

PLATE 6

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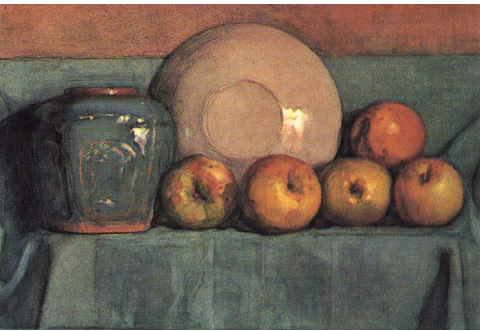
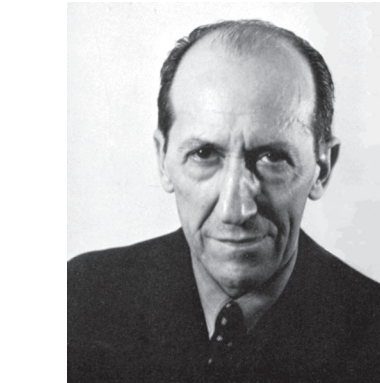
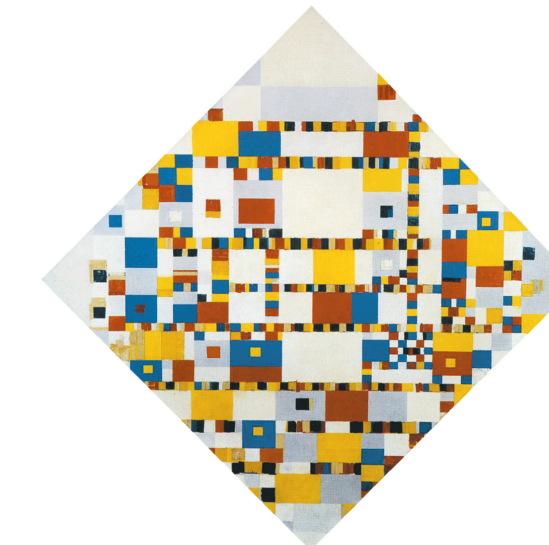
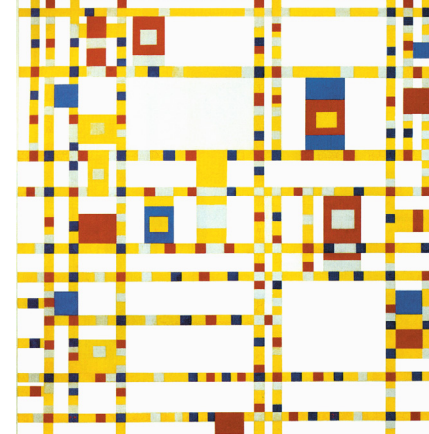
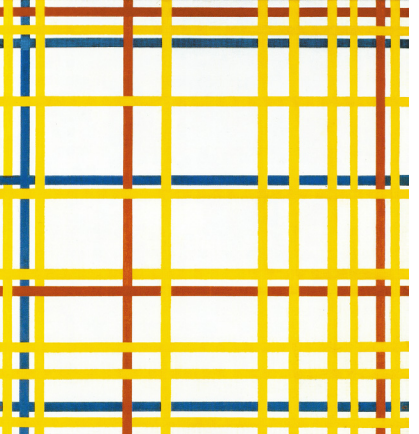
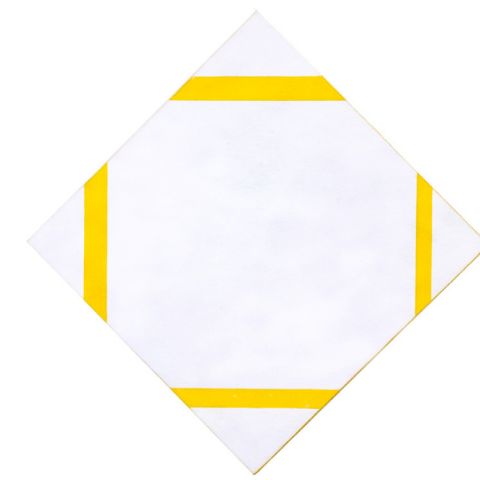
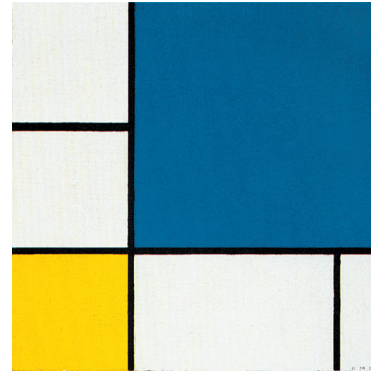
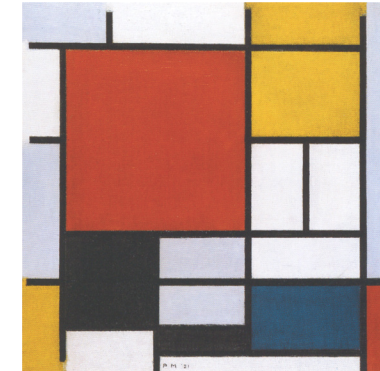
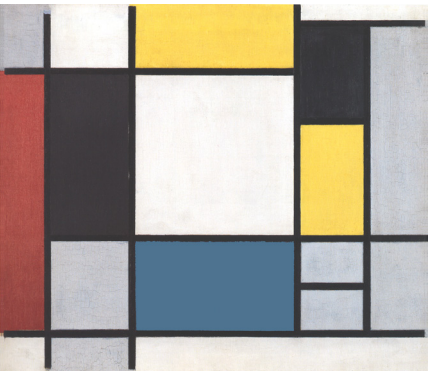
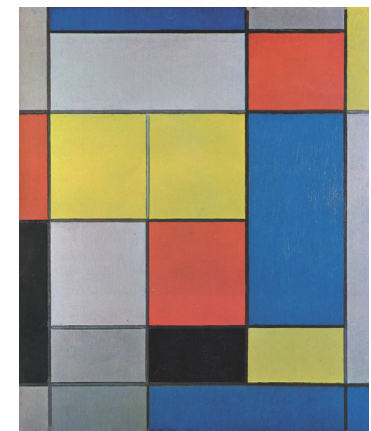
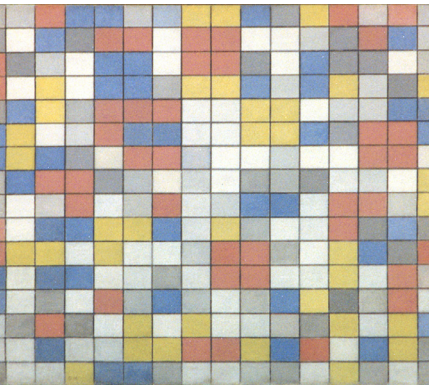
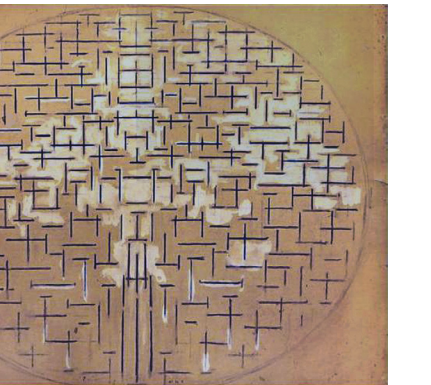
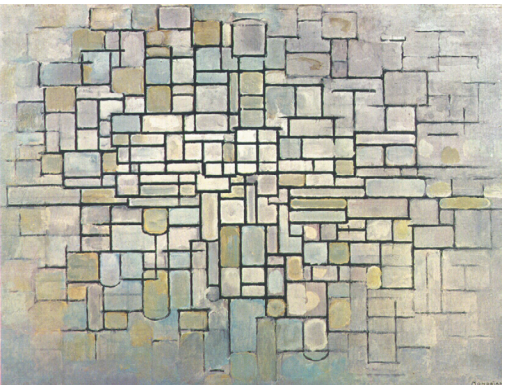
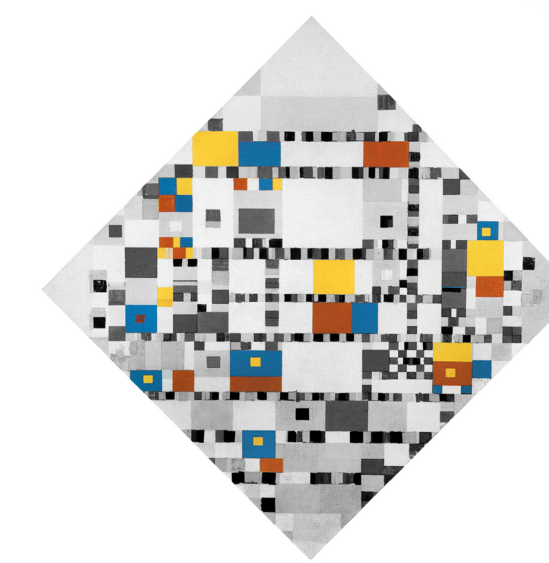
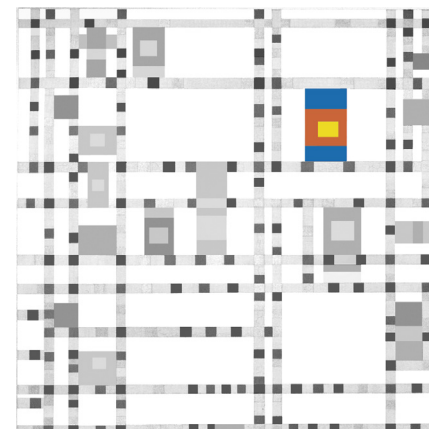
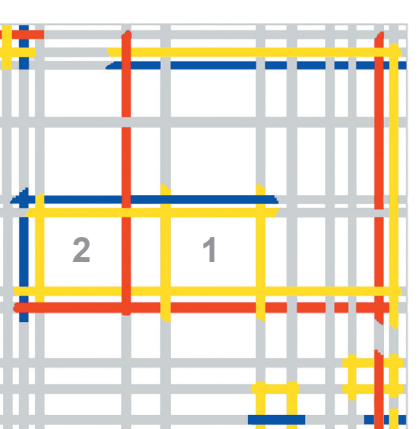
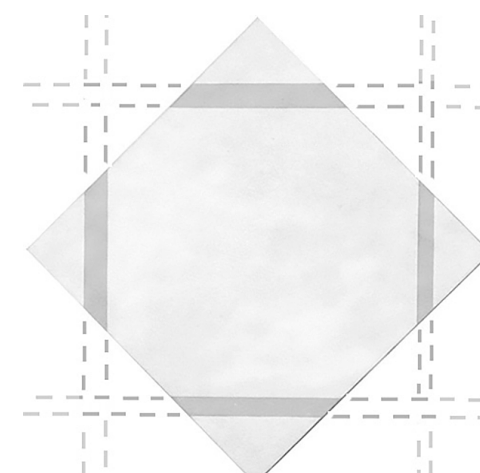
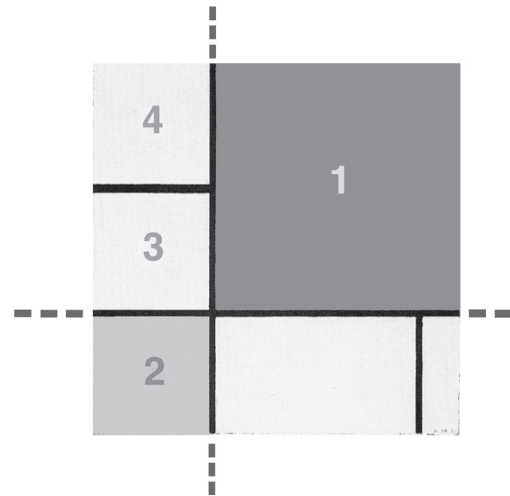
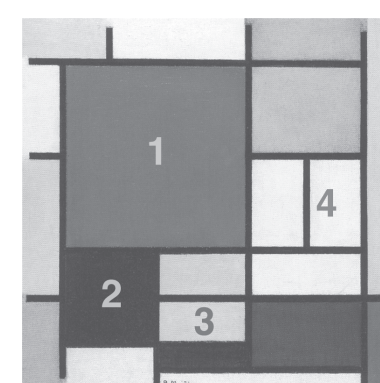
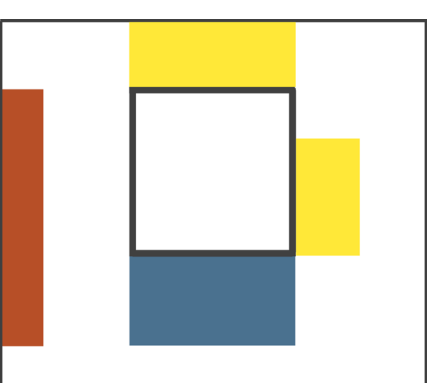
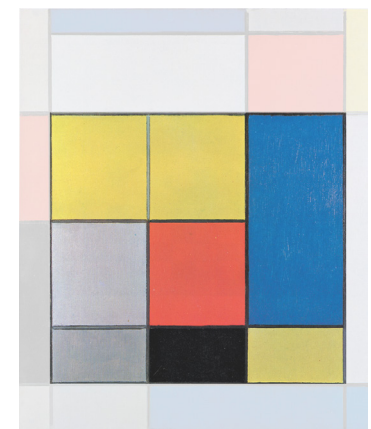
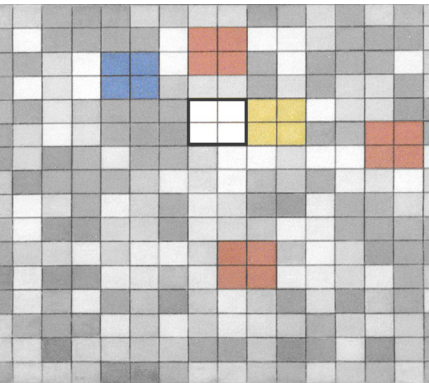
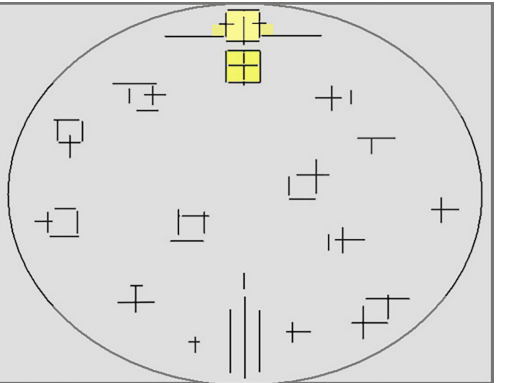
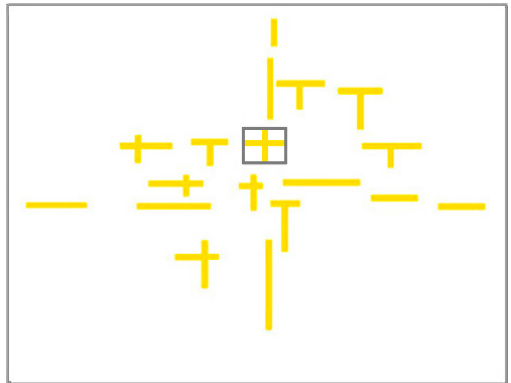


Fig. 13 - Apples, Ginger Pot and Plate on a Ledge, 1901



This document constitutes an original "format" created by Michele Sciam to explain the work of Piet Mondrian. The explanatory diagrams of Mondrian's paintings are original works created by Michele Sciam in the context of his activity of criticism, discussion, divulgation and teaching.

Piet Mondrian, 1943



"The evolution of his work is certainly the most eloquent of this century. No modern painter comes from so far, none has gone so far. This trajectory remains forever unique. The process is of such a clear and pure progression that it is its own myth. He comes from Van Gogh - what am I saying - he redoes the whole evolution of Van Gogh himself, then, after having painted as a fauve before the fauves, he catches up with cubism, overtakes it, slowly continues a process of dematerialization until a 1931 canvas, which has only two black lines on a white background. Then the curve gradually descends towards the sensitive life, to end up in the "boogie-woogies", in view of a new land. I know of no other example of such acute finalism." (Michel Seuphor)

I shall now retrace in synthesis the development of Mondrian's oeuvre.

Fig. 13: The relationship between a variety of imperfect circular shapes (some apples) and a perfect circle (a plate in the center) symbolizes a relationship between the manifold and unpredictable aspect of nature and the quest for some order, regularity and unity posed by the human mind, or as Mondrian put it, a relationship between the natural and the spiritual. An interaction between multiplicity and unity was to become the *leit motiv* of the subsequent work. This interaction takes places years later between a variety of imbalanced relationships between horizontal and vertical dashes which then find a synthesis in a central rectangle evoking a sense of stability and unity (20). Synthesis expressed by the circular form of a plate becomes a balanced relationship between opposite directions. The artist explained his rejection of any circular form by stating that "the compact, rounded line expressing no relationship in plastic terms was replaced by the straight line in the duality of the orthogonal position, which expresses the purest relationship." The dialectic between the one and the many continues with 22 with the substantial difference that the rectangle (20) becomes a square which is generated out of the multiple space around it and toward which it returns a moment later. A static relationship between multiplicity and unity (20) becomes a dynamic one (22). All the changing appearances of the physical world are ideally concentrated in the most balanced relationship (the square) that then opens up again to the manifold, imbalanced space of the world.

The composition expresses the controversial space of real life which attains measure and a harmonious condition in the space of consciousness (the inner space of the square) before opening up again to nature and life. This process of reopening constitutes the guiding thread of all the subsequent work, where the unity evoked by a white square (28) progressively interpenetrates with colors and various proportions (29, 30), i.e. with a neoplastic symbol of manifold space.

The graphic structure of 22 opens up to colors (26) and to the dynamic traversal of straight lines that evoke a more open and continuous space. Previously expressed in a metaphorical way within the closed form of an oval (22), the totality of space opens up and is transformed over a span of four years into a sense of totality expressed through the continuity of straight lines (26). The relationship between multiplicity and unity is now expressed by a variable set of colored planes which grow larger and gather around a white large rectangle placed in the center suggesting a synthesis of the opposites both in terms of form (horizontal and vertical) and color (the white field crossed by black lines).

The sketched-out square (22) and the white rectangle (26) then become a large square consisting of different horizontal and vertical areas of colors (27). With a large square visibly structured and colored within, the artist seeks here to interpenetrate unity (the square proportion and multiplicity (the changing measurements and proportions. Every individual thing we perceive as one reveals in reality a manifold nature. "Through our reality, true reality is unveiled." (Mondrian)

Because it is chromatically so heterogeneous, however, the large square (27) which should express unity does not manifest itself with sufficient clarity. For this reason, in a following canvas, the square turns again into a more evident homogeneous white field defined by thicker black lines (28).

It is worth noting how in Fig. 13 as well as in 20, 22, 26, 27, 28 a symbol for unity always generates in the center of the composition.

A white unity (26) becomes a large colored square (27), reverts to white (28) but then re-opens to variable colors, dimensions and proportions (29, 30). A plastic symbol of the unifying space of consciousness, the square opens up to the endless variety and the unpredictable aspects of nature and life symbolized here by variable proportions and colors. The number of planes decreases in the transition from 26 to 30 and the composition now displays a greater degree of synthesis which reaches its peak with 33. Four yellow lines of increasing thickness express a sense of relative multiplicity whereas an idea of unity is conveyed by a presumed and not entirely visible square which lies beyond our field of vision. On observing the differing thickness of the lines, we are faced with a unity undergoing transformation from one side to the other. We perceive a unity that tends to become rather than to be. It endures but changes at the same time; a square that is open, dynamic, asymmetric, and entirely expressed by color. This work goes to the heart of the problem: to show the manifold in unitary form; to open up unity, i.e. the postulate of consciousness, to the infinite (the endless lines) and changing aspect of nature and existence in time but without losing sight of it. In actual fact, the square opened up and interpenetrated with the variety of forms and colors in the rectangular canvases (29, 30) while seeking in the lozenge compositions to absorb that variety with no extensive change to the square itself (33). In the first case, the square opens up in the direction of multiplicity; in the second, the square absorbs multiplicity while remaining substantially one.

While 33 can be regarded as a point of arrival, at the same time, as in other moments of Mondrian's artistic development, the work also represents a new point of departure. The painter was in fact soon to realize that his canvas did not convey a sense of the variety perceived by the eye in nature or urban space, the rich and multiform aspect of color previously captured with 20, 22, 26.

The tendency toward a space of ever-greater rarefaction and synthesis (26 to 33) gradually gave way to the opposite tendency, whereby an increasing level of articulation and complexity was progressively reintroduced into the canvases (38). It appears to be a short step from 33 to 38. In actual fact, however, the process of spatial multiplication was a quite a long and laborious undertaking that took a far larger number of works.

38: Approximate squares of variable size and proportions generate and dissolve in a variety of combinations between yellow, red and blue lines. A number of potential and not fully attained squares can be seen in 22 already, although expressed through form only. The square module which unified horizontal and vertical in the upper central area (22) unifies now the colors all over the entire canvas (38). Nonetheless, in 38 the eye scarcely has time to identify a square unit before finding itself immersed in the dynamic and continuous flux of the lines. While the need felt with 33 had been to open up unity (the square) to multiplicity, it was now necessary to re-establish a greater degree of constancy and unity in a space that had undergone considerable multiplication in the meantime and continued uninterruptedly with the lines alone.

39 shows a process where a variety of colored lines become a single plane of those three colors which then returns to the manifold, infinite condition of the lines. An expanded multiplicity of yellow, red and blue fragments concentrate in one plane which then reopens to a multiplicity of small colored fragments. Through a dynamic process the one and the many merge and transform into each other. In this light, we can regard the unitary plane and the entire painting respectively as synthetic and analytic or as complex versions of one and the same thing. I am thinking once again of the tree that looks like a condensed point when seen from a distance but reveals increasing complexity on closer observation. How to express this new sense of reality if not in abstract terms?

The process which links together in a dynamic structure multiplicity and unity is at the same time one of progressive internalization of external space (the lines) into one plane which unifies yellow, red and blue within itself and then reopens to the expanded external space of the lines. The color of the lines (yellow) is the one that is most internalized within the unitary plane. "Through the internalization of what is known as matter and through externalization of what is known as spirit - until now too separate! - matter-spirit becomes a unity." (Mondrian)

The process observed in 39 condenses the whole of Mondrian's oeuvre within one canvas. On observing the twelve painting above,

we in fact see space evolving from multiplicity (20, 22, 26) to unity (33) and from unity back to multiplicity (33, 38, 39, 40). A pathway that stretched over some forty years can be found encapsulated in 39.

Broadway Boogie Woogie sums up an entire life and it is perhaps no coincidence that this was the last work completed by the artist. While in no way detracting from the Dutch artist's best-known Neoplastic work, the compositions of black lines and small planes of color commonly understood as his painting, I think I can say that it constitutes no more than a phase along the way in his development of the space that finally came to light in the two last Boogies produced in New York City. These are the images that Mondrian had on the tips of his fingers all through his career.

The painter worked for an entire lifetime to express this type of space: as rich and manifold as possible in order to reflect the richness he saw in the outer space and felt within himself but endowed at the same time with the degree of synthesis and unity required by his consciousness; well aware that his syntheses will always have to be confronted and reopened to the changing aspects of nature and to the course of existence. I think of all the times I have realized that reality is actually far richer and more complex than the ideas we form of it. Our peremptory images of reality - either/or, good or bad, black or white - should be opened up to contemplation of all the real gradations in between. I think of 33 becoming 40.

The Neoplastic vision urges us to open up to the manifold aspect of the world both outside and inside, to contemplate all its variety, but without losing our way. This is certainly very difficult in everyday life, where so much fear is aroused in the human mind at the thought of opening up to variety and addressing diversity. All forms of closure, intolerance, and racism are born out of this.

"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Paul Gauguin wrote these questions on a painted image. Piet Mondrian painted them in colored lines that turn into planes and then back into lines. Neoplastic geometry demonstrates that it is still possible

to talk about universal questions. A reading of the explanations will be followed by visits to museums to examine the original works, allowing the eye to reveal all the delights of the painted surfaces transformed by the Dutch painter into authentic wordless discourse about life. This work is also dedicated to those who truly believe that abstraction can be reduced to a superficial exploration of cold geometry for its own sake. This has, unfortunately, been the case with many, all head and no heart, the type Fausto Melotti referred to as "hardworking clerks of abstraction".

Mondrian put forward a utopian proposal to abolish art and achieve beauty in real life. Art would no longer be necessary once it had proved possible to attain the harmonies evoked by painting concretely among human beings. While a look around shows that this will take a long time yet, there are some positive signs. The Dutch artist was in no hurry and did not expect to see the world he had in mind established any time soon. He was well aware that it is not only creativity and technical expertise that count in life but also and above all economic, political, ethical, and religious factors. He thus understood that real progress would necessarily be slow and gradual. Others instead believe that certain changes can take place quickly and have no hesitation in proclaiming the failure of a project, whose significance they have barely grasped, if it is not fully achieved overnight.

The modern project foreshadowed by some masters of abstract-concrete art was something more than a fashion, which is what most of our contemporary visual "culture" unfortunately boils down to. In the case of Mondrian, the question was not only aesthetic but also ethical, social, and above all spiritual at the same time. To tell the truth, a look around leads us to suspect not only that modernism has not been superseded but also that it has not even begun in its deeper sense.