

The Influence of City Life on Piet Mondrian and Chris Burden

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Art 453 (Art of the First Half of the 20th Century)

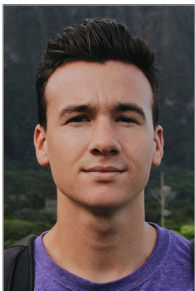
Mentor: Dr. Joseph Stanton

This article compares two specific works by artists Piet Mondrian and Chris Burden. Although born in different centuries, both artists were especially influenced by the cities in which they lived and worked. While Mondrian lived in New York City for a few years in the early 1940s until his death, Burden had a lifelong career in the Los Angeles area. By looking at an influential example from each artist's oeuvre, it can be better understood how the distinct characteristics of the two cities directly impacted each artist's life and influenced their work. Although the art discussed is specifically related to both Mondrian's and Burden's location at the time in which it was created, each piece also fits within the arch of their careers. The juxtaposition between the two examples shows how artists are affected by the individual qualities of differing cities and how artists incorporate the resulting inspiration into their own respective practices.

Cities, and the corresponding frenetic bustle of metropolitan life, have long served as a muse for artists. Although the American cities of New York City and Los Angeles are vastly different in their urban plans, both have inspired artworks centered around their respective transportation systems and overall layout. While New York City is based on a grid structure, Los Angeles is a sprawling aggregate of intersecting highways. Despite being created nearly 70 years apart, both Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943) and Chris Burden's *Metropolis II* (2010) comment on these defining characteristics of the two cities' roadways, as well as the general chaotic culture that accompanies city living. By breaking down these works, the role art plays in understanding

our increasingly urbanized world can be better understood.

Piet Mondrian was born in the Netherlands in 1872. He was the second of five children in a family that heavily supported art and music. His own father was a headmaster at the local school as well as an amateur artist. Mondrian took up his formal studies in 1892 at an art academy in Amsterdam. Unknown to most who are familiar with his work, Mondrian began his career as an artist depicting landscapes inspired by the painterly movements of Impressionism, Fauvism, and Post-Impressionism. It was within these landscapes that Mondrian first experimented with the limited primary color palette that would dominate his later abstract works. For example, in *Avond*



I am currently a senior at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa majoring in Art History and also working toward a certificate in Environmental Studies. I hope to continue my education after receiving my undergraduate degree with the goal of earning a doctorate in Art History and becoming a professor. This essay was written as a final paper for my Art of the First Half of the 20th Century class. Although my personal research revolves mostly around site-specific contemporary art, this class provided an important framework for better understanding the complete modern evolution of art history. As a result, I was able to draw connections between two distinct artists and reach an understanding of some of the things that inspire individuals, no matter the time period.

(Evening): *The Red Tree* (1910), Mondrian portrayed a pastoral scene typical of the Dutch countryside using mainly red and blue with highlights of yellow. It wasn't until Mondrian was introduced to the avant-garde movement of Cubism upon his arrival in Paris in 1912 that his work began to morph into his signature style. He wanted to advance Cubism from its already fragmented forms of representation to complete and pure abstraction. Stuck in the Netherlands during World War I, Mondrian helped found the journal *De Stijl* (The Style) with other Dutch artists. Inspired by theosophic and philosophical underpinnings, they laid out the ideas for truly abstract art devoid of any harmonic distraction consisting only of primary colors, the achromatic colors of gray, white, and black, and straight lines.

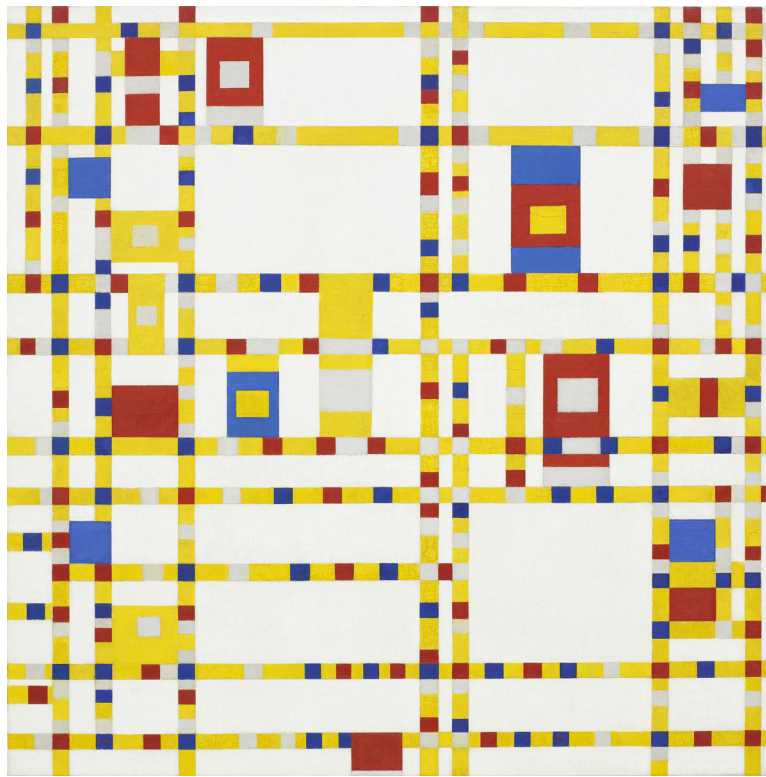
Mondrian deemed this style Neoplasticism (new plastic art) for its subject matter centered on form and color. Mondrian expressed his new ideas in *De Stijl*, writing "As a pure representation of the human mind, art will express itself in an aesthetically purified, that is to say, abstract form. The new plastic idea cannot therefore take the form of a natural or concrete representation—this new plastic idea will ignore the particulars of appearance, that is to say, natural form and color. On the contrary, it should find its expression in the abstraction of form and color, that is to say, in the straight line and the clearly defined primary color" ("Neoplasticism"). Mondrian would focus the majority of his work until his death on these ideas.

Escaping the outbreak of World War II, Mondrian moved to New York City in 1940 after a brief stay in London. Once in New York City, Mondrian found his theories of art in concrete form, as skyscrapers rose above the grid-planned streets. As early as 1917, Mondrian had said, "The truly modern artist sees the metropolis as abstract

life given form: it is closer to him than nature and it will more easily stir aesthetic emotions in him" (Arnason, 2013, p. 377). Along with the structures of New York City, the dizzying array of lights, the tempo of the traffic, and the energy of the dance halls and jazz bands captivated his attention. Thus inspired by his new home, Mondrian began working on *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, slightly departing from the specific formula he had been beholden to for over twenty years.

Although *Broadway Boogie Woogie* still retained the grid structure from the rest of Mondrian's Neoplasticism works, there are some acute differences. Gone are the

thick black lines which normally framed large blocks of color. Instead, the grid becomes a color itself, in this case yellow. The blocks of color (blue, red, and gray) now occupy the yellow grid lines. Larger squares and rectangles are interspersed throughout the grid structure. Visualizing the painting as an aerial view of New York City, the yellow lines represent the city's grid structure, whereas the smaller blocks of color within the yellow grid suggest cars and traffic moving along the roadways. The varying distances of the color



blocks create a pulsating effect, similar to what one would see watching the flow of cars. The larger squares and rectangles between the grid demonstrate the skyscrapers that line the streets (Arnason, 2013, p. 377–379). One writer said, "Finally... we find him drawing all the strands of his research together... He has broken the aggressiveness of his lines of his first New York work by giving them a brilliant multicolored, mosaic character. The whole canvas now dances with variously sized rectangles in various colors" (Tokoro, 1993, p. 35). Completed in 1943, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* was the last artwork finished by Mondrian before he passed away in 1944 at the age of 71 from pneumonia. Unfortunately, we will never know the full impact

New York City could have had on Mondrian's changing practice. About *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, Mondrian said, "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. There is still too much of the old in it" (Troy, 2013, p. 28).

The name *Broadway Boogie Woogie* references both New York City's famous Broadway street lined with theaters and the popular dance at the time known as boogie-woogie. Music and the visual arts have long been intertwined. It was Wassily Kandinsky who made the relationship well-established in the art world, often naming his paintings as "improvisations" or "compositions." Interestingly enough, Kandinsky is also often credited with painting one of the first completely abstract works of art. This connection between the influence of music and abstractness is specifically evident in Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Perhaps it was the new musical developments which led to boogie-woogie's newfound popularity that inspired Mondrian to change up his long-practiced aesthetic (Troy, 2013, p. 26). The varying sizes and colors of the rectangles suggest the flow of musical chords and the steps of the boogie-woogie dance. Mondrian was not the only artist also inspired by jazz music. American artist Stuart Davis, whose abstract works were often defined as patterns swayed by the sensations of jazz, became friends with Mondrian after meeting through the New York City music and dance hall scene. American art critic Charmion von Wiegand said about the duo, "They had a mutual enthusiasm for modern music, and they could discuss paintings on an intellectual level" (Tokoro, 1993, p. 23).

Chris Burden was an American artist who was born in Boston in 1946 but spent his adolescence growing up in France and Italy. Burden graduated from high school in Massachusetts before receiving his Bachelor of Arts in Architecture at Pomona College and his Master of Fine Arts from the University of California, Irvine. Burden became one of the foremost performance artists during the 1970s, using his own body as his medium of choice while focusing on ideas of violence and endurance. Later in his life, his work became less performative and evolved more into sculpture and installation art, yet still focused on the element of pending danger. Burden was a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1978 until 2004. A long-time resident of Los Angeles, Burden passed away in May of 2015 at the age of 69 from melanoma.

Trans-Fixed (1974) is one of Burden's most famous

performances and an interesting precursor conceptually to *Metropolis II*. Burden had his hands nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen inside a garage. The car was rolled out of the garage, and the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. The car was then pushed back in the garage and the door was closed. The short duration and quick disappearance made the whole act seem like a brief hallucination. Burden used a Volkswagen because he believed it was the car of the people; therefore, crucifying himself would liberate everyone, while also equating himself with Christ. However, by using a commercial item such as a car to crucify himself on, Burden also became a martyr to capitalism and the forces that literally drive it.

Burden's father was an engineer. His own fascination with architecture began during his undergraduate studies at Pomona and eventually merged into his art career. From roughly 1978 onward, the majority of Burden's work was sculptural in nature. Between *Trans-Fixed* and *Metropolis II*, Burden shifted his focus from the symbolic car of the people to a future utopian society in which people do not even have to drive cars themselves.

Metropolis II is an intricately engineered kinetic sculpture that circulates over 1,000 miniature cars every hour, weaving them through an elaborate transport system. The sculpture was modeled after the idea of a fast-paced modern city. It took Burden over four years to complete. The miniature cars are constantly whizzing about at high speeds, sometimes over 240 scale miles per hour, along a vast network of 18 different tracks. The piece looks toward a future where cars drive themselves and everyone can go much faster as opposed to being constantly stuck in traffic. This is likely a comment on the car culture that envelops the greater Los Angeles area and the overall fast-paced life that accompanies modern-day urban living. The cars are powered by a series of electronic conveyor belts and magnets. Along with the road system, the sculpture includes a tiny commuter rail line and dozens of skyscrapers and other buildings.

However utopian *Metropolis II* appears, there is still a sense of stifling confinement due to the sculptural medium. Despite the intricate road system and high speeds, the cars can never escape the limits of the sculpture; they travel in a never-ending loop. The only way a car leaves the roads is by flying off a corner due to high speeds or eventually breaking down due to continuous use, an interesting metaphor for city living. Because of this, *Metropolis II* could also be commenting on the ideas of self-control and the ever-impending need to conform with societal norms. Burden himself once said about the

piece, “In essence, it’s sort of a complicated roller-coaster system” (Rogers, 2012).

Similar to the influence jazz music had on Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, there is also an important aspect of sound with *Metropolis II*. When the sculpture is running at full speed, the constant noise can be nearly deafening. Burden said, “The noise, the continuous flow of the trains, and the speeding toy cars produce in the viewer the stress of living in a dynamic, active, and bustling 21st century city” (“*Metropolis II*,” 2011). He also said, “We wanted to expand it and make it truly overwhelming—the noise and level of activity are both mesmerizing and anxiety provoking” (Mills, 2015). Whereas Mondrian effectively compared city living to the soothing rhythm of jazz music, Burden seems to have taken a more cynical approach regarding the auditory sensory overload of modern cities. Even in a technologically advanced day and age, the hum of human activity will be unavoidable.

While *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Metropolis II* are unique pieces in the respective oeuvres of Piet Mondrian and Chris Burden, they were both also reiterations of a similar theme explored throughout the two artists’ individual careers. Working within Neoplasticism, Mondrian restricted his color palette to primary and achromatic colors. Although *Broadway Boogie Woogie* retains the same palette, it departs from the traditional structure Mondrian had previously employed, allowing blocks of color to infiltrate the defining grids. While Burden’s performances pieces often put his own body in harm’s way, his later work often redirected that element of danger away from his personal self and instead installed it into the gallery space. With *Metropolis II*, the fast speed of the cars creates a sublime effect, as they could come flying off the sculpture at any time.

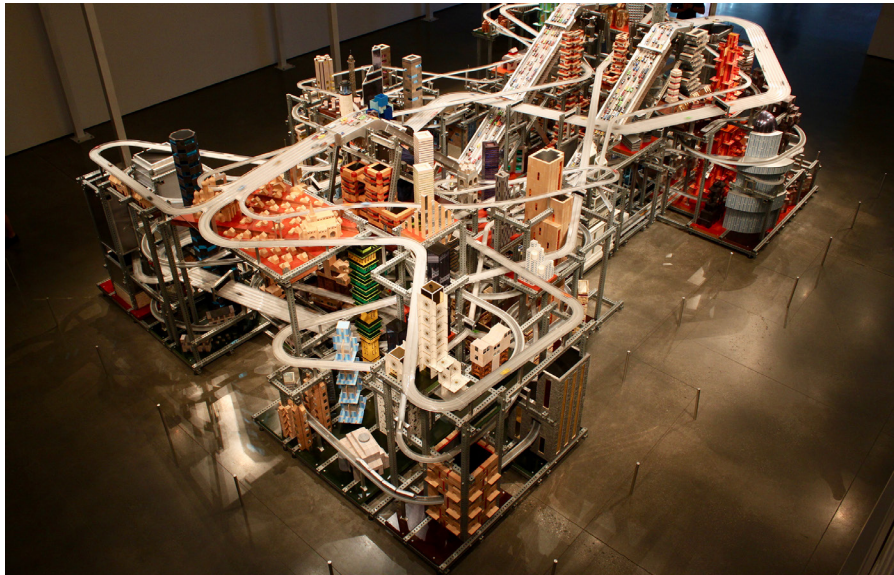
Both pieces have an interesting position in the timeline of art history and the overall development and de-

sign of city planning. Mondrian made *Broadway Boogie Woogie* when the center of the art world was beginning to shift from Paris to New York City. Art critic Charmion von Wiegand said about Mondrian’s work, “While it is doubtful if all the European art expressions recently transplanted to our shores can survive when confronted by the robust virility of America, the art of Mondrian offers a new beginning.” Mondrian himself said, “New York now opens a road of infinite possibilities of experiment for the future” (Tokoro, 1993, p. 12). Shortly after Mondrian passed away, the New York-based Abstract Expressionists seemingly took hold of the art world and held it captive for years to come (Arnason, 2013, p. 379). An older city than Los Angeles, New York was designed with a grid plan, described as autocratic, abstract, and magically geo-

metric. This grid helped make New York “a great and famous orderly place of energy and industry.” It was within his adopted city that Mondrian found this geometric grail (Koeppel, 2015, p. xiv–xxi).

As the idea of modern cities changed, Los Angeles arguably developed as a distant relative to New York City.

The grid system was replaced by a mangled system of highways. Writer David Brodsky has said, “The Los Angeles freeway is a silent monument not only to the history of the region’s spatial organization, but to the history of its values as well. Rather than representing a radical departure from tradition, the freeway was the logical next step in making the Los Angeles dream a reality. Los Angeles’ appeal lay in its being the first major city that was not quite a city, that is, not a crowded industrial metropolis.” He continues, “When the city began drowning in the sheer popularity of this vision, the freeway was offered as a lifeline. The L.A. freeway makes manifest in concrete the city’s determination to keep its dream alive” (Brodsky, 1981, p. 4). It was this same highway system that allowed the Los Angeles urban area to spread far away from the



downtown center. This extension resulted in cheaper living opportunities still close to a major metropolitan area. Los Angeles has begun to hold its own in the art world as artists flocked to the open spaces and cheaper studio spaces. In due time, several Californian artists began to make names for themselves, including Chris Burden.

Both New York City and Los Angeles profoundly influenced Piet Mondrian and Chris Burden, respectively. Although the two artists were different in nearly every way, the experience of city living maintained a grip on their imaginations. The sights and sounds of traversing throughout the city is translated into their work, encapsulating the din of culture and creativity that flows from every major metropolitan area. The lack of a direct link between the two artists' theoretical practices demonstrates how the similarities between Broadway Boogie Woogie and Metropolis II express universal ideas of modern cities and how humans continue to remain connected to their surrounding environment even in the ever-increasing built-up world.

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