Plane 3 | Composition and Layering. The Propagation of the Planar Element

Plane 3|1 Composition of Planes (side by side)

In order to distinguish between planes lying side by side, the planes themselves can be differentiated in design or their borders can be marked using various linear elements like edge, frame, joint, and ledge. [See chap. Line 2 Separation – Partition]

Even without borders the flags in this photograph are easily distinguishable planes. In a Japanese garden we see that clear geometrical figures are not necessary to keep things recognizable, but that ordering principles like the homogeneity of material, color, etc. help to connect things into plane-like ordering elements.

Again I refer to Arnheim who once said that vision no longer seemed to go from the particular to the general but that overall structural features were the primary perceptual data.

How do planar elements distinguish themselves visually from their surroundings? As long as the planes are represented as isolated elements, it is relatively simple to distinguish figure and ground.

These two details of paintings by Piet Mondrian, however, show that this isn’t always easy. In the first picture the colors or the borderless solid planes define the figure on the uniform ground. Through the interplay of their forces the planes seem balanced because in successful paintings, truly empty spaces, devoid of such countervailing forces, are quite rare. […] It is also true that the figure forces acquire their true vigor only through the resistance of their environmental antagonists. A punch into empty space evaporates. [Arnheim, The Dynamics of Architectural Form, 71]

In the second example it becomes difficult to determine whether a boundary line belongs to one plane or the other because each is part of both planes. All planes are equally powerful.

As soon as planes overlap or are superimposed, the question of dominance arises. This can lead to an increase in impact or as the result of a kind of interference. It can make one of the two planar areas disappear.

The light installations by James Turrell make the viewer wonder whether he is depicting emptiness or object. Does the frame delimit the outer or inner field? Is it a frame or a joint, figure or ground?

Different material surfaces are separated by joints, that is to say negative spatial borders. A groove-like depression in a plaster surface is enough to mark off individual planes.

The plane in the form of a tatami mat measuring roughly 90 x 180 cm constitutes the traditional basic unit of a Japanese house. In various arrangements the number of these rectangular mats determines the size of the room. Edges are usually marked by colored fabric borders. It is possible to estimate the size of the room at a glance.