terms” (Grauer).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Chronology Of Mondrian's Life

1872 – Born at Amersfoort in Holland on 7 March and christened Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan, the same name as his Calvinist father, who was a schoolteacher at Amersfoort but also a printmaker. The second of five children, he was preceded by his sister Johanna, born in 1870.

1889 – Attained a diploma to teach in elementary schools.

1892 – Having attained a diploma to teach in secondary schools he turned instead to a career as an artist, and enrolled at the Royal Academy in Amsterdam in November.

1904 – Settled at Uden in Brabant in January. Active as a landscape painter.

1905 – In February he returned to Amsterdam, where he joined the Guild of St. Luke; he exhibited with the guild up to 1910.

1908 – His first visit to Domburg on the island of Walcheren, Zeeland. He was by now aware of Theosophy and had become interested in clairvoyant experiences.

1909 – In January he exhibited with Jan Sluyters and Cornelis Spoor at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. He joined the Theosophical Society of Holland in May. Returned to Domburg and stayed until 1911. Made studies of dunes on the beach (1909), for which he employed a modified pointillist technique.

1910 – A founder-member of the Moderne Kunstkring (Modern Art Circle) with Jan Sluyters and Jan Toorop. The society's adventurous exhibitions familiarized him with much that was current and innovative in art in Paris.

1911 – Sent work to the Salon des Independents in Paris and contributed to the first Moderne Kustkring exhibition, which incorporated 28 works by Cezanne as well as Cubist paintings. Late in the year he moved to Paris on the invitation of the painter Conrad Kickert, and took up residence at 26 rue du Depart in Montparnasse, where Kickert and the Cubist painter Lodewijk Schelfhout also lived.

1912 – Rapid assimilation of Cubist techniques applied to trees and facades (which were increasingly difficult to recognize).

1913 – Guillaume Apollinaire noted his work at the Salon des Independants in Paris. He also exhibited at the First German Autumn Salon in Berlin.

1914 – Visited Holland to see his father, who was ill, and war prevented his return to Paris. Black and white paintings on the theme of the sea were constructed entirely from horizontal and vertical lines.

1915 – Exhibited with the Rotterdamse Kunstkring. At Laren near Amsterdam he met Salomon B. Slijper, who was to buy some 200 works over the next few years, and H. P. Bremner, who made a financial arrangement with Mondrian that lasted until 1919. He became interested in the theories of the priest and philosopher Schoenmaekers.

1917 – Exhibited rectilinear compositions with the Hollandse Kunstenaarskring at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. With Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, and others he was a founder-member of the group De Stijl, whose journal first published Mondrian's theoretical writings.

1918 - Paintings based upon a regular grid overlaid with asymmetrical variations.

1919 – Exhibited five works with the Hollandse Kunstenaarskring and returned to Paris, settling at 26 rue du Depart for almost all of his second Paris period.

1920 – Evolved the early versions of his characteristic asymmetrical grid compositions. Leonce Rosenberg published Mondrian's pamphlet Le Neo-Plasticisme in Paris.

1921 – Established the compositional format with black lines and planes of color that was to form the basis of the rest of his work in Paris.

1923 – Friendship with the Belgian writer Michel Seuphor. The Galerie de l'Effort Moderne, directed by Leonce Rosenberg, exhibited De Stijl architectural projects.

1925 – The Bauhaus published Mondrian's Die neue Gestaltung. Ida Bienert commissioned him to design a salon interior at Dresden.

1927 – Resigned from De Stijl. Two paintings were included in the abstract art collection at the Landesmuseum, Hanover, in an installation designed by El Lissitzky.

1930 – Exhibited in Paris with the group Cercle et Carre, founded by Michel Seuphor and the Uruguayan painter Joaquin Torres-Garcia.

1931 – Wrote a tribute to Van Doesburg (published in De Stijl in January 1932). Joined the group Abstraction-Creation.

1933 – Composition with Yellow Lines (now in the Gemeentemusuem, The Hague) introduced the colored line.

1934 – Visited in Paris by Harry Holtzman, who he introduced to Leger, Gabo, Pevsner, Helion, Le Corbusier, and others.

1936 –Moved his studio to 278 boulevard Montparnasse. Employed multiple arrangements of lines in increasingly complex paintings.

1937 –Published the essay 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' in the compendium Circle (London).

1938 – Left France for London, where he lived at 60 Park Hill Road, Hampstead, near Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, and Naum Gabo.

1940 – Wartime bombing persuaded him to leave London for New York on 20 September. Arrived in New York on 3 October. He met émigré European artists and attracted the attention of American painters.

1941 – A number of paintings begun in Europe were completed by the addition of small lines of color. His compositions gained in complexity.

1942 – Used tapes to establish compositions and also introduced colored lines. One-man exhibition at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery, New York. Lectured at AAA (American Abstract Artists) in New York.

1943 – Second one-man exhibition at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery.

1944 – Died of pneumonia in New York on 1 February.

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Appendix 3: Materials Used

Because the Neo-Plastic method places prime significance on the finished image, equipment is simply a means to an end. For most techniques, any combination of camera, lenses, and film is acceptable, be it 35mm, medium format, or a view camera. Some techniques lend themselves to specific equipment, but standard and readily available equipment is used to simply illustrate each technique's universal availability. Color film is used for these photographs with the knowledge that, if necessary, each image can be digitally converted to black and white. Transparency film was chosen because of the added contrast and color saturation. Again, each of these choices simply reflects the artist's particular preference. Following is a breakdown of the equipment used for each technique.

1. **Abstraction of reality.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film.
2. **Mondrian-esque reality.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film.
3. **Assemblage of "normal" images.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film. Computer and editing software.
4. **Motion-blurred reality.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film.
5. **Out of focus reality.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film.
6. **Lens-less photography.** 35mm SLR camera, with lens removed, and color transparency film.
7. **Multi-Lens abstraction.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film. Multiple-mirrored apparatus.
8. **Documentation of pure plastic creation.** Colored gels, light table, 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film.
9. **Digital alteration.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film. Computer and editing software.
10. **Digital creation and appropriation.** Computer, flatbed scanner, and editing software.
11. **Fictional Content.** 35mm SLR camera, lenses, and color transparency film. 4x5 view camera, black and white film.

12. **Photograms.** Darkroom, black and white photographic paper. Standard 25-watt soft white light bulb. Assorted materials used to modify light falling on the photographic paper. Flatbed scanner, computer, and editing software used to adjust color, contrast, brightness, etc.
13. **Light painting.** Darkroom, black and white photographic paper. Standard 25-watt soft white light bulb. Assorted materials used to modify light falling on the photographic paper. Flatbed scanner, computer, and editing software used to adjust color, contrast, brightness, etc.
14. **Rigid Photograms.** Darkroom, black and white photographic paper. Standard 25-watt soft white light bulb. Assorted materials (such as paper, card stock, and gels) used to modify light falling on the photographic paper.

The 35mm SLR cameras used are the Nikon F4S and Nikon N8008. Lenses include 28mm f/2.8, 50mm f/1.4, 80-200mm f/3.5 zoom, and 400mm f/5.6 telephoto. View camera is the Linhof Kardan Master with 210mm f/5.6 Rodenstock lens. Transparency films include Fujichrome Provia, Fujichrome Velvia, Fujichrome MS 100-1000, Kodak Ektachrome 100VS, and Kodak Ektachrome 100SW. Black and white film is Kodak Tri-X 100. Black and white paper is Forte Polygrade glossy and Ilford Multigrade RC Glossy. Computer is a Dell IBM-compatible PC running Windows 98 with a Pentium 133 processor, 64MB of RAM, Visioneer OneTouch 8600 flatbed scanner, and Adobe Photoshop editing software (versions 3.0, 4.0, 5.0 and 6.0). Because standard equipment, materials, and processes are used, cost is no more prohibitive to Neo-Plastic approaches than it is to any other type of photography.

Appendix 4: On Digital Imaging And Technique

Digital technology contains the greatest prospects for the future of pure creation in photography. Its precise technical abilities are unmatched by any other medium. Mondrian would certainly have jumped at the chance to incorporate the computer's tools into his Neo-Plastic process.

Too often, photographers confuse technique with creative content and allow the nature of the digital effect to not only influence but also dominate their pictures. Simply because a computer allows the abstraction of an old-style representational photograph does not turn that image into a plastic creation, or even a successful abstraction. Technique should be mastered by the artist, and used at his disposal. It should influence but not restrict his creative expression. "Clarity of thought should be accompanied by clarity of technique," wrote Mondrian to an art critic in 1909 (Milner: 80). Technique, although perhaps personally fulfilling for the artist, is simply a necessary means to a visual end.

Mondrian actually sought a new method of executing his precise works. "If these materials and their colors were more perfect and if a technique existed by which the artist could easily cut them up in order to compose his work as he conceives it, an art more real and more objective in relation to life than painting would arise" (Holtzman & James: 298).

As photography and digital creation grow ever closer in the future, an even newer plastic method of photographic creation may become appropriate, or even required. This confluence of perceived photographic truth and non-representational fiction would certainly on its own alter the way photography is understood. A further exploration of this new hyper-medium's ability for pure creation may be required to continue moving forward with any art. Or because an enlightened audience may no longer consider photography, now merged with digital technologies, as fundamental truth, its new avant-garde pursuit may be to attempt a photograph that can, in fact, completely truthfully represent the real world.