

Section 1

Piet Mondrian's artwork urges us to think about reality starting from its contradictions. The artist sought quietness and found it in movement; he looked at the beauty of external nature without losing sight of the balance and harmony of inner nature. The work of an entire lifetime served him to give concrete form to his feelings for life as he perceived it in its everyday and eternal, particular and universal aspects.

"From discordant elements comes the most beautiful harmony" said Heraclitus. What could be more discordant in painting than a horizontal and a vertical?

Broadway Boogie Woogie presents a set of horizontal and vertical lines and areas of various sizes, proportions, and colors whose interaction generates a multiple and asymmetrical composition.

Horizontal and vertical lines constitute the intimate structure of the two-dimensional space of painting. Mondrian saw something fundamental, almost immutable, in the orthogonal relationship, while all the possible outcomes of the relationship between horizontal and vertical lines (horizontal rectangle, vertical rectangle and square, all of countless sizes, proportions and colors) represent the changeable. In the opposite directions, we can also see a plastic symbol of the opposing forces at work in nature and of the duality that animates human beings.

If, at the level of form, the painter chooses the fundamental relationship, on the level of color he selects the three primary colors, yellow, red, and blue. The artist chooses elementary means of expression to account for the complexity of reality in the clearest possible way.

Mondrian wrote: *"The lines intersect and touch tangentially, but continue without ever stopping."* Art historian Maurizio Calvesi adds: *"The result radiates from the painting towards infinity, but the canvas exhausts the intuition of the whole within itself."*

A first glance at Section 2: Small squares of different colors, sizes, and proportions run along the straight lines, offering the viewer a changing and densely populated "landscape."

Diagram 2: The squares exceed the thickness of the straight lines to become larger areas of various colors and sizes. Diagram 3 shows new areas that develop an interior space, up to a single area (N) that unites the three primary colors (Diagram 4).

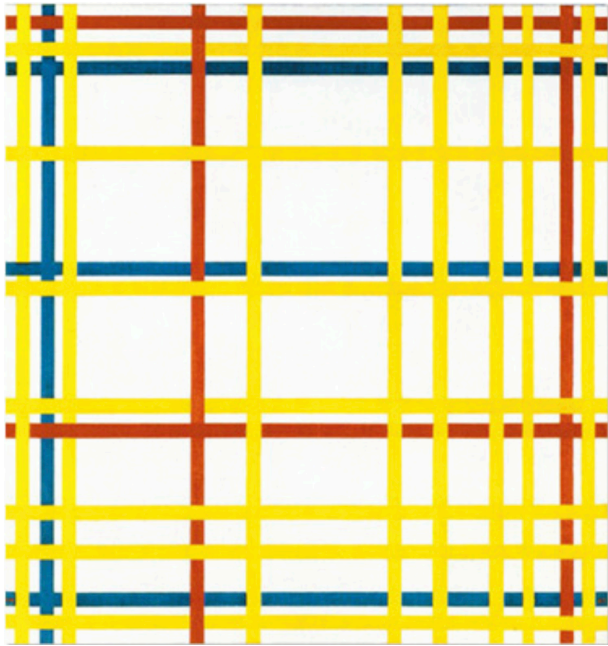
N suggests a unitary synthesis of the varied set of yellow, red, and blue squares that multiply endlessly along the straight lines (Diagram 5). In this way the painting shows a progression from the multiple to the one. A composition that ideally, with its straight lines, *"continues without ever stopping,"* suggests the infinite space of physical reality. The same composition then concentrates in an inner space (N), that is, in the space of consciousness, which in finite form imagines the infinite variety of the world (the endless straight lines) as one interconnected being (Diagram 5).

Let us now look at this process in detail:

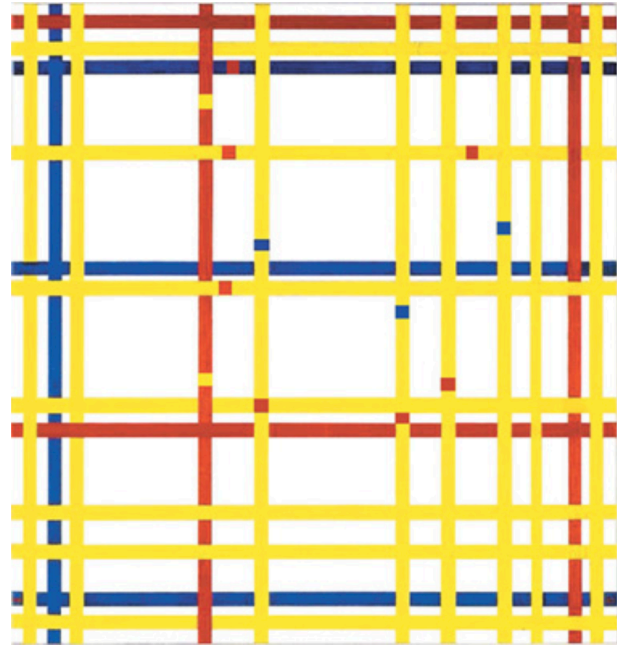
The artist writes: *"The straight line is the plastic expression of maximum speed, maximum energy, and therefore leads to the abolition of time and space."* The straight lines are a visible traces of a dynamic flow, a plastic symbol of the energy that generates all things; energy that develops from the microcosm where the notions of space-time change with respect to ours.

For Mondrian, the representation of the visible world begins with the invisible world.

To understand *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, we need to start with an earlier composition that the artist called *New York City* in homage to the city that had welcomed him during the war.



New York City, 1942, Olio su Tela, cm. 114 x 119,3



New York City, Diagramma

The diagram derived from *New York City* is my interpretation of how the small squares we see in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* are the result of the encounter between opposing directions. Unlike every single straight line, which manifests an infinite and absolute nature (only horizontal or only vertical), the small squares express a finite and relative nature, the result of a duality, that is, the coexistence of horizontal and vertical.

The small squares are not all the same but, in addition to their colors, they also differ imperceptibly in size and proportion. They are therefore entities that only tend to appear similar; a multitude that, on closer inspection, evokes diversity. All human beings have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but each face appears different from the other.

The finite and relative nature of the small square contrasts with the infinite and absolute nature of the straight line. This contrast generates continuous shifts in the squares, which tend to neutralize the expansion of the straight line on which they are located; an expansion that allows only one part of the square itself (horizontal or vertical) while denying the opposite one.

The square tends towards a synthesis of opposites, while the line tends towards their division. One could say that the line acts like a “devil” in the etymological sense of the Greek term.

Man, too, is born into an infinite space, which is the natural universe, and lives in a state of inner duality, always torn between natural instincts and rational demands. This generates imbalances and temporary deficiencies that lead individuals to act to restore a better balance with themselves and with others. This is what the squares do as they move along the lines, generating a multiple and ever-changing space. It may seem irreverent to reduce human beings to a set of colored squares, but as Albert Einstein said: “**Art is the expression of the deepest thoughts in the simplest way.**”

From disorder to a relative order

Looking at the small squares along the straight lines, we can see that some of them are arranged in a more regular pattern of alternating colors (Section 2, Diagram 1). This gives rise to **symmetrical sequences** with a red (A - A1) or blue (B) center, suggesting a certain order compared to the initial random succession of small squares that made the “landscape” different from one moment to the next; whether it is an external landscape such as an urban one or an internal landscape that thrives on instantaneous and contradictory impulses.

The symmetrical sequence is a more orderly and constant piece of space within a changing space such as the straight line. Human beings also tend, throughout their lives, to transform, as far as possible, **the unpredictable changeability of life into more stable and orderly situations**.

As mentioned, the finite and relative nature of the small square contrasts with the virtually infinite and absolute nature of the line on which it lies. This contrast tends to be rebalanced through the genesis of the symmetrical sequences that we observe in diagram 1, as if the virtually infinite extension of the straight line were to contract for a moment into an interval of orderly and therefore measurable space, thus finite (the symmetrical sequence), and then expand again to infinity. With symmetrical sequences, the small squares attempt to **bring the absolute, virtually infinity of the lines to their finite and relative dimension**. The human sciences do the same by studying the infinite universe of which we, finite entities, are part of.

Diagram 1: in the area marked A 1, we see two horizontal symmetrical sequences approaching each other and suggesting a possible correspondence in the vertical direction.

This situation is clearly realized in the area marked C, where two vertical symmetries with a red center correspond exactly in the horizontal direction.

By observing a horizontal correspondence between two vertical symmetries, we generate with our gaze a wider field that materializes in the form of a small blue area.

This growth triggers the genesis of other areas of varying size and color that extend beyond the thickness of the individual lines (Diagram 2).

In these areas, the relationship between the opposite directions appears more stable and lasting than in the small squares, but is still subject to temporary prevalence of one direction or the other.

We mentioned the human desire to transform the unpredictability of life into more stable situations. This applies not only to individual life but also to collective life. By establishing shared rules and norms, human beings tend to transform the instinctive life of the moment (the small squares) into more lasting and certain situations (the larger areas of diagrams 2, 3 and 4). Obviously, the painting evokes, in an extremely concise graphic form, situations that in real life are much more complex and lasting over time.

Diagram 2: Area D extends vertically and meets a gray horizontal line segment which, when translated downward, becomes a gray field within area E (Diagram 3). Compared to the monochromatic areas in diagram 2, those highlighted in diagram 3 develop an **inner space**.

The horizontal area F has a vertical segment inside it, while the vertical area G has a horizontal segment. The two segments are opposite to the direction of the area that expresses them. We often experience contrast between different and apparently opposite parts of ourselves. In the two areas H and I, on the other hand, we see an interior space in balance with the area of which it is part. Note how the two areas H and I are externally opposed (H is horizontal and I is vertical) while the two internal gray quadrangles tell us of a shared interiority. The intimate essence can unite people and things that appear different on the outside. From this point on, we will talk about an external space, which expands in a unique way in one direction or the other with the lines, disrupting our field of vision, and about the same space that becomes internalized, concentrating in more permanent relationships between opposites.

An interior space

The balance between the opposing directions manifested in the interior space of H and I with the two gray quadrangles seems less affected by the dynamic and changing flow of the external lines. Translating geometry into existential terms, we can see here a pictorial rendering of **a progressive consolidation of our inner space** which, resisting the contrasting stresses of the external world (the uncontrolled expansion of the lines in only one or the other direction), maintains a certain balance between opposing drives.

As mentioned, the relative nature of the small squares (the coexistence of horizontal and vertical) contrasts with the absolute nature of each individual line (only horizontal or only vertical). Hence the tendency of the small square to consolidate the relationship between horizontal and vertical and an opposite tendency of the line to open and expand this relationship in one direction, thus undermining the synthesis of opposites that the square seeks to preserve.

This brings to mind what is called **good will**, which urges us to resist the pressures of the external world and the temptations of our inner world (what Mondrian called the *Natural*) in order to keep the unity of our being (the *Spiritual*) relatively intact. However, there would be no evolution and progress without the discordant stimuli that, by testing us, offer us the opportunity to **consolidate ourselves**. Goodwill would not act without the temptations that seek to weaken the unity of being (the single line that opposes and threatens the balance and synthesis of opposites). It is up to us to take advantage of and enrich ourselves through temptations; it is up to us to open ourselves to ourselves and to the outside world without losing ourselves.

Piet Mondrian's compositions are not mere formal exercises but, albeit in a necessarily concise form, tend to evoke fundamental existential dynamics.

Towards unity

Diagram 4: The two areas L and M present a further level of internalization of the external space. A horizontal segment (in the upper part of M and in the lower part of L) contrasts with the vertical arrangement of the two areas (as in F and G Diagram 3), while a quadrangular area expresses greater balance and harmony with the area that contains it (as in H and I). The interior space of L and M therefore shows both contrast (the linear segment) and balance (the square). All the colors are now concentrated in these two areas.

Finally, at point N, we see the largest area so far, which brings together the three primary colors.

This entity evokes unity in the multiple set of yellow, red, and blue fragments that run after each other along the straight lines in search of balance between opposing forces (Diagram 5).

The N area is, in fact, formed by a vertical blue field counterbalanced internally by a red square within which a horizontal yellow field is generated. It is therefore a unified synthesis not only of the three primary colors but also of a vertical (blue) that becomes horizontal (yellow).

It is worth remembering that Mondrian identified the vertical with the *Spiritual*, while in the horizontal the artist saw a plastic symbol of the *Natural*. Obviously, there is nothing objective about this, but the attribution may depend on the fact that we think of the *Spiritual* as looking upwards, while the *Natural* expands limitlessly before our eyes in a horizontal direction, especially in the Netherlands. Furthermore, by the term *Natural*, the painter did not mean only nature itself, but also everything that can change within and outside us during the course of life.

In the vertical area N, the *Spiritual* encompasses the horizontal, that is, it makes it its own and establishes a measure of the *Natural*.

Physical space and mental space

As mentioned, Mondrian writes: *"The lines intersect and touch tangentially, but continue without ever stopping."* In this regard, art historian Maurizio Calvesi emphasizes: *"The result radiates from the painting towards infinity, but the canvas exhausts the intuition of the whole within itself."*

While we observe the composition gradually concentrating in increasingly extensive and permanent areas of color, the straight lines do not stop continuing, and the eye finds itself in dynamic equilibrium between an expanding space, multiplying into a plurality of different and apparently unconnected parts (a plastic symbol of physical space of reality) and the same space which, by internalizing itself, generates a synthesis that ideally concentrates all that multiplicity within itself (Diagram 5). Physical space thus becomes mental space; the space of consciousness grappling with the changing variety of the world.

Multifaceted unity

Pope Francis says: *"May differences not become conflicts, but diversity that integrates, and may unity not be uniformity, but rather welcome what is diverse."*

In the painting in question, unity is composed of vertical, horizontal, yellow, red, and blue, that is, all the elements that, at the beginning of the observed process, multiply along perpendicular lines. This means that **the multiple is not canceled out in the unitary synthesis.**

The part that is most internalized by the unity N is yellow and has horizontal proportions.

As mentioned, if for the artist the horizontal is a symbol of the *Natural*, while the vertical expresses the *Spiritual*, what we see tells us that in the unity N, the *Spiritual* integrates the *Natural* within itself. While remaining apparently opposed, the *Spiritual* and the *Natural* find a balanced synthesis here. Note, however, how **between the two aspects it is the dimension of the *Spiritual* (vertical) that prevails.**

The one opens to the manifold

Compared to the squares and the first areas of color, the unified synthesis N expresses a relative state of calm, but this is not a static condition, rather, it is a calm resulting from opposing impulses that counterbalance each other in a balanced and harmonious way; a slight horizontal expansion of the yellow or a slight vertical growth of the blue would produce imbalance, setting the game of oppositions in motion again; and in fact, continuing this analysis, we see how this happens.

Diagram 6: Area O has the same extension as N but is no longer formed by the three primary colors, but only by red and gray. Horizontal and vertical that balanced each other in N are once again out of balance here, with a horizontal line dividing the internal space of O.

In P, red, yellow, and blue are juxtaposed but no longer interpenetrate as in N.

The juxtaposition evokes less compactness and solidity of the whole, unlike the interpenetration, which instead blends the three colors into a single, more stable structure such as N.

Note how, on the right of P, the yellow already tends to spill out of the perimeter of the area and merge with the yellow of the surrounding lines.

Looking at N, O, and P in sequence, we see how the synthesis of the three primary colors (N) breaks down and then yellow, red, and blue open up into a multitude of small squares scattered in a disorderly manner along the lines (Q). In this way, the one flows back into the many.

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, the multiple becomes one (Diagrams 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and the one opens up to the multiple (Diagrams 6, 7).

This brings to mind Edgar Morin when he speaks of: *“a continuous coming and going between the parts and the whole.”*

The Natural Universe

Broadway Boogie Woogie shows a process of construction and constant transformation, like all natural processes, and how in nature nothing remains the same for long; every entity acquires value in relation to the other components; every point is unique and unrepeatable and at the same time part of **a process that ideally unites all things**. Everything changes, but this awareness remains. A composition without preordained patterns, where everything becomes free and new.

A space in dynamic equilibrium between a tendency towards disorder and a tendency towards order. This is what Piet Mondrian tells us with a virtually infinite and ever-new combination of basic elements such as horizontal and vertical lines, yellow, red, and blue.

Isn't nature an infinite, ever-changing combination of the same basic elements?

Henri Matisse: *“There is a common design in all things, plants, trees, animals, men, and it is with this design that one must be in harmony.”*

The common design is what binds and unites all things beyond their diversity. How can such an idea be expressed if not by abstracting from the apparent form of each individual thing?

“As for details,” Matisse continues, *“the painter should no longer concern himself with them. There is photography to render the multitude of details a hundred times better and more quickly.”*

With a skillful use of shapes and colors, abstract art speaks to us of reality, contemplating it as one contemplates the immensity of a sea with all its waves, each new wave different from all the others but still made of the same water. There is a kind of painting that pursues reality in the fleeting appearance of a few waves and a kind of painting that contemplates the eternal becoming of water.

When it is not just a convenient shortcut, **abstraction restores a universal vision** to the art of painting.

“Pro veritate adversa diligere”

Considering the painting as a visible trace of our inner space, we see how, from an irreconcilable contrast between opposing impulses, the composition suggests the possibility of reaching a synthesis. A synthesis that can only be achieved over time and through various attempts and many probable failures (Diagrams 1 to 4). The synthesis is not achieved once and for all, but remains in dynamic equilibrium between opposites (Diagrams 5, 6, 7).

“Pro veritate adversa diligere” said Cardinal Martini echoing the words of Gregory the Great. (for the sake of truth, to love adverse things)

The process analyzed in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, from straight lines to symmetries and then from these to larger areas until reaching a uniform surface, tells us that life is change, but that in order to live, humans need to reduce and stabilize the changing flow of existence, which, however, cannot be controlled to any great extent. The straight lines, which with the small squares express change continuing to infinity, represent primordial vitality. The symmetries and larger areas, which instead express a more permanent space, represent the balance necessary for existence in time. Once again, I must emphasize how the painting necessarily expresses, in a highly synthetic form, existential processes that are actually much more complex, articulated and lasting in real life.

Spirituality, Art and Science

One aspect that I find noteworthy is Mondrian's use of a precise plastic alphabet that suggests common ground between spirituality, art, and science. It brings to mind Italo Calvino when, in his *Lezioni Americane*, he writes: *“Express the imprecise with the utmost precision.”*

With a defined and precise geometry, one can express the indefinite and the imponderable.

With *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, the Dutch painter gives us a universal representation of reality expressed in a language common to all cultures, that of images. It is probably no coincidence that this painting came to light and remains in New York (once called New Amsterdam), a city where, amid many difficulties, all the cultures and religions of the world seek to coexist.

Michel Seuphor, Mondrian's friend and collaborator in Paris, wrote: *“For the first time in history, one of these prophets is an artist, a painter. For the first time, the presence of another world in this world has been entrusted to an image maker. This time it is not a matter of reading or interpreting, it is a matter of seeing. For those who can see, I believe he has succeeded in bringing the mystery into full light.”*

The purpose of these reflections is to show how, in a world that seems to have lost its bearings, a certain way of understanding painting and visual culture more generally can contribute to rediscovering what is right and, above all, a renewed communion between art and spirituality.

Form and content

Unlike much abstract art, where form is an end in itself, with Mondrian form becomes content. One could say that the content of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* blossoms from its form. From a philosophical point of view, this seems to me like a small revolution compared to the traditional distinction between form and content.