1944a

Piet Mondrian dies, leaving unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, a work that exemplifies his conception of painting as a destructive enterprise.

Piet Mondrian died in New York on February 1, 1944. Shortly thereafter his executor and heir—the young painter Harry Holtzman, who had helped organize Mondrian's immigration to the United States—opened his studio, left untouched, to the public. The threadbare yet extraordinarily dynamic space, with its white walls transformed into screens of optical flickers by the many rectangles of pure colors that were pinned onto them, and its makeshift all-white furniture designed by Mondrian from wooden crates (again, adorned with colored rectangles), were already well known to several visitors. But very few had previously seen the unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie* [**1**], even though the painter had worked on it since June 1942. It escaped none of these onlookers that there was a direct continuity between the pulsating surfaces of the walls and the staccato beat of Mondrian's last "lozangique" painting, as he called his series of square canvases rotated through forty-five degrees to stand on one corner (most commonly labeled his "diamond paintings").

This continuity was particularly enforced by the fact that not only had the black lines of classic Neoplasticism entirely vanished from the exceptionally large picture hovering on the easel, but so had *any* kind of line. One could speak only of "alignments" of tiny rectangles of color, most of them pieces of paper somewhat clumsily glued onto the canvas. But even these alignments are clearly on the verge of collapsing: they can be read only subliminally, inferred rather than seen, in most areas of the composition. Thus, to the visitors, the major difference between the walls and the painting must have seemed one of scale. Entering the box-car studio and being pulled toward *Victory Boogie-Woogie* at the very end of this long pristine space, one must have had the exhilarating feeling of walking into a painting.

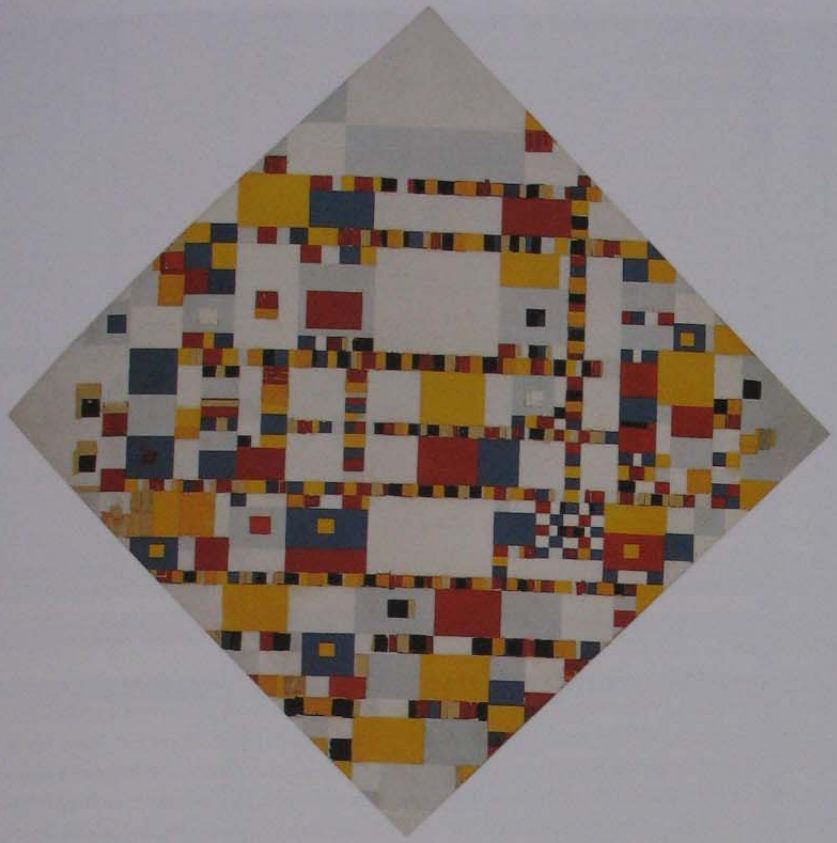
But for those who had seen this ultimate canvas before Mondrian's death, their posthumous encounter with it was a horrifying shock—in fact, among the small circle of Mondrian's acquaintances who had witnessed the painter struggling over it during the last eighteen months of his life, many shared dealer and writer Sidney Janis's verdict: it was now a ruined masterpiece.

Mondrian had several times brought the painting to a conclusion (in a photograph dating from the winter of 1942–3, one can see him putting the "finishing" brush-stroke to it). But each time he had undone what he had achieved and, to the stupefaction of his friends, had started anew. He most certainly knew that his own end was coming, and his lifelong teleological bent had led him to assume that, if this painting were to be his swan song, it had to go further than anything he had done before. He was not interested in producing just one more painting in the electrifying style of his New York period. When a friend asked him why he kept repainting *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, instead of making several pictures from the different solutions that had been superimposed on this same canvas, Mondrian replied: "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out." During the week of January 17–23, 1944, three days before entering the hospital to be treated for his fatal pneumonia, he had "unfinished" his masterwork one more time, covering its painted surface with a myriad tiny bits of colored tape and paper—to the great sorrow of Janis et al.

But negative criticism is often more perceptive than unconditional praise. The admirers of Mondrian's classic Neoplasticism saw only destruction in this collage of the eleventh hour. In many ways they were right, and they would have been surprised to hear Mondrian agree, and agree with glee. For destruction was precisely what he had endlessly sought during the long gestation of *Victory Boogie-Woogie*. The "finished" state that Janis and others had seen in his studio before the last frantic, week-long campaign was just not "destructive" enough for Mondrian: witnessing the panic of his most ardent supporters, he would have finally declared victory.

In fact, destruction had been at the very core of Mondrian's program all along. Since, right from his very first texts, he had written about the destruction of form, of the "particular," of individuality, his New York admirers should not have been so dismayed. They were not entirely at fault, however, for Mondrian had sent ambiguous signals with regard to his utopian dream of the "dissolution of art into the environment" (which he understood as a possibility for the "far distant future"): even though as early as 1922 he had determined that painting was the only vehicle within which his aesthetic principles could be truly tested by experiment, he had not gone out of his way to dissuade his early defenders from praising his art for its usefulness as a blueprint for modern architecture. By 1944, notwithstanding Mondrian's ever more aggressive statements about the fundamental role of negativity in his work

▲ 1917



1 • Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1942–4 (unfinished)
Oil and paper on canvas, 126 x 126 (49⅝ x 49⅝) diagonal

(such as "I think the destructive element is too much neglected in art"), it had become a cliché to think of him as the champion of a "constructive" aesthetic (already in 1937 Naum Gabo had been utterly baffled by Mondrian's refusal of this label.

It was in the thirties that Mondrian understood that he was not getting his message across. The posthumous publication, in the last issue of *De Stijl* (in January 1932), of fragments of Theo van Doesburg's diary must have been a severe blow. There, Mondrian's former friend compared his work to the classical painting of the seventeenth-century French artist Nicolas Poussin. At that time, indeed, through a very long process of trial and error, Mondrian's dialectical system of composition had reached a peak, a perfect pitch where nothing could go wrong. The "negation" of one element by the other had led his paintings to be absolutely decentralized (thus achieving the destruction of the "particular" he was looking for), but they were also flawlessly balanced. Mondrian celebrated this climax in a series of eight paintings, from 1930 to 1932, all based on the same general organization. Yet such a self-satisfied rehashing (unique in his production, contrary to what one might think) soon gave way to the realization that he was "stuck."

Never indulgent with himself, he came to the conclusion that if he had indeed reached a serene equilibrium in his compositions, this was at a terrible cost, since it hardly conveyed the sense of dynamic evolution, of everlasting perfectibility in art and life, that was so essential to his dialectical thinking. Courageously (at the age of sixty), he concluded that, in order to better enact the destruction he had always been advocating, he had above all to shatter the language of painting itself, including his own. One by one, the elements of Neoplasticism, which he had conceived as the culmination of all the art of the past, were annihilated as entities.

The first thing to be "dissolved," as he said, was the plane. To this effect, Mondrian reintroduced a feature that he had banned from his painting since 1919 and that would utterly undermine the "classical" look of his works—that is, repetition. If until then he had conceived of repetition only as a natural (and therefore prohibited) phenomenon, it now became a favorite weapon in his struggle against identity: he multiplied the lines delimiting and linking the planes together so that "rhythm alone emerges, leaving the planes [themselves] as 'nothing'." Lines, which had been a secondary element in "classical" Neoplasticism, thus became the most active element, the main destructive agent, and their sheer multiplication

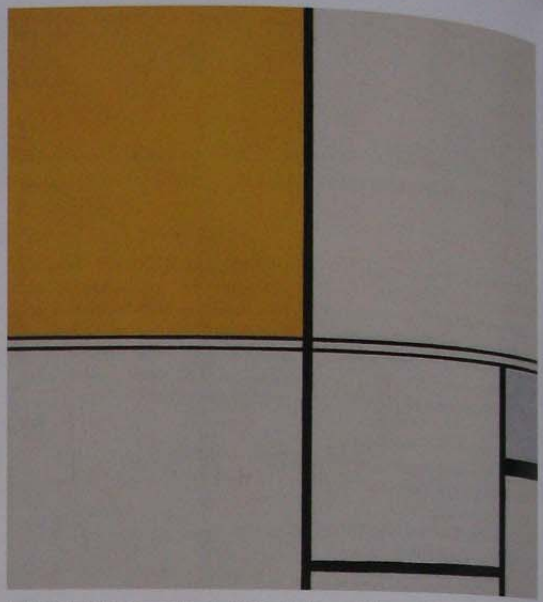
ensured not only that planes lost their "individuality" (as one cannot securely grasp a plane with multiple contours), but also that the same "depersonalization" would happen to the lines themselves.

Aesthetic sabotage

Mondrian's first attempt at such a radicalization of his pictorial program was *Composition B* of 1932 [**2**], based on the same compositional schema as the climactic series of the previous two years. With this work he inaugurated what he called his "double line"—two parallel black lines and their white interstice, itself perceived as a line. But while in this canvas the white gap of the double line is narrow (it is of the same thickness as the intersecting—"single"—black line), it will soon widen and (as Mondrian would write, bemused, to a friend) "head toward the plane." And where there is no fundamental difference between lines and planes, since the line has given up its subordinate position, should there not be colored lines as well? Though Mondrian answered this question in the affirmative as early as 1933 (with the "diamond" composition of that year, *Composition with Yellow Lines*, now in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, which bears only four "lines/planes" on a white background), it would not be until after his arrival in New York, in October 1940, that he would fully explore this possibility.

During the three years following *Composition B*, Mondrian continued to use the classical type of 1930–2 as a solid platform on which to test the sabotage of his past pictorial language. In the only two paintings completed in 1934 (one of them destroyed as "degenerate" by the Nazis), he doubled *all* the lines; in 1935, he tripled the horizontal axis of *Composition Gris-Rouge* (Chicago Art Institute) and quadrupled that of *Composition No. II with Blue and Yellow* (Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.); in *Composition C* of the same year (Tate Modern, London), this horizontal division is a "double line" whose white interstice has become wider than two of the "planes" in the picture; in the last painting of the series, *Composition with Yellow* (1936, Philadelphia Museum of Art), it is no longer really a question of double lines: instead we find a "plurality" of lines that bisect the canvas.

Mondrian's next move, during the second half of the thirties, was to transform this "plurality" of lines (ever more numerous) into a sheer scansion, an irregular pulsation of the whole surface of the canvas. Two unexpected changes resulted from this gradual filling-in of his paintings (which had once been so bare as to contain only two black lines on a white ground, as in the *Lozenge Composition with Two Black Lines* of 1931), and in both cases we witness Mondrian transgressing a taboo of his Neoplastic system: first, effects of superimposition, banned since 1917, begin to reappear (effects that Mondrian then accentuated by varying the width of his black lines); second, one notices a return of the optical flickering caused by multiple linear intersections (something he had carefully avoided since 1919). It is as if the fear of illusionism that had engendered these past proscriptions was now far less an issue than that of making sure that nothing ever remains stable. To the



2 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition B, with Double Line and Yellow and Gray*, 1932
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 (19⅝ x 19⅝)

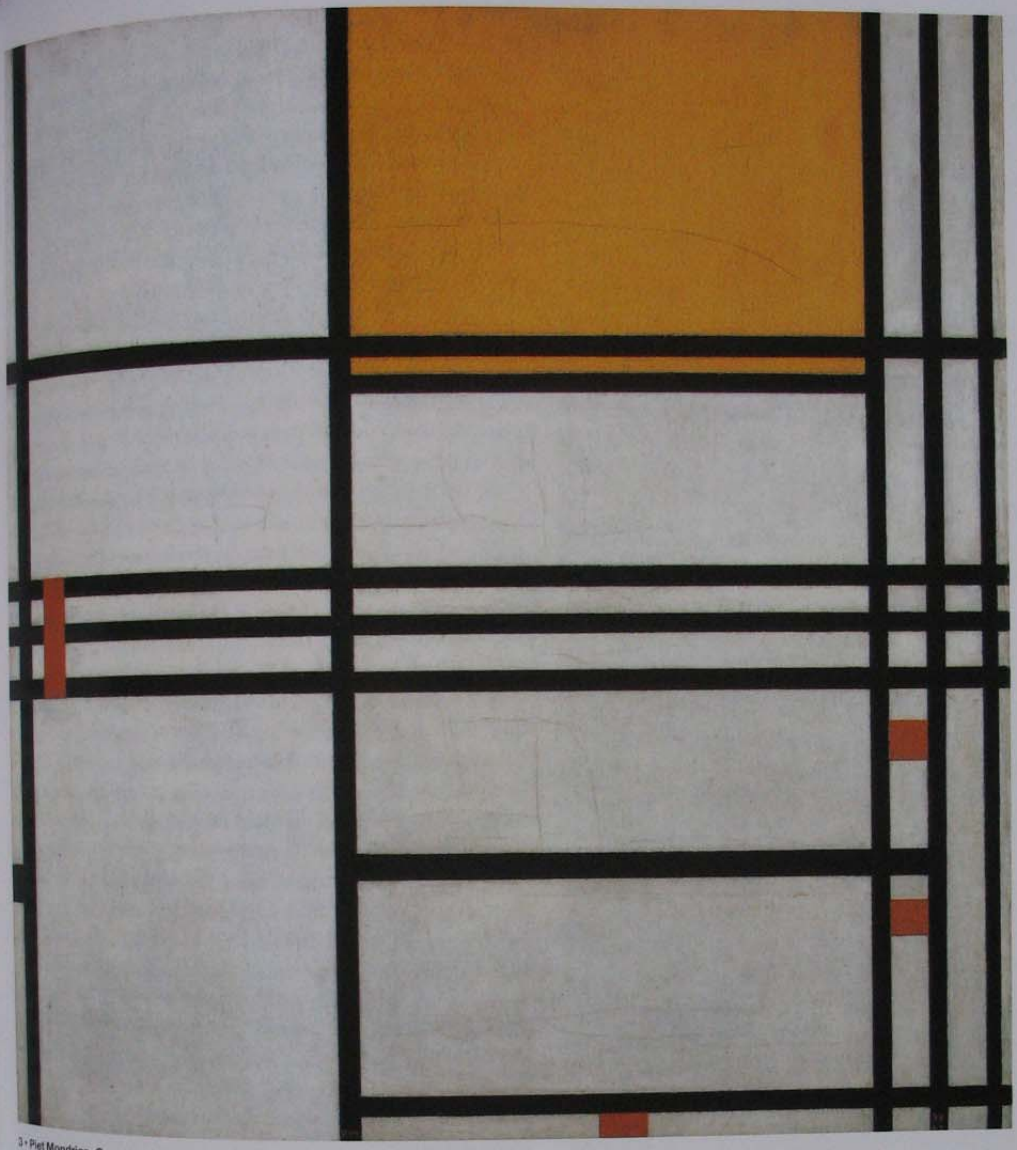
variable thickness of the lines, to their multiplication and the discomforting retinal afterimage it creates, Mondrian then added a partial interruption of certain lines, which thereby cease to bisect the surface—rather, they interact to define fictive planes of a fugitive existence, forming and dissolving before our very eyes.

Mondrian's work was evolving at a rapid rate, his compositions becoming ever more complex, when, after a short interlude in Britain, he left Europe for America (he had fled Paris in 1938, mistakenly thinking that the French capital would be bombed by the Nazis—instead a bomb fell yards away from his London studio). There, after a few weeks of adjustment in New York, he took it upon himself to revise all the canvases he had brought with him (indeed all but four of the works completed in New York were begun in Europe). The myth of Mondrian's suddenly marveling at the Manhattan skyline at night is greatly exaggerated, since the changes in his art that occurred in America were more a direct consequence of an internal development than anything else. Yet there is no doubt that the urban vitality of New York (and specially the most recent jazz music that he suddenly discovered) hit Mondrian full in the face. He felt rejuvenated by the city; for the first time in his life he was acclaimed as a master and his advice was sought (it is ▲ thanks to his interest in Jackson Pollock's *Stenographic Picture* of • 1942, for example, that Peggy Guggenheim gave this work a second look and ended up taking the American painter into her stable).

The first canvases to be reworked belong to a series of vertical compositions that Mondrian had initiated in Paris (in 1936), characterized by an "empty" bay in the center. In *Composition No. 9* [**3**], we can clearly isolate all the features of his late European period (superimposition of bisecting lines, moderate flicker effect [on the right], unequal length of black lines that determine fictively

▲ 1949, 1960b • 1942b

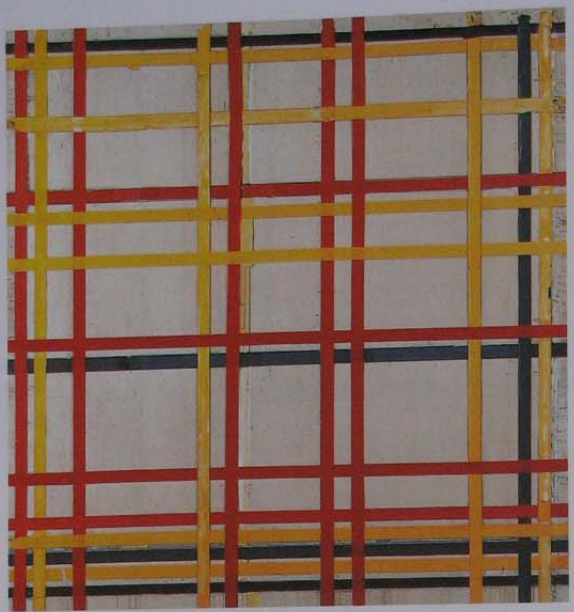
1940–1944



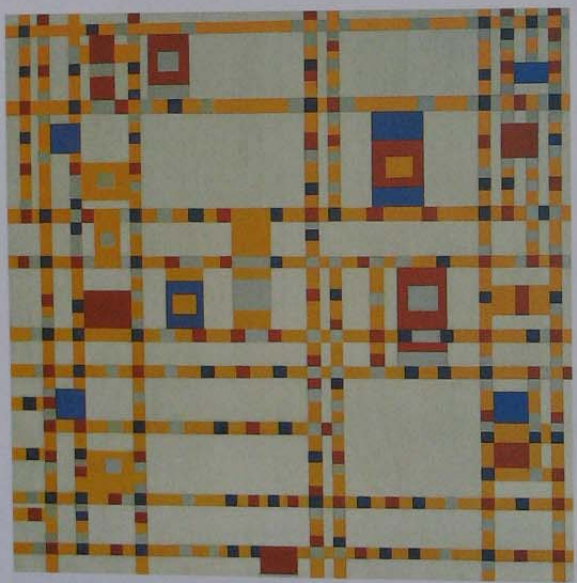
3 • Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 9*, 1939–42
Oil on canvas, 79.7 x 74 (31⅜ x 29)

overlapping rectangles of uncertain identity). To this vocabulary, Mondrian has added tiny dashes of color that seem to be unbounded by any restriction—one of them even crossing the stack of horizontal bars (in another canvas of the same batch, a red block cuts through a yellow plane, bringing the first color juxtaposition since 1917 into his art). Those dashes multiply and elongate in *Place de la Concorde* (1938–43), a picture titled in homage to the city in which Mondrian had started working on it, just as in the cases of *Trafalgar Square* (1939–43) and *New York* (1941–2). In this last painting, bisecting colored lines (briefly tried in 1933) reappear along with the dashes. The next step, with *New York City*, was the total elimination of black.

This work evolved from a series of paintings, once again initiated in Europe, where the sheer number of black lines crossing the canvas formed a grid, irregular, to be sure, but as optically active as that of the first two modular "diamond" paintings of 1918 and 1919. Mondrian had accepted the retinal afterimage as an inevitable by-product of the beat of lines scanning his canvases—but he was nevertheless wary of this. In *New York City*, he arrived at a solution to bypass this illusion, and he found it by pushing his enterprise of destruction of the language of painting further. During the early thirties, the plane as shape (the rectangle) had been "dissolved" by the multiple crossing of lines; then, in the late thirties, the identity of the line itself had



4 • Piet Mondrian, *New York City I*, c. 1941 (unfinished)
Oil and painted paper strips on canvas, 119 x 115 (47 x 45)



5 • Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, 1942–3
Oil on canvas 127 x 127 (50 x 50)

been abolished with the accelerated pulse of repetition, but what had remained untouched during this battle fought against the fundamentals was the ground on which lines and plane rest. It was now the negation of the ground as a geometric and physical entity to which Mondrian aspired. Thus *New York City* was conceived as a weave of colored lines that one can never reconfigure into independent virtual planes (as a red, a yellow, and a blue web) since no line of any given color behaves in a constant fashion (a red line will be above a blue one at an extremity and under at the other). But this deliberate loss of geometric identity is based on the physical unevenness of the ground: the painting is ostensibly layered, Mondrian having carefully imitated, via impasto and emphatic brush-strokes, the above-and-underneath of the braid that he had created with colored tapes while drafting the composition, as can be witnessed in the other canvases of the same series that were left unfinished [**4**].

The logic behind this new turn was typical of Mondrian's reduction of all phenomena to their foundational dialectic: illusionism is what happens when the ground is being optically hollowed out, but if the ground did not exist as such to begin with, if there were no geometrically continuous surface, nothing of the sort would be possible. Yet it is probably only with his penultimate work that Mondrian fully grasped this particular point. Hailed as a masterpiece (and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art when it was exhibited, freshly painted, in 1943), *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* [**5**] was deemed a failure by Mondrian. "There is too much of the old in it," he would say. For although no previous picture of his had so efficiently captured the syncopated rhythm that he loved so much in jazz—with its colored lines divided into long beats of yellow (the base) and short beats of red, gray, and blue, and its rare larger planes that had become chords of three colors—this vibrant painting is devoid of the type of material weave he had created in *New York City*. In that canvas an unexpected effect of simultaneous contrast (illusionistic apparition of complementary colors) had resulted from the multiple crossing of colored lines; in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, he had tried not to correct this effect but to give it a form by marking each crossing of the predominantly yellow lines as a square of a different color, thus furthering the atomization of these lines. But the integrity of the ground had returned in full force.

This is probably what troubled him as well in the "finished" state of *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, and why he furiously appended all the bits of colored paper one can see pasted onto it today, ending up with a collage where the relative position of all elements, woven in thickness in a shallow cut of actual (not illusionary) space, is in a perpetual state of flux—where the ground has become a ghost whose only possible existence, a fleeting one, is that of appearing *above* the figure.

FURTHER READING

Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990)

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Harry Cooper, "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie," *October*, no. 84, Spring 1998

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