

PRESS RELEASE

A look at the development of a formal aesthetics
in the 20th century

From January 26 to March 16, 1986, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal will be presenting an exhibition entitled "Point, Ligne, Plan", which celebrates the developments of geometrical abstract art by bringing together 70 works by about 50 artists.

Through works selected from the collection of the Museum, this thematic exhibition allows us to review the many formal preoccupations in 20th century art. From Cubism and Russian Constructivism to Minimal Art and Conceptual Art by way of American Geometrical Abstraction and Quebec's "Mouvement plasticien", the exhibition illustrates how an emphasis on the formal components of a work of art characterized various movements and how each one elaborated a new plastic language through specific experiments.

Cubism led the way in putting forth the basic principles of a formal aesthetics emphasizing the conceptualization of form and of composition. As early as 1910, the decomposing and recomposing of the subject into geometrical facets practiced in Cubist paintings allowed certain elementary structures to become visible, these structures being the only ones able to generate a new plastic realm. It was in Russia however, around 1913, that the extreme limits of abstract art were systematically articulated through the focus placed on the expressive powers of compositional elements, with the Rayonnism of Larionov and Natalia Gontcharova, Rodchenko's Non-Objectivism, Malevitch's Suprematism, as well as the Constructivism of Gabo, Pevsner and Tatlin. At about the same time in Holland, Mondrian and the De Stijl movement extended the Cubist analysis of form into pure geometry, a sole organization of lines and colours.

In the 20s and 30s, the influence of Constructivism and De Stijl spread all over Europe. In Germany, the Bauhaus pursued Russian Constructivist ideas and gained considerable importance by spurring the most original research carried out between the two World Wars. In France, "Cercle et Carré" was founded, followed by "Abstraction-Création", both groups channeling the activities of the main adherents of geometrical abstract art.

With the U.S. exile of many European artists - Mondrian and Albers among them - during World War II, a new geometrical abstraction evolved as an alternative to Abstract Expressionism. Its leading exponents, such as Kelly, Noland and Stella, insisted on the primacy of colour presented in compositions in which forms have neither internal nor hierarchical relationships. Meanwhile, in Quebec, the "Mouvement plasticien" was asserting itself as a reaction to the gestural and lyrical expressionism of the Automatists. It first manifested a preoccupation with plastic elements, though not yet rid of Cubist compositional structures, later granting privileged status to the notion of surface and proposing a more dynamic and autonomous role for colour.

More or less temporarily eclipsed on the international scene, geometrical abstract art soon found new justification and further developments in the various propositions of Kinetic Art under Vasarely's influence, and in Nicolas Schöffer's spatiodynamic experiments which eventually led to Op Art. All of these works of art give more importance to volume, spatiality and environment than to surface. At the same period, appeared newer forms and structures of Minimal Art, distinguishing itself by a mental attitude prone to the reduction and simplification of forms. A great many contemporary works, though individually unique, reflect this concern with form which constitutes either their essence and subject matter, or the conditions for signifying a concept.

Despite inevitable historical shortcuts and a selective grouping of some prominent figure of abstract art, the exhibition surveys on one of this century's liveliest aesthetic trends, one that has continually identified the great avant-garde movements.

"Point, Ligne, Plan", was organized by Réal Lussier, curator also in charge of travelling exhibitions.

Currently with this exhibition, the public can view "The Permanent Collection - Canadian Sculptors" and visit "Quatrefoil", Murray Macdonald's four-part installation. The vernissage for "Point, Ligne, Plan" and "Quatrefoil" will be held on Sunday, January 26, at 3:00p.m. Murray MacDonald will be present.

Photographs are available on request.

The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal is the only institution of its kind in Canada completely devoted to the promotion and conservation of contemporary art in its every aspect.