

Fig. 18 - Sea, 1914, Sketch 19 from Sketchbook 1, Pencil on Paper, cm 11,4 x 15,8

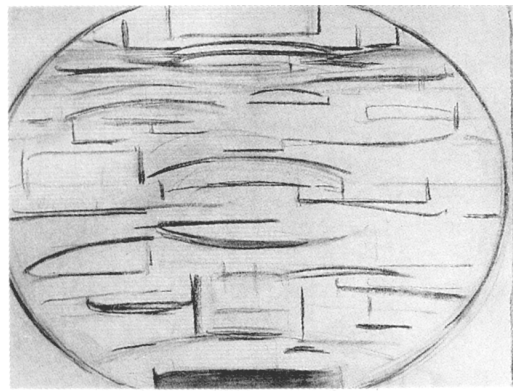


Fig. 19 - Ocean 2, 1914, Charcoal on Paper, cm 58,7 x 76,5

21, 22: Once again, as when Mondrian took the tree as his subject, the artist's eye turns spontaneously and in no fortuitously way toward a landscape presenting an intrinsic relationship between the two contrasting directions. In these works the horizontal extension of the sea (a space similar to **10, 11, 12**) interpenetrates with a vertical element (the pier, that is to say a man-made, non-natural element such as **13, 14, 15, 16**).

The vertical (the pier) appears designed to express something more constant while the horizontal (the sea) heralds multiplicity and change. The respective plastic symbols of the spiritual and the natural interact in a variety of situations where each aspect prevails for a moment onto the opposite one.

Fig. 18 is a drawing of the sea produced in 1914 that recalls the space of the dunes addressed by the artist four years earlier. The line of the horizon is enclosed in a faint oval. Two points placed in the central area like the foci of an ellipse appear to mark out a segment set slightly below the uninterrupted line of the horizon. This segment evokes a sense of permanence within the composition as though the infinite space of the horizon, which continue uninterruptedly to the right and to the left, would for a moment concentrate before the observer into a finite space.

Fig. 19 is a drawing of the sea characterized by primarily horizontal and curvilinear lines with a few faint and isolated vertical elements. The whole is again enclosed within an oval projecting slightly beyond the edges. In the central section we see two juxtaposed curvilinear signs that appear to have developed out of the central segment in the previous drawing. These signs seem to suggest a small oval inside the oval enclosing the whole; an external synthesis is transformed into an internal one.

The vertical direction takes shape in the central lower part of Fig. 20 through the pier jutting out into the sea. As previously in the trunk-branch structure of the tree, the vertical pier starts from the bottom and rises to merge into the horizontal direction of the sea. With respect to the tree, however, the Cubist subject of the pier immersed in the sea reveals more dynamic interaction between unitary element (the pier) and manifold element (the sea) than between the mutually static trunk and branches.

The vertical pier draws the extended line of the horizon into a vaguely quadrangular area that is then concentrated in the upper section (**21**) to become a defined square which contains a sign of equivalence between the two opposite directions in **22**. The horizontal extension of the sea (the natural) and the vertical, man-made pier (symbol of human presence or the spiritual as Mondrian used to say) find a perfect balance within the square proportion.

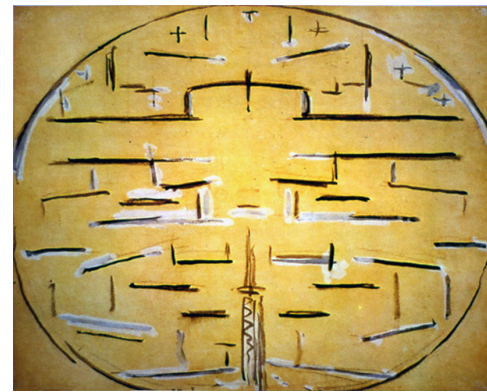


Fig. 20 - Pier and Ocean 2, 1914, Charcoal, Ink and Gouache on Paper, cm 50 x 62,6



Mondrian around 1912

The number of signs, i.e. the degree of spatial multiplicity, gradually increases from **21** to **22**, and it is only in the latter that all the signs are expressed solely and exclusively through perpendicular relations. Expressing the broadest diversity through variations of one and the same thing (the perpendicular relationship) means finding the one in the many and this is satisfying on a spiritual level.

22: Every sign expresses something different and something changes every instant. The duality expressed through the relationship between vertical and horizontal, which generates the manifold space as a whole, is cancelled out in the square, where the two opposite things are equivalent in size, i.e. assume the same value while remaining different. In the square, for an instant, duality appears as unity and becoming is transformed into being. The eye can linger on that point and contemplate in a more stable form what constantly changes in appearance in the surrounding space through alternation of the prevailing direction.

Examination of **22** reveals that other areas of the composition suggest potential squares, which do not, however, attain the balance of the one in the center. Unlike the central square, they appear unable to hold the dynamic external space and transform it into a more constant and permanent internal equilibrium. The incomplete attempts to internalize external reality evoke the moments in life when something escapes us and we cannot make the rationale of becoming our own. The central square instead expresses one of those rare moments in which we understand the fact that everything is connected and that each thing depends on its opposite.

The sign of equivalence between opposites is born inside a square and thus suggests an inner space. The square symbolizes the space of consciousness in which the changing external space (the overall space inside the oval) is captured for a while in synthesis. A multifarious imbalanced reality (the space inside the oval) finds a balanced synthesis through the unifying space of consciousness (the square). An external unity (the oval) transforms into an internal one (the square).

It is, however, obvious that the consciousness can only produce partial and temporary syntheses; it clearly cannot exhaust all the possible relations with the external world. Human consciousness cannot contain within itself the totality of the world and will never be able to comprehend reality as a whole (the oval). Every synthesis generated by thought is necessarily partial and temporary, and must therefore open up again to the multiform and ever-changing aspect of physical reality.

This is what all sensible people do when they call their certainties into question in the light of experience. This is what philosophy has been doing for centuries, as have the arts and above all the experimental sciences.

A second square can be seen in **22** above the square that we have identified as a unitary synthesis of the composition as a whole. Inside the second square we see a vertical segment divided by two horizontal segments that extend beyond the boundary of the square to the right and left. The two small horizontal segments form two crosses with the two vertical sides of the square. These two signs tell us that unity is opening up to duality. The unitary synthesis achieved for a while in the lower square in the form of the equivalence of opposites is again broken up into a duality that then flows back toward the variety of different situations marked again by the alternating predominance of one direction or the other. The unity generated with the first square opens up again to manifold space with the second.

The unity that Mondrian strove to express is a temporary synthesis generated momentarily by the subject in its changing relationship with reality, not something to be attained once and for all. Establishing equilibrium between the manifold appearance of nature and the synthesis invoked by the consciousness does not mean attaining fixed points and immutable truths. The square of **22** is not a potentially static and all-inclusive unity like the oval but a dynamic unity intrinsically linked to the manifold space in which it is born and toward which it returns a moment later. This is now a dynamic unity and no longer the static unity exemplified by the perfect circle of a plate (Fig. 13 - PAGE 3), the trunk of a tree (**17, 18**) or the rectangle in the center of **20**.

For Mondrian the unitary synthesis generated in **22** by means of a square is therefore a plastic symbol of the controversial space of real life which attains measure and a harmonious condition for a moment in the space of consciousness before opening up again to nature and life.

The equivalence generated in the square suggests the possibility of establishing balance and harmony between opposite entities. And this holds both for the subject's relationship with the external world and for the subject's relationship with itself: finding equilibrium between the contradictory drives within oneself, e.g. between the uncontrollable urges of the instinctual life (the horizontal) and the action of controlling and guiding the instincts performed by the mind or spirit (the vertical).

Mondrian establishes a relationship between two infinite directions: the horizontal (the plastic symbol of the outer world) and the vertical (the plastic symbol of the inner world). For consciousness these are two virtually infinite spaces because our inner world is no less complex and elusive than the immense variety of the outer world.

The human dimension and that of the natural universe are not and never will be symmetrically commensurable (suffice it to mention the infinite physical disproportion between the two terms). In certain situations, however, they can assume equivalent value for human awareness and attain an equilibrium taking into account the rationale both of mankind and of the natural universe. And since mankind is part of nature, this essentially means reconnecting a part of nature (human being) with the whole.

Consider the frequency in our everyday lives of situations of disproportion and conflict between the parts of us that are closer to the natural world and those that instead characterize us as the human species, namely intellect and reason: conflicts between emotional drives and ethical rules; the predominance of one direction or the other.

Disharmony between body and mind; internal imbalances that end up being projected onto the external world to create friction and conflict between individuals and between individuals and their environment. How rare and precious are instead those moments in which we see and understand the reasons of both parts of ourselves, when we manage to expand the space of our consciousness to such an extent as to contemplate all the diversity present within us as a dynamic unity. Duality disappears for an instant. We feel that we are all one and everything outside appears to be in a state of harmony because there is harmony within. Contemplating that synthesis, reveling in the instant of an eternal joy that seems to unite us with the whole (the unity symbolized by the square of **22**), then opening up again to see things separate and clash with one another in the multifarious disintegrative rhythms of everyday life (the multifarious space around the square unit of **22**). That idea of unity remains in the heart, a taste of universal life that is no longer revealed in the particular but of which our fleeting emotions and our constant pursuit of equilibrium are a component - albeit infinitesimal - capable of making an essential contribution to the whole.

The sign of equivalence between opposites urges us to attribute one and the same value to the part of us that is closer to nature and the part that is more typically human; to understand that one thing depends on the other in a dynamic vision: a vertical that yields little to the horizontal but is at the same time incapable of opposing it to the bitter end, as certain moral doctrines demand. Mondrian's plastic space suggests that the unity of being is not moral law but method: a dynamic equivalence of contrary aspects that, in a static vision of rigid content, work instead to divide consciousness, separating us from ourselves and from the world. Mondrian's aesthetic space therefore also contains an ethical message calling upon us to neutralize the imbalances within us before thinking about others and the world as a whole.

Immanuel Kant spoke of the starry sky above and moral law within. The moral law consists in the rule that accommodates the instincts but keeps them under control. For Mondrian it is a balanced relationship between the natural urges and the control exercised by the spirit, as expressed in the sign of equivalence inside the square. The starry sky is for Kant the whole world, external reality, everything that can influence our inner balance, i.e. all the space around the square in Mondrian's composition. The equivalence of opposites means that morality must not be bigoted but also that the freedom is not the unbridled satisfaction of every desire. Kant defined freedom as being able to set oneself rules, i.e. being free to choose rules that are in any case necessary, both in coping with one's inner contradictions (individual life) and in the relationship between oneself and others (social life).

In interpreting the formal relations of Mondrian's compositions, we can develop contents that speak to us about life, not in its fleeting appearances, however, but in its most intimate and authentic ways of being.

Mondrian's talent and intellectual honesty ensure that form acquires depth and reveals his intimate vision of things.

With Mondrian form becomes content and aesthetics acquires an ethical value.