

## Introduction

I would never have imagined myself writing a work of art criticism. I am a painter and the alphabet in which I express myself is one made up of shapes and colors.

I did not find Mondrian. It was rather one of his paintings, namely *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, that presented itself along my path as a discreet pointer and a source of wisdom, as simple and inaccessible as water from the fountainhead.

I remember how I used to go to the Museum of Modern Art during the first few years of my stay in New York (1980-85) and stand for ages in front of that canvas without actually understanding very much. I had studied modern art and Mondrian at university. I intuitively felt that there was a great deal in that painting but could see nothing at all of what I was later to discover over the years. In a way that I could not explain, my eye already glimpsed the content that reflection then brought to light over the following ten years.

I moved to Berlin in 1985. For those of us in the western sector, Berlin was an ideal place to live, to think, and above all to create.

I began to study *Broadway Boogie Woogie* in order to clarify some things to myself. Having started almost as a game, I discovered an entire world in that painting in the space of a few years. I followed my heart along this path far more than my head, which has instead served to express everything felt by the heart in the clearest possible terms. This work is the fruit not only of an intellectual process but also of an existential pathway stretching for nearly twenty years.

A great deal has been written about Mondrian but not enough as yet about his paintings. The content is in fact seldom allowed to flow directly from the images, which should in my view constitute the primary source of every analysis that addresses painting.

Mondrian wrote about the new art but never believed that it was possible to write a theory of art, as Kandinsky and Klee attempted to do. Art is first and foremost something you do, after which you can talk about it and try to explain it. It is paintings rather than theories that constitute the true source for those who really want to understand. As a painter, I therefore place words at the service of images in explaining Mondrian's work. This has revealed itself as an organic structure in which one canvas cannot be separated from another without losing sight of the deeper meaning of the whole. It is an evolutionary process spread over forty years during which the Dutch artist gave concrete shape to his vision of reality. That vision is encapsulated in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, his last work, completed in 1943. It really is a most fascinating trajectory.

Having realized that what I was discovering should be made available to others, I decided to inform the various scholars and experts specializing in Mondrian. Argan, Blotkamp, Bremer, Crouwel, Joosten and Seuphor replied and showed appreciation of my efforts. With the characteristic enthusiasm he displayed when defending modern thought, Bruno Zevi made the pages of his magazine *L'architettura* available, and it was there that the first part of my study, an analysis of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, was published in 1991. This book now follows with an explanation of the oeuvre as a whole.

While I regard *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as one of the most important works of the twentieth century, my own way of painting is different. The last works of Henri Matisse are equally important for me, as are the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi and the promising work of some as yet unknown artists.

I attach less importance to all the self-styled artists, creative wheeler-dealers, and multinationals of culture nowadays buzzing around art.

Paul Cézanne said that "*art is a religion and its purpose is to elevate thought*". <sup>1</sup>

Examination of Mondrian's work reveals an evolutionary process that completely transformed the way of painting in the space of fifty years. One of the aims of this book is to explain the reasons for this evolution by showing how to read and interpret abstract painting in relation to everyday life and the univer-

sal themes of the human condition. I seek to show the wealth of existential content that makes Neoplastic space a living structure of great present-day relevance, a tool that I regard as capable of contributing both to our understanding of today's world and to the development of tomorrow's.

I have only touched upon the existential aspects because my purpose here is not to develop issues of a general character but to show the connections between these and Neoplastic painting. In a world where the parts have grown superabundantly, where the firm points of reference and age-old certainties have been lost, the capacity for abstraction becomes indispensable in rediscovering a certain essence of things.

A particular way of understanding art can contribute today toward recasting the vision of greater breadth that has been lacking on the frenzied and fragmentary cultural scene over the last few decades.

Among the published works that I have found very useful, attention must be drawn to Michel Seuphor's biography. Even though it does not develop an analysis of the paintings in any great depth, it provides an absorbing explanation of the work that clearly pinpoints the links between art and life. Seuphor too was an artist.

While neglecting the examination of the images, the fine work published in 1961 by Filiberto Menna, my professor at university, provides confirmation from a philosophical and literary viewpoint of certain ideas of mine about the geometry of the paintings.

I thank Hans L.C. Jaffé for a number of intelligent observations that contributed to my work of analysis, especially at the beginning.

Particular thanks go to Joop M. Joosten and Robert Welsh for their exhaustive catalogue raisonné, which I found of great help in the chronological appraisal of the paintings and hence also in attaining a clearer understanding of the evolution of the work as a whole.

General thanks go to all those who have endeavored to explain and to disseminate the ideas of the Dutch master.

I have described and interpreted the Neoplastic compositions, which constitute the secret sap of Mondrian's thought, through painstaking examination of everything there is to be seen. The analysis may appear minute ("mechanical" or "technical" to some) because a certain form of art criticism has accustomed us to romantic digressions on themes of a general character rather than addressing the most concrete and essential elements of a painting, namely its forms and colors. I prefer to arrive at the general questions by starting from the particular and not the other way round.

I must say that it is every bit as difficult to explain visual processes in words as it is to give a verbal description of a piece of music.

I hope that the necessary degree of detail in certain passages does not unduly inhibit the overall view that remains one of the aims of my work.

Readers will therefore have to be patient and go through the details of the analysis first before being able to take a broader look at aspects of a more general character.

It was not easy to calibrate the explanation because the work is intended primarily for scholars and experts specializing in Mondrian. At the same time, as an artist, I felt the desire to disclose the meaning of the Dutch painter's work to a more general public, as I have done in seminars held over the last few years. The great challenge today is to succeed in explaining the substance of things in simple terms without reducing everything to the superficial level.

There is currently great reluctance to ask those taking an interest in art to make any effort to understand. Fear of losing an audience leads to digression and entertainment rather than explanation and the stimulation of capacities. In the end, I decided to present my studies in their complete form and defer to a later stage the writing of a more accessible text, which I am currently completing and intend to present also in the form of an educational exhibition.

I have deliberately overlooked the biographical aspects regarding Piet Mondrian in this work, as other scholars have already addressed these expertly at great length.