

N: I went back and read *Continuity and Change* by Max Bill again. In his last paragraph, Bill summarizes his motive in thinking about form and function and writes “If these objects are created in the way I’ve just described, they will become components of our culture — consumer goods will become cultural goods. This is the route by which art can leave its ivory tower and return to life — no longer as a substitute for life, but as an integral, supporting part of it.” After reading this, I was immediately reminded of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. Similar to Bill, Mondrian also believed in the transformative power of art and design. I am sure you know of Mondrian, but I would like to give a short summary of what his paintings were about.

Mondrian was initially part of *De Stijl*¹ group. He decided to leave this group when the remaining group of artists started to use diagonal lines in their works. The incorporation of these diagonals were against Mondrian’s system, which was heavily depended on binaries: horizontals vs verticals, figure vs ground, color vs non-color, order vs disorder, and etc. Having these opposite forces all in one plane gave Mondrian the chance to undo them for reconstructing a new understanding and for creating an equilibrium. (Most of what I am arguing and referring to comes from ART213 lectures at Princeton and from the book called *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*.) To me, this is similar to the idea of a *Gestalt* where the whole can be understood by its parts, where everything is related to one another, and where there is this unity.

What is most interesting to me and how my mind went from Bill to Mondrian is the recurring idea of using art or design for society. Mondrian argued that the energy he



captured with these binary oppositions in his paintings could diffuse from the wall his paintings were hanging on into the streets, then to the cities, then to the world, and thus to the society. He believed that his paintings had the power to bring an egalitarian order. Similarly, Bill believed that the consumer goods, which are the designed objects, could become cultural goods and in doing so could work for the society and for the humankind.

Although Mondrian historically comes a little before than Bill, both are from the Modernist tradition. It is also worthwhile to remind ourselves that the discipline of graphic design has developed from this modernist tradition, which had this belief in the transformative forces of arts and design. So I wonder if we have lost some of this hope in contemporary design. Maybe there is not a loss, but because there are so many approaches one can take in practicing graphic design, we just do not see these idealistic attitudes amongst the rest. I am curious, have you seen any work that made you believe in the power of graphic design?

19 May 2018

¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/de-stijl>