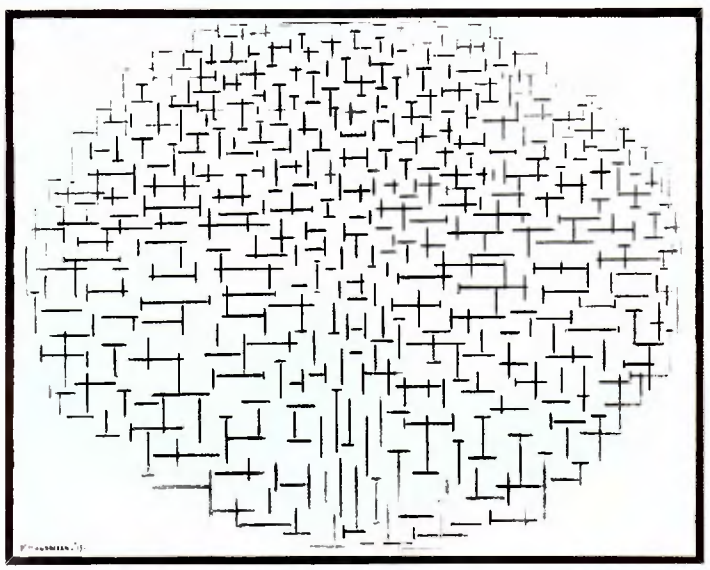
1917a

After two years of intense research, Piet Mondrian breaks through to abstraction and goes on to invent Neoplasticism.

1910–1919

When, in July 1914, Piet Mondrian returned to Holland for a family visit, his sojourn was caught up in the events of World War I, keeping him away from Paris for five long years. If he had originally moved to the French capital in early 1912 with one goal in mind, it was that of mastering Cubism. Unaware, however, of the movement's recent redirection ▲ in relation to its innovative use of collage, with all its consequences for the status of the representational sign, Mondrian wound the clock back to the summer of 1910. At that particular moment in Cubism's history, both Picasso and Braque, having found themselves on the verge of painting totally abstract grids, had recoiled. First reintroducing snippets of referentiality into their pictures ● (such as the tie and mustache in Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, they soon added lettering, flush with the picture plane, that aimed to make everything else in the painting look three-dimensional by comparison, thus ensuring that the representational character of the picture be at least hinted at.

Reading this Analytical Cubism through the lens of fin de siècle Symbolism mixed with Theosophy (an occultist and syncretic doctrine that combined various Eastern and Western religions and philosophies, highly popular in Europe at the turn of the century), Mondrian quickly became aware that just what Picasso and Braque feared most (abstraction and flatness) was precisely what he was searching for, since that would accord with the category of "the universal" that was central to his own belief system. Adopting a frontal point of view, Mondrian found a way of translating his favorite motifs (first trees and then architecture—most notably, in 1914, blank walls uncovered by the demolition of adjacent build- ■ ings) into a more orthogonally rigorous version of the Cubist grid. Through this means, what he called an image's *particularity* is overcome and spatial illusion is replaced by "truth," by the opposition of vertical and horizontal that is the "immutable" essence of all things. The method is infallible, Mondrian thought at the time: everything can be reduced to a common denominator; every figure can be digitalized into a pattern of horizontal versus vertical units and thus disseminated across the surface; and all hierarchy (thus all centrality) can be abolished. The picture's function now becomes the revelation of the world's underlying structure, understood as a reservoir of binary oppositions; but further, and more important, it is also to show how these oppositions can neutralize one another into a timeless equilibrium.

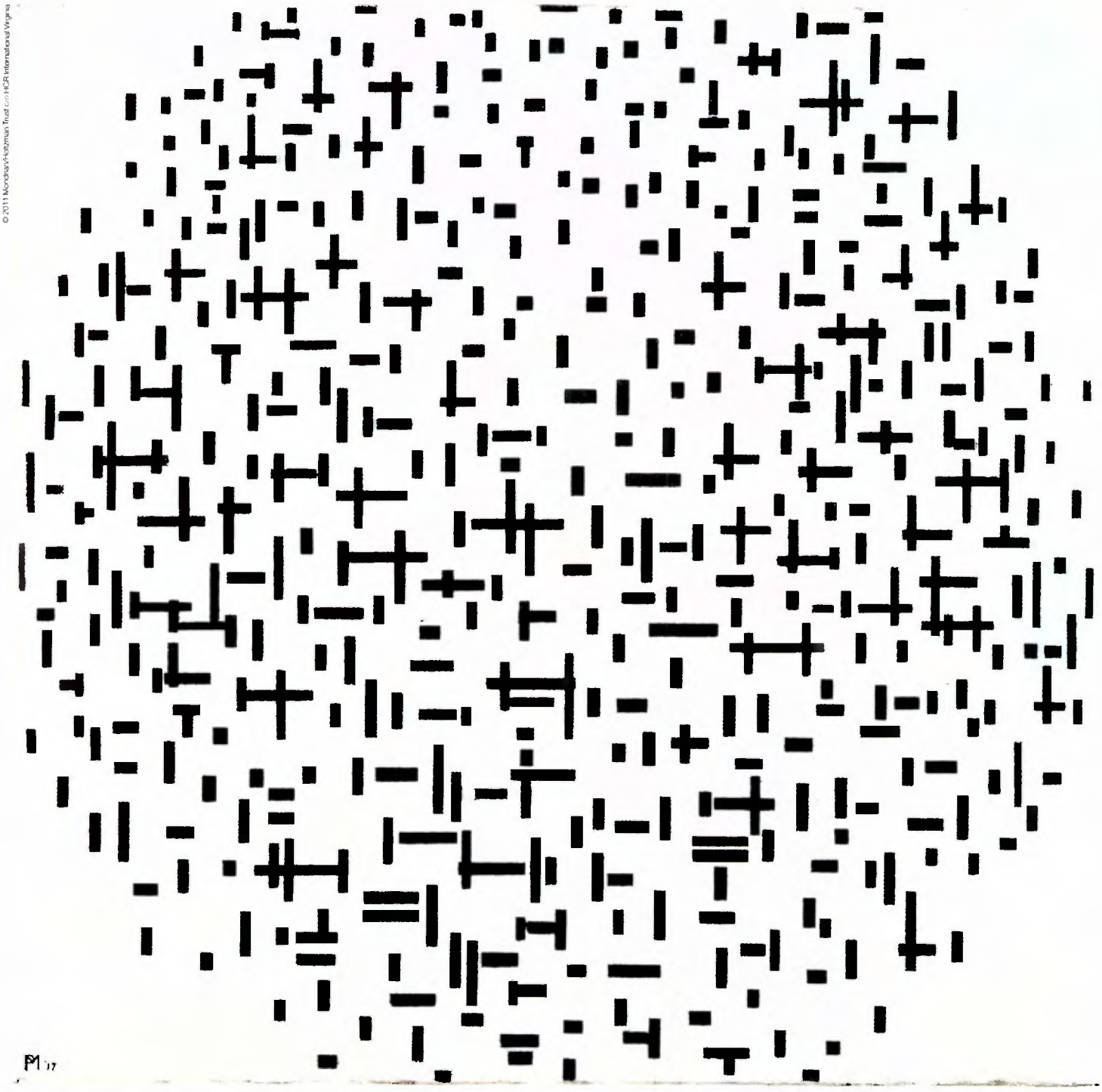


1 • Piet Mondrian, *Compositie 10 in Zwart Wit* (Composition No. 10 in Black and White), 1915
Oil on canvas, 85 × 108 (33½ × 42½)

It was at this juncture, in 1914, that Mondrian went back to Holland, where, unlike his isolated situation in France, he had a considerable following, for beginning in 1908 he had turned away from Dutch naturalism, embraced modernism, and immediately risen to the head of the local avant-garde. Joining his old Theosophist friends in his usual summer haunt—the artists' colony of Domburg—he attempted to apply his digitalizing technique to the motifs he had painted in various Postimpressionist styles—the small Gothic church, the sea, the piers—before having left for Paris. Only two paintings would result from this group of studies (one in 1915, *Composition No. 10 in Black and White* [**1**], better known by its nickname *Pier and Ocean*; the other, *Composition 1916*), but together they mark a sea change.

One of the most important factors in this shift was Mondrian's exposure to the philosophy of Hegel, which helped him break away from the inherently static character of digitalization and the neo-Platonic notion of essential truths to be disclosed behind a world of illusions. For if Hegel's Theory of Dialectics is grounded in opposi-

▲ 1912 ● 1911 ■ 1913



2 • Piet Mondrian, *Compositie in lijn* (Composition in Line), 1916/17
Oil on canvas, 108 × 108 (42½ × 42½)

tions, it does not seek their neutralization. On the contrary, it is a dynamic system moved by tensions, by contradiction. Mondrian's lifelong motto coined at that time—"each element is determined by its contrary"—stems directly from Hegel. The issue is no longer the translating (or, since it is a matter of establishing a set of arbitrary signs that will turn the real world into a form of code, a better term would be *transcoding*) of the visible world into a geometric pattern, but rather the enactment on canvas of the laws of dialectics that govern the world, visible or not.

Though both *Composition No. 10 in Black and White* and *Composition 1916* were based on drawings that had refined the digitalizing method, these canvases now forsook it, abandoning as well the overall symmetry that had resulted from the process (from now on symmetry would be banned from Mondrian's work). In the "plus/minus" drawings that led to the first of these two paintings, Mondrian explored the cruciform structure resulting from the vertical intrusion of the pier as seen from above into the horizontality of reflections on the sea. But rather than the cruciform itself, what we

see in the painting is its simultaneous gestation and dissolution—something perfectly caught by Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) when he wrote about the work in a review that its "methodical construction embodies 'becoming' rather than 'being.'" And although almost immediately after completing it, Mondrian would judge *Composition 1916* severely for its too-strong emphasis on one direction in particular (the vertical), all references to the church facade have been suppressed in the work: it is no longer the spectacle of the world that is transcoded but the elements of the art of painting itself that are digitalized—line, color, plane, each reduced to a basic cipher. Though Mondrian would never entirely forgo his original spiritualist position, his art now became, and would remain, one of the most elaborate explorations of the materiality of painting itself, an analysis of its signifiers. This dialectical jump from extreme idealism to extreme materialism is a common feature in the evolution of many early pioneers of abstraction.

Mondrian's principle of reduction is that of maximal tension: a straight line is but a "tensed curve." The same argument goes for surfaces (the flatter, the tenser) and was soon to apply to color. That Mondrian would wait four more years (until 1920) before adopting the triad of the pure primaries (red, yellow, and blue, used alongside black, gray, and white) should not mask the fact that he already knew at this point that it was the inevitable consequence of his logic. He had first to purge himself entirely of the idea, derived from Goethe, of color as the matter that sullies the purity (read spirituality) of light—this was the last vestige of representation to go, perhaps because its mimetic character, coated in symbolism, was harder to detect. But this delay did not prevent Mondrian, when he started work on *Composition in Line* **[2]** in mid-1916, from taking the plunge into pure abstraction.

Once freed from any referential obligation, Mondrian's work evolved at breakneck speed. *Composition in Line*, finished in early 1917, radicalizes the dynamism of the two previous works, accentuating the tension between an originary randomness and a purported nonhierarchical order. But with it Mondrian realized that a major component of the pictorial language still remained somewhat passive in his work. For, though the figure itself, utterly dispersed by and absorbed within the grid, is now so thoroughly atomized that it is bound to remain a virtuality—each cluster of linear units competing for attention—the white ground behind these black or dark-gray lines is not yet fully "tensed." It is optically activated by the geometrical relations that virtually interconnect the discrete elements of the picture, but in itself it remains an empty space waiting to be filled with a figure—and this, Mondrian now understood, would stop only if the ground ceases to exist as ground. Which is to say that the opposition between figure and ground—the very condition of representation—had to be abolished if an aesthetic program of pure abstraction were to be fulfilled. It was to finding means of achieving this that Mondrian devoted the years from 1917 to 1920.

In a series of canvases immediately following *Composition in Line*, Mondrian eliminated all superimposition of planes. In the first of these paintings, lateral extension is conceived as an antidote to atmospheric illusion, but soon Mondrian realized that floating color planes, appearing as though they were going to glide sideways out of the picture, still presuppose the neutrality of the ground. Gradually aligning the colored rectangles, and, most importantly, ending up this series by dividing the interstitial space itself into rectangles of various shades of white, he thereby eliminated the very notion of passive interstice.

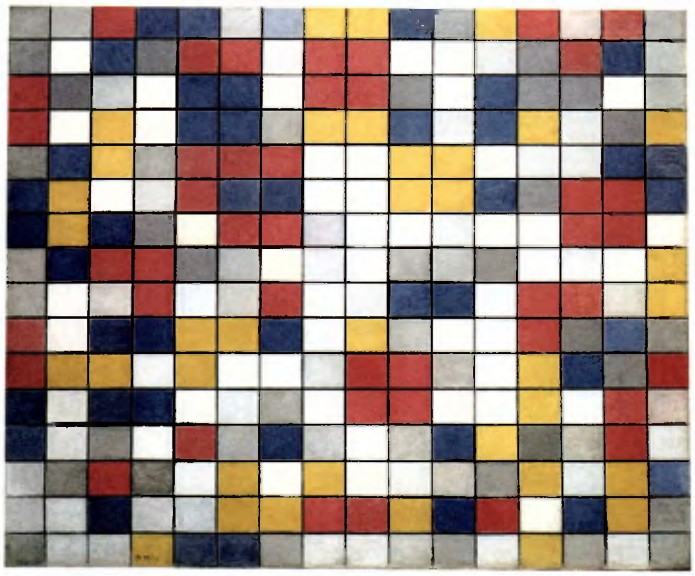
The final step in this rapid march toward the abolition of the ground as ground would be the modular grid, which Mondrian explored in nine canvases dating from 1918 and 1919. In using the proportions of the canvas as the basis of its division into regular units, Mondrian came to terms with a deductive structure that suppresses, in principle, any projection of an a priori image onto the surface. There is no difference between ground and nonground (or, to put it another way, the ground is the figure, the field is the image). The whole surface of the canvas has again become a grid, but this grid is no longer a Cubist scaffolding built up in empty space, since every zone of the canvas is now transformed into a commensurable rectangular unit.

This does not mean, however, that every unit is of equal weight: throughout this series of modular canvases, which comprises his first four so-called "diamond" paintings, Mondrian never abandoned an opposition between marked (through a greater thickness of the "contour," or through color) and unmarked units. This may come as a surprise were it not for Mondrian's Hegelianism: a dynamic tension must lie at the core of any work, which is what an even grid would automatically disallow. (It is precisely because the allover continuity of a regular grid annuls the pathos of tension that a painter such as Ad Reinhardt, and scores of Minimalist artists after him, had such a predilection for this form.) So in Mondrian's least compositional works, the poorly nicknamed *Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colors* and *Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors* **[3]**, there is a sense of struggle between the "objective" data of the operating module and the "subjective" play of the color distribution. In order for the "universal" to manifest itself, a zest of "particularity" must still be factored in—at least for the time being.

These two paintings are the last of the kind. As soon as he finished them, in the spring of 1919, Mondrian returned to Paris, utterly confident that with his modular grids he had just discovered the ultimate answer to most pictorial problems facing artists in the wake of Cubism. But the atmosphere had changed in the French capital, as exemplified by Picasso's exhibition of neoclassical works. This surely helped Mondrian realize that the absolute "elimination of the particular" was a utopian dream, and thus that the solution of the modular grid, for all its radicality, was, if not a red herring, at least ahead of its time—something for the distant future perhaps, when conditions of perception would have changed, but something that no one would be able to grasp in the present situation. Furthermore, Mondrian began to realize that the modular grid did not accord with his own theories and beliefs: in that such grids are based on repetition (for Mondrian, there was

1910–1919

▲ 1917b, 1928a, 1937b ● 1913 ▲ 1957b ● 1919



3 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Grid 9: Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors*, 1919
Oil on canvas, 86 × 106 (33⅞ × 41¾)

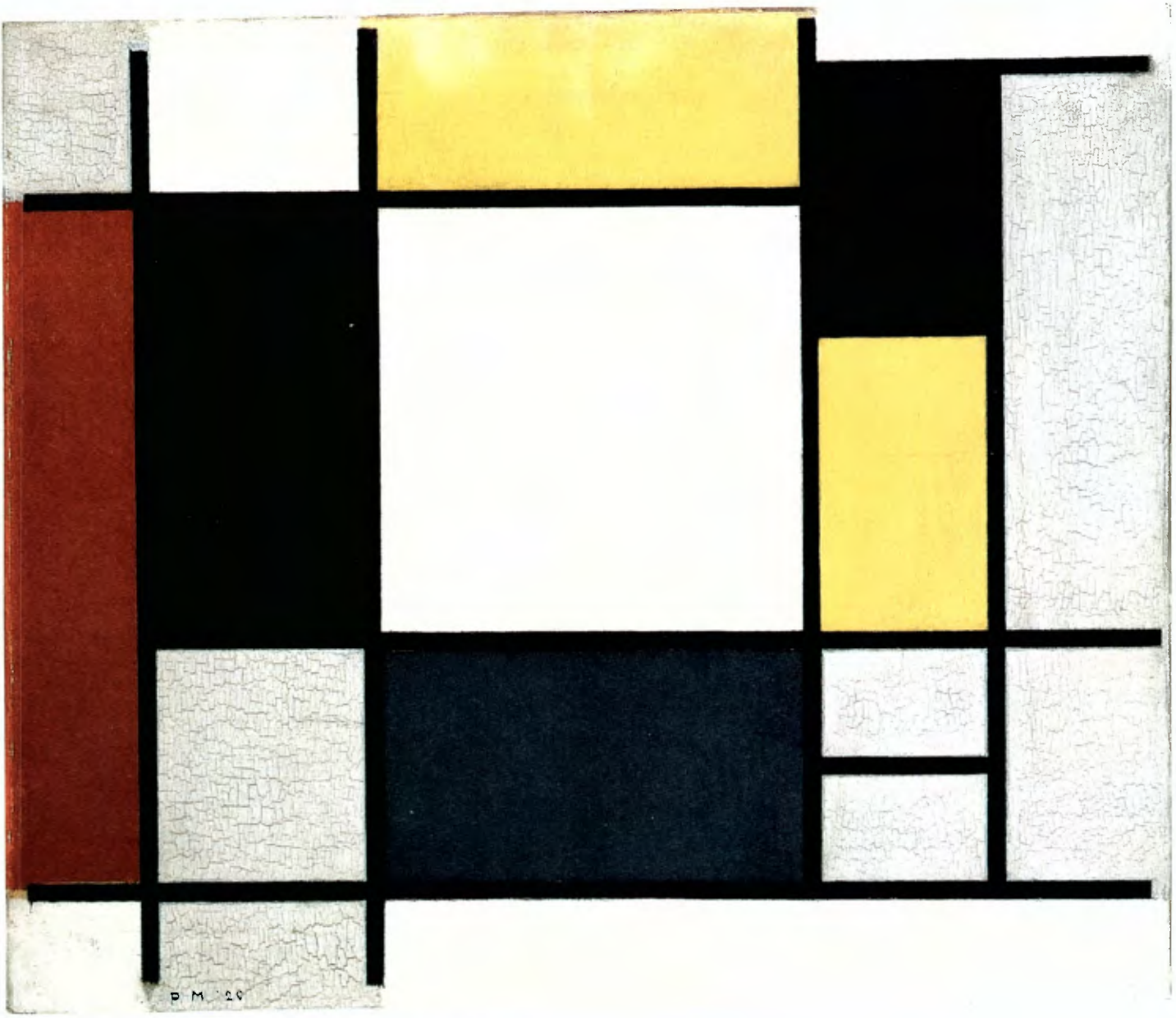
no difference between the repetitive rhythm of a machine and that of the seasons), and because reticulation (division into a network of squares engenders illusionistic optical effect (all illusions are feats of nature), he felt that they doubly contradicted his theoretical ban on the "natural."

The invention of Neoplasticism

By the end of 1920, Mondrian's mature style, which he called "Neoplasticism," was in place. Its invention was the result of an intense period of work during which Mondrian gradually eradicated modularity. The difficult goal he now set himself was to reintroduce composition without restoring the hierarchical opposition of figure and ground. The path he chose drew from the same logic that had given birth to his regular grids, but now in reverse. The new equilibrium would not be based on the promise of an equalization of all units but on their dissonance. Optical illusions would now be eliminated entirely, not only the effects of visual flicker induced by the clustering of black lines at the intersections of the grids but even, in the end, the very possibility of color contrasts: color planes cease to be adjacent and, from now on, they are more often than not displaced to the painting's periphery. There is no more opposition between figure and ground here than in the modular grids, but now each unit, clearly differentiated (it is at this point that the primary colors appear), aims at destroying the centrality of all others.

Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray **[4]**, the first Neoplastic painting proper, demonstrates the efficiency of Mondrian's new method. Although the balancing logic of the painting had called for a large central square, we do not perceive it as such. In this pictorial language, with its hostility to the idea of the gestalt (or form understood as the separation of figure from its background), nothing, not even an easily recognized shape (rectangle, square) placed on the axis of symmetry, must get the lion's share of attention. From now on, each Neoplastic painting would be a microcosmic model, a practico-theoretical object in which the destructive powers of dialectical thought are tested each time anew. *Each time anew* needs to be emphasized here, for unlike most painters in the tradition of geometrical abstract art, Mondrian never worked according to a formula—there is never anything predetermined in his compositions, each conceived, in dialectical fashion, as an improvement over its predecessor, and each geared toward the same goal: creating in itself a new kind of equilibrium, an equilibrium in tension, in which each element would be endowed with the maximal energy, and which he exposed in terms very similar to those used after the war by military strategists when advocating the theory of deterrence (Mutual Assured Destruction).

The years immediately following the advent of Neoplasticism would be Mondrian's most productive (one fifth of his Neoplastic output was painted from the end of 1920 to mid-1923). He did not work exactly in series, but he returned over and over to three compositional types that he would transform as he pressed on—the most minute change in one area necessitating a complete reformulation of the whole canvas, a fact made all the more patent by the drastic paring down of Mondrian's pictorial vocabulary, now limited to planes of primary colors and to elements of 'non-colors' (black lines, white planes and, albeit rarely, gray ones). Those three compositional types, very different from each other, were based on the idea that an element seemingly poised to dominate the canvas had to be undermined by the combined actions of all the other elements (these dominating features could be a large square or near-square in its central area, as in the first Neoplastic painting just discussed; or two lines bisecting the painting, also close to the central area; or a large "open" plane, colored or not, in one of its corners, limited on two of its sides by the edges of the canvas). And just as the radical limitation to his pictorial vocabulary was a direct consequence of his principle of "dynamic equilibrium" (a concept he would formulate only in the thirties), the number of elements present in one single work could also be reduced in order to augment each element's share of the tension. In the barest of all his works, *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines* of 1931 **[5]**, two black lines of unequal width, one vertical and the other horizontal, traverse a square white surface placed on its tip, and cross not far from its lower left border. The work is so simple in appearance that the origin of its gripping tautness is hard to discern at first: the "crossing," contrary to what one is tempted to believe (precisely by the habits of perception that Mondrian's art never cease to combat), is *not* symmetrically disposed along an oblique axis that would divide the canvas into two parts mirroring each other. It is only *nearly* so. The four white planes are different—maximal difference in the case of the tiny triangle at lower left and the large pentagon that covers the largest expanse of the canvas, and minimal difference in the case of the two irregular quadrangles at both sides of the painting. This latter, almost imperceptible difference, as well as that of the width of the black



4 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray*, 1920
Oil on canvas, 51.5 × 61 (20¼ × 24)

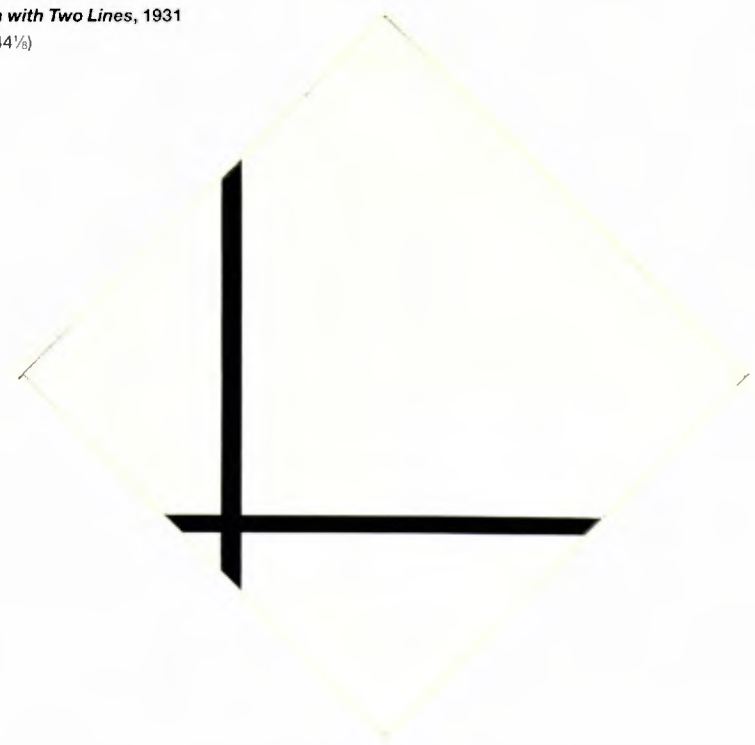
bars, is what subliminally annuls the potentially static resolve of symmetry and sets the painting into motion. None of Mondrian's colleagues would have dared come so close to symmetry—in itself an absolute taboo in his art—because none would have been as confident that it could be simultaneously, or rather dialectically, courted and undermined.

"A surrogate of the whole"

A lot has been written on Mondrian's so-called "lozenge" paintings (there were sixteen of them spanning his whole career as an abstract painter, from 1918 to 1944; he himself called them *tableaux losangiques*, a clumsy French neologism he created, and they were often called "diamond" by art historians, although neither term is appropriate since they are actually square canvases positioned on one of their tips). The main point discussed in the literature is their paradoxical nature with regard to the opposition between extension and limitation. Though Mondrian continually stressed that his canvases were autonomous paintings, independent from the architectural setting that would eventually host them, each complete in itself as a microcosm, he seemed at first sight in these *losangiques* works to be advocating a virtual extension of the composition into the surrounding space—or, more precisely, implying that they were fragments of a whole, slivers of an invisible yet all-encompassing orthogonal grid that they would be revealing to us. That idea, notoriously put forward by the painter Max Bill in the fifties and later by art historian Meyer Schapiro, seemed to be in accordance with the call for a unification of painting and architecture that was a crucial

▲ 1928a, 1937b, 1947a, 1959e, 1967c

5 • Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines*, 1931
Oil on canvas, diagonals 112 × 112 (44⅛ × 44⅛)



▲ rallying cry for the members of the De Stijl movement (of which Mondrian was a prominent member from 1917 to 1924), and with Mondrian's own utopia of a future dissolution of art into the environment. But no matter how seductive the matching of Mondrian's "*losangique*" format and his ideas about architecture might seem, the link is based on a double misunderstanding—of the works themselves and of the theory.

Contrary to what one might believe, Mondrian always insisted that the Neoplastic canvas was a closed totality, a "surrogate of the whole," as he loved to say, and thus necessarily contrasting with its (chaotic, natural, "undetermined") environment, wherever it would be placed—until, that is, modern architecture had evolved to the point when it could effortlessly integrate his art because it would share its general principles; but that point, he kept warning, was some way off in the future. The idea that his canvases, in underlining by themselves the "disharmony" of their surroundings, could function as a kind of accelerator in the progress of humankind toward its vision of an abstract built environment even precedes the formation of Neoplasticism (it first appears in 1917 in his writings); but as Mondrian devoted more and more thoughts to the issue of architecture throughout the twenties, this view gradually became a mantra, culminating in his 1927 essay "The Home—Street—City." In the present condition of architecture and urbanism, Mondrian stated, the best a Neoplastic artist can do is to adjust the interior space of his studio to the aesthetic rigor of his paintings, hoping that this homeopathic dose of Neoplasticism injected into the built environment would in time induce a transformation of the whole house (adjusting to the Neoplastic studio in the same manner as the studio had adjusted to the Neoplastic paintings it contained), then that the same process would spread to the whole street, then to the city, then ... to the world at large. Mondrian firmly clung to his utopian belief in such a chain reaction, hence the considerable energy he devoted, from 1920 to his death, to the constant transformation of his working and living space into a "chromo-plastic environment" whose walls were covered with colored pieces of cardboard, their number, size, and position changing in sync with the evolution of his art. (This work in progress, particularly the studio/apartment Mondrian occupied from 1921 to 1936 at the 26 rue du Départ in Paris, became a staple of the European avant-garde, visited by countless artists on whom it had a profound impact—the most famous ▲ example being Alexander Calder, who credited his conversion to abstraction to such a visit in October 1930).

The utopia sounds naive today, but Mondrian himself knew full well that it was far-fetched, which is why he had a more immediate goal for his paintings, entrusting them with a role they had to perform even in the most hostile environment: their linear grids would not virtually extend into the architectural space, but each picture would nevertheless be endowed with an expansive force; it would "irradiate in space," and, in doing so, "correct" the ugliness around it; it would be a bundle of energy so powerful that it would visually control the room in which it was hung. YAB

FURTHER READING

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▲ 1917b ▲ 1931b, 1955b