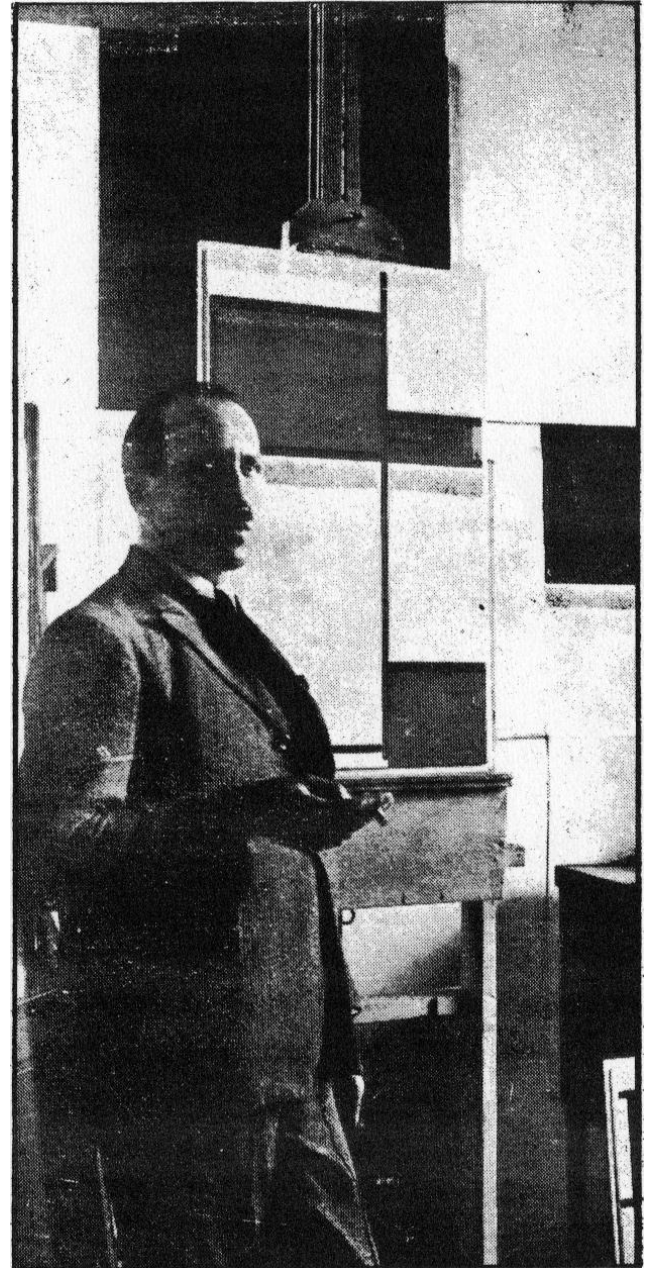


Stand by Mondrian

Prologue

In 1900 Mondrian had already written an important page in the artistic development of Modernism. This claim was confirmed in 2017, by the discovery of a Mondrian's original manuscript in Cologne, where one of the most important contemporary art publishers came across a forgotten notebook with his sketches for a pavilion that was never constructed.

There is no evidence that Mondrian visited the 1900 Expo in Paris, but he almost certainly saw photographs of the Dutch pavilion. The reconstruction of temples and architecture from the Dutch Indies was in harmony with the spirit of internationalism that characterized the Expo, with the celebration of the new century, human progress and innovation.



Mondrian used to meditate and had for some time been interested in theosophy. He was therefore greatly struck by that vision of a humanity reconstructed by universalist rationality and enthusiastically set about designing a Pavilion of Harmony. The imagined stand took the form of an abstract space where the balance between opposites was achieved through the internal dynamics of the constituent parts.

Many years later, those influences would be the basis of his most radical and celebrated abstract works representing the triumph of Modernism. But the story of Mondrian's pavilion also involves other greater and lesser figures of history, strange coincidences and grey areas which this fiction sets out to explore. With an inevitable grand finale.

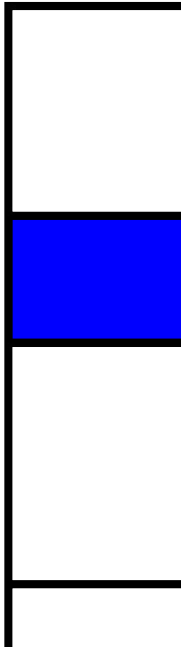
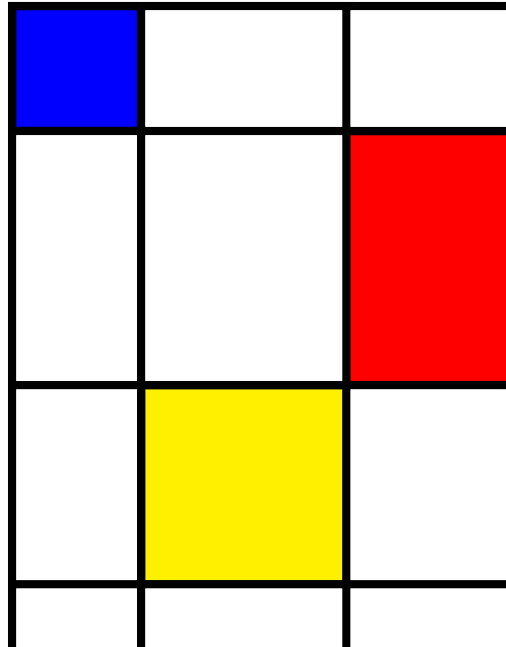
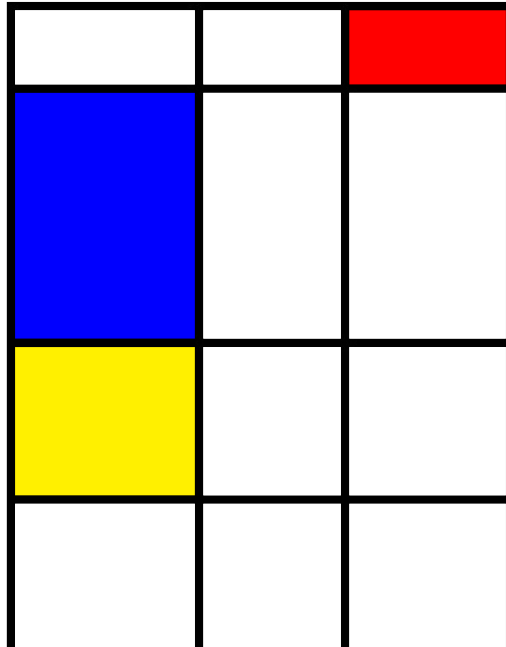
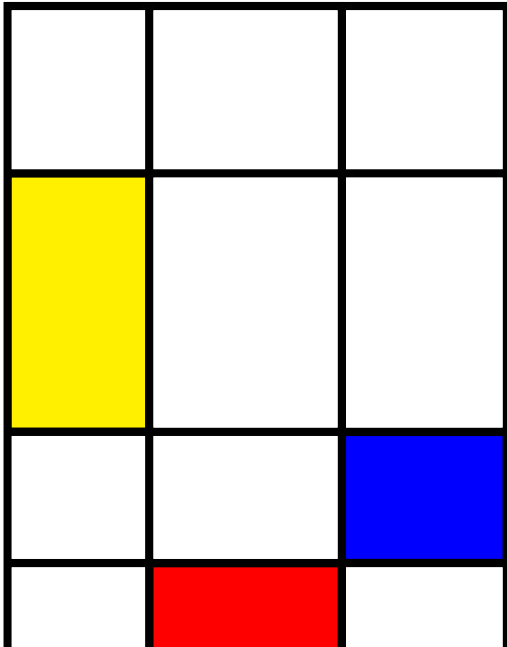
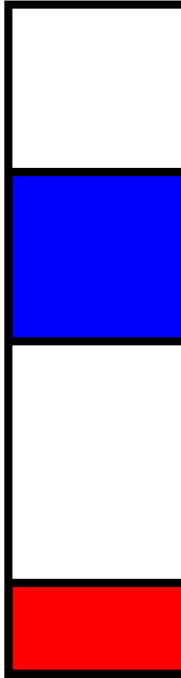
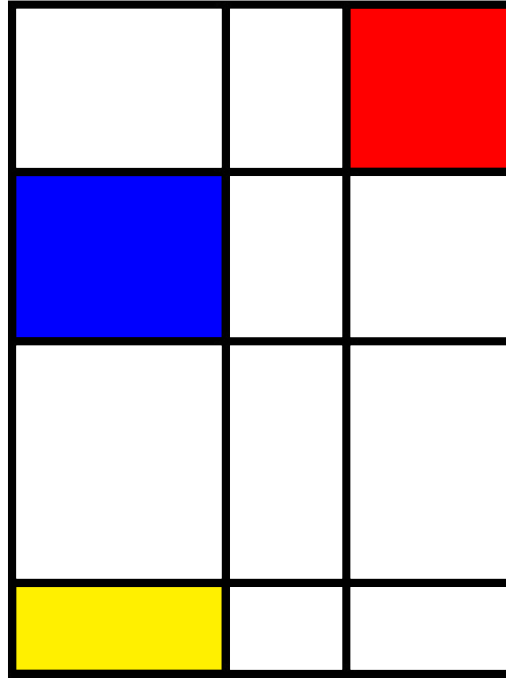
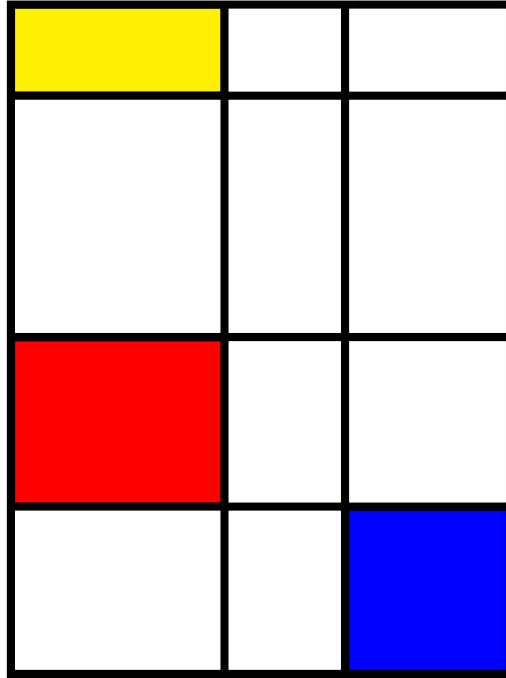
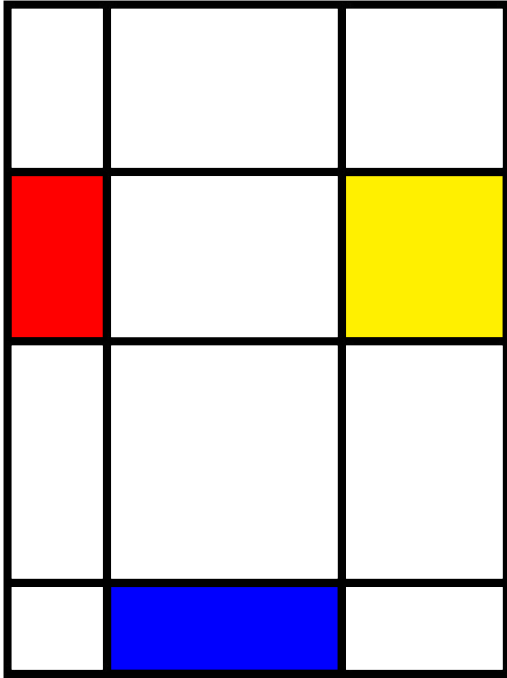
CHAPTER 1

**In Harmony
We Trust**

In 2017, the Cologne-based publisher Walther König revealed that he had found at a local flea market an original Mondrian's notebook that was considered lost during World War II. From 1900 and up until his death in 1944, Mondrian wrote down on it notes and reflections relating to his work. He apparently never separated himself from the little brown notebook that secured his most hidden thoughts, including the project we will try to reconstruct here - and with it, the life of an extraordinary figure.

To the great surprise of many Mondrian's scholars, the evolution of his aesthetic conceptions, which were believed as linear and progressive, began with an idea intimately connected with the final outcome of his artistic research. If it's well known that his last pictorial work, *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, represents a rewriting of the abstract grid stimulated by the frenetic rhythm of New York, nobody knew that many years before the *abstract turn* his iconic visual grid had appeared in a project for a pavilion.

**“Three colors as quarks
for the Master [...]
A network of forces, a
Pavilion of Harmony”**



During the 1900 Paris Expo, the Dutch pavilion presented to the world the reconstruction of the 8th century Sari temple and other religious buildings from the Dutch Indies. The universalist culture that inaugurated the new century with the faith in human and technological progress attracted the young Mondrian. He did not visit the Expo, but quite certainly he saw the photos of the pavilion and discussed of them with friends, as we can deduce from his notes.

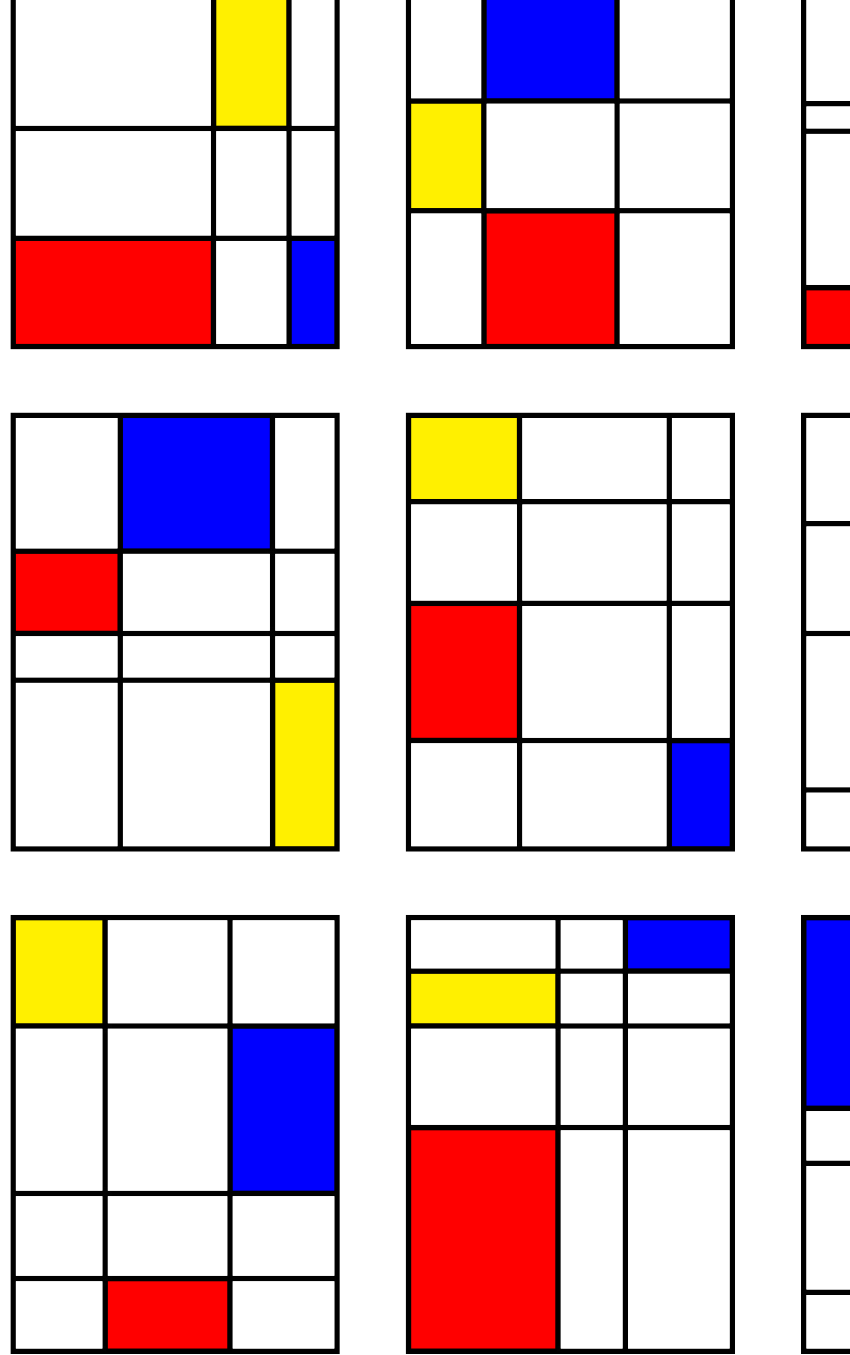
In those months Mondrian had just finished a self-portrait and was devoting himself to the study of nature, according to the Dutch School. He wasn't painting like a romantic, as he was looking at the space around him with realistic eyes, opposing modern art and its more avant-garde fringes. From a Calvinist background, he was searching for the essential truth in the appearance of the visible world, approaching theosophy and meditation.

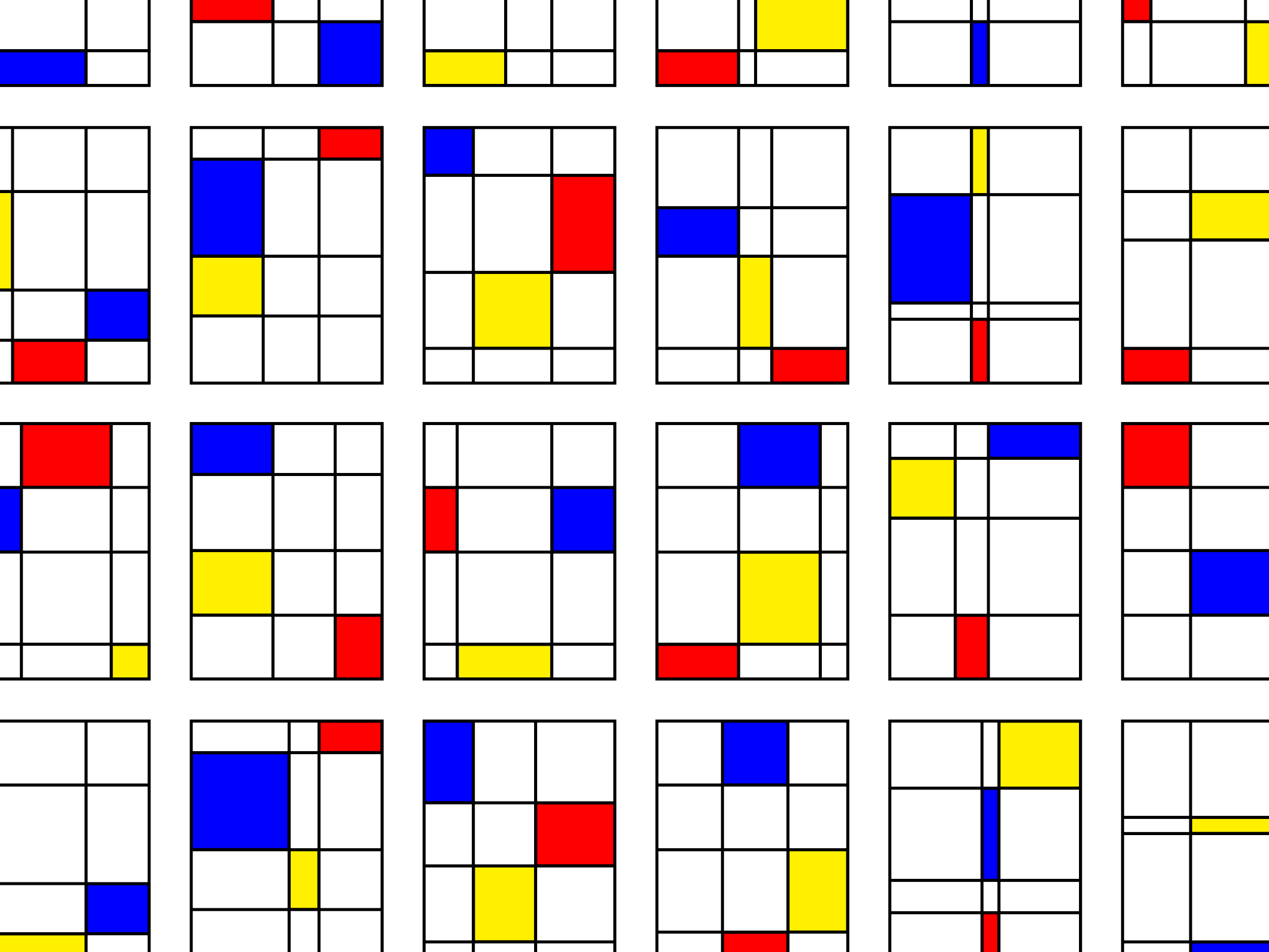
1. CORPORATE YOGA

The problem of control - of passions, of others' mind or your own - is a serious issue in the corporate life: just look at the number of stock photos that portray business people in their office practicing yoga with a smile. Therefore, a curious photo depicting the young Mondrian in a meditative pose does not conflict with those he had himself orchestrated in his Paris studio, wearing an elegant suit. The shaman / showman split, reabsorbed through the development of the abstract grid, is consistent with the figure of the shaman of the new economy, whose grid takes the form of increasingly fluid and adaptable organisational charts.

The vision of the Sari temple, reproduced in the heart of Western civilization at its maximum splendor and prosperity, stimulated his imagination: how to make a synthesis between Eastern spirituality and Western rationality? Then he began to write down in a notebook - *that* notebook - the first ideas about the creation of a “Pavilion of Harmony”, as he called it. He sketched several plans of the Pavilion, which condensed different knowledge and experiences: color theory, the concept of architectural space, *ars combinatoria* and theosophy.

“Know yourself, the true man, the man god [...] to become God.
I am a God, even though I'm a man of God”





The Pavilion of Harmony is a space located between the physical and the ideal world, characterized as a place for meditation. Three areas marked by primary colors (red, blue and yellow), separated by the void, are the basic elements of it. Among the notes, Mondrian wrote of “slightly raised modular plinths” covered with colored rugs, on which to place furniture and decorative objects or simply sit and meditate. Starting from a regular grid the three areas can be modified by balancing the relative sizes, so that one color predominates over another. The quest for balance is thus resolved in a dynamic and changeable space, against the rigid and static nature of tradition.

1. HARMONEY

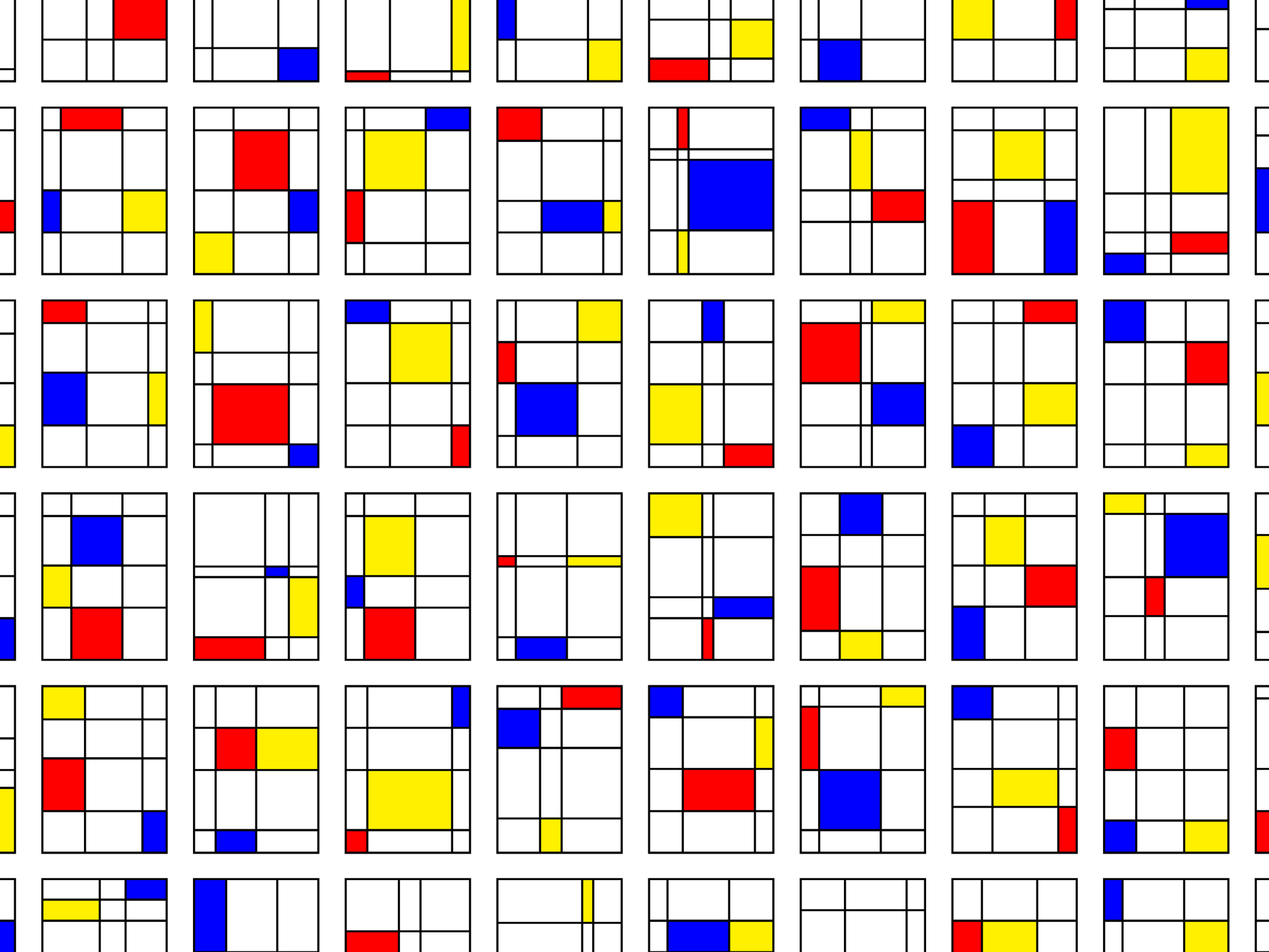
Is it really impossible to harmonize capital flows? Full automation and AI processes could implement forms of redistribution while remaining within the logic of competition. Stock exchanges regulated by machines as an “hacking Gekko” strategy: from greed-oriented human competitors to grid-related adversarial algorithms that balance on the global level, according to a perspective of increasing complexity and integration favored by the network. If harmony is a universal law, it will be realized also through the metaphysics of money, however counterintuitive it may seem.

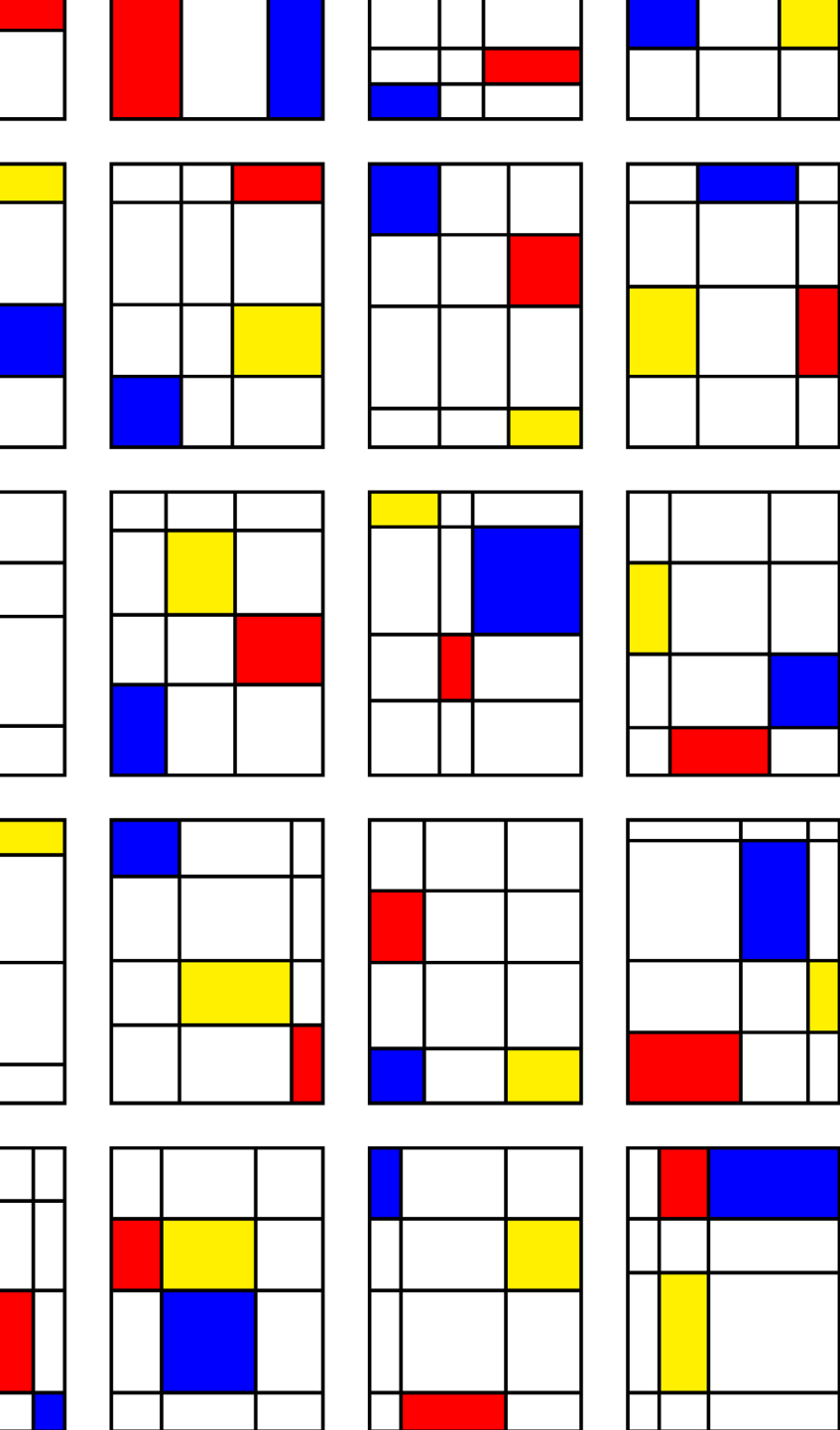
Abstraction did not manifested itself only through the simplification of forms, as the new spirit sought to look beyond. It was not enough to realize harmonious proportions, indeed it was necessary to express plastically the relationship of forces in eternal opposition. In a few sketches, Mondrian had made a fusion between order and chaos, between sensorial appearance and hidden universal laws.

Besides his interests in Eastern philosophies, Mondrian was quite involved in modern mathematics, particularly in the Cantor's infinity theory. He was fascinated by the ordering power hidden under the veil of things, as well as by mathematical tricks he used to amaze his friends.

The figure of David Hilbert, author of a radical meta-theoretical research on the foundations of mathematics, was one of his heroes. The Pavilion of Harmony contained the power of infinity: Mondrian tried to calculate the number of possible internal configurations, concluding that they were certainly "hundreds of thousands of millions".

**"No one shall expel us
from the paradise that
Cantor has created"**





3. IN RANDOM MONDRIAN

Starting from Mondrian's original sketches, it was possible to recreate a simplified model of the Pavilion of Harmony, which closely resembles the subsequent pictorial works. This model is the basis of a web app with which the user can interact to create his own configuration of shapes and colors. The idea of composition has been altered here by a mixed solution of generative art: the grids to be colored are randomly generated, selecting one of the millions of possible combinations. Mondrian's gamification seeks a balance between infinite potential and the intuition of color, both repacked and served in a user-generated fashion.

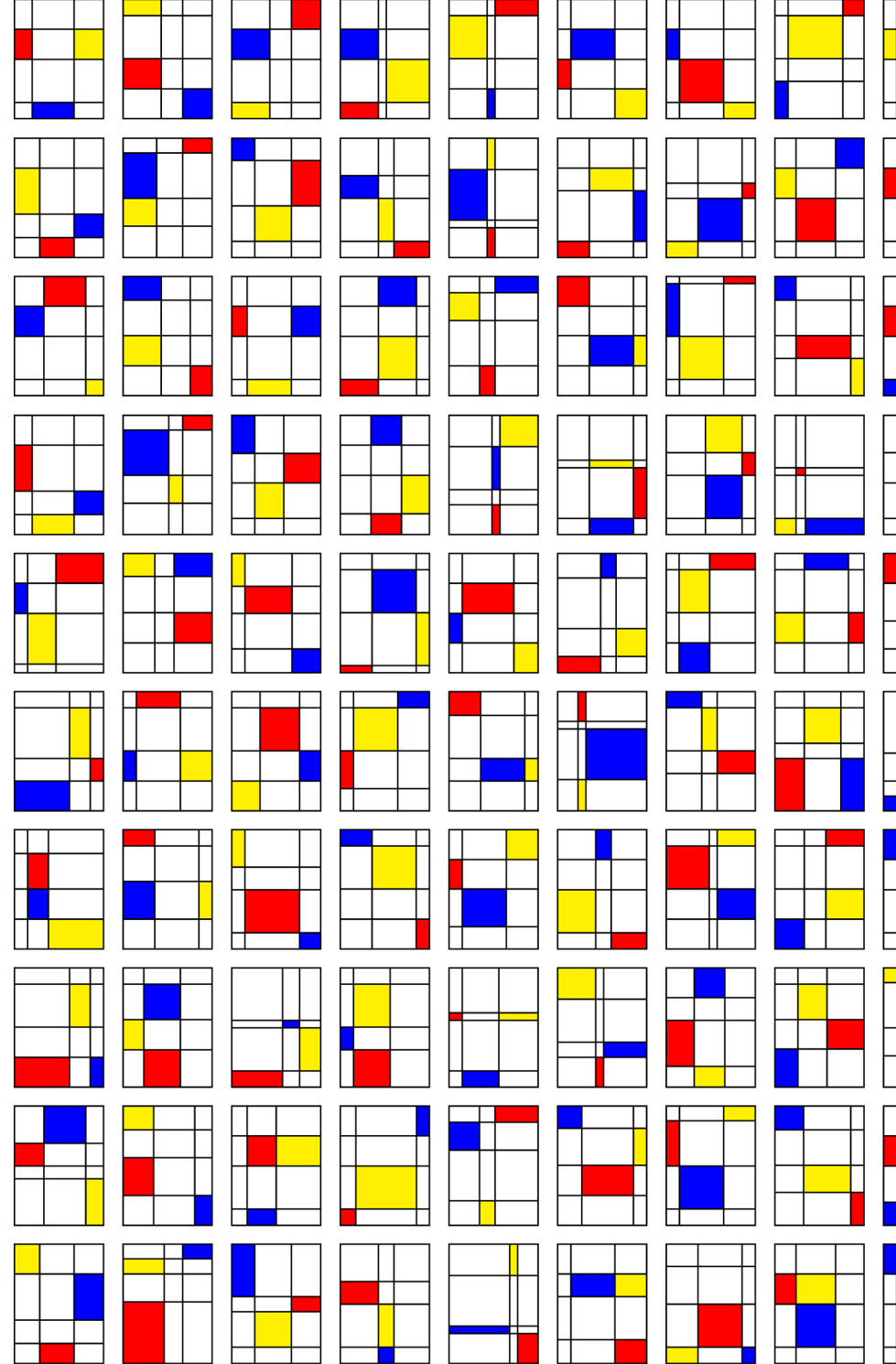
The grid, which appeared for the first time in this project, was therefore intended as a map of change and of universal dynamism. In all this there was still nothing pictorial. Indeed, the dissatisfaction with his work was at the origin of a profound existential crisis for Mondrian, who in 1903 secluded himself in the solitude of a spiritual retreat, on quest for superior truths beyond the senses.

In the representation of the landscape, and with the desire to become a great artist, he confronted himself with the masters of the past including the beloved Rembrandt, writing in his notebook imaginary dialogues with them. He began to share with the Romantics the doubt if it was still possible to depict nature, and the intuition of the painting surface as the most vivid direct experience in front of him. The definitive conclusion that Mondrian reached is that the paintings did nothing but refer to other paintings, opening up a world of new experiences that was worth exploring.

**“Remember Rembrandt:
paint a painting as if
infinity finally could
end and stand”**

This discovery fascinated him to the point of abandoning any attempt to directly depict the surrounding landscape, preferring the artificiality of a network of references and visual quotes. The copied landscapes opened up the possibility of an artificial life within the realm of art, where he would have lived for years to come. He began to methodically forget the notions learned during the academy, so that from the technical error could emerge the experience of the image itself.

What obsessed him was the quest for unity between painting and personal experience. His artistic and spiritual path reached a synthesis in metaphysical abstraction, but he was eager to go further. He felt the urgency of a new art, in step with the times. He had no choice but to go where the new art was theorized and practiced: Paris.



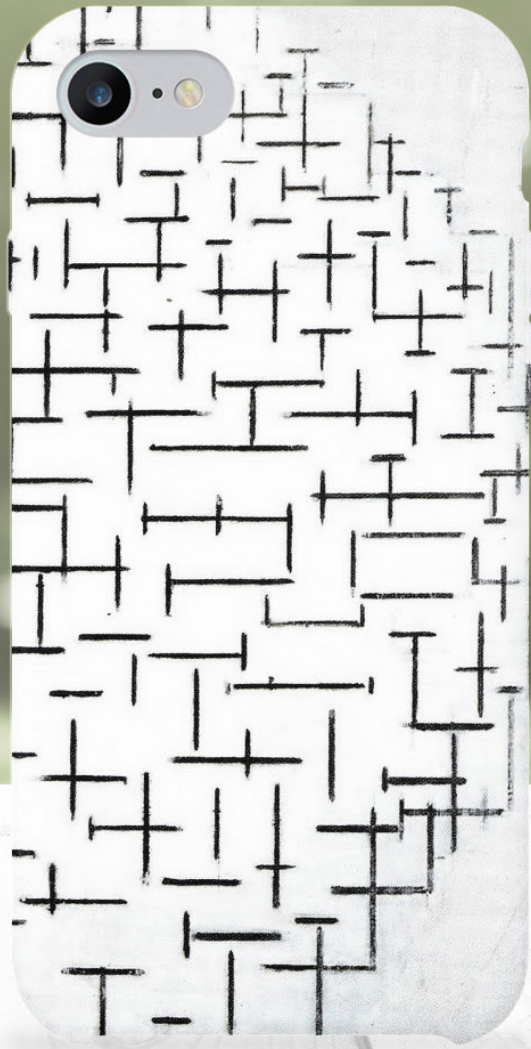
CHAPTER 2

Sitting on the Colors of the Bay

When Mondrian arrived in Paris, the artworld was dominated by the figures of Picasso and Braque. He reworked the Cubist style, which favored drawing over color, to depict trees and still lifes using a grid of black lines that outline the contours of things. The tangle of houses in Paris suggested him how to insert elements of daily life into the Cubist grid, while the peeling walls and remnants of tapestries from demolished buildings he saw from the window of his studio in Montparnasse seemed to him like giant abstract paintings.

In 1914 he had to return to Holland because his father was sick, and with the outbreak of the World War I he was forced to stay there for a period. He returned to Domburg, where his true artistic life had come to light, literally. In the past, sitting beyond the sand dunes observing the pier and ocean, he had tried to fix the impression of those colors. Now everything looked different: in his notebook he drew an oval that contained a dense network of short horizontal and vertical lines, reducing the sea view to an abstract model that evokes the rhythmic motion of the waves. Mondrian reached a new figurative form, devoid of a center and even of the classical composition, using the void and the flatness of the surface.

“The horizontal line is a symbol of the material principle, the vertical line of the spiritual one”



He met Theo van Doesburg, and they soon became inseparable friends. In 1917 van Doesburg founded De Stijl, gathering around him the best Dutch artists of the time from different disciplines: painting, architecture, theater, poetry, music and dance. The movement denied any natural form in favor of abstraction, proposing a new humanism that would be in harmony with the cycle of the universe. Mondrian concentrated mainly on the theoretical elaboration of the new painting, publishing articles on aesthetics: extreme formal rigor, exclusive use of primary colors, orthogonal lines, shapes limited to the rectangle and square. His intent was to reach the zero degree of painting.

The attitude of the group towards the unity of the various disciplines and the total artwork, pushed Mondrian and van Doesburg to conceive painting in a strict relation with architecture. In fact, both tended to reconfigure the space in which the modern man would have lived. If radical architecture had spread the use of pure colors combined with simple supporting structures, the new abstract painting would have seemed less incomprehensible to the eyes of contemporaries.

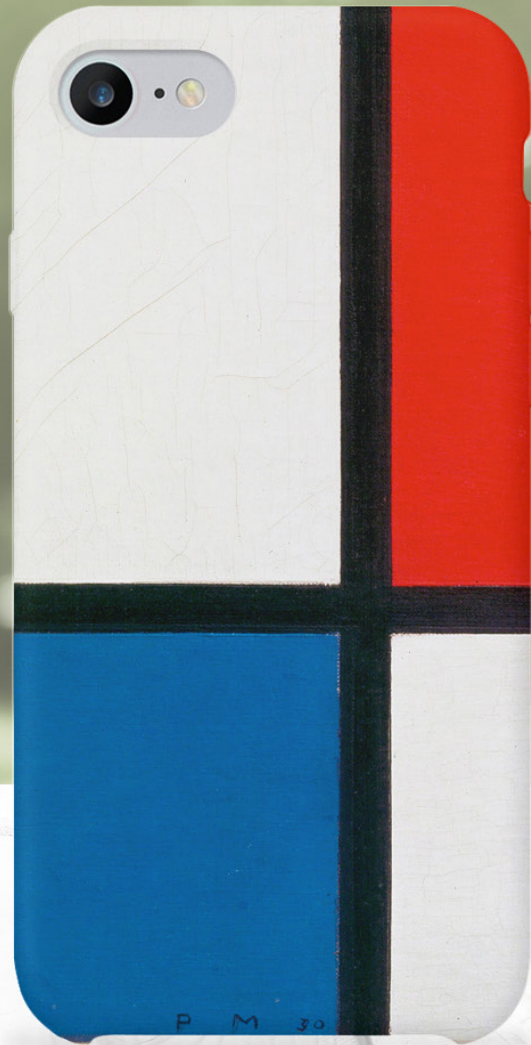
“This new beauty is indispensable to the new man, because it allows him to express his own image. New art is born”



One evening at the home of Rietveld, a designer of the group, Mondrian showed everyone the sketch of a chair he had traced in his notebook using the harmonic numbers of the Pavilion. On a side note he wrote: “Sitting on the pier with colors”, recalling the summers in Domburg. Rietveld said that the chair would be very uncomfortable, as all the elements were orthogonal to each other, and proposed to tilt the seat and backrest. It was the kind of accommodation that Mondrian would have rejected in the past, preferring the purity of the idea, but on that occasion the group was cohesive. They laughed when someone commented: “Look, it seems just like the pier, *Piet-and-ocean!*”

4. I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN

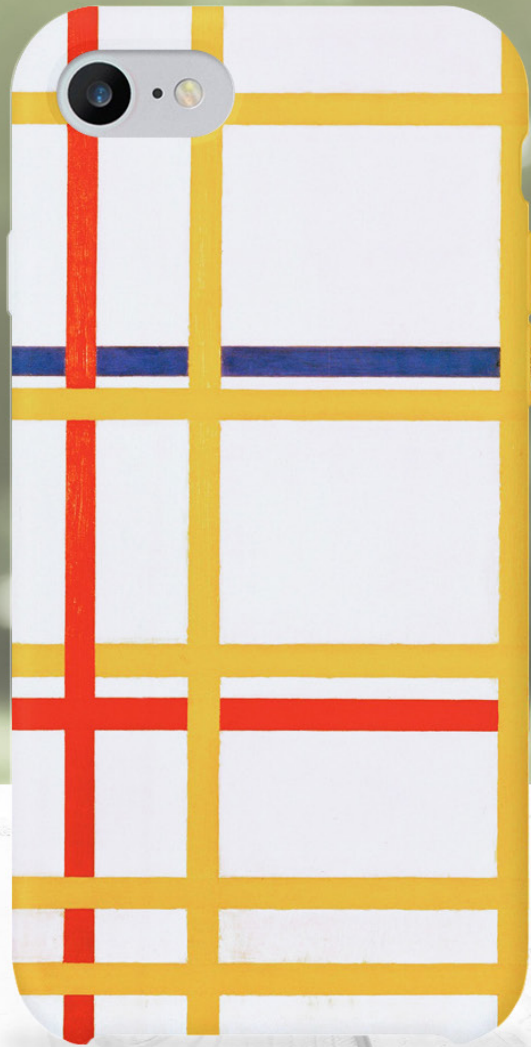
A Chinese company sells smartphone skins and cases whose printed graphics reproduce famous paintings. The catalog online counts over a thousand selectable art images, among which it is possible to find reproductions of Mondrian's works belonging to different periods. Printable on demand, the skins still don't exist except as previews serially built using mockups. The images are cut vertically, re-adapting the work for decorative purposes and degrading the grid. The blurred background recalls a naturalistic landscape, and is repeated identical in all previews. The table gives perspective to an otherwise flat and abstract scene: then you realize that the vanishing point coincides with the camera eye. These trivial images are actually epiphanies of the end of a worldview, the reversal of the gaze and its new eye: EYE is for I.



In 1918 Mondrian created an emblematic realistic self-portrait, with an abstract painting in the background, portraying himself in the manner of the great masters. The meaning and destiny of painting would have coincided with the artist's life and work. After some white paintings in which colored squares floated in the void, Mondrian realized that the much sought-after formal solution had already been traced years earlier in his notebook, with the Pavilion of Harmony. Suddenly, painting and architecture merged into one, transferring the grid of black lines and colored rectangles onto the canvas.

In his manifesto on the “end of art”, van Doesburg stated that art - even the avant-garde - was hindering the progress of modern life. The separation between art and life had to fall definitively, and this in part was already happening with the reduction of abstract painting to decoration. Mondrian moved away from the De Stijl group, experimenting in the solitude of his studio the personal blurring of art and life. He lived the opposition between the desire to be a great artist and the need to overcome tradition. He would never have accepted to simply become a designer.

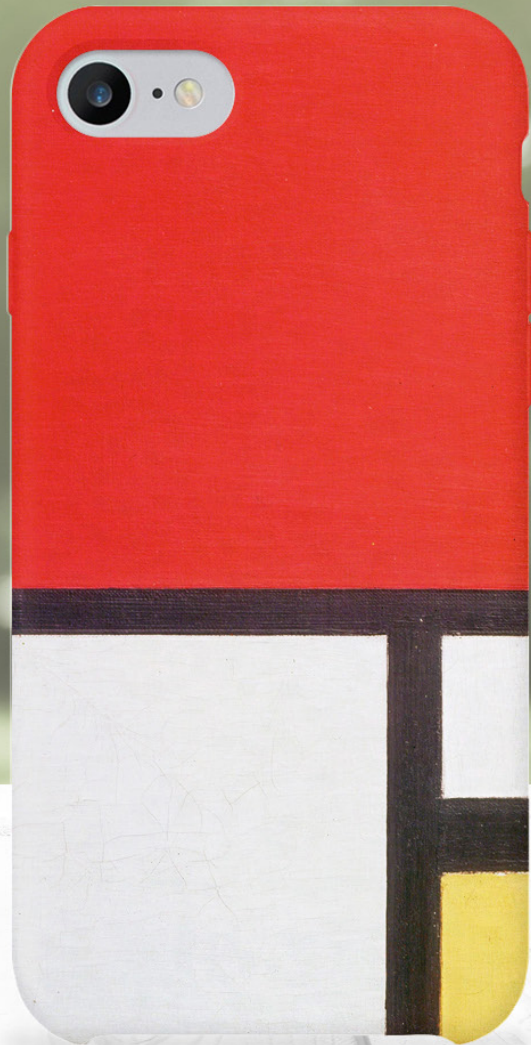
“Art, whose function nobody knows, hinders the function of life. For the sake of progress we must destroy Art”



In his apparent retreat from social life he also avoided to be photographed at work, preferring to control the image he offered of himself to the outside, removing every private aspect. In a 1926 photo orchestrated by himself, we see the empty atelier with one of his abstract paintings on the easel. He wanted to embody his doctrine within the studio, which he had furnished with interchangeable modular elements as in a plastic realization of the Harmony Pavilion. His own person was the object of creation: only the idea of a life dedicated to the purity of form should remain in the collective memory.

His sentimental life was disastrous: women clashed with his mysterious, inaccessible side. A fake flower in his studio replaced the female presence. To compensate for the too strict austerity he frequented jazz clubs but always with distance, without being directly involved in that vital rhythm. Josephine Baker, who was scandalizing the Parisians with her erotic dance, maybe was the absolute antithesis of Mondrian's art. They met one evening after a show, and talked all night long. She wrote a note in his notebook, mocking Mondrian's poor attitude at dancing.

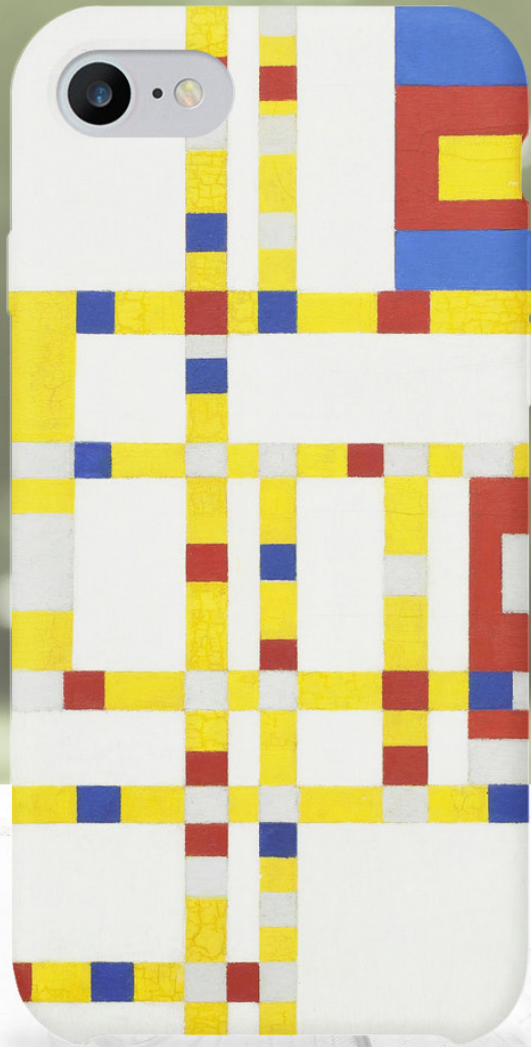
**“Don't be square! Follow the
rhythm you've discovered in
the night & day of colors.
Bisous, J.”**



The “monk of painting”, as he was maliciously defined, started foretelling the imminent end of the subject. The scenography of his atelier had become a total artwork that had expelled its author, and in which painting was self-generating by infinite variations and repetitions. In an essay of 1931 he announced the next end of art: with an utopian world about to arise, abstract art would no longer be referable to everyday experience, as it would no longer be possible for the artist to paint.

5. THINK DESIGNING

Design as a total art program has existed since the days of De Stijl and the Bauhaus - but where did it lead us? In what sense, if there is any, would art have come to an end? And what would come after it? These overwhelming questions have, as always, different answers. First of all, art tout court did not end, as demonstrated by the exponential increase in exhibitions around the world. However, we can think of a secularization of art and the weakening of its magnitude, as sought and theorized by many avant-gardes. Design, on the other hand, represents a scaled approach to the everyday. Its field of applications has widened considerably to reach the most abstract and strategic areas of business. Declaring that “everything is art” makes very little sense today, while affirming that “everything is design” sounds much more convincing.



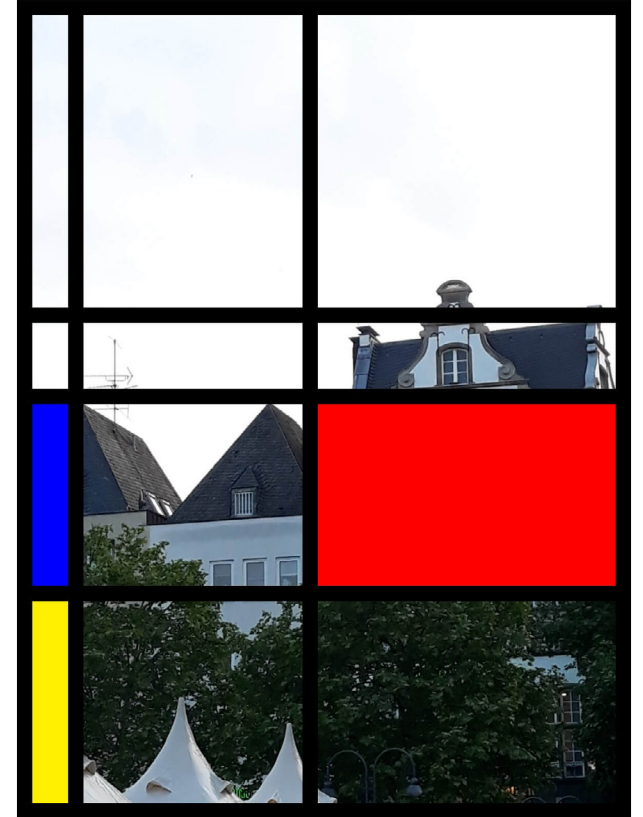
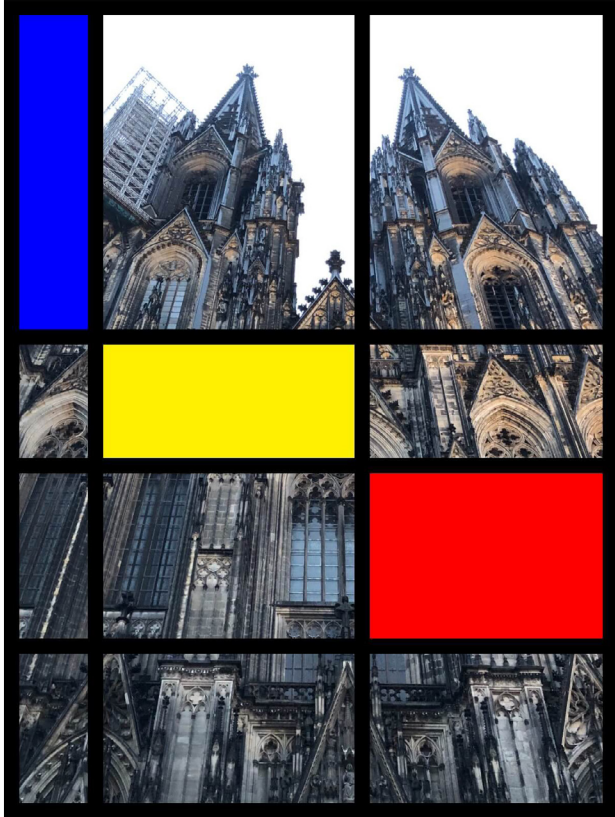
CHAPTER 3

**Prost,
Modernism!**

In 1920 a Dadaist happening held in a pub in Cologne scandalized the city. At that time, the avant-gardes were organized into groups in which different creative minds had to coexist. Unlike the Dadaists and the Surrealists, De Stijl was more compact and pragmatic, oriented not to symbolically subvert the order and provoke the bourgeois culture, but to the functional transformation of the collective space. Mondrian openly condemned the Cologne episode: art could not be abandoned to human instincts, but had to transcend them.

After a period of isolation in his studio in Montparnasse, Mondrian slowly started over meeting old and new friends. He came into contact with the Russian artist El Lissitzky, who later set up an exhibition of abstract constructivist art in Hannover. Lissitzky became an important figure for the development of exhibition displays, including the notable Russian pavilion that designed for the “Pressa” Fair Cologne, in 1928. Printing and advertising were becoming serious industries, but Mondrian’s art seemed apparently far from that.

“What happened in Cologne shows that art must not be destroyed but transformed in a radical sense”



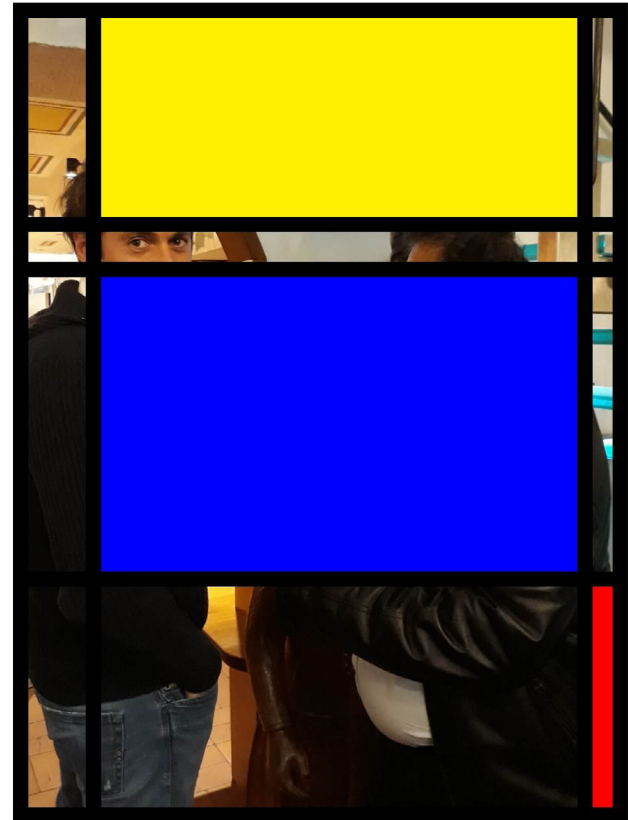
In his youth, through acquaintances related to theosophy, he had come into contact with a Dutch Masonic lodge to which the architect Mies van der Rohe also joined. They had never met before that day in Hannover, during the constructivist exhibition, when the architect invited Mondrian to his Berlin studio. It was an enlightening encounter. It is almost certain that Mondrian showed van Der Rohe his seminal project for the Pavilion of Harmony, as among the architect's notes there are several references to a "new conception of space based on rhythm and color" suggested by a friend. In 1929, Mies van Der Rohe created the famous German pavilion for the Expo of Barcelona, characterized by an innovative free plan and flowing spaces, in which interior and exterior merge. Somehow, Mondrian had succeeded in materializing that ideal and utopian space he dreamed of thirty years before.

6. PIMP MY MONDRIAN

The grid system from which Mondrian had apparently expelled any reference to the subject, was in fact inhabited by himself and had become one with his person. In a sense, it can be considered his philosophical selfie. If you randomly superimpose the colored grid to a selfie, you get an interesting effect: the colored areas often cover part of the face, revealing other areas of the scene that would otherwise go unnoticed. The focus is no longer only concentrated on the face, but also on the colored areas and other details, eliminating the difference between the center and the periphery of the image as in a Mondrian's painting. This type of image recalls the facial recognition process used by some algorithms, which break down an image by analyzing recurrent patterns. By applying the colored-grid filter, the identity of the user is partly obscured, and therefore secured: will he choose to renounce to a part of his ego?

A common friend, the Swiss Max Bill, as a graphic designer enthusiastically embraced the tenets and philosophical views of modernist movement. His graphic work was based on cohesive visual principles of organization and purist forms - modular grids, sans-serif typography, asymmetric compositions, linear spatial divisions, mathematical progressions. It was he who suggested to Mondrian that the grid system was probably the most important achievement in applied art, comparable to the invention of perspective in painting, and that Mondrian himself had inspired it.

According to Bill, the grid system would have integrated every aspect of the visual experience of everyday life, at any level. Mondrian saw in the grid system the keystone to resolve the inner opposition that had affected his entire life.

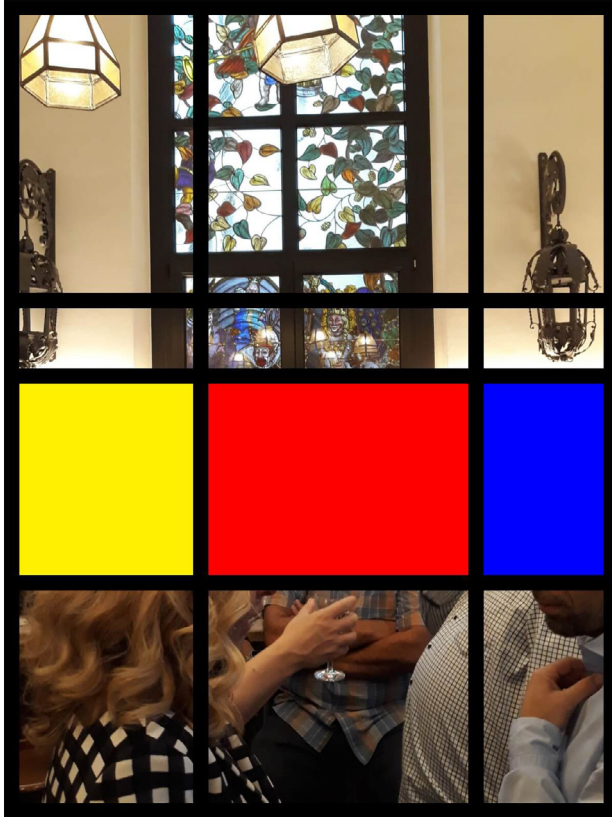
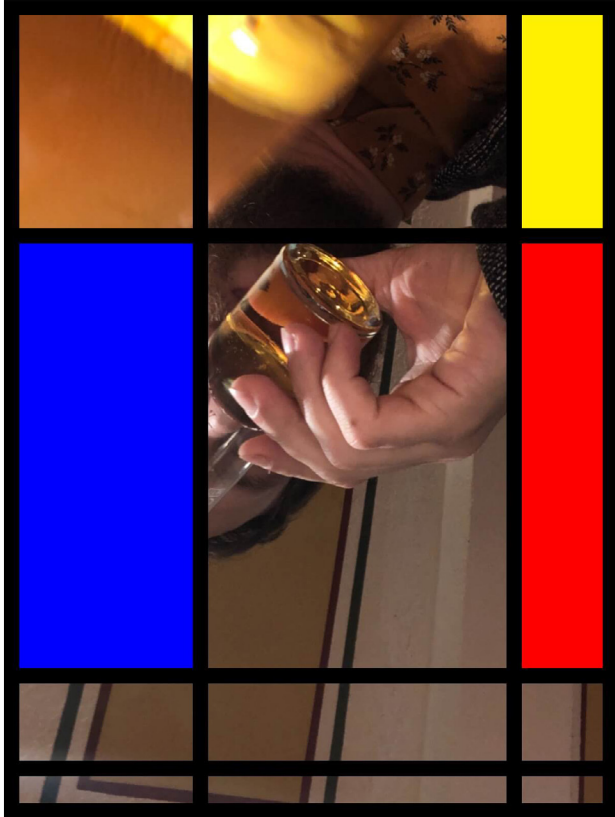


The great art that had generated the perspective, the window from which anyone would have observed the world for centuries, could descend from the wall of eternity into things, finally embracing the utopian progress of modernity. His painting began to wrap around itself, following a new rhythm. Two innovations appeared: the parallel double line and the colored line. With the double line, Mondrian seemed to quote and copy himself at last, while with the colored line the traditional separation between drawing and color, which even Cubism had not renounced, disappeared. Mondrian had overcome Picasso, and he was ready to go to the discovery of new horizons - those of the Far West.

“The flat surface, as a modern way of using art to call attention to art, implies a worldview connected with the Genesis”

He attended the first concert of Armstrong in Paris: jazz music, the highest American artistic expression of the moment, attracts him so strongly towards New York. His friends had always thought that jazz was the antithesis of his painting, but perhaps it was the natural continuation of an obsessive search for balance through rhythm, made up of repetition and variation.

With the advent of the World War II, Mondrian was forced to take shelter in London with a family friend, Samuel Shenton, who particularly loved the flatness of his painting. Some of his works were exhibited in the infamous exhibition of “degenerate art” organized by the Nazi regime. The caption dedicated to him: “Mondrian is perhaps the best example of generative degenerate art”.



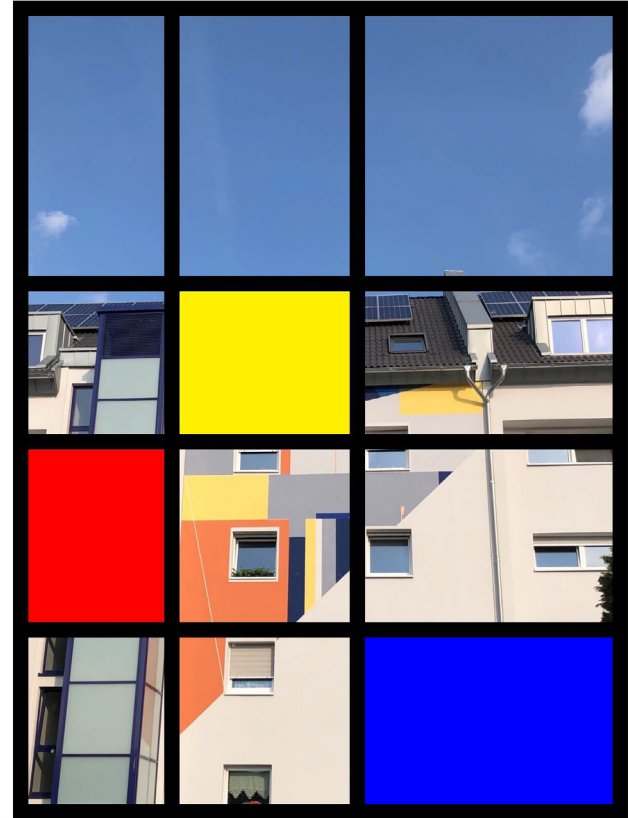


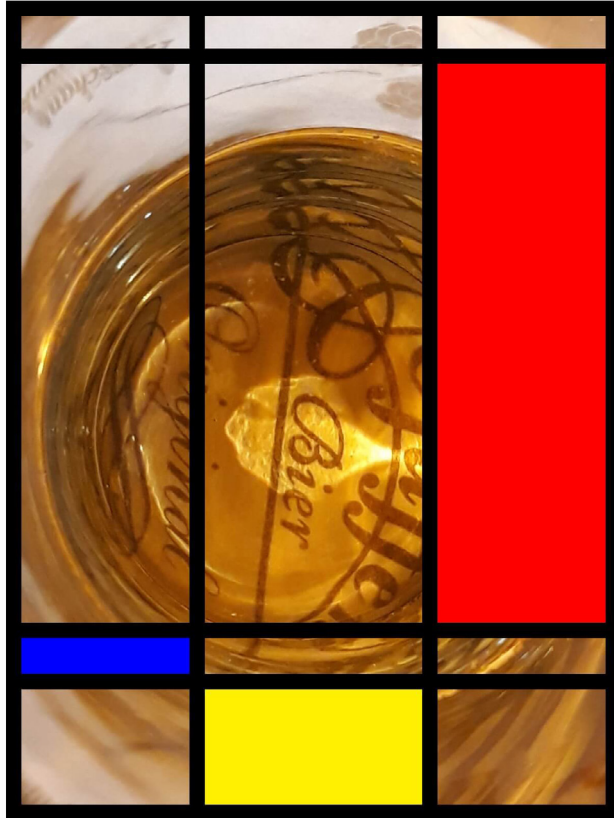
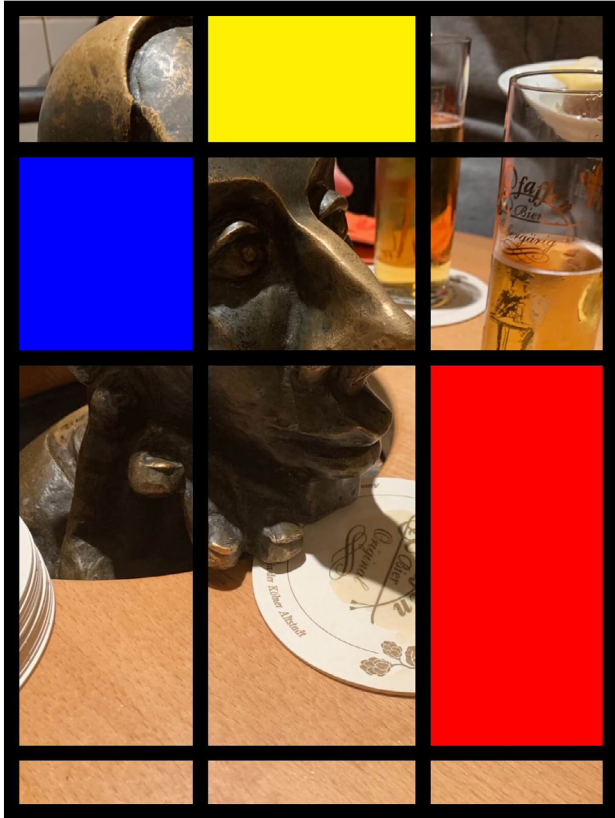
7. FROM GRAND NARRATIVES TO STORYTELLING

Perhaps the story of Mondrian is the last grand narrative of Modernism, which symbolically ended after the war in the United States, settling its legacy in that country for decades on. Using this grand narrative by reducing it to a fictional storytelling is an attempt to tell the story again, and differently. Because the feeling is that we can't simply escape the need to narrate, even if the grand narratives are no longer possible, as they said. In their place, a more modest storytelling has come, weakened in its claims, potentially faking, ironic and functional to the productive system. For many, this has represented a return to order and even to the super-ordering and control of social media driven apparatuses. But you can also see it as a process not so distant from secularization, that at best has showed art fading into design.

In 1940 Mondrian decided to move permanently to the United States, renting a studio in New York. America, with its skyscrapers and busy streets, was a monumental work of art in motion. Noises, traffic, perpendicular streets, sparkling lights and Broadway enchanted him.

The grid of windows that covered the skyscrapers appeared as the large-scale transposition of De Stijl's ideas, but also of his Parisian atelier. What he saw moving in the streets was the end of the art itself and its new beginning, in a syncopated fashion.



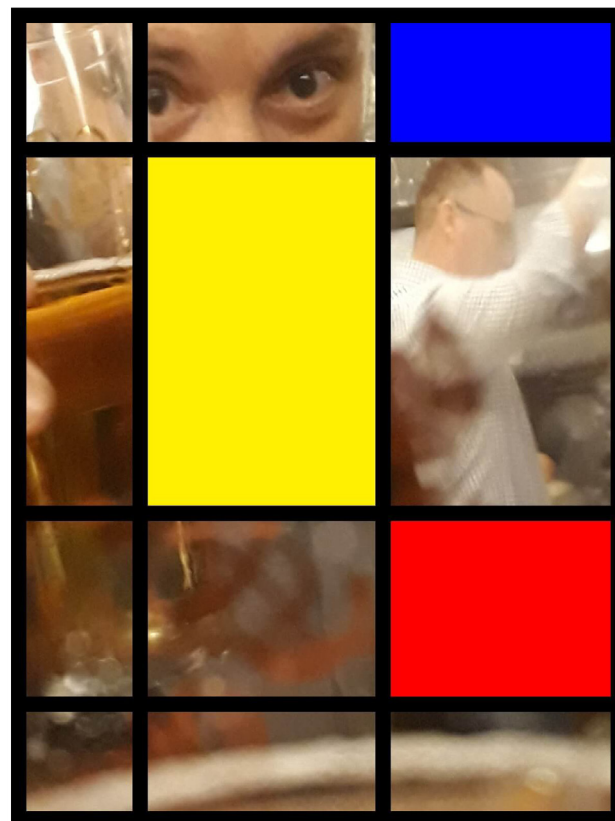


Madison Avenue was already crowded with advertising agencies, and recalling what El Lissitzky told him about the power of the media he realized how right he was. Painting was nourished by these suggestions, and his grid system then seemed a direct transposition of the main streets of New York, with the yellow (of taxis in constant motion) instead of black, and an explicit reference to them in the titles of the works. *All that jazz*: the new trend of boogie-woogie struck him to the point of appearing in the title of his last painting, almost as a testament to a research lasted more than forty years, reaching a radical identification with the urban fabric.

8. BOOGIE GOOGLE

What could be the equivalent of boogie-woogie today? Perhaps Mondrian would have been surprised by some flavor of rap. Definitely not the g-rap, more likely a kind of Big G-rap. Rhythm, total identification with the street, improvisation, and a search engine under the hood. The speed with which the words are sequenced, the mouth-algorithm that parse them based on their average usage and possible associations recalls the power of Google. Of course, in the 1990s drum & bass, glitch and IDM appeared on the scene, which with their polyrhythm could better match Mondrian's latest research. However, it is precisely the program of integration between art and life that is at stake in the hyper-realism of rap, in which fired bullets are often real. What happens when the avant-garde becomes mainstream? In Japanese hip hop, cut-up techniques and the appropriation of styles have hacked a language that for its construction of sentences did not seem to be usable in rap. Listening to those pieces is very similar to a surrealist or dadaist experience, coming out of cultural elites and overflowing into the streets.

America bigger than life, America that won the war. Mondrian made new friends and went back to good society. His agent, Peggy Guggenheim, was not so interested in the work of a young painter, Jackson Pollock, and it seems it was Mondrian who convinced her that he would be the future of painting. He met another painter who had emigrated from old Europe, Hans Hofmann, who would soon be one of the first to merge Mondrian's geometric research with American action painting. "It's all-over, it's all-over!", were repeating the critics about Pollock's style, but that surface devoid of center and periphery had been inhabited by Mondrian for almost 30 years.



A few days before his death, Mondrian found himself with his new friends for an evening at the jazz club. With him, among others, were Peggy Guggenheim, Pollock, Hoffmann, the critic Clement Greenberg, the young architect Robert Venturi, and a noted science fiction writer with a passion for the occult, Ron Hubbard. Mondrian, who had finally learned to dance, after a few steps with Peggy, sat exhausted next to Venturi and pulled out, for the last time, his little brown notebook. He was next to a young and promising architect, full of doubts about the work of masters such as van Der Rohe, so he showed him the project for the Pavilion of Harmony, recalling how it had inspired the great architect.

**“How did you come up with that idea so early?”
Venturi asked.**

**And Mondrian replied:
“Stroopwafel. It’s a dutch cookie,
that makes it almost perfect.
I always liked it. The pattern
more than the syrup.**

Then he proposed a toast to America and to the triumph of Modernism: “Proost, Modernism!”, but everyone understood “post modernism”, and the story went on as we know.

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