



Kazimir Malevich
The Black Square, 1915
Oil on linen
31 1/4 × 31 1/4 inches
Courtesy Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The Complexity of Simplicity: The Inner Structure of the Artistic Image

Juhani Pallasmaa

*The means with which one paints can never be simple enough. I have always forced myself to become simpler. But the maximum simplicity coincides with the maximum fullness. The simplest means frees the eye for vision to the maximum of clarity. And in the long run only the simplest means is convincing. But courage has always been required in order to be simple. I think there's nothing harder in the world. Those who work with simple means should never be afraid of becoming apparently trite.*¹

—Henri Matisse (1869–1954)

*Making the simple complicated is commonplace, making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.*²

—Charles Mingus (1922–1979)

We tend to think of simplicity and complexity as polar and exclusive opposites. When speaking of phenomena in logic, this view may well be acceptable, but our mental lives and artistic imagery do not follow rules of rationality and logic. While the logical processes focus, the emotive artistic exploration opens up and widens; a logical entity is exclusive, whereas artistic imagery aspires to inclusivity. The objective of art is always to evoke something about the entity of human existential experience. And our minds are in constant flux of images, thoughts, associations, recollections, emotions, and dreams. This existential and mental fusion of irreconcilable categories is the essential realm of art.

¹Henri Matisse in a conversation with Gotthard Jedlich, 1952. Text was displayed in the exhibition *Henri Matisse: Arabesque*, Scuderia del Quirinale, Rome, 2015.

²The quote originates in a letter by Michael Matiisen to the author, dated January 2013.

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In his book *The Philosophy of No: A Philosophy of the New Scientific Mind*, Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), the French philosopher of science and poetic imagery (whose book *The Poetics of Space* has been one of the most influential texts in architectural theory since its publication in 1958), argues that all scientific thought develops along a predestined path: from animism through realism, positivism, rationalism, and complex rationalism to dialectic rationalism [2, p. 15]. “The philosophical evolution of a special piece of scientific knowledge is a movement through all these doctrines in the order indicated,” he argues [2, p. 16]. In my view, artistic thinking aspires to advance in the opposite direction; the arts work their way from the realist, rational, intellectual, and analytic understanding of the world back towards a unifying mythical and animistic experience, and art seeks to re-mythicize, re-enchant, and re-eroticize our relationship with the world.

Paradoxically, the notion of simplicity is commonly used both in a pejorative sense and in acknowledgement of a distinct quality. Also the notion of complexity has a dual essence, it implies both something chaotic or unresolved, and a synthetic unity of a multifaceted field of phenomena. To further confuse the interplay of the two notions in the arts, the fundamental meaning of artistic and architectural works is always beyond the material work itself, as it evokes and mediates relationships and horizons of perception, feeling, and understanding. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) points out: “We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work.”³ This philosopher’s observation also applies to architecture; a profound building frames and guides our perceptions, actions, thoughts, and feelings instead of being the objective itself. It projects an epic narrative of human life and culture. As a consequence, the entire complexity of life becomes part of even the simplest of artistic or architectural works. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) suggests: “If the painter presents us with a field or a vase of flowers, his paintings are windows which are open on the whole world” [16, p. 272]. This openness to the world of feeling and interpretation is an inherent quality of all profound artistic images.

Instead of analyzing and separating things, art is fundamentally engaged in merging and fusing opposites. Alvar Aalto (1898–1976), the Finnish master architect, for one, argued that only by means of uniting opposites, can an artistic work achieve meaningfulness. “Whatever our task... [i]n every case [of creative work] opposites must be reconciled... Almost every formal assignment involves dozens, often hundreds, sometimes thousands of conflicting elements that can be forced into functional harmony only by an act of will. This harmony cannot be achieved by any other means than art.”⁴

The art form of architecture is logically an “impure” or “messy” category, as it contains and fuses ingredients from conflicting and even irreconcilable categories, such as materiality and feeling, construction and aesthetics, physical facts and

³Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as quoted in [10, p. 409].

⁴Alvar Aalto, “Taide ja tekniikka” (Art and technology), lecture, Academy of Finland, October 3, 1955, in [1, p. 174].

beliefs, knowledge and dreams, past and future, means and ends. In fact, it is hard to imagine a more complex and internally more conflicting human endeavor than architecture.

Such an array of unrelated and conflicting factors, aspects, requirements, and concerns can only be brought to a synthesis—or harmony, to use Aalto’s notion—through a creative process based on deep mental identification, embodied metaphors and the fusion of doubt and certainty, emotion and judgement, intuition and feeling, belief and desire. The mediating and reconciliatory task of architecture is twofold; it fuses a multitude of dimensions into an experiential and structured entity, and it serves as an essential fusion of the world and the self. In this fusion we are encountering the miracle of the poetic image and imagination. Architectural projects and propositions are lived spatial metaphors which have their impacts largely on a prereflective and unconscious level. Colin St John Wilson (1922–2007), the architect of the British Library whose former house at Cambridge currently houses the Wittgenstein archive, describes this impact convincingly [20]:

It is as if I am manipulated by some subliminal code, not to be translated into words, which acts directly on the nervous system and imagination, at the same time stirring intimations of meaning with vivid spatial experience as though they were one thing. It is my belief that the code acts so directly and vividly upon us because it is strangely familiar; it is in fact the first language we ever learned, long before words... now recalled to us through art, which alone holds the key to revive it...

The utterly reductive spatial works of the American artist Fred Sandback (1943–2003) exemplify the perceptual interplay of an extremely simple image and an unexpectedly complex and sensorially subtle experience. In their material essence his works are as minimal as artworks can possibly be, only a few thin lines stretched in space. They could be regarded as “minimalism,” but the artist himself did not like the label and preferred to call his pieces “sculptures” or “constructions” [15]. The notion of minimalism is altogether problematic, as usually the characterization is based on a purely formal understanding of the work, or a process of deliberate formal simplification as a stylistic preconception. Sandback defines his works as “simple facts” without any representational intentions.⁵ Yet, the artist’s statement of his conscious intention cannot void the perceptual and cognitive processes that his works set in motion in the observer’s mind. Regardless of the artist’s expressed view, his works automatically complete their gestalt in the viewer’s mind, and seek their meanings. Frank Stella famously described his intention: “What you see is what you see,”⁶ but in the phenomenon of art, what you experience is never what you actually see. A profound work opens up a wide field of images, meanings, associations, recollections and intuitions. Every great work of art is an open excavation. In the

⁵“A sculpture made with just a few lines may seem very purist or geometric at first. My work isn’t either of these things. My lines aren’t distillations or refinements of anything. They are simple facts, issues of my activity that don’t represent anything beyond themselves. My pieces are offered as concrete, literal situations and not as indications of any other sort of order [14, p. 106].

⁶Source unidentified.

light of current neurological studies the process of “seeing” is far more complex than has been assumed; the process of perception always fuses observation, memory, and imagination and it is essentially a creative act.

The hidden complexity of Sandback’s spatial configurations arises from our perceptual mechanism, the *gestalt* power of geometry, and the convention of reading spatiality in a drawing, as well as from the essential and unavoidable ambivalences and tensions between the material and imaginative realities in art. Besides, we constantly seek meaning because the act of giving meaning is built into our system of perception itself. Sandback’s nearly immaterial lines of acrylic yarn, tensioned in space, are essentially philosophical questions: why and how does a spatial image arise; what is the reality of this mental unreality; why does a thing exist rather than not?

Sandback’s works are essentially spatial drawings: his lines make us see a specifically shaped figure of space, an imaginary shape or volume set on the floor, leaning against a wall, or suspended in the air. The connected lines, arranged as planar configurations in a corner of a gallery, or suspended between the walls, ceiling, and/or floor, lose their linear nature as a drawing, as they become immaterial spaces with ideated materiality. The air inside the imaginative figure seems denser and of a slightly different consistency than the air outside the figure. The nonexistent plane even acquires an experiential color and weight. This artistic alchemy is particularly effective in the constructions of four lines that make us conceive a rectangular plane leaning against a wall. The imagined rectangle transforms into a sheet of glass-like transparent but non-existent matter, and the construction seems paradoxically both to invoke an imaginary volume and to annul weight and gravity. The “plane” leaning against the wall appears to bend of its own weight. These experiences or perceptions are likely to be a result of our empathetic capacity brought about by our mirror neurons and systems; we feel the imaginary plane through our unconscious bodily mimesis, or embodied simulation, and our combined sense of balance and gravity. Similarly, we experience the weight and ideated movement of Richard Serra’s pieces of steel through our muscles and bones, skin and sense of balance. We re-enact what we see through the empathetic capacity of our body. Without being conscious of it, we become the artistic work that we are looking at, listening to, or reading. “Be like me,” is the demand of every poem to its reader, according to Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), and this unconscious identification applies to all art, including architecture [6].

Yet, visual tricks and illusions are mere perceptual demonstrations of the psychologist or the magic of an illusionist, whereas an artistic impact calls for a metaphoric and existential content. Profound artistic works are always about the world and the perceiver’s own life situation and consciousness. A work of art makes us encounter a specific world, which is not symbolic, but real in its own right. What are the hidden metaphors of Sandback’s constructions? Don’t his works question the assumptions of naive realism, and don’t they reveal to us the relativity and dialectical nature of our experience of reality. We do not live in a given and objective world, but one of our own making, and this world and our self constitute an entity

and continuum. “In a word, the [artistic] image is not a certain meaning...but an entire world reflected in a drop of water,” as the great Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986) suggests [18, p. 110].

A work of art has a double existence: it takes place in its own reality of matter and execution, on the one hand, and in an imaginative world of perception, association, thought, and emotion, on the other. We do not usually see the silhouette of a figure as an independent line because we perceive the physical object that it encloses, and we name that very object. The focusing on one aspect of our perceptual field tends to make us lose sight of the other aspects. We do not primarily experience the physical matter of sculpture either, as we perceive the volume and shape of the piece in its suggestive and imaginative reality. Similarly, in a building we do not experience the meaningless physical space as we are affected by the architecturally articulated space possessing specific intentionalities and meanings. Art makes visible the invisible and gives meaning to the meaningless. A tension between these two realities is fundamental for the magic of art.

The ultimate ideal of all art (and an impossibility, we must admit) is to fuse the complexity of human experiences into a singular image, or “the oceanic feeling” of unity and oneness of the child in the mother’s womb, as psychoanalytic thinking suggests. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) writes touchingly about the ingredients of this poetic condensation: “[V]erses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings—they are experiences. For the sake of a single verse, one must see many cities, men and things, one must know the animals, one must feel how the birds fly and know the gesture with which the little flowers open in the morning” [12, p. 26]. The poet continues his list of experiences required for the writing of a single verse for the length of a full page. He lists roads leading to unknown regions, unexpected encounters and separations, childhood illnesses and withdrawals into the solitude of rooms, nights of love, screams of women in labor, and tending the dying. But even all of this together is not sufficient to create a line of verse. In the poet’s view, one has to forget all of this and have patience to wait for the distilled return of these experiences. Only after all our life experiences have turned to our own blood within us, “not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them” [12, p. 27]. The poet’s powerful description makes clear that a poem is not a formal invention; it is a poetically constructed world.

In the mental and artistic realms a special form of complexity in simplicity is the archetype. The concept originates in Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) idea of “archaic remnants” of the mind. Later, Carl Jung (1875–1961) defined the archetype as a tendency of an image to evoke distinct associations, feelings and meanings in our collective memory. Again, the openness and layeredness of the mental phenomenon is essential—a wealth of associations mediated by a collectively identifiable image, instead of a specific and closed meaning. In their desire to fuse the primordial mythical past and the lived actuality, works of art tend to approach the concept of the archetype, or these works touch upon a hidden imagery of primordial power.

Barnett Newman (1905–1970), the American Abstract Expressionist painter, entitled some of his paintings, consisting of a single linear element against the

background of a single color, *Onements*. The painter condenses a multitude of existential experiences into an ultimately simple image. Kazimir Malevich's (1879–1935) painting of a black square on white ground and Yves Klein's (1928–1962) mono-chromatic paintings, as well as James Turrell's (1943–) skyspaces, are similar “onements,” which fuse the multiplicity of experiences into a singular indivisible whole. There are no “elements” in these works, only their singularity. Do they represent simplicity or complexity?

These works derive their richness from their enigmatic nature; they are inexhaustible generators of questions and feelings. The experience of encountering a work of art is not simply a matter of looking at or hearing the work. The process is a complex interaction and exchange between the work and the embodied mind of the person experiencing it. Ingredients of one's individual memory as well as archetypal meanings and feelings enter the process; the encounter unveils layers of the work at the same time that the work unveils layers of the perceiving mind. In Lucio Fontana's (1899–1966) famous slashed canvases, for instance, the violent act of gashing is certainly present as an unconscious mimetic experience; when looking at his works, I feel the threatening sharpness of the blade, and the “pain” of the canvas being slashed. Viewing an artwork is not unlike an archeological excavation in which both the depth of the work and the perceiving mind are being simultaneously excavated.

The difficulty of determining something as simple or complex in an artwork, arises from the fact that any artistic image—painting, poem, a piece of music, or architectural space—exists simultaneously in two realms, firstly as a material phenomenon in the physical world, and secondly as a mental image in the unique individual experience. In the first sense, the *Black Square* of Malevich is just a simple geometric figure in black against a white ground, executed by the painter's brush. However, the painted surface, cracked by time, gives the painting a sense of uniqueness and authenticity, reality and age, beyond its geometric essence, as well as its iconic authority and aura. Old icon paintings possess a similar authority and radiance. The work is in a dialogue with artistic works before its creation as well as with ones that have come after it. Its mental image is numerous things at the same time, which connect it to existential, philosophical, metaphysical, religious, and symbolic fields. The viewer's imagination and autonomous search for meaning sets a never ending process of association and interpretation in motion. It is the provocative undefinedness and openness of the poetic suggestion that gives it its evocative richness, sense of life, and mental complexity. Simplicity turns into labyrinthian complexity. A profound artistic or architectural work is always a never-ending mental rhizom. Devoid of the enigmatic suggestiveness of the poetic image, a square remains a mere lifeless geometric figure without deeper meanings and the capacity to evoke emotions. Profound architectural simplicity condenses imagery and meaning similarly. The geometry of architectural constructions and spaces turns into spatial mandalas, devices that mediate between the cosmos, the world and the self. Also in architecture, formal simplicity, devoid of poetic intention and richness of feeling, results in mere construction.

The Wittgenstein House, which Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) designed and built in Vienna in 1928, is an illuminating case regarding the necessary interaction of formal simplicity and complexity of context and content. Conceived by a major philosopher of the twentieth century, it is undoubtedly a product of serious and precise thinking, which has reduced all architectural elements into their minimum essence. The fact that Wittgenstein had the intermediate floor plate chiseled away and recast three centimeters higher, convinces us of the author’s uncompromising architectural ambition. However, the building remains curiously mute and lifeless. What seems to be missing in this ultra-rational piece of architecture is the mental complexity and contextual dialogue, sense of embodiment and poetic sensuality. “I am not interested in erecting a building, but in . . . presenting to myself the foundation of all possible buildings,” Wittgenstein himself confessed [22, p. 9]. It seems that exactly this rationalized generality makes the Wittgenstein House appear mute; it feels like a logical formula for a house rather than a specific and authentic building in the “flesh of the world,” to use the suggestive notion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁷ The work hardly evokes associations, or feelings, it merely exists as itself and reflects its uncompromising system of proportions and structure.

Today’s Minimalist architecture usually implies the application of a formal stylistic preconception, whereas meaningful artistic simplicity and abstraction is a result of a laborious and gradual process. The word “abstraction” suggests misleadingly a subtraction or reduction of contents and meaning, but a pregnant artistic abstraction that has the capacity to touch our emotions and charge our imaginations can only arise from the opposite process of distillation or compression. Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), the master sculptor, gives us a significant piece of advice: “Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, in approaching the real essence of things. . . simplicity is at bottom complexity and one must be nourished on its essence to understand its significance” [4]. What does the artist mean by “in spite of himself”; does he suggest that simplicity has its own gravity that pulls the artist to go for it regardless of his true nature?

A true abstraction condenses countless ingredients of the creative exploration into an artistic singularity. At the same time, the work takes a determined distance from the subjectivity of the author towards universality and anonymity. Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola) (1908–2001), one of the greatest figurative painters of last century, makes a surprising and thought provoking comment on artistic expression. “If a work only expresses the person who created it, it wasn’t worth doing. . . Expressing the world, understanding it, that is what seems interesting to me” [13, p. 18]. Later, Balthus reformulated his argument: “Great painting has to have a universal meaning. This is really no longer so today and this is why I want

⁷In “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” Merleau-Ponty describes the notion of the flesh as follows: “My body is made of the same flesh as the world. . . and moreover. . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world” [11, p. 248] and “The flesh (of the world or my own) is. . . a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself” [11, p. 146].

to give painting back its lost anonymity, because the more anonymous painting is, the more real it is” [3, p. 6]. This is a thought-provoking argument, but the same argument could surely be made of architecture. In its obsessive search for uniqueness, architecture of our time has often become meaningless.

All meaningful works of art are microcosms, miniaturized and condensed representations of a metaphoric and idealized world. This is an internal universe of the work itself, the *Weltinnenraum*, to use a beautiful notion of Rilke [8, p. 8]. The poetic image keeps guiding our minds to constantly new contexts: clarity contains inviting obscurity, and formal simplicity turns into an experiential complexity. “What is there more mysterious than clarity?” Paul Valéry (1871–1945), the poet asks [19, p. 107]. William James (1842–1910), the visionary American psychologist, describes the essential fluidity and open-endedness of mental imagery: “Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value of the image, is all in the halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it” [9]. Clarity has value in art only when it projects a potent field of crisscrossing associations and impression. The most simple of poetic images, which arises from an authentic process of artistic distillation, keeps suggesting images and echoes and endlessly seeking new meanings.

The associative imagery of art is existential rather than aesthetic and it addresses our entire sense of being. Instead of offering mere visual pleasure, architecture, also, stirs up deep layers of the mind and sense of self, or more precisely, true architectural images evoke multi-sensory and embodied memories, making the architectural entity part of our bodily constitution and sense of existence. Through our body, we re-enact and mimic unconsciously whatever we encounter in the world; this is called “embodied simulation.” As neurological studies have recently confirmed, every meaningful work of art and architecture actually changes our brain, behavior, and self-understanding.⁸

In addition to the sphere of the arts, the interaction of simplicity and complexity is especially impressive and inspiring in the natural and biological world. Here the constant interaction of simple principles and causalities creates a never ending flow of subtle variations and complexities. The complexity of the biological world is normally underestimated as we tend to overvalue our own understanding and achievements. Edward O. Wilson (1929–), the world’s leading myrmecologist and the spokesman of Biophilia, the science and ethics of life, makes the staggering argument, that the “superorganism” of a leafcutter ant community is “one of the evolution’s master clockworks, tireless, repetitive and precise, and more complicated than any human invention and unimaginably old” [21, p. 37]. No wonder, complicated traffic systems are designed today using models of ant behaviour, and new types of super-fast computers are being developed using our own neural network as the model. At the same time, Semir Zeki, a neurobiologist and professor

⁸Fred Gage, as quoted in [7, p. 135].

of neuroaesthetics, who has applied the recent knowledge of the neurosciences on artistic phenomena, suggests “a theory of aesthetics that is biologically grounded” [23, p. 1]. What else could beauty be than nature’s ultimate principle of bringing complexity into the stunning coherence of seemingly self-evidently simple beauty. Joseph Brodsky declares this view with the assurance of a great poet: “The purpose of evolution, believe it or not, is beauty [6].

I wish to end my essay on the interplay of simplicity and complexity in the arts with Constantin Brancusi’s powerful and poetic statement on the fundamental requirement of a true artistic work: “Art must give suddenly, all at once, the shock of life, the sensation of breathing.”⁹

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⁹Constantin Brancusi, as quoted in [17, p. 67].

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-53383-4>

Simplicity: Ideals of Practice in Mathematics and the Arts

Kossak, R.; Ording, P. (Eds.)

2017, XX, 305 p. 26 illus., 1 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-53383-4