

Section 1

Piet Mondrian's painting encourages us to think about reality starting from its contradictions. The artist sought tranquility 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 to give concrete form to his feelings about life, which he perceived in its everyday and eternal, particular and universal aspects.

"From discordant elements comes the most beautiful harmony" said Heraclitus.

What could be more discordant than a horizontal line opposed to a vertical line?

Broadway Boogie Woogie features horizontal and vertical straight lines as well as areas of various measurements, proportions, and colors, whose interaction generates a manifold and asymmetrical composition.

Horizontal and vertical lines constitute the intimate structure of the two-dimensional space of painting. Mondrian sees something fundamental, almost immutable, in the orthogonal relationship, while all the possible results of the relationship between horizontals and verticals (horizontal rectangles, vertical rectangles, squares; of different sizes, proportions, and colors) present the mutable. In the horizontal-vertical relationship, we can also see a plastic symbol of the opposing forces at work in nature as well as the duality that animates human beings.

If, on 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 ending."* Art historian Maurizio Calvesi adds: *"The result radiates from the painting towards infinity, but the canvas exhausts the intuition of the whole."*

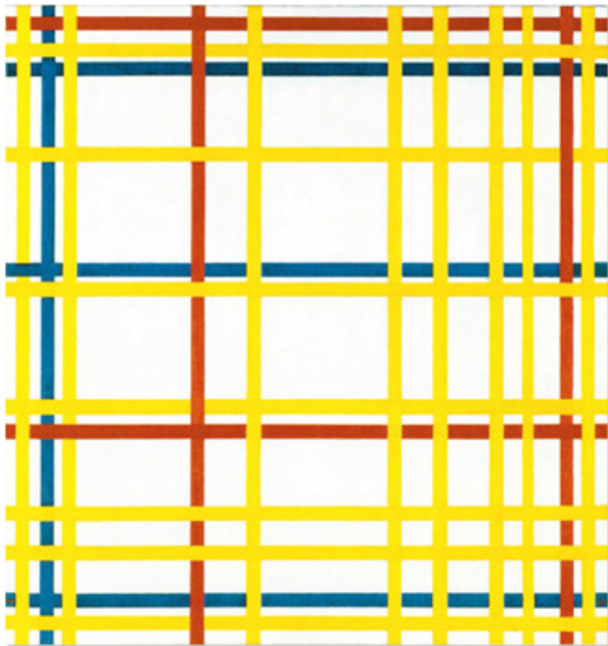
Taking a first glance at Section 2, we see small squares of different colors, sizes, and proportions running along the straight lines and offering the eye a changing and densely populated "landscape." Diagram 2: The small squares join together and exceed the thickness of the straight lines to become larger areas of various colors and sizes. Diagram 3 shows new areas that develop an inner space, up to a single area (N) that unites the three primary colors (Diagram 4). N suggests a synthesis of the varied set of yellow, red, and blue small squares that multiply relentlessly along the straight lines (Diagram 5). *Broadway Boogie Woogie* thus shows a progression from a manifold to a unitary space; from the multiple to the one.

Let us now look at this process in detail, focusing on some of its existential and spiritual aspects.

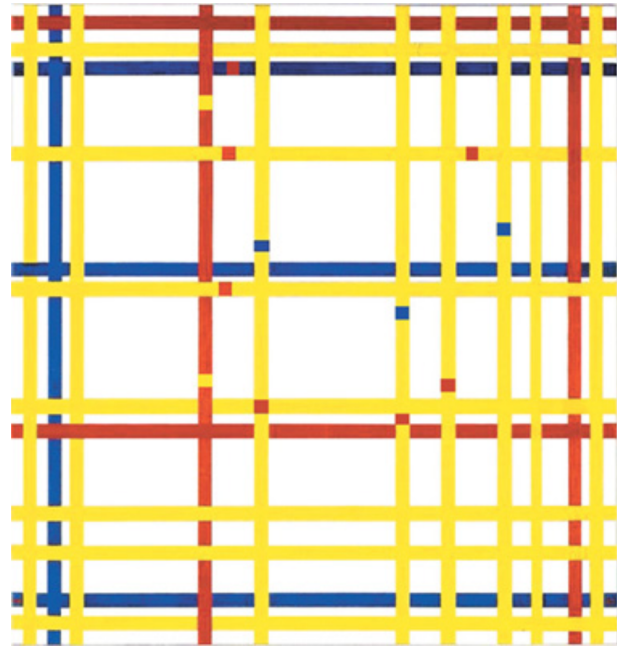
The artist writes: *"The straight line is the plastic expression of maximum speed, maximum energy, and therefore leads to the abolition of time and space."*

Straight lines are dynamic entities; a plastic expression of a primordial energy that generates all visible things; energy that develops from the microcosm where the notion of space-time is different from ours. **For Mondrian, the depiction of the visible world begins from the invisible world.**

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



New York City, 1942, Oil on Canvas, cm. 114 x 119,3



New York City, Diagram

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 meeting point of opposite directions.

The painter says that *“the straight line is the plastic expression of maximum speed, maximum energy, and therefore leads to the abolition of time and space.”*

On a virtually infinite straight line, it is not possible to isolate a specific point in space/time which, instead, manifests itself when two opposite straight lines establish a relationship and generate a small square. The small square is a finite entity and therefore a measurable portion of space that lasts a certain amount of time along the straight line.

The small square signals the birth of our space-time (here and now) that emerges from a reality without space-time such as the microcosm symbolized here by the straight line.

Unlike each individual 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 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 square contrasts with the infinite and absolute nature of the line. This contrast generates continuous shifts in the squares, which tend to neutralize the expansion of the line on which they are located; this expansion disproportionately accentuates only one part of the square itself (either horizontal or vertical) **negating the opposite**.

The square tends towards the synthesis and unity 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 issues**.

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 multifaceted and constantly evolving space. It may seem irreverent to reduce human beings to a set of small colored squares in this case, but as Albert Einstein said: ***“Art is the expression of the deepest thought in the simplest way”***.

From disorder to a certain level of order

Observing the squares moving along the lines, we see that some of them are arranged in a more regular alternation of the same colors (Section 2, Diagram 1). This creates 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 was 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 an ever-changing space such as the straight line. Human beings also tend, in the course of 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 square contrasts with the virtually infinite and absolute nature (either vertical or horizontal) of the line of which is part of.

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

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 sense.

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

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

This growth gives rise to 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 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 concerns not only individual life but also 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 extreme visual synthesis situations that in real life are much more articulated, complex, and lasting over time.

Diagram 2: Area D extends vertically and meets a gray horizontal line segment which, 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 oppose the direction of the area that expresses them. We often experience contrast between apparently opposing parts of ourselves. In the two areas H and I, instead, we see an inner space in balance with the area of which it is a part.

Note how the two areas H and I are externally opposed (H is horizontal and I is vertical), while the two gray quadrangles inside tell us of their shared interiority.

The intimate essence can unite individuals and things that look externally very different.

From this point on, we will talk about an external space, which expands univocally in one direction or the other with straight lines, disrupting our field of vision, and about the same space that is internalized, concentrating on more stable and permanent relationships between opposites.

An inner space

The balance between the opposing directions, that we observe in the inner 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 the plastic rendering of a **progressive consolidation of our inner space** which, resisting the contrasting stresses of the outside world or of our inner contradictory nature (either one or the opposing direction), maintains a certain balance between opposites.

As mentioned, the relative nature of the squares (the coexistence of horizontal and vertical) contrasts with the absolute nature of each individual line (only horizontal or vertical) on which they are located. Hence the tendency of the square to consolidate the relationship between horizontal and vertical and an opposite tendency of the line to open and expand this relationship in only one direction, thus undermining the synthesis of opposites that the small square seeks to preserve. This brings to mind what is called **goodwill**, which urges us to resist the pressures of the outside world and the temptations of our inner world (what Mondrian calls the *Natural*) in order to keep the unity of our being (the *Spiritual*) relatively unspoiled.

However, there would be no evolution and progress without the discordant pressures that, by testing us, offer us the opportunity **to consolidate ourselves**. Goodwill would not act without the temptations that aim to weaken the unity of being (the single straight 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 merely a formal exercise but, albeit in a necessarily concise form, tend to evoke fundamental existential dynamics.

Towards synthesis and unity

Diagram 4: Areas L and M show 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 predominantly vertical layout of the two areas (as in F and G Diagram 3), while a quadrangular area expresses greater balance and harmony with the surface that hosts it (as in H and I). The inner 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 combining the three primary colors in a balanced synthesis. This entity evokes unity of the multiple set of yellow, red, and blue fragments running along the straight lines in search of balance between opposites (Diagram 5). Area N 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), that is, a synthesis of opposites.

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 could depend on the fact that we think of the *Spiritual* by 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 is subject to change within and outside us in the course of a lifetime.

In the vertical area N, the *Spiritual* welcomes the horizontal, that is, it interpenetrates with the *Natural*, establishing its measure.

Physical space and mental space

As mentioned, Mondrian writes: *"The lines intersect and touch tangentially, but continue without ever ending."* 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."*

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 thus 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 out there) 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.

A manifold unity

Pope Francis says: *"May differences not become conflicts, but diversity that integrates, and at the same time, may unity not be uniformity, but welcome what is manifold."*

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, unity is composed of vertical, horizontal, yellow, red, and blue, that is, all the elements that multiply along the perpendicular lines at the beginning of the observed process. This means that **unity does not cancel out multiplicity**.

The part that is most internalized by 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 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, that between the two aspects, **it is the dimension of the *Spiritual* (vertical) that prevails.**

The one opens up to the manifold

Compared to the squares and the first areas of color, unit N expresses a relative state of calm, but this should not be seen as a static condition; rather, it is a calm resulting from opposing forces that perfectly balance each other out for a certain amount of time. A slight horizontal expansion of yellow or a slight vertical growth of blue would produce an imbalance, setting the interplay of oppositions in motion again; and in fact, continuing with 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. The horizontal and vertical lines 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 (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 opens up to a multiplicity of small squares scattered in a disorderly manner along the lines (Q).

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

Edgar Morin comes to mind 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 parts; 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 of unity remains. 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-changing combination of basic elements such as horizontal and vertical lines, yellow, red, and blue colors.

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

"We must give a conscious image of nature; until now, we have only considered the image of man," used to say Paul Cézanne at the end of the 19th century.

On the side, we see a painting by Austrian painter Peter Wenzel (1745-1829) who, in addition to representing human beings, strives to give an account of the great variety of creatures found in nature.

"Art must express the universal." says Mondrian.



Obviously, no painting can ever represent the infinite diversity of nature, which science and the media have made us aware of today. How can we account for the myriad of different things that exist in the world if not by abstracting from the apparent form of each individual thing?

The small squares in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* serve this function: they ideally evoke the widest possible diversity (each square is different from the others in color, size, and proportions) while at the same time allowing us to maintain an overview of the whole.

Furthermore, every single thing or individual is in reality a small, potentially infinite universe. Every single entity that appears as one is at the same time multiple.

Let's take a concrete example: if we look at a tree from a distance, it appears to us as a synthetic green dot. As we get closer, the tree reveals an increasing amount of detail, reaching enormous complexity when we contemplate each individual leaf, which, on closer inspection, reveals a small universe. The tree, which appeared as a synthetic green spot, now appears as an infinite reality. As we move away from the tree, the multiplicity in which we were immersed gradually returns to appearing as a synthetic green dot. Everything is both one and many, depending on the relationship of position and the level of perception that we establish with things. How can we depict the infinite multiplicity of each individual thing and, at the same time, the immense variety of all different things? How, if not by abstracting from the contingent and particular aspect of each single thing to evoke what all things have in common?

Henri Matisse: *"There is a common design in all things, plants, trees, animals, humans, and it is with this design that one must be in consonance."* The common design evoked by the French artist is what links things that are apparently very different from each other; each in its own specific uniqueness, but all being the result of an ever-changing combination of the same basic natural elements. *"As for details,"* Matisse continues, *"the painter no longer needs to worry about them. Photography is there to render the multitude of details a hundred times better and faster."*

With a skillful use of shapes and colors, abstract painting speaks to us of reality, contemplating it as one contemplates the immensity of the sea with all its waves, each new wave appearing 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 ceaseless becoming of water.

When it is not merely a convenient shortcut, the abstract vision of reality restores to the art of painting **a universal vision**. In a world where parts have multiplied excessively, where the reference points and certainties of the past seem to be faded, the capacity for abstraction becomes indispensable for rediscovering a certain essence of things.

“Pro veritate adversa diligere”

Considering the painting as a visible trace of our inner space, we see how, from an irreconcilable contrast between opposing entities, 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 complete essay shows those moments when attempts to consolidate a synthesis fail. This synthesis is not achieved once and for all, but remains in dynamic equilibrium between opposite impulses (Diagrams 5, 6, 7). *“Pro veritate adversa diligere”* said Cardinal Martini, echoing a saying by Gregory the Great.

The process analyzed in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, from the uncontrolled expansion of straight lines to small squares, and from these to symmetries and then to larger areas, up to the largest area that ideally unites everything in a balanced synthesis, tells us that human beings need to reduce and stabilize the changing and unpredictable flow of events that life brings with it in order to live. The straight lines, which express uncontrollable change continuing indefinitely, represent primordial vitality. From the relationship between opposite straight lines arise the small squares and then the symmetries and larger areas, which instead express a measured and permanent space, that is, the balance necessary for existence over time. At the same time, we cannot escape the changes that lead us to new situations which life always brings with it. Once again, I must emphasize how the painting expresses, in a necessarily very concise form, existential situations that in real life are much more complex, and lasting.

An image maker

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 help us rediscover the a renewed communion between art and spirituality.

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 know how to see, I believe he has succeeded in bringing the mystery into full light.”*

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 (formerly known as New Amsterdam), a city where, amid many difficulties, all the cultures and religions of the world try to coexist.

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 *Lezioni Americane*, he writes: *“Express the imprecise with the utmost precision.”*

With a defined and precise geometry, one can speak of the indefinite and the imponderable, but one must know how and where to place things.

Unlike much abstract art, where form is an end in itself, with Mondrian, form becomes content. 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.

Man's questions about the essence and purpose of the world also arise from our tiny, finite dimension compared to an infinite universe. Every religion, philosophy, or scientific theory constitutes a sophisticated attempt to rebalance that disproportion. Ultimately, it is a question of proportions, and what, if not the art of painting, can deal with proportions?