PIET MONDRIAN was an evolutionist and a utopianist. He was not the only one such among the pioneers of abstract art (Kazimir Malevich also comes to mind), but he was the most consistent. His career as a modernist painter started with two successive splashes: around 1908 he discovered Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Fauvism, absorbed them pell-mell, and within a few months became Holland's most advanced painter; and in 1911-12 his encounter with Cubism was the spark plug of his path to abstraction, at which he would arrive by increments. After that, any radical leap in his oeuvre would always and inexorably follow many telltale signs. He conceived of his art and of everything else (society, man, the world at large) as in perpetual evolution toward a future universality, a utopian golden age when art would dissolve into life. Each of his paintings, or series of paintings, had in his view to be an improvement on the previous one in a long journey toward this ever unreachable goal—and his trajectory as such, in hindsight, seems impeccably logical.

The three groups of paintings included in Inventing Abstraction perfectly epitomize three essential moments in the development of Mondrian's art: his digestion of Cubism in 1912-14; his accelerated passage to abstraction in 1915-19; the constitution of his mature style, which he called Neo-Plasticism, in 1920-21.

All his life Mondrian professed the greatest admiration for the Analytic Cubism of Pablo Picasso, even though he would always add the proviso that "it did not go far enough" and that he had taken up the baton of abstraction where the Spaniard had left it—which is what he did, his works of 1912-13 being very close in principle to those Picasso brought back to Paris from Cadaqués at the end of the summer of 1910 (plates 3, 4). As Mondrian understood the idiom of Analytic Cubism, it formally consisted in 1) a grid formation that becomes gradually more orthogonal as blurry before coming into contact with the edges of the canvas; and 2) a restricted, tonally even palette that underscores the growing aloveness of the distribution of rectangles. This pictorial language, he thought, was particularly adequate to his new goal, that of showing in his art the process of a kind of digitization, one could even say of pixelization, of the outside world solely through the horizontal/vertical opposition, which he was beginning to conceive as the mark of the "universal" lying behind all "particular" phenomena.

The splendid Tableau No. 2/Composition No. VII (1913; plate 254) is the culminating work of a series of canvases based on a tree motif (for example "The Trees", 1912; plate 252). But the manifest success of Mondrian's method quickly presented a dilemma for him: if the transformation of any motif was bound to result in a perfectly balanced grid, was there any sense in pursuing the experiment? His next move, in the spring of 1914, would be somewhat similar to that of Picasso in the works immediately following his Cadaqués crisis: he would reintroduce some representational elements in a new series based on a specific feature of the Parisian cityscape common at the time—the windowless walls revealed by the demolition of contiguous buildings, full of the ghost images of razed
that the superb graphic series based on the sea yielded no canvas—it proved too difficult for him to bring forth any verticality in such a vast horizontal expanse. But both the pier-and-ocean drawings (e.g., plate 255), often nicknamed “Plus and Minus,” and the church-in-Domburg series resulted in a major painting, respectively *Composition in zwart wit* (Composition 10 in black and white, 1915; plate 256) and *Composition* (Composition, 1916; plate 257).

Nothing is more telling than a comparison between the drawings and the two canvases. In the drawings, whose composition is basically symmetrical, Mondrian explored the cruciform resulting from the intrusion of a vertical element (pier) into a horizontal field (ocean), or vice versa (cornice and horizontal row of squat arches interrupting the vertical elongation of the church façade). In the canvases, the cruciform is abandoned as a fixed entity (symmetry would never reappear in Mondrian’s oeuvre) and we witness its simultaneous gestation and dissolution. This was perfectly caught by the young Theo van Doesburg when he saw *Composition in zwart wit* in a group show at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in October 1915. In a review that would launch his friendship with Mondrian, he noted that the painter’s “methodical construction embodies ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’."

Though Van Doesburg could not have been aware of this, the phrase “becoming rather than being” captures an important mutation in Mondrian’s thought, due to his sudden exposure (via a Dutch vulgarizer) to the dialectical philosophy of Hegel. Far removed from the static world of purified essences he had been searching for, Hegel’s dialectics helped him understand that what he called the “fundamental opposition” (vertical/horizontal) should be understood as a system of contradictory forces whose equilibrium is no longer achieved by mutual neutralization but by reciprocal tension. The enduring motto he coined at that time—“Each element is determined by its contrary”—stems directly from Hegel. The goal is no longer to encode the spectacle of the real world in a geometric pattern, but to enact on canvas the laws of dialectics that govern this world. And even though *Composition in zwart wit* and *Composition* were still based on the distillation of a natural motif (or rather on drawings that are based on the distillation of a natural motif), all traces of that motif have vanished from them. It is no longer the spectacle of the world that is encoded, but the elements of the art of painting itself—line, color, plane, each reduced to basic ciphers whose interaction constitutes a “new reality.” With his next major canvas, dating from 1916/1917—*Composition in Lijn* (Composition in line; plate 250)—Mondrian would entirely forego any reliance on a natural motif, even as a starting point. As he himself would later say, he had left what he called “abstraction from” for the “purely abstract.”

After this major shift, Mondrian’s art would evolve at breakneck speed until 1919, when he could finally return to France—each painting proposing a new response to a challenge he had encountered while reflecting upon *Composition in Lijn*. In this work...
the figure has been disseminated into linear clusters that assemble and disassemble in front of our eyes, but there is still a passive ingredient in the work, an element that plays no role in the dialectical tension he now conceived as the energetic basis of his art: the white background, though optically activated by the multiple relations between all the short black and gray dashes, remains an empty space. The ground as such, as a neutral receptacle, had to be abolished. After several tries, each brilliant in its own way, Mondrian arrived in 1918 at the ideal solution, or so he thought—the modular grid, in which the proportions of the units, colored or not, are based on that of the canvas as a whole. There is no longer any ground (or any figure) but an allover field. (Mondrian was not the only artist to come up with this formal strategy at the time—other, younger members of the de Stijl group, of which he was the de facto mentor; did so as well, in particular Vilmos Huszar; and outside Holland Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp were also experimenting with the modular grid in their “duo” collages [plate 334].)

Though each of Mondrian’s nine modular paintings from 1918–19 carries out his dialectical principle in a different way, the last two works of the series, Composition with Grid 8 and Composition with Grid 9 (plate 249)—better known under the poorly chosen nicknames Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colors and Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors—reveal most clearly where the discovery of this perfectly regular and geometric structure led him. The modular grid is purely autoreferential, its configuration perfectly mapping the field upon which it is inscribed—it is an indexical sign, not unlike a footprint on the sand. But as such it is static (a grid is a grid is a grid): no precarious equilibrium, no balancing act. In order to produce the tension that he needed, Mondrian reintroduced a modicum of composition (the subjective placement and distribution of the colored and noncolored planes) into the noncompositional, “objective” order of the grid. Once again he had intuitively adapted Hegelian dialectics to suit his purpose: in order for the “universal” to manifest itself, a zest of “particularity” still had to be factored in.

Arriving in Paris shortly after finishing his so-called “Checkerboard” compositions, Mondrian found Cubism as he knew it dead and buried, and the French avant-garde, with his hero Picasso at the helm, fully engaged in a figurative, in his mind retrograde, return to order. Needless to say that in such an atmosphere, the “ideal” solution of the modular grid, which he had planned to share with his peers as his most advanced contribution to the “inevitable evolution” of art, did not stand a chance. It was at this juncture that the evolutionist side of his theory came to the rescue of the utopian one: the modular grid failed to be appreciated for its worth because it was ahead of its time, like a biological mutation that had suddenly skipped over several evolutionary steps. Furthermore, Mondrian realized that the grid disobeyed his ban of repetition (which he saw as a “natural” phenomenon and thus as something that should have no place in a “purely abstract” art). Throughout
the later part of 1919 and the whole of 1920, he patiently weaned himself from the seduction of the modular grid. One can still detect it in Composition C (1920; plate 251), though it has already been submitted to major perturbation (none of the rectangles at the periphery of the canvas is modular, and within the large square central zone, itself divided into nine units of equal size, some of the linear partitions are elided, allowing neighboring planes to merge). With Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray (plate 260), the last painting dated 1920, Mondrian’s mature style, Neo-Plasticism, is born.  

If one had to sum up Mondrian’s invention of Neo-Plasticism by using one of his favorite mottos, one would choose “the abolition of form”—by which he meant the abolition not only of shape as such but of any fixed entity. “I think that the destructive element is too much neglected in art,” he would write at the end of his life. But right from the very beginning of Neo-Plasticism we see this destructive impulse at work. In Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray, for example, we have a hard time perceiving that a large white square is placed smack on the axis of symmetry—which is to say, it is not meant to be seen as a square as such, as an ideal shape magnified by its central position, but as form undone by its surrounding, whose elements compete with it. From then on, Mondrian would spend all his considerable force of concentration on finding ways of undermining in his art any center, any hierarchy, any identity. To achieve this goal, he stuck to a limited pictorial vocabulary that he thought would maximize tension (planes of primary colors and of what he called “noncolors”—black, white and gray; and black lines, to which he added colored lines once in 1933 and again in several canvases during the last two years of his life). With this restricted panoply, he launched his battle against what he deemed “the culture of form,” demonstrating over and over in his extremely diverse compositions that no element ever exists by itself except as an illusion, or, as he would say himself countless times, that, “in true reality,” there is nothing but relationships.

1 Piet Mondrian first saw works by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the international exhibition of modern art organized by the Moderne Kunstkring in Amsterdam in the fall of 1911. His interest in these works perhaps prompted him to leave for Paris, where he arrived around Christmas.
3 This distinction appears repeatedly in Mondrian’s writings after 1920. In 1926, he was distressed by the fact that Felix Del Marle, the editor of the journal Vouwori, when publishing an essay he had submitted, altered its title from “L’art pur et abstrait” (Purely abstract art) to “Art: Pureté + Abstraction” (Art: purity + abstraction). He wrote in protest to Del Marle, “Purity is for the Purists and ‘abstraction’ is not ‘abstract art,’ as I even think I pointed out in the article.”
4 The qualitative leap is particularly striking when one compares this canvas with its immediate predecessor, Composition III ("Komposition No. XIII") (no. B110 in Joop M. Joosten, Piet Mondrian. Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911-1944, vols 2-3 [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997]), a canvas of the same type as MoMA’s Composition C, on whose composition it is clearly based.

253. PIET MONDRIAN. Tableau no. 4/Composition No. VIII/Compositie 3. 1913. Oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 31 1/2” (95 x 80 cm). Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

254. PIET MONDRIAN. Tableau no. 2/Composition No. VII. 1913. Oil on canvas, 41 1/9 x 44 1/2” (104.4 x 113.6 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International
255 (opposite, above). PIET MONDRIAN. 
Pier and Ocean 5: “Zee en sterrenlucht”
(Sea and starry sky). 1915 (inscribed 1914).
Charcoal and watercolor on paper, 34 7/8 x 44”
(88.9 x 111.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art,
© 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR
International

256 (opposite, below). PIET MONDRIAN.
Composition 10 in zwart wit (Composition 10
in black and white). 1915. Oil on canvas,
33 7/8 x 42 1/2” (85 x 108 cm). Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo. © 2012 Mondrian/
Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

257. PIET MONDRIAN. Compositie (Composition).
1916. Oil on canvas, with wood strip nailed to
the bottom edge, 46 7/8 x 39 3/8” (119 x 75.1 cm).
Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection.
© 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o
HCR International
PIET MONDRIAN. Composition with Grid 4: Lozenge Composition. 1919.
Oil on canvas, diagonals: 33 7/16 x 33 1/4" (85 x 84.5 cm), sides: 23 5/8 x 23 9/16" (60 x 60.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.
© 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International
PIET MONDRIAN. Composition with Grid 9: Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors. 1919. Oil on canvas, 33 7/8 x 41 3/4" (86 x 106 cm). Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International
260. PIET MONDRIAN. *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray*. 1920. Oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 24" (51.5 x 61 cm). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

261. PIET MONDRIAN. *Tableau I, with Red, Blue, Black, and Yellow*. 1921. Oil on canvas, 40 9/16 x 39 11/16" (103 x 100 cm). Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International
262. PIET MONDRIAN. Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray. 1921. Oil on canvas, diagonals: $33 \frac{3}{4} \times 33 \frac{3}{4}$" ($84.5 \times 84.5$ cm), sides: $23 \frac{3}{8} \times 23 \frac{3}{8}$" ($60.1 \times 60.1$ cm). The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

263. PIET MONDRIAN. Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray. 1921. Oil on canvas, $15 \frac{7}{8} \times 13 \frac{7}{8}$" ($39.5 \times 35$ cm). Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague. © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International