

diagram A

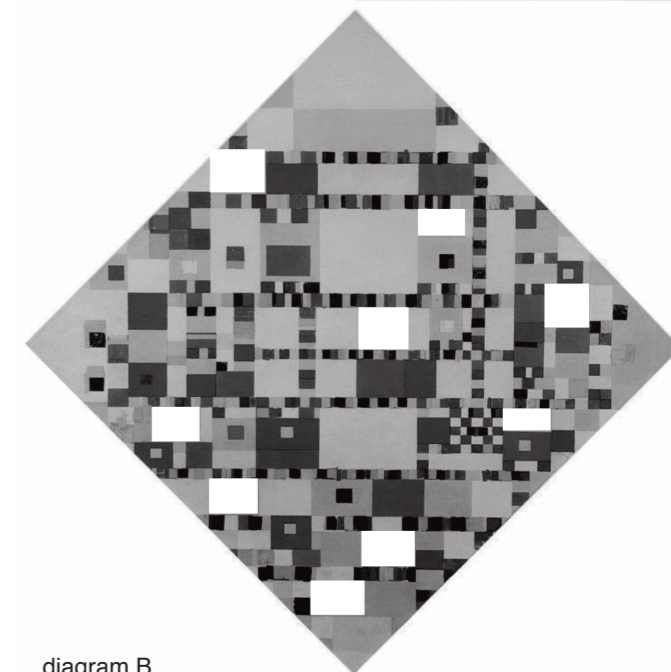


diagram B

Piet Mondrian *Victory Boogie Woogie* 1942-44

A photograph of 1942 shows the artist laying out *Victory Boogie Woogie* (*VBW*) in continuous, uniform lines that he presumably then divided to form a variety of planes. He believed that the painting was actually finished at a certain point but later felt dissatisfied with the result and reworked the canvas with modifications that death prevented him from making permanent. The canvas was thus left with the colored tape provisionally added during the phase of rethinking, and it is my impression that this was no coincidence. I believe that *VBW* was necessarily left incomplete.

The canvas is the same size as the one used for *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (*BBW*) but this time in the lozenge position.

What characterizes the composition at first sight is a

further increase in multiplicity.

Another significant difference with respect to *BBW* consists in the almost complete absence of continuity in the lines, which are reduced to seven horizontal and two vertical rectilinear sequences.

The lines appear continuous in *BBW* because the space between the small squares is predominantly yellow.

The rectilinear sequences of *VBW* are instead made up of a tighter rhythm of small squares, so closely arranged as to reduce the sense of linear continuity to the absolute minimum.

In *VBW* the small planes are laid out in rectilinear sequences whose continuity disappears with changes in the color, size, and position of the planes.

In *BBW* the planes are generated by the lines and return to them; in *VBW* lines and planes seem to become one and the same thing.

While the space is nevertheless very dynamic (not least because of the lozenge format), its dynamism is the result of a virtually unlimited number of planes interacting with one another.

While the finite dimension of the planes appears to predominate now, their enormous number and variety tend to evoke an infinite space. The infinite space of the lines is now expressed through the finite space of the planes.

Everything varies in this painting, as it does in *BBW*, but we no longer see any process leading to a unitary synthesis. It is multiplicity that predominates here.

VBW appears to present an endless sequence of possible syntheses of yellow, red, and blue manifested in constantly varying forms.

In actual fact, this is precisely what *BBW* tells us: unitary synthesis opens up again to multiplicity. We encounter a great many instances of partial unity (including white) in *VBW*, but not one that holds for the composition as a whole. All the planes are in a state of reciprocal motion. They are all relative and there is not one that establishes itself as a synthesis of all the others. I am reminded of the multiethnic society of New York, where all cultures and all religions necessarily assume relative value.

We mentioned unitary syntheses in white. A white form verging on the square can be seen in the upper section (diagram A) (1).

On the left we see a white plane (2) (with the same proportions as the unitary synthesis of *BBW*) inside which two small notes of color (yellow and red) are born.

These then develop linear sequences inside a third white area (3), which is analogous in its proportions to the square (1).

The synthesis we see in 1 is manifold at the same time (3). All the colors (3) blossom from the white (1): first the two small accents of yellow and red (2) and then more substantial sequences of yellow, red, and blue (3). A quick view taking in the composition as a whole picks

out a group of yellow planes that seem to evoke something more constant (diagram B).

On closer observation, we note that the eight yellow planes present analogous amounts of color but vary in their proportions or present the same proportions but vary in terms of position and relations with the surrounding parts. We are thus observing either different entities that are related to the same thing or the "same" entity in a state of becoming, constantly changing in appearance: the one and the many.

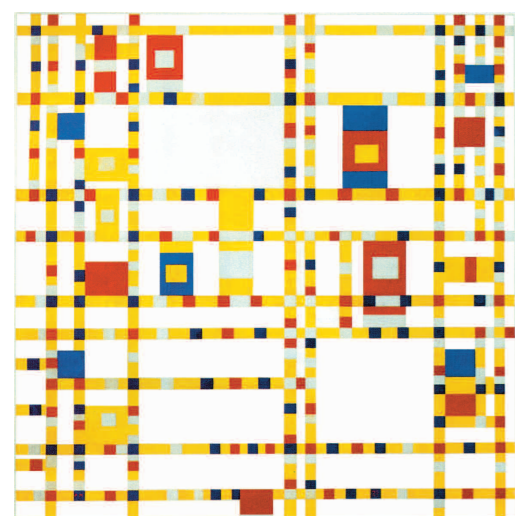
Here too, as in the canvases of 1930, there is nothing more different than things that appear to be almost the same.

Mondrian shows us this broader variation of yellow in order to suggest that the variety he intends to evoke is in actual fact far greater than the canvas can display. It prompts us to imagine all the other different shapes, sizes, and proportions that the white, gray, red, and blue could also assume in all the possible positions and reciprocal relations: a truly infinite "landscape".

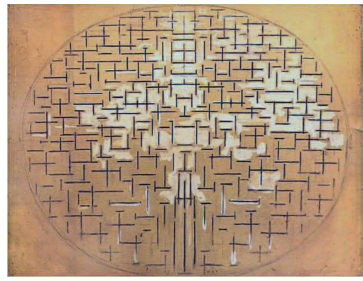
As noted above, *VBW* is characterized by the almost complete disappearance of lines, a crucial component of Neoplastic space all the way up to *BBW*.

In *VBW* lines and planes become the same thing and the sense of multiplicity or totality previously expressed through the continuity of the lines now appears to be wholly concentrated inside the canvas.

This has a precise meaning upon which it is necessary to reflect. (see page 2)



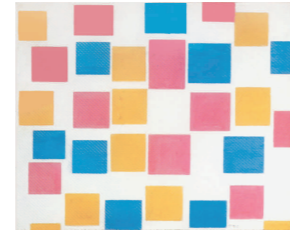
Broadway Boogie Woogie



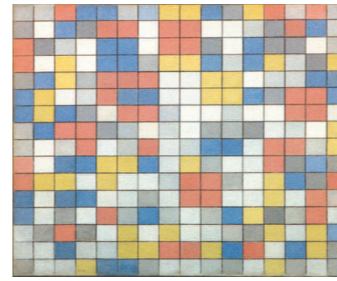
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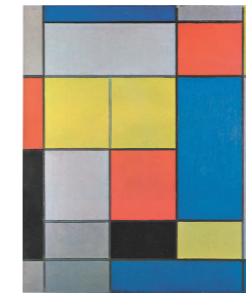
2 1916



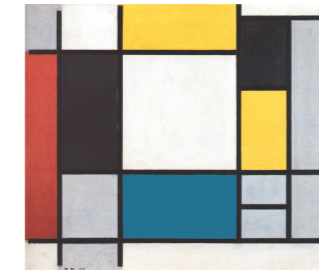
3 1917



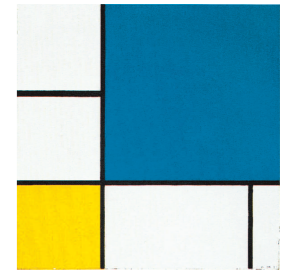
4 1919



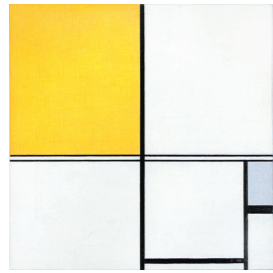
5 1920



6 1920



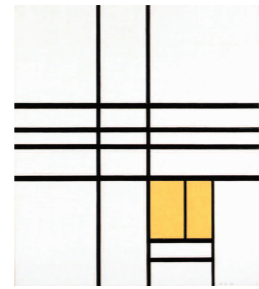
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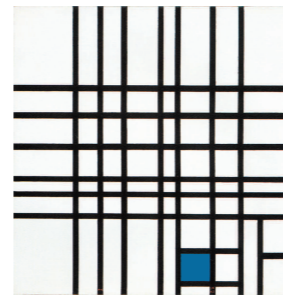
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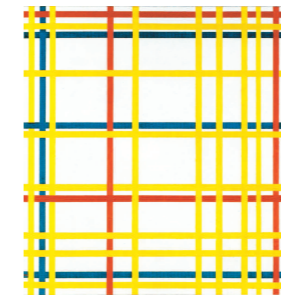
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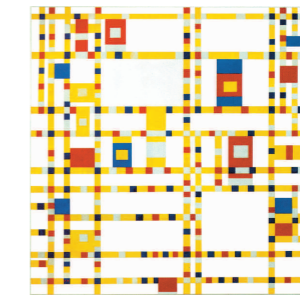
10 1934



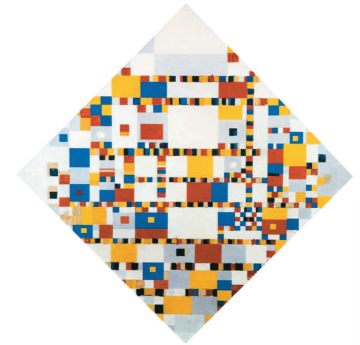
11 1937-42



12 1942



13 1942-43



14 1942-44

Neoplastic lines were born when the oval of the Cubist period expanded beyond the finite space of the canvas (see paintings 1, 2, 3) and the planes joined to generate continuous lines (4).

The totality of space expressed by the oval as a whole within the canvas (1) opened up (1916-19) and became a totality manifested through lines that continue uninterrupted (5, 6, 7).

The idea of totality conceived in a metaphysical form (the oval) gave way to the assumed totality of real space, to which the canvas belongs and the lines allude.

The manifold aspect of space underwent constant reduction as from 1919 (5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

Mondrian's Neoplastic compositions attained greater synthesis in the early 1920s because the artist saw the finite space of the canvas connecting with the objective space of the world through lines. The lines performed the vital function of maintaining a link between the limited space of the pictorial representation and the infinite space of reality.

Mondrian thus concentrated all through the 1920s on unitary synthesis (the white square field) (6), which admitted color, opened up, and multiplied (7 and all the compositions Mondrian made around 1930).

He saw the need for the finite space of the canvas to

open up to the diversity of the world.

9: the unitary synthesis expanded beyond the canvas almost as though in an attempt to coincide with the infinite space evoked by the lines, especially in the lozenge compositions.

As from 1934, when the compositions gradually opened up once again to complexity (10, 11) and the lines blossomed into color (12) as a multitude of small squares (13), the sense of totality displayed in a virtual way only by the black lines manifested itself in tangible and concrete form within the canvas.

It was as though the uniform black lines had contracted to draw all of the variety previously situated outside the painting back into the canvas.

In *VBW* the lines appear as sequences of small squares or planes that begin, develop, and end inside the canvas. The lines no longer continue beyond the edges of the canvas because "all" of the manifold aspect of the world is now manifested inside the canvas itself.

Subjective representation seeks to coincide with the objective reality of the world.

Manifold space, previously expressed as assumed and non-visible infinite extension (the continuity of the black lines), gives way to manifold space understood as the largest amount of variation wholly visible inside the painting: variety that had not been seen since 4; mul-

tiplicity that the painter had endeavored between 1920 and 1933 (from 5 to 9) to drive beyond the canvas with lines in order to concentrate on a unity designed to express both the one and the many at the same time (9).

From this viewpoint, the Neoplastic lines could be seen as a sort of "memorandum" serving for over twenty years as an ideal link between the representational space of art and the space of reality (the oval) and then dissolving on the return of the latter (the variety of planes).

The lines in *VBW* restore all the variety of the world to the composition, which means that the totality of space (formerly expressed by the oval) re-enters the canvas in the two last paintings.

The whole of the European Neoplastic phase is a slow and gradual opening up of unity to multiplicity (from 1 to 13). The one finally opens up to the point of coinciding with the many (14).

While it is unity that alludes to virtual multiplicity in 9, it is multiplicity that alludes to a series of possible unities in 14.

This is probably what Mondrian felt in his heart but was not yet able to explain clearly when he said that there was too much that was old even in *BBW*.

While the painting does express a high degree of multi-

plicity, he probably saw something old in the fact that it was still necessary to evoke a part of reality virtually through the continuity of the lines.

In talking about this work, the artist is also said to have expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of yellow, which is tantamount to saying the same thing. He must have felt that lines were still excessively present in *BBW*. Lines are the primary means of expression in drawing, just as colored planes are in painting. The lines become planes in *BBW*, and everything is a plane in *VBW*.

Mondrian was again dissatisfied with *VBW*, and I can understand this. Some parts are not resolved very well and it is now impossible to understand what state the composition was in when the painter initially decided that it could be regarded as a finished work.

The area of space in the left corner of the lozenge is weak because the two small black planes abruptly interrupt the rhythm flowing from the central section. There is also something wrong with the section on the right, where a marked concentration of small planes can be seen, and with the area by the upper corner of the lozenge, which appears to be unduly summary.

With compositions of this sort, one could obviously work for some years before obtaining an even barely satisfactory result.