

The Logician and the Shaman

Nicholas Rakita, 2019

Introduction

Sitting in the gallery, you ponder the canvas before you. Upon its surface dance a multitude of perpendicular lines. Flat cells of color twinkle against a pale white background. This painting is an act of restraint, a distillation of all elements necessary, and indeed nothing more. Staring further into the frame you recognize the work as a tribute, an artifact of a purer reality than that which it currently resides. The placard below the canvas before escaped your attention, but now you direct your curious gaze to it. Which genius of form can this work be attributed to, Piet Mondrian or Agnes Martin?

The ambiguity here is understandable, from a formal perspective both artists produced works which bear a remarkable resemblance. We find in their pieces a plethora of similarities such as an emphasis on minimal aesthetics, severely limited palettes, and an apparent fascination with perpendicular lines. To this end though, we might also attempt to devise boundaries on which to distinguish these artists, because while their methodologies and ideologies are in some ways comparable, they also differed significantly. With Mondrian we find an artist obsessed with codification, a visual linguist concerned ultimately with the construction of a universal grammar for painting. The oeuvre of Martin suggests a different paradigm, one based on Orphic journeys inward from which one returns bearing transcendental forms. The relationship between the two is that between the logician and the shaman.

Similarities and Differences

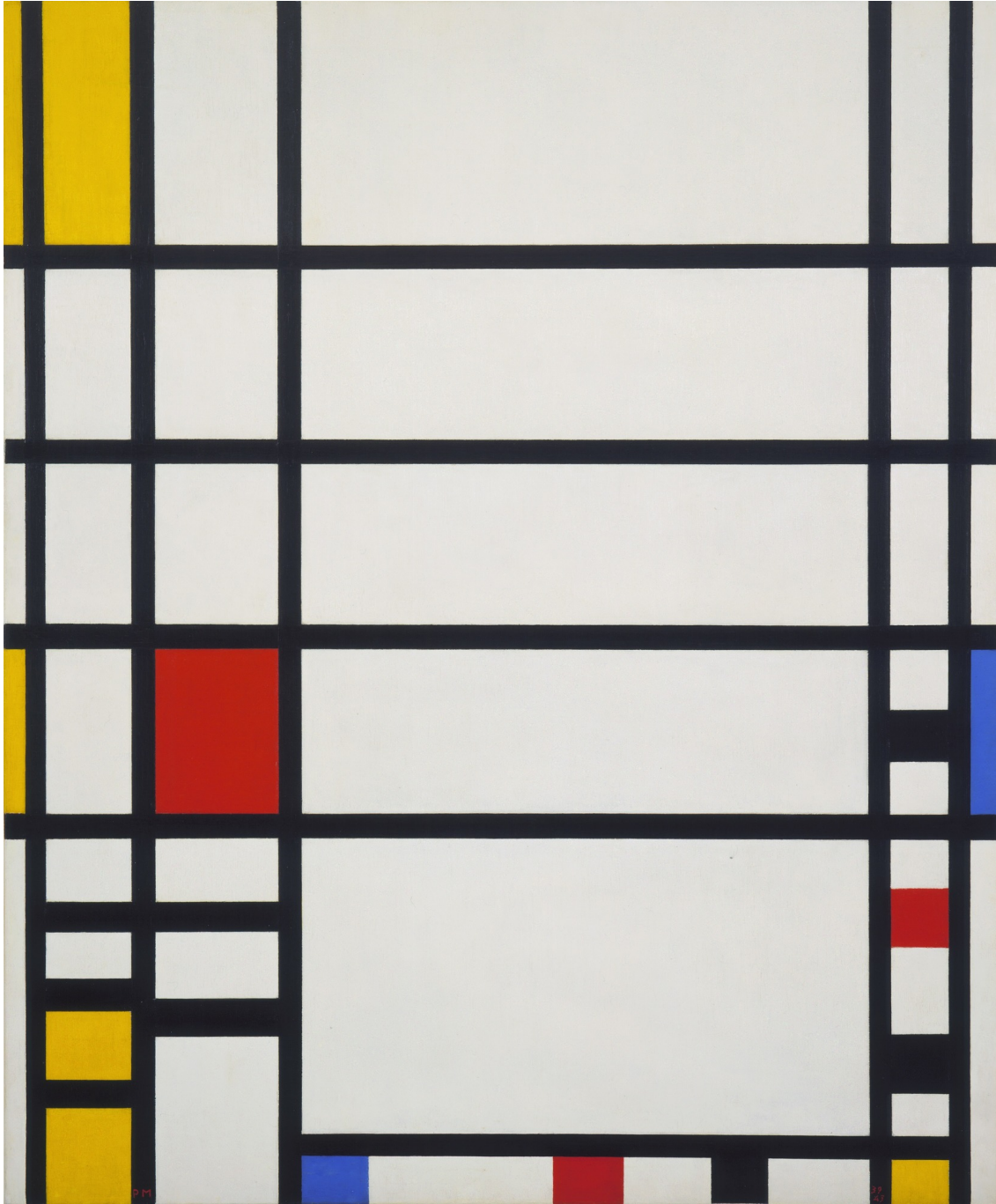
In what ways can we find the work of Mondrian and Martin to coincide? Perhaps to begin with intentions, one can see in both artists that their painting represented a means of reaching for or expressing a higher reality. In the case of Mondrian this transcendentalism can be linked with his participation in the Theosophy movement, and more generally with his personal ideology concerning universal harmony. With Martin we find something more akin to Surrealism, albeit with a far more abstract and spiritual bent. Regarding her subjects she claimed, "My paintings are not about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in the mind." (Sheck 2006, p. 100). For both artists abstraction and simplicity represented the ultimate vehicle for connecting with the divine, leading both to undergo an evolution towards non-representational painting and a culling process of any formal elements they believed to be superfluous to this end. Because of this abstraction we can observe repetition to be a key element of both their individual compositions and their work as a whole. The formal restrictions adhered to by both artists resulted in a kind of permutation game, where the limits of expressiveness were explored through a minimization of subject.

The question then becomes: in which ways do these artists differ? In regards to methodology we find among the two seemingly opposing approaches. For Mondrian painting was conducted as an iterative almost scientific process in which compositional harmony is constructed from the meticulous balancing of elements according to his own theories concerning universal beauty. Martin on the other hand employed a less structured approach which was built instead on meditation and the expression of inner truth. Consequentially her pieces often appear more organic or humanist compared to the starkly rational painting of Mondrian. His works are obvious products of systematic creation, while with Martin's pieces we find a more intuitive and spontaneous approach. Another axis to divide them along is their historical placement in modernist painting. The Neoplastic paradigm advocated by Mondrian was rooted in a conviction of universal truth and the notion of progress, both concepts lodged firmly in the modernist perspective. His works can be seen as analogous to the still virtualized painting of Russian Suprematism and Constructivism. Martin's pieces meanwhile connect more with the highly personal works of the Abstract Expressionists, products of the end of modernism which manifest the dying notions of universalism and progress. Her use of the physical properties of canvas and paint can be seen to further confirm this categorization. Looking at the formal properties of works from these artists we can draw distinctions

between their use of color, compositional balance, and technical precision which reflect the corresponding differences between their ideological and historical contexts.

In the interest of providing a more in depth comparison of these two artists three pairs of their work have been selected for subsequent analysis. These pairs were picked not arbitrarily, but rather on the basis that their formal qualities are highly revelatory towards the similarities and differences mentioned above.

Comparison I: *Trafalgar Square* and *On a Clear Day*



Trafalgar Square, Piet Mondrian (1939-43)

Trafalgar Square is an archetypal Mondrian painting. A flat void is subdivided by bold black lines which enclose fields of white or primary hues. The subdivision is hardly random as proved by the repeated proportions of several adjacent cells. Similarly, the composition of the colored fields is also far from arbitrary, as the electric tones cling to the edges of the canvas in something of a supreme balancing act.



*Untitled work from **On a Clear Day**, Agnes Martin (1973)*

An untitled piece from Agnes Martin's collection *On a Clear Day* likewise provides a classic example of this artist's work. The silkscreen print depicts a barren square positioned in the center of the work. The square is divided into four vertical and twelve horizontal sections of precisely equal size. The work is entirely monochromatic lacking even the subtle pastel tones sometimes employed by the artist.

We recognize immediately in both pieces a fundamental technique in the repertoire of both Mondrian and Martin, perpendicularity. Arrangements of orthogonal lines can be seen as a compositional system heavily utilized by both painters, however their particular tendencies regarding these arrangements are respectively unique. For Mondrian perpendicular lines are used to construct *lattices* which are often asymmetric and whose compositional balance is

dependent on careful positioning and supplementation by the colored fields which reside between intersections. The lines which form these *lattices* typically run up to the boundaries of the canvas, and seem that as if allowed to escape the edge of the frame would continue on infinitely. For Martin perpendicularity is instead manifested by *grids* in which each cell maintains the same proportion and volume. The composition of these grids are determined mostly by the ratios which divide them, though they are occasionally augmented by coloration of the cells or variations regarding whether the edge cells are capped. A deeper exploration of the compositional ideologies utilized by these artists can be explained in terms of these *lattices* and *grids*.

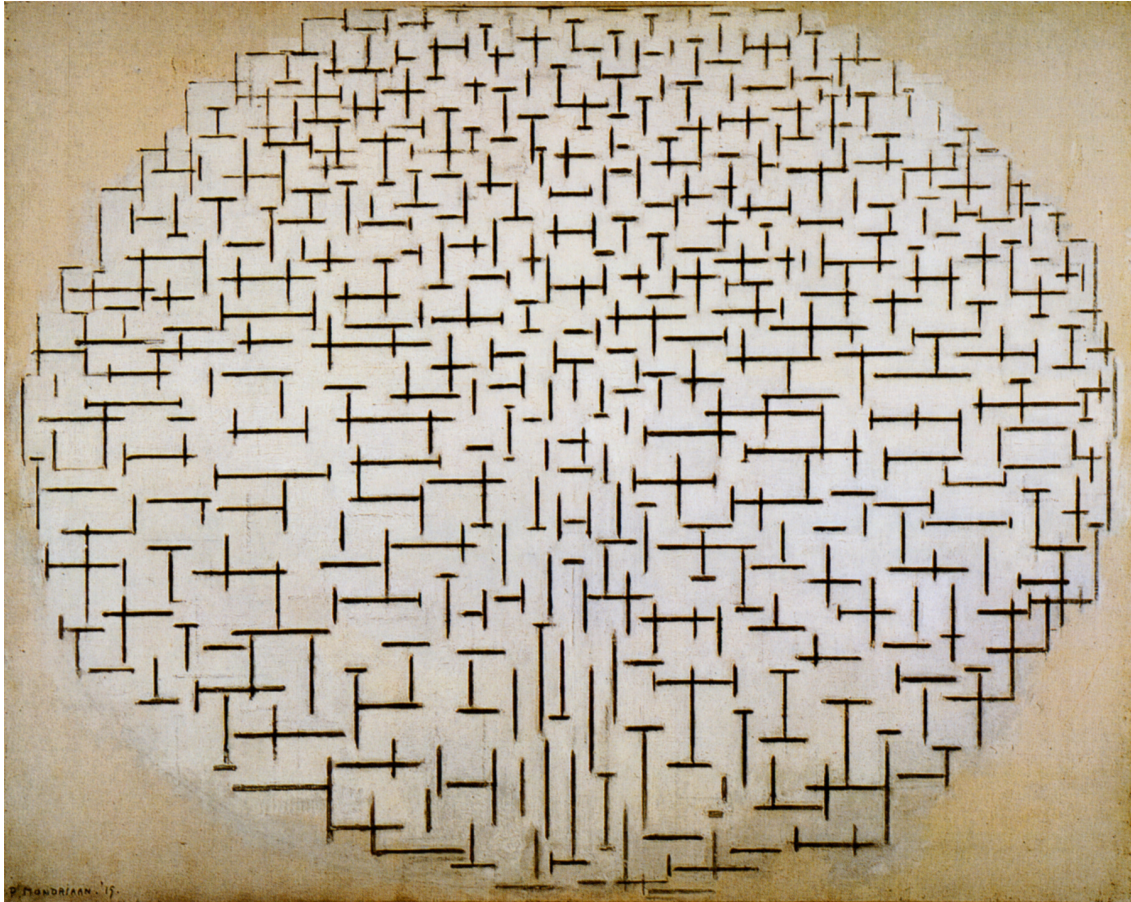
The Neoplasticist approach used by Mondrian can be understood as an extension of his belief in the ultimate importance of balance and harmony. Regarding Neoplasticism, he said: "Plastic art shows that real freedom is not mutual equality but mutual equivalence. In art, forms and colors have different dimension and position, but are equal in value." (Veen 2017, p. 2). Mondrian's lattices are embodiments of this concept, and depend greatly on the evocation of a "dynamic equilibrium" through the careful juxtaposition of equivalent (but not equal) compositional elements. This approach necessitates the exactness and precision for which his pieces are known, and it can be observed that even slight errors in the boundaries of these elements would result in complete compositional ruin. We can realize the genius in Mondrian's asymmetric lattices to be their strict accordance with a kind of grammar dictating subdivision and coloration, in which beauty is tied directly to syntactic correctness.

To contrast, the symmetric grids used by Martin are in a sense self-balancing. Their total uniformity give the impression of geometric perfection. One could even liken these grids to manifestations of the pristine shapes which inhabit Plato's world of ideals. Despite their apparent perfection every grid is distinct, owing to their differing irregularities, microscopic fluctuations, and unique ratios (Sheck 2006, p. 101). It is through these variations that Martin composes her paintings. In opposition to the bottom-up approach towards stabilization leveraged by Mondrian, we find her works to be evidence instead of a destabilization game. Frequently her grids come alive with the addition of color through the minute variations in tone that occur between cells. While the graphite lines which delineate her grids may appear on first glance precisely equal, a closer inspection reveals that even they contain slight irregularities or gradations in value. When preparing canvases Martin preferred to use very little sanding in order to preserve the tooth of the material which

consequentially gave rise to these irregularities. Martin's paintings can be understood in this way as expressions of her own ideal internal reality, whose beauty is derived from the unavoidable imperfections which accumulate from their extraction into our inherently disordered world.

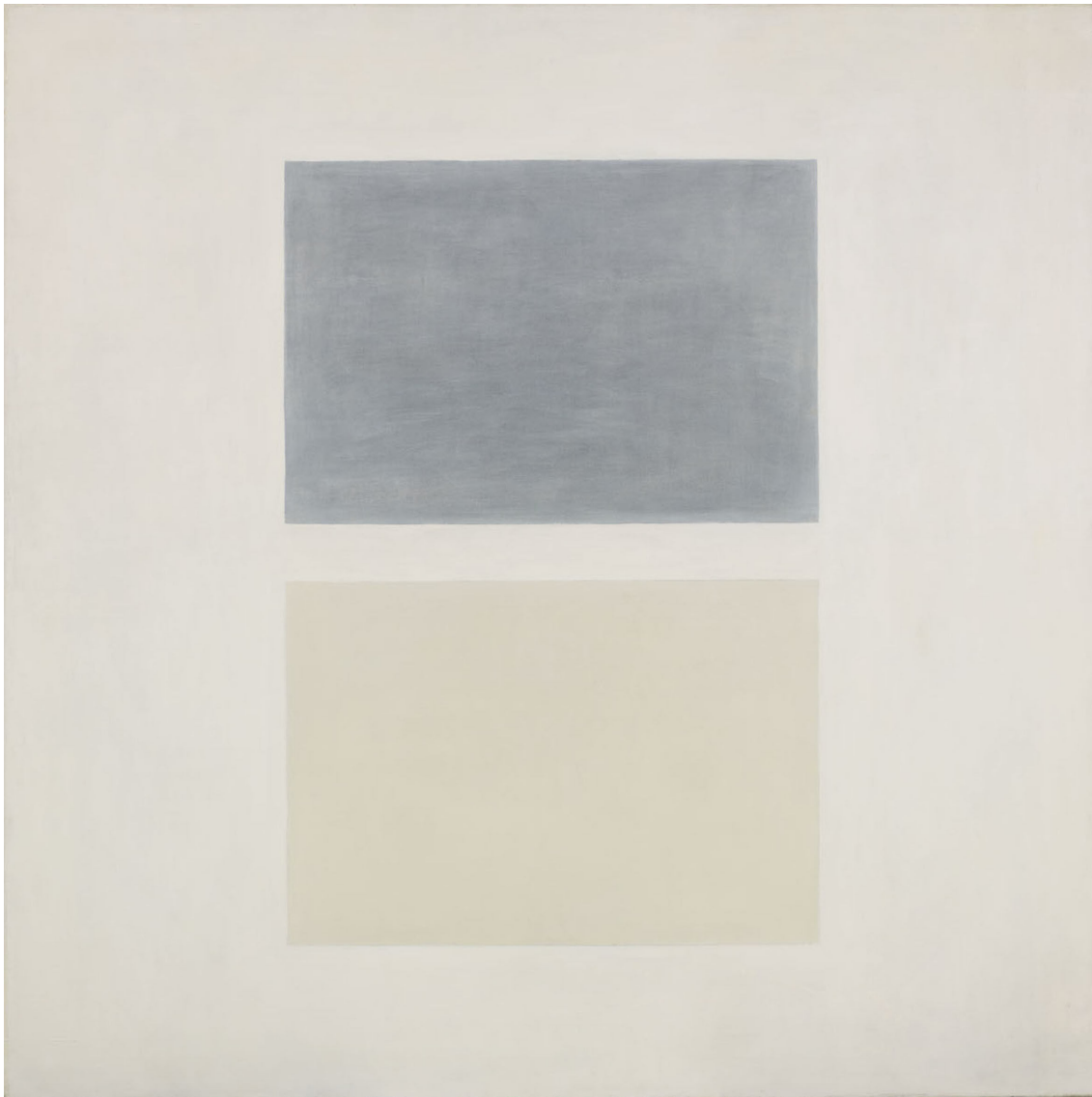
Thus we find the lattice and the grid to be manifestations of deeper methodological differences between these artists. In particular they serve to highlight the preference for asymmetry and balancing in Mondrian's work contrasted to Martin's use of minute imperfections in aggregate as a means of composition. Coming back to the dichotomy of logician and shaman we can distinguish a constructive and systematic approach in Mondrian's pieces with the more naturalistic and subconscious process of Martin.

Comparison II: *Pier and Ocean* and *This Rain*



Pier and Ocean, Piet Mondrian (1915)

Enclosed within a pale elliptical surface embedded in the center of *Pier and Ocean* we find numerous small vertical and horizontal lines. While on first glance the work appears fully abstract a closer look allows us to see the subject hinted at by the title: a narrow pier extending into a bobbing sea of waves. The subject in this piece is represented entirely through the carefully architected lengths and positions of the rectilinear dashes. Like a hundred small plus and minus signs, these dashes give the remarkable impression of a gently churning tide.



This Rain, Agnes Martin (1960)

This Rain meanwhile gives us another taste of Martin's grids, this time reduced to an exceedingly simple division of one column and two rows. The upper and lower rectangles are colored respectively with tones of greyish blue and beige, and seem to float effortlessly in the center of the square canvas. Their borders are unmarked and rather than meeting directly they hover apart leaving a small gap where they would otherwise touch. This work is reminiscent of the color field work of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, though the severity of its geometric precision and pastel coloring betray Martin's hand.

These pieces offer a opportunity to discuss the shared gravitation towards abstraction in the work of both Mondrian and Martin . While these painters are most well known for their non-representational works, both began painting with obvious subjects and only later moved towards non-referentiality. For

Mondrian this was a gradual process as his initial Fauvist-esque style eventually gave way to an aesthetic resembling analytical cubism and then to pure geometric abstraction. *Pier and Ocean* represents a critical work in his transition from pseudo-cubism, and one can easily compare the strokes of this composition to the guide-line seams which fracture perspective in the works of Picasso or Braque. Martin's transition to abstraction was more abrupt, occurring after a seven year hiatus from painting. Upon settling in New Mexico she abandoned her previous attachment to landscape painting and began working instead in the style she is best remembered for today. Even with these later non-representational pieces we can still find a connection to her earlier work through their titles which frequently reference nature, as with *This Rain*. Understanding the reasons for these artist's use of abstraction and the consequentially minimal form of their work is of considerable importance when comparing their ideologies.

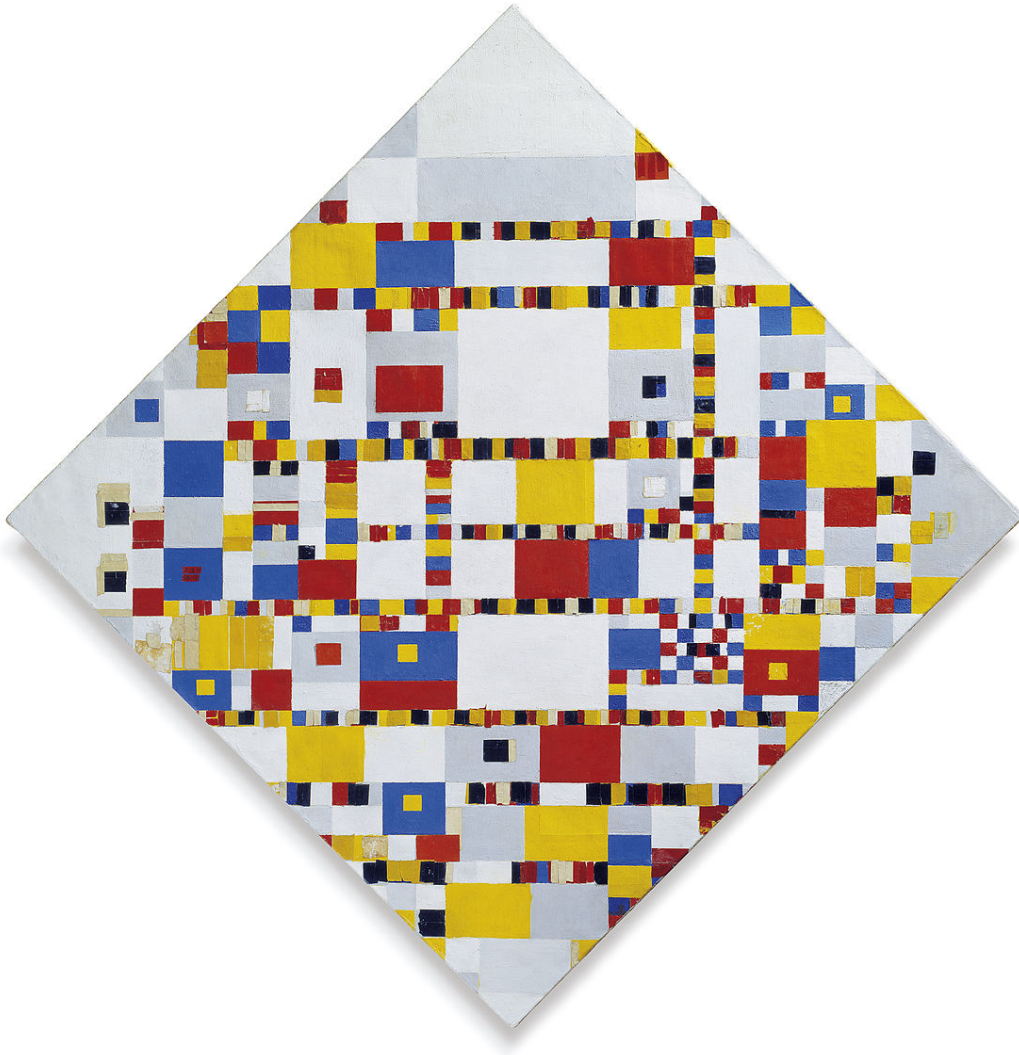
Both artists use of abstraction can be understood on spiritual terms. Concerning non-figurative art, Mondrian wrote that it enables the viewer to perceive the constant ground of existence and the cosmic center which humanity congregates around in order to be shielded against disorder and banality (Butler, p. 416-417). He believed that suffering and disequilibrium could be traced to the human tendency towards mimesis in both art and life, and that the eradication of this mimicry was the only path to harmony. On this matter Terrell Butler wrote, "Mondrian never tires of saying that we have, most of us, been deceived by illusory appearances, by simulacra. For that reason, we have surrendered ourselves to a violent and terrifying simulacrum of life. Modern men and women, he believes, are trapped in an imitative cycle that is at the same time a cycle of violence: they imitate the disorder around them; thereby they allow violence to proliferate intolerably" (Butler 1982, p. 419). We can liken this perspective to that of the Russian Suprematists, and in particular their founding member Kazimir Malevich. To Malevich mimetic painting represented a dangerous fixation that served only to hinder progress in the field and prevent the expression of "pure feeling". The use of abstraction in both Suprematist paintings and the work of Mondrian can therefore be understood in regards to truth and phenomenological investigation. For Mondrian painting non-referentially was a means of expressing the fundamental truths of visual composition. Coming to a discussion of *Pier and Ocean*, we can see this painting as an attempt to reduce a seascape to its most basic geometry. By distilling the essence of painting to its visual core Mondrian was able to play with harmonization without the obscurantism of mimesis. We return again to the notion of the logician, one who reduces the actual to

symbols and expresses the interrelations between them in terms of operands. In this way he encodes reality in axioms and all of experience in formulae consistent with them.

The work of Agnes Martin is without doubt also highly abstract, however the goal of this abstraction differs from that of Mondrian. We find in her work simplicity as a vehicle to discover inner rather than universal truths. In the case of *This Rain* we recognize immediately the origin of its title, as the piece captures the gentle experience of precipitation, though it does so in a wholly emotional manner. The question then becomes: how is it possible for Martin to achieve this remarkable expressiveness through entirely non-mimetic painting? The answer lies in her process, an intuitive system of painting based on the representation of qualia through a minimized framework of visual experience. The influence of eastern philosophy such as Zen Buddhism which swept through the United States in the 1940's and 50's is especially apparent in her work. Martin, though never a practitioner of these faiths, studied the writing of Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki and participated in lectures held by spiritualist Jiddu Krishnamurti (Molesworth 2010, p. 16). The simplicity of her pieces relate both in practice and theory to mindfulness and the emotional clarity reached through mental stillness. When asked about her method of deciding which hues to use in a given piece, Martin replied: "I say to my mind, 'What am I going to paint next?' Then I wait for the inspiration. The painting comes into my mind, and I can see it. You have to wait if you're going to be inspired. You have to clear out your mind, to have a quiet and empty mind." (Cotter 1998, p. 77). Given this context, we can interpret her pieces rather than careful studies of universal composition as with Mondrian, instead as expression of deeply personal truths. Painting for Martin is an exploration not of general reality, but rather the space circumscribed by the skull. It is from this perspective that an appreciation for the intimacy and subtle emotions which permeate her work can be established. *This Rain* reduces the experience of rain and earth to their most essential mental formations: turquoise above beige. According to Martin herself: "Art is the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings" (Molesworth 2010, p. 19). These "subtle feelings" are what grace her pieces with the tranquil and sublime quality they have become famous for. We can liken her spiritual efforts to that of the Amazonian Ayahuascero or Tibetan Bhikkhu, a conscious process of disregard for the details of the intellect until only acute conceptions remain.

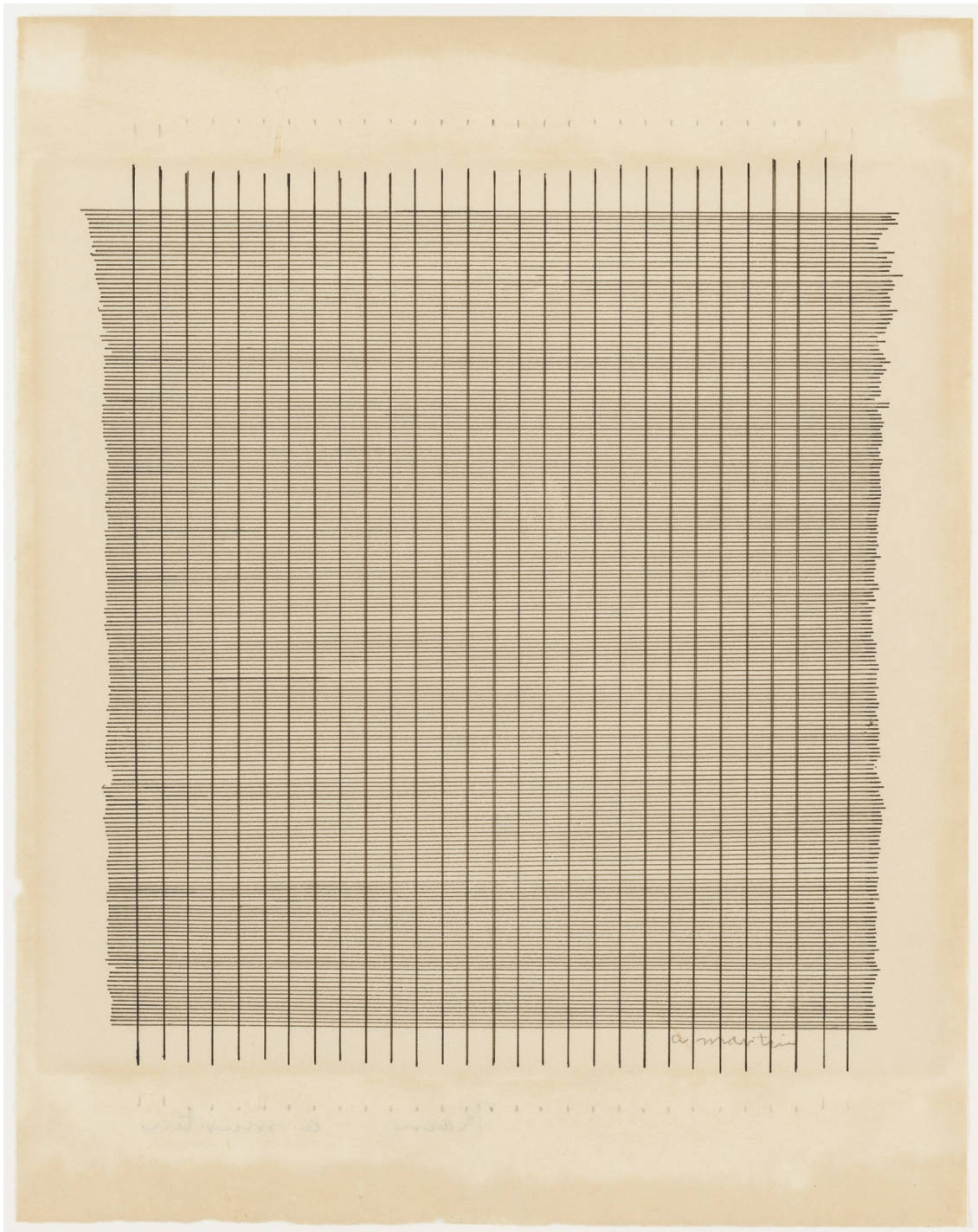
For both painters abstraction became a powerful means of expressing truth. The key distinction between the two is the origin of this truth, being universal and personal respectively. Looking deeper into the historical contexts surrounding each of their practices we shall see in the preceding chapter that this difference is a consequence of the evolution of paradigms accompanying the transition from early to late modernism.

Comparison III: *Victory Boogie Woogie* and *Tremolo*



***Victory Boogie Woogie*, Piet Mondrian (1942–44)**

Victory Boogie Woogie is one of Mondrian's so called lozenge paintings, where the canvas is turned 45 degrees to form a diamond. We find on this diamond a complex arrangement of small rectangles colored with the vibrant primary hues the painter is renown for. *V.B.W.* was in fact Mondrian's last painting and remained unfinished at the time of his death. This becomes obvious when we realize many of the compositional elements are made not of paint, but instead colored tape. In his last years Mondrian began experimenting with the use of tape to test potential layouts before finalizing the work in paint. This process further enforces the idea that his paintings were constructed rationally as a slow effort of balancing and harmonization.



Tremolo, Agnes Martin (1962)

In *Tremolo* we observe yet another of Martin's grids, however unlike the near-perfect geometry of the last two pieces we find here obviously oscillating imperfections in the lengths of the grid segments. While Martin often used tape to ensure the lengths of her grid lines remained constant she sometimes abstained from doing so, resulting in the effect we see above. Mimicking the sonic effect from which this piece derives its name the ends of the grid lines in

Tremolo fluctuate gradually inducing a stark contrast to their highly ordered internal sections.

Chronologically the work of Mondrian spans from the early 1900's up to the early 1940's, with his last painting, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, being left uncompleted at the time of his death in 1942. By tracking the course of modern painting through Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Suprematism we find analogies of all these formal styles in Mondrian's oeuvre. The trajectory in Mondrian's own pieces towards abstractions can be seen as a microcosm of the same evolution in modernist painting as a whole. Attached deeply to this transition is the notion of progress, a conviction in the minds of many modernist painters that their work would serve to surpass that of their predecessors and change the course of human artistic endeavor for the better. There was in this mentality both an optimism and a naivety which Mondrian seems to embody perfectly. In contrast, Agnes Martin's painting career occurred from the late 1950's to 1990's, and as a consequence we find her work to be more emblematic of the aesthetic crisis of late modernity and even early post-modernism. Her pieces speak towards the doubtful and self-critical attitudes which came to permeate the art-world from the 50's onward. They represent less an ideology of progress, instead manifesting the deeply personal nature of artistic process and the prioritization of relative perspectives over universalism.

The core of Mondrian's philosophy lies with the idea that the universe is understandable, given enough effort and study on the part of humanity. His works demonstrate this paradigm limited to the scope of beauty, in that they represent a continual effort to unravel the central principles of optical composition. On the epistemological ideology of Mondrian's work, Albert Levy commented: "Mondrian's purity lies in his passionate belief that there is a repeatable order which lies close to the heart of ultimate reality. Repeatable but inherently unchangeable." (Levi 1951, p. 388). The certainty which marks both the artistic and scientific endeavors of modernity is reflected in Mondrian's painting, a hopeful belief that truth could be achieved from progress. For Mondrian Neo-Plasticism represented not only an innovative painting style but indeed a framework for design and architecture, which because of its capacity for harmonization would improve the lives of human beings. We look then to *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which is in many senses a celebration of modernity and progress. Though the painting is highly abstract, leaving the door open for many possible interpretations, a frequent reading

suggests that it represents the bustling street grids of New York, the city in which Mondrian resided for the last years of his life. Unlike the soft curvature and gradients found in his early work, *V.B.W.* features sharp boundaries and rectilinear geometry which hearken immediately to the angularity of New York's avenues and skyscrapers. The piece can be understood as a tribute towards a city highly influential not only to Mondrian's practice, but indeed to modernity itself, replacing Paris as an international hub for artists following the second world war. Coming to the title of the work we might comment on modernist variety of music important to both Mondrian and the city of New York: Jazz. The vibrating colors and rhythmic composition of *Victory Boogie Woogie* speak directly of the painter's love for this genre. According to Jürgen Stoye, "Mondrian loved to dance around his studio to jazz music he played on his gramophone – alone." (Stoye 2015, p. 235). We find in both early Jazz and Mondrian's work an apparent fascination with complex rhythmic structures and non-traditional harmonization schemes. To paint in Neo-Plastic style or compose a boogie-woogie is to reduce and atomize the substrate to its essential particles and then reconfigure them into an aesthetically pleasing whole. For Mondrian this process was completed in the name of progress, to advance and forever innovate the field of painting.

To counter the analogy of Mondrian and Jazz we might connect Agnes Martin instead to the work of John Cage. Indeed there may be no better piece for accompanied listening when appreciating the extreme simplicity of *Tremolo* than the sound of silence for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Their minimally formal compositions and the influence of Eastern thought found in both of these artists work are deeply linked to their position at the end of modernity. In the 1950's the art-world underwent a process of transformation involving disillusionment with traditional notions of progress and the evaporation of universalistic perspectives. Arising out of the ashes of modernism came new paradigms towards art creation built instead around transgressive attitudes and radical individualism. It was in this climate that Agnes Martin began her career, and consequentially we find these themes to be key elements in understanding her work. In regards to her subversion of traditional practices *Tremolo* serves as an excellent example. As with her many other pieces which utilize only graphite or ink we are forced to reexamine and adapt our very definition of painting to accommodate these works. On Martin's use of simple lines alone as compositional elements Richard Tuttle wrote: "When her work is included in sophisticated exhibitions of drawings, some people are hard put to call these straight lines 'drawings', for drawing is the least difficult to understand of the means she uses for her painting. It is the

part that she has brought most down to earth. She has said she loves line, and she makes us love it in the same way that she does. But we can also see the loved lines conspire. At a certain moment her drawing becomes a painting." (Tuttle 2002, p. 94). Besides her employment of unorthodox painting techniques, Martin can also be recognized as a late-modernist artist by the formal simplicity of her pieces. Though she never applied the label of Minimalism to her own works, Martin's pieces can nonetheless be compared to the works of artists from this movement. Her distillation of formal elements to an absolute minimum can be seen to parallel a general effort of the same intention in many other artists of the era. A key distinction though between Martin's work and that of the early minimalists, is the lack of conceptual undertones to her work. Unlike pieces by Sol LeWitt, Martin's paintings represent purely formalistic compositions, where the canvas is used as an emotive rather than intellectual surface. *Tremolo* is in essence a glimpse into the mind of this artist; a visual depiction of some internal conception. This quality leads us to a comparison of Martin's pieces with those of the Abstract Expressionists, the movement which she personally identified with. Much like the works of Rothko or Pollock, we find Martin's pieces to be expressions of an inner world. Her pieces are not prescriptive towards a specific aesthetic or ideology, rather they are insights into her own feelings and personal experience. We can understand Martin not as a writer of manifestos, but instead as a advocate for relativity and individualistic expression. Returning again to the commentary of Richard Tuttle, a single line summarizes well the intent of her work: "They are a gift to the artist as well as the viewer." (Tuttle 2002, p. 92).

From the contrasting artistic epochs between these artists arise many distinctions in their work and ideology as can be observed in the previous sections. In Mondrian we find a strong embodiment of the mentality and aesthetics of modernism, while with Martin we discover instead a conclusion to modernism and emerging paradigms which would come to define the post-modernist art practice. This gives us a final axis on which to divide them, and thus differentiate their work.

Closing Statements

We arrive finally back to the notion proposed at the beginning of this essay, the distinction between the role of the logician with Mondrian and the shaman with Martin. Both artists can be compared in regards to their formal aesthetics and endeavors to induce transcendent experiences with their abstract art. For Mondrian though this takes place in the context of a universal framework for composition based around precise harmonization of lattices and colored fields. We find this approach rooted in his aversion towards mimetic painting and strictly modernist values. With Martin we find instead a methodology attached to the humanization of otherwise pristine grids. Her approach revolves around stillness of mind as a means of reaching deeply personal inner conceptions and the resulting transduction of these forms as emotionally instilled manifestations on the canvas. Mondrian embodies the rationalism, precision, and syntactic fixation of the logician, while in Martin we find the shaman who precipitates truth through inner exploration.

Having concluded our investigation into the similarities and differences between the works of Piet Mondrian and Agnes Martin we return the reader to their seat in the gallery. Equipped now with the many distinction explained above they might be able to derive the author of this work even before glancing at the placard below.

Sources

Images

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On a Clear Day from The MoMA. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/63711>

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