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Timothy M. Gallant

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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The New Plastic in Sculpture

A Thesis Project

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of Art

by

Timothy M. Gallant

April, 1998

In his "new plastic" paintings, Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) created an aesthetic of universal dimensions through the unification of simplified visual elements¹. Through an intuitive process of trial and error², Mondrian achieved the unity required for his universal aesthetic by creating a delicate tension between simplified elements in simulated three dimensional space. Mondrian's "new plastic" (neoplastic) aesthetic in painting, however, is physically bound to the two dimensional surface of his canvas and allowed only the *appearance* of three dimensions. I intend to translate Mondrian's aesthetic into a physically three dimensional context, creating a universal aesthetic in sculpture that operates on the same principles of simplicity and unity.

Neoplastic painting starts with a rectangular picture plane created by arranging two pairs of parallel lines in perpendicular opposition. This picture plane is subdivided in a grid-like manner by lines and rectangular planes of various colors and sizes also arranged in perpendicular opposition (figure 1). The variations among these subdividing lines and planes create dominant and subordinate relationships which consequently make the parts *appear* to advance or recede in relation to one another and the picture plane itself. This creates the *illusion* of three dimensions. As these interactions between the picture plane and the subdividing parts ultimately reach a level of inter-dependent order, the perception of this order leads to the perception of absolute coherence and completion between the subdividing parts and the quality of their organization. When this absolute coherence is perceived, the viewer in turn perceives complete

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Mondrian's work are based on observations of his new plastic paintings.

² Harry Holtzman, "Piet Mondrian: The Man and His Work," The New Art--The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed./trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York:Da Capo, 1993) 1.

unity. The realization of this absolute, complete unity alludes to a "universal" ordering of elements in space and can be considered the "ideal" organization of the composed area.

Even though Mondrian attained this ideal organization in *painting*, he realized his method would not necessarily work for other mediums. Different art forms require different considerations even when the same goal is being pursued. As Mondrian asserted, "the possibilities of plastic expression are different for each art" and so "must be discovered by each art"³. Accordingly, I am presenting a theory for three dimensional neoplasticism (neoplastic sculpture) that addresses this assertion. Both the elements of neoplastic painting and the process of their composition will change as neoplasticism is translated from two dimensions into three.

Color and line are not used in neoplastic sculpture, but only grid-based rectangular volumes with various dimensions of height, width, and depth. These volumes are derived from the two dimensional (2D) rectangular planes used in neoplastic painting by projecting their height and width along an axis parallel to the viewer's line of sight (figure 2). Though they could be used in neoplastic sculpture, color and line are eliminated in the interest of economy and simplicity, because they are not needed in to achieve the unity desired. Color is not needed to imply advancement and recession in space because the individual volumes can be arranged physically for the same effect. Line can be eliminated because there is no need for the containment of color, and because the individual volumes do not require line for definition or separation.

³ Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting (1917)," The New Art--The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed./trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York:Da Capo, 1993) 29.

More significant than the differences in elements between neoplastic painting and neoplastic sculpture is the way in which the composed space is defined and subdivided. Instead of beginning with a specified picture plane as in neoplastic painting, the space to be organized in neoplastic sculpture is not defined until it is "claimed" from previously formless space. The space is claimed in the form of a rectangular volume that becomes *visually implied* when the elements of neoplastic sculpture are arranged in space along a 3D grid (figure 3). As these individual elements are arranged to claim the larger rectangular volume from empty space, they subdivide it just as the individual elements of neoplastic painting subdivide the 2D picture plane. Unlike the elements of neoplastic painting, though, the elements of neoplastic sculpture both define and subdivide the organized space *simultaneously*.

As the elements fluctuate between their roles as individual volumes, markers of the "claimed" volume, and subdivisions of the claimed volume, an interdependent order between these roles is ultimately reached. The interdependent roles of the individual elements reach a level of absolute coherence and completion. The perception of this coherence then leads to the perception of complete unity between the elements, their functions, and their arrangement in space. Just as in neoplastic painting, this absolute unity characterizes the "ideal" organization of the claimed space, a glimpse of "universal" order. In neoplastic sculpture, though, this ideal organization is expanded from the organization of neoplastic painting by adding to it another physical dimension⁴.

Even though neoplastic sculpture widens the scope of

⁴ The third dimension, physical depth.

Mondrian's neoplasticism, the "reality" of ideal organization is still a limited experience. I believe, though, that exciting possibilities will come to light as neoplastic theory expands and develops. After all, if the mind can ascribe such "universal" connotations to a unified *visual* experience, why could it not do the same for other experiences as well? If ways are developed to achieve similarly unified organizations of experiences such as sound or smell, entire "environments" could be created. These environments would incorporate several different types of unified experiences that, when combined, would completely *envelope* the participant with a sense of "universal" order. Of course these developments are far off, but it is important that the search for the "universal" order in all things continues. Then hopefully--in time--a truly universal art form will emerge that impacts equally all who experience it, expanding perceptions about the world we live in.

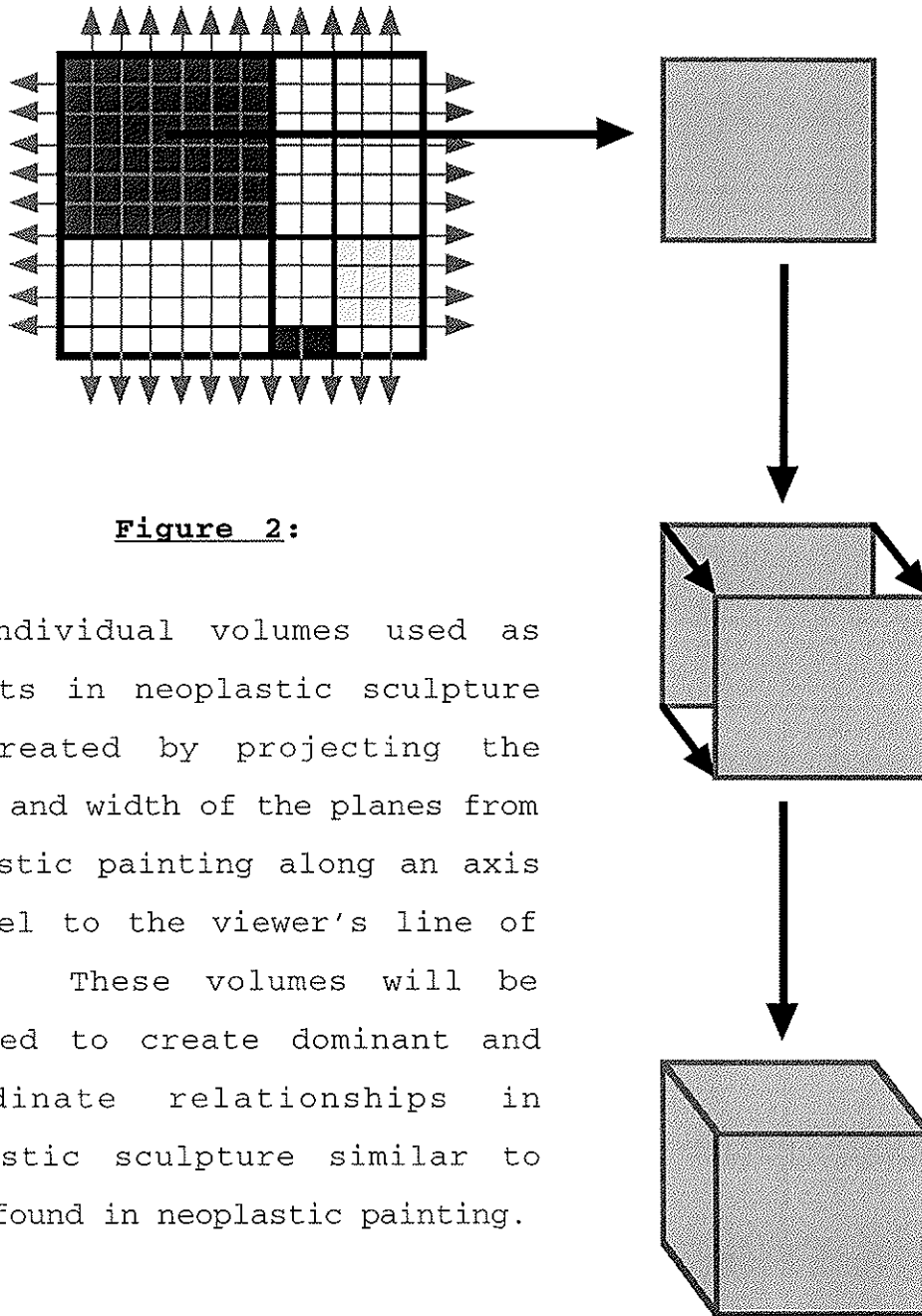


Figure 2:

The individual volumes used as elements in neoplastic sculpture are created by projecting the height and width of the planes from neoplastic painting along an axis parallel to the viewer's line of sight. These volumes will be arranged to create dominant and subordinate relationships in neoplastic sculpture similar to those found in neoplastic painting.

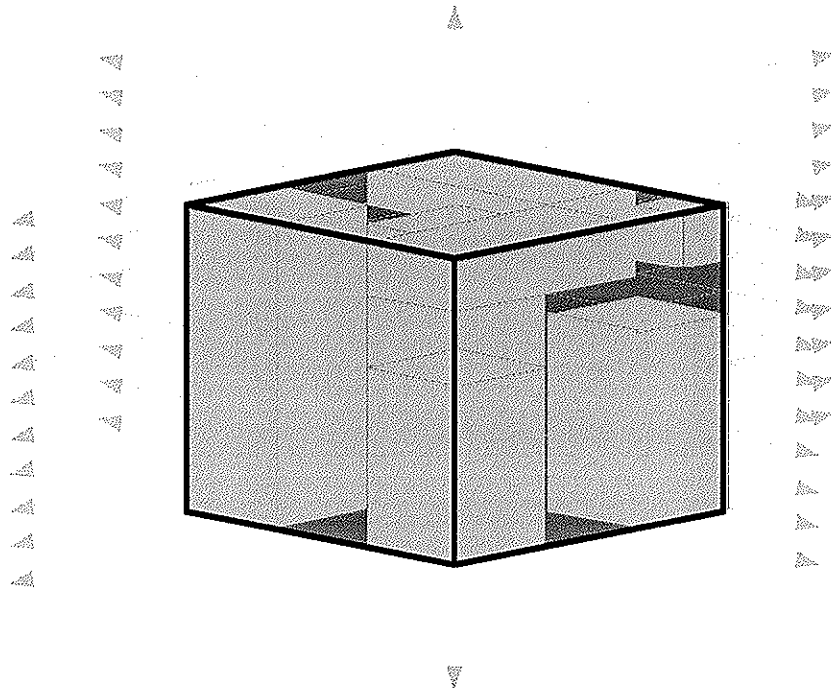
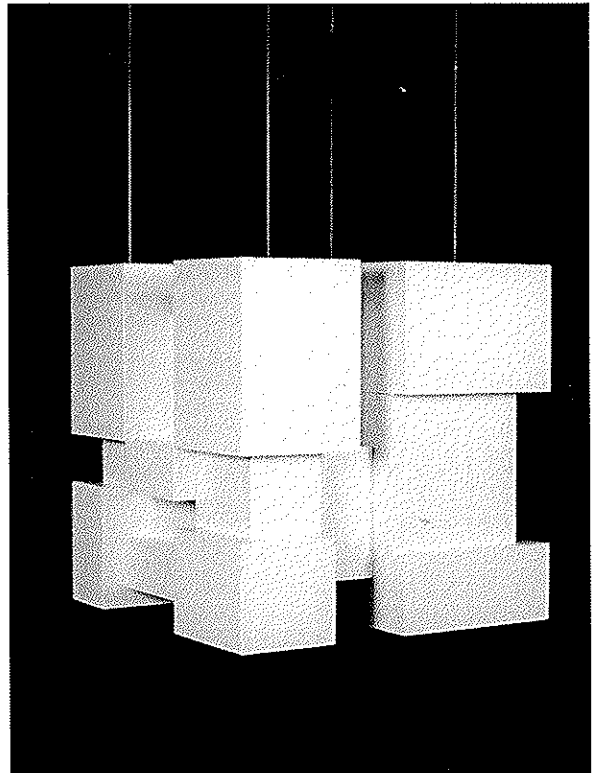
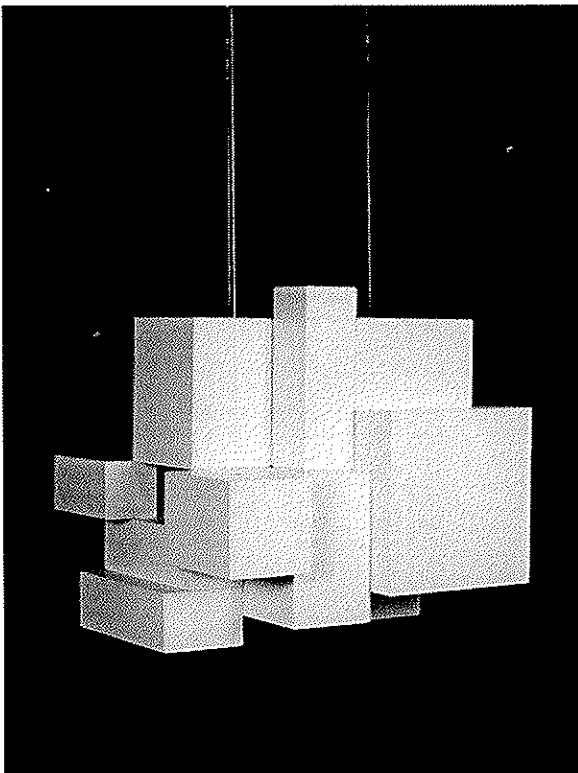
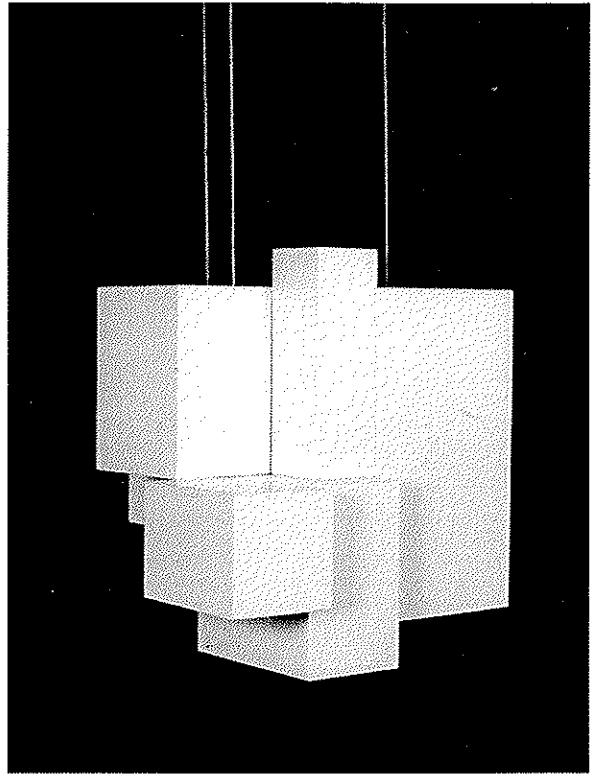
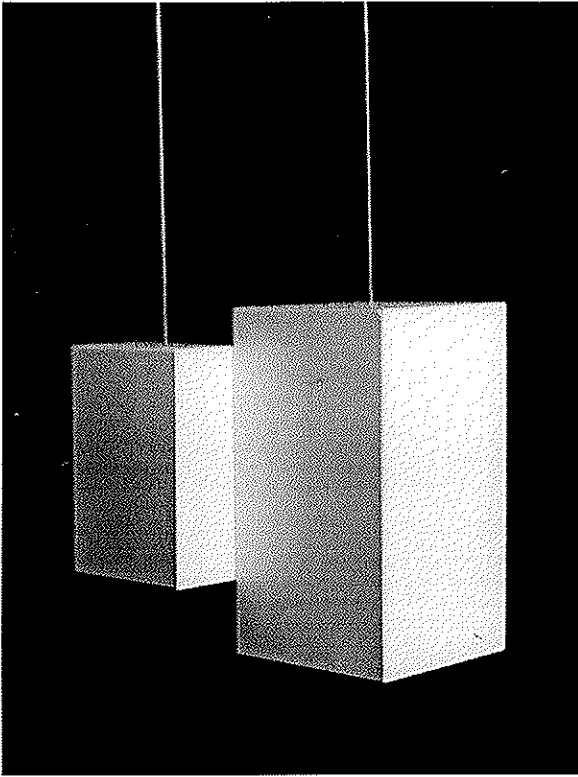
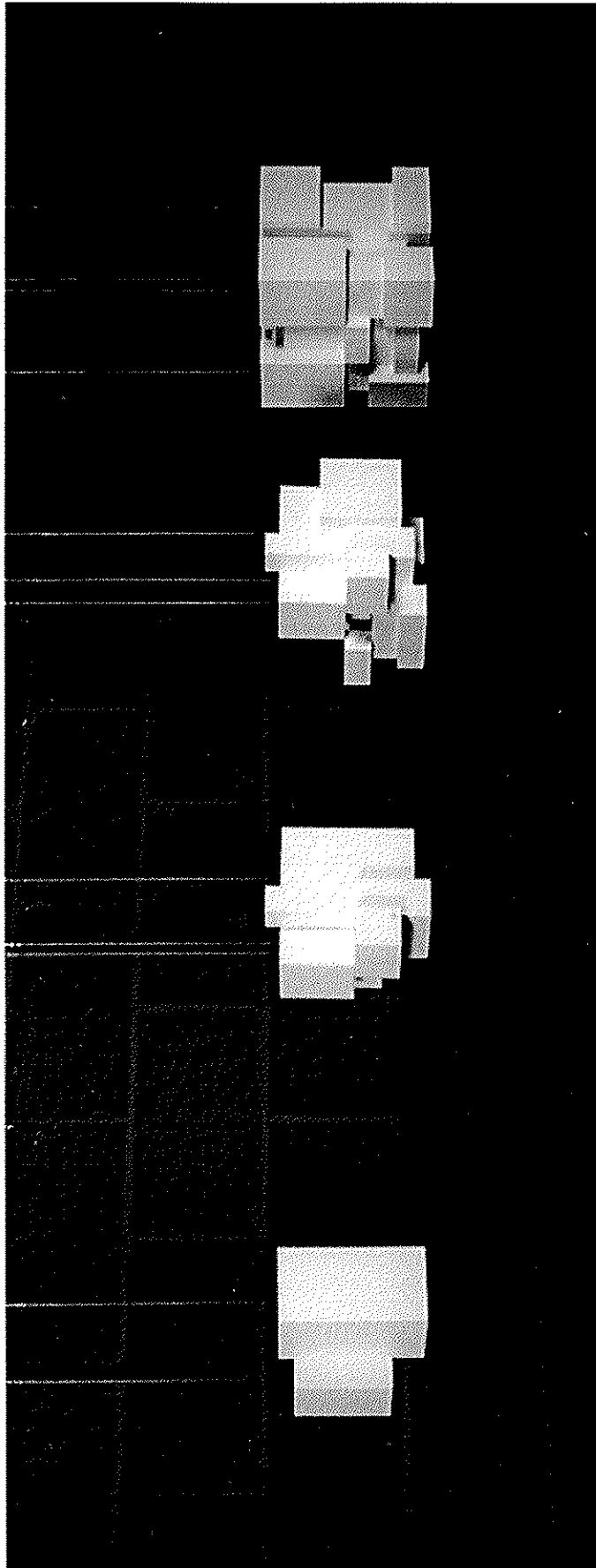


Figure 3:

Individual rectangular volumes (the elements of neoplastic sculpture) are arranged in space along a 3D grid in order to "claim" the space that will be organized. The space is claimed from formlessness when the arrangement of the individual volumes gives closure to a larger rectangular volume. The larger rectangular volume is derived from the rectangular picture plane of neoplastic painting by projecting its height and width along an axis parallel to the viewer's line of sight, just as the individual elements were projected from the individual planes of neoplastic painting.





Project Title: The New Plastic in Sculpture

Approved by:

Gordon Goetzmann

Professor of Art

Alan Reed Osby.

Associate Professor of Art

Paul A. Sluts.

Assistant Professor of Art

Alan Reed Osby.

Chair, Department of Art

Margaret L. Cook

Director, Honors Thesis Program

Charles A. Bohrer

Director, Honors Program