Piet Mondrian, "New York City"
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Piet Mondrian, *New York City*

Yve-Alain Bois

Translated by Amy Reiter-McIntosh

In his article on Piet Mondrian's New York works, published ten years ago, Joseph Masheck very judiciously analyzes the particularity and the newness of *New York City* in relation to preceding works. He notes a more aggressive kind of flatness, an all-over effect of compression to a single plane. According to Masheck, this effect is

> partly accomplished by differentiating the densities and overlaps of the separate grids and by overloading the system with more identity than differentiation, so as to control the spatial weave. Thus, the three grids, composed of different numbers of lines all equal in width (15 yellow, 4 blue, 4 red) weave in and out, or avoid weaving, with no apparent governing principle, except perhaps the idea that there should be a lot more yellow than blue or red, both to weigh against them in value and to identify the grid more closely with the pigmentally white ground.[1]

Later in the same article, Masheck pursues the remainder of the variation to which Mondrian devoted himself: the "four blue and red bands assert both sameness and difference (1 vertical blue, 3 horizontal; 2 vertical

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This article originally appeared in French in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne,* no. 15 (1985). This article would not have been possible without the valuable help of the late Charmion von Wiegand and the late Harry Holtzman. Both let me quote from unpublished material in their archives. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Fried for his help with the present version of this article.

[1] Joseph Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," *Artforum* 13 (Oct. 1974): 60–61.

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red, 2 horizontal), balance and asymmetry. Meanwhile, a multitude of yellow-and-yellow intersections tightens the surface, and the overall sameness of the yellow grid enhances the differentiation of red from blue."[2]

The association between *New York City*'s all-over structure and the play that unfolds within it relative to difference and identity is very pertinent but is not specific enough, in my opinion. On the one hand, *all* of Mondrian's neoplastic works are constituted by an opposition between the variable (position, dimension, and color of the planes) and the invariable (right angle, the so-called "constant rapport"). On the other hand, the type of identity produced in *New York City* relies on *repetition,* a principle which, we know, explicitly governs a whole range of paintings predating neoplasticism. *New York City* differs from the "classic" neoplastic works, as well as from the 1918–19 modular paintings with which it seems to have a good deal in common. It is, in part, because he never discusses this last point that Masheck doesn't entirely grasp the amplitude of the reversal that Mondrian effected in his New York works.

In fact, as James Johnson Sweeney realized quite early, one must go back to the 1917 works, which gave rise to modular grids for the two years that followed, in order to understand what happens not only in *New York City* but also in the two Boogie-Woogie paintings.[3] Everyone is aware of the extraordinarily rapid evolution of Mondrian's work during the years immediately preceding the foundation of neoplasticism: under the influence of Bart van der Leck, he adopted the colored plane and the black dash on a white background as elements of his composition for the two *Compositions in Color, A* and *B* (1917, Seuphor 290–91[4]). Mondrian, who had not yet found a means of perspicuously relating these diverse elements (which are the result of a cubist disjunction between

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[2] Ibid., p. 62.

[3] See James Johnson Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and *De Stijl*," *Art News* 50 (Summer 1951): 63. Meyer Schapiro made a similar remark, at about the same time, in his courses. (However, his article on Mondrian appeared much later. See "Mondrian," in Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* [New York, 1978], p. 256.)

[4] When I refer to a number accompanied by "Seuphor," it refers to the "catalog by group" included in Michel Seuphor's book on the artist. See Seuphor [Ferdinand Louis Berckelaers], *Piet Mondrian: sa vie, son oeuvre,* 2d ed. (Paris, 1970).

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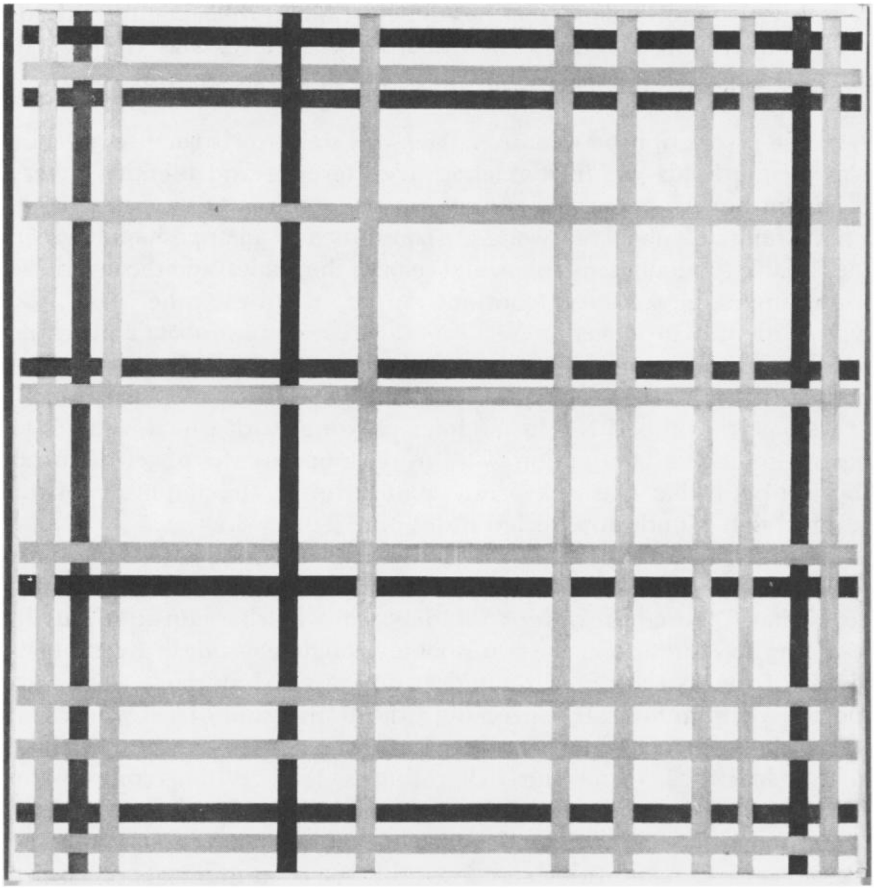

FIG. 1.—Piet Mondrian, *New York City,* 1942, oil on canvas, 119.3 × 114.2 cm., Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Photo courtesy of the museum. The painting was entitled *New York City* when exhibited by Mondrian in 1942 (the title was altered after his death, much later, when the unfinished paintings of the same series began to appear on the market). Throughout this essay I will use the original title.

line and color), tied both plane and dashes together by way of an optical dynamism, based largely on their superimposition. The immediate consequence was to make the background recede optically. The next step was the five *Compositions* (also in 1917), all entitled "*With Colored Planes*" (Seuphor 285–89). Here all superimposition was eliminated, as well as all "line." In the last two of these canvases, the background itself is divided without remainder into planes of different shades of white. The colored rectangles (less numerous) are on the way to alignment. In spite of this, the rectangles fluctuate and, consequently, the background is hollowed out behind them.

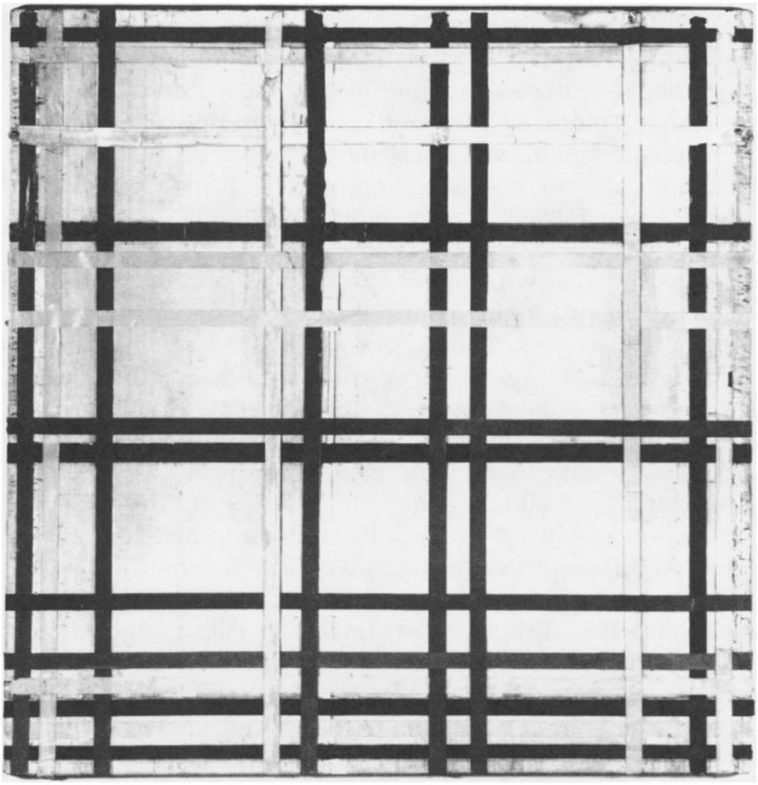

FIG. 2.—Piet Mondrian, *New York City II* (unfinished), 1942–44, charcoal, oil, and colored paper tapes on canvas, 119 × 115 cm., Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Photo courtesy of the museum.

It is at this point that the linear structure reappears, in three 1918 works, two of which have been lost.[5] There is no longer any white "background" and the rectangles, even more in alignment than before, are all bordered by grey lines. However, although the grey or white planes, less numerous than the others, cannot be taken as "background" in the painting, the rectangles still fluctuate; they are still individualized. At this point Mondrian introduced the all-over modular grid, which has the advantage of diminishing, or better still, of equalizing any contrast, preventing any individuation and abolishing the figure/background opposition. But this abolition, far from accentuating the painting's flatness, annihilates the surface of inscription with an overwhelming assault of optical flickers owing to the multiplication of lines and intersections. It re-creates an effect of illusory depth where the aim was to rule out that possibility. Little by little, Mondrian abandoned the modular grid (it took him two years to drop it completely) because, first, it did not fulfill the function for which he had intended it, fixing the surface in its integrity once and for all, without hierarchy; and, second, it exalted rhythm and repetition which were inseparable from symmetry for Mondrian at that time; it exalted the "natural."

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[5] One of these paintings belongs to Max Bill (Seuphor 301), another was reproduced in *De Stijl* (2 [Mar. 1919], plate 9), and a recently published photo of the third was found in Vilmos Huszar's papers and published by Ankie de Jongh, "De Stijl," *Museumjournaal* 17 (Dec. 1972): 273.

Neoplasticism was born out of this double rejection. And it is from a return to these two highly contradictory symbolic forms (depth and repetition) that *New York City* was composed. In describing the all-over structure of the painting, Masheck correctly observes the dialectic of repetition/symmetry that most critics, following Mondrian himself, have compared to the musical rhythm of boogie-woogie.[6] However, by ignoring the question of depth (or by only mentioning it in passing), Masheck blocks his own appreciation of the inaugural gesture this painting produced, which is why he all but excludes the unfinished canvases of *New York City II* and *III* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie* from Mondrian's oeuvre.[7]

However, there are some excuses for this (and Masheck's article remains to date one of the best on Mondrian's later period). In fact the artist himself did not speak explicitly, anywhere in his later writings, about any sort of *return* to a pre-neoplastic problematic of depth. Conversely, "A New Realism," the fundamental article Mondrian was writing while painting *New York City* and which he meticulously polished on the same day as the opening of his first American exhibit (where the painting reigned supreme), clearly and concisely unveils important changes occurring in his ideas of rhythm and repetition.[8] Indeed, if the first theoretical texts of 1917–18 contradict the painter's then-current modular practice, they also very specifically anticipate the neoplastic style (and show that the module could never be more than a temporary solution). For Mondrian, rhythm is the subjective part of composition, the relative ("natural," particular) element which must be interiorized, neutralized by the constant, nonrepetitive opposition of plastic elements; it is by this means that we may attain the universal, the balance, repose, and that the tragic can be abolished.[9] It wasn't until 1927—not coincidentally in connection with jazz—that rhythm was given a positive value. Not limited or formal, the "free rhythm" of jazz is universal, not particular. By a kind of theoretical hocus-pocus, which is more common than we would generally believe, Mondrian dissociated rhythm from repetition, which remained "individual" (the oppression of the machine or biological limitation).[10] In the early thirties, the immobility of repose, then associated with symmetry, but also with "similitude" or repetition, was laid aside little by little on behalf of the notion of dynamic equilibrium (which first appeared in 1934).[11] The immediate plastic translation of this notion was as follows: lines, until that time considered secondary in relation to planes (their only function being the "determination" of those planes), became the most active element of composition.[12] Mondrian quickly began to assign a destructive function to the line. We can see how closely these theoretical adjustments parallel the evolution of his painting: "the rectangular planes (formed by the plurality of straight lines . . .) are dissolved by their homogeneity and rhythm alone emerges, leaving the planes as 'nothing.'" Written in 1931, in an article responding to E. Tériade's accusation of

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[6] See Sweeney, "An Interview with Mondrian," *Piet Mondrian* (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1948). This "interview" was in fact Sweeney's collage of letters Mondrian had sent to him who was then preparing a monograph on the artist. See also Sweeney, "Piet Mondrian," in this same catalog (p. 13) and, among others, Robert Welsh's article "Landscape into Music—Mondrian's New York Period," *Arts Magazine* 40 (Feb. 1966) and Karin von Maur's "Mondrian and Music," in *Mondrian: Drawings, Watercolours, New York Paintings* (exhibition catalog, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 287–311.

[7] In a way, Masheck adopted Sidney Janis' position that *Victory Boogie-Woogie* had been ruined by Mondrian's "last minute" transformations. (See E. A. Carmean, Jr., *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions* [exhibition catalog, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1979], p. 63.) Masheck goes so far as to say that this painting is "formidably muddled, so much so that only our knowledge that it was once finished allows us to consider it at all" (Masheck, "Mondrian," p. 65).

[8] The final version of the text of "A New Realism" was first published in Mondrian's *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art 1937 and Other Essays, 1941–1943* (New York, 1945). It was reprinted in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian,* ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston, 1986), pp. 345–50; further references to this essay, abbreviated "NR," will be included in the text. Also see Virginia Rembert,

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"Mondrian, America, and American Painting" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970), pp. 60–62 and p. 107 nn. 44, 45.

[9] See Mondrian, "De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst," *De Stijl* 1 (Feb. 1918): 44 and n. 2; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 39 and n. j. See also Mondrian, "De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst," *De Stijl* 1 (Aug. 1918): 124 n. 5; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 57 n. j. I would like to thank Kathy Stein for her help with philological details.

[10] See Mondrian, "De Jazz et de Neo Plastic," *i 10—Internationale Revue* 1 (Dec. 1927): 421–27; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* pp. 217–22.

[11] Concerning repose, which henceforth has a negative connotation, see Mondrian, "L'art réaliste et l'art superréaliste: la morphoplastique et la néoplastique," *Cercle et carré,* no. 2 (15 Apr. 1930), no pagination. ("Equilibrium through equivalence excludes similarity and symmetry, just as it excludes repose in the sense of immobility." Translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 229.) The notion of dynamic equilibrium appeared in Mondrian's "Vraie valeur des oppositions," written in 1934 but first published in a Dutch translation in 1939. The original French text was published in *Cahiers d'Art* 22 (1947): 105–8; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* pp. 283–85.

[12] "It is a great mistake to think that Neo-Plastic constructs rectangular planes set side by side—like paving stones. The rectangular plane should be seen rather as the result of a plurality of straight lines in rectangular opposition. In painting the straight line is certainly the most precise and appropriate means to express free rhythm." Mondrian, "L'art réaliste et l'art superréaliste"; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 231.

decorativeness in neoplasticism,[13] such a statement corresponds to everything that was woven around the "double line" from 1932 onward, as well as to explanations later furnished in both his autobiography ("Toward the True Vision of Reality") and his correspondence with Sweeney. The multiplied intersections of lines destroyed the static, monumental entity of the planes, abolishing them as rectangles and as form.[14]

The next step was to be the abolition of line as form by "mutual oppositions," which he explicitly attempted in his New York works. (It is noteworthy that in New York Mondrian didn't want to hear about lines, asking those who claimed to see them in his work in progress to point them out to him.[15]) Nonetheless, this ultimate destruction was only feasible once the possibility of repetition was fully accepted. In "A New Realism," Mondrian stated that "the plurality of varied and similar forms annihilates the existence of forms as entities. Similar forms do not show contrast but are in equivalent opposition. Therefore they annihilate themselves more completely in their plurality" ("NR," p. 349). Only syncopated repetition is capable of simultaneously destroying the "objective" expression of forms or elements of form (that singular, individual quality, independent of our perceptions that makes a square a square and not a circle or a rhombus) and their "subjective" expression, the gestaltist transformation of these forms by our subjective vision which necessarily recreates other limitations.[16] If we fail to perceive the double movement of the strategy set forth by Mondrian in this text, we run the risk of missing the specificity of his New York works, particularly *New York City*. We also run the risk of not understanding why Mondrian magnifies the all-over optical perturbations with a violence unequaled since his 1918–19 grids, whereas he is very careful not to organize his canvas according to a regular weave. We run the risk of not understanding that the famous "if we cannot free ourselves, we can free our *vision*" speaks also of a painting which would be entirely free of the tragic which perception necessarily entails in that it always seeks to impose an order, a particular structure, a "limitation," a stability upon the free rhythm of the visual facts that confront it[17]: to liberate our vision is also to accept that we no longer master it. And it is obviously this vertigo, this *fading* that informs the aporetic braiding and the shallow depth of *New York City.*

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[13] Mondrian, "De l'art abstrait," *Cahiers d'Art* 6 (Jan. 1931): 43; translated in Mondrian, *The New Art*, p. 240. Tériade had attacked neoplasticism in "Hygiène artistique," *L'Intransigeant*, 11 Mar. 1930. Mondrian had composed a response which the journal refused to publish. It appeared instead in *Cahiers d'Art*, minus its polemical section and any reference to Tériade's article. The complete, original version is translated in Mondrian, *The New Art*, under the title "Cubism and Neo-Plastic," pp. 236–61.

[14] For an analysis of Mondrian and the function of lines and their multiplication in his work during the thirties, see Welsh, "The Place of *Composition 12 With Small Blue Square* in the Art of Piet Mondrian," *Bulletin of the National Gallery of Canada*, no. 29 (1977): 21–26.

[15] See Rembert, "Mondrian," pp. 144–45 n. 22.

[16] I am summarizing pp. 346–48 of Mondrian, "A New Realism," *The New Art*.

Masheck's analysis isn't just insufficiently specific—it is also incomplete. At any rate, it seems to me to rely on assumptions that closer observation proves to be unwarranted. To take a crucial example, Masheck makes a passing remark in a footnote that one of the strips is narrower than the others (the second vertical yellow strip from the right). His conclusion that the strip "looks accidentally narrower" is a strange testimony to a certain level of ignorance of Mondrian's microscopic precision in his working method, but the statement is consistent with my earlier criticism of Masheck's article. For this "exception" relies on the opposition that the entire work produces and in a way abolishes, namely, the opposition between fictive depth ("optical") and real depth (thickness). If Mondrian allows himself this exception, perhaps it is to signal that he has finally conquered the menace of an illusionist hollowing out of the surface, telling us, in a sense, "this strip is more slender than the others; however, it is impossible for you to read it as more distant."

It would be unfair to forget that Masheck observes the "literal superimposition," in *New York City* which, according to him, allows Mondrian to avoid the optical flickers from which the earlier compositions (containing a heavy density of black lines) suffered. (The superimpositions are for Masheck the *Aufhebung,* the resolution of the earlier oscillations.) It would also be unfair not to mention his allusion to the problem of real depth, when Masheck notes that the width of the strips is equal to the thickness of the stretcher. But this is really a red herring which allows Masheck to avoid those questions directly posed by the unfinished works which use adhesive tape and, more subtly, by *New York City.* For in this painting Mondrian insists on retaining the sculptural quality of its unfinished state when it (like its companions) was no more than a braided field of overlapping tapes and therefore superimposed not only the "immaterial" optically colored grids, but the actual strips of tape as well, each endowed with a certain thickness (which ultimately projected shadow) and with upper and "under" surfaces. Even though Mascheck briefly mentions the more assertive, more pictorial texture of the New York works, he does not notice that in *New York City* each strip possesses an individual facture and that when two identically colored strips intersect—as they did in the unfinished pictures—they do not do so indifferently. In fact, the braided effect, as Robert Welsh has already observed, is "an effect heightened by the subtly felt directions of the brushstrokes, which typically continue the movement of one line at the expense of that which it bisects, although this practice is applied with no apparent system."[18]

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[17] Mondrian, "Toward the True Vision of Reality," *The New Art,* p. 341; further references to this essay, abbreviated "T," will be included in the text.

No apparent system: what does this really signify? (And let us note here that Welsh used a similar expression to the one Masheck used when he spoke of the colored braiding.) Is there a system, hidden from view? Must we search for some secret geometry in this painting which would be the abstract equivalent of the hidden symbolism that all the iconologists work themselves to death trying to uncover in all the art of the past? Certainly not, and it is well known that Mondrian loathed any axiomatization of his art and that he repeated throughout his life that he worked not by calculation, but by intuition.[19] It goes without saying that this picture—like the classical neoplastic paintings in general—does not come under the heading of systemic or programmed art. But if it is not systemic, isn't it, in some way, systematic? Isn't there a system functioning within it, entirely apparent, whose goal is to prohibit any stasis or fixing of perception in a systematic assurance? In fact, even these terms are somewhat crude, and to understand what happens in this painting (as well as what differentiates it from the modular paintings), we must introduce an opposition, for example between system (binary) and structure (tertiary)—or between woof and warp. We wonder if perhaps Mondrian is not the first painter to accomplish this "pas de trois" that Hubert Damisch has recently discussed,[20] not so much because of the braid of three primary colors (that triad is not new) as because in this painting the "exceptions" not only bore holes in the system through and through, they infinitize it; they cause it to slacken. (Here again, "exception" isn't quite right because it presumes that the rule is a given: to think in terms of exception is to think in terms of system and contrast. But no other, better term comes at once to mind.)

I have already indicated that *New York City* is, in a way, a sort of definitive victory over geometrical apriorism: in this painting a nonmodular repetition is invented, a grid becomes undone. Here, Carl Holty's memories are useful since they show that Mondrian was tempted for a moment to find a mechanical solution to the problem raised by this painting:

> He complained about the "banality" of the corners of the original layout. He had varied the overlapping of the colored strips mechanically at first ("because [I] like to be logical"), placing red above blue, yellow above red, red above yellow in their respective corners. As he used only three colors, the fourth corner was em-

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[18] Welsh, "Landscape into Music," p. 35.

[19] For more information about Mondrian's antigeometry, see my "Du procés au projet" in *L'Atelier de Mondrian,* ed. Bois (Paris, 1982), p. 35.

[20] Hubert Damisch, "La Peinture est un vrai trois," *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris, 1984); see esp. pp. 289–90 and 301. Regarding the problematics of this book, see my review, "Painting as Model," *October,* no. 37 (Summer 1986): 125–37.

> barrassing for a time. After giving the matter some thought, Mondrian decided that the logical process governing the layout was not binding on him in the further development of the picture. He proceeded to adjust the sections of the long colored strips (planes) to relate not only to each other but to the canvas as a whole, and disregarded the earlier disposition and variations.[21]

It is useless to state that the problem of the corners might have been easily resolved in such a mechanical fashion if Mondrian had kept a fourth color, namely black, as he did in *New York City II* (unfinished). This is a question of deliberate renunciation, and this renunciation depends on the painting's extraordinarily complex structure.

Suppose we take the yellow grid, which, but for six crossings, lies "above" the red and blue grids: the horizontal yellow strips "dominate" the verticals by texture at all but three intersections. But there is an exception in this binary system (above and beneath), an exception within the exceptions, an undecidable moment (the intersection of the second yellow horizontal from the top and the third yellow vertical from the left). Is it chance that this is the most isolated yellow intersection of the whole canvas, the one furthest from any other, the one which may claim to rival what Charmion von Wiegand dubbed "the red cross" in the lower left third of the painting? Doesn't Mondrian want to express—here, in this very spot, more visible as detail because it is more isolated, more contrasting—the exception which transforms the binary opposition into a "pas de trois"? (Not only does the horizontal not dominate, the intersection is flat, level.) As for the six exceptions to the mere "appearance of system" (to speak as Masheck might), namely, the tendency of yellow to be laid out on top, isn't it remarkable that these exceptions are found either at the periphery or close to the "red cross," as if to assert a precedence of that element that a moment later is repudiated? If the primacy of yellow had not been broached, close to the edges of the painting, wouldn't the yellow lines that frame the composition on three sides have seemed to squeeze it, giving it a peculiar form, a static, systemic, definitive optical basis?

A photo of Mondrian in his studio showing *New York City* in an unfinished state confirms that all of these exceptions are thought out. (This photo must have been taken in early September of 1941, since Mondrian had already begun to replace the colored tapes with paint.[22])

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[21] Carl Holty, "Mondrian in New York: A Memoir," *Arts* 31 (Sept. 1957): 20–21.

[22] Regarding a different photo taken by the same photographer—Emery Muscetra—at the same time, on the same spot, and published by Sidney Janis in 1941 (Janis, "School of Paris Comes to U.S.," *Decision* [Nov.–Dec. 1941]: 89), see Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 102 n. 35. The photograph reproduced here offers two advantages relative to the *Decision* photograph: it is clearer, and a larger portion of *New York City* is shown. It was reproduced for the first time in *50 Years of Mondrian* (exhibition catalog, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, 2–30 Nov. 1953). Charmion von Wiegand's unpublished diary tells us that after

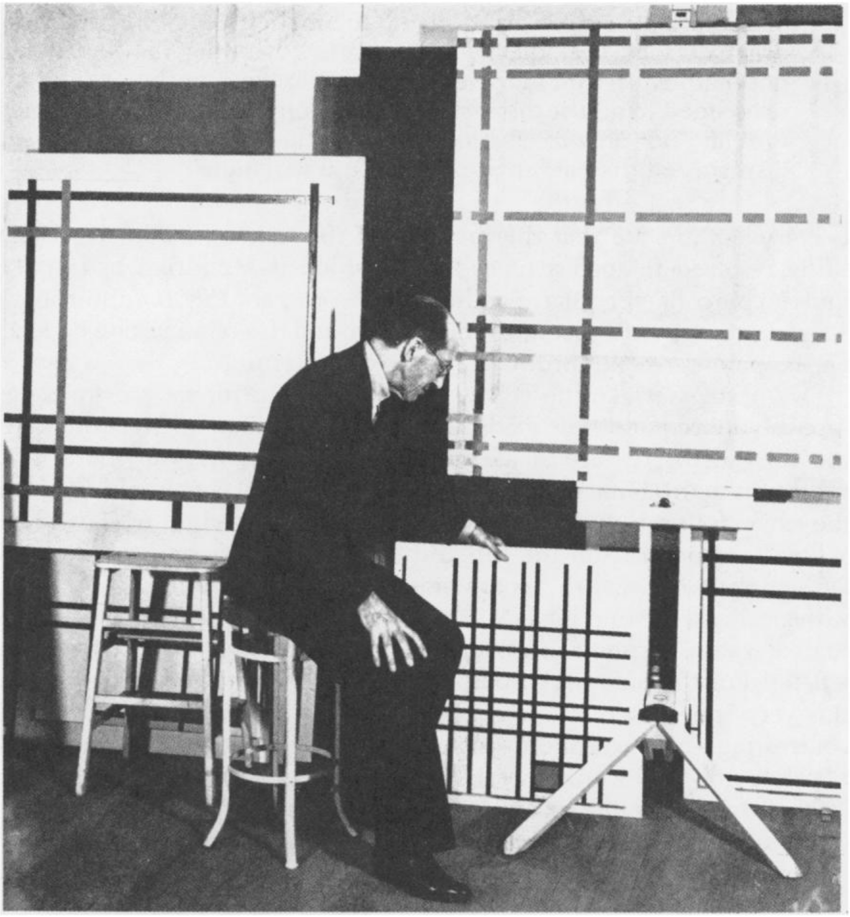

FIG. 3.—Emery Muscetra, *Piet Mondrian in His Studio,* New York, September (?) 1941. Photo courtesy of the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.

On the one hand, insofar as we can determine, all the yellow lines appear to be of equal width; on the other, the changes to come relate to all the areas I have mentioned. First, let us consider the "red cross": in the unfinished state as in the final version, the vertical lay on top of all the horizontals in the upper section of the canvas (it is impossible to tell if it lay on top of the upper red horizontal), but it was constantly cut in

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painting the "background" of *New York City* in white (Wiegand, unpublished diary, entry for 1 Aug. 1941), Mondrian had begun to paint the yellow lines even before 13 August. On 9 September, Mondrian told Wiegand that he had changed the two lower horizontal yellow lines two months earlier without yet having found a solution. On 16 September, she remarked that the painting hadn't changed for a week. "I do like it best," Mondrian said. The painting is not mentioned again in the diary, Mondrian busying himself henceforth with reworking his London paintings to prepare for the exhibition at the Valentine Gallery. Perhaps the painting was then in its finished state.

the lower section by the yellow horizontals. As for the horizontal forming the "red cross," it passed underneath all the yellow verticals. This is entirely different in the finished version of the painting. The "red cross" is reinforced on three sides (and only three; in order that there be "structure," not "system," there must be interplay): toward the top and the left, passing over the nearest yellow horizontal and vertical; and toward the bottom, because the third yellow horizontal from the bottom is placed considerably lower. The only side of the "red cross" that is not accentuated is the right, where the vertical of that "undecidable" yellow crossing passes above it. As for this last intersection, which I shall call the "yellow cross" to simplify the matter (another inappropriate term which I only use here as a shortcut),[23] it is, given the identity of color, impossible to know what was happening "facturally," but there, too, we see that its precedence is accentuated in the final version of the painting. While Mondrian was interested in freeing the vertical of his "red cross" by the transformations I have noted, he decided, here, on the contrary, to correct his initial composition in an inverse sense and to make the red vertical pass underneath the horizontal of the "yellow cross." As for the exceptions of the periphery, three were added (on the left, the blue horizontal crossing over the first yellow vertical; then, as I have already mentioned, the horizontal of the "red cross" passing over the second yellow vertical; and, at the bottom, the vertical of the "red cross" passing over the lower yellow horizontal). Since the photo cuts off the painting we cannot know whether the exception at the right is a late addition (the red vertical near the edge of the painting that crosses over the horizontal of the "yellow cross"); and because the photo is in black and white, we cannot determine what happened to its red and blue overlaps of a similar value. We can, however, affirm that of the six exceptions to the global system of colored superimposition in the finished painting, only one, situated at the periphery, is visible in the photo of this stage of the work. This shows that it was not until relatively late, after beginning to paint the strips, that Mondrian was, on the one hand, driven to make the weaving of his composition more complex (to make it a braiding) and, on the other hand, to assign it a precise, structural function.

Von Wiegand gives us the following account: "I asked him if using the colored lines was not more difficult because the varied intensity of red, blue and yellow does not maintain the surface plane as easily as the black lines. He was aware of that but confident of finding proper solutions."[24] The solution was obviously the braiding, and the reversal Mondrian brought about in this painting informs this enigma: the transformation of a procedure of contrast (superimposition, which had indeed hollowed out the surface of his paintings in 1917) into an agent of flatness. This sort of reversal, as Clement Greenberg has so skillfully demonstrated, was already at work in the cubist collage. (In fact, it comprised its inaugural revolutionary act, and it is not surprising that a certain number of critics have insisted on the collagelike aspect of the unfinished *New York City* paintings.)[25] However, I believe that there is something different occurring. I would even say that in *New York City,* Mondrian definitely breaks with cubism (or with whatever cubist influence remained in his art), and it is surely not by chance that Mondrian refers explicitly to cubism (in his letters to Sweeney) in order to discuss the series of destructions that led him to do the New York works. More precisely, the chain reaction that he exposed (destruction of space by planes, of planes by lines, of lines by repetition) is supposed to explain "*why* [he] left the cubist influence."[26]

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[23] Mondrian insisted on this even in his earliest writings on neoplasticism: it is always a matter of destroying the cross by multiplying it.

[24] Margit Rowell, "Interview with Charmion von Wiegand," *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944, Centennial Exhibition* (exhibition catalog, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1971), p. 81.

All of Mondrian's texts dealing with cubism, including Sweeney's "interview," say the same thing: cubism "has not accepted the logical consequences of its own discoveries," it has remained an abstraction *of* something, never having become fully abstract. This immediately places neoplasticism in the position of logical heir, the appointed dauphin in the line of "steady evolution" toward "the abstract expression of pure reality." But if most of the writings insist on the figurative character of cubism, Mondrian remarks that it has remained "basically an abstraction" (which means of course that it was not of itself abstract) because cubism was seeking above all to *express* space or volume (not, as we shall see, to *determine* space or volume). The two aspects of the problem are obviously linked, but everything seems as though Mondrian didn't realize this until that moment when he returned to a particular cubist usage of superimposing planes which he had abandoned after 1917, a certain construction of the surface of inscription *above* the material support surface.

Greenberg, in his analysis of the cubist collage, shows that Georges Braque and Picasso were attempting to dissociate literal surface (that of the support) from depicted surface (that of the colored, or noncolored, planes) in order to introduce a minimum of three-dimensional illusion between the two. He also demonstrates how their surface of inscription became temporarily aporetic, denied and affirmed, simultaneously and in turn, until a suspended vibrato immobilized its ambivalence. Greenberg indicates as well how when they found themselves constrained to represent spatial relations (that is, illusion) only schematically and so to speak semiotically they were also forced to return to representation—namely, to groupings of independent forms functioning as silhouettes—since only large concatenated planes could maintain the integrity of the picture surface.[27] I believe that it is precisely here that the criticism of cubism in Mondrian's later work intervenes, or at least this is the point where he once again takes up the dialogue with cubism that he had interrupted with the advent of neoplasticism. Indeed, Greenberg himself notes that Picasso invented a solution (with his reliefs) that allowed him to escape the optical dilemma (decorative flatness/illusionist hollowing); but faithful to an ideological model of pictorial quality as resolved contradiction, he immediately placed the spatial literality of these constructions into the domain of sculpture where, according to him, they heralded the ideal he then held of that art—that sculpture be as pictorial as possible. In a word, Greenberg absolutely shunned any comment on their quality as objects, or on their opacity. From a painting becoming sculpture, he evoked a sculpture that remained painting.[28]

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[25] See especially Nancy J. Troy, *Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism in America* (exhibition catalog, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., 1979), p. 10.

[26] See Sweeney, "Interview," p. 16, and Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and *De Stijl,*" p. 62.

To say it briefly (but I shall return to this momentarily), in *New York City,* Mondrian recovers that impenetrability, that *nonopticality* of cubist relief, while instantly avoiding any form being able to take root there or getting caught up in the woof of the painting. If we agree to read this canvas as a critical reprise or an eradication of cubist principles, we understand why Mondrian here abandons (for the first time but one) the cubist dissociation of color and line.[29] We also understand why he sternly considered his "classic" neoplastic works at this same time as being still too conspicuously *drawn.* (Dissociation always produces a hierarchical effect in favor of drawing. This is Paul Cézanne's lesson, and Henri Matisse's, and Barnett Newman's, and, I would venture, the late Mondrian's as well. All of them wished to sketch in color.) Finally, to understand *New York City* not as postcubist but as anticubist is to understand why Mondrian so obstinately sought to annihilate contrast, that essential element of cubism, to de-semanticize contrasts by means of the all-over repetition (since "similar forms do not show contrast, but are in equivalent opposition"). At the same time, at least if we refuse to abide by Greenberg's postcubist reading, it is also to understand a little of what links Jackson Pollock to Mondrian's late period.

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[27] See Clement Greenberg, "Collage," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), pp. 70–83. For a "nonoptical" reading of the cubist collage, see Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981): pp. 5–12. See also Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," *Representations* 18 (Spring 1987): 33–68.

[28] This problematic was not yet established in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," published by Greenberg in 1940. Devoting a few lines to sculpture after a lengthy discussion of painting, Greenberg writes:

> Sculpture hovers finally on the verge of "pure" architecture, and painting, having been pushed up from fictive depths, is forced through the surface of the canvas to emerge on the other side in the form of paper, cloth, cement and actual objects of wood and other materials pasted, glued or nailed to what was originally the transparent picture plane, which the painter no longer dares to puncture—or if he does, it is only to dare.

Turning then to artists like Arp, who "escape eventually from the prison of the single plane," he says, "They go . . . from painting to colored bas-relief, and finally—so far must they fly in order to return to three-dimensionality without at the same time risking the illusion—they become sculptors and create objects in the round, through which they can free their feelings for movement and direction from the increasing ascetic geometry of pure painting" (*Partisan Review* 7 [1940]: 309; rpt. in Greenberg, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–44,* vol. 1 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brien [Chicago, 1986], p. 36). This liberty in relation to the pictorial order that Greenberg then assigned to sculpture was to be denied any significance by all his later writings.

[29] The 1933 "diamond" painting with yellow lines at the Gemeentemuseum de La Haye (Seuphor 410).

Regarding Mondrian, Naum Gabo reports that

> he was against space. Once he was showing me a painting . . . "My goodness!" I said, "Are you still painting that one?" I had seen it much earlier. "The white is not flat enough," he said. He thought there was still too much space in the white, and he denied any variations of colour. His ideas were very clear. He thought a painting must be flat, and that colour should not show any indication of space . . . My argument was, "You can go on for ever, but you will never succeed."[30]

As Virginia Rembert has observed, this discussion, which occurred in the late thirties, immediately recalls Greenberg's famous remark regarding the impossibility of absolute flatness: "the first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension."[31] Unfortunately, Greenberg ends the debate by adding, "only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension," and he seems to believe, against all evidence, that this new type of illusion was the effect Mondrian desired. Nonetheless, Greenberg's affirmation was not always thus. We can even say with Rembert that in this 1961 text he reversed his own position on Mondrian's art, the one to which he laid claim at the time of the painter's death. Didn't he write, just after Mondrian's death, that "his pictures . . . are no longer windows in the wall, but islands radiating clarity, harmony and grandeur—passion mastered and cooled, a difficult struggle resolved, unity imposed on diversity. Space outside them is transformed by their presence"?[32] For the time being, I shall dismiss the metaphorical geography. At this moment, Greenberg insisted on the physical presence of these paintings, which he opposed to the Albertian illusionism of the "window in the wall." In such a way, he notes their quality of inscribed objects in the real space of the room at a time when this essential characteristic of sculpture was not yet the hydra of literality that modern sculpture (for him) owed itself to destroy.[33]

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[30] Naum Gabo, "Reminiscences of Mondrian," *Studio International* 172 (Dec. 1966): 292.

[31] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook*, no. 4 (1961): 106. See Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 125.

[32] Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation*, 4 Mar. 1944; rpt. in Greenberg, *Perceptions*, pp. 187–89.

Thanks again to Rembert, we know that this text was informed by an extraordinary article by G. L. K. Morris, published a year earlier in the *Partisan Review,* a journal of which both he and Greenberg were among the major editors. "Relations of Painting and Sculpture" is a modern version of the *paragone* of the Italian Renaissance (and Morris makes explicit reference to the well-known positions of both Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci). The era was one of redefinition. While in "Towards a New Laocoon," published three years earlier, Greenberg radicalized Gotthold Lessing's discourse (which dealt especially with literature) by characterizing the "essence" of each art by the propriety of its means, Morris examined the different types of relationships between painting and sculpture in history. Of the four categories he separated in his sequence of illustrations, each including a work of ancient and of modern art, without a doubt the most provocative is the category of "paintings conceived in terms of sculpture": an Andrea Mantegna is reproduced beside a Mondrian.[34] Of course, Morris is not in the least attempting to suggest that it is a question here of similar matters. On the contrary, his entire analysis rests on the initial assertion that modern art (since Cézanne) first had to renounce any desire to imitate the effects of sculpture in painting. But according to Morris, since cubism we have been witness to certain exchanges of function: sculptures are conceived as paintings, even though they may be in motion (Alexander Calder); paintings imply a literal tactility. The cubist collage was still rather reticent on this level:

> It is Mondrian, however, who goes farthest toward giving us sculpture,—although the word "object" might better characterize one of his canvases. Mondrian's paintings preclude any possibility of entrance at all; the very frame (set behind the canvas surface) pushes the area forward instead of letting the spectator into the wall. I find highly significant the contention which Mondrian once

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[33] Regarding Greenberg's change of heart on the question of literality, see my article, "The Sculptural Opaque," *Sub/stance* 31 (1981): 23–48, esp. pp. 41–42.

[34] The other pairs of illustrations are a Bernini and a Calder for "sculptures conceived in terms of painting"; an ancient Greek statue and a sculpture in the round by Picasso for "sculptures that are entirely sculpture"; and a Byzantine mosaic and a synthetic cubist painting by Picasso for "paintings that are entirely painting" (G. L. K. Morris, "Relations of Painting and Sculpture," *Partisan Review* 10 [Jan.–Feb. 1943]: illustrations between pp. 64–65).

> put forward verbally, that mural painting was "wrong." It is wrong for him indeed because he would not have his pictures a *part* of anything; they are free objects which one can touch and move around, as much a part of the world as any statue; they remain the strongest examples yet conceived of painting projected as sculpture. Previously the sculptural traditions had presented forms *inside* the painting realized in sculptural terms. But Mondrian gives us a thing in itself,—and here we have something entirely new, a fragment of the modern world, concise, compact and complete. I do not infer that Mondrian is the only one to propose this new conception; he has merely presented it with the least compromise and perhaps the sharpest sensibility.[35]

Incidentally, the other example Morris offers is comprised of Jean Arp's paintings and collages ("the only 'pure' besides neoplasticism," according to Mondrian).[36] More important for our discussion is the fact that the illustration Morris chose (and he had known Mondrian's work for a lengthy period: he had bought one of the artist's paintings as early as 1936) is a New York work and not a "classical" neoplastic painting. More precisely, it is true, it was one of those works begun in Europe, completed in New York, and presented by Mondrian with two dates (1939–42) at the time of his first one-man show at the Valentine Gallery.[37] One might find my entire argument weakened by the fact that Morris did not illustrate his article with *New York City*, which was also presented at that same exhibit. But it could be here a question of a deliberate act: his text appeared at the time of Mondrian's second showing at the Valentine Gallery, in January and February of 1943, where *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, unquestionably an "optical" regression in relation to what Morris wanted to demonstrate, held the place of honor. Now in a way, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* arises from *New York City*. If indeed Morris had the chance to see Mondrian's second New York exhibit before publishing his article, he probably would have preferred to reproduce a painting from the artist's work that represented his progressive inclination toward a sculptural tendency rather than *New York City* which was, in a sense, its conclusion (but which comes off badly in black and white). Furthermore, certain characteristics of *New York City* foreshadowed the temporary negation of this sculptural tendency (with *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*) before its final reaffirmation constituted by the unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie*. This is, of course, only conjecture: the important thing is that Morris considered Mondrian's New York works as participants in the order of object or sculpture and that Greenberg, far from speaking at that time about a new type of "purely optical" illusion, adopted the same point of view.

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[35] Ibid., pp. 69–70. We can relate what Morris says about the opposition: *sculptural forms inside a painting and painting conceived as sculpture* to this idea of Wölfflin's that the more a represented object coincides with the field of the image, the more the painting is tactile, linear; the less it is picturesque, pictorial, the less it necessarily puts "opticality" to work. "Everyone knows that, of the possible aspects of a building, the front view is the least picturesque: here the thing and its appearance fully coincide. But as soon as foreshortening comes in, the appearance separates from the thing, the picture-form becomes different from the object-form, and we speak of a picturesque movement-effect." Wölfflin goes on to associate the picturesque charm with the illusion of movement. (See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art,* trans. M. D. Hottinger [New York, n.d.], p. 25.) The question of total equivalence of the object and its field was "analyzed" in a programmatic manner by Jasper Johns in his series of flags, this equivalence causing painting to become object. If we envision Mondrian's work from the point of view of this tendency to "become object," we can understand the painter's interest in building facades seen head-on (1913–16), and what Mondrian himself had said about his early years. Speaking about his "Naturalist period," he said: "I never painted these things romantically; but from the very beginning, I was always a realist. Even at this time, I disliked particular movement, such as people in action. I enjoyed painting flowers, not bouquets, but a single flower at a time, in order that I might better express its plastic structure" ("T," p. 338). A complete study of the growing frontalization of the motif in Mondrian's work could spring from this point of view.

[36] Mondrian to Albert Roth, 1 Nov. 1931, quoted in Roth, *Begegnung mit Pionieren* (Basel, 1973), p. 164.

[37] The painting in question does not appear in Seuphor's book. Reproduced in color in Ottavio Morisani's *Astrattismo di Piet Mondrian* (Venice, 1956), it was at that time in Gates Lloyd's collection in Washington. I am not certain of its dimensions nor of its precise date of composition. (Morisani gives 1939–42 as a date, but Rembert, who thinks it was part

Everything occurred as though, in New York, Mondrian had at last taken into account Gabo's remark on the ineluctableness of spatial illusion in his earlier neoplastic works. It is as though he had judged these paintings in the same way Greenberg did, twenty years later, but, far from appreciating their optical spatiality, he had wanted to return to the origin of the problem in order to find a radical solution. This question had undeniably preoccupied him for quite some time. It has often been noted that from the thirties onward, his black lines were almost inlaid, engraved into the white surfaces. For Mondrian, it was visibly a matter of counterbalancing the optical hollowing effect of the white accentuated by the black lines. At the same time, the lacquered, shiny black aspect of the lines in opposition to the radiant matte quality of the white prevents those lines from being perceived as shadows. Another indication of the artist's preoccupation is the frame, whose usage Morris emphasizes in Mondrian's work, the zigguratlike frame which itself is of greater and greater importance from the thirties on (and one day it will be necessary to analyze to what extent the two evolutions are parallel: that of the material imbedding of the black lines and that of the setup of the frame). We know from Sweeney's "interview" that Mondrian himself considered his frames as an essential contribution: "So far as I know, I was the first to bring the painting forward from the frame, rather than set it within the frame. I had noted that a picture without a frame works better than

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of Mondrian's first New York exhibition, dates it at 1939–40 [Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 302].)

a framed one and that the framing causes sensations of three dimensions. It gives an illusion of depth, so I took a frame of plain wood and mounted my picture on it. In this way I brought it to a more real existence."[38]

In the case of both lines and frame, sculptural models were at Mondrian's disposal. (By this, I mean theoretical models and not examples to be imitated.) Around 1930, Jean Gorin realized his first neoplastic reliefs, whose hollowed lines (often white on white, thus shadowed) pleased Mondrian enormously. Mondrian said, "It goes farther than my work, which in the end remains *tableau*."[39] As for the famous remarks about the frame, they were directly associated in Mondrian's mind with the sculptures of his friend, Harry Holtzman. Shortly after having sent to Holtzman a first version of those remarks, Mondrian wrote the following:

> Today Sweeney has asked me to lunch again and still asked some questions. I gave him some notes for the right understanding of some points and explained a little why I brought the canvas *on* the frame instead of *in* it. Then I wrote, "In recent three-dimensional works of Harry Holtzman we see the 'picture' still more from the wall brought into our surrounding space. In this way, the painting *annihile* [annihilates] literally the volume and becomes more real."[40]

Here again, Mondrian found Holtzman's columns more "modern" than his own paintings.[41]

But it is of primary importance that, in the first place, in both cases, Mondrian associates these three-dimensional works much more with architecture than with sculpture, and, in the second, that he was never tempted to pursue such a path.[42] For sculpture as such has the bad habit of constituting itself as figure against the surrounding space, which thus functions as background. Having no predetermined limit, sculpture is only conceivable from a neoplastic viewpoint as inscribing itself in an architectural space which it articulates (thereby avoiding the figurative menace).[43] Such is not the problem of the *tableau,* which is *necessarily* limited and which functions, according to Mondrian, as a "substitute for the ensemble." In short, it is not sculpture that Mondrian is after. He is seeking the sculptural in painting: he strives to give to his works, which are autonomous entities, the literal quality of an object which will render them optically impenetrable. To make sculpture per se would, for Mondrian, have been a renunciation. It would have meant siding with Gabo. He remains a painter and wants to resolve the problem in painting.[44]

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[38] Sweeney, "Interview," p. 15.

[39] Mondrian to Jean Gorin, 31 Jan. 1934, "Lettres à Jean Gorin," *Macula* 2 (1977): 130.

[40] Mondrian to Harry Holtzman, 1 June 1942. Mondrian wrote this letter after Holtzman had created his two sculptures. For more on these important works, see Troy, *Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism in America*, p. 11, and Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 147 n. 21. Also see Daniel Abadie's commentary in *Paris-New York* (exhibition catalog, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1977), p. 441.

[41] On 9 Jan. 1942, Wiegand recorded in her diary Mondrian's reaction after he had seen Holtzman's first column: "He told me that Holtzman was doing an interesting work—a kind of sculpture and painting—'He really is much more modern than I am—you will see—and he leans toward what I wrote about the end of art.'—'Most people hate that idea.' 'I know,' he said, 'it will come and Holtzman is less personal than I am, less traditional and nearer to architecture.' "

[42] Regarding Holtzman, see preceding note. Here is what he wrote to Gorin about one of his reliefs: "Nonetheless, a difficulty occurs: it should not have been exhibited as a 'tableau'—It's between a tableau and an architectural realization (so to speak), rather a 'plastic-aesthetic realization in our surroundings.' " Mondrian then wrote in the margin of the letter: "It's true, a new form of painting may come out but, I believe, that would necessitate a very long preparation." The letter continues: "It's farther than my work,

"In Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism the surfaces are flat, but all is not yet flat. The painter still seeks contrasts, he paints in evenly colored planes

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which still remains 'tableau' in essence—I already told you that, I think. They are two different values, which is one of the many reasons I prefer to do solo exhibits. Exhibiting with others gives rise to false comparisons" (Mondrian to Gorin, 31 Jan. 1934, *Macula* 2 [1977]: 130. I have attempted here to keep Mondrian's punctuation and the peculiarities of his language).

[43] See my article on Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, "En quête de la motivation," *Critique* 40 (Jan.–Feb. 1984): 89–93.

[44] In his discussion with Georges Charbonnier, Giacometti perceived the problematic nature of the new category that Mondrian was trying to invent. The text is very keen but poorly articulated. Giacometti begins by presenting the problem of pictorial illusion and the impossibility of completely freeing oneself from it. (This is the same problem Gabo discussed.) But because he identifies the semiological order with that of representation, he can only conceive of Mondrian's work as an impasse. However, while noting that Mondrian's painting does not escape the economy of the projective trace (the work being the imprint of its producer on canvas), he ends his text by making this a sort of experience-limit, giving it an interpretation which approaches Morris':

> As for me, I am persuaded that painting is only that which is illusion. The reality of painting is the canvas. There is a canvas; that is reality. But a painting can only represent what it itself is not, namely, the illusion of something else. If you will, it seems to me that there is no great gulf between writing and painting. The signs of writing are only the signs of what they themselves are not. It is the same with painting. Take as an example abstract painting, or Mondrian. Mondrian wanted to abolish illusion and create an object in itself equivalent to any other object. He came to a sort of impasse. Mondrian is one of the painters I like the most, because I believe it is wonderful to have gone so far in a given direction. But the whole thing dead-ends. And yet Mondrian deluded himself: his painting is not at all an object in itself. It is altogether uniquely . . . the imprint of Mondrian on a canvas! In fact, Mondrian's painting almost became an object. He considered it, a bit, as such. But, really, I believe that Mondrian is coming from the domain of painting and entering into another realm.

(Georges Charbonnier, "Entretien avec Alberto Giacometti," *Le Monologue du peintre* [Paris, 1959], pp. 169–70.)

but doesn't understand the consequences of this set purpose," wrote Władysław Strzemiński in his fundamental text entitled "Unism in Painting" in 1928.[45] In a sense, this is to say more or less the same thing Gabo (or Greenberg) would later say with one basic difference: Strzemiński believed (or claimed to believe) in the possibility of an absolute pictorial flatness. However, Strzemiński's remark helps us understand the specificity of Mondrian's New York works. *New York City*'s flatness has a great deal to do with a neutralization of contrasts, as I have already mentioned. But here, Mondrian adopted a strategy rigorously opposed to the one Strzemiński had earlier adopted in his monochromes. (The monochrome settles nothing. No limit stops it from optically opening onto infinity.) Instead of suppressing all contrast, Mondrian multiplied contrasts, *just as Georges Seurat had done.* We know that Mondrian did go through a neoimpressionist phase and that, under Jan Toorop's influence, he practiced Seurat's technique. This occurred about 1908. However, in all his first writings on color, it is not Seurat he mentions, but Cézanne. In his 1942 autobiography, when he wrote that "the first thing to change in [his] paintings was color," he was referring to the impressionists, Vincent Van Gogh, Kees Van Dongen, the Fauves. Not to Seurat ("T," p. 338).[46] Mondrian does mention pointillism in "A New Realism," right after a vehement protest against the then-current interpretation of abstract art as an "expression of space" (a late version of his dialogue with Gabo). Space should not be expressed, said Mondrian; it should be *determined,* articulated, destroyed as such, as receptacle, as void. It should be caught up in a network of oppositions from which it is inseparable. "To express space" is already to make it a peculiarity, a background from which forms raise themselves. "In the course of culture, space determination is not only established by structure and forms, but even by the mechanics of painting (brushwork, color-squares or points—impressionism, divisionism, pointillism). It has to be emphasized that these techniques deal with space-determination and not with texture. The expression of texture is the establishment of the natural aspect of things. Space-determination destroys this aspect" ("NR," p. 350). Although Mondrian's remark is not too clear (especially at a time, as all have noted, when he was adopting a more pictorial brushwork than in his "classical" neoplastic phase),[47] it is extraordinary that he refers to Seurat, among others, to illustrate his concept of determination of space.

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[45] Strzemiński, "L'Unisme en peinture," *L'Espace uniste,* trans. and ed. Antoine Baudin and Pierre Maxine Jedryka (Lausanne, 1977), p. 80.

[46] For more about Cézanne and color, see Mondrian, "De Nieuwe Beelding in der Schilderkunst," *De Stijl* 1 (Feb. 1918): 43; translated as "The New Plastic in Painting" in Mondrian, *The New Art,* pp. 38–39.

[47] The expression "mechanics of painting," unusual for Mondrian, may refer to an article by Morris that appeared in *Partisan Review* ("On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," [Sept.–Oct. 1941]: 403–17). In fact, it is known that Mondrian hardly appreciated the article, perhaps because in that article Morris spoke of texture in terms the artist considered to be too traditional. See Wiegand's diary, entry for 25 Sept. 1941.

What did Seurat do? As Jean Clay has superbly demonstrated in an article where he compares Seurat to Pollock and Pollock to Mondrian, Seurat worked on the *superimposition* of similar elements in an overall disposition: "The work process allies itself with a bombardment of discrete unities distributed in layers that articulate themselves on the one or more layers already laid down. It is because texture is constituted by 'relatively homogeneous' distinct elements that the work appears to us as an ordered superimposition of layers. The pigmentary mass 'unfolds' itself in a certain number of imbricated strata which, between them, offer sufficient similitude to form a system." Clay then returns to Pollock: "Pollock's 'contrapuntal' painting . . . is equally representative of this ordered articulation of distinct elements. . . . When the capacity for articulation fell short, Pollock's skeins ran together, formed blotches—the networks, formerly interlaced, became clotted into an opaque, viscous mass."[48] I shall return to Pollock, but I want here to follow Clay in analyzing depth as articulation in Mondrian's New York works. We have seen that in *New York City* Mondrian abandoned contrast founded on a cubist dissociation of color and drawing. It is far from the case, however, that he wanted to undo all differences in an absolute "unism." On the contrary, Mondrian believed, as did Seurat, that it is only possible to determine space by articulating it: "Opposition requires separation of forms, planes or lines. Confusion produces a false unity," he wrote in "A New Realism" ("NR," p. 349). Hence the clear but also complex definition of intersections in *New York City,* including tone-on-tone intersections—which is what Mondrian meant by determination. Hence the desire to avoid all optical mixing (contradictory, certainly, to the goal Seurat was after). Holty tells us, most probably speaking of *Victory Boogie-Woogie,* that Mondrian "did not want the colors to 'harmonize' but to remain distinct as forces. Too often, little blue areas next to yellow ones caused the effect to be green, or reds and blues gave the effect of violet or purple. The object was to find the proper intervals to prevent this 'weakening' of the color and to preserve its original strength brought to life by oppositions."[49] I have said elsewhere that Mondrian had invented a new type of color relation, nonchromatic, but founded nonetheless on the radicalization of atomism in Seurat's work: relations of quantities of intensity and weight, not of tints and tones. However, I shall correct myself on one point. If color order is always given at the outset in neoplasticism (the three so-called primary colors), there are still variations in tints from one work to another in his "classical" period, for the simple reason that before *New York City,* Mondrian's atoms (indivisible, incompressible elements) were not yet the discrete, similar unities that articulated themselves in the painting (the colored strips), but were the colors themselves, or rather the colored tripartition given prior to its formal actualization in the painting. In other words, in "classical" neoplasticism, the conceptual atom had not yet found a rigorous plastic "translation." And this slippage between the colored a priori and the necessity of a formal "equilibrium" gradually discovered, or constructed, in the act of painting compelled Mondrian to make chromatic adjustments, even though he then already tended to consider his colors as separate, absolute entities.[50] In the famous remark Mondrian made in New York, "I always want to overbalance things," a statement usually quite rightly read as a denunciation of the static equilibrium in his earlier neoplastic works, we can also see a lament precisely about the coloristic fine-tuning he had been obliged to practice. He must have indeed still been striving, in *New York City,* to find the perfect tone for each color, but that tone was ideally to be independent of the overall color harmony of the painting. (And I believe that all the color work of neoplasticism reached for this

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[48] Jean Clay, "Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat: la profondeur plate," in Hans Namuth, *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock,* ed. Clay (Paris, 1982), no pagination.

[49] Holty, "Mondrian in New York," p. 21. Unfortunately, we cannot discuss in depth the complex debate on color which occurred in the De Stijl group from 1917 to 1919 until Max Bill releases the correspondence between Mondrian and Vantongerloo. Echoes of this dialogue appear in Mondrian's correspondence with van Doesburg. (Both rejected Vantongerloo's theory founded on optical mixing and measuring the color "harmony" of a painting by the color created by the sum of its colors—this being, ideally, grey.) For a concise analysis of this problem, see Els Hoek, "Piet Mondrian," in Carel Blotkamp et al., *De Stijl: The Formative Years, 1917–1922,* trans. Charlotte I. Loeb and Arthur L. Loeb (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 62. In this context, it is interesting to note what van Doesburg

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says about his use of relief (hollow and relief) for the linear structure in some of his "decorations" of the Aubette in Strasbourg (1926–28): "The painting of the ceiling and the walls in the great hall on the first floor and in the cinema/ballroom was done in relief, for two reasons. First, because that way I managed a more defined surface and the superbrilliance of the colors was avoided and second, because the fusion of two colors was absolutely impossible" (Theo van Doesburg, "Notices sur l'Aubette à Strasbourg," *De Stijl* 8 [1928]: 6).

For an analysis of Mondrian's system of color, as indebted to Seurat's, opposed to Matisse's, and clearly understood by Fernand Léger, see Bois, "Du Projet au procès," pp. 36–37. Marcel Duchamp was remarkably aware not only of Mondrian and Seurat's affinities but also of their departure from a purely optical, chromatic conception of color. He said in an interview with Alain Jouffroy, after having scorned impressionist, fauve, cubist, and abstract art for "stopping at the retina": "Their physical preoccupations: the reactions of color, etc., put the reactions of the gray matter in the background. This doesn't apply to all the protagonists of these movements. . . . Some men like Seurat or like Mondrian were not retinalists, even in wholly seeming to be so" (quoted in Alain Jouffroy, "Conversations avec Marcel Duchamp," *Une Révolution du regard* [Paris, 1964], p. 110). I am grateful to Rosalind Krauss for bringing this text to my attention.

[50] "You are the first person who has ever painted Yellow," Winnifred Nicholson told him one day. "He denied it but the next time I saw him, he took up the remark. 'I have thought about it and, it is so, but is merely because Cadmium yellow pigment has been invented' " (Winnifred Nicholson, "Reminiscences of Mondrian," *Studio International* 172 [Dec. 1966]: 286).

goal which remained unattainable as long as the formal ideal was governed by what Mondrian called "static equilibrium.")

In a rather strange text written about the time Mondrian definitively abandoned his practice of modulating white tones, he brought up the problem of color in a discussion of the nature of egoism. He stated that it was possible to view egoism in a positive fashion, a fact that traditional ethics, riddled with hypocrisy, was incapable of understanding. The color of neoplasticism furnished a good example of such an egoism founded on equality: "Neo-Plastic . . . gives each color and noncolor its maximum strength and value; and precisely in this way the other colors and noncolors achieve their own strength and value, so that the composition as a whole benefits directly from the care given to each separate plane."[51] We can easily see that the concept of mutual reinforcement of colored intensities is still indebted to an aesthetic of contrast. (Mondrian was never to renounce this idea, but in New York he would accentuate it to the point of dialectically transforming it into its contrary.) Nonetheless, the intrusion of color by way of egoism, in this text dealing with the social implications of neoplasticism, demonstrates that Mondrian was attempting even then to formulate an "achromatic" theory of color, to find an articulation of colors that would borrow nothing from the natural order, that would be, in a word, absolutely abstract.

I have said that one of Mondrian's main fears was optical mixing ("the profound confusion produces a false unity"), which is perhaps why he was loath to speak about Seurat as one of his predecessors in the realm of color. Holty states that Mondrian complained of the radiance of the yellow in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* when he saw the painting hanging in the Museum of Modern Art.[52] In fact, this problem had already occurred to him when he was working on *New York City*. Von Wiegand noted the following in her journal: "he showed me that yellow against white was making the background appear yellow by reflection and it [this painting] was not therefore so pure as the 'classical' one [a painting begun in London] where the yellow rectangle in the lower left was defined by the black line." Von Wiegand added, "then we noticed that the reflection of sunset was casting a warm yellow glow on the paintings, which changed them and softened their colors."[53] Unfortunately for Mondrian, the sun wasn't the only cause. It would be pointless to deny that, in *New York City,* yellow and white intermingle ever so slightly. This intermingling is even cited by Masheck as an agent of the painting's flatness. I would say an involuntary agent because an optical one. (We should note that oddly enough a yellow-white mingling is the only kind Mondrian allowed himself during his "classical" neoplastic period, with the unicum that constituted his 1933 diamond painting with yellow lines.) But Mondrian's disappointment before *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* at the Museum of Modern Art may well be the debt he had to pay for a particular fetishizing of modern life. He had never liked the flickering of the gas lighting in his Parisian studio; in New York, the electrical lighting fascinated him with its evenness, its disengagement from natural rhythm, and its "abstraction." He painted at night. We can easily imagine the yellow and the contrast of yellow/white reacting differently by daylight and by electric light (one being white, the other yellow). I don't know what the lighting was like at that time in the Museum of Modern Art, but Holty tells us, according to Rempert, that the colors in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* "had looked clearer and more distinct in the small space of Mondrian's studio than in the larger gallery at the museum, where the yellows appeared to bleed-off against the whites and a desirable crisp effect was lost."[54] Furthermore, it is that gentle coloration that Greenberg objected to in the painting when he saw it at the museum, going so far as to see impure colors in it (orange and purple), only to correct himself a week later, explaining his error by the new usage of greys in the painting.[55] (Several times during Mondrian's years as a painter, the artist complained of the changes his canvases underwent when they were illuminated in a way other than that used in his studio. In one of his earliest writings, for this very reason, he proposed that his canvases be painted in the very spot where they were to be hung.)[56]

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[51] A first draft of "L'Art nouveau—la vie nouvelle: la culture des rapports purs" was completed in Dec. 1931 but remained unpublished during Mondrian's lifetime. See also "The New Art—The New Life = The Culture of Pure Relationships" in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 272.

[52] See Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 96.

[53] Wiegand unpublished diary, entry for 13 Aug. 1941.

Returning to *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,* we find that optical mixing is omnipresent. The intensity of the colors is subsumed in a generalized tone. From this point of view, it is the work closest to Seurat: a fusion is at work whose primary cause, according to Greenberg, is the small grey squares. That seems at first to be a curious interpretation, in the sense that most critics see in the grey squares a way of avoiding direct contrasts of primary colors and of "correcting," or, rather, of determining the optical oscillations generated at the intersecting nodes of *New York City* (by effects of simultaneous contrast).[57] But it is fundamentally a valid

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54. See Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 85.

55. Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation,* 9 Oct. 1943, p. 416 and "Art Notes," *The Nation,* 16 Oct. 1943, p. 455; rpt. in Greenberg, *Perceptions,* pp. 153–54.

56. Mondrian, "De Nieuwe Beelding in der Schilderkunst," *De Stijl* 1 (Jan. 1917): 31; translated in *The New Art,* p. 37. A letter dated 16 May 1917 to van Doesburg informs us that this idea came to Mondrian after deploring the alteration undergone by the *Compositions in Color A* and *B* when they were exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (unpublished letter in the van Doesburg archives, Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties, The Hague).

57. See for example Welsh, *Piet Mondrian: 1872–1944* (exhibition catalog, Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto, 1966), no. 112, p. 220.

interpretation: in attempting to correct what still remained of "opticality" in *New York City,* Mondrian relinquished the sculptural, that literally "tactile" braiding, that determination of space—and consequently only accentuated opticality as such. In fact, two "optical" effects were at work: the oscillations at the line intersections and the illusionist hollowing-out of the surface. (Both are secondary effects, which is why one is such a good way to contain the other.) While in *New York City* the first effect, oscillation, had been used by him to render the second, hollowing-out, impossible, in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* Mondrian attempted to integrate the oscillation as a *given* (that is, not any more as an effect) into his composition, but this attempt at once reinforced rather than suppressed the hollowing-out. In the unfinished state of *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (whose superimpositions and oscillations are much more violent than those in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* and whose white planes come forward as never before in Mondrian's painting); in the feverishness with which Mondrian "destroyed" the near-finished state of this painting in his latter days, to Sidney Janis' bitter regret; in that compulsion to heap tiny bits of paper upon other tiny bits of paper—I see a sort of frantic, impossible struggle against "opticality" for the "liberation of our vision."[58]

This strategy of destruction is more clearly at work in *New York City,* and I need not add that I do not comply with any reading that sees *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* as a sort of salvage of this painting or that sees *Victory Boogie-Woogie* as a failed version of it.[59] As Christian Bonnefoi has stated, it is a matter of first destroying the entity of the surface in order to be able to reinvent the surface as an instance, to be able to produce it and no longer consider it as a given.[60] We know about Erwin Panofsky's famous demonstration: perspective foreshortenings of the various "proto-Renaissances" have nothing to do with the monocular perspective of the Italian Renaissance, because they imply an aggregative space conceived as a simple receptacle, as a residue of what is not material body, the only substantial entity. In order for the perspective of the Renaissance to become possible, the art of the High Middle Ages had to renounce, under Byzantine influence, all ambitions of creating spatial illusion.

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58. Regarding the optical flickers due to retinal after-images and their importance in the modular Mondrians of 1918 as well as their multiplication in his work of the late thirties and forties, see Welsh, "*Composition 12,*" pp. 17–26, and Clara Weyergraf, *Piet Mondrian und Theo van Doesburg: Deutung von Werk und Theorie* (Munich, 1979), pp. 8–20.

59. Kermit Champa ("Piet Mondrian's 'Broadway Boogie Woogie,' " *Arts Magazine* 54 [Jan. 1980]: 150–53), Masheck, and Rembert all consider *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* as a *resolution* of the *New York City* series. Curiously, Rembert doesn't appear to pay particular attention to Mondrian's loss of affection (which she notes) for this second-to-last painting. See Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 135.

60. See three articles by Christian Bonnefoi: "A Propos de la destruction de la surface," *Macula* 3/4 (1978): 163–69; regarding Mondrian, "Sur l'apparition du visible," *Macula* 5/6 (1979): 205–9; and "Composition du retrait," *L'Atelier de Mondrian,* pp. 60–61.

> So, [Panofsky states,] when romanesque painting reduces body and space to the surface, in the same manner and with the same consistency, this transformation imprints, for the first time, really, a definite seal on the homogeneity of body and space, in changing their former, loose optical unity into a solid and substantial one. Henceforth body and space are soldered together for better or worse and consequently when body again frees itself from the ties that link it to the surface, it cannot grow without the space increasing as well.[61]

In other words, for the painting's surface to be optically denied by the construction of perspective, for the window to open out on the world, this surface would first have had to be defined as an entity, it would have had to be geometrically constituted as a finite, homogeneous field. (Meyer Schapiro says the same thing by placing the question in a larger historical context, without falling into the perspectivist teleology characteristic of Panofsky: "The new smoothness and closure made possible the later transparency of the picture-plane, without which the representation of three-dimensional space would not have been successful.")[62] It is as though in New York Mondrian wanted to travel in reverse along the path that had led, in Mantegna's epoch five centuries earlier, to that piercing—that annihilation—of the painting's plane. Everything happened as if he had realized at that time that to destroy this illusionism, this weight of tradition that entraps us, he had to destroy what had made it possible, namely the unity, the homogeneity of surface at work in Byzantium. (Indeed, it is obviously not by chance that he refers precisely to Byzantine art in his late writings, in order to note how his painting differs from it ["T," p. 340].)[63] The only way to establish the surface's optical impenetrability, its opacity, was to contest its material identity, the geometric cohesion that had been the condition for its annihilation. It is impossible to annihilate (make transparent) what does not exist as such (surface entity). Only a literalization of volume (braiding) can destroy spatial illusion.

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[61] Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'symbolishe Form,' " *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenchaft,* ed. Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (Berlin, 1974), p. 113. Regarding this matter, see Jean Claude Bonne's reading of Panofsky's text, "Fond, surfaces, support (Panofsky et l'art roman)" in *Cahiers pour un temps: Erwin Panofsky,* ed. Jacques Bonnet (Paris, 1983), pp. 117–34.

[62] Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 224.

[63] Although Mondrian had already spoken of Byzantium in his 1917–18 writings, it is possible that New York's artistic intelligentsia influenced the renewal of his interest: we have seen that Morris spoke of Byzantine art in his article on sculpture and painting (see n. 35), and an article written much later by Greenberg ("Byzantine Parallels," *Art and Culture,* pp. 167–70) shows that the American artistic milieu had been interested in it for several decades.

In a dense and enigmatic text from his youth, Walter Benjamin defined painting in this manner: "Painting—An image has no background. Besides, one color is never superimposed upon another but rather appears at the very most in its medium. This is perhaps also hard to make out, and so one could not in principle for most paintings distinguish whether a color is closest to the foreground or furthest in the background. But this question is pointless. In painting there is neither background nor is there graphic line." Opposed to this is the category of drawing:

> Graphic line is determined in opposition to surface. . . . In fact, graphic line is coordinated with its background. Graphic line designates the surface and thereby determines it by coordinating it itself as its background. Conversely there is a graphic line only on this background; this is why, for example, a drawing which entirely covered its background, would cease to be a drawing altogether. The background thereby occupies a definite and, for the sense of a drawing, indispensable position; this is why within graphics two lines can determine their relation to each other only in relation to the background—a phenomenon which demonstrates with particular clarity the difference between graphic and geometric line.[64]

Must we deduce from this that *New York City* participates in the category of drawing since colors are superimposed on other colors? (But is it possible to establish other than by fragment, in detail, "whether a color is closest to the foreground or furthest in the background"?) Are there even graphic lines in this work? And if we admit for a moment that the colored strips are lines, is the relation between two lines uniquely determined by reference to their common background? *Is* there a background in *New York City*? Benjamin continues: "Graphic line confers an identity upon its background." Isn't that the opposite of what occurs in this painting? A series of questions pointing to the fact that with *New York City* a new category is invented, beyond painting and drawing.

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[64] Walter Benjamin, "Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal," *Gesammelte Schriften,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 6 vols. to date (Frankfurt am Main, 1974–), II, 2:603–7. I would like to thank Peter Fenves for his meticulous translation of all passages of Benjamin's texts and letters quoted in this essay. It should be noted that Wölfflin distinguishes painting and drawing in a similar way in his *Principles of Art History,* published two years earlier: "Painting, with its all-covering pigments, on principle creates surfaces, and thereby, even where it remains monochrome, is distinguished from any drawing. Lines are there, and are to be felt everywhere, but only as the limits of surfaces which are plastically felt and modelled throughout by the tactile sense" (Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History,* pp. 41–42).

To read Benjamin's text, we must refer to the circumstances of its composition. Written in the fall of 1917, "Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal" was conceived as a response to a letter from Gerhard Scholem, a letter about cubism, "although it was hardly mentioned."[65] For Benjamin it was a question of refuting the avant-gardist boast that cubism was an art completely estranged from pictorial tradition. It was also a question "of first outlining a universally valid conceptual foundation for that which we understand painting to be" (*B,* 1:173).[66] However, in wanting to demonstrate that a cubist painting and a painting by Raphael belong to the same sphere, that of painting and not of drawing, Benjamin conceded that he had omitted the analysis of what separated the two (*B,* 1:154).[67] Such was Benjamin's starting point. In his correspondence relating to this text, he cited Picasso's *Dame à l'éventail.* (The precise reference is unclear.)[68] We should note that he did not refer to the cubist collage, a silence not without significance, since it is highly possible that the problems laid bare by the collage bothered Benjamin a great deal as he began to elaborate his ideas on the opposition between painting and drawing. It may even be possible that these problems were the source of his interest in such a question, since this text immediately follows another, far more concise, written during the summer of 1917, which Benjamin considered indispensable to the proper understanding of his ideas. He summarized the substance of the earlier text to Scholem, not having the written copy at hand: "Allow me to add this important complementary remark: from the point of view of man, the level of drawing is horizontal; that of painting, vertical" (*B,* 1:167). Indeed, it is in this manner that he distinguishes between painting and drawing in "Malerei und Graphik." Certainly, according to Benjamin, there are some drawings that we may consider as we do paintings, on a vertical plane (for example, one of Rembrandt's landscapes), but there are others that cannot be placed vertically "without missing their true significance" (for example, children's drawings). "One could speak of two sections of the world's substance: the longitudinal section of painting and the transverse section of some drawings. The longitudinal section seems to be representative; it somehow contains things; the transverse section is symbolic, it contains signs."[69] If I think that the cubist collages were perhaps at the origin of Benjamin's reflections, it is because in those collages there was for the first time an attempt at a certain horizontalization of the pictorial plane, a sort of logical short circuit, the invention of a new category. It was an attempt which the cubists were forced to abandon. That is why the cubists were obliged to remain at the level of figuration and why Benjamin took only their paintings into account, and perhaps rightly so, wanting to demonstrate that finally they belonged to the same category as Raphael's paintings.[70]

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[65] This is what Benjamin himself stated in a letter to Gerhard Scholem, 22 Oct. 1917 (Benjamin, *Briefe,* ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, 2 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1966], 1:154; further references to this work, abbreviated *B,* will be included in the text).

[66] This letter to Ernst Schoen dates from late 1917 or early 1918.

[67] In this same letter Benjamin adds, "The problem of cubism lies, from one point of view, in the possibility of a not necessarily *colorless* painting but rather radically *uncolored* painting in which linear structure [der lineare Gebilde] dominates the image [das Bild]—without, however, cubism's ceasing to be painting and turning into graphics" (*B,* 1:154).

[68] Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, the editors of Benjamin's correspondence, tell us that this *Dame mit Fächer* was exhibited at the gallery Der Sturm in Berlin during the summer of 1917 and was the point of departure of Gerhard Scholem's reflections (*B,* 1:156–57 n. 3), but I was not able to identify the painting with certainty, although this would obviously cast some light on Benjamin's view of cubism. In his meticulous recension, George Brühl does not list any painting by Picasso as having been exhibited in Der Sturm after 1913 (Brühl, *Herwarth Walden und "Der Sturm"* [Cologne, 1983], p. 264). Although titles are not the most reliable guides, since Picasso did not assign them himself, one may determine which painting Benjamin was referring to by examining four possibilities, all with similar titles, in the various catalogues raisonnés of Picasso's oeuvre up to 1917: *Femme tenant un éventail* (1908; Pierre Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years, 1907–1916* [London, 1979], no. 168, p. 222) was apparently in the collection of Sergei Shchukin in Moscow at the latest in 1913; *Femme à l'éventail* (1909; Daix, no. 263, p. 239) apparently entered the Shchukin collection between 1913 and 1918, but it is unlikely that the Russian collector, who was buying directly from Kahnweiler in Paris, would have bought a painting as late as the fall of 1917—at a time when his country was in a complete political turmoil (for that matter, it is equally unlikely that he would have lent any works in his collection to the gallery Der Sturm which, furthermore, was only functioning as a German showcase for Kahnweiler's stable—in other words, works exhibited were generally for sale); *Femme à l'éventail* (1910–18; Daix, no. 364, p. 258) is a work which Picasso had begun in Cadaqués in 1910 and is said by Christian Zervos to have reworked and finished only in 1918; and *Femme à l'éventail* (Zervos, *Pablo Picasso,* vol. 3 of *Oeuvres de 1917 à 1919* [Paris, 1943], no. 21, p. 8) was painted in Barcelona during the summer of 1917. Of these four candidates, two have

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to be ruled out: the first (out of circulation too early) and the last (too late). The 1909 painting seems quite improbable, for the reasons mentioned above, but as a magisterial example of analytical cubism, preceding immediately the breakthrough of the work at Horta de Ebro in the summer of 1909, it is more in accordance with what we know of Scholem's reaction than any other works considered here. In his discussion with Scholem, Benjamin quotes the latter as having characterized cubism as "communicating the essence of the space which is the world in decomposing it" (*B,* 1:155). Another (remote) possibility would be that the 1910–18 canvas was exhibited before Picasso reworked it, or that the date given for this second working session, 1918, is wrong. This canvas, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, is one of the most "abstract" paintings by Picasso and participates in the vertical/horizontal reversal which is attempted in synthetic cubism. A letter sent to Scholem prior to his death regarding this matter remained unanswered.

[69] Benjamin, "Malerei und Graphik," *Gesammelte Schriften,* II, 2:602–3.

[70] For a different usage of Benjamin's vertical/horizontal opposition, see Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago, 1987), p. 174. Fried himself remarks: "In short, Benjamin and I make somewhat different use of the same basic opposition between verticality and horizontality, but of course we are fundamentally concerned with different artistic phenomena, he with Cubism, I with Eakins."

I believe that this horizontalization of painting, this passage to the symbolic order of drawing in painting, is what is at work in *New York City,* and it is, in a sense, what earlier caused the impossibility of directly applying Benjamin's insights in "Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal" to the painting. There may already be a tendency toward "the transverse section of some drawings" in Mondrian's work that came directly out of cubism. Many critics have noted this; among them are Leo Steinberg, who called *Pier and Ocean* (1915) a forerunner to what he named the "flatbed" in sixties art; and Svetlana Alpers, who spoke of a map in relation to this painting.[71] Others have remarked that if the cubists blurred their compositions on three sides, steadily maintaining the central figure on the support constituted by the lower limit of their paintings, Mondrian gnawed at his composition by haziness on all four sides at once.[72] Still others say that the blinkings of the 1918 diamond modular composition were inspired by a starry sky (which is to say an isotropic space).[73] But what is at stake in all these accounts is no more than a very uncertain tendency broached by the elaboration of neoplastic principles (and by the concept of static equilibrium) which depended entirely on gravitational sentiment, on man's upright position on earth. This last point even served as the essential argument in Mondrian's famous critique of Theo van Doesburg's use of oblique lines, which presupposes, according to Mondrian, an eye liberated from the human body: neoplasticism is "the true and pure manifestation of cosmic equilibrium from which, as human beings, we cannot separate ourselves."[74]

Obviously, something quite different happened in New York. Since his years in Paris, Mondrian had certainly worked at his paintings on a table, as though drawing.[75] But it was only with *New York City,* by using adhesive tapes, that this process moved into the painting. Why? Because each colored strip is an atom (indivisible: it is applied all at once) and because the atom is immediately laid out from edge to edge. It immediately governs the surface exactly like Pollock's networks (he worked with his canvases on the floor) and no longer requires putting the painting on an easel after every placement to verify its effect (or, to be more precise, no act of verification can concern any unit smaller than a whole line dividing the painting from edge to edge). Everything goes very quickly when one is no longer "balancing," when one is no longer obliged to weigh *everything,* when each stroke is all or nothing. All his observers have noted the rapidity with which Mondrian placed his strips of adhesive tape. (Von Wiegand, describing one of Mondrian's work sessions, spoke of the humming of "his intent mental activity, to which his steps and movements were an accompanying ritualistic dance."[76] This remark again reminds us of everything we know about Pollock's method.) Von Wiegand also evokes "the geometric rhythm of city traffic seen from above" when discussing *New York City,*[77] and this maplike metaphor will be reused constantly—remember that Greenberg, too, discussed Mondrian's painting in geographic terms. In short, in Mondrian's later works, there is a deliberate battle against gravitation—just as there is in Pollock's great *drippings.* This does not mean, in one case as in the other, that these works are reversible . . . try it and see! (Absolute reversibility assumes either monochromes or symmetry, the latter a form which had to wait until the sixties and Frank Stella's work to be definitively separated from the idea of decoration.) Painting, as opposed to some drawings, continues to be viewed from a vertical position. It is necessary to take this into account in the composition phase if one wants to liberate one's painting from any gravitational feeling. It is true that all the *New York City* works are higher than they are wide, as opposed to *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,* which is square. The small drawing which is like the first conception of this series shows that Mondrian had at first envisioned a more vertical format (which would make *New York City III*—the only one of the three which is distinctly vertical—the first of the series).[78] What does this signify? It means that Mondrian was only able to return to a square format (a very rare occurrence in his work, let it be noted) after having found a more structural means of attaining antigravitation with *New York City.* It has often been observed that he used fewer and fewer horizontal formats (and practically none at all after the thirties), as though he wanted to avoid at all costs the landscapelike connotations which were linked to his traditional concept of static equilibrium (the horizon-line). It is also well known that he didn't like his paintings to be too "Gothically" vertical, finding them "tragic." Besides, it is certain that he was completely aware of the difference in value of horizontal and vertical lines (the verticals always seemed longer), which is why Mondrian generally accorded them less width. In a way, the equal width of the strips in *New York City* demonstrates that he felt sure enough of himself to no longer need such an artifice to counter the verticality of his painting. His return to the square in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* shows that he no longer feared the ghost of the natural horizon. This completely contradicts Kermit Champa's reading of that painting. In *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,* Champa saw some sort of triumph of verticality, seeing in the *New York City* series signs foretelling this triumph. (On the one hand, the finished *New York City*—our painting—has more horizontals than verticals; on the other, as Masheck has noted, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* was the first painting to contain more broken verticals than broken horizontals.)[79]

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[71] See Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 85, and Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983), p. 258 n. 23.

[72] See Carmean, *The Diamond Compositions,* pp. 20–21, and Clay, "Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat," no pagination.

[73] See Clay, "Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat," no pagination; Welsh, "*Composition 12,*" p. 17; and Carmean, *The Diamond Compositions,* p. 24.

[74] Mondrian, "Le Home–La Rue–La Cité," *Vouloir,* no. 25 (1927); translated in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 210.

[75] Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian,* p. 158.

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[76] Wiegand, "Mondrian: A Memoir of His New York Period," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 62.

[77] Ibid., p. 61.

[78] The drawing in question was bought by the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris at the same time as *New York City.* The title which has been given to it is *New York City—Classical Drawing no. 6* (graphite on paper, 22.8 × 21 cm., inventory number M.N.A.M. Paris, AM 1984–271D). The unfinished *New York City III* is still in the collection of the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.

In the past few pages, I have often referred to Pollock (and it is not insignificant that it was Mondrian who discovered him, in a way, or who at least persuaded Peggy Guggenheim that Pollock's painting was something fundamental: "the most exciting painting that I have seen in a long, long time, here or in Europe").[80] I have also noted that Clay was careful to characterize a certain number of common elements between Pollock and Mondrian's New York painting. (These include the "all-over," depth as articulation, the impossibility of the observer's visual control over the general effect of the work's field. We could also mention the sense of detail, which Clay noted in relation to Pollock and which would also apply to *New York City* as it would to *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,* to say nothing of *Victory Boogie-Woogie.*) I believe that Mondrian's later works participate in the fundamental shift that Rosalind Krauss intuited in Pollock's work, in his method itself which assumes a break between painting a canvas (on the floor) and seeing it (on the wall) and which necessitates an operation of reading. "Certainly this break, this double movement—the rough experience on the floor; the deciphering on the wall—is reiterated in the observer's experience in front of the hung and finished painting. In fact we *can* look at Pollock's paintings as arising from pure optical sensation. But to view them in this way—following his early critics—proves that we possess none of the keys essential to understanding them."[81] In the same way, an "optical" interpretation of Mondrian, conceived in the assurance of immediate perception, cannot account for his New York paintings.

For it is undoubtedly the dominance of Greenberg's interpretation of Pollock (undeniably the best of its era) which led Steinberg to exclude this artist from his definition of the "flatbed."[82] Perhaps the same is true of Mondrian's later work, which should have interested Steinberg a great deal more than *Pier and Ocean. New York City* is one of the first "flatbeds," one of the first examples of the horizontal reversal that Steinberg considered in quasi–Lévi-Straussian terms as a passage from nature to culture in Robert Rauschenberg's art: "palimpsest, canceled plate, printer's proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information in a relevant analogue of his picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field."[83] Steinberg says that the "flatbed"—transverse section, symbolic—arises from action, as the verticality of the picture plane in the Renaissance arose from vision. There is a fundamental difference—a gulf, however small—between representing action and fulfilling it. Mondrian had this to say relative to the works of his youth: "Even at this time, I disliked [painting] particular movement, such as people in action" ("T," p. 338). Regarding free rhythm and dynamic (universal) movement, he wrote in one of his American texts that plastic art "creates *action* by the tension of the forms, lines, and the intensity of the colors—and in this is its force."[84]

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[79] See Champa, "Piet Mondrian's Broadway 'Boogie Woogie,' " and Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," p. 64.

[80] Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-So-Still-Life: A Memoir* (New York, 1984), p. 241. Until now, the only known version of this anecdote was Peggy Guggenheim's. The publication of these memories by Max Ernst's son sheds a new light on Mondrian's interest in Pollock. Of course, it was not yet a matter of an *all-over dripping* (this is 1943), but I'd wager that a later painting would have fascinated Mondrian even more.

[81] Krauss, "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique," *L'Atelier de Pollock,* no pagination.

Sculptural thickness (braiding), nonchromatic color relation (atoms), antigravitation (all-over): such is the conceptual, plastic "pas de trois" achieved by Mondrian in *New York City,* which is a painting, but also a diagram, a battle plan against the "longitudinal" section of representation. When Holty asked him why he kept repainting *Victory Boogie-Woogie* instead of making several paintings of the different solutions which had been superimposed on this canvas, Mondrian answered, "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out."

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[82] Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* p. 84.

[83] Ibid., p. 88. Certainly there are authentic "flatbeds" before *New York City,* for example, Ivan Puni's *Bains* (1915, Berninger Collection). See my "Malevich, le carré, le degré zéro," *Macula* 1 (1976): 47. But these were notable exceptions. For a discussion and development of the "flatbed" idea, see Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum* 13 (Dec. 1974): 36–43.

[84] Mondrian, "Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life," written in 1939–40, first published in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,* pp. 37–48; reprinted in Mondrian, *The New Art,* p. 329.