De Stijl, Its Other Face: Abstraction and Cacophony, or What Was the Matter with Hegel?*

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for Bénédicte Pesle

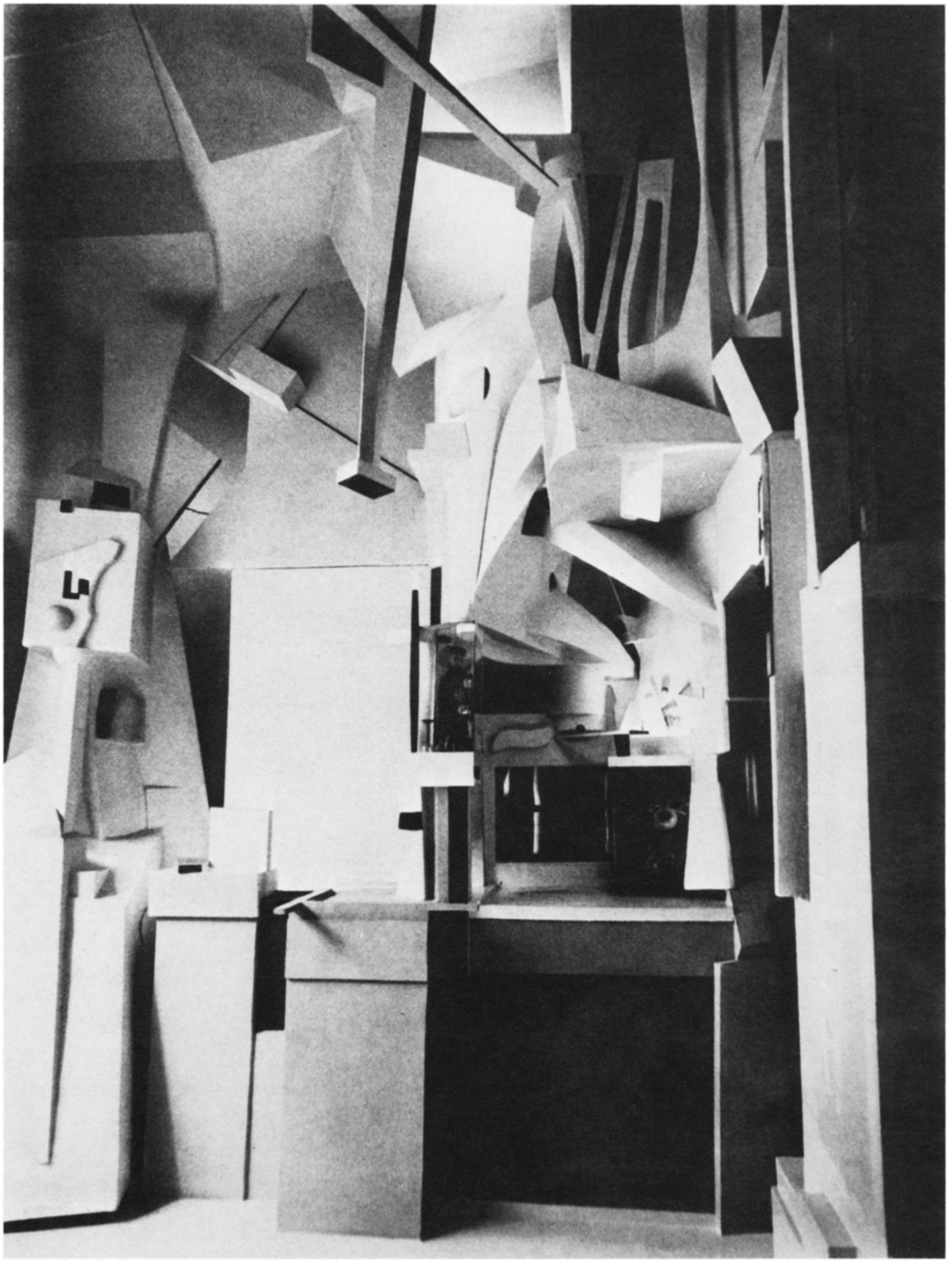
In 1822, Hegel, touring the Netherlands, wrote from Holland to his wife:

> What a lovely country! This is a land for strolling; green meadows everywhere, with contented, well-fed cattle and no whip-holding cowherds behind them. Long parks filled with oaks and beeches; country villas—Holland is the most densely populated land in the world, but there are few villages in the flat lands. Brabant, a fertile area full of villages. Haarlem, clear, large and lovely as the others, lies on Haarlem Lake. For all the beautiful things and places I have seen, and am seeing, there are just as many, equally beautiful ones, that I have not seen, but I have seen the most important, the finest and the best. Every city is rich, dainty and clean. I still cannot tell where they keep the common folk and the poor, especially in the Hague; no dilapidated houses, palsied roofs, rotten doors, broken windows anywhere. In the Hague and generally here, all the streets are filled with the finest shops, in the evening all the streets are lit up by their illuminations; endless assortments—gold, silver, porcelain, tobacco, bread, shoes—everything perfectly arranged in booths.[1]

The enthusiasm of the genial tourist finds its rhapsodic echo—and its complement—exactly one century later when, in 1922, Kurt Schwitters, fresh from his tour of Holland in the company of the van Doesburgs and Vilmos Huszar, describes the lecture tour that was to become known as the *Dada Feldzug in Holland*. Their alliance was tactical certainly, but more than that;

* This essay was first presented as a lecture on May 8, 1982 at the symposium on De Stijl organized for the exhibition held at the Hirshorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institution.

1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, Herausgegeben von Johannes Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1953, Band II: 1813-1822, p. 362. An English translation of this passage appears in Franz Wiedmann, *Hegel*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, New York, Pegasus, 1968, p. 88.



for Schwitters, van Doesburg had already proved himself "a connoisseur of things Dada." Here is a fragment of his account of their introductory evening in the Hague Kunstring:

> I was supposed to provide an example of Dadaism. But the truth is that van Doesburg, as he appeared on the platform in his dinner jacket, distinguished black shirtfront, and white tie, and on top of that bemonocled, powdered all white, his severe features imprinted with an eerie solemnity, produced an effect that was quite adequately Dada; to cite his own aphorism: "Life is a wonderful invention."
>
> Since I didn't know a word of Dutch, we had agreed that I should demonstrate Dadaism as soon as he took a drink of water. Van Doesburg drank and I, sitting in the middle of the audience, to whom I was unknown, suddenly began to bark furiously. The barking netted us a second evening in Haarlem; as a matter of fact it was sold out, because everyone was curious to see van Doesburg take a drink of water and then hear me suddenly and unexpectedly bark. At van Doesburg's suggestion, I neglected to bark on this occasion. This brought us our third evening in Amsterdam; this time people were carried out of the hall in a faint, a woman was so convulsed with laughter that for fifteen minutes she held the public attention, and a fanatical gentleman in a homespun coat prophetically hurled the epithet "idiots" at the crowd. Van Doesburg's campaign for Dadaism had gained a decisive victory. The consequence was innumerable evenings in all the cities of Holland, and everywhere van Doesburg managed to arouse the most violent hostility to himself and his forces. But again and again we all of us ventured to beard the infuriated public which we ourselves had taken pains to infuriate, and despite his black shirtfront, Does always produced the effect of a red rag. The Dutch found this deep-black elegance and distinction atrociously provocative, and consequently he was able to plough his public round and round, to cultivate his soil with the greatest care, so that important new things might spring from it.

And of another evening: "The police, who had been called in, wept; the public fought furiously amongst themselves; on all sides people congratulated us and each other with black eyes and bloody noses. It was an unparalleled Dadaist triumph."[2]

2. Kurt Schwitters, "Theo van Doesburg and Dada," trans. Ralph Manheim, in Robert Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, New York, Wittenborn Schulz, 1951, pp. 273–276.

Kurt Schwitters and Theo van Doesburg. Kleine Dada Soirée. *1922.*

Within the century's interval between these two triumphal tours, the progress of Hegelian thought in Holland had been steady, wide, decisive. Hegel's visit had been arranged on invitation by Peter Gabriel van Ghert, an early pupil and faithful friend from the Jena period, now charged with educational policy and administration in the Dutch Ministry of Culture. Van Ghert had, in fact, also arranged an offer of a chair of philosophy in Holland and a contract with a publishing house. Hegel's thought, once implanted within Dutch culture, was there to prosper, subject, of course, to the many corruptions and mutations familiar to us from the period preceding World War I. Theosophy and its influence upon the founding members of De Stijl, we must see as yet another vicissitude of the Dialectic. It is, to begin with at least, its specifically Hegelian heritage that I now wish to invoke. And in so doing I will, in referring to the writings of both van Doesburg and Mondrian, claim for their enterprise something more than a utopian direction; their aesthetics were, in fact, projects of an eschatological dimension.

Let van Doesburg have the floor. The text is an excerpt from the eloquently titled *Resurrection*, "an historical-philosophical play of Beauty and Love

in one act, enacted in the twentieth century." It was written in 1915, and the characters are three: Adonis, a painter; Jorsa La Fara, painter and friend of Adonis; a girl, the model (who remains silent throughout this excerpt). It is Jorsa who first speaks:

> Art, believe me, aims not for the new, but for the eternal. If the artist wants to speak of something eternal. . . . If he wants to penetrate to the being of things . . . to the being of the universe, then . . . then he must create from . . . the Feeling of Eternity. . . . This feeling contains all other feeling. . . . In this feeling he will bind all men together . . . as he now separates them through beauty . . . he will make them into one man. . . . This Feeling raises the dead . . . it is the cause and ultimate object of all form, of the whole cosmos. . . . To teach through this feeling . . . to live and die in it, one makes himself the midpoint of the universe.
> Adonis' voice (from the depths; wild): Huh. . . . Pause. . . .
> Jorsa's voice: You feel that this is an advance, not of the Artist alone, but the advance to a higher . . . a better . . . freer image of life. A victory over matter.[3]

It is the voice of Hegel speaking here, echoing the stilled voice of Becoming in the repose of Absolute Spirit, in that place where the Dialectic comes to rest, that point beyond Time, at the end of History. In Time, the Future has primacy, and its name in the real world is that of Desire (Mondrian will call it "tragedy" and urge its abolition through Art). Time in the world is the mode of human life. The temporal is understood as human and conversely, Man's action, arising from nonnatural human desire, is action in negation, determined by his conception of the Future. Man, as creator, is Logos. The empirical existence of Idea in the World is subtended by Time. It is human Desire that transforms the World. To understand the Real in its modes of presentness, between Past and Future, is to understand dialectically. To understand Man's Future as his death is to attain wisdom. The understanding of History, of Man and of his actions as finite entails a view of universal History as finite. It is from this outer limit that van Doesburg's artist speaks, from the midpoint of the universe, beyond History. Art is the eschatological agent of resurrection, Man's link with Being.

Now, Being, in the Dialectic, is both Identity and Negativity within Totality, the fundamental and universal ontological category. Thus, to Mondrian, in his essay of 1920 in dialogue form, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*:

3. Theo van Doesburg, "Resurrection: An historical and philosophical play of Beauty and Love in one act," trans. Hannah Hedrick, *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969), 14–18. This text was first published in the last issue of *De Stijl*, January 1932.

The number "two" which is one plus one, is a duality and yet a whole: and conversely unity implies duality. Unity appears as such only to us: In fact, it is a composite. Each unity is already a new duality, a whole, each thing is a miniature replica of the whole—a composition. . . . *So all we have to do is to consider each thing in itself as a duality—a multiplicity, a complex, then we will see only relations, and we will know things by other things.*

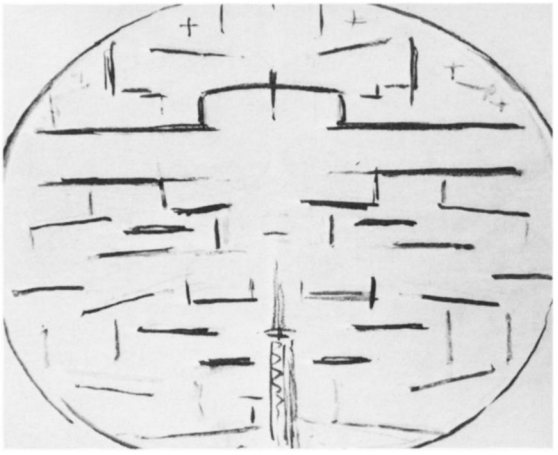
We are men and still have to represent repose by movement, unity by multiplicity. In the art of painting, it is a rhythm of lines and colors that has to make us feel the real. *The original relation, that is, the right angle, is, of course, a living reality in itself, but it becomes a plastic reality only through the relativity, that is, the multiplicity, of relations.* We ought not to look past nature, rather we should look through it; we ought to see more deeply, our vision should be abstract, universal. Then externality will become for us what it really is: the mirror of truth. To achieve this we must free ourselves from our attachment to the external, for only then do we transcend the tragic, and are enabled consciously to contemplate in repose.

Man is enabled by means of abstract-aesthetic contemplation to achieve conscious unity with the universal. . . . The deepest purpose of painting has always been to give concrete existence, through color and line, to this universal which appears in contemplation. . . . Our age, as it reaches ever higher degrees of consciousness, becomes increasingly capable of transforming the various moments of contemplation into one unique moment, into permanent contemplation.[4]

4. Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," in Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, New York, Abrams, undated, passim, italics added. This important text deserves a closer reading than those provided until now. Mondrian scholarship of the past two decades has been largely concerned, as in the work of Robert Welch and Joost Baljeu, with establishing the theosophical basis of a possible iconography. A reading of the Hegelian discourse as filtered through the texts of Mondrian and Kandinsky in their anthropomorphical and theosophical registers would, I believe, offer a more interesting avenue of investigation. A recent popular account of Mondrian's work offers a résumé of existing scholarship. Thus, Peter Gay, *Art as Act: Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian*, New York, New York University Press, 1976: "Mondrian's art is quintessentially modern, certainly, but its eloquence is only apparent. His art is, in effect, wholly unreadable.

"There is something appropriate about this illegibility. Mondrian, after all, was not a political cartoonist. Yet the conviction will not down that the striking resemblance of his work to the blank faces of skyscrapers or the angular compositions of modern design is not fortuitous. Mondrian's vision and the most modern manifestations of the modern world seem somehow and intimately involved with one another."

The number of presuppositions involved in this fragment and the text from which it is extracted, suppositions as to the nature of meaning, of iconographical method, of pertinence, of



Piet Mondrian. Pier and Ocean. *1914 (this page). 1914 (right). 1915 (far right).*

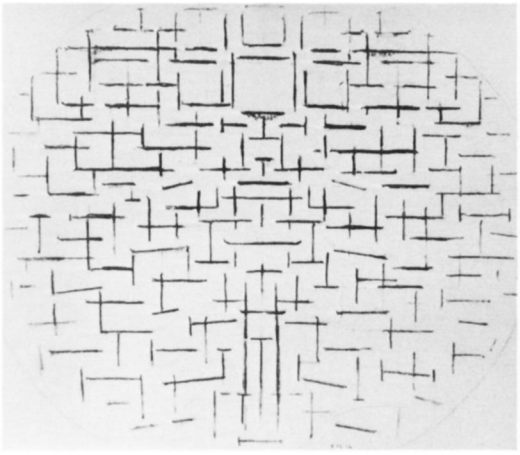
Van Doesburg had developed the eschatological thrust of the Hegelian discourse. It was Mondrian's task to produce the implementation of the Logic as an aesthetic, hypostatizing the notions of Identity and Negation in the deployment of right angles, primary colors, black and white, in what he named "an art of pure relations." (That, as we know, was the phrase constantly on his lips.)

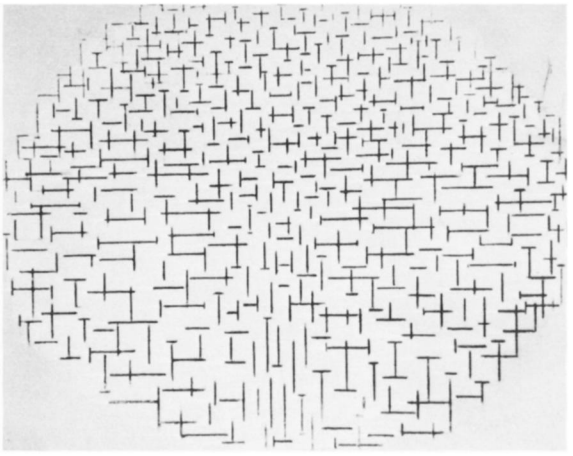
It is not, however, only the grand order and design of the Logic that Hegel bequeathed to De Stijl. Hegel offers, as well, a reading of Holland's pictorial tradition in its historical continuity, which we would be ill advised not to heed—and it is my feeling that modernist criticism and theory have been insufficiently attentive to it. I turn, therefore, to the account of Dutch art in the first volume of the *Aesthetic*, surely one of the richest of the art-critical texts in the century that saw the flowering of the discipline. It is here that Hegel offers his altogether dazzling analysis of the nature and origins of that transfiguration of the commonplace that constitutes for him the ideality of Dutch art.[5]

It is, he tells us, the Dutch and the Venetians, seaside dwellers, inhabitants of netherlands scattered with marshes and canals, who have revealed themselves as the supreme masters of color, of light and the play of light. Here

"reading," of the modern, of surface, and of facade preclude unpacking here. Gay's text is, however, interesting in that it rehearses the range of prevalent notions and methodological options, joining to them a psychoanalytically inflected description of the subject, Mondrian.

5. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Esthétique*, trans. S. Jankelevich, Paris, Editions Aubier, vol. I, part 1, passim. My attention to Hegel's remarks on Dutch art was first drawn by the excellent selection offered in Bernard Tesseydre, *Hegel: Esthétique de la peinture figurative*, Paris, Editions Herrmann, 1964, pp. 156–173. My translation is from the French.

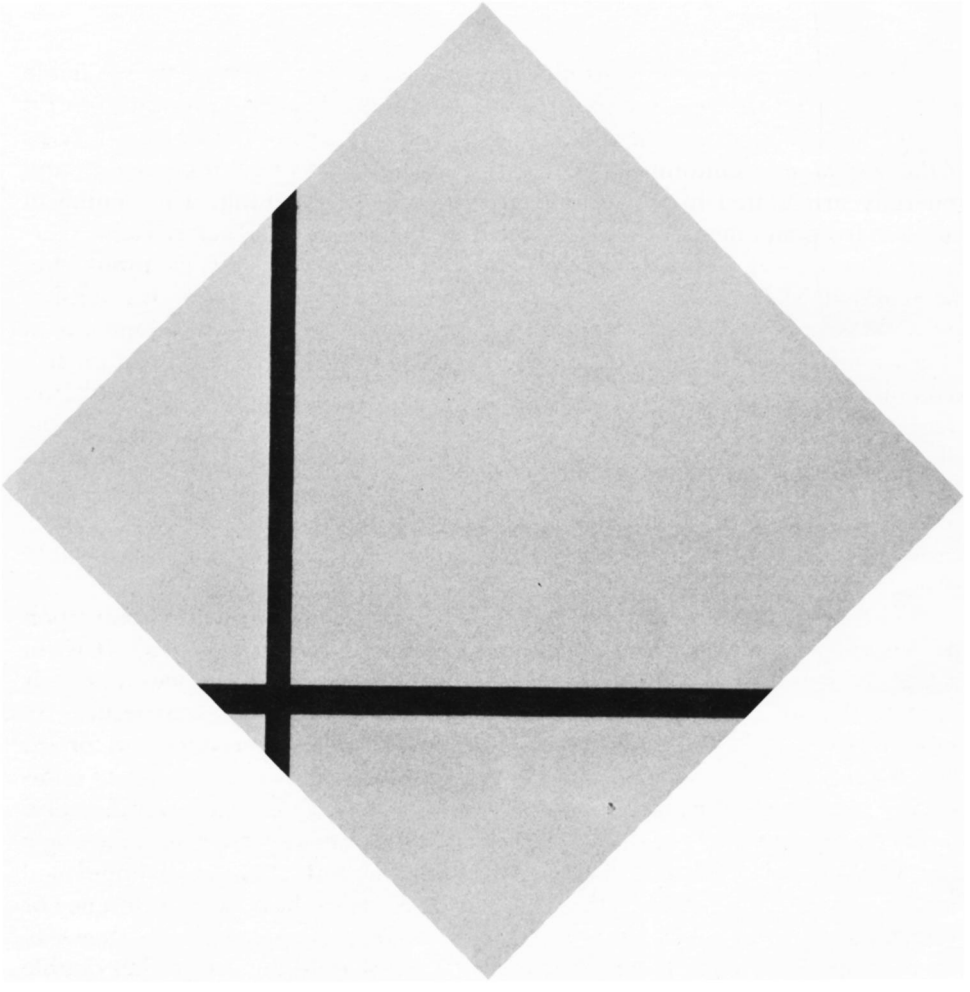




is the central task to which their artists addressed themselves. The content of this art, he goes on to say, is fairly indifferent, and may interest us but little. Rather it is the fleeting appearances of nature and its infinity of effects—the sheen of silk, the glow of velvet, the shine of metal, the haze of smoke, the gleam of wine in crystal—which are, in the painting of the Dutch masters, rendered in a manner such that the material world, exterior and sensual, is transformed to its very depths. In a particularly noteworthy passage, he speaks of

> the way in which appearances, created by the mind, are, together with the prosaic quality of the real, transformed into a miracle of ideality. Here is a kind of irony, exerted at the expense of the external world; here is a triumph of art over the decadent, perishable aspect of life and of nature, a triumph which transcends the power of substance over the fleeting moment, causing us even to doubt that power. This art, adopting as its content the appearances of objects as such, goes further still; so that it is the subjective skill in the means of art which becomes the object of the art work, its magic of color and charm of mystery. It has the look of an objective music; a sonority of color. It is as though this color were music, in which an isolated sound signifies nothing, taking on meaning only in its relations with other sounds, relations of opposition, accord, fusion, or transition.

To paint was for Mondrian to radicalize that irony, to instantiate the movement of the Dialectic toward Ideality through the progressive elimination of particular determination. By the election of the right angle, the relating of horizontal to vertical, he hypostatizes the resolution of Desire in the image of



Piet Mondrian. Composition with Two Lines. *1931*.

Equivalence. Equi-valence, we might more properly say, remembering, as well, that for Mondrian, repose is the relation of valences of force and energy within the play of absolute difference. His art of relations generalizes and sustains that play of difference, with a force and tenacity wholly unprecedented: Dialectic is projected as a diacritically structured system of signs.

*

It is an interesting and insufficiently explored fact, everywhere verifiable in Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, that the decade surrounding World War I, the extended final moment of the nineteenth century, witnesses a crisis of the verbal sign epitomized in poetry. This crisis is most immediately and generally articulated in a straining at the limits of meaning, a loosening of signifier from signified. We encounter it in the poetry of Russia, Italy, Germany, France—and, as we shall see, Holland. The new poetics, exemplified in the work of Marinetti, Tzara, Joyce, Schwitters, Kruchonykh, Kamensky, Stein, Khlebnikov, Morgenstern, is contemporary with the development of what we have come to know as abstraction in art and the dissolution of music's armature of tonality. Were I a linguist, or even a literary historian, I should gladly adopt the investigation of these interrelated events as a life project; no other seems to me more urgent and more revealing in its generality. It is upon its localization within dadaism, and within Italian and Russian futurism (in both *parole in libertá* and *zaum*: words in freedom and the language of transsense), and their particular point of juncture with De Stijl that I now wish to focus.

The crisis of language is both contemporary with and consequent upon the founding moment of modern linguistics (Saussure died in 1913). It is, in fact, even as the nature of the linguistic system is clarified that it is placed in crisis through the art of its period. Let us remember, too, that Saussure, in elaborating his definition of the linguistic sign, had wrested it, once and for all, from a certain variety of picture theory; he therefore posited the sign as composed of two elements, indissociable and "arbitrarily" related: signifier and signified are compared, in the celebrated image, to the reverse sides of a single sheet of paper. The referent, that entity in the real world, is to be distinguished from the concept inscribed in the signified. It is, as we have seen, reference or determination from which Mondrian wished to sever painting. Signs, then—to rehearse the Saussurean claim—are not pictures of anything, but rather double articulations, diacritical, arbitrarily constituted within a system of differences and/or oppositions, deriving their meaning from within the totality of the system as such. Two considerations must now be borne in mind: Saussure's radical insistence on the unmotivated nature of the sign[6] and the consequent founding of his method on the level of phonology, that of the linguistic atom, the smallest element of utterance, the individual sound. The phoneme, seen

6. Recent research has modified this view of the sign as arbitrary. This question is discussed in its recent developments by Joel Fineman in "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), 47–66.

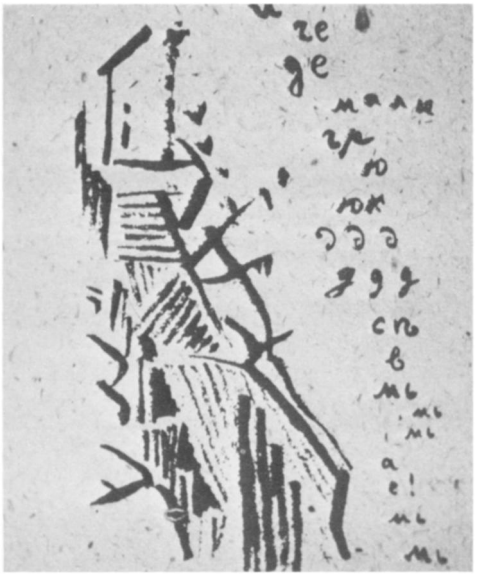
thus, performs the function of distinction, and it is insofar as this system of differences is available to us that we make meaning. It is, then, in 1912 that Marinetti proclaims, in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, a poetics *dictated by the propeller of his plane*, while flying high over Milan. It calls for:

> the destruction of syntax
> the dispersal and doubling of nouns
> the stress upon, and systematic use of, infinitives
> the abolition of the adverb and of punctuation
> the adoption of mathematical symbols as surrogates for relations of conjunctions, accumulation, subtraction.[7]

What was wanted was an orchestral style, polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous. And Marinetti gave to his renewal of language the name *parole in libertá*. This renewal of language, of meaning, was to proceed through the destruction of the I, that is, of psychology, and it called for the invention of a "wireless imagination" (*Immaginazione senza fili*) in which the first terms of all

7. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, ed. and with an introduction by R. W. Flint, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971, pp. 84–89.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Parole in Libertá. *1913.*



Alexei Kruchonykh. Page from Explodity. *1913.*

analogies are suppressed. A revealing detail from David Burliuk's hilarious account of Marinetti's 1912 tour of Russia describes a reading before a group of young futurist poets assembled in St. Petersburg and determined to withstand the conquering Italian's patronizing bravado. As Marinetti proclaimed, with his usual panache, that he had eliminated grammar and syntax, he was loudly corrected by the group, with Kruchonykh exclaiming, "But your style of declamation restores them immediately!"

The linguistic utopia of Russian futurism was certainly sympathetic to the wireless imagination. It proposed an analysis and resynthesis of language in the creation of a poetics whose universality was contingent upon a transcendence of the limits of nationality, as of rationality. Thus *zaum*, the transrational, trans-mental idiom of its radical poetics, is a Russian phonemic condensation of special resonance. One may see *zaum* as the radical challenge of the *Logos* as *ratio* within the Western metaphysical tradition. The fragmentation of the word, the reassemblage, in invented orders (those which in rhetoric we call anacoluthia) of the elementary root structures, of old Russian morphemes, of onomatopoeias, characterizes the futurist publications, enhanced by the advanced graphic design of the time, its typography, and sense of *mise en page*. For the Russians—and Kruchonykh's view is perhaps the clearest at this early stage:

> Artists until now had proceeded to the word through thought, and we, we grasp immediacy through the word. We declare the word to be larger, wider than meaning; the word (and its component parts) is not only idea, not only logic, it is, above all, transmental, related to the irrational, the mystical, the aesthetic. And each letter counts, each sound. We must master our materials as the mystics, members of religious sects have, speaking in tongues.[8]

And an entire linguistic tradition, from Rosenstein in the nineteenth century, through Tynianov and Jakobson in the twentieth, will define the significance of the word as indeterminate except in relation to other words—subject, in any case, to fluctuating signification, susceptible to the loosening of signifier from signified that we on occasion term non-sense. Let us center our reflections upon this development on three poetic texts, drawn from German dada, the "critical" literature of Russia, and from Holland. They represent different moments in that development, and I shall consider them without regard to their chronological order. The first, the greatest and most celebrated from within the dada movement, is Schwitters's *Merz-Poem No. 1*, to his beloved, Anna Blume, so named for reasons that become explicit in what we may well

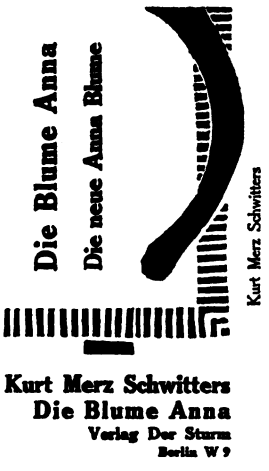
8. A. Kruchonykh, "*Les Voies nouvelles du mot (langue de l'avenir: mort au symbolisme)*, 1931, trans. from the Russian by Henri Deluy, *Action Poétique*, no. 48 (1971), 42–49.

call the body of the text, and translated by Schwitters, during his residence in England, as "eve Blossom has wheels."[9]

O thou, beloved of my twenty-seven senses,
I love thine!
Though thee thee thine, I thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) is beside the point
Who art thou, uncounted woman,
Thou art, art thou?
People say, thou werst,
Let them say, they don't know what they are talking about.
Thou wearest thine hat on thy feet, and wanderest on thine hands,
On thine hands thou wanderest.
Hallo, thy red dress, sewn into white folds,
Red I love eve Blossom, red I love thine.
Thou thee thee thine, I thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) belongs to the cold glow!
eve Blossom, red eve Blossom, what do people say?
PRIZE 1. eve Blossom is red.
2. eve Blossom has wheels.
QUESTION: 3. what colour are the wheels?
Blue is the colour of your yellow hair,
Red is the whirl of your green wheels,
Thou simple maiden in everyday dress,
Thou small green beast,
I love thine!
Thou thee thee thine, thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) belongs to the glowing brazier!
eve Blossom,
eve,
E-V-E
E easy, V victory, E easy,
I trickle your name.
Your name drops like soft tallow.
Do you know it, eve,
Do you already know it?
One can also read you from the back.
And you, you most glorious of all,

9. Kurt Schwitters, "eve Blossom has wheels," trans. by Schwitters, in Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, New York, Abrams, 1967, p. 204.

You are from the back as from the front,
E-V-E.
Easy victory.
Tallow trickles to strike over my back!
eve Blossom,
Thou drippy animal,
I
Love
Thine!
I love you!!!



Schwitters here acknowledges the libidinal source of the will to confound beginning and ending. The rejection of a structural telos (of the genital grammar of the body) is linked with pleasure in the ambi-valence of the name E-V-E newly bestowed upon the beloved. Grammar and genitality are both subsumed in the delighted insistence on the body as text to be ambivalently read as it is polymorphously enjoyed. (Or as Schwitters was to say, on another occasion, "Why shouldn't a locomotive run backwards from time to time?") Liberated from the constraints of purposiveness the autotelic text extends *une promesse de bonheur*, "a promise of bliss." The utopia of Russian futurism, absorbed into the Soviet constructivist aesthetic, was, as one might expect, not wholly congruent with that of dada's polymorphous perversity. It was, however, as we shall see, by no means unrelated to it.

Consider Kamensky's ferro-concrete "Poem on the Letter *K*," listed as number 82 in the catalogue *The Avant-Garde in Russia.*[10] It is an example of *zaum* that depends for its full effect upon both sound and sight, here reproduced in transliteration and literal translation:

K	(Klinók)	K (Blade)
Kak		As
Kirká	KólKo	Pick (Chopping)
Kólet	Kámen	Stabs Stone
Tak	Kukúshki	Like Cuckoo Clock (Steam Locomotive)
Krik	Ku-Ku	Shouts Cuckoo
Kóvka	Gálka	Forging Jackdaw
Kóvka	Pálka	Forging Stick
Ka—Ke—Ki		Ka—ke—ki
1918		1918
Ko	Kamenski Vasilii	Ko Kamensky Vassily

The text is patently aggressive in its imagery, but it contains as well a subtext or foretext/pretext which stands forth in the capital letters strewn reiteratively over the surface. They stand for the poet himself, his name Kamensky, which contains, of course, *Kamen,* or stone. He offers us this earnest of his presence in the letter *K*. *K*, then, or Ka, as the letter is pronounced in Russian, is the basic phonemic element of this subtext, pretext, foretext, which we must read as "Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka." This dispersal of meaning is the explosion of matter in the face of the reading and listening public.

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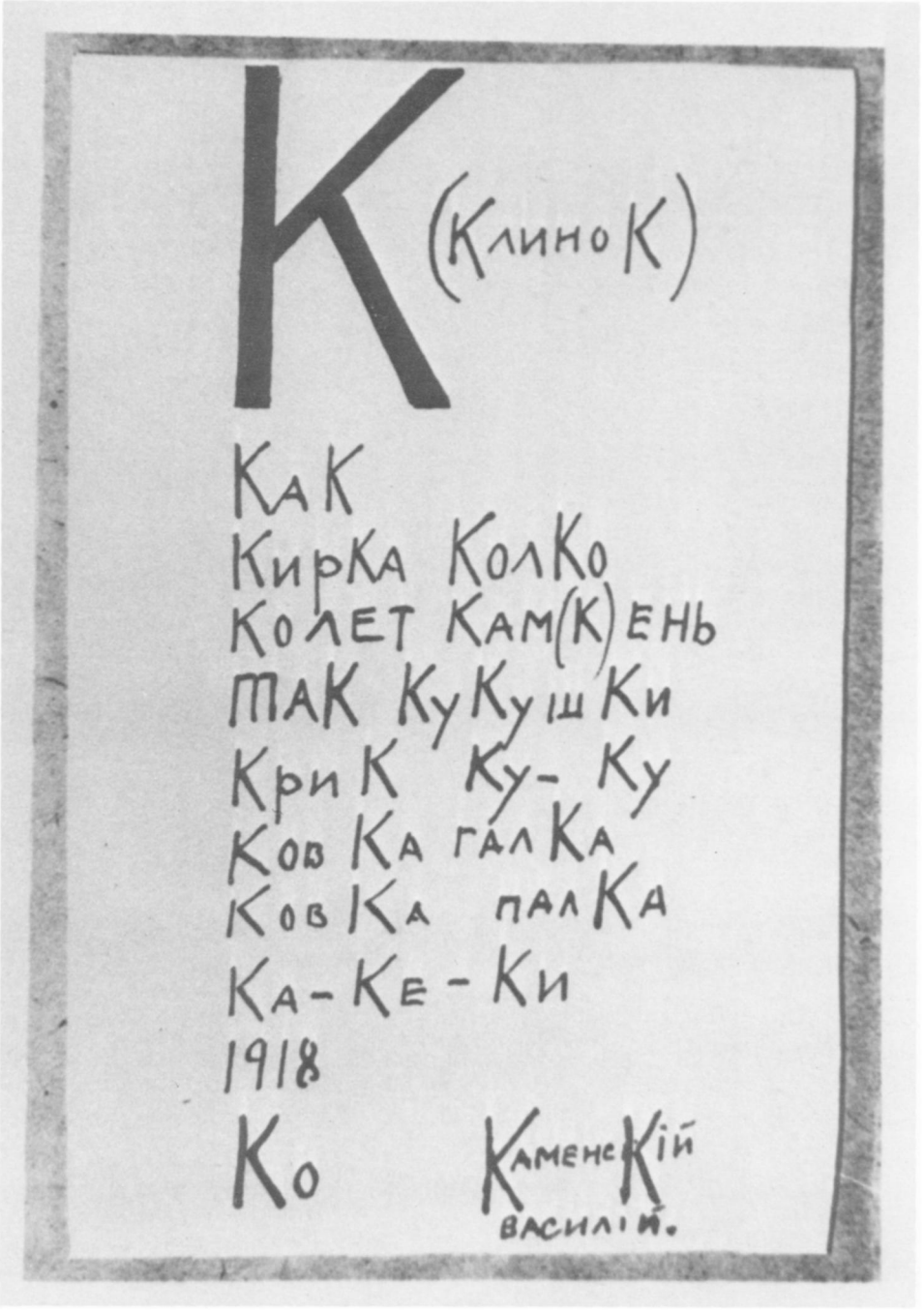
It is precisely at this point in our story that the plot thickens. Enter suddenly another character, none other than the mysterious I. K. Bonset. And who is he? Well, as all scholars of the movement know, he is a man of parts: poet, contributor to *Merz*—Schwitters's journal—he is also the editor of his own journal, *Mécano*, whose design and typography are the work of none other than Theo van Doesburg. And, in addition, he publishes from time to time in *De Stijl*. Dada Piet, who regards dadaism as a strategic ally in the destruction of

10. Vasilii Vasilievich Kamensky, "Poem on the Letter *K*," linocut, 1981, reproduced in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930,* Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1980, p. 161.



Vasilii Vasilievich Kamensky. Poem on the Letter *K*. *1918. (Courtesy Thomas P. Whitney.)*

Theo van Doesburg. Letter-Sound Images. *1921*.

Blikken trommel
Blikken trommel
Blikken trommel
RANSEL
BLikken trommel
Blikken trommel
Ransel
Blikken trommel
Ransel
Blikken trommel
RAN

Rui schen
Rui schen
Rui schen
Rui schen
Ruischen
Ruisch . . .
Rui . . .
Ru . . .
Ru . . .
R . . .
R . . .
r . .

Theo van Doesburg. Mécano, *nos. 4–5. 1923*.

pictorial representation, nevertheless warns van Doesburg against further publication of Bonset's texts, for he is obviously "using their ideas"![11] Bonset, is, of course, van Doesburg's alter ego (or rather one of them, for he has split himself into parts); he appears first in the December 1919 issue of *De Stijl*, in a text entitled "The Other Face," which marks his wish to link the cause of his movement with that of dada. As I. K. Bonset (whose true identity is carefully concealed from Mondrian) he may cavort in ludic freedom in the pages of his new journal. This release, this coming out, came not a moment too soon; for the canon of van Doesburg's writings includes the futurist *X*-image poems and letter-sound images, the entire program of a new poetics elaborated as early as 1915 (two years before the founding of *De Stijl*). "Sound," proclaims van Doesburg, in accents which are becoming familiar to us, "should live and be heard, not merely read."[12]

X-IMAGES

i am penetrated by the room where the tram glides through
i have a cap on
organ sounds
from outside—through me
disintegrate behind me out of tune
little fragments
TIN TIN TIN
and glass
little black cyclists
in my likeness glide and disappear n
+ LIGHT
the palsied quaking tree crown
fragments the exterior
into multicolored matter
the blackwhite waterpilings
4 × HORIZONTAL
innumerable vertical pilings
and too the high
curved blue
INFINITE SPACE
AM I[13]

11. Mondrian in a letter to van Doesburg, cited in Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg*, New York, Macmillan, 1974, p. 38.
12. Cited in Hannah Hedrick, "Van Doesburg's Dream," *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969), 11.
13. Theo van Doesburg, "*X*-image poem," from the collection, *Cubistic Verses, 1913–1919*,

For Hannah Hedrick, the editor of a selection of theoretical and poetic texts, van Doesburg creates "an intermediate form of poetry, exposing his readers to abstractions, in order to prepare them for his later, more radical work."[14] *Ik Kom*, an unpublished manuscript, declares his intention to destroy the old forms and to impress the world with the power of the word. Ms Hedrick passes lightly, however—and in this she is not alone—over an extremely interesting text of van Doesburg's, his very first sound poem, written, while on military service, to his friend Anthony Kok, in 1915, two years before the founding of the movement. Here it is:

A-/aba-/ca ca-/ca, ca ca/ ca da,/da, da,-/ da da da.[15]

It is the founding father of *De Stijl*, the celebrant of the Dialectic, the Hierophant of the Absolute who has produced this text. Kruchonykh, Kamensky, Schwitters, van Doesburg, Tzara, "cacaphonists" all. We seem to have wandered into a pan-European nursery, resonant with an infantile demotic that inscribes within the empyrean of Hegelian onto-aesthetics the discourse of a primitive anal eroticism. As Schwitters was later to say, "Dada had to arise and let out the pent-up gases; poop-poop!"

How does this come to be, and what can it signify? I turn for further instruction to the tradition of linguistics that culminates in the work of Roman Jakobson, and most particularly to his work on the elements of language formation as observed in children, for as Jakobson, quoting Buhler, reminds us, "the child provides the only opportunity that we have to observe language in its nascent state."[16]

The child borrows and creates, through modification of his linguistic models, persevering in deviations, resisting every attempt at correction. Children will often create a separate language. Above all, the child is an imitator who is imitated. We know this from our observations of the way in which adults will speak to children, adopting their pronunciation, approximating their timbre. The child begins, however, as a babbler, producing a huge, all-inclusive panoply of sounds; the babbler will, in fact, with no difficulty reproduce, in an unstructured chain, a kind of phonetic abundance of "wild sounds," which are then transformed into entities of linguistic value. That is to say, the first stage of actual language entails a reduction of that enormous range, a selection of

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trans. Hannah Hedrick in *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969). This text was first published in *De Stijl*, vol. III, no. 7 (May 1920), 57.

14. Hedrick, "Van Doesburg's Dream," p. 11.

15. This first "sound-poem without words," contained in a letter of September 22, 1915, from van Doesburg to his friend, the poet Anthony Kok, is cited by Hannah Hedrick.

16. For the following exposition I have drawn on "*Les Lois phoniques du langage enfantin et leur place dans la phonologie générale*," "Why 'Mama' and 'Papa,'" and "Phonology and Phonetics," Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, The Hague, Mouton, 1962.

speech sounds for the construction of a phonemic system. Once that system is launched, we observe a succession that is universally valid and strictly regulated by structural laws.

The acquisition of language is determined by the physiological structure of the organs of utterance (mouth, tongue, vocal cords). At the beginning of the first stage of language development, the acquisition of vowels is launched with a wide vowel, and, at the same time, the acquisition of consonants by a forward articulated stop. An *a* therefore emerges as the first vowel, and generally a labial *m* as the first consonant, in child language. The first consonantal opposition, then, in the construction of differences within language, is that of nasal and oral stop (e.g., *mama-papa*). This is followed by the opposition of labials and dentals (e.g., *papa–tata* and *mama-nana*). These two oppositions form the minimal consonantal system of the languages of the world. These are the only oppositions that cannot be lacking anywhere, provided that there is no mechanical deformity of the speech apparatus (*dyslalia labialis*). The general loss of labials in the language of females in several central African tribes is caused by the ritual of lip mutilations.

The construction of the more complete system of utterance involves the acquisition of back consonants and presupposes the acquisition, already accomplished, of the front consonants, labials and dentals. Thus, the velar sounds—*g* and *k*—require solidarity with *p* and *t* or *m* and *n*. There are languages without velar sounds, but where they exist they do so in relation to the foregoing. The two first consonantal oppositions are followed by the first vocalic opposition; narrow vs. wide vowel, or *papa-pipi*. Then *papa*, *pipi*, *pupu* or *papa*, *pipi*, *pepe*. As Van Ginneken has observed, in studies of Dutch children—but it is a rule that is generalizable—"The development is from general human language to Dutch."

In that development, the velar sign *k* and its twin *g* emerged at a particular stage, detaching themselves and in opposition to the dental sound *d* and its twin *t*. *Dada* and *kaka* or *caca*, then, are linked in the paradigm of the secondary stage of language formation. And as *mama* (the first level of opposition) represents the child's first effort, through repetition, to install a lexicality within the oppositional basis of a language system, so we may see *dada* and *kaka* as linked in its elaboration. It is, as well (as we have seen) a common speech of European modernism. What remains to be said in our reading of that point of junction between De Stijl and dada?

First, that the glossolalic poetics of European modernism in the second decade of the century represents the development of the autotelic text of free play. The semiotics of *zaum*, *merz*, *parole in libertá*, *X*-images, like that of music, is, in a sense, one of auto-signification, introvertive like that of nonfigurative sculpture and painting. Second, it would appear to be this historical moment of aspiration to the universal, to the Equivalence of the Absolute, to an art of pure relations, which secretes, as it were, the glossolalic poetics of anal eroticism.

We have recognized this discourse as that of the early stages of formation of symbolic sign systems, that moment in which the relations of phonemic oppositions come to symbolize the child's situation in the world of its immediate concerns (Ma, Pa, Ka, Da). But it is, of course, also that moment in which everything relating to themselves is endowed by children with a narcissistic esteem. It is, as psychoanalysis has taught us, only as we grow older that we learn secrecy and shame, for children exhibit pride in their own excretions, and use them in their relations with adults. The excremental impulse and the sexual instincts, for reasons both anatomical and cultural, are not yet quite distinct in children; and it was Freud's view that the child recapitulates the cultural phylogeny of the race in learning shame.[17] (The persistence of coprophilic rites in folklore and language testifies to the ancient esteem for excrement which is preserved from childhood.) The literature of psychoanalysis—the case studies of Freud and of Klein among others—is rich in the theorization of the role of faeces in the child's development: the equation of faeces and baby, the fantasmatic projection of excrement as both good and bad substance. Children are known to use excrement as a weapon, and to make of it a gift. It is fantasized as a magical substance for the gaining of control; it is magical in its protean character, the manner in which it assumes the function with which the child has endowed it. As Schwitters said, "Merz had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning I gave it."

Marion Milner has related the analysis of an eleven-year-old girl who fervently and defiantly scribbled over every surface she could find:

> The apparent defiance did not change until I began to guess that the trouble was less to do with faeces given in anger and meant to express anger, than with faeces given in love and meant to express love. In this sense it was a battle over how she was to communicate her love, a battle over what kind of medium she was going to use for the language of love. The battle over communicating the private vision, when the battleground is the evaluation of the body products, has a peculiar poignancy. In challenging the accepted objective view and claiming the right to make others share their vision, there is a danger which is perhaps the sticking point in the development of many who would otherwise be creative people. For to win this battle, when fought on this field, would mean to seduce the world to madness, to denial of the difference between organization and chaos. Thus in one sense the battle is a very practical one; it is over what is a suitable and convenient stuff for symbols to be made of; but at the same time it is also a battle over the painful recognition that, if the

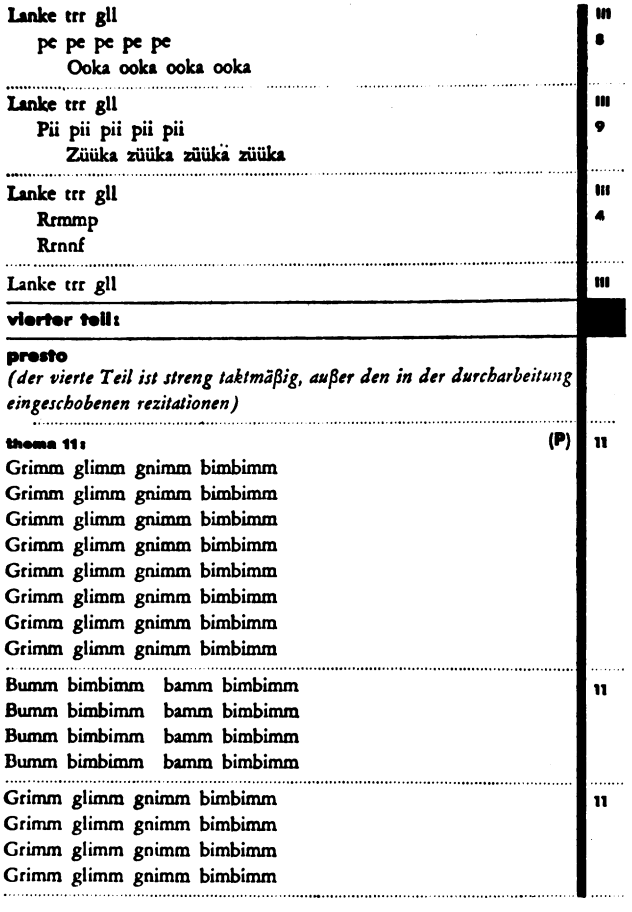
17. The locus classicus of these considerations is Sigmund Freud's "Preface to Bourke's Scatalogic Rites of All Nations," (1913) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 12, pp. 333-340.

lovely stuff (or matter) to the children is to convey the lovely feelings, there must be work done on the material.[18]

Or, as we say, work upon the signifier is the principle of the modern artistic text. The poetics of anal glossolalia may be seen as the hyperbolic instance of the sliding of signifier over signified in the choreographic movement of a glissade.

18. Marion Milner, "The role of Illusion in Symbol Formation," in *New Directions in Psychoanalysis: The Significance of Infant Conflict in the Pattern of Adult Behaviour*, ed. Melanie Klein, Paula Heimann, R. E. Money-Kyrle, London, Tavistock Publications, 1955, p. 108.

Kurt Schwitters. Page from the Ursonote. *1932.*



It was the grand cacaphonist, Schwitters, who said, "Today expression in a work of art seems to me injurious to art. Art is a primordial concept, exalted as the Godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and without purpose. . . ." And, "Merz aims only at art, because no man can serve two masters." But we *do* serve two masters, and do not Mondrian, Schwitters, and van Doesburg rehearse the dynamics of the Freudian topology, with van Doesburg as its mediating instance? He had, of course, to split himself to do it. It is Mondrian and Schwitters who have, with Hegel, had the last words.

Mondrian: "The purpose of Neo-Plasticism for the New Man is to awaken the deepest interiority, which is to say, the Universal, and not only to stir it powerfully, but also to express it with precision."

Schwitters: "A game we play with serious matter, that is art."

This essay is, in large part, a first result of a continuing exchange upon questions of language and aesthetics with my coeditor, Rosalind Krauss. To her stimulating interest and encouragement it owes a great deal.