

I shall now retrace the development of Piet Mondrian's work as a whole and present an overview of the various periods examined so far.

The early stages are characterized by a way of painting reality as it appears to us, in all its immediacy and detail.

Faced with the vastness and variety of nature, the artist very soon began to ask himself the questions that every human being asks. What is this infinite space of different things? What are we with respect to all this? As a painter, Mondrian obtained his answers through the eye and its discovery of correspondences between certain outer forms and some traces of an inner path.

The Dutch master painted about 280 landscapes between 1893 and 1905. The eye settles on the surface of things, whose constant change multiplies the appearances of the world, an infinite reality that is, however, perceived as an indissoluble unity by the mind.

In addressing the natural landscape, as in **5**, the artist displays a number of tree trunks while seeking at the same time to express them in synthesis with an upward convergence of the line of the horizon that concentrates and unifies the manifold aspect.

In the restricted space of a still life (**7**), which is certainly not as extensive and multiform as a landscape, the painter again sees a relationship between multiplication (the variety of imperfect circles expressed with the apples) and synthesis (the perfect circle of the plate). Once again the theme of the one and the many, the natural and the human, manifests itself metaphorically. The painter endeavors to capture something more lasting and essential in the ever-changing relationship with the vastness and beauty of nature.

On observing **10**, **11**, **12**, **13**, and **14** in order, we see a horizontal sequence of trees (**10**) draw closer together (**11**) and attain synthesis with an oval form (**12**) that then opens up again to the rectilinear space moving away on the right (**13**).

The uninterrupted flow of the natural landscape (the white strip of sky) predominates again in **14** but is concentrated and finds a moment of synthesis in the two juxtaposed sails of the windmill, which reproduce the contrast between the immensity of the sky (horizontal) and the windmill itself (vertical) in a restricted form. In other words, they express a synthesis of the natural and the human, concentrating the entire space of the canvas into that unitary relationship.

10, **11**, **12**, **13**, and **14** were not painted in succession. I have chosen **10** as exemplifying many other landscapes on which the painter worked in that period. Similarly, **14** is just one of the many different versions of landscapes with windmill painted by Mondrian between 1905 and 1907. When observed as a sequence, however, these five works clearly display the dynamics underlying the variable appearance of nature that guided the artist's eye toward the developments his work was undergoing.

Not all of Mondrian's works succeed in manifesting what the artist felt in clear and convincing form: the need to express a space expanding horizontally in pursuit of the boundless extension of the natural landscape and, at the same time, to evoke a striving of the same space for concentration in accordance with the needs of its own inner world. The search for synthesis manifests itself with an upward convergence (**5**) or a circle inside the composition (**7**), sometimes with an oval enclosing the composition as a whole (**12**, **13**) or a concentration of horizontal and vertical (**14**).

Similarly to what can be seen in the works cited above, **15** presents a black segment (the roof of a farmhouse) that seems intent on concentrating the uninterrupted horizontal expansion of the central area (the river) within itself.

The synthesis that Mondrian seeks through form in the presence of nature (**5**, **7**, **12**, **14**) manifests itself in other canvases through light, i.e. color (**16**, **17**). In the various landscapes painted by the faint glow of the moon, the contrast between details is softened and the painter can concentrate on the broad

outlines.

This brings to mind the subsequent Cubist period, when the artist's quest for synthesis and unity led him to reduce the contrasting range of colors used during the expressionistic phase (**22, 24, 28, 30**) to variations of ochre, brown, and gray (**39, 40, 41**).

In the period spanning the turn of the century, a freer use of color enabled painters to express a greater correspondence between external reality and the feelings it aroused in them. The naturalistic tones gave way to colors highlighting the relationship between subject and object (**19, 20, 21, 22**). As we have seen, this relationship had already manifested itself at the level of form for Mondrian in some works of the naturalistic phase, in which he addressed the variety of the outer world on the one hand while seeking on the other to concentrate it in a synthesis (the inner world).

Synthesis is generated from inside the composition in **5** and **7** but imposed from outside in **12** (the oval).

Between **13** and **14** we again see the transition from a suggestion of all-embracing externally imposed synthesis (the oval) to synthesis generated within the composition (the sails of the windmill). In **15** an internally generated concentrating motion (the black segment/farmhouse roof) coexists with an external synthesis (the faint oval). **23** presents a unitary synthesis of circular shape born inside the composition (the sun high on the right).

In a way that is still veiled by appearances, we can already glimpse the dialectic that was to develop throughout the Cubist phase (1912-15) when Mondrian replaced an external unity (the oval) (**40, 44, 45**) with a unitary synthesis generated from inside the composition (rectangle/**42** and square/**45**).

The dialectic between the manifold aspect of the world (an expanding space) and the need for synthesis and unity stemming from the inner world (a concentrating motion) led between 1908 and 1910 to the space of the dunes, the buildings, and the tree.

It is as though the painter extrapolated from **C 23** both the horizontals of the ground (**C 30**) and the verticals of the trunks (**C 31**) to find in the trunk of a single tree the unifying moment of a space that multiplies its appearances with the branches (**C 35**).

What Mondrian saw in the structure of the branches was a metaphor of the multiform aspect of nature, which he inwardly perceived as a unity. The figure of the tree represented a small universe for Mondrian, multiple and unitary at the same time.

The black segment observed in the central area of **15** becomes a yellow accent in the center of **C 30**, where a vertical develops a moment later (**C 31**). This vertical then joins up again with the horizontal (**C 35**).

Space is now based on a relationship between horizontal and vertical (the tree), which become plastic symbols respectively of boundless natural extension (the dunes) and motion toward the concentration in synthesis brought about by consciousness (the buildings).

The naturalistic tree was transformed into the Cubist tree between 1911 and 1913 (**36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41**) and became an abstract space over a period of three years (**42, 43, 44, 45**). The relationship between the horizontal expansion of the branches and the vertical concentration of the trunk developed from the static form of a single tree (**C 35**) now undergoes multiplication into a variety of small relationships (**C 41, 42**) that can, when seen as a whole, express both the complex structure of a tree and a virtually infinite number of trees. In **35** the point of observation is fixed and limited to the outer form of a single object; in **C 41, 42**, and **45** the point of observation is mobile and contemplates a reality that succeeds in evoking something constant despite its continuous change in appearance.

The key transition took place between **C 35** and **C 42**. The variety of still lifes, landscapes, and trees painted by the artist between 1893 and 1908 with an abundance of details gradually gave way to an "inner landscape". Responding to the stimuli of external reality, Mondrian was no longer concerned with details but sought instead to pinpoint a structure common to all things. The Cubist composition acquired for the Dutch painter the value of a universal space

in which the particular aspect of each individual thing is lost (**C 35**) but the visual horizons are broadened so as to contemplate the variety of the world in an ideal synthesis (**C 45**).

Faced with the fragmentary nature of the new Cubist space, Mondrian sought unification. He softened his colors (**37, 38, 39**), introduced an oval form (**40**), and gradually transformed the variety of small signs into variations on the perpendicular relationship (**41, 43, 45**).

The strong contrasts of color characterizing the "expressionistic" period were reduced in this phase (**37, 38, 39, 40, 41**) but then returned (**42, 43, 44**), only to diminish again (**45**) as the artist sought greater cohesion of the formal layout.

Though opened up and relaxed almost to the point of elimination, the oval still appeared too absolute a form, a closed and predetermined entity that failed to express the relationship between subject and object (vertical and horizontal) upon which the artist's vision now rested.

Mondrian wanted to evoke a unity generated from inside the composition, as in **5, 7, 14**, and **23** and with the trunk of the naturalistic tree (**29, 35**).

The space inside the oval was therefore transformed between 1913 and 1915 into a multitude of unpredictable combinations of horizontal and vertical lines. Every point appears different and everything changes incessantly, but the consciousness relates everything to endless variation on one and the same thing, namely the perpendicular relationship.

The potentially closed and rounded form imposed from the outside (the oval)-which, as the painter was to say, expresses no relationship-was replaced with an open form expressing duality (the relationship between horizontal and vertical) as unity inside a square. A rectangle (**42**) and then a square (**45**) evoked the inner space of consciousness, in which the changing aspect of physical reality (constant imbalance between opposites) was recomposed for an instant in the best possible equilibrium. Manifold and fragmentary external space was united in inner space.

The relationship between the external world and the internal is obviously a dynamic process and the synthesis brought about by consciousness will therefore necessarily have to open up again to the variable progress of existence. We see this in **C 45**, where the square opens again higher up. The ideal unity opens up to the duality and variety of physical reality.

Mondrian's plastic space lives and acquires meaning in virtue of a continuous process of interaction. All the landscapes of the naturalistic phase are concentrated ideally in an inner landscape, an abstract "landscape" that then opens up again to the infinite landscapes of external nature.

Now detached from the outward appearance of things, the painting holds no longer for one particular landscape alone but for all possible landscapes seen from all possible positions; now abstract, it holds no longer for natural landscapes alone but also for "artificial landscapes", i.e. for the cities in which human beings spend most of their lives.

The unifying space of consciousness, which Mondrian evokes in a square (**45**), opens up to color (**46**) and multiplies in the form of rectangles of different shapes, sizes, and hues (**47**) that generate the variety previously expressed through small black dashes. Between 1915 and 1917 the ideal synthesis opened up to the variable aspect of the world, which now appeared in the form of yellow, pink or blue rectangles, some larger and some smaller, some horizontal and some vertical. Everything was in a state of constant change. Mondrian once again perceived the lack of synthesis and unity.

He joined up the rectangles (**48**), but this did not make up for the lack of cohesion. He therefore abandoned color once again to concentrate on formal layout (**49**) and produced compositions where the variety of rectangles reflected the expansion or contraction of a constant module (**50**). The rectangles

are different but now change on the basis of a common parameter. Everything changes but something remains. The formal structure acquires order and clarity. This order is accentuated with the wholly regular schema of **51**, where the variable aspect of the composition is expressed almost exclusively through color. From space that is completely drawn (**45**) to space that is entirely painted (**47**), which undergoes a new reorganization of formal structure (**49**) and then opens up again to color (**50, 51**).

The small linear segments of the Cubist compositions become continuous lines in the meantime. This transition occurs when the graphic structure of **45** opens up to color (**46**) and becomes a space composed solely of planes (**47**). Mondrian's subsequent decision to join up the planes generates lines (**48**), which become straight in **51**.

On the one hand, the formal structure of **51** maintains complete regularity; on the other, it works with the lines that continue uninterruptedly to generate a more open and dynamic composition. The space of the canvas is connected ideally with the space of reality.

In the center of **51** we see the formation of a synthesis of opposite values (horizontal and vertical, black and white).

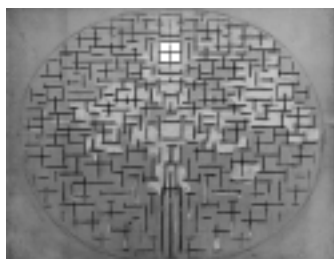
The composition now expresses in clear and determined form both the continuity (lines) that Mondrian sees in the space of physical reality (previously evoked with the dunes) and the concentrating motion (the vertical shape of the buildings) that generates a synthesis of consciousness within the space itself (the tree trunk in 1910, a drawn square in 1915 (**45**), and a painted rectangle in 1919 (**51**).

I refer in this summary to only some of the more significant works out of all those actually produced by Mondrian. The real scale of his output should therefore be kept clearly in mind.

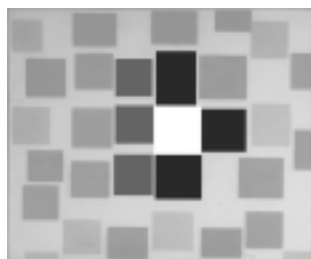
A set of bright and contrasting colors (**51**) turns into a varying range of grays that meet in a white synthesis. The painter sees an ideal fusion of the different colors in the white rectangle. The chromatic variety of the world (yellow, red, and blue) attains unity in white just as variety itself attained unity inside a square form with a sign of equivalence between horizontal and vertical (**45**).

Space with a graphic flavor (**45**) becomes wholly colored space (**51**) over a period of four years.

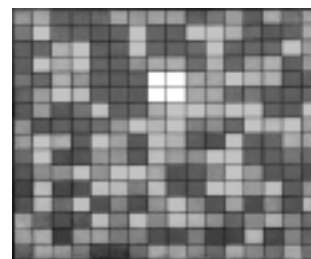
The white synthesis manifested in **51** was to become a constant feature of the first Neoplastic phase as a whole (**53, 54, 56, 57**) and of many subsequent works (**59, 62**). Closer examination reveals, however, that the idea of a synthesis expressed through a white field can already be found two years earlier (diagram 47 **a**).



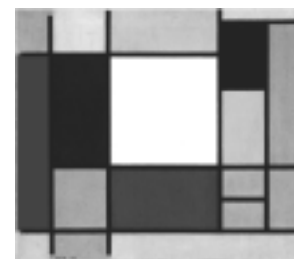
45 a



47 a



51 m



53 a

On looking carefully, we note the presence in **C 45** of a fluid substance covering some areas of the composition with white, including the unitary synthesis manifested in the square (diagram 45 **a**). The genesis of the white unity, which was to take shape after 1920 and to guide the development of the European Neoplastic phase, can be traced back to the mass of white that was first seen in 1915 (**45**), became a square form with precise edges (**47**), reappeared two years later as a rectangle (**51**), and then turned into a dynamic white field of potentially square proportions as from 1920 (**53, 54**).

Nevertheless, the artist's true intention was to open up the synthesis (**45**) to color (**46, 47**). Mondrian arrived at a compromise in **51**, where the three primary colors are ideally united in a white rectangle through a varied range of grays. Immediately afterward, however, he endeavored to open up the unitary synthesis to all the colors in a more concrete way (**52**). While the regular layout of **51** becomes asymmetric, gray, yellow, red, and blue give life to a large square form in the center of composition (**C 52**). The white synthesis (**51**) opens up to colors, thus leading, however, to a predominance of the manifold aspect and the renewed absence of the particular moment in which the composition is supposed to manifest unity.

The composition is therefore divided up again into a variable set of measures, proportions, and colors that attain an instant of unitary synthesis in a large white square (**53**).

In the meantime, the lines gradually take on the function of expressing space that continues uninterrupted and the artist's gaze can concentrate on the square and a smaller number of surfaces (**54, 55**).

The painter uses lines to maintain ideal contact between the surface of the canvas and the real space of life, the subjective synthesis generated by the work of art and the multiform extension of the world, i.e. objective unity. Art transforms imbalances, which multiply out of all proportion in reality, into ideal equilibriums manifested on the surface of a canvas.

This marked the beginning of a long and a laborious process of gradually bringing together subjective unity (a white field of square proportions) (**53, 54**) and objective unity, i.e. the infinite variety of forms and colors of the world. This variety is suggested on the canvas by the different measures, proportions, and colors around the square, a necessarily limited degree of multiplicity that is ideally linked to the much broader variety of the real world by the continuity of the lines.

The whole of the European Neoplastic phase (1919-39) was to be a slow and gradual opening up of the subjective to the objective, the one to the many: Mondrian still endeavored in the works of 1921 to express both the one and the many at the same time (**53.2, 53.3, 53.4, 54.3, 54.4**), but then ended up once again highlighting a large white square, made more dynamic and asymmetric by a variable set of colored areas (**54, 54.6, 54.7, 54.8, 54.9, 54.10**). The unitary/constant aspect and the manifold/variable aspect influenced one another reciprocally while remaining clearly separate and distinct. I have classified this type of composition as belonging to layout N. I (see page 96).

The dialectic between unity and multiplicity continued. The square form took on color (**55**), underwent duplication and motion (**56**), opened up (**57**), and began to interpenetrate with a vertical line (**58**) (layout N. II). A closed square developed out of the dynamic continuity of the lines around 1930 (layout N. III): sometimes more horizontal (**59**), sometimes more vertical (**62**); sometimes larger, sometimes smaller; sometimes blue, sometimes red (layout N. IV) (**60**). The single square of 1922 gradually gave way to a variety of probable square forms (**63**). Unity and multiplicity tended to interpenetrate. Subjective unity tended toward the objective.

In actual fact, the square opened up and interpenetrated with the variety of forms and colors on the one hand while seeking on the other to absorb that variety with no extensive change to itself. The rectangular canvases show the synthesis opening up to different shapes, sizes and colors (**57, 59, 60, 62**,

63) whereas the lozenge compositions produced at the same time show the square form itself becoming multiple. In the first case, the square opens up in the direction of multiplicity (**59, 60, 61**); in the second, the square absorbs multiplicity while remaining substantially one (**64**).

Mondrian uses lines that continue uninterruptedly to drive the totality of space, previously represented by the oval, beyond the finite field of the canvas and concentrates, above all in the lozenge compositions, on a unity seeking to express the whole by itself. This is taken to the extreme synthesis of just two black lines (**61.3**) striving to evoke an "infinite square form". For an instant, subjective unity (the finite space of the square) becomes objective unity, i.e. the infinite totality of real space, previously expressed by means of an oval and now manifested through the continuity of the lines. With reference to the composition of **45**, we can say that the square tended toward the oval between 1925 and 1933.

64 achieves the goal of showing a wholly colored and comparatively multiple space in synthesis. The synthesis is, however, too absolute and all of the manifold aspect of the world appears to be sacrificed.

This led to a new opening up of the subjective to the objective, the one to the many, carried out in this initial phase primarily by means of form (**65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70**). In 1942, when the black lines became yellow, red and blue (**71**), the unitary synthesis underwent multiplication also and above all through color.

The lines had suddenly become yellow (**64**) nine years before reverting to black until 1941. It is as though space attained such a level of synthesis in that lozenge as to be concentrated into pure energy and initiate a process of multiplication in which form and then color work to open space up again to a growing level of complexity. In **71** the composition is again rich and varied, as in **45** or **51**, but the space appears excessively dynamic. If unity predominates in **64**, it is the manifold and infinite space of the lines that predominates nine later years in **71**.

Equilibrium was to be re-established in **72**, where the opposite values manifest dynamic equivalence through a process (Section **D**).

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie (BBW)* a variety of colored lines become a single plane of those three colors that then returns to the manifold condition of the lines; objective unity (the totality of space, as previously expressed with the oval and then with the continuity of the lines) becomes subjective unity (the unitary plane) and then returns to the objective dimension. It is the same thing appearing alternately in unitary and multiple form.

In *BBW* the unity opens up (as in all the canvases of rectangular format painted in the 1920s) and remains one (as in the lozenge compositions).

The brightest colors of the world and its infinite extension become a measured-i.e. thinkable-space that then opens up again to the infinite extension of the world; the physical becomes mental and then reverts to physical. Mondrian called this process the subjectivization of the objective.

It was only when the manifold aspect finally reached its peak (**73**) that the Neoplastic lines were able to stop. The variety expressed virtually in **64** was now manifested in wholly visible form on the surface of the canvas (**73**).

The painter worked in the last few months of his life on compositions of colored rectangles freely juxtaposed on the walls of his studio (**73.1, 73.2, 73.3**). The space of the canvas opened up to the space of reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of the world (the space of the lines) returned to the canvas (**73**); on the other, the subjective reality of art left the canvas and was transmitted to the world. Either way, the space of art became the space of life. *Victory Boogie Woogie (VBW)* is a sort of spiritual testament containing an exhortation addressed to the artists of the future: painting must be able to transform the discord of the real world into plastic harmonies serving as a model for the future developments of life; art must be able to change the world.

Mondrian: "A day will come when we will be able to dispense with all the forms of art as we know them today: only then will beauty have reached matu-

city to become concrete reality." ²⁸

VBW remains incomplete because every human action aimed at improving the world will necessarily be left unfinished. It is an open process that will never come to an end. This is why *VBW* could not be completed; it is only the first step on an endless path toward a more balanced world. While the painting was not finished, it is to be hoped that it can serve to keep the human spirit awake and accompany it in its pursuit of justice and harmony. It was "aux hommes futures", to future mankind, that Mondrian dedicated an essay on the new plastic art.

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The process observed in *BBW*, from multiplicity to unity and back to multiplicity, condenses all of Piet Mondrian's work within a single canvas. His work as a whole is in fact summed up in a pathway that first transforms the manifold aspect of nature (**2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20, 23**) into abstract space (**29, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45, 51**) and then concentrates progressively on unity (**53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 64**) before opening up again to multiplicity (**64, 66, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73**). From the many (**23, 41, 47, 51**) to the one (**64**) and from the one to the many (**64, 71, 73**), the pathway stretched over some forty years and can be found encapsulated in *BBW*.

BBW sums up an entire life and it is perhaps no coincidence that this was the last work completed by the artist.

The astounding consistency found in the Dutch master's artistic trajectory brings to mind certain wonderful processes of nature that human thought has to trace back to a precise concatenation of causes and effects, in other words to a designing mind. I do not know whether nature really is based on a "design", but if so then Mondrian, like all true artists, did nothing throughout his life other than act in spontaneous obedience to it.

Processes of this nature can certainly not be thought out but only carried through, step by step, following your intuition. If your intuition reaches such depths and succeeds in seeing so far, the results acquire all the astonishing and organic coherence that, it should be recalled, is displayed only upon completion.

It is much easier for us today to see the entire work as a whole. It was certainly impossible for the painter to take full cognizance of everything he was creating when he let himself be guided by his eye in addressing the canvas with his brushes.

Piet Mondrian's work was the patient pursuit of an image capable by itself of expressing his feeling for life in clear and precise form. It makes no sense to isolate individual paintings from this context, which is a dynamic process with no break in continuity. It is necessary to see the space that slowly evolves from one painting to another: from the dunes, the buildings, and the trees all the way to *BBW*.

It will be necessary one day to hold a great exhibition displaying the work as a whole and explaining its more substantial meanings. We cannot go on showing Mondrian in separate fragments. The exhibitions held so far can be compared to a piece of music with the individual notes played in different places at different times.

In the few cases where it has proved possible to gather a substantial and significant group of works together in a single exhibition, full advantage has not been taken of the opportunity to provide insight in this respect.

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While in no way detracting from the Dutch artist's best-known Neoplastic work, the compositions of black lines and small planes of color commonly understood as his painting, I think I can say that it constitutes no more than a phase along the way in his development of the space that finally came to light in the two last *Boogies* produced in New York. These are the images that Mondrian had on the tips of his fingers all through his career.

The painter worked for an entire lifetime to express this type of space: as rich and manifold as possible in order to reflect the richness and multiplicity he saw in the natural universe but endowed at the same time with the degree of synthesis and unity required by his consciousness and indeed practically always by the human mind in general. As the artist said with respect to the *Pier and Ocean* series in 1914-15, "*I was struck by the vastness of nature and tried to express its extent, its calm, and its unity.*" ²⁹

This is a dynamic space of boundless extension that gradually comes to concentrate in a finite and more constant dimension, but not to stop. Life never stops. The equilibrium between life and ideas is dynamic. The unitary synthesis opens up again to all the immense variation of multiplicity and then returns to synthesis.

The end of the process coincides with a new beginning in a virtually infinite series of cycles from the many to the one and from the one to the many.

An image in which the end coincides with a new beginning suggests a circular process. An oval? An oval expressed in straight lines? The absolute becomes relative.

Nature too can appear rectilinear (e.g. the horizon of the sea) while proving round from another point of observation. Which is more real, our subjective vision or the objective reality lying beyond our immediate perception of things?

Mondrian's tendency to express the circularity suggesting a whole by means of straight lines dates from the time around 1905-06 when, in a still embryonic form, the synthesis evoked with an oval (**13**, **14**) became a synthesis of horizontal and vertical concentrated in the sails of a windmill (**14**).

Nine years later, we see this transition take place in abstract form (**45**) with an oval (unity external to the composition) that becomes a perpendicular relationship and concentrates to form a square (internal unity).

Over a span of seven years the juxtaposed sails of the windmill (**14**) become a rectangle (**42**) out of which a square is developed (**45**) that takes the place, in the form of a rectangle (**51**), of the all-embracing unity expressed by means of the oval. The latter gradually disappears beyond the edges of the canvas and turns as from 1919 into the infinite continuity of lines.

With the lines that continue uninterruptedly, the totality of space was to remain beyond the finite field of the painting for over 20 years before making its re-entry (**72**, **73**). At the same time, the composition enclosed within the boundary of the canvas was projected toward real space (the patterns of colored surfaces that Mondrian made on the walls of his studio (**73.1**, **73.2**, **73.3**)).

The idea that multiplicity should become unity and that this should then open up again to multiplicity (the space of *BBW*) had already been manifested 27 years earlier with **45**, where the square (unitary synthesis) reverts to duality in the upper section and then flows back to multiplicity. As in **45**, it is again a horizontal in **72** that expands the concentration put into effect by the vertical.

Because the square presented itself in the drawing of 1915 as a synthesis of the entire composition, i.e. of all the space inside the oval, it was necessarily compelled to open up again to multiplicity. In other words, it had to seek to become all the space of the oval but without thereby losing its nature as a square.

All the canvases painted by Mondrian between 1915 and 1943 served this purpose of opening unity up to multiplicity without losing it in the process.

With the Cubist transformation of space and the loss of the metaphorical synthesis evoked through the tree trunk, unity was expressed with a central rec-

tangle (**42**) that opened up in subsequent canvases to interpenetrate with the surrounding space (**42.2**) before concentrating again two years later in a clearly visible square (**45**), which opened up in turn to color and dissolved (**47**). In 1917 a square area colored white suggested an embryonic form of synthesis (**47**) that took clearer shape only two years later (**51**).

While the synthesis is clearly manifested in **42**, **45**, **47**, and **51**, it opens up and interpenetrates with manifold space in **42.2**, **48**, and **51.1** until it is practically lost (**52**). The artist strives for a fusion of unity and multiplicity because he feels that the two opposite aspects are one and the same reality. And so, if the manifold aspect predominates in **52**, there is a focus in **53** on unity, which then opens up again to variations in shape, size, and color (**54.4**) before concentrating once more in an entirely white field (**54.6**). The fusion of unity and multiplicity continues with **55**, **58**, **60**, and **62** (all canvases that I have classified as belonging to layouts N. II, N. III, and N. IV) and with **64** and **71**. The two aspects finally come to form an indissoluble process in **72**. The sequence from **42** to **73** shows this dialectic of the unitary synthesis that manifests itself in concrete form (**42**, **45**, **51**, **53**, **54.6**, **55**, **62**, **72**) and then dissolves into multiplicity (**42.2**, **47**, **48**, **51.1**, **52**, **54.4**, **60**, **63**, **71**, **73**). Unity and multiplicity coincide in **64**, as they do in **73**, but it is unity that governs all the space in the first lozenge and the apotheosis of multiplicity in the second.

Opening unity up to multiplicity without losing sight of it in the process was a goal that appeared crucial to the painter, and this can be understood because subjective unity (the square of **45**) can only symbolize objective unity (the oval) by corresponding to it. It appears obvious, however, that this could not be attained simultaneously (as seen in **45**) but only in a dynamic vision gradually transforming one aspect into the other (**72**).

With the unitary plane that is born out of the lines and then returns to them, i.e. with the composition of *BBW*, the square and oval of **45** become a single reality that appears sometimes in one form and sometimes in another.

Once again I am reminded of a flower; a simple patch of color that reveals a whole micro universe.

Closer examination shows that the idea of multiplicity being transformed into unity and then back originated even earlier than the *Pier and Ocean* of 1915 (**45**).

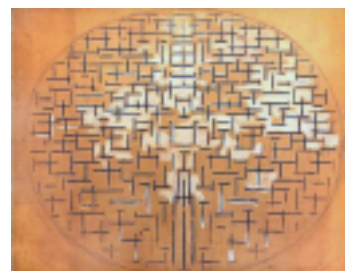
Observe the figure of the tree (**25**, **29**, **35**). The trunk is vertical while the space extends horizontally with the branches. This holds both for **35**, where the lower branches are taut and form horizontal lines perfectly orthogonal to the trunk, and for **25** and **29**, where the transition from trunk to branches is more gradual and, unlike **35**, the branches tend to touch the line of the horizon on the right (see also **24.3**).

Sequence 1



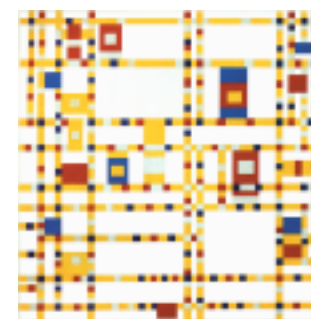
29

1908-10



45

1915



72

1942-43

The line of the ground runs from one side of the painting to the other and therefore seems to correspond to the uninterrupted space expressed during the same period with dunes, i.e. a boundless horizontal expanse. The line of the ground presents a horizontal sequence of small vertical strokes, above all in **24.1**, **24.3**, and **25**.

Some of the vertical strokes cluster together and consolidate to form the trunk, from which the multiple branches project before joining up again with the line of the ground on the right. Close observation reveals that this is a circular process. The line of the ground converges in the trunk, the trunk generates the branches, and the branches then return to the original line.

Through the vertical (the trunk), a boundless space that cannot be wholly represented within the canvas (the line of the ground, i.e. the endless natural horizon) becomes a manifold space (the branches) that is expressed as a synthesis inside the painting before flowing back toward the multiple extension of the ground.

Mutatis mutandis, we see the same thing in **45**, where the horizontal of the sea is concentrated by the vertical (the pier) into a synthesis (the square) that opens higher up to the horizontal before flowing back toward manifold space; as in **72**, where the virtually infinite space of the lines is concentrated into the unitary synthesis of a plane that then reverts to the infinite extension of the lines.

The objective totality (the uninterrupted continuity of the ground) is transformed through the unifying action of the trunk into a momentary subjective synthesis (the set of branches) that then flows back toward the objective totality out of which it was generated. The objective becomes subjective and then returns to the objective, just like the square of **45** and unity of **72**, which express multiplicity in a synthesis and then open up again to multiplicity. The tree is a metaphor of the process that Mondrian described as the subjectivization of the objective, which guided the whole of his work.

The naturalistic tree thus already reveals in wholly embryonic form the process from multiplicity to unity and from unity to multiplicity that took shape in abstract-i.e. universal-form six years later (**C 45**) and was expressed 27 years later in the world's brightest colors (**C 72**).

The idea of the tree already containing an implicit reference to a circular process seems to find confirmation in **29**, where a circle can be seen in the upper right section, and also in **24.4**, where the whole seems to suggest an oval outline.

* * *

Comparison of **23** and **72** brings interesting analogies to light. In the painting of 1908 we see a contrast between horizontal and vertical rectilinear thrusts that find an instant of synthesis in the circular form of the sun setting in the upper right section. The painting of 1943 also shows the contrast between opposing lines that find an instant of synthesis in the unitary plane in the upper right section. The sun and the unitary plane occupy the same position within the composition.

* * *

In *BBW* the color yellow goes from a dynamic and external condition (lines) toward a greater degree of internalization and comparative rest inside the unitary plane. The innermost part of the unity is in fact a yellow area developing a slight horizontal predominance. The Neoplastic lines (symbolizing a physical reality of infinite extension) concentrate in a plane that, as delimited space, corresponds to the activity of thinking in man. The natural is concentrated in the spiritual; the spiritual reveals a natural soul (the yellow horizontal area).

Mondrian painted *Church at Domburg with Tree* - **25.3** - in 1909. Sketched out in quick strokes, the painting presents the façade of a church enclosing the shape of a tree, i.e. a symbol of the natural world inside a symbol of the spiritual.

The painting of 1909 appears to act as a sort of memorandum for everything that developed over the next thirty years. In the unitary plane of *BBW*, the vertical, which Mondrian identified with the spiritual, internalizes a horizontal (which the artist identified with the natural) in yellow, a color that stands for external space in *BBW*. In 1909 the church internalized a tree.

Something similar is expressed in more structured form in another painting of a church façade *Church Tower at Domburg* - **34** -, which the artist produced in 1911.

The architectural volume of a bell tower rises from the bottom to the top of the canvas, changing as it does so from indigo (the ground) to shades of cobalt purple (the lower part of the building) and magenta hues (the middle and upper section) that contrast visibly with the colors of the sky. The latter is green scattered with touches of cerulean blue. Magenta and green express the maximum contrast between the closed volume of the building and the open space of the sky.

In the lower left section, the vertical volume of the building expands horizontally with an architectural offshoot that detaches itself from the tower and descends at an angle toward the ground. Analogously, a compact mass colored blue on the right seems designed to mediate between the vertical of the building and the horizontal of the ground.

The lower part of the building presents two windows, one set in the lateral offshoot to the left and one in the center of the tower. The two windows are similar in size and color. Moving upward, we first see two smaller windows and then another pair of the same size as those we left at the bottom. The two windows are now closer to one another than those below. Both are now set inside the vertical body.

With respect to the two windows below, those above present a lighter color (a turquoise blue) seen as an intermediate value between the green and the blue of the sky. It is almost as though the external space of the sky were internalized in the vertical body of the bell tower, concentrated in those two windows. The natural (the sky) is internalized in the spiritual (the tower).

Seen as separate and distant in the lower section, the pair of windows are closer higher up, as though brought together by the vertical development of the bell tower; the vertical concentrates and joins what the horizontal of the ground expands and distances (as in the dunes).

All this constitutes an embryo of **45**, where an analogous development can be seen four years later in abstract form with a vertical (the pier) that interacts with a horizontal (the sea), to generate a synthesis (a square) in which the spiritual (vertical) concentrates the natural (the horizontal expanse of the sea). Analogously to what can be seen in **45**, a horizontal drive also acts in the upper section of **34** to open up the synthesis generated by the vertical. At the top of the bell tower we can in fact see another pair of narrower windows that appear to be covered by an architectural element. With respect to the pair of windows below, which are turquoise blue, those at the top appear somehow blank. They are in fact a darker blue or indigo not dissimilar from what can be seen at the bottom, where the two windows are set at a distance. Some fragments of cerulean sky overlap with the upper edges of the building to express a horizontal predominance that seems intent on opening up the vertical shape of the bell tower, as though thus allowing the quantity of turquoise concentrated in the two central windows to flow back out.

On rereading this sequence from the bottom up, we see two vertical elements transposed into the horizontal (the two windows near the ground) that come together under the concentrating effect of the vertical body, which brings the external space of the sky inside the building, and then open up again to the pressure of the horizontal, allowing the space to flow back from the interior toward the exterior (the blank windows). First external space is internalized

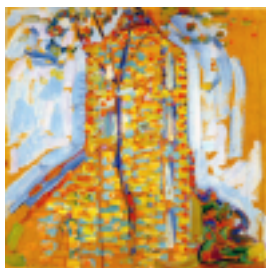
and then internal space is externalized. The natural becomes spiritual and then reverts to natural.

34.2 shows a similar process of externalization of the interior (from the left to the central panel) followed by internalization of experience (the yellow area of the central panel concentrated in the two stars of the right panel). As in **45** and then in **72**, where the exterior is internalized and then flows back toward the outside. From **25.3** to **34**, **34.2**, and then **45** all the way to **72**, the same idea is expressed with ever-increasing clarity.

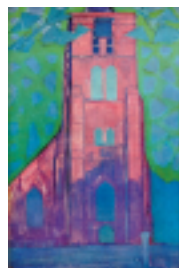
In Sequence 1 (p. 151) we see the same idea of multiplicity becoming unity and then returning to multiplicity expressed in ever-changing forms.

In Sequence 2 (below) we see a manifestation of the idea of external space that becomes internal and then flows back toward the outside.

Sequence 2



25.3



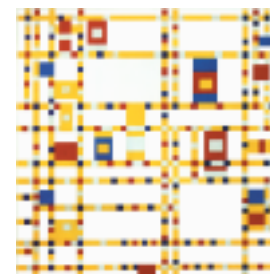
34



34.2



45



72

The same ideas are expressed in abstract form in **72**. This means that *BBW* no longer speaks to us solely of a church, a human figure or a pier against the background of the sea but of all these things and others too. Abstracting from the particular and contingent aspect of things, *BBW* evokes a universal vision of reality.

The essential meaning of Mondrian's work is encapsulated in the six paintings of the two sequences (1 and 2). Tracing the relations between these works helps us to understand the need for the process of abstraction. This is what changes and what does not change in the transition from the naturalistic (figurative) vision to the abstract.

The artist described life as continued examination of the same thing in ever-greater depth.

* * *

We shall now recapitulate the whole of Piet Mondrian's work in no more than ten lines.

Section **A** - Faced with the immensity of the universe and the ever-changing appearances of the world, the painter finds some signs of correspondence with his inner world in a number of tree trunks that come together (**5**), in a plate that expresses a more precise synthesis of the multiform appearance of nature (**7**), or a sequence of trees that concentrates within an oval (**10, 11, 12**) and then opens up to the natural horizon (**13**). The immensity of the horizon is concentrated in the vertical shape of windmill (**14**) with two sails expressing the relationship between the infinite space of nature and the finite space of thought. This marks the beginning of the dialectic between expansion (**18, 22, 26, 30, 33**) and concentration (**20, 21, 24, 28, 31, 34**), between multiplicity and unity (**23, 25, 29, 35**), which continues into the Cubist phase (**36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41**), where **42** recalls the space of **5, 7, 14**, and **15** in abstract form. All the changing appearances are ideally concentrated in a square (**45**) that then opens up again to the manifold space of the world. This process of reopening constitutes the guiding thread of all the subsequent work, where the unity evoked by a white square (**53, 54**) progressively interpenetrates with colors and various proportions (from **55** to **71**), i.e. with manifold space. This continues until one thing becomes the other and then turns back into itself (**72**), until the postulate of the spirit (unity) and the physical reality of nature (multiplicity) become one and the same thing (**73**), thus foreshadowing a new world in which the harmonies evoked by art can become everyday reality (**73.1, 73.2, 73.3**). The trajectory goes from preponderant natural exteriority (**1-18**) to a more balanced relationship between subject and object, artifice and nature (**72, 73**).

After all, the history of mankind can be summed up as progressive emancipation from the original conditions of nature. Present-day reality suggests that our species will necessarily have to strive to maintain balance between nature and human artifice.

* * *

The regular schemata used by Mondrian during the evolution of his work served to support the construction and definition of the new space that was slowly taking shape. Having taken the steps he felt necessary, the artist freed himself from the schemata just as a building is freed from the scaffolding that served to support it during the various phases of its construction.

The center of the composition, which had always been the key point for manifestation of the unitary synthesis (**5, 7, 14, 35, 42, 45, 53**), lost its importance in *BBW*.

The regular layouts and proportional modules used to curb the uncontrolled development of form (**49, 50, 51**) dissolved along the way.

In the last two *Boogies* (**72, 73**) everything is in a state of becoming. One thing calls another and the first two become a third that gives birth to a process in which the only fixed elements are the orthogonal relationship and the five colors. All the rest is a free and unforeseeable development of forms differing from one another.

Mondrian's pictorial evolution shows that, contrary to common belief, the artist had no intention whatsoever of forcing existing reality into rigid geometric schemata but rather of making his geometry as open and flexible as possible. In the last two works every form is born, grows and develops as every natural form does. As in natural space, nothing lasts forever; no entity is pre-established but becomes such in that particular situation, in that particular positional relationship with respect to the other forms undergoing reciprocal determination. Every point of *BBW* is unique and unforeseeable but, at the same time, part of a process that brings all of the elements together like a universal rhythm.

A fluid space that gives concrete form to becoming more than being, to relations more than the individual things in themselves; a geometry that is anything but rigid, cold, or exclusively rational; a space that strikes me instead as very similar to life.

Neoplastic geometry has very little in common with the rather antiseptic geometric approach of certain forms of concrete art in the second half of the 20th

century.

Mondrian strove throughout his career to adapt the potentially schematic and reductive forms of the human mind to the far broader variety and variability of existence so as to maintain equilibrium between thought and nature. Neoplastic space is born out of a vision that takes into due consideration the non-rational aspects of life and is therefore capable of generating a geometry that we can describe as organic but that is nevertheless expressed in the clear and precise forms of rational thought. Neither aspect must ride roughshod over its opposite. This is typical of the artist's way of proceeding: attaining a certain degree of synthesis and control and then opening up again to variability while always seeking to maintain a certain balance between the two aspects. *VBW* shows that the lines themselves—a crucial element of Neoplastic space for over twenty years—were no longer necessary.

It is difficult to imagine geometry more flexible than this, so free in its innermost spirit as to reformulate itself continuously. It is precisely this aspect that was misinterpreted by those who accused the painter of betraying the Neoplastic rules in his last period, those who described *BBW* in terms of crazed geometries.

These people have failed to understand the true nature of Piet Mondrian's visual thought. He has been criticized by some for his allegedly schematic approach and by others for abandoning rules and schemata. It often happens to truly free spirits to find themselves on the outside between one flock and another. Mondrian chose his rules and schemata in complete freedom and followed them for just as long as he considered necessary. This is true freedom. In art, as in life, freedom is not the absence of rules, contrary to what some people believe. Freedom means being able to choose rules that are in any case necessary.

* * *

The distinction between color and non-color drawn by Mondrian in the early 1920s had also disappeared by 1943, when everything had become color.

In the European Neoplastic compositions the black lines performed the function of drawing and the fields of color the role of painting. Drawing (the lines) controlled painting (the colored planes) from the outside with no participation, and painting accentuated and varied the proportions pre-established by drawing. Drawing and painting, intellect and emotion, engaged in dialogue but kept their distance. The two things merge in the works produced in New York. The drawing is born in paint and the painting is already drawn. Thought and emotion become a single thing.

As I have already pointed out, the transition from black to colored lines was certainly helped by the colored tape that Mondrian found available in the United States, even though it was not the tape that generated a change that had been ripening for years. Nevertheless, as often happens, the availability of a new technical resource influences the creative processes, making as yet untested solutions possible. (Le Corbusier said that *technology extends the boundaries of poetry*.) I can imagine the freedom with which the painter "traced" the colored lines on the white surface of the canvas, feeling free to move them at will and therefore to try out the entire composition repeatedly without being overly tied to any definitive solution. Once it had been decided that the whole worked, the tape would give way to oil paint, but a great deal could still change also in this phase.

Henri Matisse did the same thing with his paper cutouts, working on the composition by pinning up pieces of colored paper provisionally. The difference was that the French artist then glued the same pieces of paper directly onto the canvas. The precious hand-made *Montgolfier* paper he used is unfortunately no longer available.

* * *

Consideration of the work Mondrian produced between 1905 and 1943 (Section **A**, from **17** to **73**) makes it possible to pinpoint the transition from naturalist or figurative painting to abstract. This move caused bewilderment and many still find it difficult today to grasp the real meaning and sense of such a radical change.

Music is a form of abstract art to which we have long been accustomed. It is for this reason that when we listen to a piece of music, we are not immediately concerned about understanding the work and having its meaning explained, as some are when faced with an abstract painting. On listening repeatedly to a piece of music, we get in tune with the work, whether we like it or not. Understanding takes time. The same should be done with painting.

The lines, the contrasts between solid and void, and the composition as a whole are developed in **35** so as to suggest the figure of a tree. In the pursuit of equilibrium and harmony that guides the artist's hand, the apparent shape of an object asserts itself and dictates the development of the forms. It is instead the rationale of painting that prevails in **41**. There is no longer a single object to be recognized, no longer a metric scale or precise contours establishing a relationship with the definite shapes of things as they appear to the eye from a certain viewpoint. The task of faithfully reproducing the fleeting appearance of things has been taken over in the meantime by photography. What counts in painting is the physical consistency of the painted surface, the colors and the mutual relations established through the rhythm of the composition as a whole. This can only be fully realized by viewing the original works. Be it an image created by following the clearly recognizable shape of a tree or an abstract composition, what makes the difference between good and bad painting, between just any image and a work of art, is the quality, intensity, and mutual arrangement of the colors and forms; in short, the quality and the relationship of the parts with the whole.

There are deep and inexplicable reasons underlying our spontaneous reactions to colors. Certain chromatic relations resolved in a certain form acquire far greater value for us than would derive from their simple juxtaposition. In that added value-capable of transforming matter into sensation and feeling into a vision of the world-lies the art of a truly great painter.

It cannot be explained why certain relations of form and color arouse a sense of harmony in us and why this harmony proves still more credible when it is challenged. In the twinkling of an eye, without knowing how or why, our mind can distinguish a plausible pattern of forms from others in which there are either too many things or something appears to be missing. On reflection, it is perhaps truer to say that we do not all possess these abilities and a great deal unquestionably depends also on cultural factors. The ability to see is not, however, necessarily linked to education. I know people endowed with innate talent in this respect.

Nature appears to us as an infinite sequence of colored surfaces and volumes. Cézanne said that *"reading nature meant seeing it beneath the veil of interpretation through patches of color that follow one another in accordance with a harmonious law."* ³⁰

Even if it wished to do so, art could never duplicate the beauty of nature. It can, however, use its own means to create an equally true beauty.

Abstraction means abandoning the easy path of imitation and assuming the responsibility of recreating an image of the world with the real and concrete ingredients available to us as painters, i.e. with forms and colors that interact on a two-dimensional surface; just as a musician has a pentagram and seven notes that vibrate in the air and a poet has words. As Apollinaire noted, *"geometry is for the visual arts what grammar is for poetry."* ³¹

Cézanne: *"Everything in nature is modeled on the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder. We must learn to paint on these simple figures, and then we will be able to do whatever we want."* ³²

The perpendicular relationship and the three primary colors used by Mondrian are obvious abstractions of natural reality just like the sphere, cone, and

cylinder mentioned by Cézanne. Yellow, red, and blue together with white and gray are a synthesis of the infinite number of colors present in nature. They nonetheless serve the Dutch painter in order to evoke the complexity of the world in the most living and contrasting forms but, at the same time, in the clearest and most concise way possible. The perpendicular relationship constitutes an initial axiom, as it were, a starting point from which to set space in motion and express the variability of appearances without losing sight of the essence.

Mondrian can seem rigorous, sometimes perhaps excessively so. It must, however, be borne in mind that his inner world was so rich and full of subtle shades that he perceived every single thing in relation to other things. Everything was constantly changing and some cornerstone must be established in a world of things in a state of becoming.

As he said, *"But what will give us a foothold in all these relations? In this variability of relations there is an immutable relationship; it expresses itself plastically through the orthogonal position, and this gives us plastically a foothold."*³³ Once the "foothold" has been found, it will be possible to vary all the rest. The orthogonal position is not the form of things as they appear to us at once but rather a "visual device" permitting infinite relations between things and us.

It is depressing to think of those who really thought that Mondrian saw reality in perpendicular terms.

In his pursuit of a new plastic art, the painter progressively identified the spiritual with the vertical and the natural with the horizontal in order to create a relational space in the two dimensions of the canvas between what he, like every human being, felt to be contrasting realities. This should not, however, be taken as an attribution of objective value. The vertical could function equally well as a symbol of the natural, in which case the horizontal would come to symbolize the spiritual.

Natural space is of course presented to the eye as a boundless horizontal expanse whereas the vertical aptly expresses the human desire to concentrate the variety of the physical world ideally, conceiving it as a whole. A vertical thrust expresses mankind's atavistic propensity to imagine the spiritual as an invisible reality extending toward the ethereal space of the heavens rather than remaining bound to the everyday matter spread out before our eyes. All this may have influenced the artist in his attribution of meaning, but not to any great extent. After all, Mondrian's aim was to express an equivalence of spirit and matter, interior and exterior.

Horizontal and vertical have no inherent value in Neoplastic space. They serve as visual metaphors of the duality present in the human mind, the symbol of natural forces that clash with one another to generate all the variety of the world.

On thinking for a moment about our common experience of life, we realize that the preliminary choice of "straight" paths enables us to move more easily through the unpredictable twists and turns of existence. It is through "lines" that the designing mind, out of which science and technology are generated, expresses itself. This does not, however, alter the fact that lines are successfully used in *BBW* to express a vision of greater breadth rising from the particular and the precise to the universal and the imponderable.

Humanistic thought and scientific thought will never be brought together unless we succeed in expressing the unpredictable and indeterminate aspect of nature and human existence with determinate means of expression. In no way does this mean reducing everything to the rational sphere. Mondrian's work demonstrates that a clear and precise alphabet does not make it impossible to express the mysterious as long as one has a broader vision of things and the ability to place that alphabet at its service. We are reminded of Italo Calvino's remark about *"expressing the indefinite with the definite and the inexact with the utmost precision."*³⁴

The perpendicular lines of Neoplastic space are not designed to create a "cross" or what certain North American critics call a "grid". They should not be seen as the representation of an object but as the expression of a dynamic flow encompassing every possible object viewed from every possible position.

Mondrian: *"Everything is expressed through relations. Color, size, and position exist only through opposition to a different color, size, and position. This is why I call the relationship the fundamental element. (...) Each thing becomes knowable only through another, as every form of wisdom teaches us."*³⁵

An abstract painting is still viewed in naturalistic (figurative) terms on the other side of the Atlantic. Abstraction is regarded with great superficiality as one of the many possible styles or schools of modern art. The truest and deepest meaning of the process of abstraction that revolutionized the language of European painting during the first half of the 20th century has yet to be understood in New York.

We shall also have to wait some time in the Old World for people to stop seeing Neoplastic lines solely as rigid reticular structures and sterile geometric schemata. These schemata are in actual fact located in their own minds: when they are careful not to give way too much to emotion; when they endeavor to control the unpredictable flux of existence by meticulously planning every aspect of their lives. The inner lives of certain human beings are so controlled that when they turn to look at art, they prefer forms of visceral expression. They cannot bear to add one more straight line to all the ones already present in their heads. Art becomes an escape from themselves and from reality. I instead believe that art must tackle reality in all its aspects.

Neoplasticism urges us to consider the human being as a whole, simultaneously visceral and rational, in order to find equilibrium between the contradictory aspects of the life, between instinct and reason, nature and thought.

I am afraid that time and a great deal of teaching will still be needed to make people understand the degree of mental openness and emotional transport that should actually be involved in the enjoyment of a Neoplastic composition.

The orthogonal lines and primary colors are an act of autonomy and freedom of thought with respect to nature, not an imposition. Though it might at first seem an arbitrary and restrictive choice with respect to the natural world, the Neoplastic language then strives to reformulate as exhaustively as possible the real and not merely apparent characteristics of natural space, or rather the characteristics of the relationship between thought and nature, finally treating the two aspects as essential components of a single and indissoluble process.

* * *

As we were saying, the abstract language enables the Dutch painter to represent the broadest range of variation without getting lost in the outward appearances of countless things that fragment the consciousness and prevent an overall vision. As Mondrian put it, *"art should express the universal."* Harassed as we are by the frenzied pace of life, we have lost the capacity to consider questions of greater breadth. We have reached the point of being ashamed to talk about universal issues.

Painting means first of all observing the world, breathing in all of its forms and colors, and transforming that infinite variety into the most concentrated forms of thought.

A realistic or, if you prefer, a figurative artist, Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, said: *"It is not real truth that I must represent in the painting but ideal truth. The conflict of these two forms of truth in the mind of the artist who produces the work ensures that it will remain incomplete. Artists who stick too close to reality in their pursuit of truth fail to achieve their objective. It is through the sacrifice of real truth that ideal truth is attained."*³⁶

This has always been so, in the painting of the ancient Egyptians as in Byzantine, medieval, and Renaissance painting. Every work of art is the creation of a finite field of relations that seek to evoke the far more complex and elusive relations perceived in the space of real life.

When we observe a landscape, be it natural or urban, space continues uninterrupted far beyond our visual field with a virtually infinite series of different shapes and colors. The observer's consciousness can only contemplate that infinite variety simultaneously by breaking it down into parts and reducing it to more unified wholes. With its initial perception and then with the construction of scientific theories, philosophical systems, and forms of artistic expression, human thought has always endeavored to break down into finite wholes and unitary structures what actually exists in natural physical space and life as a far richer and more complex variety of interconnected and simultaneous phenomena.

Without realizing it, we address relations between unity and multiplicity every day, e.g. every time we summarize something that strikes us as unduly complex. We create a relationship between the parts and the whole both when we strive to see all the different facets of reality and when we are driven by emotion to trace everything back to a few elements and make generalizations. Though aware that the reality is far more complex, we often tend to make narrow, summary judgments. The reality before us is always more complex than our descriptions but we cannot always concentrate on it and investigate every single aspect in depth, not least because every single aspect is in fact an infinite reality in itself. This has always been true and is even more so today given the level of complexity attained by modern societies. I therefore believe that the question of the one and the many is one of the most relevant to the present day.

Nor is this something purely intellectual. We often experience a drive for concentration when rational explanations give way to an urge that transforms all the complexity and fragmentation of a vision thought into the almost absolute synthesis of a vision felt. When we fall in love, for example, the whole of our fragmented daily life seems to come together in a concentrated form of energy that makes us feel in harmony with the world. Here too we can talk of multiplicity becoming unity.

Every description we formulate of the world is a process of transposing the infinite physical reality into a finite series of mental constructs that we can use to observe, examine, and establish relations between different things. Physical reality is to be understood both as the macrocosm outside us and as the microcosm out of which our very individuality is constituted. It must, however, be remembered that these constructs are abstractions of the real phenomena, which are always far more complex than our ideas. We have been aware ever since Kant that we can know our representations of phenomena but not phenomena in themselves. Nevertheless, we identify our mental symbols with physical phenomena out of habit and take our ideas as reality for the sake of convenience. Every era and every civilization or culture has its own ideas about the reality of things.

While we do our utmost to give precise shape to our ideas, things change slowly and we change with them.



René Magritte
C'est ci nez pas une pipe 1926

Like every other expression of human thought, all of the arts construct symbols that evoke reality but-as it should be recalled, obvious though it may seem-are not reality.

This is what René Magritte meant when he painted a realistic pipe in 1926 and entitled the work *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (this is not a pipe). He used this paradox to tell us that the pictorial image of an object, no matter how faithfully it may be produced, is not the object itself. Presenting just one single aspect of a certain thing, the image abstracts from its reality, which is far more complex and multiform.

No canvas or human mental construct can ever represent the reality of the world except through a synthesis of its multiform appearance, i.e. by abstracting just some of its many possible aspects. In point of fact, a realistic (figurative) painting of a landscape, a human figure or a vase of flowers is also an abstraction, albeit one to which we are accusto-

med and that does not therefore disturb us in the same way as a more evidently abstract painting. Many claim that they can understand a naturalist (figurative) painting with ease but cannot decipher an abstract painting. What they actually mean is perhaps that they can recognize familiar things in the former but have to grapple with things never seen before in the latter.

Does recognizing things you have seen before mean understanding the art of painting?

How many of those looking at an example of Impressionist painting - which everyone "understands" nowadays - succeed in seeing and appreciating the accuracy of the composition and the felicitous sequence of colors? How many succeed in following the measured and joyous rhythm of the forms that interweave, separate, and meet again, concentrating the space and opening it up again in new forms to the deep breath of life?

The creation of a work of art worthy of the name requires a great deal of talent in the choice of colors and compositional ability, regardless of whether the painting is to be figurative or abstract. What makes the difference is the quality of the means of expression. This holds also for the painting of a face. This is what Cézanne said with reference to the critics: *"I would like to see them here, all the ones who write about us, in front of your ugly mug and me fumbling with my tubes of paint and brushes (...) They are a thousand miles away (...) And you can imagine how little they know that you can make a mouth sad or a cheek smile by combining a shade of green with a red (...)." 37* The content of painting is its own form.

How many succeed in understanding the truer meanings conveyed by the way of representing things rather than the things represented?

Matisse: *"The great number of people who appear to have been affected by painting in the Middle Ages were not interested in the plastic and graphic qualities of the painter's work. They were interested in the story it had to tell, because there was no other way to learn the story (...) Today there is no need to resort to a painting unless you are interested in painting." 38*

Being interested in painting means, first of all, contemplating the substance spread out over a two-dimensional surface. Understanding painting means responding to the content expressed by the relations of form and color (assuming that a real process of transposition has taken place during the execution of the work). Understanding painting means observing matter as it becomes idea. This is where real art lies.

There are, however, still some who insist (in good or bad faith) on the supposedly greater veracity of realistic (figurative) painting with respect to abstract. I believe that the real point is not so much a matter of understanding whether greater veracity lies in figurative painting or abstract. Both are transpositions of reality. The real point regards the degree of abstraction of our descriptions of reality.

In a world like that of the present, where everything has multiplied exponentially with respect to the past and everything moves at great speed, what level of abstraction must we achieve today so that our representations can effectively describe a new and more complex reality?

It strikes me as somewhat ingenuous to pose the question in terms of abstraction or reality.

If we reflect on the way in which we interact with the world, we realize that we do not see certain colors and we do not hear certain sounds. We do not perceive a whole quantity and variety of natural phenomena (e.g. the microcosm) that nevertheless exist and constitute reality inside us and outside us. In actual fact, we see only a part of the real physical world. The reality we are accustomed to talking about is therefore already in itself a form of abstraction that our physiology spontaneously implements whenever we behold the surrounding world. What common sense defines as real is the level of abstraction to which we are accustomed.

The real question therefore regards our habits; it regards two different ways of interpreting and describing the world. The basic difference is between the preservation of consolidated habits and the gradual introduction of new habits. Why on earth should we change our habits? Because everything around us has changed in the space of a century and something tells me that such a dramatic change in reality necessarily entails changes also in the way of representing it.

If things appear to us today first in one way and then in another in the space of a few seconds, does it still make sense to paint them from only one viewpoint?

Painting in an abstract way today means endowing our vision with greater effectiveness in representing everyday reality.

In the period spanning the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, artists felt that realistic or figurative painting no longer succeeded in adequately expressing a world that had started to move at ever-increasing speed, multiplying its appearances out of all proportion. The Impressionist painters and then the Cubists realized that if their art was to represent the new reality, it would have to change the assumptions on which it was grounded. They saw that the factor transforming everything was the speed at which contemporary man perceived the landscape, especially at the urban level. Unlike others, these artists took up the challenge and understood that everything had to be called into question, especially the fixed viewpoint (the vanishing point of perspective space on which the supposedly realistic vision is based) from which mankind had observed and described the world for at least four centuries. Crisis struck a system of visual representation that had been grounded for centuries on the assumption of a reality conceived as something objective and permanent; a reality that could be known once and for all in virtue of the far slower old rhythms of life.

In addition to everything becoming faster and more complex, it was clear by the beginning of the 20th century that the reality of the external world also depends on the way in which we observe it. The new space that began to develop toward the end of the 19th century no longer called into question only the object (the external landscape) but also the subject, which began to move more quickly with respect to the things observed, constantly changing its point of observation.

The opposing lines of Neoplasticism serve the precise function of express a dynamic space that is the outcome of the variable relations between subject and object.

How to construct a more constant relationship with a reality like that of the present, where everything is in motion?

After the naturalistic phase in which Mondrian pursued the changing appearance of things landscape after landscape, the expressionistic phase (**23, 30, 31, 35**) served the Dutch painter to consolidate a fixed point of reference highlighting the dynamic relationship between subject and object (vertical and horizontal). He thus laid the foundations for the construction of a new space based no longer on a single set point of convergence for the whole of the visible world (the vanishing point) but rather on a relationship between infinite lines, i.e. on a mobile point.

If one of the fundamental assumptions of Renaissance perspective is the fixed position of the subject (which becomes the vanishing point on the painted surface), the assumption of Impressionist, Cubist, and then Neoplastic space is its dynamic condition.

In a society where everything was now in motion, one could ask for nothing better than an effort to adapt the old spatial coordinates to the new reality.

Born out of Impressionism and Cézanne's work in particular, Cubism then found exceptional interpreters in Braque, Léger, and Picasso, but only with Mondrian did it develop all of its potential to arrive at a completely new space resting on an authentic dynamic conception of reality.

Neoplasticism encompasses Impressionism, Expressionism, and Cubism, expressing their essence in a new trailblazing vision that it is now our task to develop further.

I believe that the search for values, about which there is so much talk nowadays, is also a question of space: plastic space capable of generating a new

mental space.

In truth, it is our own rhythms of life (far more dynamic than those experienced in the past) that have undermined the foundations of a system of visual representation based on the vanishing point of Renaissance perspective. It is the social progress of the last two centuries that has transformed the conception of space as a wholly external a priori reality independent of human action in a new conception of space understood as an open structure in a state of constant transformation depending also on the active consciousness of individuals.

After Mondrian, space is no longer a purely external phenomenon but the result of the relationship between subject and object, interior and exterior.

It is certainly no coincidence that psychoanalysis was born at the same time as this new plastic space. Psychoanalysis focuses precisely on the relationship between exterior and interior, i.e. between horizontal and vertical in Mondrian's terms.

Modern space is no longer something existing prior to the subject, something that has always been there waiting. The new concept of space is rather of a reality that is born, develops, and alters together with the subject. We are therefore talking about a dynamic process, an open and flexible structure that is not only a geometric entity but also depends on mental and cultural coordinates.

The new "vanishing point" that unifies plastic space no longer lies solely in external reality but rather in a dynamic equilibrium between the space of the world and the space of consciousness. Aesthetics necessarily involves ethics.

I believe that there is a relationship between the social life of a collectivity and the type of space with which it identifies. It is no coincidence that Nazism, Fascism, and Communism were all fiercely opposed to abstract art. Certain cultural regimes, the expression of obtuse economic power, confine themselves today, more democratically, to ignoring the radically revolutionary impetus of true abstract art and dishing up surrogates that are as high-flown as they are insignificant. The official art world certainly cannot ignore the historical figures of abstract art but does nothing at all to promote the work of young people who display the capacity to continue along the path opened up by the masters.

There is a great deal of talk today about the rediscovery of values.

We shall only find more certain and lasting values by adopting a dynamic vision capable of harmonizing with a reality that changes. A constant relationship cannot in fact be established between subject and object if they are not traveling at much the same speed. The choice is ours: whether to adopt a dynamic vision or opt for a return to the slower rhythms of life of the agricultural society and the more certain, tried and tested values associated with that type of social organization.

So-called realistic or figurative painting would regain its veracity if we again perceived our surrounding reality at the speed of the human being on foot or horseback. Everything changed much more slowly in social life back when the world appeared to be almost immobile, when people thought that it was the sun that revolved around the earth and that reality was something permanently given on which they could in any case exert no influence. Realistic or figurative painting can no longer be "true" today because it is we ourselves with our ideas and actions that alter its underlying assumptions every day. Here lies what I regard as one of the fundamental contradictions of our time, namely the fact that we live in accordance with dynamic rhythms that our common sense still represents through the coordinates of a potentially static and hence obsolete space. This is also one of the factors leading to the general crisis of values and in particular of "strong thought", not to mention the whole of the recent parade of Neo, Trans, and Post trends in the visual arts, all of which basically mean an incapacity to formulate an effective vision of present-day reality.

Sixty years after the death of Piet Mondrian, we still find ourselves halfway between a system that is old but still real for many, namely naturalistic or figurative painting, and a newer and more functional system used by a growing number of people that is not yet capable of constituting a tried and tested language, a canon serving as a yardstick to establish what the art of painting consists in today. Has the time perhaps come to sketch out a code for the new form of painting? What can we take as the grammar and syntax of the new space? I am obviously not referring solely to painting as traditionally understood but also to the whole range of expressive possibilities offered by the new techniques of visual representation. This will be the subject of my next work. Even though I believe that the new space depends to a great extent on the work of Piet Mondrian, a code for the new painting will not be based solely on Neoplasticism as handed on to us by the Dutch painter. I am also thinking of Matisse's last period and his masterly use of color, Mark Rothko's vibrant textures, the "repetitions" or variations introduced by Andy Warhol, and the spontaneous, uninterrupted continuity of space evoked by Jackson Pollock.

As a matter of fact, I do not believe it necessary to paint like Mondrian in order to produce true abstract art.

To give just one example, consider the work of an unknown Zen painter of the 18th century, which appears at first sight to be the very antithesis of a Neoplastic work. It is a painting of a circle that opens up again just when it is about to close, a circular process where the end coincides with a new beginning, as in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (BBW).

Unlike the geometry constructed by Mondrian, that of the Japanese artist requires a rapid gesture of the hand. But how much practice was needed before such a well-formed circle could be painted in one go. It is an open and imprecise circle that resembles nature and at the same time manifests the striving for perfection typical of human thought, a circle that expresses our idea of a universal cycle of life but with the spontaneity that life alone possesses.

The circle seems to contain all the impermanence of the moment within itself while nevertheless striving for almost absolute fulfillment, a circle in a state of becoming balanced between the everyday and the eternal.



Unknown Japanese Artist c. 1750

Like *BBW*, this image is again capable of evoking the unity of all things, a unity that can only be attained through a dynamic vision. That gesture, as fast as lightning, seems to enclose the secret of life itself.

While a circular process evoking the cycles of nature is generated in both images, in one case (the circle of the Japanese artist) it is a matter of immediate intuition that captures unity without too much concern for its manifold aspect. *BBW* instead presents a mediated vision that proceeds through a variety of particular forms, all differing from one another, before showing how they belong intrinsically to a unitary process. The image that takes the form of a spontaneous gesture in the Japanese painter is broken down in Mondrian and arranged in a complex pattern of forms that are developed, juxtaposed, and finally brought together.

In their very different ways, both images celebrate the dynamic and unpredictable spontaneity of life. We could say that the western painter seeks to break the spontaneous gesture down into a succession of considered moments. Both are sacred visions of life, but the first tends toward a mystical and absolute mode of expression while the latter (*BBW*) endeavors to organize itself, to explain itself, and to assume the relative nature always possessed by our fragmented experience of reality. As pointed out, the idea of a circular process is expressed in *BBW* by means of straight lines, which is to say that in *BBW* the absolute becomes relative and the eternal transient.

I wish to make it clear that the spontaneity I am talking about corresponds to the most advanced stage of a long and patient exercise of discipline that must be completed before you can let go without missing the "target".

Matisse: *"Novice painters think they are painting from the heart. Artists at the peak of their development also think they are painting from their heart, but they alone are right, because the training and discipline they have imposed upon themselves enable them to accept its impulses."* ³⁹

Another example of true abstract painting (even though the title could prove misleading here too) is a work that Matisse produced in 1952. I refer to a cutout or papier découpé: paper colored by the artist (or his assistant, to be more precise) then cut out in accordance with compositional requirements and glued onto canvas.

Every surface has a certain color and assumes its particular shape in relation to the configuration and color of the neighboring surfaces. As a whole, the surfaces evoke a circular motion that can also recall the spiral shape of a snail's shell, whence the title *L'Escargot*. As pointed out with respect to *BBW*, this work too should have been given a more neutral title so as to avoid prompting the inexpert observer to see nothing but a snail in this splendid composition.

Once again it is an image that seeks to evoke a dynamic unity made up of the most disparate entities. While every surface differs from the others both in shape and in color, they all form part of a unitary process. As in *BBW* and the work of the Japanese painter, we again see a circular structure that generates an impression of variety and evokes synthesis and unity at the same time.

The extreme synthesis generated in the Zen painting is arranged here in a series of parts. The immediate and very visible circle of the eastern painter becomes a circular motion that takes shape in a more gradual and structured way. Matisse's work can be described as being midway between the almost absolute circle of the Japanese painter and the circular process generated by means of straight lines in *BBW*. It expresses a degree of multiplicity that is greater than the Zen painting but not so great as *BBW*.

I will not even try to describe the beauty of the colors and the healthy energy that emanates from this masterpiece by the French painter. It is well worth a trip to London and a visit to the Tate Gallery to observe the work at first hand.



Henri Matisse *L'Escargot* 1952

Broadway Boogie Woogie, a painting by an anonymous Japanese artist, and Matisse's *L'escargot*: three images that speak to us in their very different ways about the same things. Abstraction does not mean adopting a certain style but rather the capacity to capture the essence of things, each in his or her own way.

Through the deft use of shapes and colors, abstract art can evoke the intimate nature concealed behind the changing appearances of life, contemplating it as one might contemplate the immensity of a sea with all its waves, every new wave appearing to be different from all the others but always consisting of water. There is a form of painting that looks to the particular appearance of a few waves and one that is capable of concentrating on the state of becoming of the water and hence of seeing all the possible waves. This presupposes an uncommon sensitivity that succeeds in looking beyond manifold appearance, but also something more, namely the ability to give concrete form to one's inner visions, which requires a great amount of talent if the images are to gladden the eye and be transformed into content that enriches the mind and the spirit.

All this is very rare on the contemporary artistic scene.

We are today presented with a great amount of self-styled abstract art that actually has more in common with wallpaper. Even among those prompted by honest intentions, there are very few works of abstract art born out of the fertile observation and distillation of reality. Most of the time, contemporary abstract painting presents syntheses that prove empty.

This is what Matisse said to Verdet about a canvas by Cézanne: *"It takes a great deal of analysis, invention, and love to arrive at the simplicity of the bathers you see at the end of the garden. You have to be worthy of them, to deserve them. As I have already said, when the synthesis is immediate, it is schematic, lacking in density and impoverished in expression."* ⁴⁰

It is not necessary to paint like Mondrian. It is possible to talk about the same things in different ways. But filling a canvas up with just any shapes and colors is not enough to produce a work of abstract art, just as any combination of words or notes is not enough to create a work of literature or music.

The beauty and the rightness of certain combinations of color and forms are things that cannot be taught or learned and still less explained in words. They are either there or not there. You either know how to recognize them or you do not. Color has its own inherent expressive strength that a good painter must know how to calibrate, like the notes of a musical composition.

Just as the same words can be used in verbal language to come out with nonsense or to construct splendid phrases rich in meaning, so it is with the language of forms and colors. The dictionary is the same but the difference between an image of fully expressed significance and one devoid of sense mainly depends on the use made of that dictionary. In the absence of established rules and canons for the new form of painting, we are today at a primitive stage where everyone thinks themselves capable of creating an abstract work of art. We are actually surrounded by a great mass of illiterates who want to make us believe that they can write poems.

Variations of form become content in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, but it is not just any variation of form that can evoke content in the art of painting. There are unfortunately not many people capable of seeing and distinguishing compositions in which form becomes content from ones where content never come to life. And those few no longer count in a society where mass consumption predominates, hence the confusion prevailing in the contemporary artistic panorama. As always, confusion means a great opportunity for fraud.

This is why most of what is put forward as art today does not really possess the qualities one would expect to find in a genuine work of art.