

How to See Mondrian

FOREWORD

I am a painter and the alphabet in which I express myself is one made up of shapes and colors. I did not find Mondrian. It was rather one of his paintings, namely Broadway Boogie Woogie, that presented itself along my path as a discreet pointer and a source of wisdom, as simple and inaccessible as water from the fountainhead. I began to study the composition in order to clarify some things to myself and in the space of a few years I discovered an entire world in that painting. While I regard Broadway Boogie Woogie as one of the most important works of the twentieth century, my own way of painting is different. The last works of Henri Matisse are equally important for me, as are the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi and the promising work of some as yet unknown artists.



Mondrian with Broadway Boogie Woogie

I attach less importance to all the self-styled artists, creative wheeler-dealers, and multinationals of culture nowadays buzzing around art. Paul Cézanne used to say that *“art is a religion and its purpose is to elevate thought”*.

A great deal has been written about Mondrian but not enough as yet about his paintings. The content is in fact seldom allowed to flow directly from the images, which should in my view constitute the primary source of every analysis that addresses painting. Mondrian wrote about the new art but never believed that it was possible to write a theory of art, as Kandinsky and Klee attempted to do. Art is first and foremost something you do, after which you can talk about it and try to explain it. It is paintings rather than theories that constitute the true source for those who really want to understand. As a painter, I therefore place words at the service of images in explaining Mondrian’s work. This has revealed itself as an organic structure in which one canvas cannot be separated from another without losing sight of the deeper meaning of the whole. It is an evolutionary process spread over forty years during which the Dutch artist gave concrete shape to his vision of reality. That vision is encapsulated in Broadway Boogie Woogie, his last work, completed in 1943. It really is a most fascinating trajectory.

Examination of Mondrian’s work reveals an evolutionary process that completely transformed the way of painting in the space of fifty years. One of the aims of these studies is to explain the reasons for this evolution by showing how to read and interpret abstract painting in relation to everyday life and the universal themes of the human condition. I have only touched upon the existential aspects because my purpose here is not to develop issues of a general character but to show the connections between these and Neoplastic painting. In a world where the parts have grown superabundantly, where the firm points of reference and age-old certainties have been lost, the capacity for abstraction becomes indispensable in rediscovering a certain essence of things. A certain way of understanding art can contribute today toward recasting the vision of greater breadth that has been lacking on the frenzied and fragmentary cultural scene over the last few decades.

I must say that it is every bit as difficult to explain visual processes in words as it is to give a verbal description of a piece of music. I hope that the necessary degree of detail in certain passages does not unduly inhibit the overall view that remains one of the aims of my work.

Among the published works that I have found very useful, attention must be drawn to Michel Seuphor’s biography. Seuphor too was an artist and a good friend of Mondrian. The fine work published in 1961 by Filiberto Menna, my professor at university, provides confirmation from a philosophical and literary viewpoint of certain ideas of mine about the geometry of the paintings. I thank Hans L. C. Jaffé for a number of intelligent observations that contributed to my work of analysis, especially at the beginning. Particular thanks go to Joop M. Joosten and Robert Welsh for their exhaustive catalogue raisonné. General thanks go to all those who have endeavored to explain and to disseminate the ideas of the Dutch master.

Michael Sciam

Further information at www.pietmondrian.eu, www.piet-mondrian.eu, www.pietmondrian.info and www.michaelsciam.eu.

A VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

The purpose of these pages, as well as of the web sites (www.piet-mondrian.eu and www.pietmondrian.eu) is to show the whole of Mondrian’s oeuvre as a dynamic process. I believe that throughout his entire life the artist has been searching for one image which finally took form with his last accomplished canvas Broadway Boogie Woogie. Mondrian wrote that *“Life is a continued examination of the same thing in ever-greater depth”*. These pages try to highlight the *“continued examination of the same thing”* the Dutch master has dedicated his life to.

I have selected eighty works to show the evolutionary process which has guided Mondrian toward that one image which should express a new vision of reality. In order to provide a synthetical explanation of the process, I have then selected forty works which represent fundamental stages in the evolutionary path. These works, numbered from 1 to 40, have been placed together as an uninterrupted sequence on five plates (PLATE 1 to 5). These provide a first analysys of the significance of the whole process. Additional and more detailed explanation of the whole body of examined works is provided on additional pages (PAGE 1 to 15). PLATE 6 finally summarizes the explanation provided by PLATES 1 to 5 and by PAGES 1 to 15. One more page (PAGE 16) compares Broadway Boogie Woogie with a Japanese Zen painting and a work by Henri Matisse.

The first fourty works (shown on PLATES 1 to 5 as well as on PAGES 1 to 15) are marked with bold types and numbers only (**1** to **40**) whereas the additional forty works (shown on PAGES 1 to 15) are marked with regular types as Fig. 1 to Fig. 40.

Recapitulating, the explanation starts with PLATE 1 to PLATE 5, goes on with a detailed analysis through PAGE 1 to PAGE 15 and ends up with a synthesis of the whole process with PLATE 6.

I do realize that this is a rather anomalous format, half-way between a book and an exhibition format. As a matter of fact, some people have mounted the five plates on a wall to obtain an exhibition route similar to that of an actual show.



Michael Sciam is an artist and art theorist. He has studied architecture and art history at the university in Rome while painting had been always present in his life and gained momentum when he decided to grant his inner vision with freer ways of expression.

Although Sciam is not an art critic, he writes about painting believing in a didactic and social function of art. He seeks to show the wealth of existential content that makes true abstract painting a tool capable of contributing both to our understanding of today’s world and to the development of tomorrow’s.

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Mondrian in his Amsterdam atelier, 1905



1 - Still Life with Herings, 1893, Oil on Canvas, cm 66,5 x 77,5

PLATE 1

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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.

Mondrian began to paint in accordance with the tried and tested canons of nineteenth-century Dutch naturalism. The works he produced between 1893 and 1907 were predominantly still lifes, portraits, and above all landscapes including drawings in pencil or charcoal, watercolors and works in oil on canvas and cardboard.

The artist often painted riverside landscapes: The solid and static shape of a house (**3**) is reflected in the mutable flowing water of a river suggesting contrast between the human quest for firmness and durability (the house) and the mutability of life and the ever-changing aspect of nature, in this case of water. Mondrian: *“In art, it is important to distinguish two kinds of balance: 1) static balance 2) dynamic balance. It is always natural for human beings to seek static balance. This balance is obviously necessary for existence in time. But vitality, in the continuous succession in time, always destroys this balance.”*

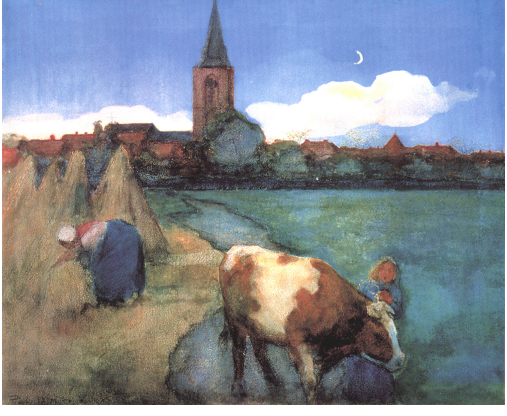
In **6** the arched profile of the trees is reflected in the river to evoke an oval form suggesting a sense of unity. *“I was struck by the vastness of nature and I tried to express expansion, tranquillity, unity”*. (Mondrian) The river

Around 1907 the artist worked at several paintings in the light of evening and by moonlight (**5**). Unlike sunlight, which accentuates colors by creating reflections and shadows that increase the manifold appearance of things, the light emitted by the moon is faint and makes it possible to see the broad outline of the landscape. The multiplicity of details are reduced and the multiform natural shapes appear more synthetic.

7: The human figures are mostly presented in contemplative attitudes. The female figure with one or more flowers is a subject connected with the theosophical theories that interested the artist in that period. The flower indicates a process of inner purification.

8: Mondrian was drawn to the simplicity of a flower while contemplating its rich and articulated inner structure at the same time.

A theme repeatedly addressed around 1900 is a landscape at the center of which we see a village church (**4**). It is the St. Jakob’s Church in the village of Winterswijk where the artist’s family has been living in. After preliminary studies, the painter represents the scene from a particular viewpoint which allows him to express contrast between the chaotic web of the tree branches and the rectilinear and precise vertical shape of the church tower. The branches develop toward all possible directions contrasting one another, whereas the church tower in the center firmly and unequivocally points upward. It seems as if through the contrast between the disordered crowd of branches and the neat architectural skyline the artist wants to evidence on one hand the unpredictable course of nature and on the other the stability human beings need to carry on their life. A metaphor of the contrast between what Mondrian called the Natural and the Spiritual. Same as the branches, the hedgerow at the bottom, with some chickens behind, evoke the unceasing, uncatchable flowing energy of nature.



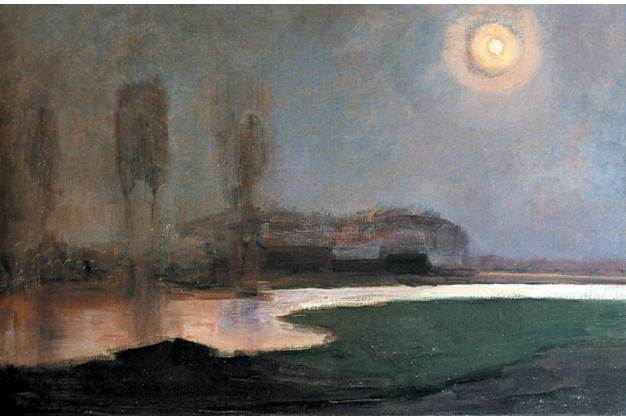
2 - Rural Scene with S. Jakob’s Church, 1899, Watercolor, cm 53 x 65



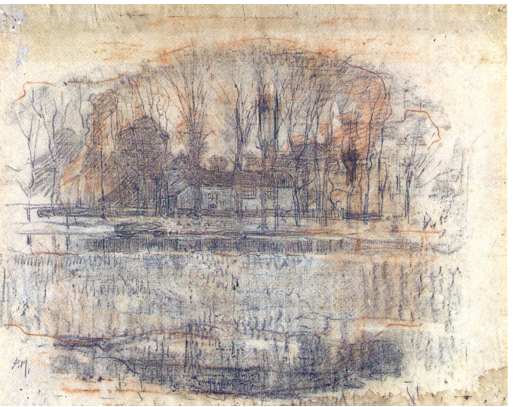
3 - House on the Gein, 1901, Watercolor and Gouache on Paper, cm 46 x 57



4 - St. Jakob’s Church, c. 1898, Gouache on Paper, cm 50 x 75



5 - Summer Night, 1907, Oil on Canvas, cm 71 x 110,5



6 - Geinrust Farm, Compositional Study, c. 1906, Crayon, Sanguine and Pastel on Paper, cm 47,5 x 72,5



7 - Passion Flower, 1901, Watercolor on Paper, cm 47,5 x 72,5



8 - Upright Chrysanthemum, 1901, Watercolor on Paper, cm 19.3 x 38.3



9 - Stammer Mill with Streaked Sky, c. 1906, Oil on Canvas, cm 74, 6 x 96,5



10 - The Red Cloud, 1907, Oil on Cardboard, cm 64 x 75



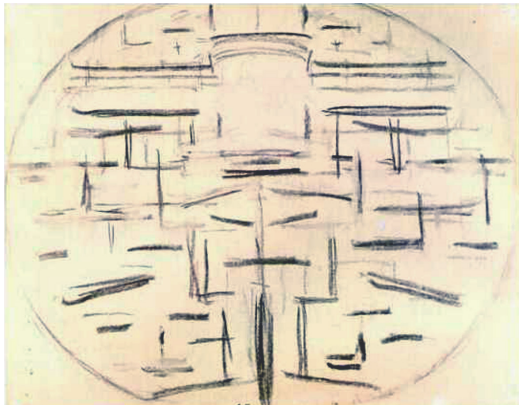
11 - Evening Sky with Luminous Cloud Streaks, c. 1907, Oil on Cardboard, cm 64 x 76,5



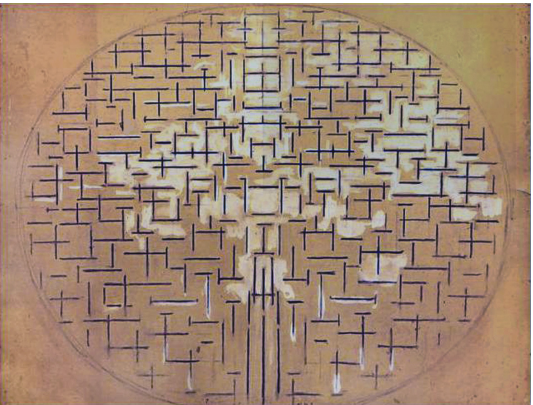
12 - Seascape, 1909, Oil on Cardboard, cm 34,5 x 50,5



Picture of a pier jutting into the water suggesting a probable whereabouts for 21 and 22



21 - Pier and Ocean 3, 1914, Charcoal on Paper, cm 50,5 x 63



22 - Pier and Ocean 5, 1915, Charcoal, Ink (?) and Gouache on Paper, cm 87,9 x 111,7

What we have seen so far is confirmed by new works inspired by the sea and a pier jutting out from the beach into the waters (21, 22).

In 22 and 23 we see the horizontal extension of the sea (a space similar to 10, 11, 12) interpenetrating with a vertical element (the pier, i.e. a man-made, non-natural element such as 14, 15, 16).

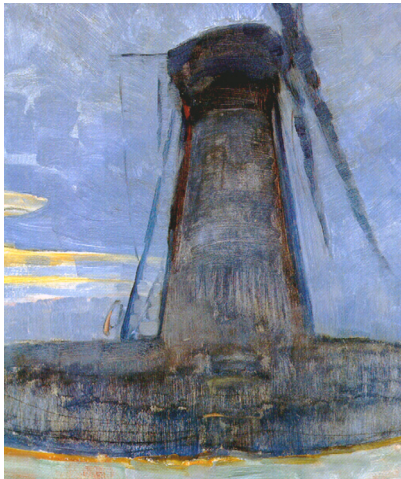
The interplay between the vertical (symbol of the *Spiritual*) and the horizontal (the *Natural*) gives birth to a variety of situations where each aspect prevails for a moment onto the opposite one.

The interaction between pier and sea generates a vaguely quadrangular area (21) which then concentrates in the upper section of 22 into a defined square expressing a perfect balance between the two opposing directions, that is, between the *Natural* and the *Spiritual*.

PLATE 2

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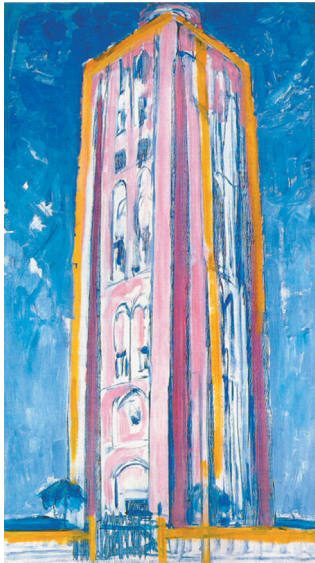
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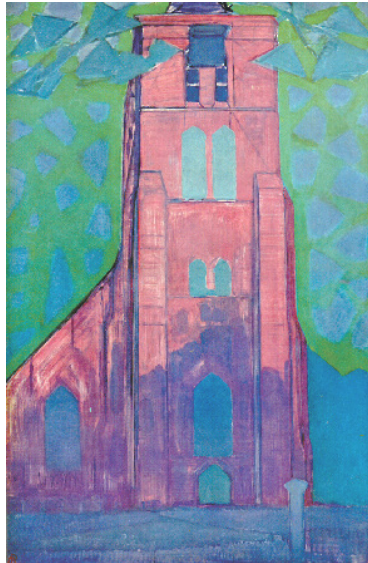
13 - Mill at Domburg, c. 1908, Oil on Cardboard, cm 63,5 x 76,5



14 - The Red Mill, 1911, Oil on Canvas, cm 86 x 150



15 - Lighthouse at Westkapelle in Orange, Pink, Purple and Blue, c. 1910, Oil on Canvas, cm 75 x 135



16 - Church Tower at Domburg, 1911, Oil on Canvas, cm 75 x 114

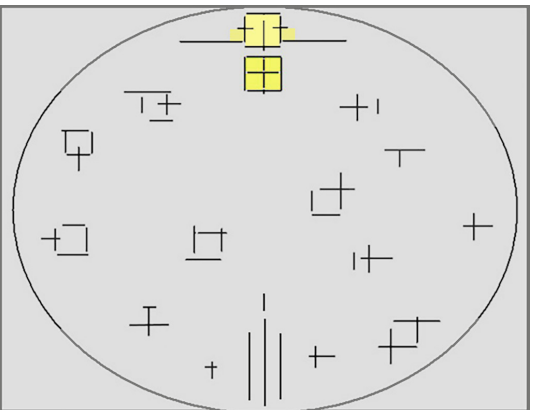


Picture of the Church at Domburg

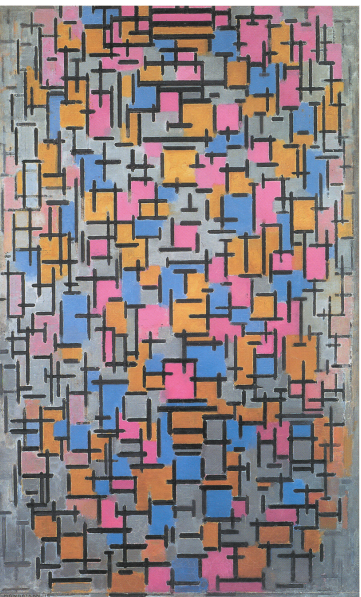
Around 1906-07 the landscapes of the naturalistic period are gradually stripped of trees, houses and any other sign of human presence and seem designed to emphasize the endless space of nature (10 to 12). The painter's attention also focused at the same time on individual objects like windmills, lighthouses and church towers (13 to 16). It almost appears that, on observing the landscape (9), Mondrian tended on the one hand to extrapolate the natural element (the whitish streaked sky) which he began to identify with a primarily horizontal space and on the other to accentuate in the opposite direction, i.e. the vertical, the shape of artificial, man-made elements (windmills, lighthouses, church towers). Years later, Mondrian would write about the *Natural* as identified by the horizontal and the *Spiritual* by the vertical. By *Natural* Mondrian meant not only the natural landscape but also anything that around us and within ourselves during our lives constantly changes while the vertical is a symbol of the all-human propensity to seek stability, constancy, unity, i.e. of the *Spiritual*.

While horizontal extension predominates in the landscapes and vertical development in the architectural volumes, the two opposing directions interpenetrate in the figure of a tree (17, 18, 18 Diagram). In the tree layout the artist imagines an ideal synthesis between the horizontal (the *Natural*) and the vertical (the *Spiritual*). In this phase the tree becomes the visual metaphor of a search for equilibrium between contrasting entities such as, on the one hand, the manifold aspect of nature and the unpredictable course of life (evoked by the disordered set of branches) and, on the other, the human spiritual quest for constancy and unity (the trunk).

Around 1912 space turns cubist (19) and the structure of the tree (18) re-appears in the center of an abstract composition (20) where a variety of horizontal and vertical dashes presents in clearer form the crowded space previously expressed with the branches. The relationship between horizontal and vertical, which is expressed in a rather univocal and static way (18), multiplies (19) and takes on ever changing combinations (20). 20 evokes in abstract form, i.e. in essential terms, a variety of relationships between horizontals (symbol of nature) and verticals (the non-natural elements such as mills, and church towers) he had, one by one, painted in a realistic form during the previous years. One could also say that 20 suggests a variety of tree basic structures or different ways to look at the same tree structure (18). While the composition expresses a variety of precarious relationships between opposites, a rectangle in the center evokes a sense of stability, constancy and **unity** (the *Spiritual*) in a space which otherwise unexpectedly **multiplies** all around (the *Natural*).



Mondrian in his studio apartment, 1909



23 - Composition, 1916, Oil on Canvas and Wood, cm 75,1 x 119

Same as the vertical trunk of a tree unifies a rather chaotic set of branches (18), a rectangle (20) and then a square (22) unify a multifarious set of unbalanced relationships between horizontal and vertical lines. This variety is a plastic rendering of the ever-changing manifold space of the world. By reducing reality to a multitude of orthogonal signs, Mondrian undoubtedly performs an arbitrary operation with respect to everything we see. This enables him, however, to express the widest diversity on the canvas while at the same time maintaining something more constant (the horizontal / vertical relationship). The process of abstraction enables the artist to address the endless multiplicity of the outer world without neglecting a sense of unity to which he aspires in the depth of his spirit. Every sign differs from the others but they all share the same intimate nature (the perpendicular relationship), just as every human being, every animal or tree is unique and unrepeatable but all express some fundamental characteristics that make it possible to discern an invisible overall design.

During this phase the artist seems intent in finding an "inner landscape" capable of evoking a universal image of the outer world. *Art must express the universal*" (Mondrian).

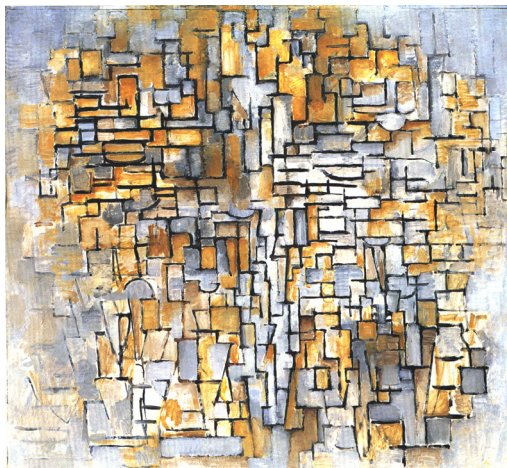
The task of faithfully reproducing the fleeting appearance of things had been taken over in the meantime by photography.



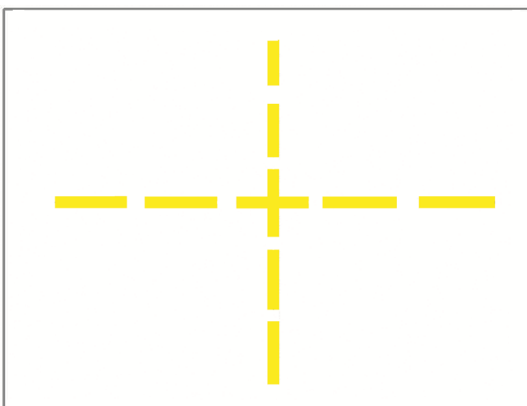
17 - The Red Tree (Evening), 1908-10, Oil on Canvas, cm 70 x 99



18 - Study of Trees 1, 1912, Black Crayon on Paper, cm 66 x 89



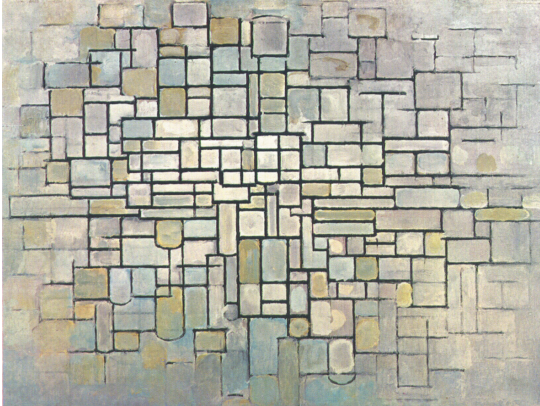
19 - Table 2, Composition VII, 1913, Oil on Canvas, cm 104,4 x 113,6



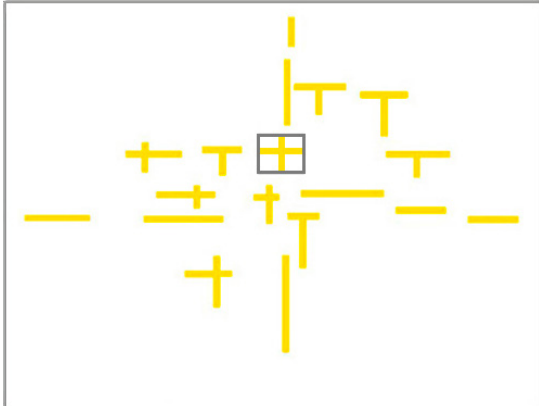
18 - Diagram

Horizontal as
10 11 12

Vertical as
13
14
15
16



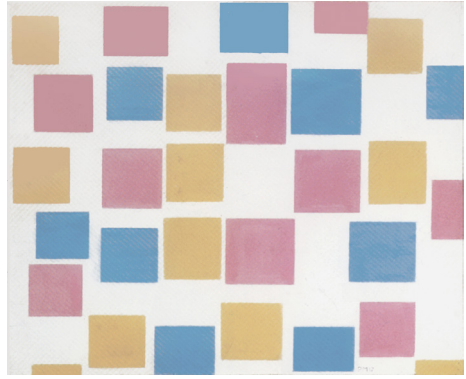
20 - Composition II, 1913, Oil on Canvas, cm 88 x 115



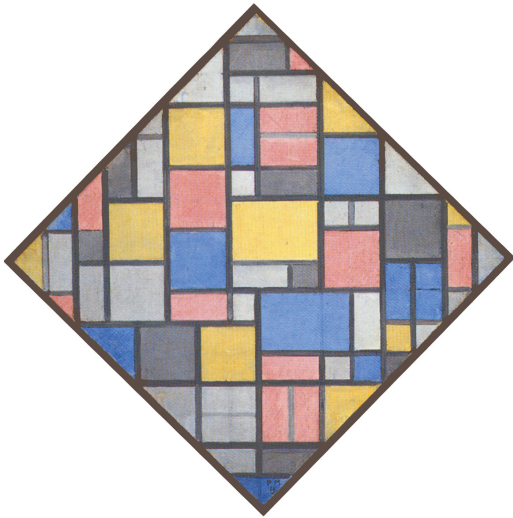
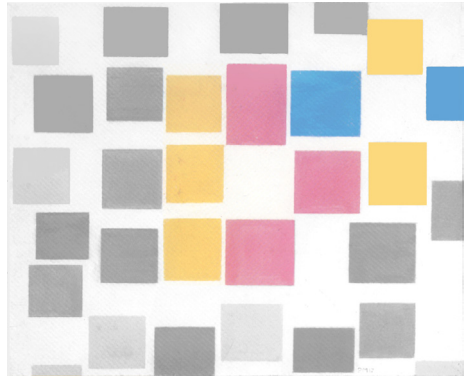
20 - Diagram

PLATE 3

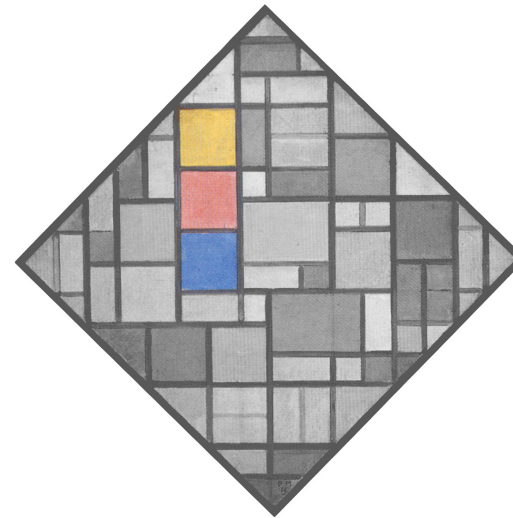
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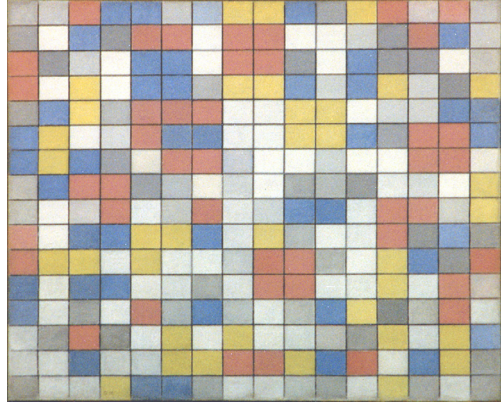
24 - Composition with Color Planes 2, 1917, Oil on Canvas, cm 48 x 61,5



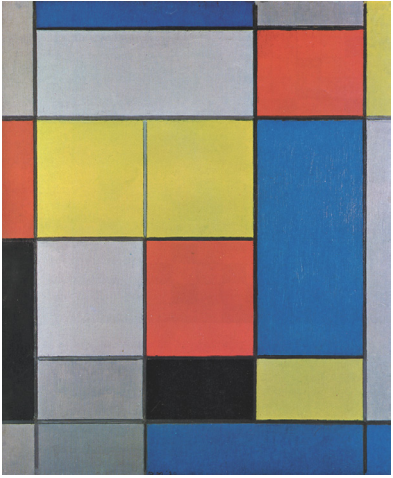
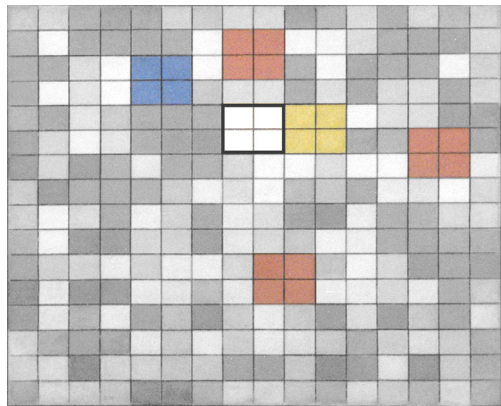
25 - Lozenge Composition with Colors, 1919, Oil on Canvas, Diagonal cm 68,5



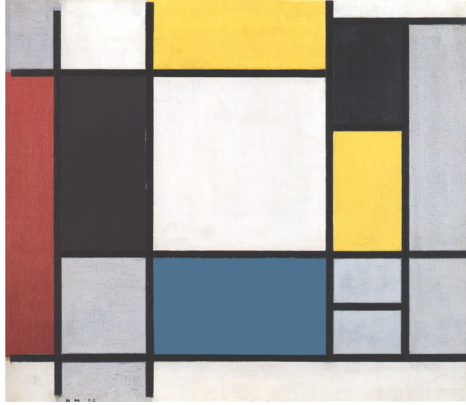
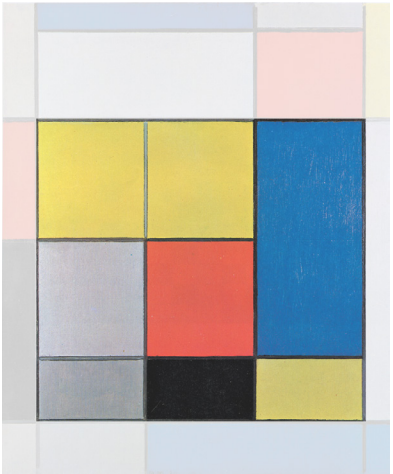
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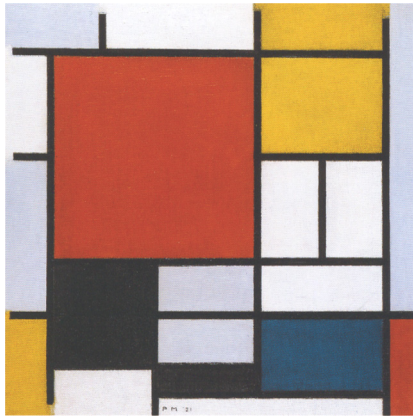
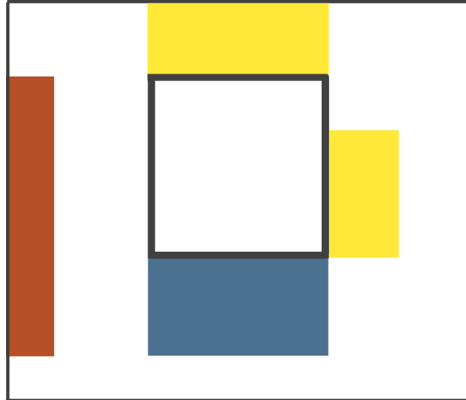
26 - Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors, 1919, Oil on Canvas, cm 86 x 106



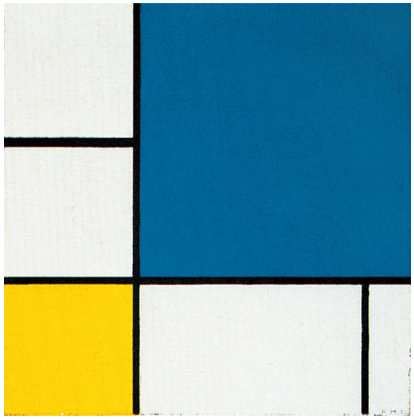
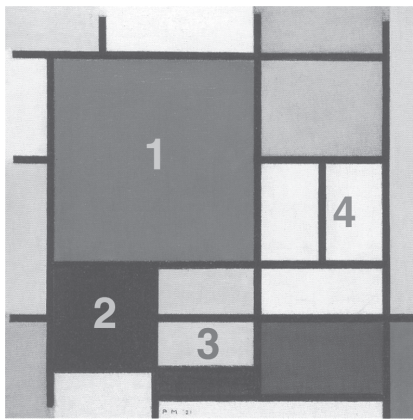
27 - Composition B, 1920, Oil on Canvas, cm 57,5 x 67



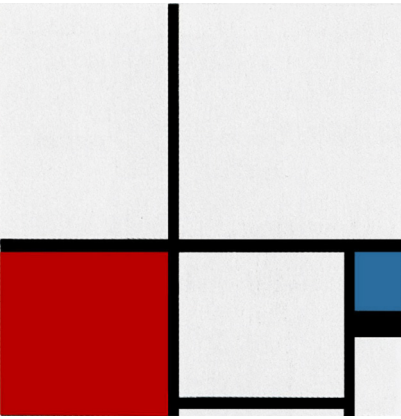
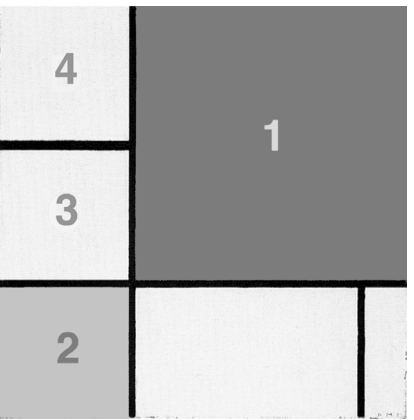
28 - Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray, 1920, Oil on Canvas, cm 51,5 x 61



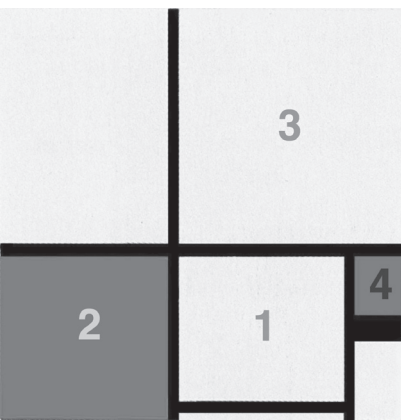
29 - Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Gray and Blue, 1921, Oil on Canvas, cm 59,5 x 59,5



30 - Composition with Blue and Yellow, 1932, Oil on Canvas, cm 45,4 x 45,4



31 - Composition N. 1 with Red and Blue, 1931, Oil on Canvas, cm 50,5 x 50,5



The graphic structure of **22** opens up to colors (**23**) and becomes a space composed solely of planes (**24**).

24 can be read as the development and variation of an ideal square that changes in size, proportion and color to suggest a manifold and variable space. We talk about "squares" but in fact some planes present rectangular proportions. The rectangles - whether horizontal or vertical - can be seen as "squares" overbalanced by a sudden predominance of one direction or the other. This is essentially the space of **22** expressed entirely with color planes instead of linear segments.

In **22** the central square expresses a balanced synthesis of horizontal and vertical, which otherwise overbalance elsewhere through the entire composition. When that drawn square opens up to colors (**23**, **24**), Mondrian is faced with a variety of squares, some yellow, some magenta, and some light blue. This means that a unitary synthesis, equivalent to the one expressed in the center of **22**, would now need to be attained not only between horizontals and verticals but also among the different colors.

24: Note how the variety of forms and colors reduces in the central area around a white square emerging from the background. In this respect it is worth recalling that the tendency to express a synthesis, such as the tree trunk (**17**, **18**), the rectangle (**20**) and the square (**22**), always manifested itself in the center of the composition. Can the central white square (**24**) be seen as a potential synthesis of the colored planes all around it? Is white suggesting an ideal interpenetration of the colors? The idea gains ground when we consider that around the central white square the colors - magenta and yellow express a high degree of constancy whereas in other parts of the composition the same colors disorderly change. A similar degree of constancy is to be found in the higher right corner with two blue and two yellow planes orderly placed around a second white square field. The composition expresses multiplicity while at the same time suggesting a tendency towards synthesis and unity. Nevertheless, years later Mondrian said that the planes floated freely in space and the whole composition lacked cohesion.

"Feeling the lack of unity, I grouped the rectangles together." (Mondrian, 1943). Joining the planes was equivalent to creating lines between them (**25**) and this meant continuing the small horizontal and vertical dashes (**23**) over the entire composition (**26**).

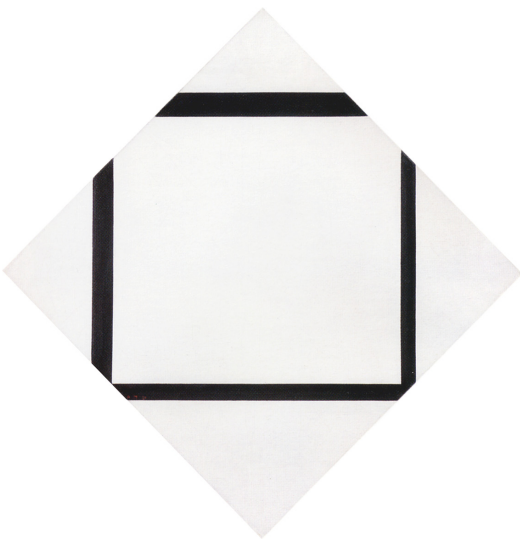
25: Three squares of the same size, one blue, one red and one yellow, form a compact and regular layout which suggests constancy and unity if compared with other parts of the composition where the forms suddenly change contrasting one another. The painter tries here to suggest a synthesis of the colors which could appear in a more evident way than the one tried out with the rather faint white square area in the center of **24**. The solution of three superimposed squares however does not satisfy Mondrian either since he needs to express unity through one single shape: one rectangle (**20**) or one square (**22**) whereas the unity tried out with **25** appears as a juxtaposition of three distinct squares.

26: Straight perpendicular lines generate a regular pattern formed by a multitude of small rectangles of equal size. This pattern becomes irregular by virtue of the unpredictable and asymmetrical rhythm of the colors. Two, three, and even four rectangles of the same color gather in some areas to form larger rectangles suggesting a tendency towards synthesis. Having identified a larger unit, the eye spontaneously seeks others and is obliged in this search to address many other situations involving the absence of one or two basic units needed to form a homogeneous large rectangle, the others being of a different color. In seeking larger rectangles of a single color we end up contemplating a great variety of entities born out of ever-changing combinations of the same basic colors. Isn't nature a multitude of different entities born out of an endless combinations of the same basic elements? Placed in the upper center of the composition we note a larger white rectangle whose form and position recalls the one we have seen in **20**. A yellow, a red and a light blue larger rectangles are positioned around the white central rectangle. The painter appears intent on gathering together the three colors around the white rectangle and therefore reassert the function of white as an ideal synthesis of the colors. As in **18**, **20**, **22**, **24** here too unity manifests itself in the center of the composition.

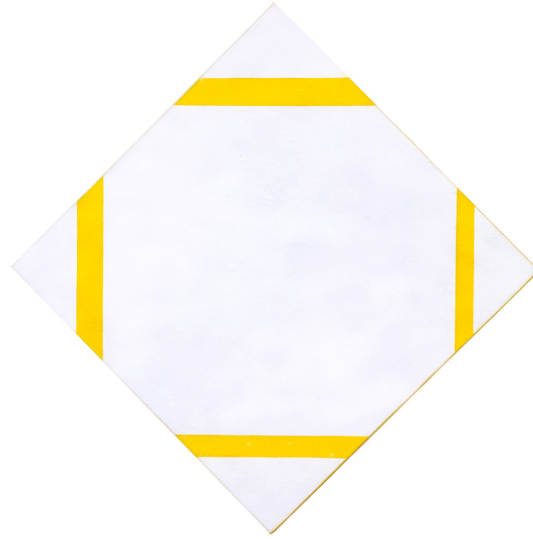
The three superimposed squares (**25**) merge into one large square presenting different proportions as well as gray and black planes (**27**). Mondrian seeks here to present a unitary synthesis (a square parameter he had used in **22**, **24** and **25**) open to multiplicity almost as though intent on effecting interpenetration between the white rectangle unit and the three rectangles of colors in its immediate vicinity (**26**). Because it is chromatically so heterogeneous, however, the large square which should convey a sense of unity does not manifest itself with sufficient clarity and that's why in a following canvas the square turns again into a more evident homogeneous white field defined by black lines (**28**).

With **28** the painter returns to the idea of unity expressed with a white field (**24**, **26**), but with the substantial difference that, with respect to **26**, the composition has now become wholly asymmetric and the sense of variation is no longer expressed solely through color but also through form. The square module, first appeared in 1914-15 (**22**) was to inform nearly all the compositions produced by Mondrian after 1920. The square form is a constant feature but in a state of continuous evolution (**28** to **38**).

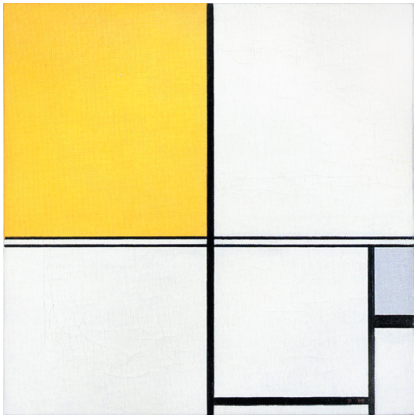
Mondrian does not see the square as a closed and pre-established geometric shape but rather the given moment in which the relationship between opposites (horizontals and verticals) attains a certain balance which is then lost when the different aspects again start to challenge and attain predominance over one another. Every Neoplastic composition expresses this dialectic between the contradictory aspects of life and the human need to stabilize them and find something of greater constancy and duration. A square form keeps space constant while differences in size, proportion and color change it. The basic meaning of the compositions Mondrian works at between 1920 (**28**) and 1942 (**38**) is to interpenetrate the unifying space of consciousness (symbolized by the square) with the endless variety and unpredictable aspects of nature and life (evoked by the variable measurements, proportions and colors) without, however, losing sight of the square. **29**, **30**, **31** show squares of red, yellow and blue changing size and proportions. **33** shows four yellow lines of different thickness generating a square which expands beyond the canvas; a unity consisting of different parts which we do not perceive in full; as it is quite often the case in real life.



32 - Lozenge with Four Lines, 1930, Oil on Canvas, cm 75,2 x 75,2



33 - Lozenge with Four Yellow Lines, 1933, Oil on Canvas, cm 80,2 x 79,9



34 - Composition B with Two Lines, Yellow and Grey, 1932, Oil on Canvas, cm 50 x 50

34 to 37: Observation of these works in sequential order reveals a gradual increase in the number of lines, which divide the space of the canvas into a growing number of parts.

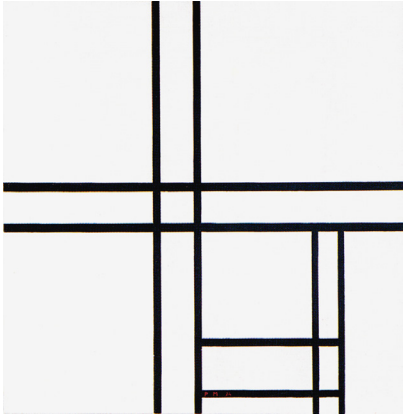
The tendency which can be observed during the 1920s toward a space of ever-greater rarefaction and synthesis (PLATE 3 - 26 to 33) gradually gave way to the opposite tendency, whereby an increasing level of articulation and complexity was progressively reintroduced into the canvases as from 1934.



Mondrian's table in his New York City atelier

PLATE 4

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35 - Composition in Black and White with Double Lines, 1934, Oil on Canvas, cm 59,4 x 60,3

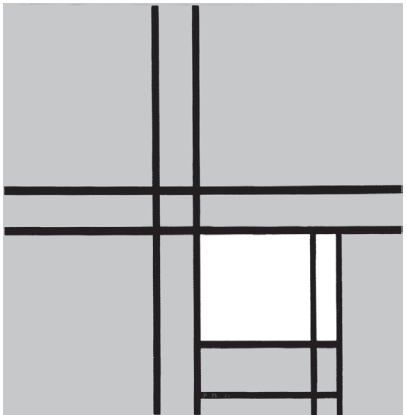


Diagram A

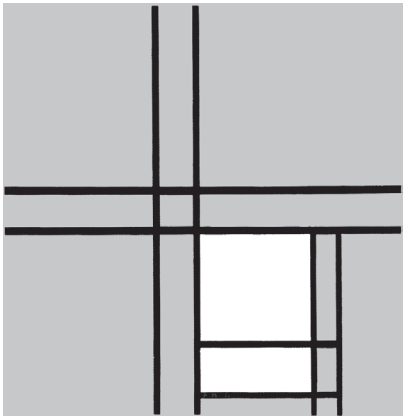


Diagram B

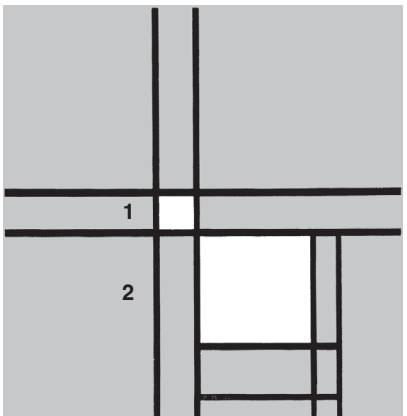
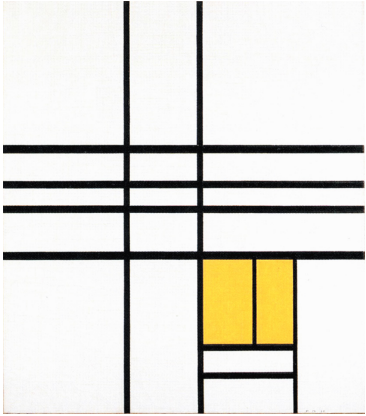
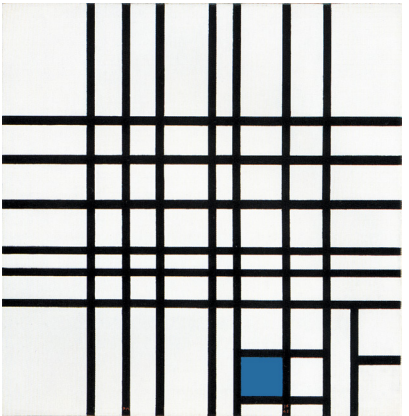
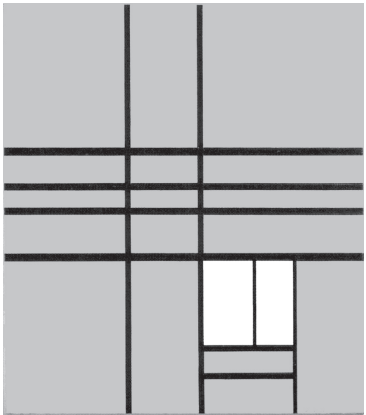


Diagram C



36 - Composition with Yellow, 1934, Oil on Canvas, cm 59,4 x 60,3



37 - Composition N. 12 with Blue, 1937-42, Oil on Canvas, cm 60,5 x 62

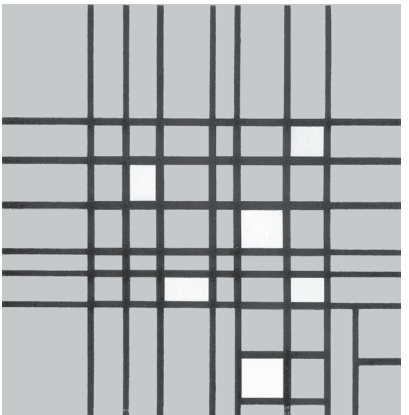


Diagram A

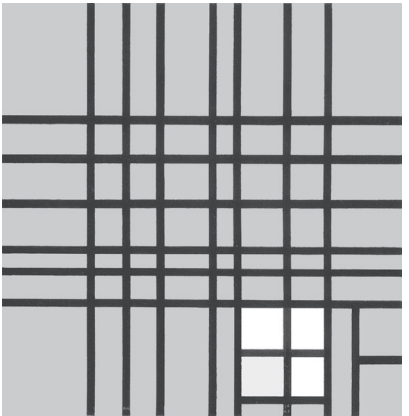


Diagram B



Mondrian, 1942

To escape the war, Mondrian had moved from Paris to London in 1938 and by the end of 1940 he arrived in the USA. In addition to brushes and oil paints, New York City offered Mondrian a new tool to use in producing his works, namely colored tape, which allowed him to change the positions of the lines and thus work on the composition with greater flexibility. Once a satisfactory configuration had been obtained, it could be made permanent in oils.

With 33 (Plate 3) the artist had already used yellow lines.

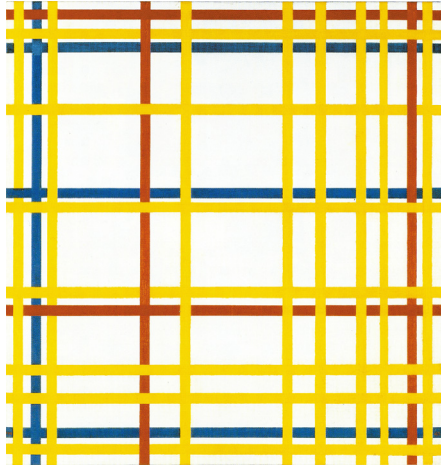
The blossoming of colored lines constitutes a further development in the process of opening up the unity to multiplicity that had begun eight years before with 34, 35, 36, 37.

38: Squares of variable size and proportions generate and dissolve in a variety of combinations between yellow, red and blue lines. Diagram A: Squares 1 and 2 are similar in terms of form but differ as regards their respective distribution of colors. The same holds for 3 and 4. Mondrian seems to have been intent above all in square 2 on combining the three colors so as to express not only a synthesis of horizontal and vertical but of yellow, red, and blue at the same time.

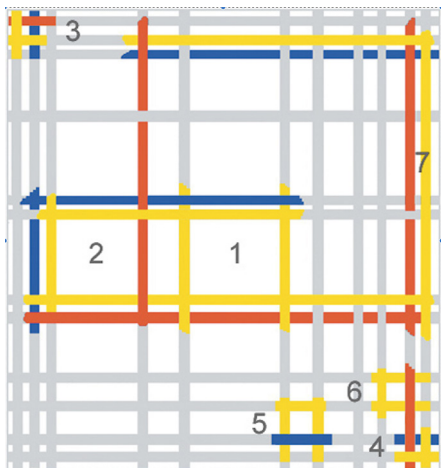
The permanent black and white square unit of the 1920's has now become dynamic and intrinsically manifold; not only in terms of form, as seen in 37, but also in terms of color as we see in 38.



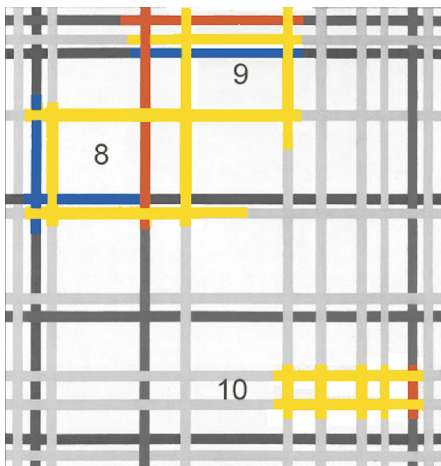
Mondrian, 1942



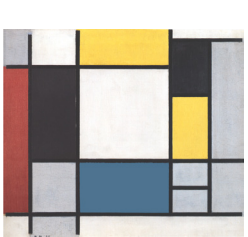
38 - New York City, 1942, Oil on Canvas, cm 114,2 x 119,3



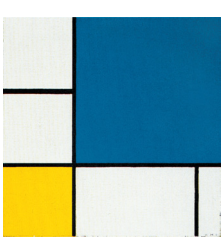
New York City, Diagram A



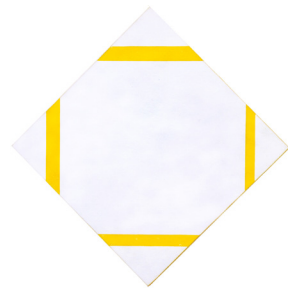
New York City, Diagram B



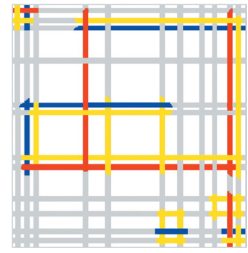
1920



1932



1933



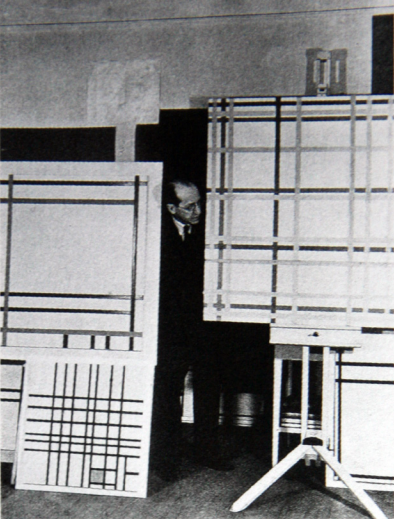
1942

Observe the four compositions above in sequential order:

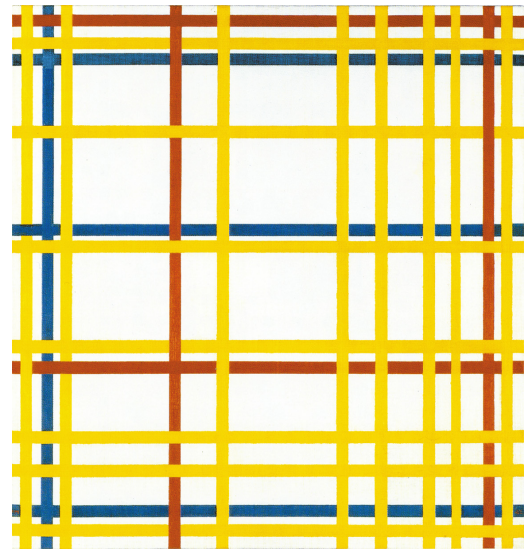
Between 1920 and 1942 a white square field (1920) absorbs colors (1932), consists of lines differing in thickness (1933) and incessantly changes position, measurements, proportions and combinations of colors (1942). I am reminded of three superimposed squares (one yellow, one red and one blue) trying to suggest unity both in terms of form and color (PLATE 3 - 25); I think of the large square fully colored within, which however does not emerge with sufficient clarity (27). Twenty years later the square evoking unity is fully colored and manifold (38). Even perhaps too much. The eye scarcely has time to identify a more stable relationship between opposites (a square) before finding itself immersed in the dynamic and continuous flux of the lines. This happens because when color was applied to lines and the former colored planes disappeared, the painter found himself grappling with compositions in never-ending development.

While the need felt around 1933 had been to open up unity (the square) to multiplicity (34 to 37), it was now necessary to re-establish a greater degree of synthesis and constancy in a space that had undergone considerable multiplication in the meantime and continued uninterrupted with the lines alone (38).

Another aspect that appears unsatisfactory in 38 is the fact that the points where lines of different color intersect are no longer marked by a single homogeneous plane, as happened with the black lines, but instead by the predominance of one color over the other. In 38 the colors seem to be on three different planes, with yellow, red, and blue appearing respectively on the first, second, and third plane. This superimposition creates a three-dimensional effect with which Mondrian could hardly be satisfied, since one of his aims had been precisely the elimination of any perspective-based illusion of supposed and nonexistent third dimensions in order to express reality in the two real dimensions of painting. The problem arising as from this moment was to bring the three different planes of the yellow, red, and blue back onto a single plane.



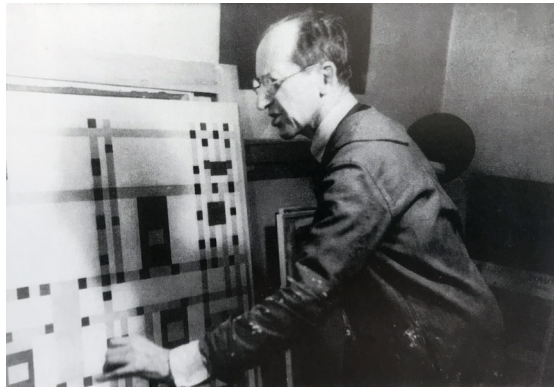
Mondrian with Composition N. 12 with Blue, New York Boogie Woogie and New York City.



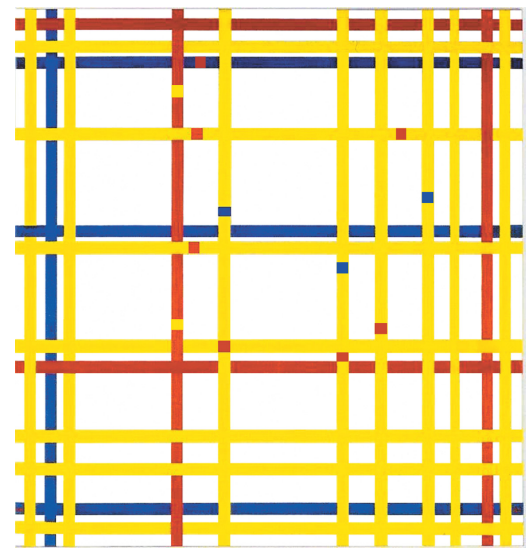
38 - New York City, 1942

PLATE 5

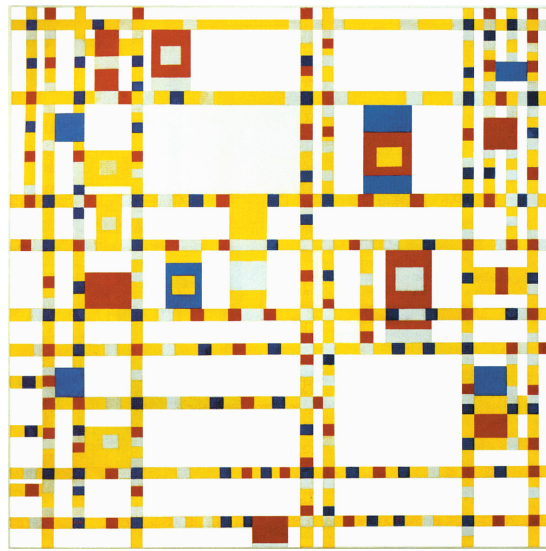
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Mondrian working at Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1943



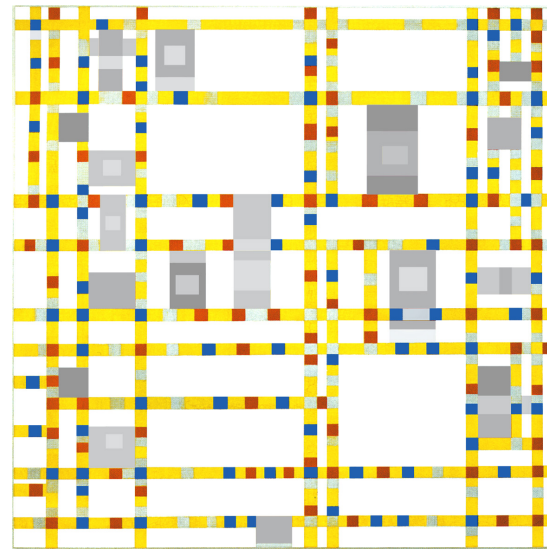
New York City, Diagram C



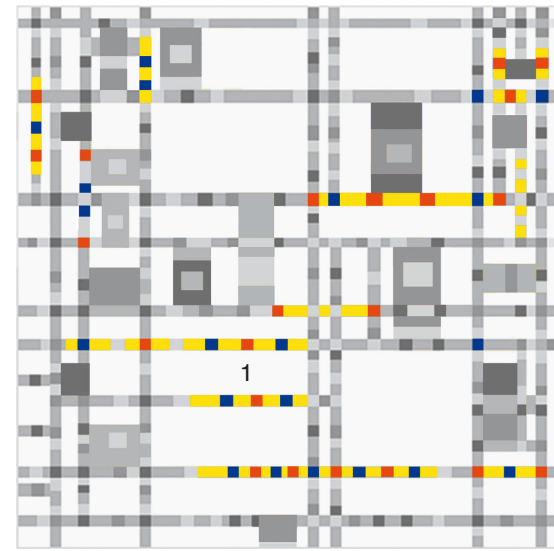
39 - Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942-43, Oil on Canvas, cm 127 x 127



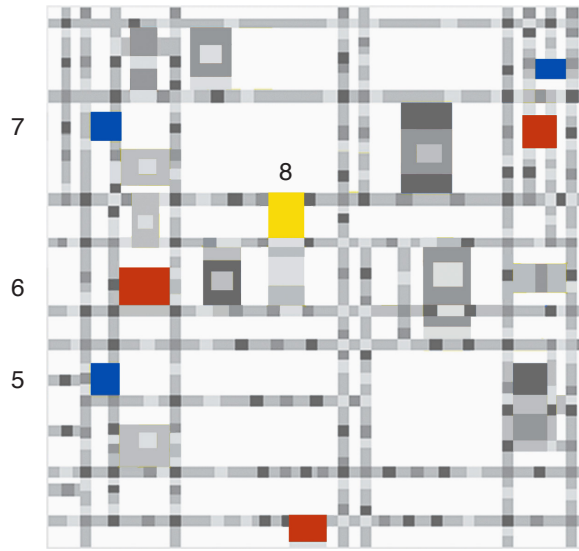
Mondrian with Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1943



BBW Diagram A



BBW Diagram B



BBW Diagram C

New York City Diagram C shows how the predominance of yellow over red or red over blue is resolved by ensuring that each line allows the perpendicular section covered over to reappear shortly after. A single plane is re-established and the three colors are brought together while preserving their specific qualities. Sections of yellow, red, and blue begin to interpenetrate within every line in the shape of small quadrangles or squares and this is the genesis of Broadway Boogie Woogie (39).

The interpenetration of the colored lines generates a multitude of small gray red, and blue squares while the color yellow is mainly expressed by larger intervals of space and this is why yellow appears as the color of the lines (BBW Diagram A). Observation of the frenzied succession of small squares (Diagram A) reveals some that join up with others to generate symmetrical configurations along the lines (Diagram B).

Two vertical symmetries with a red center establish a horizontal symmetry between them (Diagram B Section 2).

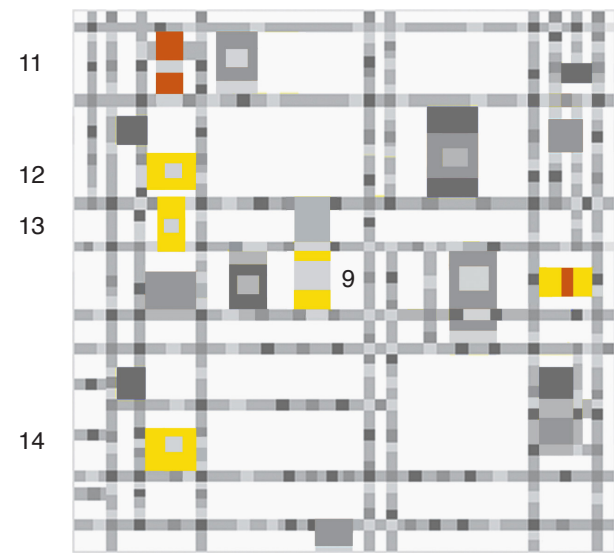
Through the act of contemplating a horizontal relationship between two vertical symmetries, we actually generate a field of greater extension, i.e. a plane, which covers the space between the two vertical lines. In that very point, we see the birth of a small blue plane and then of other larger planes (Diagram C).

Diagram D shows new planes differing from those observed in diagram C by presenting an inner space marked with a different color.

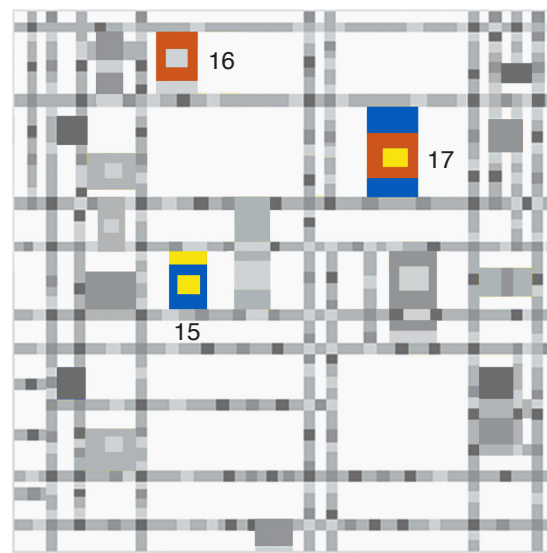
We can see at points 15 and 16 of diagram E how the self-internalization of space continues and there are now four colors concentrated in the area of two planes: blue and yellow in 15, red and gray in 16 while a single plane expressing a synthesis of the three primary colors is finally reached at point 17. A yellow, red, and blue space of virtually infinite expansion (38) concentrates in a finite and compact plane of those three colors in 39. This is the evident and permanent unity that was missing in (38) where variable squares were forming and dissolving at a rather frantic pace.

In 39 space undergoes uninterrupted transformation from a condition of multiplicity (BBW Diagram A) to one of unity (Diagram E). For the first time, the unitary synthesis is no longer a sketched square (PLATE 3 - 22) nor a white rectangle (26) or a square marked out with black lines (28) or yellow lines (33), but a plane made up simultaneously of yellow, red and blue, a free and unpredictable interplay of form that depends on the respective qualities and quantities of the colors.

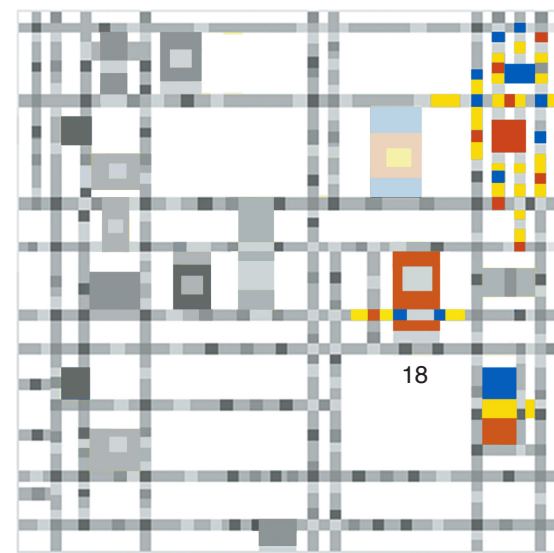
I am reminded of the scattered planes lacking unity (24), which now find synthesis in a single plane. I am also reminded of 25 where Mondrian tried to unify squares of different colors and I recall 26 with the three larger rectangles (one yellow, one red, and one blue) around a white rectangle in the center. The unsuccessful attempt to attain unitary interpenetration of the white rectangle and the colored rectangles in one large square form (27) is now achieved (39), where a synthesis of horizontal, vertical, yellow, red, and blue is attained with great visibility.



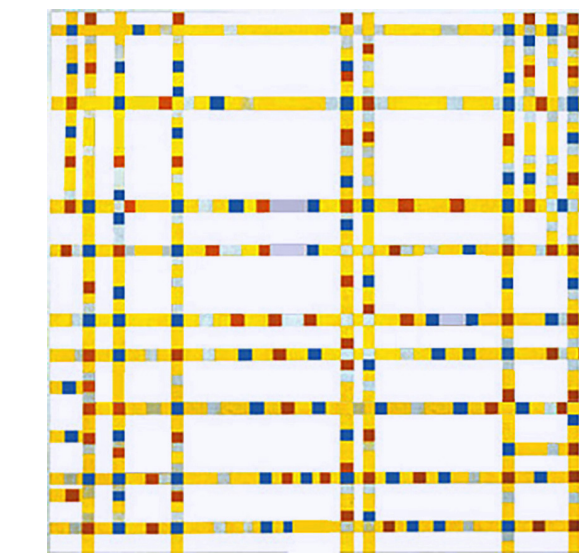
BBW Diagram D



BBW Diagram E



BBW Diagram F



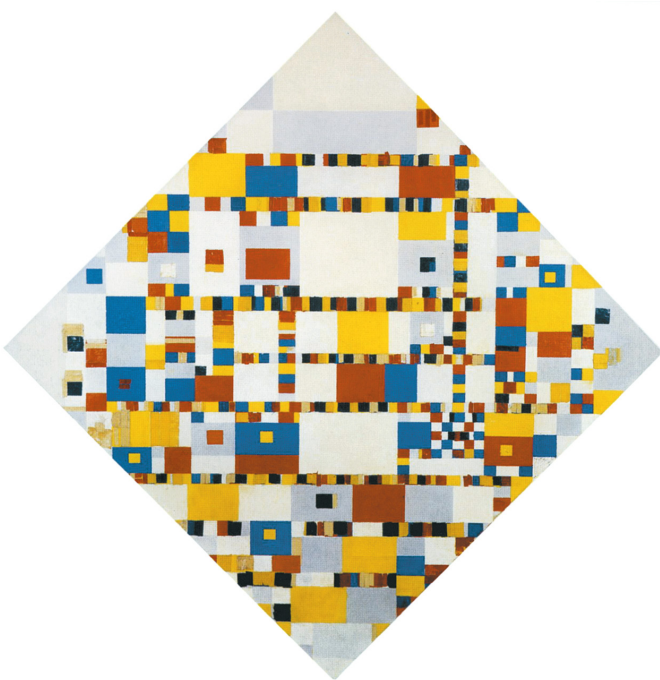
BBW Diagram G

Additional examination to be found on PAGES 12 to 14 will show how and explain why the yellow, red and blue unity will open up and revert to the more dynamic and variable condition of the small squares and the endless lines (BBW - Diagrams F and G).

Victory Boogie Woogie, (40) is a canvas that Mondrian worked on at the same time as Broadway Boogie Woogie and that was to remain unfinished after various episodes of reworking. A detailed examination of this painting on PAGE 13 and 14.

The re-established balance between lines and planes we have observed in 39 goes even further with 40 where the lines almost disappear and their function to express infinite space is taken over by a virtually unlimited number of planes.

41, 42: The colors expand from the limited space of a canvas to the walls of the studio to ideally shape the real space of life with the equilibrium, harmony and beauty Mondrian had been looking for throughout his life. More on PAGE 14.



40 - Victory Boogie Woogie, 1942-44 (Unfinished), Oil and Paper on Canvas, cm 127 x 127

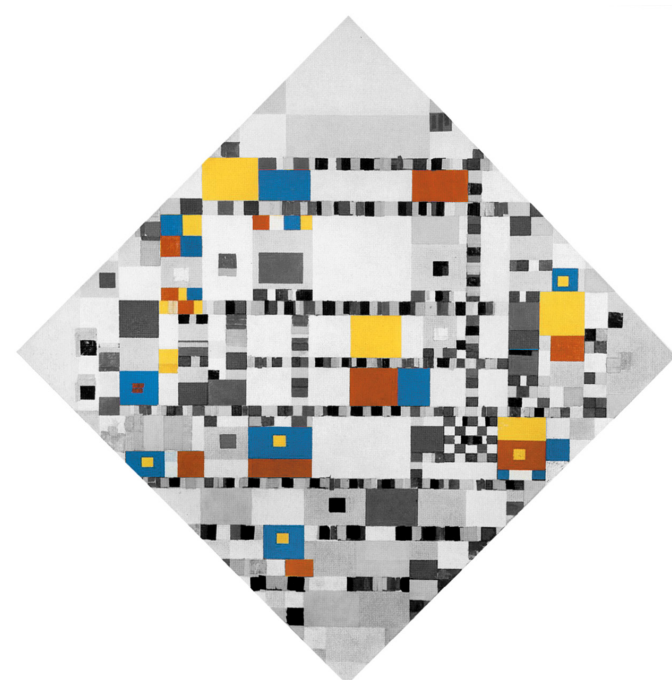


Diagram A

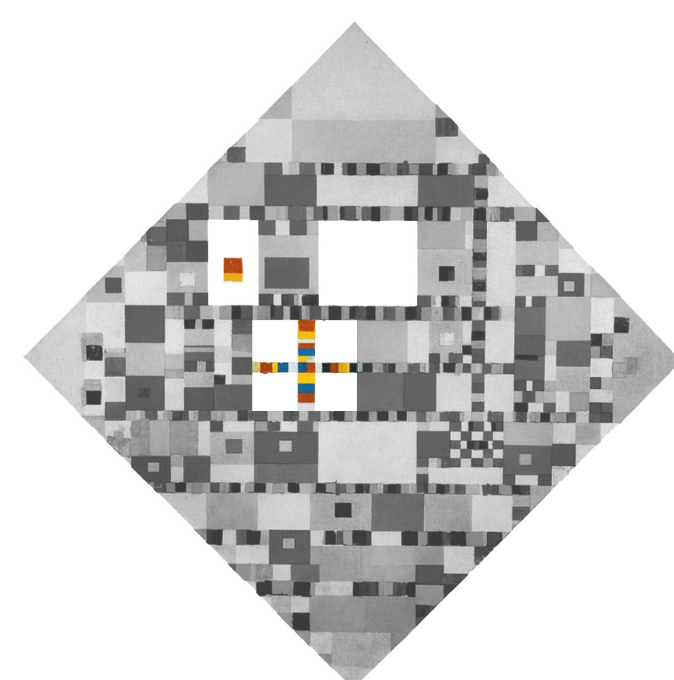


Diagram B

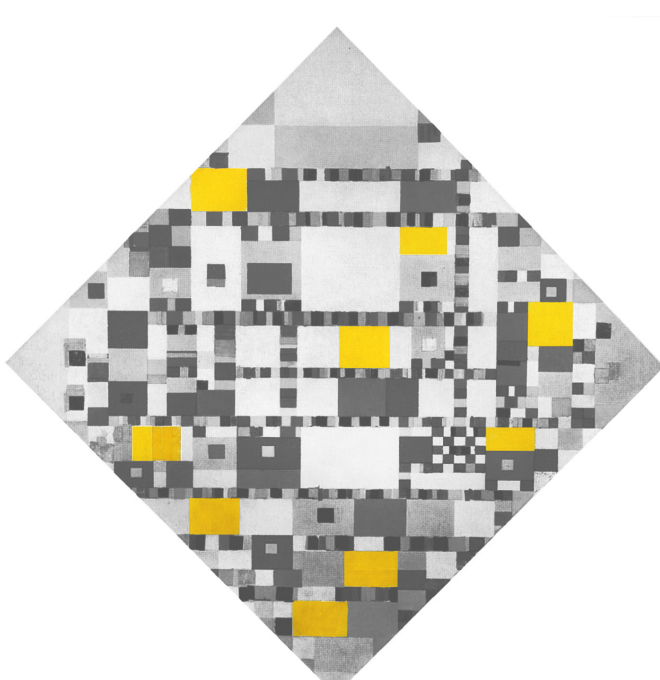


Diagram C



41 - Mondrian's atelier with Victory Boogie Woogie after his death in 1944



42 - Another corner of the studio in 1944