

ter contends, but imaginative proposals are not forthcoming, chiefly because "today's technology visionaries know little and care less about the mundane problems of daily urban life." To an earlier generation of thinkers, including Norman Bel Geddes and others, these were central concerns. To contemporary thinkers such as George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Esther Dyson, using powerful computers and the information highway to telecommute and teleconference is more important than mere physical transportation.

To improve city life, Gelernter argues, visionaries should be tackling such everyday problems as how to cut the New Haven-to-Grand Central commute to an hour or less.

The conventional wisdom is that better tracks and fancy new trains, perhaps magnetic-levitation models, are needed. Gelernter instead proposes paving over the tracks and running buses on the right-of-way. "Suppose they ran on two-lane busroads, the outer lane for high-speed express travel and the inner for station stops." Not only would such buses be faster, they could—with the aid of central computers that swiftly responded to requests from riders—be scheduled more flexibly.

Such ideas might or might not prove economically practical, Gelernter argues, but they certainly are worth considering—and that, he says, is precisely the problem: they are not even being put on the public agenda.

ARTS & LETTERS

Abstract Art's Mystical Heart

"Mondrian & Mysticism: 'My Long Search Is Over'" by Hilton Kramer, in *The New Criterion* (Sept. 1995), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Art historians who revere abstract art tend to tiptoe around the role that mysticism played in its genesis. Occult beliefs were so common among abstract art's pioneers, such as the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), that it was "a basic component of their vision," argues Kramer, editor of the *New Criterion*.

Mondrian and the Russians Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) were very heavily influenced by theosophy. The mystical philosophy's high priestess, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), claimed that the conflict between science and religion could be resolved by applying evolutionary theory to the "spiritual" aspects of existence. The soul was born and reborn countless times until it achieved earthly perfection.

Mondrian was a working artist before he turned to the occult, Kramer notes, "but it was as a dedicated theosophist that he created his first abstractions." The influence is clear in the notebooks he began to keep in 1914. "To approach the spiritual in art," Mondrian wrote, "one will make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual. Thus the use of elementary forms is logically accounted for. These forms being abstract, we find ourselves in the presence of an abstract art."

The influential avant-garde movement called De Stijl (the Style) that Mondrian and other artists founded in 1917 was more than an art movement, Kramer points out. "Its ambition was to redesign the world by imposing straight lines, primary colors, and geometric form—and thus an ideal of impersonal order and rationality—upon the production of every man-made object essential to the modern human environment. Rejecting tradition, it envisioned the rebirth of the world as a kind of technological Eden from which all trace of individualism and the conflicts it generates would be permanently banished."

Where did these ambitious ideas come from? Chiefly, says Kramer, from the Dutch writer and mystic M. H. J. Schoenmaekers. Kramer says that Schoenmaekers even "specified the nature of the forms (rectilinear structures of the horizontal and the vertical) and the colors (the primaries: red, yellow, and blue) to be used in this artistic quest for the absolute."

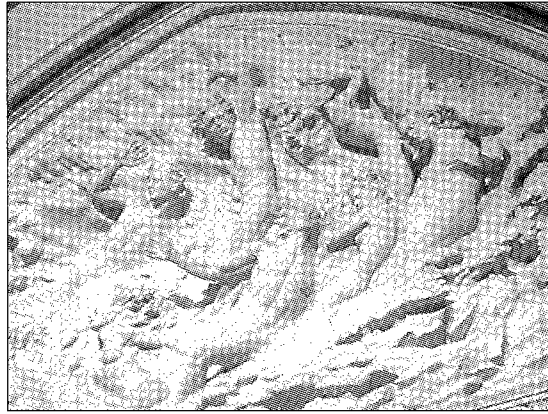
The evolution of art was part of the larger evolution of the spirit, Mondrian and the others in the De Stijl group believed. In their abstract art, they were determined to get ever closer to what the mystic Schoenmaekers described as an "earthly heaven."

The Shame of the Critics

Tom Wolfe chronicles in the *Weekly Standard* (Oct. 2, 1995) the brilliant career and strange neglect of representational sculptor Frederick Hart. Hart's works include the popular *Three Soldiers* at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

[Hart] was discovered . . . by a stone carver from Italy, Roger Morigi. As Morigi's apprentice, Hart learned to conceive of form in stone from the carver's perspective, from the inside out.

By day Morigi and Hart carved stone for Washington National Cathedral, an enormous structure in the Middle English Gothic style. By night Hart began sculpting on his own, and by the age of 25 he was pulling human forms out of clay and stone with a breathtaking facility. In 1971 he learned that the cathedral would be looking for a sculptor to adorn the entire west facade. The theme was to be the Creation, with the *pièce de résistance* a two-story-high, 21-ft.-wide stone bas-relief above the main entrance. Morigi urged Hart to enter the competition. The young would-be sculptor spent three years conceiving and preparing a series of scale models. In 1974, at the age of



31, a complete unknown, a stone carver by trade, Hart won what would turn out to be the most monumental commission for religious sculpture in the United States in the 20th century. He spent 10 years creating the full-size models in clay and overseeing Morigi and his men as they carved *Ex Nihilo*, depicting mankind emerging from the swirling rush of chaos.

Hart was now at the same point in his career as Giotto when Giotto did his first great painting, the Virgin Mary trembling before the Archangel Gabriel, for the high altar of the Abbey of Florence in 1301. From that time on, Giotto's life was an uninterrupted ascension to wealth, the company and patronage of the rich and powerful, surpassing fame, and the universal admiration of his fellow artists. For Hart, the more earthly rewards came soon enough. . . . One thing was missing: the artistic atmosphere of 14th-century Florence, not to mention a Vasari or two to chronicle his success.

Just what this meant Hart found out in the very first week after the dedication of *Ex Nihilo* in 1982 (two years before the completion of the entire facade). In the press, even the local press, there was nothing, save a single rather slighting remark in passing in the Style section of the *Washington Post*. In the art press in the weeks and months and years that followed—nothing, not even so much as a one-paragraph review. Thirteen years at work on the most important American religious commission of the 20th century, and—nihil, a hollow silence. It was as if the west side of Washington National Cathedral, the seventh-largest cathedral in the world, were invisible.

Interactive Lit. 101

"Writing for the New Millennium: The Birth of Electronic Literature" by Robert Kendall, in *Poets & Writers Magazine* (Nov.–Dec. 1995), 72 Spring St., New York, N.Y. 10012.

Someone reading Stuart Moulthrop's novel *Victory Garden* (1991) on a computer encounters a man named Harley and a waitress named Veronica flirting in a bar. If the