

# **Paul Klee: the thinking eye**

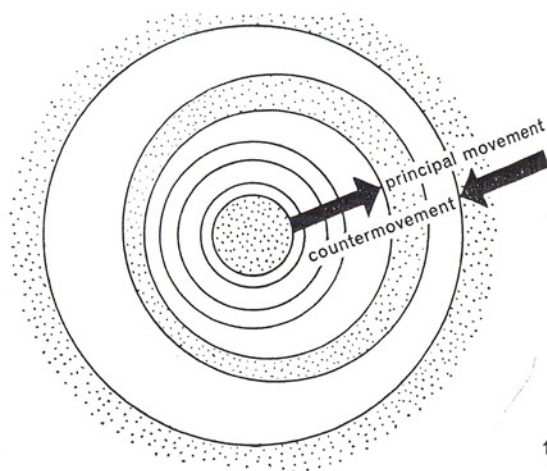
the notebooks of Paul Klee

Edited by Jürg Spiller

George Wittenborn, New York  
Lund Humphries, London

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ments

'The creation of a definite movement and  
countermovement from the centre of a plane.  
The norm in the centre.' [1]  
'If the norm is acentric, it becomes isolated  
and non-normative.' [2]



1934/U 2: *Fear*. Oil on burlap.

The tension between rest and incipient motion as  
alternate elements in painting.  
The opposites may be combined or contrasted;  
the two intrinsically connected groups may be  
put side by side or one over  
the other. The characteristics of 'here and  
there' are intensified by the contrast.

## The concept of artistic creation

<sup>1</sup> According to a note by Klee:  
Gestalt = Living being.  
Form = 'nature morte'.

The study of creation deals with the ways that lead to form. It is the study of form, but emphasises the paths to form rather than the form itself. The word *Gestaltung* suggests as much. 'Theory of form' (*Formlehre*), as it is usually called, does not stress the principles and paths. 'Theory of formation' (*Formungslehre*) is too unusual. Moreover, *Gestaltung* in its broader sense clearly contains the idea of an underlying mobility, and is therefore preferable.

For another thing, 'Gestalt' (over against form)<sup>1</sup> means something more alive. Gestalt is in a manner of speaking a form with an undercurrent of living functions. A function made of functions, so to speak. The functions are purely spiritual. A need for expression underlies them.

Every expression of function must be cogently grounded. Then there will be a close bond between beginning, middle, end. They will be joined by necessity, and there will be room for nothing doubtful, since they fit so tightly.

The power of creativity cannot be named. It remains mysterious to the end. But what does not shake us to our foundations is no mystery. We ourselves, down to the smallest part of us, are charged with this power. We cannot state its essence but we can, in certain measure, move towards its source. In any case we must reveal this power in its functions just as it is revealed to us. Probably it is only a form of matter, but one that cannot be perceived by the same senses as the familiar kinds of matter. Still, it must make itself known through the familiar kinds of matter and function in union with them. Merged with matter, it must enter a real and living form.

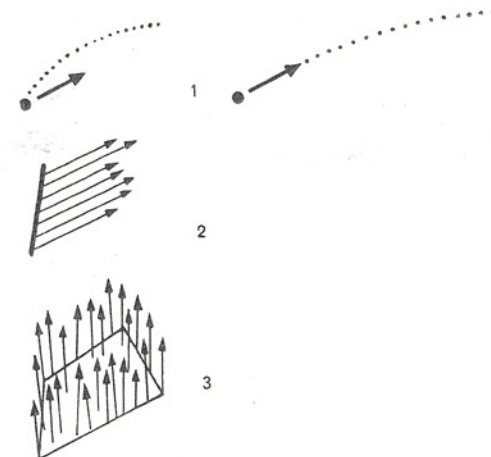
This freedom in nature's way of building form is a good school for the artist. It may produce in him the same profound freedom, and with it he can be relied on to develop freely his own paths to form.

Genesis as formal movement is the essence of the work of art. In the beginning the motif, the harnessing of energy, sperm. Work as form-making in the material sense: primordial feminine. Work as form-deciding sperm: primordial masculine.



From point to line  
The line as element  
Linear and planar character

## 1. Line: active, middle, passive



Shortly after application of the pencil, or any other pointed tool, a (linear-active) line comes into being. The more freely it develops, the clearer will be its mobility [1].

But if I apply a line, e.g. the edge of a black or coloured crayon, a plane is produced (at first and when the freedom of movement is very limited) [2].

If we had a medium that made it possible to move planes in a similar way, we should be able to inscribe an ideal three-dimensional piece of sculpture in space [3].

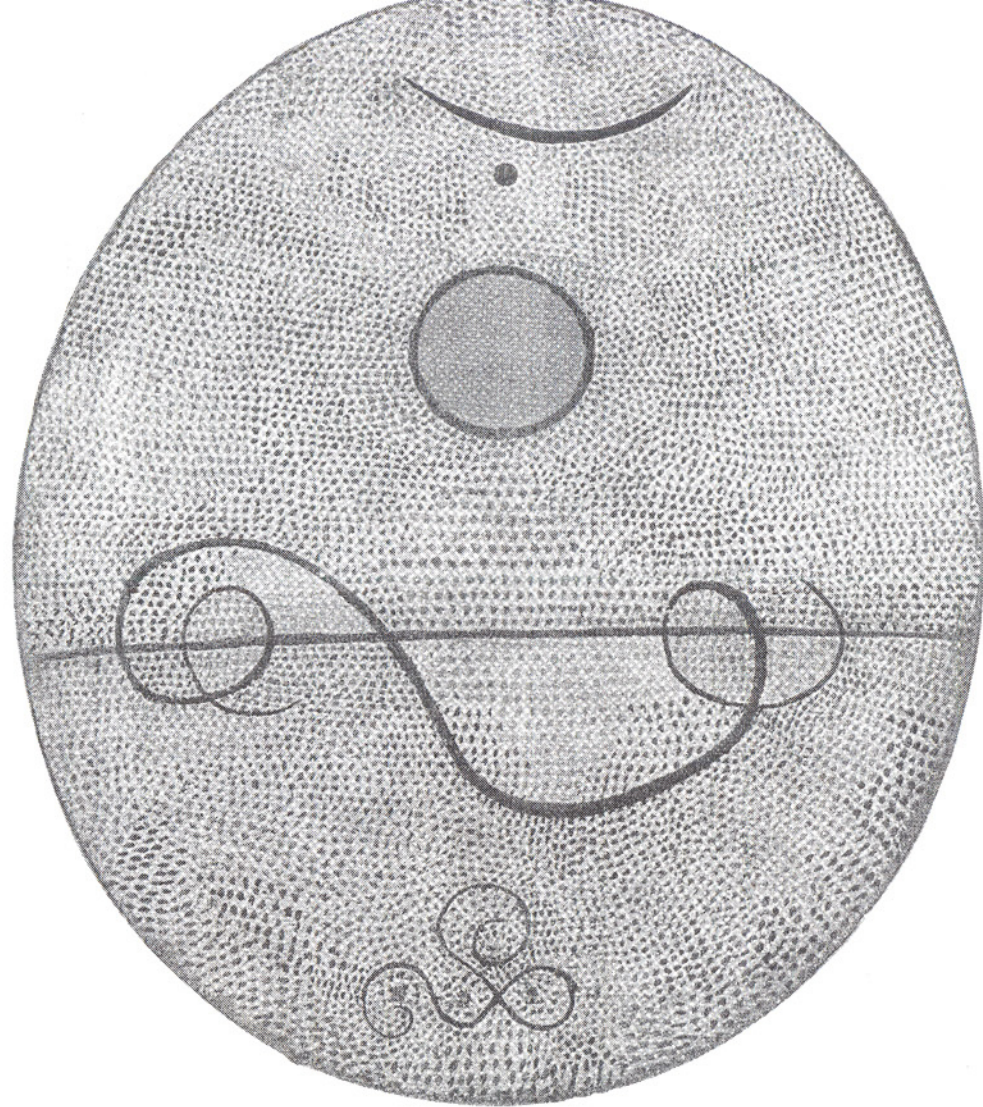
But I am afraid that is utopian.

For the present then let us content ourselves with the most primitive of elements, the line. At the dawn of civilisation, when writing and drawing were the same thing, it was the basic element. And as a rule our children begin with it; one day they discover the phenomenon of the mobile point, with what enthusiasm it is hard for us grown-ups to imagine. At first the pencil moves with extreme freedom, wherever it pleases.

But once he begins to look at these first works, the child discovers that there are laws which govern his random efforts. Children who continue to take pleasure in the chaotic are, of course, no artists; other children will soon progress towards a certain order. Criticism sets in. The chaos of the first play-drawing gives way to the beginning of order. The free motion of the line is subordinated to anticipation of a final effect; cautiously the child begins to work with a very few lines. He is still primitive.

But one can't remain primitive for long. One has to discover a way of enriching the pitiful result, without destroying or blurring the simple, intelligible plan. It becomes necessary to establish a relation between things of first importance and those which are subsidiary.





1932/k 9; *Tendrils*, Oil.





1932/k 9: *Tendrils*. Oil.

## Linear-active

● Dynamic repose



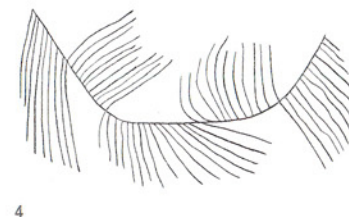
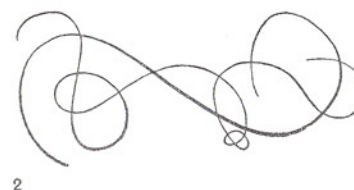
From point to line. The point is not dimensionless but an infinitely small planar element, an agent carrying out zero motion, i.e. resting. Mobility is the condition of change. Certain things have primordial motion. The point is cosmic, a primordial element. Things on earth are obstructed in their movement; they require an impetus. The primordial movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion (genesis of form). A line comes into being. The most highly-charged line is the most authentic line because it is the most active.

In all these examples the principal and active line develops freely. It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk.

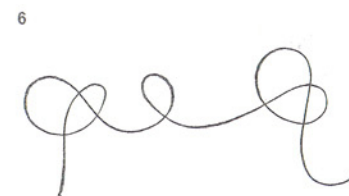
Dynamic movement. The point seen in dynamic terms, as an agent.



Simple linear motion, self-contained. Free line a-b [1].  
Free line a-b, companion line a<sub>1</sub>-b<sub>1</sub>. (The melody in Fig.1: accompanied) [2, 3, 4, 5].



Free line making detours [6, 7, 8, 9].





1927/D 9: *Difficult journey through O. Pen-and-ink.*

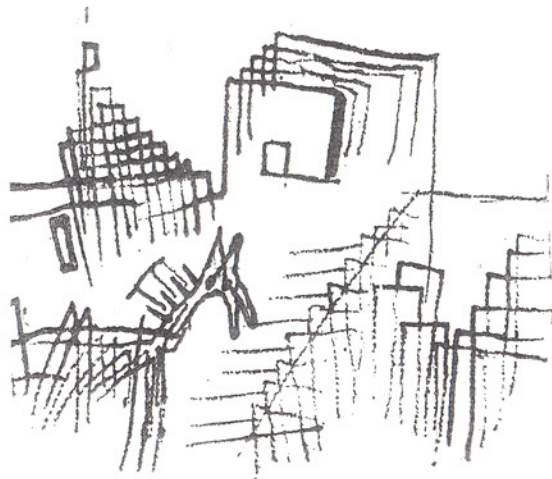


Two 'interpenetrating' lines



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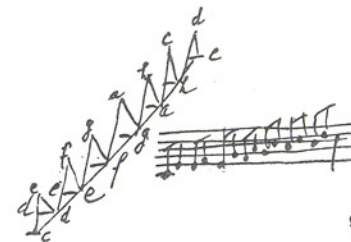




1927/D 9: *Difficult journey through O*. Pen-and-ink.

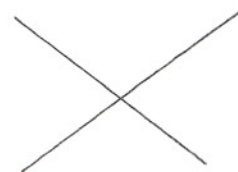


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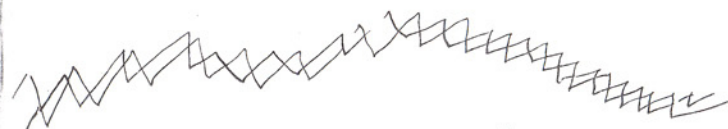


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Two 'interpenetrating' lines



Two secondary lines, moving round an imaginary main line [10, 11, 12, 13]



10



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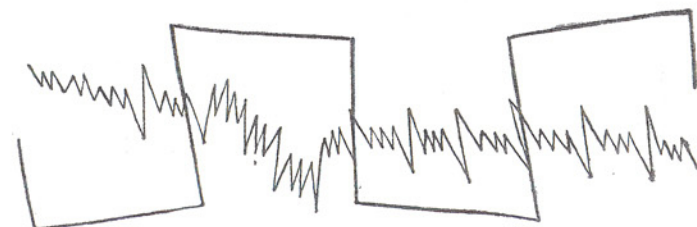


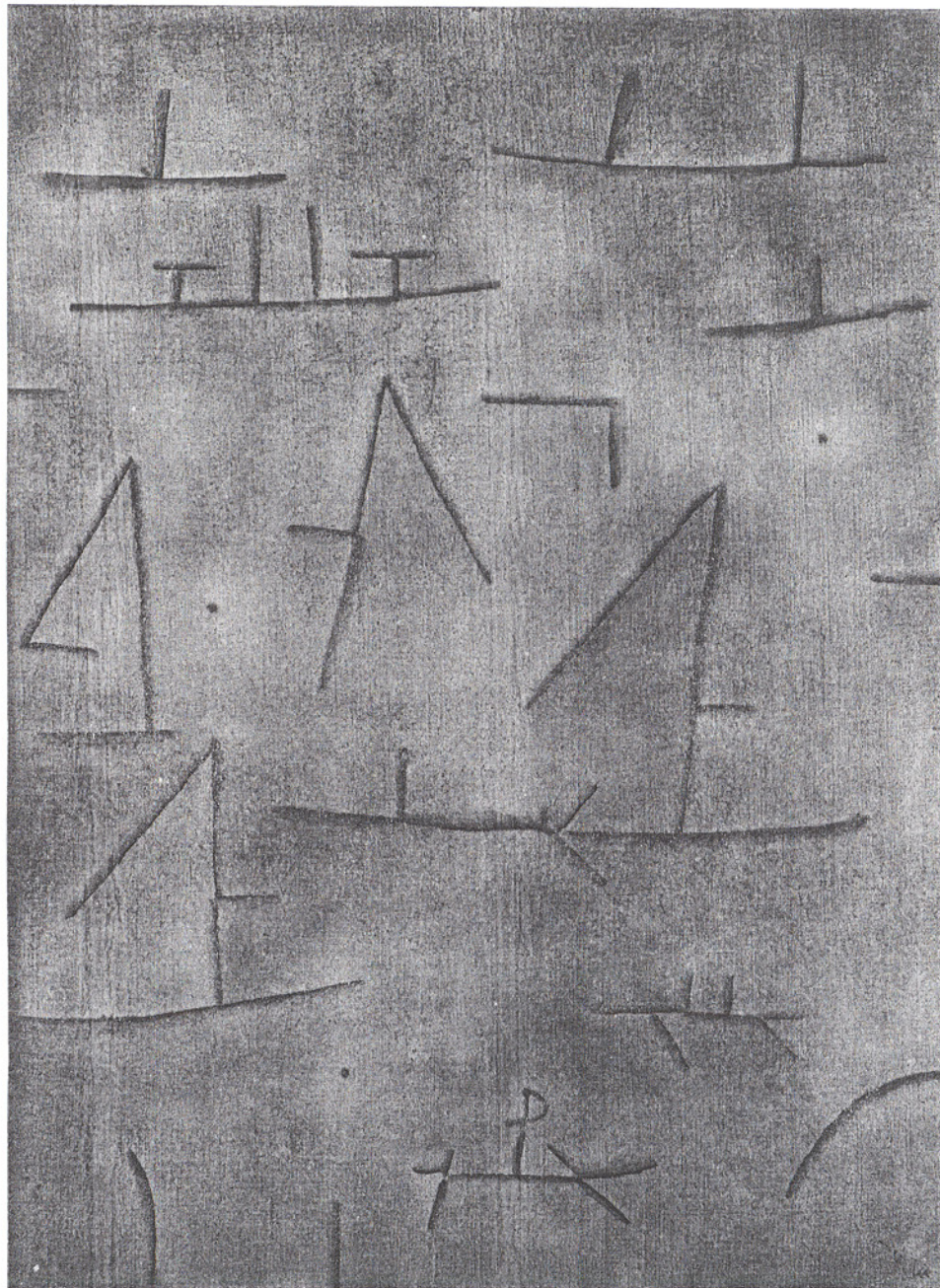
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Dividual-individual,  
connected by  
rhythmic articulation





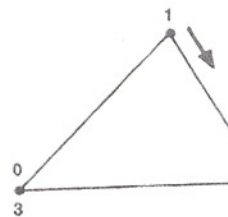
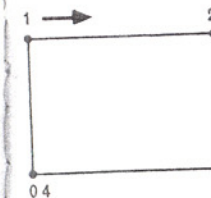
1937/R 11: *Harbour with sailboats*. Oil.

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### Linear-medial

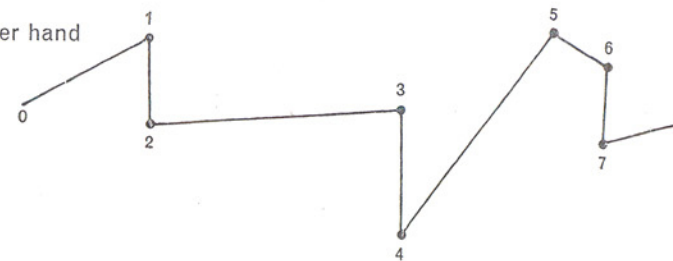


Cf. p.368, 1927/i 1: *Many-coloured lightning*. Oil.

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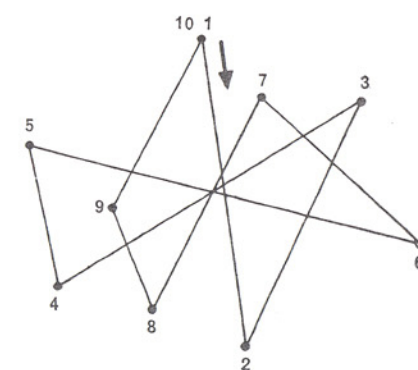
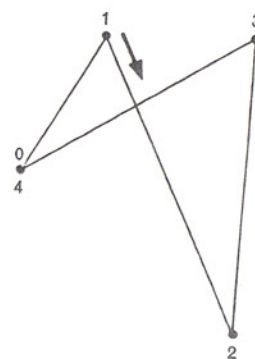
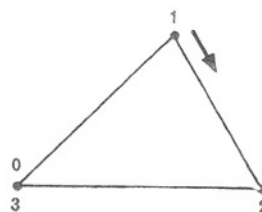
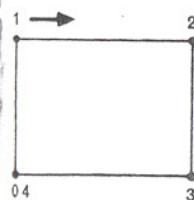


is short of time, wants to get to 1, then to 2, then to 3, etc. as quickly as possible. More like a series of appointments than a walk. This is shown by the straight stretches. But both the free and the hurrying line are purely active types.

The linear tension of the straight stretches (most active line) is discharged between the points of tension lying on the path. (Dualism = static. ———. The straight lines are the quintessence of the static.)

### Linear-medial

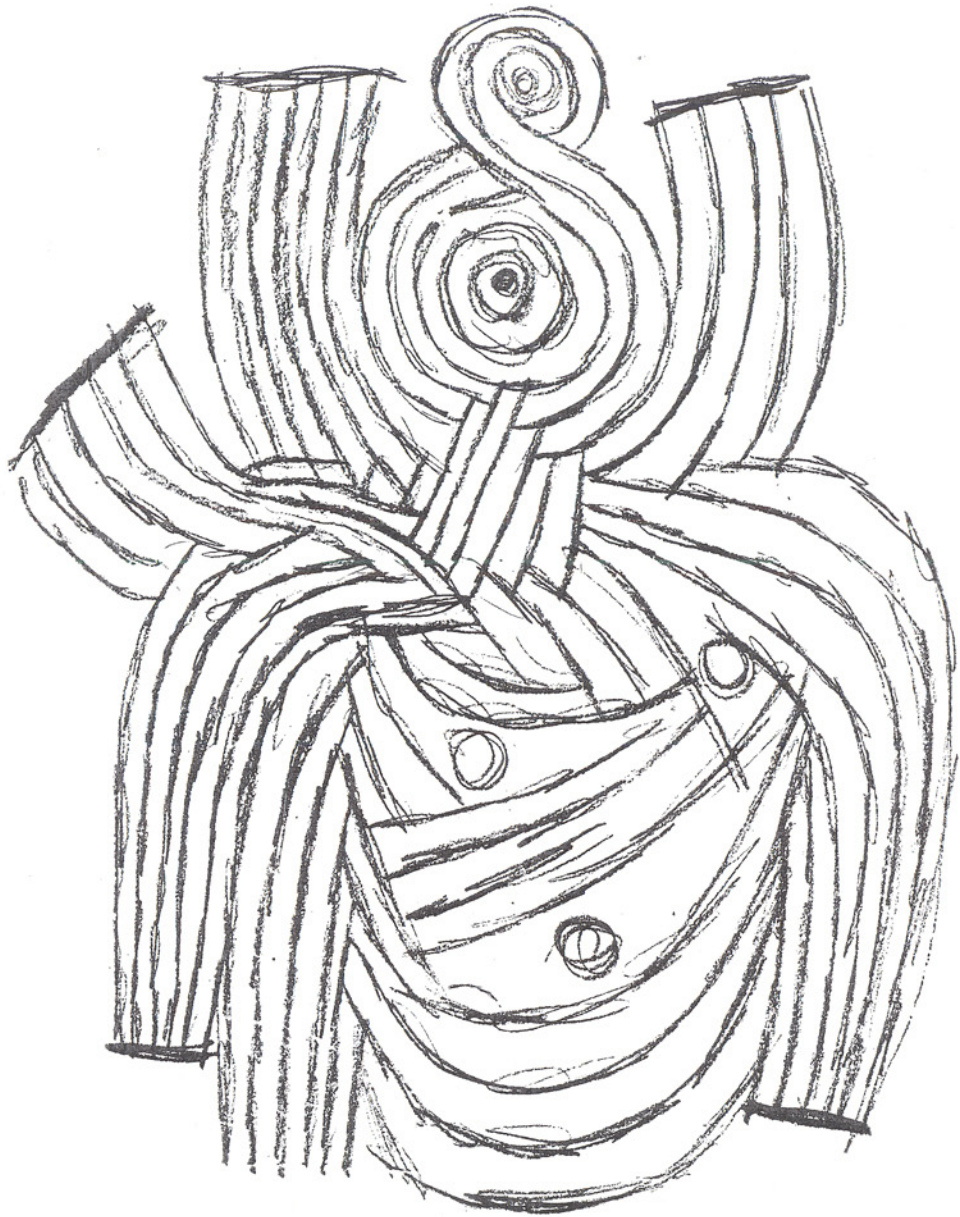
Neither line nor plane, but some sort of middle thing between the two. At the beginning it is linear, the movement of a point; it ends by looking like a plane. A medial line: planar effect obtained by circumscribed lines.



The line determined by few points. Time is of the essence.

In these examples the hurrying line circumscribes plane figures like the triangle and square.

The energies that move a line are the result of forces working in different directions. Tension is connective.



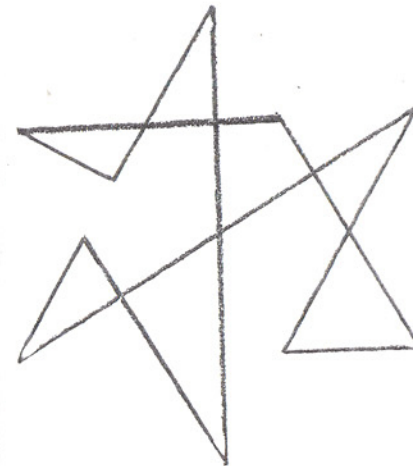
Variation on 1926/A 4: *Embraced*. Drawing.

Plane formation with medial lines in a structure of a higher order.

Point-line movement = planar impression.

The concentric design (Fig.3, p.111) is taken as a norm.

'In displacements representing deviation from the norm the centres move apart, the elementary forms multiply and change, evenly or unevenly.'



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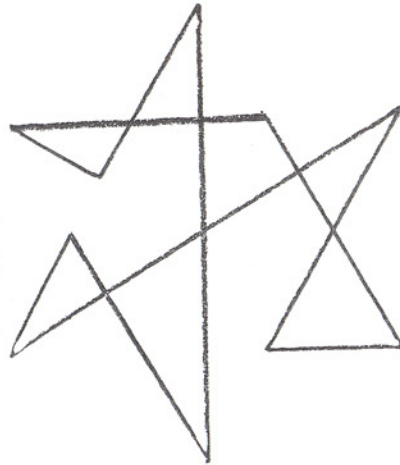
Variation on 1926/A 4: *Embraced*. Drawing.

Plane formation with medial lines in a structure of a higher order.

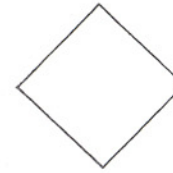
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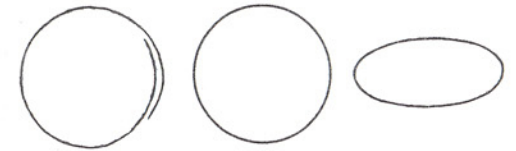
'In displacements representing deviation from the norm the centres move apart, the elementary forms multiply and change, evenly or unevenly.'



A square stood on its corner moves into the dynamic realm, the tensions are diagonal.

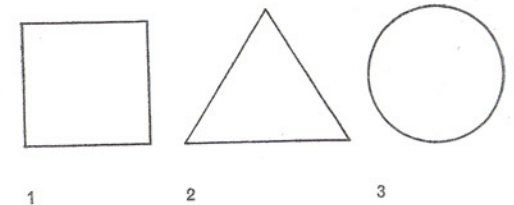


The line circumscribes a circle and an ellipse



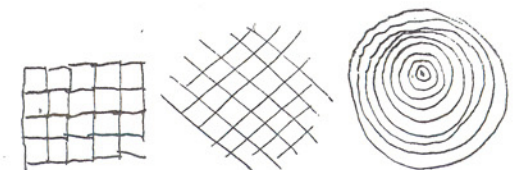
Taken as a line it has a soothing character and is without beginning or end. In an elementary sense (taken as an action of the hand) it remains a line, but when it is completed the linear impression inevitably gives way to a planar impression. The mobile character disappears (no one looking at the disc of the moon will take it for a merry-go-round and want to go for a ride). It is replaced by a sense of perfect rest, especially in the case of the circle.

Linear-medial, planar-medial  
in amplified,  
composite examples



The straight line (as a progression of points), quintessence of the static [1, 2].

The circle (as a progression of points), quintessence of the dynamic [3].



In this case the character of the lines is wholly passive



Linear-passive

We still see lines, but not linear acts; what we see are linear results of planar actions. The line is not made but suffered. What is this? a square. How did it come into being? What are the underlying tensions?

Linear movement displaced

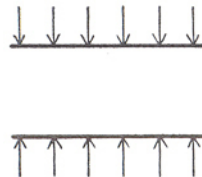


to produce this effect

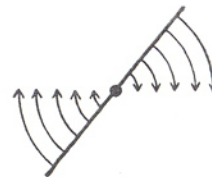


It came into being when a line entered into a relation of tension with a parallel line and discharged this tension. The most general cause therefore is a reciprocal tension forced into two dimensions. Result: a square, without accent, without emphasis. With horizontal emphasis, the square becomes

a recumbent rectangle



The linear movement rotated



to produce this effect



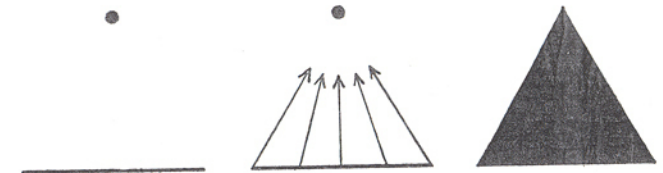
Plane formation by progressive linear rotation round a point. In linear-passive development the line operates as a planar element; and the impression therefore is planar. Any suggestion of a line is left over, and is suffered (passive lines, active plane formation).

Note in the manuscript: pictorial examples of 'linear-active', 'linear-passive', and 'lines of both characters':  
Linear-active: 1921/112: *About the fate of two girls*. Transfer drawing. Grohmann, p.392.  
Also: *Precursors and Mass prayer*.  
Linear-active painting: Jawlensky: *Head of Christ*.  
For linear-passive: 1919/68: *With the three (three part time)*. Watercolour. Giedion, p.105, Grohmann, p.389.  
With elements of both characters, linear-active and planar active:  
1919/156: *Composition with B*. Oil. Colour reproduction: Giedion, p.97, Grohmann, p.390.  
Similar example: 1919/235: *Picture with rooster and grenadier (Gallus militarius)*. Oil.  
The picture titles were written in the margin at a later date as visual aids for the students.



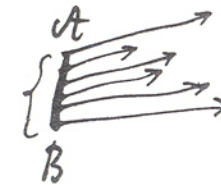
## Linear-passive

The triangle came into being when a point entered into a relation of tension with a line and, following the command of its Eros, discharged this tension. The tension between point and line is characteristic of the triangle.



In a contrary direction to this brief account of the line runs the account of the plane contained in it. When the line was active, it created divisions into imaginary planes. Meanwhile the planar character thrust itself forward and became active when the line was designated as passive. The plane is pure bred, the tranquil element.

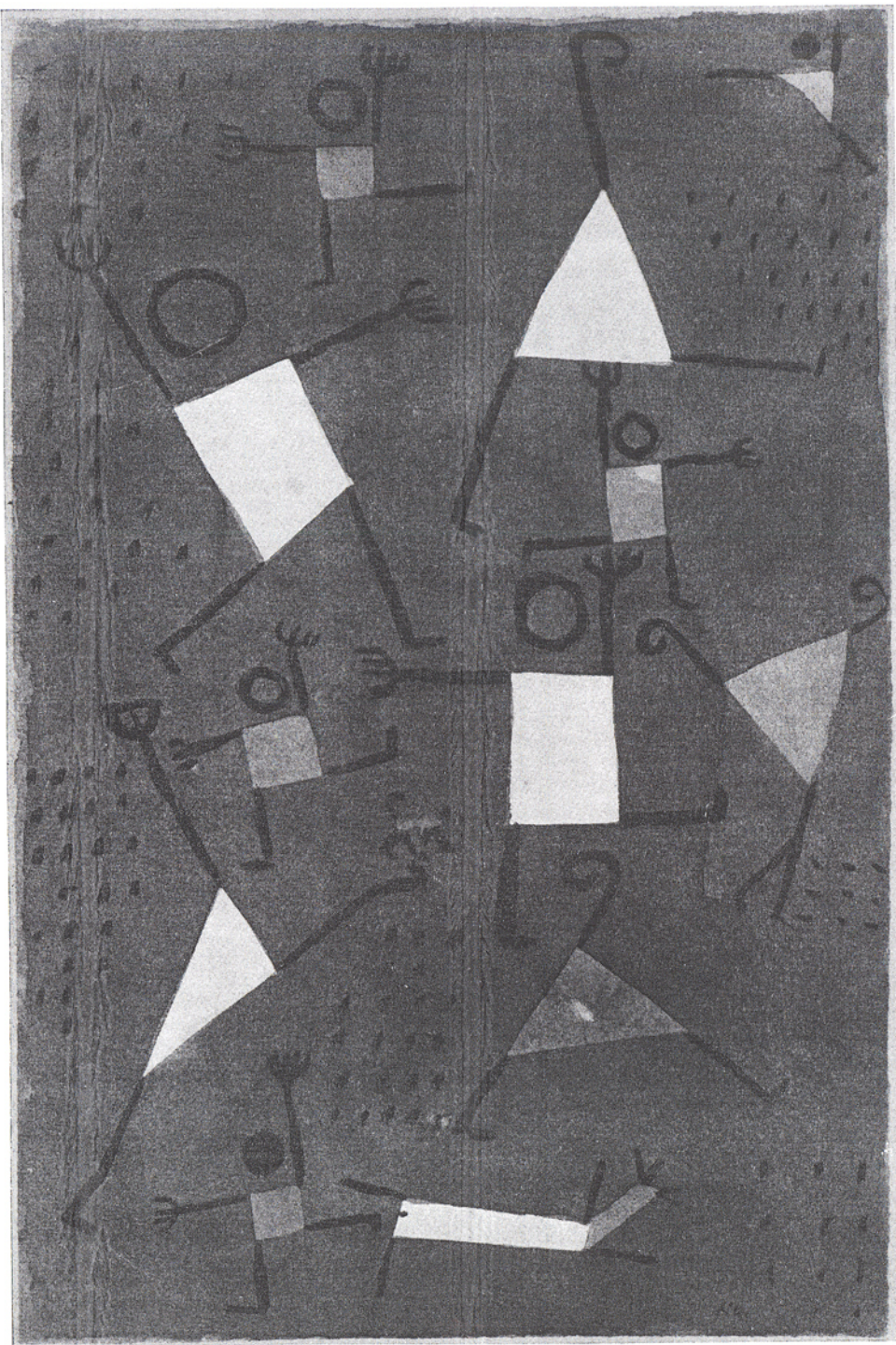
But if it becomes mobile,  it takes on a linear character.



The farther the line A-B progresses, the thinner becomes the plane it describes in relation to its length, until in the end we may think of A and B as coincident, which takes us back to the active line.<sup>1</sup>

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1938/g 10: *Dancing from fright*. Watercolour.

Energies of both characters: linear-active and planar-active (linear-passive) in equilibrium. Linear and planar fields clearly separated. The lines dynamise the accented motion of the planes (dynamic accentuation by rotation).

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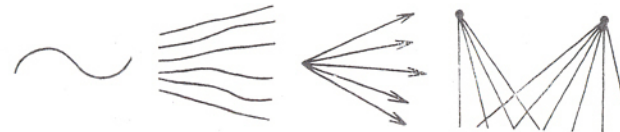
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The basic formal differences: active, middle, passive. We must distinguish three characters:

I. a linear character:



Linear-active – planar passive.

In 'active' the point goes to work, and the effect is linear in keeping with the point progression. Linear energies (tensions between active lines) result in passive planes, as side effects.

II. a middle character:



Middle character: point-line progression, planar impression.

In linear-'medial' (middle) the point progression leads indirectly, by way of the contour to a planar impression. Linear energies, 'medial' (middle) lines and planar effect.

III. a planar character:



Planar active – linear-passive.

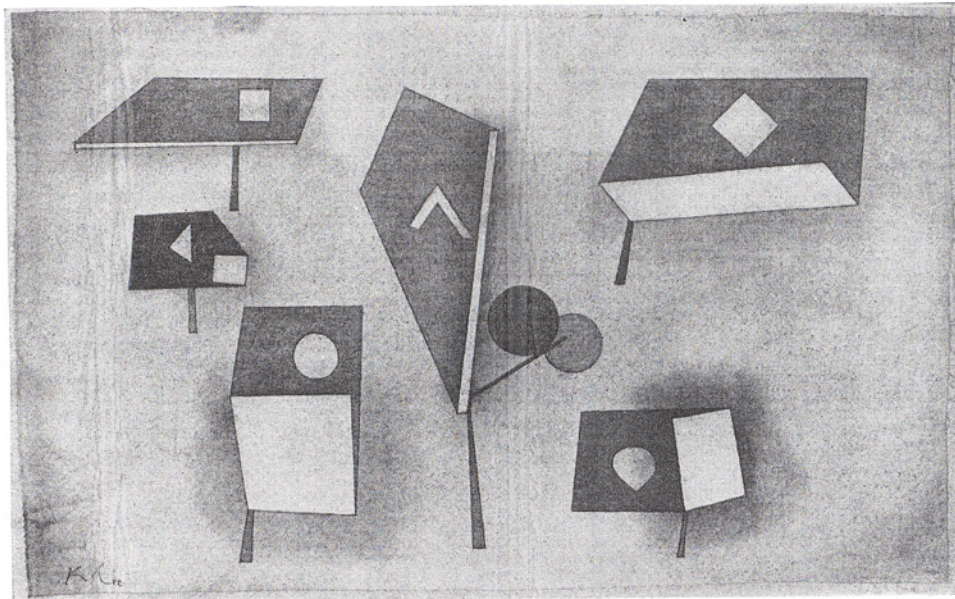
In linear-'passive' the line works as a planar element. Active plane, linear side effect (passive lines).

I. and III. are main, primary characters; II. (the middle ground) is intermediate, a hybrid.

1938/g 10: *Dancing from fright*. Watercolour.

Energies of both characters: linear-active and planar-active (linear-passive) in equilibrium. Linear and planar fields clearly separated. The lines dynamise the accented motion of the planes (dynamic accentuation by rotation).





1930/x 4: *Six species*. Watercolour.

### Analysis and synthesis of differences

From the linear standpoint this character is

active



this one middle



this one passive



From the planar standpoint this character is

passive



this one middle



this one active



Thus the standpoints are diametrically opposed to one another, meeting only in the medial zone.

In connection with the synthesis of active, middle, passive.  
cf. 1932/z 19: *The Step*. Oil on burlap, p.434.  
1932/13: *Poison* Watercolour. Giedion, p.162  
Grohmann, p.399.

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1930/x 4: *Six species*. Watercolour.



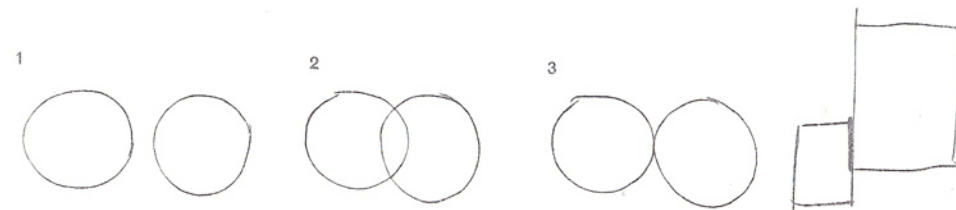
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1932/13: *Poison* Watercolour. Giedion, p.162  
Grohmann, p.399.

### The genesis of composite forms (interpenetration or mesh)

A new type of structure arises when the parts do not lie side by side but overlap.  
The nature of such structure is characterised by the word interpenetration. One part penetrates the other, or the two parts penetrate each other.  
The relation between the parts: no contact, or contact in point, in line, in plane, in space  
The situation of the parts: apart, grouped but separate, touching, or interpenetrating.

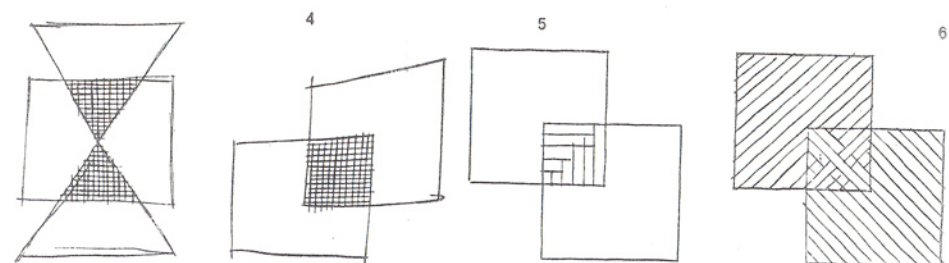
Side by side, or individual [1].

Circular planes with linear interpenetration (variant: interlocking) [2].



One-dimensional contact (contact in point or line, balanced or unbalanced) [3].

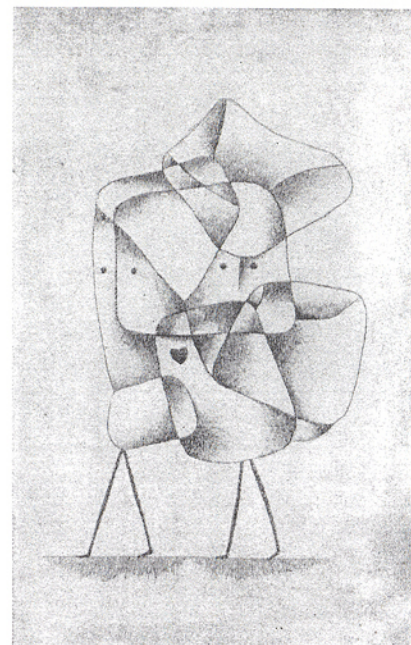
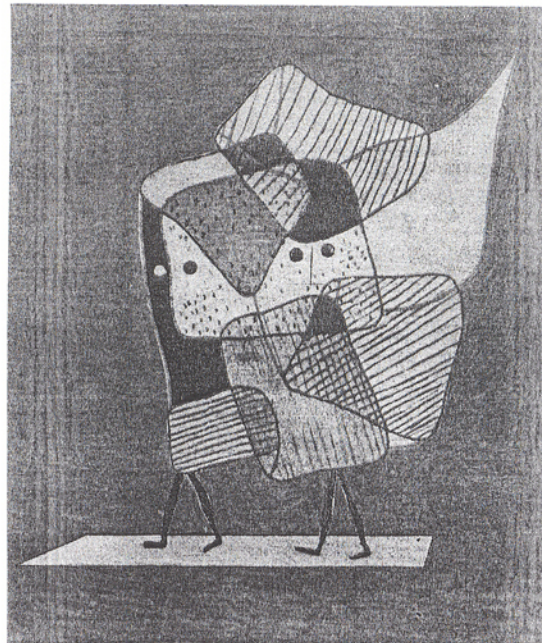
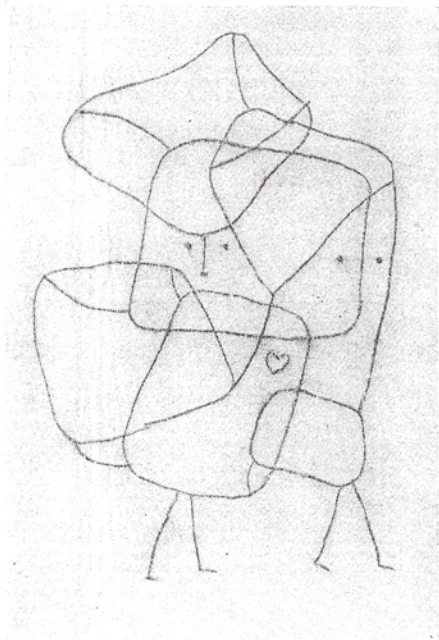
Composite form with planar contact. Two-dimensional contact in the plane. More or less interpenetration (planar penetration). The same loss from both sides [4].



Interpenetration and division of the common territory on the basis of the inner constructive relations and elementary formal factors [5].

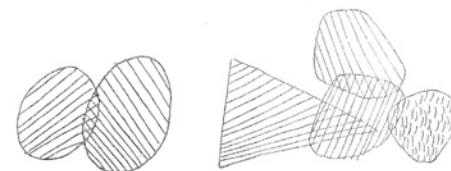
Overlapping or mixture in the passive realm. Interpenetration as organisation of differences to form a unity [6].

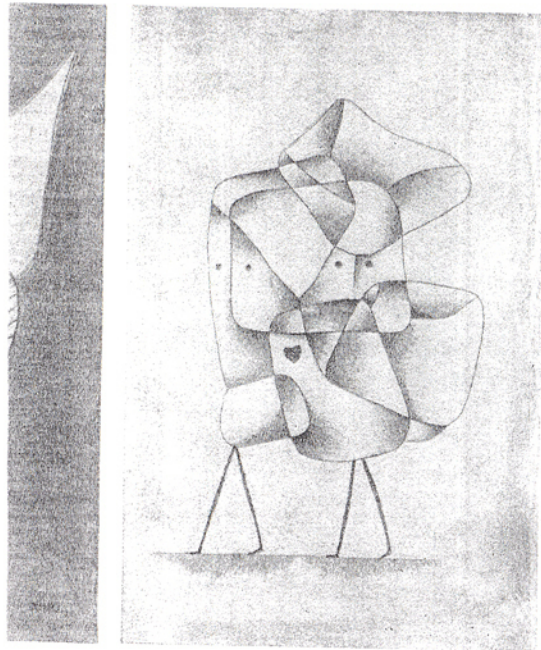




1930/a 7: *Twins*. Drawing.  
 1930/w 8: *Twins*. Oil on canvas.  
 1930/e 8: *Brother and sister*. Oil on canvas.

Result of several partial actions:  
 1930/w 8: *Twins*. Oil on canvas.  
 Here Klee notes: 'Additive relations: twins, triplets, etc.'  
 Productive relations: mother and child.'





1930/a 7: *Twins*. Drawing.

1930/w 8: *Twins*. Oil on canvas.

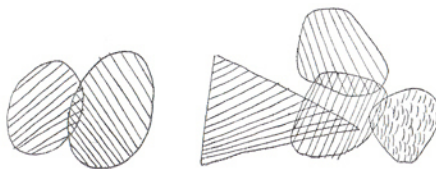
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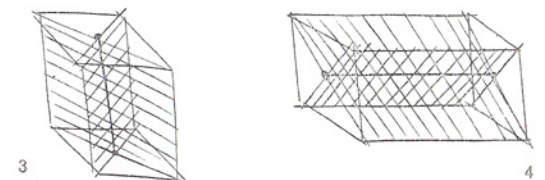
Studies in movement:



Planar results from both kinds of linear progression [1].

Movement in one direction on the basis of a norm [2].

(Examine the way. Follow it back to the gentle start. Compare the action with the scene of action.)



The mesh of the planes indicates the body-content. Diagonals suggest intermediate positions [3, 4].

The mesh should be interpreted as a summation of all three kinetic processes (in the three directions). Tension between plane and counterplane is the quickest way to form bodies.

We must also consider the transparent representation of tone values. They suppress the values of frontal planes, so eliminating them and letting us look in freely. Then space is formed in space.

Analytic representation as partial action.



Tension between two directions of motion, plane and counterplane.

The greater energy wins out.

Further possibilities:

Penetration as polyphonic intersection of different planar structures and directions of motion.

Structures of similar or dissimilar form, which stand close together, touch, interpenetrate, or intermesh, while one absorbs the other.



## The dimensional signs

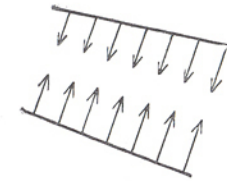
Concerning the development of a point into a line, of a line into a plane, of a plane into a body

**Point.** The point as primordial element, all-pervasive.

**Line.** A point discharges its tension towards another point. The causal principle is the will inherent in reciprocal tension. Essence of a dimension. One-dimensional element.

**Plane.** Tension between line and line results in a plane. Essence of two dimensions. Two-dimensional element.

Tension

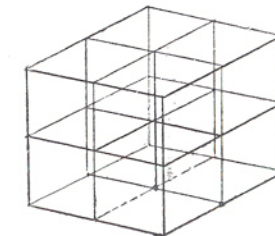


Discharge of tension



from point to point = line

from line to line = plane



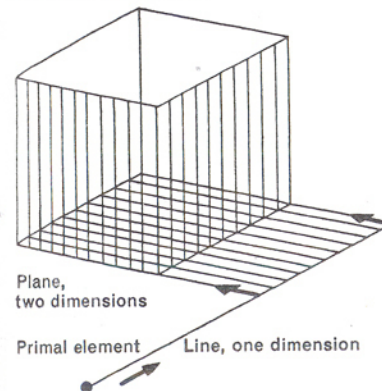
Two diverging lines A-B and C-D with a point of intersection D.



Two diverging lines with two points of intersection

d the  
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s our

Body, three dimensions



Plane,  
two dimensions

Primal element

Line, one dimension

**Body.** The line moves and produces the plane; the plane moves and the body comes into being.

Essence of three dimensions. Three-dimensional element.

The cube is a balanced synthesis of three definite dimensions and as such the normative symbol of corporeality.

The movements summarised:

Characteristic of the dimension behind-in front (the third dimension) is the increasing progression of points, lines, and surfaces. In the point the opposite ends of the pictorial elements are still effective; less so in the intermediary stages. They need more room before they can be weighed or measured by the eye, or critically appraised.