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Source: *October*, Vol. 84 (Spring, 1998), pp. 118-142

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

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Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie*

HARRY COOPER

*I could give all to Time except—except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept.*

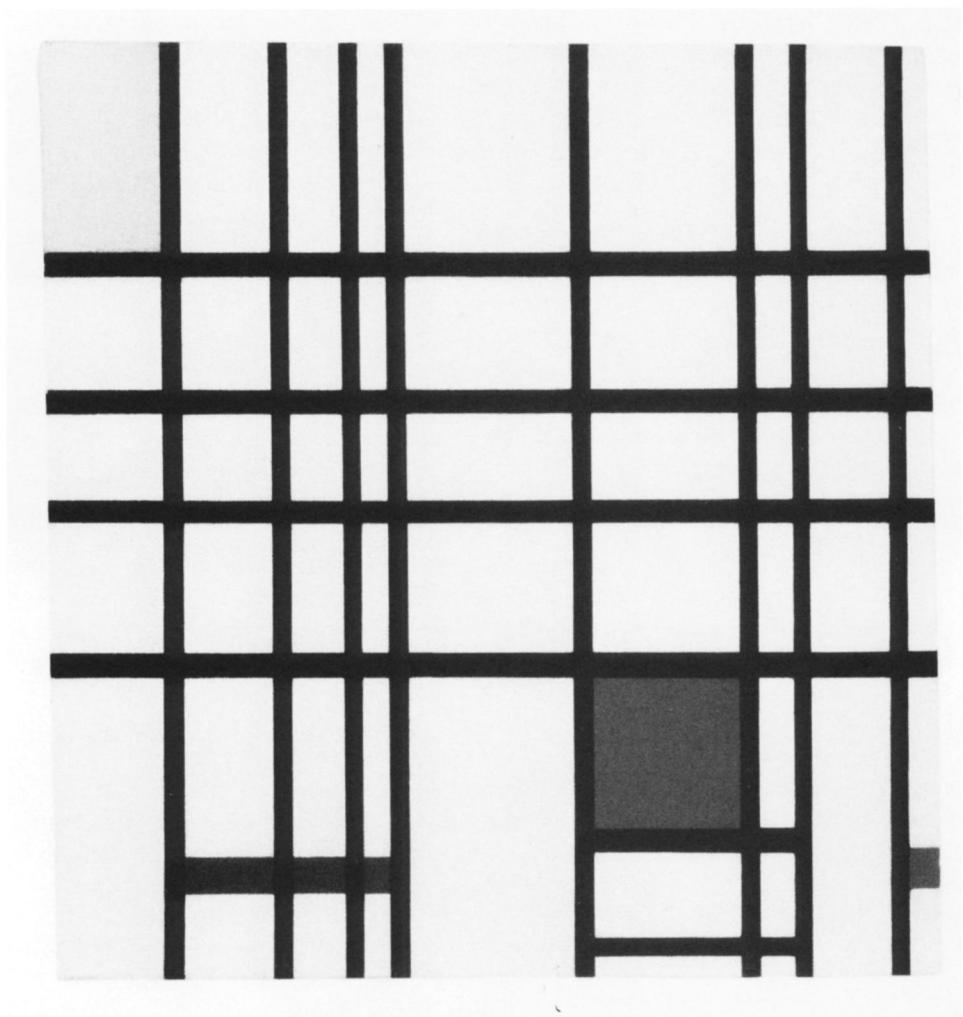
—Robert Frost, “If I Could Give All to Time” (1942)

In September 1938, anticipating war and concerned for the safety of his works, Mondrian left Paris for London. In October 1940, bombed out of his Hampstead apartment, he arrived in New York, which had been his goal all along. But despite the removal, the blitz lingered in his mind. Foghorns on the East River sounded like air raid warnings, July 4 fireworks like bombs, and he set about making blackout curtains.¹ All this betrays age and nerves, but perhaps guilty relief too, for Mondrian’s New York years were among his happiest. He had a spacious apartment thanks to his friend and patron Harry Holtzman. He was lionized by artists, both fellow expatriates and young Americans. His belief that “city-culture is freeing [mankind] from the grasp of nature”² was perfectly real-

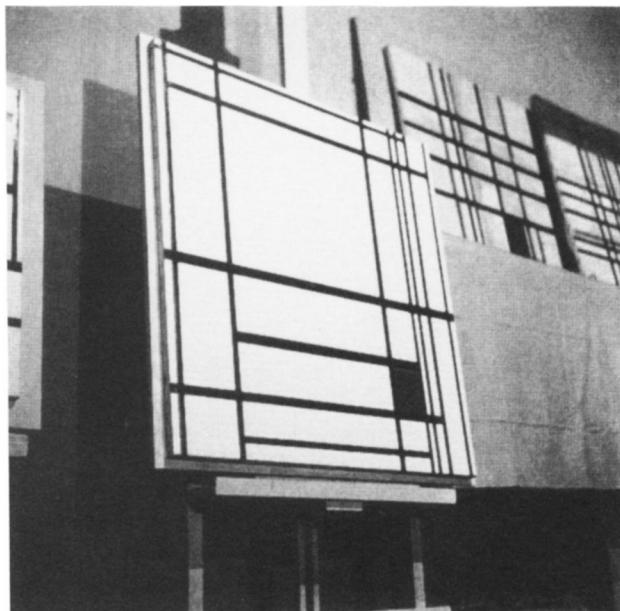
* This essay is based on a talk delivered at the College Art Association on February 15, 1997, and incorporates elements of my Ph.D. dissertation, “Dialectics of Painting: Mondrian’s Diamond Series, 1918–1944” (Harvard University, 1997). Thanks to Yve-Alain Bois for guiding my work on Mondrian, to Joop Joosten and Angelica Rudenstine for their generous help, to Hester Diamond for allowing me to inspect Mondrian’s *Boogie Woogie*, and to Sarah Boxer for her comments on the manuscript. The following abbreviations are used throughout: *NANL* for *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986); *PM* for *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944*, exhibition catalogue (Haags Gemeentemuseum, National Gallery of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, 1994–96); and *Seuphor* for Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Art* (New York: Abrams, [1956]).

1. This information is from Charmion von Wiegand’s typescript journal of her visits with Mondrian, parts of which have been published in Von Wiegand, “Mondrian: A Memoir of His New York Period,” *Arts Yearbook 4* (1961), pp. 57–65; Margit Rowell, “Interview with Charmion von Wiegand,” *Piet Mondrian Centennial Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), pp. 77–86; and Seuphor, p. 181.

2. Mondrian [Metropolis, c. 1942], *NANL*, p. 391.



Piet Mondrian. Composition with
Yellow, Blue and Red. 1937-42.



278 boulevard Raspail. Summer 1937.
(Photo: Cas Oorthuys.)

ized by Manhattan, and especially by boogie-woogie music, a recently rediscovered form of piano blues then enjoying great popularity. Holtzman, who knew of Mondrian's long enthusiasm for popular music, played him some boogie records as soon as he arrived, and Mondrian declared the music (attempting to render colloquial French into English) "enormous, enormous."³

Still, no matter how taken he was with Manhattan, Mondrian must have missed Paris. His exile ended over twenty years there, including fifteen straight years in the studio at 26, rue du Départ, a continuity essential to his work on its abstract interior. By 1940 he was thoroughly uprooted, first by a move within Paris in 1936, forced by urban renewal, then by his emigration via London to New York. He used to stroll proudly through the notorious double traffic circle at place de l'Opéra, a latter-day *flâneur*. In New York he had trouble crossing the streets, missed the sight of Paris prostitutes, and patronized a cheap French restaurant for its red-and-white tablecloths.⁴

Of course, Mondrian would have dismissed any feelings of nostalgia or dislo-

3. Holtzman played the records on Mondrian's first or second night in New York. See Holtzman, "Piet Mondrian: The Man and His Work," *NANL*, p. 2, and Virginia Pitts Rembert, "Mondrian, America, and American Painting" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970), p. 33. Mondrian owned five boogie-woogie albums and frequented, among other clubs and dance halls, the Café Society Downtown, which showcased the music.

4. Theo van Doesburg to J. J. P. Oud, February 4, 1920, quoted in *NANL*, p. 124: "One could cross the Place de l'Opéra only with the greatest caution, but Mondrian did it as calmly as if he were in his atelier." The information about New York is from Von Wiegand's journals.

cation as “individual,” “tragic,” and “romantic,” not to mention embarrassing to a good internationalist. His anxieties found expression in a more allowable concern: namely, that exile might break the flow of time, and thus of painting. If the New York works have a subject, it is the shape of time or history as such. Admittedly, this history, like Hegel’s, is abstract, lacking the full grain of ordinary reality. Yet Mondrian’s pictures bear traces not only of his physical body, but of that other corpus, the work itself, which he felt bound to protect, transport, and shape into something that would register his experience. To read these traces, we must consider Mondrian’s thinking about time and change, in history and in painting.

Hegel and Continuity

Mondrian’s great subject, in some sense his medium, was time. This is the opposite of the accepted view, that Mondrian was a Platonic idealist who valued “being” not “becoming,” and wanted his work experienced all at once, in a transcendent instant. As a recent critic writes, Mondrian’s “color planes all need to be seen at once for their meditative harmony to register with full force. . . . Mondrian’s work seems to sit lotuslike in the harmonious austerity of his apartment. . . . Mondrian’s art is meant to transcend the material world.”⁵ That Greenbergian account would do well for many an abstract painter, but Mondrian’s idealism was by no means purely Platonic. He subscribed to Hegel’s critique of Plato, which he knew through the popular work of the Dutch Hegelian G. J. P. J. Bolland, if not also directly. Hegel qualified Plato’s celebration of eternal Forms with a Heraclitan emphasis on change and flux.⁶ He insisted that time could be transcended only by working through it, and likewise, that the ideal could only be approached along the path of material embodiment. “Spirit necessarily appears in Time,” wrote Hegel, “so long as it has not grasped its pure Notion, has not annulled Time.”⁷ “Beyond time is the True Reality,” Mondrian paraphrased, but (significantly switching the emphasis) “we are living in time. We have to reckon with its Changing.”⁸

5. Simon Schama, “Dangerous Curves,” *The New Yorker*, November 4, 1996.

6. Hegel’s *Science of Logic* famously opens by contrasting the “pure being” of Parmenides (crucial for Plato’s theory of Forms) with the “becoming” of the “deep-thinking” Heraclitus, and proceeds to derive becoming from the dialectic of being and nothing (G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1969], p. 83). Significantly, it was the quality of “becoming” in distinction to “being” that Theo Van Doesburg insisted on in his first review of Mondrian’s work in 1915. See *PM*, p. 170. Of course, Hegel can figure in many ways. Annette Michelson argues that what the De Stijl artists heard in Hegel was “the stilled voice of Becoming in the repose of Absolute Spirit, in the place where the Dialectic comes to rest, that point beyond Time, at the end of History,” and that Mondrian more than Van Doesburg hoped to “instantiate the movement of the Dialectic toward Ideality through the progressive elimination of particular determination” (“De Stijl, Its Other Face: Abstraction and Cacaphony, or What Was the Matter with Hegel?” *October* 22 [Fall 1982], pp. 8, 11). Without at all denying the importance to Mondrian of an idealist teleology, the present essay emphasizes the material, temporal, “becoming” half of the dialectic in Mondrian, as in Hegel, and the difficulty and resistance that accumulate as the historical endpoint of the dialectic is felt to approach.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 487.

8. Mondrian [Life, Time, Evolution, c. 1938–44], *NANL*, p. 361.

As early as 1922, Mondrian understood the viewing of his painting as temporal, even if a total impression was the desired starting point and endpoint. Buried in his essay on the possibility of a “neo-plastic music” are some rare instructions to the viewer: “After the total impression, our eye goes from a plane to its oppositions, from oppositions to plane. From this arises no repetition but continually [*telkens*] new relationship[s] through which the total impression is fixed in us.”⁹ The passage recalls Goethe’s account of afterimages in his *Theory of Colors*, a work Mondrian clearly knew, and from there it is linked to what Crary has called Hegel’s “sweeping repudiation of Lockean perception” in favor of a “dynamic, dialectical account.”¹⁰

Given its complexity, the passage is worth paraphrasing. Aesthetic synthesis (a “total impression”) can be deepened and internalized (“fixed in us”) by a gaze that is dialectical or structured by dualities (“from a plane to its oppositions”), progressive (getting something “new” from the “repetition” of a back-and-forth scan), and continuous or seamless (“continually new relationship”). Opposition, progress, continuity—these are the very qualities that Hegel attributed in his *Phenomenology* to the historical evolution of Spirit. Mondrian’s awareness of this is signaled in another passage: “A true conception of the essential meaning of spirit and nature in man shows . . . a continual [*voortdurende*] sacrifice of inward to outward and outward to inward . . . serving to broaden man’s individual inwardness (spirit) toward universal inwardness.”¹¹ In this passage, a constant, progressive inwardness is won from the to-and-fro of history; in the first passage, perceptual progress is wrested from a back-and-forth scan. The parallelism that Mondrian forges between these two different phenomenologies (of vision, of Spirit) suggests that for him, looking at pictures was a microcosm of human evolution. His ambition was nothing less than to tame our eyes’ saccadic motion to the world-rhythm of dialectic.

From this fundamental crossroads in Mondrian’s theory, one could follow many leads. I will begin with a single word, the inconspicuous “continually” that appears in each of the last two passages. Mondrian regularly used “continually” (*voortdurend*, *telkens*, or *aanhoudend*) to modify notions of progress and opposition in art and life.¹² But the idea that motion between opposites is continuous is counterintuitive, and raises several problems. In each case, Mondrian has recourse to Hegel, explicitly or implicitly, to state the problem or try to solve it.

9. Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: Its Realization in Music and in Future Theater” (1922), *NANL*, p. 162 (translation modified).

10. “It [the eye] is forced to a sort of opposition, which, in contrasting extreme with extreme, intermediate degree with intermediate degree, at the same time combines these opposite impressions, and thus ever tends to be whole” (Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Eastlake [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970], p. 13; quoted and discussed in Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990], p. 99).

11. Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917), *NANL*, p. 48 (translation modified).

12. See, for example, “The New Plastic in Painting,” pp. 39, 48, 53, 55; and “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)” (1919–20), *NANL*, pp. 90, 108, 114.

What ensures that sharp oppositions will be continuous at all, rather than becoming a series of hiccups or degenerating entirely? In Hegel's words, why don't the "intermittence" and "retrogression" of history threaten its "continued processes of growth"? Mondrian keenly felt the need for an explanation, a Hegelian "theodicy."¹³ He explained the tenacious public taste for realistic art by asserting that "progress . . . had inevitably first to bring about a degeneration of pure plastic expression and a perfecting of natural form."¹⁴ But if history moved in such a perverse way, how was it nonetheless "a gradation—a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom," as Hegel wrote?¹⁵

History might stumble, Hegel explained, but each gap or retreat contributed to a "purer Spirit" because Thought, the latent engine of the process, performed an "annulling . . . at the same time conservative and elevating in its operation."¹⁶ This is one of Hegel's clearest statements of the essential dialectical principle of *Aufhebung* or sublation, the mutual cancellation, preservation, and elevation of terms within an opposition.¹⁷ Whether the peculiar logic of sublation provides a satisfying answer to the problem of how history can be continuous in its very interruptions is doubtful at best. What matters for us is that Mondrian believed it did: "Opposites in general, in their deepest sense, have no stability. . . . they are destroyed by their mutual opposition (Hegel; Bolland, Pure Reason)." As a result, "man moves . . . continually toward a new, deeper individual inwardness."¹⁸

There is a related problem. How does repetition ("from a plane to its oppositions, from oppositions to plane") lead to development ("continually *new* relationship")? How does "repeated union of the opposites . . . bring about the new: progress"?¹⁹ The problem is only magnified by the fact that Mondrian subscribed to Hegel's sharp distinction between the "perpetually self-repeating cycle" of nature and the developing dynamic of culture or Spirit.²⁰ It was a cornerstone of Mondrian's theory: "We see the natural outside of man repeating itself, for (in this world) nature is bound to the law of repetition; but man's spirit is (relatively) free and—in evolving—abolishes this repetition [*heeft die herhaling op*.]"²¹ Given the syncopated, asymmetrical penchant of Neo-Plastic painting,

13. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 56; on theodicy, see pp. 15, 457.

14. Mondrian, "The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931), *NANL*, p. 250. Likewise, he asserted that "civilization . . . accomplishes the task of reducing the oppression of the natural-physical aspect precisely by cultivating the material side of life" (*NANL*, p. 254).

15. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 63.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 77.

17. On *Aufhebung*, see Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 106–8; and Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), pp. 283–85.

18. Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," p. 48 note i.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

20. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 54. It is possible that Mondrian also received this idea via Theosophy. In Rudolph Steiner's 1908 lectures given in The Netherlands, a transcript of which Mondrian owned, the "etheric" (animal) principle of repetition is contrasted with the higher, "astral" principle of development.

21. Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," p. 48 note g.

passages like this have been taken as evidence that Mondrian simply outlawed repetition. But in the original, the word translated here as “abolish” is the Dutch *ophoffen*, cognate of the German *aufheben*. While translators may wish to avoid the alarming term “sublation,” only a word that preserves its triple sense (abolish, preserve, lift up) can convey Mondrian’s complex attitude to repetition: Spirit did not banish its natural, repetitive matrix, but sublated it.

Art was a formal reflection of this process. In a section of the *Aesthetics* that may well have been important to Mondrian given its advocacy of straight lines and pure primary colors, Hegel described musical harmony as the sublation of repetition: “This relation advances beyond conformity to law, which has in itself the aspect of regularity, and rises above equality and repetition.”²² Likewise, Mondrian believed that the “continuous sublation” of pictorial oppositions converted “repetition” into a “rhythm interiorized.”²³ Sublation solved (or restated) the paradox of repetition and rhythm/evolution.

Mondrian immediately added that this pictorial dynamism also converted “sequence” into “plastic unity.” Which raises another difficulty: How can any rhythm persist once sequence is compressed into unity? How (recalling Mondrian’s instructions to the viewer) can we discover a painting without changing our “total impression”? Hegel offered a solution at the level of Spirit. Here the question becomes: How can a universal viewpoint oversee its own development? How does the upward spiral of history know where to go next?²⁴ The secret behind this “cunning of reason” was a yardstick (*Massstab*) dwelling within each changing moment. Spirit was bipolar, both above history and in it. Its Idea was beyond time, but its agents, will and consciousness, were crucially “sunk in their primary merely natural life.” As a result, Spirit did not exhibit the “tranquility of mere [natural] growth” but a “working against itself.”²⁵ This conflict was condensed in a present that was also past and future:

Nothing in the past is lost for it [Spirit], for the Idea is ever present; Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential now. This necessarily implies that the present form of Spirit comprehends within it all earlier steps.²⁶

It would be hard to find a better description of the embracing temporality of

22. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 140–41; cited in Veerle Thielemans, “Mondrian and Hegelian Dialectics: Appropriation or Subjection?” (unpublished student paper, Johns Hopkins University, spring 1990), p. 19. See also Mondrian’s correspondence with Van Doesburg in 1919 about the issue of regularity: *PM*, pp. 184, 375.

23. Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting,” p. 40 (translation modified).

24. On the spiral, see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 35, 42.

25. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 55, 33. On the “bipolarity of consciousness” in Hegel, see Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 135–36.

26. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 79.

Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. "All the art of the past collaborated in building the new art . . . brought it into being." And: "Only that art is truly alive which gives expression to the contemporary—the future—consciousness."²⁷ By splitting "all style" into a "transitory appearance" and a "timeless content," Mondrian could find something of value in all art, and portray his own as both cumulative and projective.²⁸

Clearly, we have been puzzling over paradoxes that present no problem to Hegel's omnivorous Logic. But Mondrian, to his credit, struggled harder when the paradoxes descended from History to the concrete level of painting and viewing. The final, lengthy section of Mondrian's "Trialogue" (1920) concerns his new arrangements of colored cardboard rectangles and painted furniture in his Paris studio: "Relatively speaking, the room can also be seen [like a painting] as a whole all at once. . . . We survey the room visually, but inwardly we also form a single image. Thus, we perceive all its planes as a single plane."²⁹ Here Mondrian proposes the dubious idea that a room can be felt as a single plane, like a painting.³⁰ But in the next breath he raises two momentous objections: "Is it so desirable to see the plastic expression as a whole? Doesn't painting still remain too much a 'thing'?" The first question challenges the architectural ideal; the second projects that doubt back into painting, asking whether the classical pictorial goals of unity and instantaneity do not literally reify (thing-ify) the picture.

This is a Mondrian Greenberg never read, for it is enough to challenge his "all-at-once" at its very foundation. Given Greenberg's pictorial essentialism, it is no accident that the challenge comes just where Mondrian blurs painting with another art, even one as apparently modest as arranging colored squares on the wall. Their presence kept Mondrian aware that the individual picture had a temporality just as complex as the decorated room. Not only did it require time and motion to see the room. The abstract interior adumbrated an afterlife of painting that Mondrian invoked often, a post-*Gesamtkunstwerk* in which all the arts, and art itself, would be dissolved into life, and history would come to rest.

Approaching Hegel's "essential now," however, required that one eye be kept firmly fixed in the other direction, so that, as Hegel wrote, "nothing in the past is lost." Which brings us back to sublation. Derrida has pointed out (via Bataille's critique of Hegel) that *Aufhebung* "continuously links meaning up to itself . . . never exceeds its closure."³¹ Jean Clay sees all the tangles of Mondrian's theory as "a matter of leaving nothing, of surpassing in englobing, in the movement of

27. Mondrian, "The New Art—The New Life," p. 250; "The New Plastic in Painting," p. 30.

28. Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," pp. 30–31.

29. Mondrian, "A Trialogue," p. 113.

30. Yve-Alain Bois, "Mondrian and the Theory of Architecture," *Assemblage* 4 (October 1987), pp. 120–21. Mondrian himself qualified the idea: "by its very nature . . . architecture is not a planar but corporeal plastic. . . . Both architecture and sculpture will gain in purity by becoming planar plastic *so far as is possible*" ("The New Plastic in Painting," p. 72 note u [emphasis added]).

31. Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1978), p. 275.

*opheffing.*³² Clay's amoebic metaphor fits nicely with Mondrian's double view of painting: like any organism, painting must remain distinctly bounded for the present, but must have the capacity to assimilate difference across its membranes in order to survive and produce its own future.

Exile presented Mondrian with the problem of registering everything, including difference and discontinuity itself. His first works in New York made an effort to mitigate rupture, even while eagerly responding to new stimuli. But since any such attempt is imperfect, he arrived at a double stance, exploiting what Adorno calls "the fractures left by the process of integration." Adorno goes on to say, in a Hegelian mood, that "the traces of those elements that resisted integration" should not be "erased," but made to subsist in an "aesthetic whole."³³ But what is a nonintegral whole? For that matter, what is an interrupted continuum? What does it look like?

Transatlantic Construction

Revision had always been part of Mondrian's method, but it became an obsession in New York. In the three and a quarter years he lived there, he only finished three of the paintings he started, leaving a fourth unfinished at his death in February 1944. Let's call these his all-American works. He also got the strange idea of revising seventeen works completed in Europe between 1935 and 1940, which Kermit Champa has dubbed the transatlantic paintings.³⁴

The early state of several transatlantic pictures is nicely captured in the photograph of Mondrian's studio at 278 boulevard Raspail from the summer of 1937. Take the work to the right of center, which reappeared with ten other transatlantic works in Mondrian's one-man exhibition in January 1942 at the Valentine Gallery, his first major show after arriving in New York. (The picture, *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red* [1937–42], which is reproduced at the beginning of this essay, was bought shortly afterward, and today it is in the Tate Gallery.) If we compare its first and final states, the characteristic New York additions are easy to spot: free-floating bars and blocks of color, unbounded by black outlines, always near the periphery. Mondrian also added black lines (one at left, two at right) and a large color plane (the yellow rectangle filling the upper left corner).³⁵ And he made some of the white areas more painterly and the black lines glossier.

Mondrian said all this gave the works "more boogie-woogie," referring no doubt to the resulting increase in visual variety and excitement, but that is not the

32. Jean Clay, "Présentation [de Piet Mondrian, 'Le jazz et le néo-plasticisme']," *Macula* 1 (1976), p. 78.

33. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 10.

34. Kermit Champa, *Mondrian Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

35. Since the plane is yellow, it is possible that Oorthuys's black-and-white photograph simply does not capture it. But it seems likely that Mondrian added it later, based on the picture *Rhythm of Straight Lines* (1937–42), a close cousin of the Tate painting. In this case, Mondrian added a blue plane in New York, also in the upper left corner, as proven by a 1938 photo in which the plane is clearly absent (*PM*, p. 276, fig. a).

whole story.³⁶ Something more conservative is happening as well. In the Tate painting, the added color carefully links the new black lines to the old ones. Take the vertical line at left, which Mondrian added midway between its neighbor and the left edge. It is not really a member of that group of three lines to the right—not until the blue bar at lower left links them together, and suddenly the three intervals make harmonic sense. The same vertical is tied to the left edge by the yellow plane in the top left corner. At lower right, Mondrian uses a short red bar to bind another added black line to the edge of the canvas, but also to the left of the composition: the red bar connects to the blue one along an implied line of latitude. As in other transatlantic works, these color bars act as spacers and binders, helping us read intervals and securing the structure with a kind of visual orthodontia.

In two unusual vertical works, the bridging device nearly rises to the level of a theme. Mondrian showed *Composition No. III White-Yellow* at the Museum of Modern Art's "Cubism and Abstract Art" show in 1936 and revised it for his 1942 exhibition. The additions carefully multiply the links between the two sides of the painting without violating the empty vertical shaft that was the *raison d'être* of the small series to which the work belongs.³⁷ Mondrian showed another member of this series in England in 1936 and revised it along exactly the same lines.³⁸ The revised versions play a game in which a line on one side of the divide is continued on the other by one that is thickened, colored, or (like the interrupted tabletop of a Cézanne still life) misaligned. These works meditate on exile, offering an abstract iconography of its dialectics of rift and continuity.

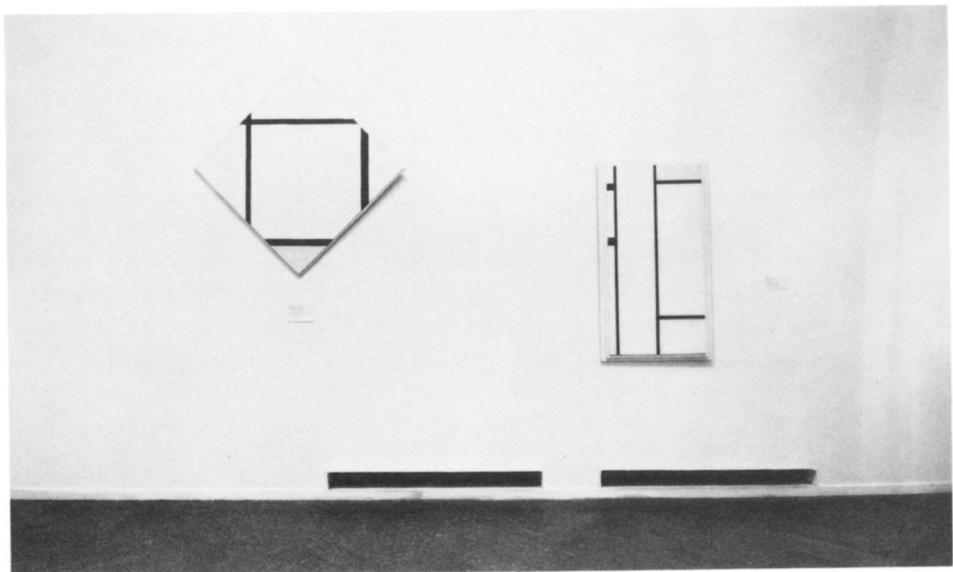
What I mean by that last phrase is just that a bridge, in joining two shores, inevitably measures their separation. This explains an odd, seemingly marginal detail. At the bottom of the Tate painting, three lines from the right (thus on an original black line), is the date "39/42". Rather than either change the original year or not, Mondrian inscribed two years, the way for example Joyce did at the end of *Ulysses*.³⁹ In a painting, this is very unusual.

36. Mondrian's comment is reported by Sidney Janis, "School of Paris comes to U.S.," *Decision 2* (November-December 1941); reprinted in *Mondrian in the Sidney Janis Family Collections*, New York, exhibition catalogue (Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1988), p. 10.

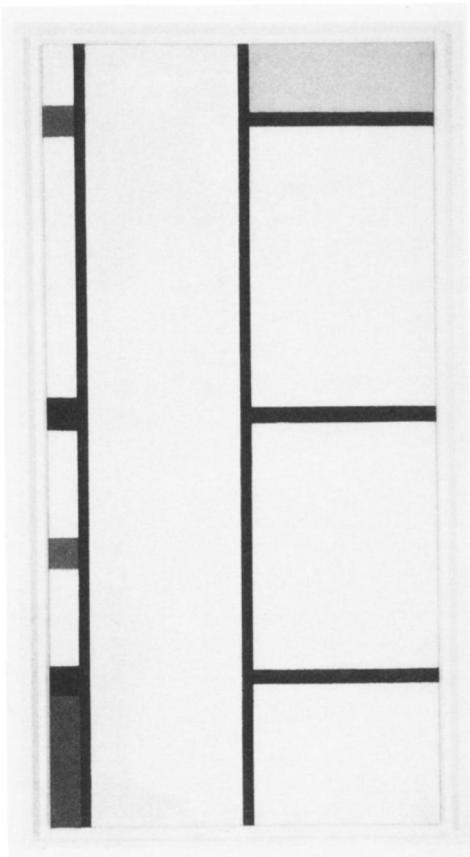
37. A different reading of the revisions is given by Meyer Schapiro, one of the few commentators to have addressed the changes Mondrian made to the transatlantic paintings. See his "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting," *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), p. 243.

38. This work is *Composition A (No. I)* (1935–42), Seuphor, catalogue no. 387 (reproduced upside down). For an installation photo showing the 1936 state on exhibition at "Abstract and Concrete" in London, see *Circle: Constructive Art in Britain 1934–40*, exhibition catalogue (Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge, 1982), p. 20 (top). The third member of the vertical series is *Composition No. I (C)* (1934–36; dated 1936), Seuphor, catalogue no. 385. Mondrian could not revise it, as it had been sold in 1936.

39. On this "convention of signing off novels" considered as an "illocutionary act," see Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 285. My thanks to Louis Cooper for this reference. It should be noted that Mondrian had double-dated once before: he revised three 1921 works to fill out a 1925 exhibition in Dresden, and dated them "21–25".



Above: "Cubism and Abstract Art," The Museum of Modern Art. 1936. With Composition No. III White-Yellow.



Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue.
1935-42.

Mondrian's motive was certainly not record-keeping. His memory for dates was bad, and in the Tate picture as in other transatlantic works, the first date is wrong. He must have painted over the original inscription during the course of revision, then simply forgotten it. The main thing was to have the two dates, however approximate, so that the works became bridges to the New World, declarations that exile was no obstacle to the evolution of Art and Spirit.

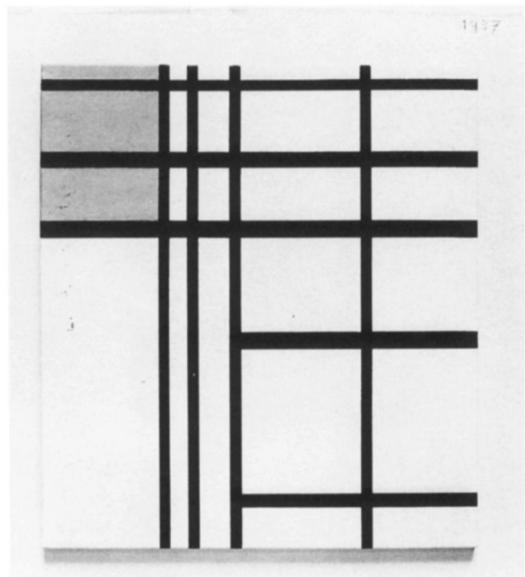
The double date, then, is a cipher of the transatlantic project, a microcosm of the way these pictures state their self-division in order to assert the wholeness won from it, a whole in which obviously new elements are integrated without losing their resistance, as Adorno might put it. But the high price of this complex ambition, a price Adorno would not have acknowledged, is the idea that an art work is the manifestation of a single, continuous intention. After all, Mondrian's double date does not reflect a span of work, as one might expect, but two completions, one of which retracts the other.

In this structure of difference-in-continuity, I have been emphasizing continuity, but later transatlantic works indicate that Mondrian was increasingly aware of the difference. In *Picture II* (another work for which there is a photo showing its initial state, under the title *No. III: Opposition of Lines, of White and Yellow*), a small red block at the middle of the right edge of the picture seems to have slipped out of place, disturbing rather than binding the structure of black lines. Another larger red block, at left, violates the peripheral rule for the placement of such elements, showing up near the center. These hints of motion and disturbance are magnified in *Place de la Concorde* (1938–43). A pattern of colored bars moves along the bottom and up and down the right edge, snakily subverting the black grid by offering "false" colored extensions to the black lines. The picture is further ruptured by a dizzying drop in scale from the large yellow plane at the top to the two tiny red accents at left. Some of the same devices recur in *Trafalgar Square* (1939–43).

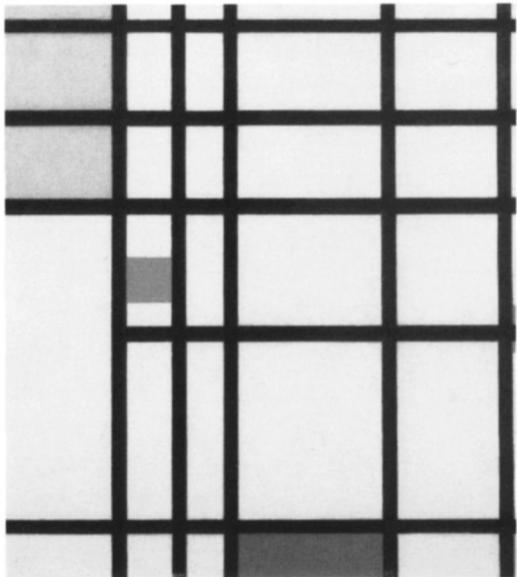
Most of Mondrian's work on the transatlantic paintings took place between March 1941, when he received the invitation from Valentine Dudensing to have the one-man exhibition, and January 1942, when the exhibition was held. But these last three works, as their second date of 1943 indicates, form a relatively distinct group. Unlike the other transatlantic works, they were revised for Mondrian's March 1943 show (his second at the Valentine Gallery), which suggests that Mondrian revised his revisionism during the course of 1942.⁴⁰

Why exacerbate the very fractures that other transatlantic works had sought, however imperfectly, to mend? For a Hegelian, it is no great turnabout. Mondrian simply began to emphasize a different part of the meaning of *opheffing*, not preservation but cancellation, not continuity but destruction. Exploiting the margin of difference left within the transatlantic works, he shifted the gears of the dialectical engine.

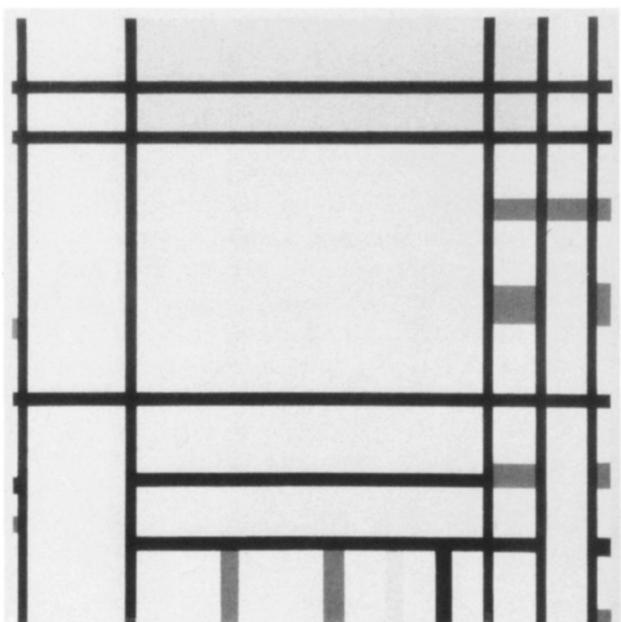
40. Von Wiegand notes that Mondrian had started revising both *Place de la Concorde* and *Trafalgar Square* in 1941, but did not finish in time for the January 1942 exhibition.



No. III: Opposition of Lines, of White and Yellow.
1937.



Picture II. 1937-43.



Place de la Concorde. 1938-43.

Boogie-Woogie Demolition

The first step was to expand the revisions, making them more than “grace notes” in James Johnson Sweeney’s phrase.⁴¹ Mondrian’s first all-American painting is an honorary transatlantic work, or, better, a critique of one. It mimics their double completion and double-dating, but its revisions go far deeper.⁴² The picture was first shown under the title *New York* in February 1941 (Mondrian’s first exposure after his arrival) at the annual exhibition of the American Abstract Artists, which had just welcomed him and Léger into its ranks. Mondrian then revised it and showed it a year later at his January 1942 exhibition under the title *Boogie Woogie*, which is the picture we know today.

There is no photographic record of the first state, but according to all reports it was stunningly simple. This is surprising in retrospect, given the complexity of the other all-American works. Mondrian’s devoted friend Charminion von Wiegand, who saw the picture in the studio a month after the show, described it as “a square with black lines,” probably much like the present picture minus the colored elements.⁴³ I suspect Mondrian intended this state, consciously or not, as something of a blank slate. As soon as it was returned to him, he declared it “empty as Hell.”⁴⁴ He revised it while working on the transatlantic pictures and showed it with them a year later at his 1942 show.

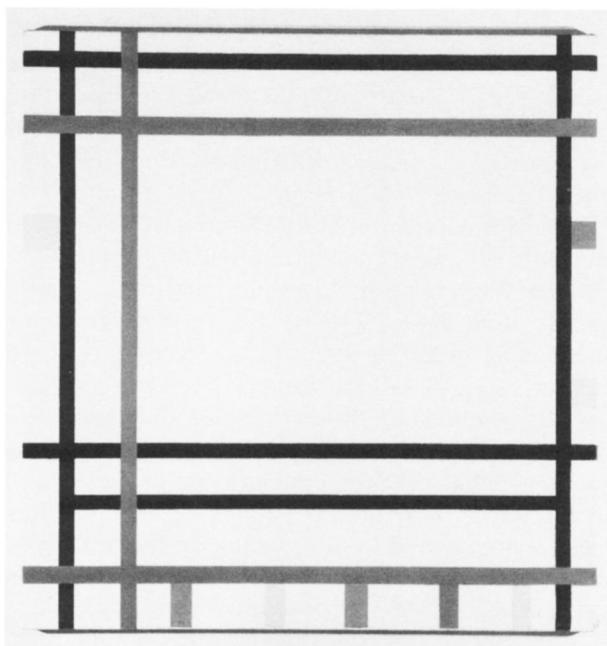
Whether it was because he purposefully left room on the surface to be filled in later, or because the first state of the picture, begun in New York, was less foreign to his current goals, Mondrian was able to make much bolder additions than in the transatlantic works. The spanning red lines of *Boogie Woogie* are unprecedented in his art (except for the curious diamond painting with yellow lines of 1933). They seem to move on another plane and at another speed than the black lines, despite the fact that the eight peripheral bars of color attempt to bind the red and black lines equally to the frame. But the red lines will not be bound. They are like a new, faster-firing nerve cell on the surface of Mondrian’s art.

41. Sweeney, “Piet Mondrian,” *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1945), p. 12.

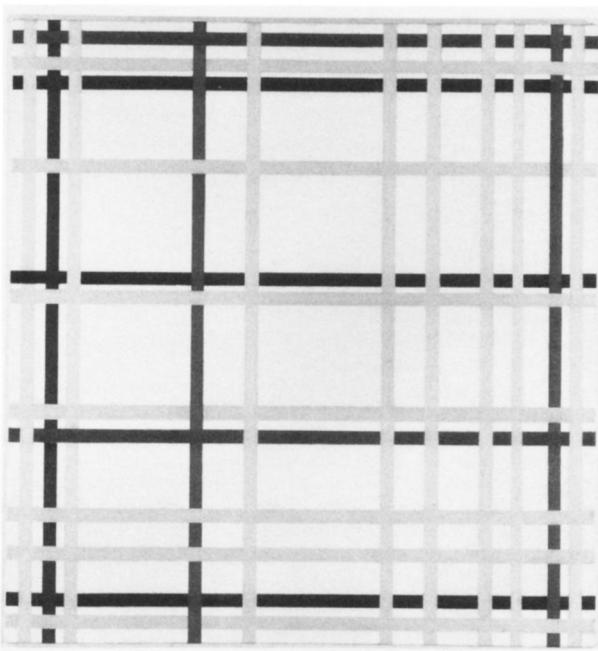
42. Its double-dating has a somewhat different meaning, indicating continuous work for over a year rather than separate completions. But Mondrian had worked before on paintings that long without ever double-dating them, e.g., *Composition in Line* (1916–17; dated 1917), *PM*, catalogue no. 72, or *Composition No. I (C)* (1934–46; dated 1936), Seuphor, catalogue no. 385.

43. Von Wiegand, “Mondrian: A Memoir,” p. 57. Sidney Janis, on the other hand, recalled that *New York* had four black lines and one red one at the AAA show, and that André Breton, noticing the red one, mockingly declared “*la révolution*” (Janis, “Reflexions of an Art Dealer,” in *Mondrian in the Sidney Janis Family Collections*, p. 19). But Janis’s recollections are from 1987, and his story seems designed to deliver the colorful Breton anecdote. If the painting had a red line at that point, Von Wiegand would have noted it in her journals. The three red lines and some of the colored elements had been added by the fall of 1941, when Emery Muscetra took three photos of Mondrian in his studio with the painting (the top red line does not yet extend fully to the right). See *PM*, p. 291, fig. a, and *PM*, p. 78, fig. 21.

44. Carl Holty, quoted in Rembert, “Mondrian,” p. 49. In his “Mondrian in New York: A Memoir,” *Arts* (September 1957), Holty adds that Mondrian went to work on the picture “as soon as it was returned to him,” and that he made the “empty as hell” remark “as though anyone should have seen this fault at first glance.”

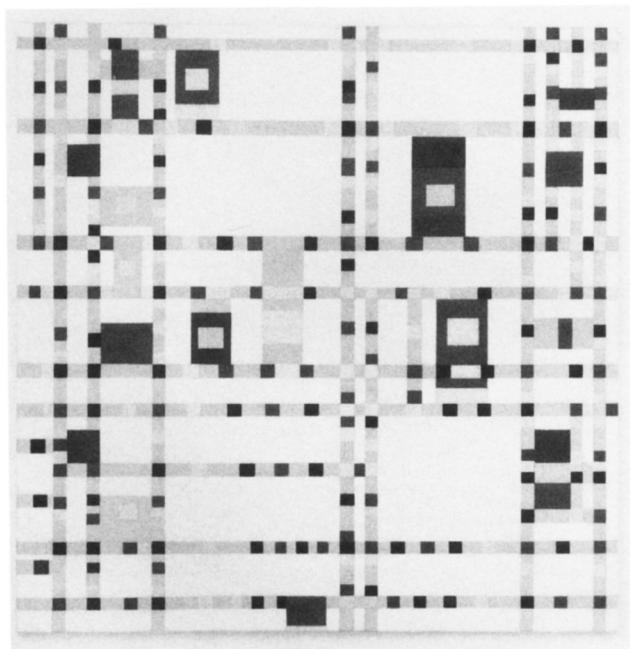


Boogie Woogie. 1941–42.



New York City. 1941–42.

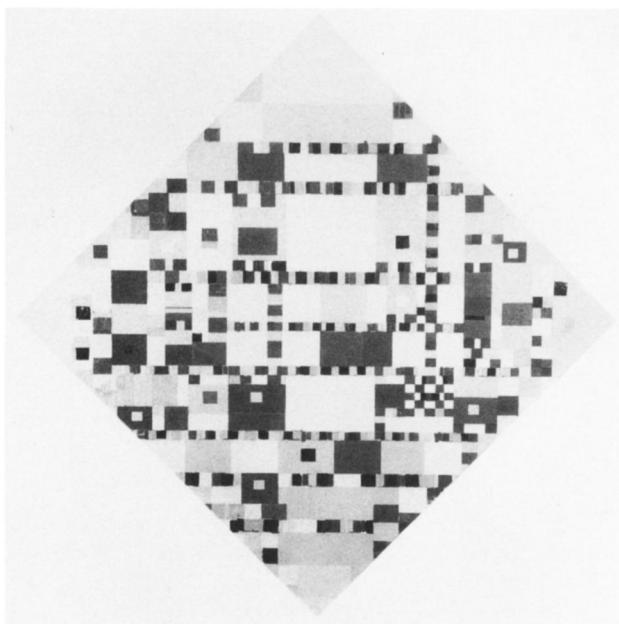
Broadway Boogie Woogie. 1942–43.



Mondrian's second all-American painting was *New York City* (1941–42).⁴⁵ Here the black lines still retained in *Boogie Woogie* are gone, yielding to a composition made entirely of canvas-spanning colored lines. In short, the colored line segments of *Boogie Woogie* have been extended into a new, all-purpose element. This was to be the first of a grand New York City series, but the project never materialized. After the January 1942 show, Mondrian left at least three similar works unfinished and turned to a pair of paintings, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*.⁴⁶ At exactly 50 by 50 inches each, they are Mondrian's largest abstract works ever. He managed to "finish" the former in time for his March 1943 show. (In the end he considered it insufficiently advanced and too yellow, but it was

45. It is simply inscribed "42" rather than double dated, which may reflect the fact that the picture did not go through as many changes as the three other all-American works, although some colored rectangles were present at the beginning (see *PM*, p. 291).

46. The unfinished works are Seuphor, catalogue no. 435; *PM*, catalogue no. 184; and a heavily restored picture in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. These are conventionally titled *New York City Nos. 2–4*. Two more works, *PM*, catalogue nos. 181 and 182 (both charcoal on canvas), may also belong to the series. Von Wiegand writes that Mondrian put these paintings aside "around the time of his first exhibition at Valentine Dudensing's (1942), and after that exhibition he began work on the two *Boogie Woogie* pictures. He worked on both of them simultaneously and finished *Broadway Boogie Woogie* first" (Rowell, "Interview," p. 82). The pair relationship of Mondrian's last two pictures has been neglected, perhaps because Von Wiegand's account of their making is not well known, perhaps because their identical size is not obvious given the fact that a square looks bigger in a "diamond" orientation.



already sold).⁴⁷ The latter occupied the nine months that remained until his death.

I will not dwell on *New York City*, which Yve-Alain Bois has treated extensively.⁴⁸ But what happened to the *New York City* series itself? It is not like Mondrian to leave a series of works unfinished.⁴⁹ Perhaps he had found out all he could from it, and felt no need to clean his plate. "I don't want pictures," Mondrian's friend Carl Holty recalls him replying to a general question about his obsessive revisions and consequent drop in productivity. "I just want to find things out."⁵⁰ But Holty reported this in 1957, and it sounds like Mondrian filtered through the Pollock-colored rhetoric of the time. What Von Wiegand remembers Mondrian saying in response to her similar query about *Victory Boogie Woogie* seems more plausible: "It

47. "After Mondrian saw 'Broadway Boogie-Woogie' hanging in the Modern Museum, he felt its effect was weakened by the preponderance of yellow" (Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 85, based on her interviews with Holty, 1968–70). "[Mondrian] died, feeling of his last completed work: 'I am only satisfied insofar as I feel *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* is a definite progress but even about this picture I am not quite satisfied'" (James Johnson Sweeney, "Art Chronicle," *Partisan Review* 11, no. 2 [Spring 1944], pp. 173–76).

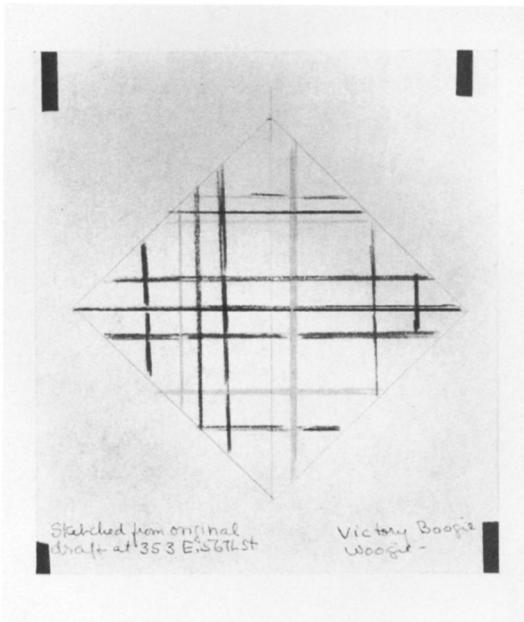
48. Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," in his *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 157–83.

49. The only other instance is a group of works from 1934, including *PM*, catalogue nos. 171–74, and this batch is likely explained by a serious illness that kept Mondrian from painting during the first half of 1935. In September he resumed work and finished four pictures, but was ready by then to move on rather than complete the rest (see *PM*, pp. 66–67).

50. Holty, "Mondrian in New York," p. 21.

Left: Victory Boogie Woogie.
1942–44.

Right: Charmion von Wiegand.
Sketch of Victory Boogie Woogie.
1942.



is not important to make many pictures but that I have the picture right.”⁵¹ This fixation on finishing a picture, no matter how long it took, was incompatible with the multiple logic of the series, which had long been the mainstay of Mondrian’s practice. So Mondrian quietly dropped the New York City series, indeed the very idea of seriality, deliberately taking up a pair of works that would allow him to make a definitive statement about the two formats that had preoccupied him since 1925, the square and the diamond.

At this point, to understand Mondrian’s various moves it is necessary to understand boogie-woogie, which, Mondrian wrote, “I see as homogeneous with my intentions.”⁵² (He did not explain much further.) The essence of piano boogie is the vigorously competing rhythms of two hands, and sometimes two or even three pianos as well. It is a competition of likeness: the left and right hands nearly abandon their traditional roles of harmony and melody, instead sharing one repeated rhythmic motif and offsetting it between them to create a virtuoso polyrhythmic texture. The sound of good boogie-woogie, as early critics recognized, is a single mesh whose elements cannot easily be teased apart into “right” and “left,” a dazzling acoustic Moiré pattern whose elements seem to eat away at

51. Rowell, “Interview,” p. 82.

52. Mondrian, note to James Johnson Sweeney, May 1943, published in Sweeney, “Mondrian, the Dutch and De Stijl,” *Art News* 50, no. 4 (Summer 1951), p. 62. For some reason, a different version is given in *NANL*, p. 357.

one another. "If you can detect, without looking at the piano, what hand plays what note (in crossed-hand patterns), you are listening to a bad player."⁵³ Boogie-woogie is the very model of a collapsed dualism, or rather a collapsing one, since the two hands remain distinct despite their similarities: the left hand is (more) repetitive, the right hand (more) discursive.

Mondrian takes an uncharacteristic stab at illustrating this music in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, with its Albers-like blocked chords (pounding right hand) and, at lower center, its similar patterns of alternating colors that run along parallel horizontal tracks at different rates (polyrhythm of simultaneous lines). But the more important relationship to the music lies at a higher level of abstraction. Here we can be guided by an observation about *New York City* made by Masheck, who finds in that picture "a continuity of artistic and physical form that had been blocked by an older, dualistic notion of composition." Bois extends this thought about the painting into a full-blown account, finding a deconstruction of the drawing-painting hierarchy in its braided, colored lines.⁵⁴

In short, the guiding axiom of Neo-Plasticism, "the equivalence of the dissimilar,"⁵⁵ which had justified Mondrian's classic dualism of black lines bounding color planes, got ditched in the 1940s with the help of boogie-woogie (a model Mondrian could not have understood without having already assimilated the beat-syncopation dualism of classic jazz, but that is another story). Oddly, this decisive shift is not readily apparent in Mondrian's late writings.⁵⁶ But there is a negative indication that, once noticed, looms large: the master opposition of "position" versus "dimension," or *stand* versus *maat* (the constancy of the vertical-horizontal relationship versus all the variability of composition), quickly fades from the New York texts.⁵⁷ When Mondrian writes to Von Wiegand that all his oppositions have become confused, the comment is an agenda, not a complaint.⁵⁸

53. Ernest Borneman, "Boogie Woogie," in *Just Jazz*, ed. Sinclair Traill and Gerald Lascelles (London: Peter Davies, 1957), p. 40. Mondrian's writings contain little musical analysis, but he did comment that "boogie-woogie is pure rhythm" (Rembert, "Mondrian," p. 80, based on 1967 interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Fritz Glarner). This was a critical commonplace: "The test of a good piece of boogie music is whether it will still hold your attention when it is played on a single note" (Borneman, "Boogie Woogie," p. 14). See also William Russell, "Three Boogie-Woogie Blues Pianists," in *The Art of Jazz: Essays on the Nature and Development of Jazz*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 95–108; William Russell, "Boogie Woogie," in *Jazzmen*, ed. Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and Charles Edward Smith (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1957); and Peter J. Silvester, *A Left Hand Like God: A History of Boogie-Woogie Piano* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989).

54. Joseph Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," *Artforum* 13, no. 2 (October 1974), p. 61; Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," *passim*.

55. Mondrian, "No Axiom But the Plastic Principle" (1923), *NANL*, p. 179.

56. One reason is that, as Bois has noted, Mondrian had begun to write in terms of plurality instead of duality as early as 1930, just before the explosion of multiple black lines in his work (Bois, "The Iconoclast," *PM*, pp. 356–57). This explosion was a great change, but nothing like the restructuring of his language in New York.

57. One late iteration of position-dimension, in 1942, turns out to be taken word for word from a 1930 essay (compare *NANL*, pp. 343, 242). This staleness is verified by the total absence of position-dimension from the voluminous New York notes Mondrian left at this death (*NANL*, pp. 358–92).

58. Mondrian to Von Wiegand, June 27, 1942, transcribed by Von Wiegand, unpublished typescript.

But if boogie-woogie inspired Mondrian to shift his pictorial and theoretical vocabulary away from duality and opposition, and toward plurality and similarity, why then the 1942 abandonment of seriality, why the return to duality in the pairing of the last two pictures? The answer can be found along another axis of boogie-woogie. If the simultaneous relation of right and left hands (the vertical aspect of the music) suggested to Mondrian all the excitement of an abrasive similarity, with its promise of a terminal fusion of elements, the temporal (horizontal) structure indicated the price to be paid.

Whatever the particular bass-line motif chosen by the pianist, boogie-woogie nearly always had an eighth-note rhythmic feel originally meant to pump along through an all-night dance or rent party, hence the nickname “eight to the bar.” In this virtually endless format, success depended on moment-to-moment or chorus-to-chorus inventiveness, not on the ability to shape a compositional whole. But when John Hammond brought boogie-woogie into the recording studios, the three-minute form of the 78 rpm record made new, arguably inappropriate demands on the music. Above all, it made the ending much more prominent, exacerbating the problem of how to finish a music characterized by driving repetitiveness. One sly solution was the ironic flourish, complete with rallentando and mock-classical harmonic resolution.⁵⁹

So if Mondrian responded to boogie-woogie by fusing his pictorial language in the swinging plaid of *New York City*, his subsequent abandonment of seriality was inspired by a collision of the repetitiveness of boogie-woogie and its new need to end, a collision that caused Mondrian to doubt his Hegelian faith in the possibility of sublating a repetition. Homogeneity or similarity of elements could function within a given painting as a new technology of unity, suggesting a single, active texture.⁶⁰ But between paintings in a series, it only heightened the sense of repetition. Whether or not Mondrian was familiar with Hegel’s criticism of the Romantic ideal of endless striving as a “bad infinity,” he had a musical model of it in front of him.

Victory

In 1942, at the age of seventy, Mondrian began to face the prospect of his

59. See, for example, Meade Lux Lewis’s 1936 Decca recording of his showpiece, “Honky-Tonk Train Blues.”

60. When MOMA acquired *Broadway Boogie Woogie* in 1943, Greenberg complained that its unity was too easily won: “at no point does the rhythm threaten to break out of and unbalance [the square pattern of the picture] enough to justify the latter’s final triumph.” With his aesthetics of struggle, Greenberg was still hankering after the contrasts of Mondrian’s 1920s style, and didn’t understand that what he called the picture’s “floating, wavering quality” was a new kind of unity. In “Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1948) Greenberg seems to grasp this, using Mondrian’s term “equivalence” to describe new “polyphonic” painters like Pollock who “weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principle of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in each thread” (see Clement Greenberg: *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93], vol. 1, p. 153; vol. 2, p. 223).

own ending. He had suffered respiratory problems for years, and had had a bad scare in 1935. Von Wiegand, who knew Mondrian as intimately as anyone, concluded in retrospect that his behavior in his last months indicated a premonition of death.

This is an odd context for Mondrian's exuberant last picture—or is it? For a teleologist, the end is everything. Mondrian often repeated his belief that art progressed to a final goal, when it would be superseded in a fusion of all the (former) arts with the environment and life itself. So the end of painting, which was queen of the arts, implied the end of art, too. In *Victory Boogie Woogie*, Mondrian linked his own imminent end with that of painting, which made the picture both ecstatic and tragic.

Of course, to argue this is to risk making the historian's retroactive mistake, taking what turned out to be the last painting for a Last Painting. But the size and pairing of Mondrian's last two works, his age and health, his teleological bent, his august self-image (could he have failed to read Hegel's magisterial self-Assumption at the end of the *Phenomenology*?)—all these argue for a summarizing ambition, a big finish. With *Victory Boogie Woogie*, the time was finally ripe, to borrow and negate a favorite expression from Mondrian's Theosophical lexicon.⁶¹ But the greater the pressure to conclude, the more second thoughts he had. Judging from photographs, he "finished" the picture at least twice, once in late 1942 and once in January 1944, just ten days before his death from pneumonia. Each time he began a new campaign, sketching furiously with bits of paper and tape over the paint until the surface became the battlefield it has remained—revenge of the repetition he had tried to eliminate by dropping the series.

Every narrative is haunted by the end, the feared/desired goal that brings to a crisis what Barthes calls "the discourse's instinct for preservation."⁶² This problem is one that Hegel's narrative both acts out and reflects on (and it is this, rather than his famous but meagre speculations on the end of art, that is relevant to the case of Mondrian). Spirit is infinite, totally free, and moves toward self-perfection. How then can infinite Spirit reach an endpoint, or total freedom confine itself? Hegel's tentative answers (the circular image of a "good infinity" in the *Logic*, the definition of ultimate knowledge as endless progress in the *Phenomenology*) did not concern Mondrian, if he knew of them.⁶³ Instead, he thrashed out the problem of ending an evolutionary narrative on the surface of *Victory Boogie Woogie*.

Here it is time to say that there is nothing anti-Hegelian about the collapse of oppositions: quite the contrary. Just as Hegel envisioned the end of his narrative as the prodigal return of Spirit out of worldly exile back to itself (the masterplot

61. Mondrian: "Insofar as the time is not yet ripe for the complete unification of architecture, the new plastic must continue to be manifested as painting" ("The New Plastic in Painting," p. 37).

62. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 75–76, 135–35, 171–73. See also Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 90–112.

63. Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 240; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. xiv.

of the *Phenomenology*), so Mondrian imagined the end of art as a return to an “original unity” that appeared “in time as a duality.”⁶⁴ The goal of evolution was the eventual and gradual cure, as if by a time-released drug, of all opposition. The point of dialectics was its own collapse, in which duality itself was not just cancelled but kept and transformed, sublated: “Hegel is neither a monist nor a dualist. If any number is to be assigned to him, it is the number 3.”⁶⁵

Hence Mondrian’s final articulation of dialectical opposition as something other than binary. Where he had always relied on oppositions to undo visual fixity (with its baggage of geometry and symbolism) and to produce dynamic equilibrium, in New York he struggled for other, nonbinary terms: “We have to destroy the entity through complexity.”⁶⁶ Boogie-woogie came as close as possible to taking similarity, not difference, as the basis for dialectics. Mondrian grasped it as a way of seizing his pictorial dialectic at its most advanced point, where the elements were so near synthesis that they could barely be differentiated. In Mondrian’s last work, that point arrives. The picture’s mess of revisions, with bits of paper and tape stacked up to eight layers thick, is like a sonic boom, the pile-up of waves as a jet approaches the sound barrier and runs into its own noise. Mondrian finally allowed himself to catch up to the historical signal he had been sending ahead (but not to pass it, not to finish the painting). In the blast, all the oppositions that Neo-Plasticism cherished and kept distinct are fused.

This degree of fusion is what really distinguishes *Victory Boogie Woogie* from *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. In *Victory*, one can no longer tell a thick mosaic line from a column of planes, or a group of adjacent lines from a checkered grid. And whereas in *Broadway* the gray remains within either the lines or the large planes connecting them, leaving white to function as sole background, in *Victory* the size and position of gray is deregulated, allowing gray planes to get big enough to function as background as well. As a result, white areas pop out in relation to their less obtrusive gray neighbors. The central white planes even promote themselves in front of the parti-colored lines around them, suggesting the “ghost of a ground . . . appearing above the figure.”⁶⁷ Adieu to the principal opposition and favorite plaything of De Stijl painting.

Postscript

But *Victory Boogie Woogie* does more than criticize the residual dualism and musical iconographics of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. It reaches much farther back, for

64. Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting,” p. 48. See also “A Trialogue,” pp. 95, 98.

65. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, p. 296.

66. Mondrian [A Folder of Notes, c. 1938–44], *NANL*, p. 381. This idea is foreshadowed by an unusual passage in the “Trialogue” where Mondrian hesitates between duality and multiplicity: “everything that is regarded as a thing in itself, as one, must be viewed as a duality or multiplicity—as a complex” (*NANL*, p. 86).

67. Bois, “The Iconoclast,” p. 361.

it comes after a series of ten diamond paintings executed between 1925 and 1938, of which it is the critical postscript.

Mondrian had two rules for this diamond series, unspoken but empirically derivable: all lines must cross the entire surface, and, in a kind of pictorial agoraphobia, the central area must be avoided. Never mind the significance of these rules here, nor the place of the diamond and diagonal in Mondrian's thinking. The important thing for our purpose is that *Victory Boogie Woogie* began by deliberately violating both rules. As shown in the sketch of it made in Mondrian's studio by Von Wiegand on June 13, 1942, when it was still a stripe painting like *New York City*, its two longest lines crossed almost at the center and a short blue vertical at right did not reach the edge in either direction. Judging from Von Wiegand's parallel written report, this second violation was well considered: "The right corner gave the most trouble: a blue cross with enclosing red horizontals. He found a solution in cutting off the blue line top and bottom and leaving empty space above and below the cross."⁶⁸ This violation of the spanning line rule was not only carefully pondered; it was prepared by the penultimate diamond, *Picture No. III* of 1938 (the largest work of the series at 40 inches per side). This picture, like a Freudian dream, *condenses* the preceding nine diamonds on its surface, combining the two-, three-, and four-line subtypes of the series, and in the process *displaces* all their structures. As a result, two of its eight lines fail to reach the edge, blocked by a red triangle. As Bois writes, "A red triangle steps in to knock over the house of cards that our eye tries to construct."⁶⁹ Significantly, it was the only recent painting from Europe that Mondrian had in New York and never transatlanticized.⁷⁰ He needed it just as it was, facing backward and forward, memorandum and precedent. Its red wedge drives an opening into the rule-bound field of the diamonds for *Victory Boogie Woogie* to enter.

The last picture ended up looking very different from the way it started.⁷¹ A riot of blocks has replaced the stripes of the original. A vertical symmetry around the totem-like stack of central white planes, slightly offset to the right, has replaced the exact horizontal symmetry of the sketch.⁷² And while the plaid of the original was fairly evenly distributed, now the picture is densely structured by

68. Rowell, "Interview," pp. 83–84.

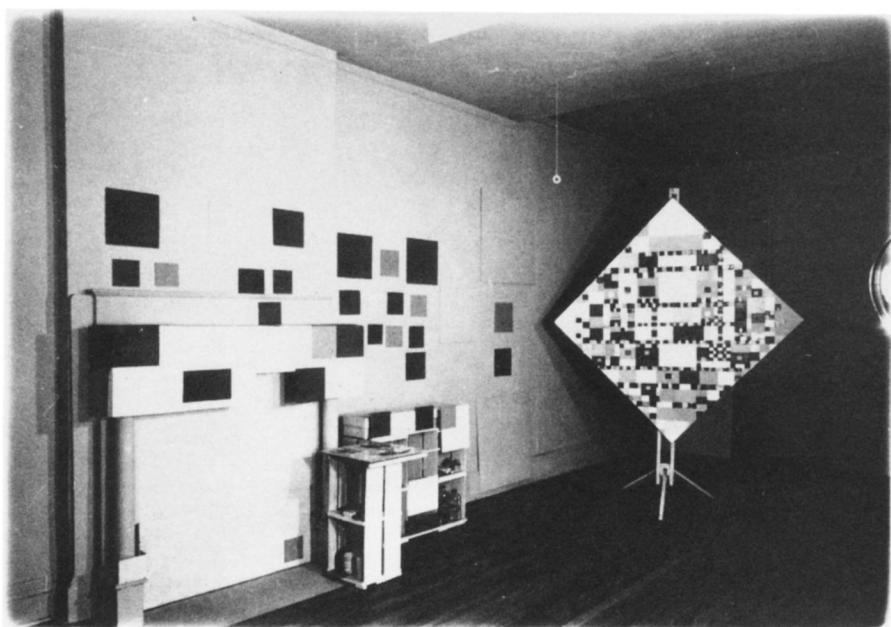
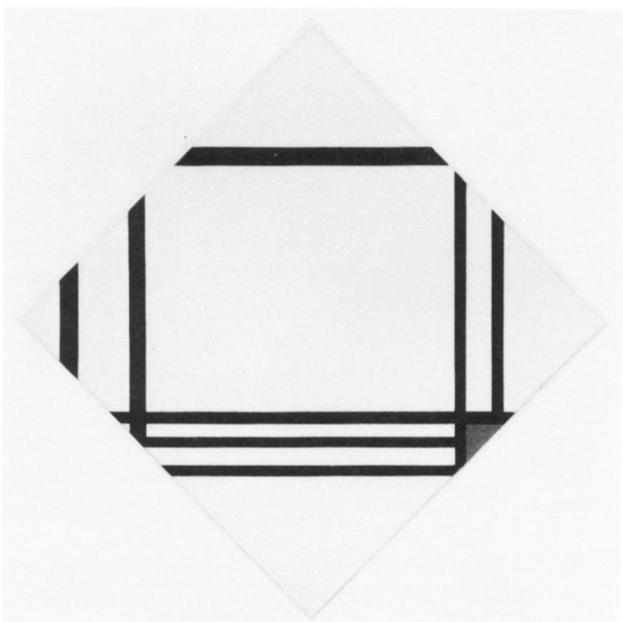
69. Bois, "The Iconoclast," p. 359. He continues: "This irruption of color produces an ongoing disruption in all the formal concatenations that we try to imagine on the basis of the interwoven lines in the painting."

70. He discussed revising the work for the one-man show with Von Wiegand, according to her journals, but apparently he never did, for it was neither shown nor double-dated. And the revisions he considered were not of the "trans-atlantic" type, just changes in line thickness.

71. In his careful study, E. A. Carmean instead emphasizes the continuity in the evolution of the picture (Carmean, *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions*, exhibition catalogue (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1979), pp. 59–66).

72. The fact that this vertical symmetry in the final state has never been noted can perhaps be explained by the fact that Mondrian was forced to use bits of tape whose colors did not match his paint. As a result the painting in its mixed-media state is more confusing than it would have been if finished.

Picture No. III. 1938.



15 E. 59th Street. 1944.

crossing lines at the center. This strong centering contradicts all the afocal, asymmetrical tendencies of Neo-Plasticism, indeed flouts them, for what is revealed at the center, flanked by two isolated crosses (a form Mondrian explicitly abhorred), is the triad of colors (red-yellow-blue) that it had been the business of Neo-Plasticism to keep apart.⁷³

This heretical centering seems to have engrossed all the energies of the picture, for the composition is fragmented and grayly floating toward the edges. At the top and bottom corners, a strange grayish-green plane entirely escapes the Neo-Plastic color canon.⁷⁴ At the left corner, two wandering pairs of red and blue rectangles, revised up and down, seem to call to a pair of rectangles, red and yellow, that swim on the wall to the left amid larger white planes (as shown in a posthumous photograph of the picture in the studio). Reading further left along the wall, the colored cardboard rectangles line up under the influence of the horizontal mantelpiece which they hide. Another photo shows them dispersing again as they approach the opposite wall, ending with a color triad below the window, and thus concluding the narrative that originated at the very center of the painting.⁷⁵

This “failure” of structure at the edge of *Victory Boogie Woogie*, then, has more than a negative significance: it draws our eye past the frame. Contemplating the new historical stage of art-as-environment meant breaching not only the structuralist enclosure of the diamond series, and not only the grammar of Neo-Plasticism itself, but the literal enclosure of painting. As Mondrian often wrote, no doubt thinking of Hegel (or, with Hegel, of the Hindu god Shiva), no creation without destruction. He took a similar lesson from the transatlantic paintings—no crossing without a chasm, one might say—and with the help of boogie-woogie, applied it to the next looming exile—the end of life, career, painting—in order to register its finality but deny its fatality. No ending without a beginning.⁷⁶ As Hegel wrote of Spirit, “We may compare it with the seed; for with this the plant begins, yet it is also the result of the plant’s entire life. But . . . the commencement and the result are disjoined from each other.”⁷⁷ In *Victory Boogie Woogie*, the discontinuous result of more than twenty years of work, Mondrian burst the pod of painting and disseminated its elements across a broken border.

73. As Bois writes, in Neo-Plasticism the color planes “will tend to be at the periphery, and the function of non-color planes will be to separate them” (“The Iconoclast,” p. 325).

74. It has been suggested that this is a result of discoloration, but Von Wiegand’s journals indicate that this odd color was originally present. It is more visible in the original than in reproductions.

75. For complete photographic documentation of these “wall works,” as well as a list of Mondrian’s boogie-woogie records, see *Mondrian in New York*, exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: Galerie Tokoro, 1993).

76. “The account of the end of a time is told in a new time that conserves this ending and, even in that way, presents itself as a beginning” (Jean-François Lyotard, “Being Done with Narrative by Cubism and André Malraux,” in *Centuries’ Ends, Narrative Means*, ed. Robert Newman [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], p. 79).

77. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 78. On Hegel’s use of the seed as metaphor for the development of Spirit, see Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, pp. 79–80.