1917

After two years of intense research, Piet Mondrian breaks through to abstraction, an event immediately followed by the launching of *De Stijl*, the earliest avant-garde journal devoted to the cause of abstraction in art and architecture.

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.

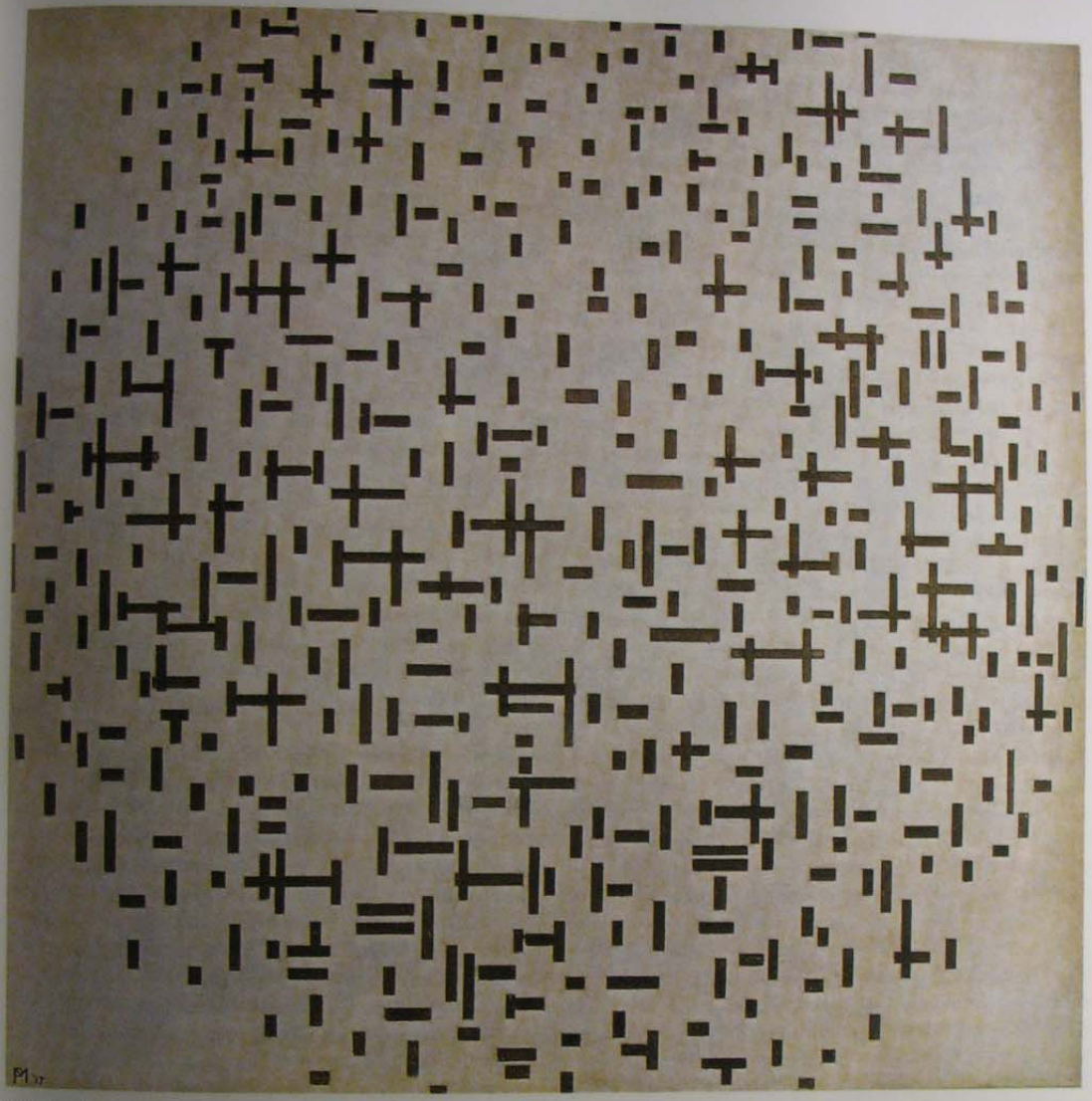
Reading this Analytical Cubism through the lens of fin de siècle Symbolism mixed with Theosophy (an occultist and syncretic doctrine that combined various Eastern and Western religions and philosophies, highly popular in Europe at the turn of the century), Mondrian quickly became aware that just what 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, *Composition No. 10 in Black and White (Pier and Ocean)*, 1915
Oil on canvas, 85 x 108 (33½ x 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 oppositi-

▲ 1912 • 1911 ■ 1913



2 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Line*, 1917
Oil on canvas, 108 x 108 (42⅝ x 42⅝)

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.

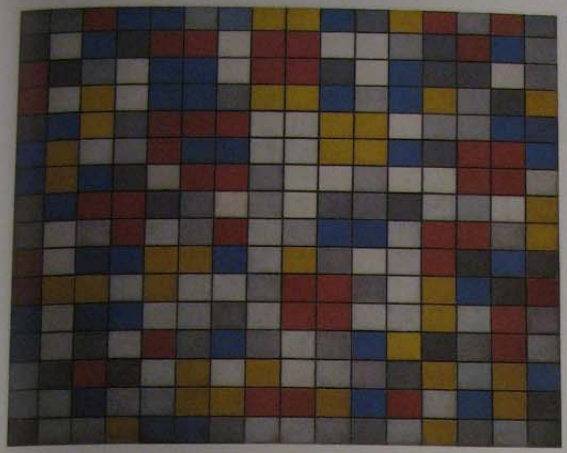
In a series of canvases immediately following *Composition in Line*, Mondrian eliminated all superimposition of planes. In the first of these paintings, lateral extension is conceived as an antidote to atmospheric illusion, but soon Mondrian realized that floating color planes, appearing as though they 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 with Dark Colors* and *Checkerboard with Light Colors* [**3**], there is a clear 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 no

▲ 1926, 1937b ● 1913 ▲ 1957b ● 1919



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

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.

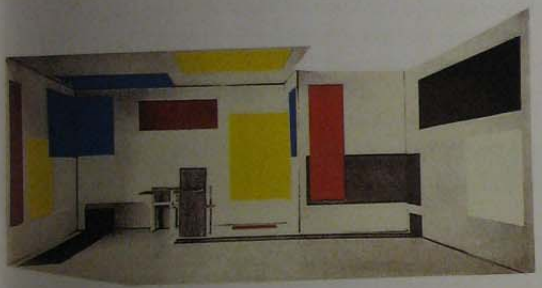
Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray [4], the first Neoplastic painting proper, demonstrates the efficiency of Mondrian's new method. Although the balancing logic of the painting had called for a large central square, we do not perceive it as such. In this pictorial language, with its 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. Using a vocabulary that is fixed once and for all (there would be no ▲ major change until Mondrian's last years in New York), Mondrian would patiently spend the next two decades applying himself to combating the idea of identity as a form of self-sufficiency unthreatened by its opposite or its negation. After the figure and the ground, he would tackle the plane and the line: one after the other, these elements of painting, and their secular functions, would be questioned.

Most pioneers of abstraction were staunch evolutionists, but Mondrian seems to be the only one to have matched his words with his deeds. It does not diminish the messianic strength of his convictions, bolstered by his Hegelianism, to note that he was not working in a vacuum. Help and adulation from younger colleagues came at the right moment with the birth of *De Stijl*, a journal founded in October 1917 by van Doesburg, around whom gathered a nucleus of painters (Bart van der Leck and Vilmos Huszar) and architects (J. J. P. Oud, Jan Wils, and Robert van't Hoff), plus a sculptor (Georges Vantongerloo) and a poet (Antony Kok), all of whom were focused on modernism as a utopian integration of the arts into the space of living.

Van Doesburg was the coordinator, but Mondrian was the mentor: his theory of art was the basis for the collective activity of the group—even if dissensions caused several members to drift away very early on (such as van der Leck, reluctant to forgo figuration in his paintings entirely, or Jan Wils, too attached to symmetry in his buildings). In their analysis of the figure–ground opposition, none of the painters would propose anything more radical than did Mondrian, but the very fact that van Doesburg and Huszar were concerned with the same problem certainly encouraged him. It was in its collaborative program, however, that the De Stijl group proved the most inventive.

• The movement's agenda was typically modernist. Like Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, De Stijl conceived of its production as the logical culmination of the art of the past, and saw as the motor of this "inevitable" evolution the ontological quest of each individual art for its own "essence," and the elimination of any superfluous convention (countless texts by Mondrian and his peers reflect upon these principles with regard not only to painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also to music, dance, and literature). What is specific to De Stijl is the way its members considered the articulation between the individual arts: nothing can be gained from the sheer confusion of distinctive fields (the medley of Art Nouveau is sharply criticized by van Doesburg); nothing is more reprehensible than the very idea of "applied" arts; each art has to determine its own irreducible elements before attempting a fusion with any other art. Different arts can unite only if they share such "irreducible elements," which explains the centrality for De Stijl of the relationship between painting and

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



5 • Vilmos Huszar and Gerrit Rietveld, *Spatial Color Composition for an Exhibition, Berlin*, 1923, from *L'Architecture vivante*, Autumn 1924

architecture, two mediums available for such fusion because of their common use of planar units.

In the end, however, the collaboration between architects and painters proved extremely difficult and led to the progressive dismantling of the original group, the practitioners of each art being reluctant to relinquish any prerogative to those of the other. The main stumbling block was theoretical. For Mondrian, architecture, by its very nature, could not perform the abolition of hierarchy, centrality, and "particularity" that lay at the core of his aesthetics. Architecture was doomed by anatomy (the post-and-lintel structure), and thus—paradoxically, since it is nonmimetic—could never become abstract. The De Stijl painters thus conceived their art as a Trojan horse entering architectural space in order to destroy its anatomical structure visually, but at the cost of reintroducing a form of illusion. For example, in Huszar's and Gerrit Rietveld's experimental project of 1923, *Spatial Color Composition for an Exhibition, Berlin* [**5**], the physical shape of the room, especially its corners, is negated optically by wandering planes of color. Thus, even if Mondrian retained a lifelong interest in the possibility of the "abstract interior" (the hybrid form invented by De Stijl members as a result of their collective analysis), transforming his successive studios, first in Paris and then in New York, into paintings that deploy their planar elements throughout the real space of the room, he knew that the "future dissolution of art into the environment" that he had envisioned early on as a logical consequence of his Hegelian program was not to be realized during his lifetime, if ever. Though he kept writing on all the arts and imagining how his Neoplastic theory, once transferred to their domain, would affect them, painting remained the only uncompromising field of experimentation for him. De Stijl had given him some important feedback, but retrospectively it is obvious that he could not have condoned for long the devolution of his highly elaborate pictorial language into principles of good design.

FURTHER READING

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