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Abstract Art: A Global History

Pepe Karmel

A radically new approach to the history of abstract painting that breaks open the canon to make room for artists from across the globe.

250 illustrations

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344pp

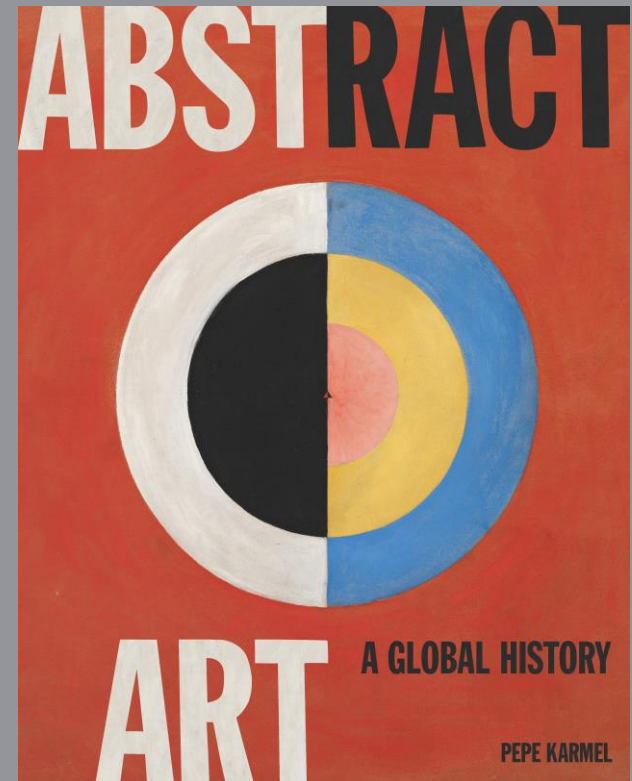
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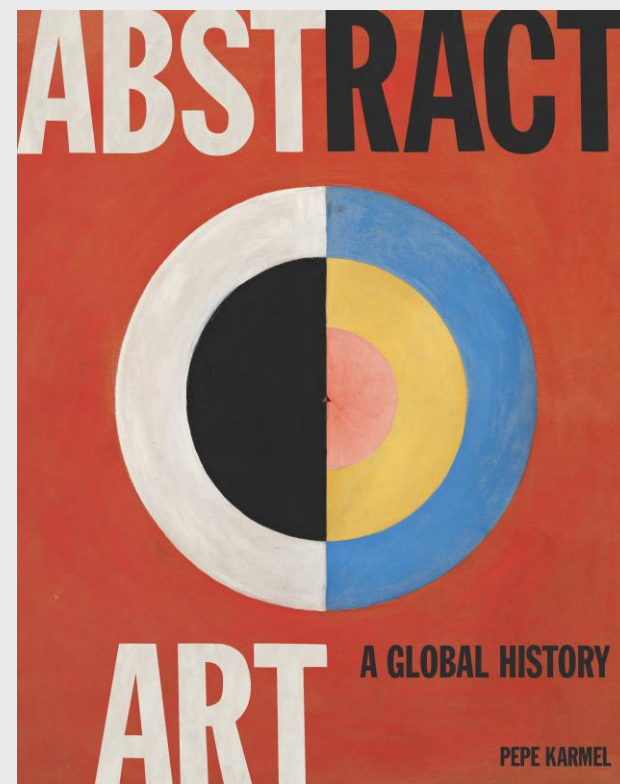


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Book

Key Sales Points

- A new approach to the history of abstract painting, based on subject matter and content rather than form and colour.
- A global perspective on abstraction incorporating work from Asia, Australia, Africa and South America, as well as Europe and North America.
- 250 colour illustrations, including over 80 curated pairings with individual feature captions setting up unusual and thought-provoking comparisons.



1

BODIES

DANGERS ATHLETES AND FOES
WORKERS AND MACHINES
EMERGENCIES AND DEATHS
TOILETS
PRESENCES
SKINS AND FOLDS



Pablo Picasso (Spain/France, 1881–1973).
Three Women, 1908

Leo Steinberg described Pablo Picasso's *Three Women* of 1908 as a 'nativity story' about the birth of three dimensions from two (fig. 1.1). 'Under geological pressure', the surface of the painting reacts 'by contracting, buckling, and folding; each plane brought up sharp to a sudden ridge, as though the faceting of the figures registered an ongoing upheaval.' The picture is, in Steinberg's words, 'a catastrophe in three dimensions'. He argued that the composition began as an undifferentiated visual field that then divided into segments and that only later did the figures emerge from 'the partitioning of the field'.¹

This is not literally true. In Picasso's first studies for the painting, the three figures stand out clearly against the background.² However, Steinberg accurately described the *effect* of the finished painting, which gives the sense that it began as an abstraction and evolved into a figurative image. Picasso undermined the autonomy of the figures by butting them together: for instance, the breast and abdomen of the crouching figure at right coincide exactly with the protruding hip of the central figure. Their integration is augmented by pin-wheeling curves that extend from one figure into the next, and from the figures into the background. The three women emerge from a continuous field of geometric facets, with shifts of value and colour occurring mostly at the borders between them. Individual facets seem flat, while local groups of facets feel strongly modelled but merge into a continuous relief surface, so that the composition looks like a mountainous region seen from an airplane.

Essentially, *Three Women* is a revised and concentrated version of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, The Museum of Modern Art, New York), simultaneously more abstract and more aggressive. The women's raised elbows contrast more strongly with their dropped arms, and the *contrapposto* between their upper and lower bodies is more intense. Their red and orange colouring charges them with a sense of aggression and arousal. With their broad shoulders and muscular limbs, they seem primitive and masculine, even less conventionally feminine than the figures of the *Demaiselles*. Steinberg argued that the androgynous yet erotic figures manifest 'a modern awareness of sexuality as a force impinging from inside the organism upon personality', enacting a 'psychic upheaval' that gives expressive meaning to the painting's formal tensions.³

Purchased by Gertrude and Leo Stein, the *Three Women* went on display in their salon at 32 rue de Fleurus, where for five years (until they sold it in 1913) it was seen by every avant-garde artist who lived in or visited Paris, becoming the starting point for cubism and thence for geometric abstraction. The American painter Morgan Russell did a pencil sketch of the *Three Women* when he visited the Steins in 1911 (Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey), and it became the basis for the abstract composition of his 1913–14 *Synchromy in Orange* (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo).

In summer 1908 Georges Braque had taken the idea of a diagonal lattice extending through both figures and ground, and applied it to landscape and still life, leading the critic Louis Vauxcelles to coin the term 'cubism'. In 1910 Fernand Léger, trained as an architect, exhibited a geometric *Nudes in the Forest* (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), in which he substituted cylindrical forms for Picasso and Braque's flat planes; Vauxcelles quipped that Léger's new style should be called 'tubism'.

The figures of the *Three Women* seem to turn and twist while remaining in place, and the curving lattice that the work bequeathed to early cubism charges its subjects with dynamism. Picasso and Braque themselves continued to paint still figures and objects, but other artists used their formal innovations to evoke the image of the human body in motion. In 1912 Marcel Duchamp painted his



FRANCIS PICABIA

[France, 1879–1963]
Dances at the Spring II, 1912

1.61

In 1912 Francis Picabia, the son of a Cuban diplomat and an early convert to cubism, painted a series of compositions depicting dancers at a spring. The setting, a rocky landscape, was reminiscent of classical and biblical Salon paintings from the nineteenth century, which aimed for historical authenticity by evoking the actual landscapes of Greece and Palestine. Picabia's geometric faceting of figures and landscapes was dramatically different from Salon painting, however. Furthermore, his changing treatment of the figures imbued the different canvases in the series with different meanings. In *Dances at the Spring I* (Philadelphia Museum of Art) the dancers were faceted in the manner of Picasso's *Three Women* (fig. 1.1): like

Picasso's women, they recalled the geometric carving of African sculpture, erroneously associated in European minds with an overwhelming fear of chaos and an irrational belief in spirits. The placement of these 'African' figures in a classical setting evoked the argument of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that beneath the Apollonian grace of classical culture there lay concealed a primitive Dionysian celebration of desire and aggression. In contrast, the figures in *Dances at the Spring II* are fragmented to the point where they no longer seem 'African'. The dancers have become flickering columns of light moving through a reddish haze, as abstract as Lole Fuller's veils. Epiphany takes the place of terror.¹¹



THEO VAN DOESBURG

[Holland/France, 1883–1931]
Counter-Composition XIV, 1925

1.77

The 'counter-compositions' that Theo van Doesburg began painting in 1924 made explicit the diagonal axes implied in his 1919 *Rag-Time* (fig. 1.5). This contravened Piet Mondrian's dictum that only horizontals and verticals were permissible in abstract art. Indeed, van Doesburg seems to have called them *counter-compositions* precisely because they were contrary to Mondrian's rules of composition. Mondrian was so angry at van Doesburg's transgression that he resigned from the editorial board of *De Stijl* and the two men did not speak for several years. The dispute may seem like a tempest in a teapot. How much difference did it make, really, whether the grid was diagonal or perpendicular? However, Mondrian wanted to create a harmonious art that could function effectively as a symbol for

a harmonious society, free from the passions and conflicts of private life, while van Doesburg, like the futurists, wanted to express the dynamism of modern life: not just the impersonal energy of modern technology but also the erotic excitement of the dance hall. To underscore his intentions, van Doesburg had several photographs taken showing a professional dancer posing in front of another *Counter-Composition*, her limbs and torso aligned with the diagonals of the painting. In 1926–28, when he received a commission to decorate the *Aubette*, a combination dance hall and cinema in Strasbourg, France, he designed a giant relief mural based on his counter-compositions, so that the dancers would be surrounded and stimulated by abstract evocations of their own movements.¹²



FRANCIS PICABIA (1. 16)
[France, 1879–1964]
Machine Turn Quickly, 1916–17

Machine Turn Quickly mimics the look of a blueprint, with its two gears silhouetted in white against a cobalt ground and overscored with lines and circles suggesting meticulous measurement. A small gear labelled '1' meshes with a large gear labelled '2'. The neatly lettered legend at lower left explains that the small gear is a woman, the large one a man. The painting's title, *Machine Turn Quickly*, urges the couple to reach a maximum of sexual excitation by spinning faster. In a contemporary picture, *Girl Born without Mother* (1916–18, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh), Picabia took a cutaway view of a piston turning the wheel of a locomotive, rotated it 180 degrees and added a gold background like that of a Byzantine icon. The title suggests the chaste goddess Athena, born from the forehead of Zeus, but the implied action of the shaft sliding in and out of the piston, setting the wheel into motion, provides yet another allegory of sexual intercourse. Picabia's mechanical view of intercourse may have been influenced by Remy de Gourmont's book *The Science of Love: Essay on the Sexual Instinct* (1903), which presented sexuality as a mechanical process driven by inexorable laws of reproduction. For Picabia, the modern world seemed to offer endless occasions for sexual arousal, but induced a kind of helplessness in the face of both instinct and technology.²³



VICTOR SERVFRANCKX (1. 16)
[Belgium, 1897–1966]
Pure Plastic, 1922

Victor Servranckx's *Pure Plastic* recapitulates the machine imagery typical of its era. The black and white disks recall the railway semaphores in paintings like Fernand Léger's *The Disks* of 1918 (Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris). But here the disks seem to be spinning wheels, set into motion by a piston at lower left, like the one in Picabia's *Girl Born without Mother*. In real life, factories were not thus crowded with wheels, gears and pistons. They were dominated by lathes and stamping machines, by bins of components awaiting assembly, and – in the case of actual assembly lines – by overhead rails that carried things from place to place. However fictive, the proliferation of cylinders and wheels in *Pure Plastic* produces a vivid impression of a mechanical universe. The cylinders are painted with alternating bands of black, white and red, suggesting the gleam of light on stainless steel. The flicker of light and dark spills over into every area of the picture, bringing the composition to the verge of chaos. However, the subliminal division of the surface into equally spaced vertical, horizontal and diagonal bands restores a tacit sensation of rhythmic order. The threat of breakdown becomes instead an ecstatic experience of sensory overload.



[1.25]
Jackson Pollock (USA, 1912-1956). *Untitled*,
1944-46, printed 1967. Etching

[1.26]
(centre) Jackson Pollock. *The Little King*,
c. 1946 (photo of overpainted work, now
Galaxy)



third figure, or an animal, squeezed in at right. At the far left, there is a vertical band encircled by a snaking line, recalling the Rod of Asclepius, the classical symbol of medicine. The etching provided the model for a painting, *The Little King*, whose appearance is recorded in a black-and-white photograph (fig. 1.26). The figure with the triangular head now occupies the centre of the composition. The hand-headed figure stands erect at right, balanced by a new figure at left. The three frontal figures confront the viewer like totems arranged on an altar. The painting's powerful patterning and gestural drawing recall *Totem Lesson I*.

In early 1947 Pollock heavily reworked *The Little King* and gave it a new title, *Galaxy* (fig. 1.27). Enough of the original composition remains visible to suggest that *The Little King* was painted primarily with blue, mustard yellow, olive green and grey, topped with black lines giving definition to the figures. When Pollock began to rework the canvas, his first move was to brush on a layer of shiny aluminium paint, masking much of the composition while leaving key passages visible. He then added skeins of dripped white paint, forming an irregular arabesque that echoed the shapes of the original figures without



TERRY WINTERS

[1.49]
[USA, b. 1949]
Double Gravity, 1984

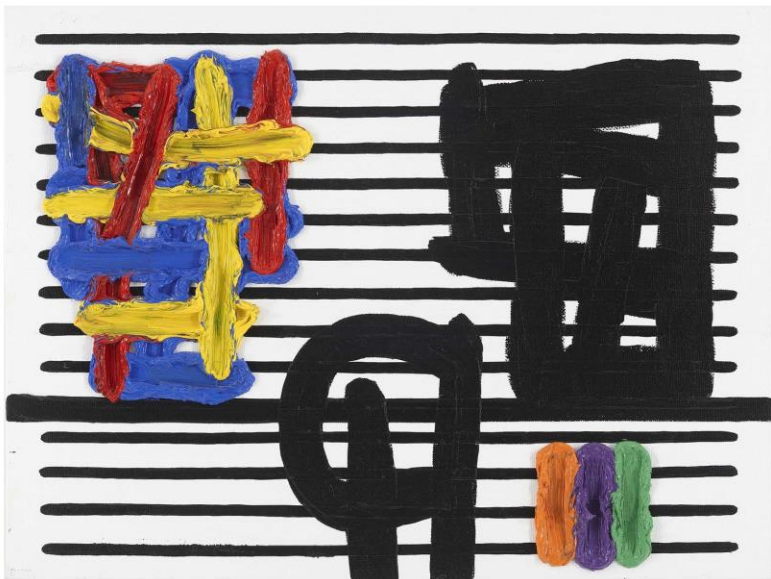
The segmented globes in Terry Winters's *Double Gravity* resemble blastulas, the hollow spheres that appear at an early stage of embryonic development, surrounding and protecting the delicate cells that will become the fetus. Despite its scientific inspiration, the painting is in no sense a transcription from a biology textbook. Where actual blastulas are bumpy spheres composed from a single kind of cell, the surfaces of Winters's imaginary cells are divided into alternating rings of large and small polygons, a bit like footballs. Furthermore, the process of human fertilization creates one blastula at a time. You would never find a swarm of blastulas like those in Winters's canvas, which seem to be carried forwards like blood cells coursing through an artery. Instead of organic vitality, however, the palette and paint handling suggest deterioration. Some of the cells are mere black or white outlines; others are shaded with thick strokes of grey, brown and black. Some float freely in space; others clump together in irregular agglomerations. Even the foggy space they inhabit struggles to assume a fixed character. The grey field opens, at right, to reveal a glimpse of jet-black emptiness. Below, in the lower-right corner, a brown patch suggests terra firma, but the ochre paint is visibly brushed over the grey field. The pathos of the human condition is evident even at the micro-cellular level.

CARROLL DUNHAM

[1.50]
[USA, b. 1949]
Two Dimensions, 1984-85

The animated turds of Picasso's *Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) return in Carroll Dunham's hallucinatory *Two Dimensions*, where the grey mushrooms at upper right excrete grey phallic projectiles and brown braided lumps. Below, a large muscular tube bursts open to release another series of projectiles, their outlines left unshaded like those of the newborn cells in Winters's *Double Gravity*. In the left panel of the painting, finger-like outlines overlay a delicately shaded form resembling a Chinese scholar's rock. Refinement co-exists with degradation; perhaps one is not possible without the other. Dunham's dragged and scumbled brushwork recalls de Kooning's paintings of the mid-1950s but, like Cy Twombly [fig. 5.31], he transformed the painterly mark from heroic gesture to obscene scribble. New York City, where Dunham lived and worked, had teetered on the verge of bankruptcy in the 1970s. The 1980s boom in finance and real estate balanced the city's budget but did little to help the poor. Drug dealing and crime soared, and the AIDS epidemic devastated the art community. The Lower East Side, where the worlds of art and music intersected, has become a subject of intense nostalgia. Dunham's painting summarizes the widely shared sensation of living in a world of shit, albeit one animated by an irrepressible *joie de vivre*.





JONATHAN LASKER

[USA, b. 1948]
Pictorial Regularity, 2009

In Jonathan Lasker's sketches, the background and some of the foreground shapes are drawn with felt-tip markers, while broad areas of colour are created by doodling until the area is filled. Lasker draws other foreground shapes with brush and oil paint, modelling the paint into a thick impasto. When enlarging his studies, he exactly preserves every detail. Doodled lines that seemed natural at their original, hand-made scale become profoundly unnatural. The impasto becomes a simulacrum, built up with modelling paste and painted to match the original colours. Breaking the rules of post-war abstraction, Lasker distinguishes clearly between figures and ground, placing ideographic shapes in

front of patterned fields that create a tacit sense of spatial recession. The foreground motif in *Pictorial Irregularity*, also found in *A Portrait of the Artist's Father* (2007, private collection), is a square with rounded corners, mounted atop a smaller rectangular base; a flattened, faceless image of a head resting on a neck. The head at the upper right of *Pictorial Regularity* is painted with thin black strokes; the one at upper left is built up from thickly impastoed strokes of red, yellow and blue. The materiality of the coloured paint stands in for the materiality of the absent body, like the ghost of sensuality in an empty landscape.

[1.55]



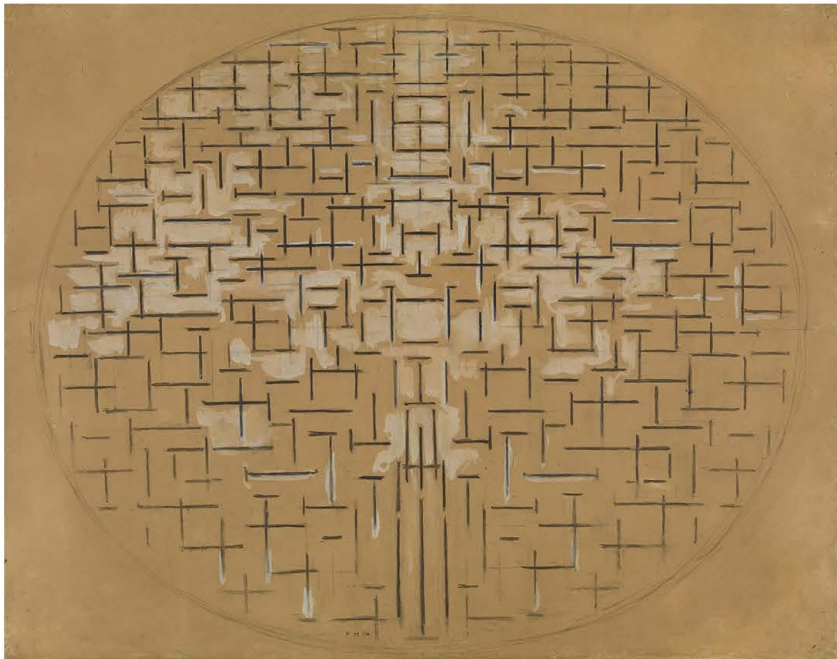
CARRIE MOYER

[USA, b. 1960]
Herr Doktor, 2012

From the outset Carrie Moyer's work combined three seemingly incompatible elements: pin-ups, politics and painterliness. In *Everything for Everybody* (2002, collection of the artist), the pink silhouette of a standing female nude merged into the posterized *Herr Doktor*. Here, an undulating white silhouette extends horizontally across the canvas, suggesting a recumbent female figure like Henri Matisse's *Large Reclining Nude* (1935, Cone Collection, Baltimore Museum of Art). At the upper right, two circular bands resemble eyes (one with an almond-shaped pupil like a cat's). Their irises are filled, wholly or in part, with painterly textures and colours: scumbled

while lozenges submerged beneath washes of red, pink and yellow, and rimmed patches of black like volcanic islands rising from a sea of white, red, pink and green. The painting's title, *Herr Doktor*, seems ironically to invoke Sigmund Freud – not, as in the work of Hannah Wilke [fig. 1.43] and Lynda Benglis [fig. 1.47], to refute the concept of castration anxiety, but to revive the idea of scopophilia. Moyer authorizes the viewer to take pleasure in looking, whether at bodies or at paintings. What she does *not* authorize is the invisible voyeur: the eyes melting with pleasure, in her painting, fix the viewer in their gaze.

[1.54]



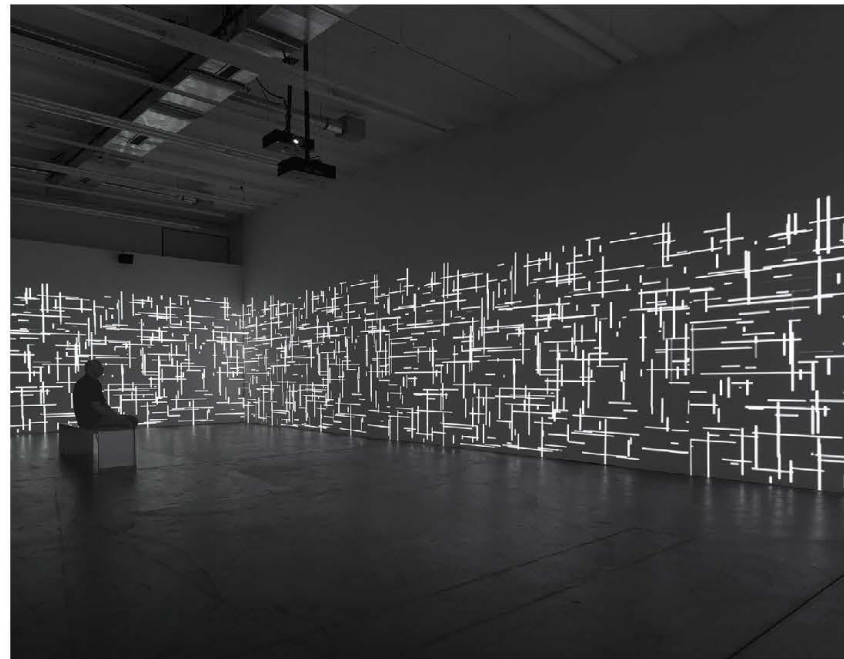
PIET MONDRIAN

[Holland/France/USA, 1872–1944]
Pier and Ocean V, 1916, dated_1914

In Mondrian's first, naturalistic sketch for the *Pier and Ocean* series, the pier rises like a tower from the bottom edge of the sheet, while horizontal lines evenly divide the surface of the sea. Developing the composition in a series of charcoal drawings, Mondrian eliminated all curves and diagonals. His decision seemed to be motivated by a mystical belief that the vertical and the horizontal represent the two fundamental dimensions of existence: the first signifying consciousness, masculinity and the sky, the second unconsciousness, femininity and the earth. In contrast to these eternal principles, curves and diagonals are mere accidents, too ephemeral for

inclusion in high art. Having eliminated them, Mondrian needed some way to evoke a sense of life. He divided the cubist grid into an atomized field of "plus-and-minus" signs, whose irregular intervals, augmented by touches of white paint, suggest the motion of a quiet sea. Despite the apparent randomness of the composition, the spaces between horizontal lines consistently diminish as they approach the top of the canvas, recalling the angled checkerboards of traditional perspective. The subdued movement and the hidden order generate a sense of timelessness like the twilight vista of Friedrich's *Moonrise over the Sea* [fig. 2.19].²³

[2.20]



MAGDALENA FERNÁNDEZ

[Venezuela, b. 1964]
2iPM009, from *Mobile Paintings* series, 2009

Magdalena Fernández's installation *2iPM009* uses wrap-around video to reimagine Piet Mondrian's "plus and minus" paintings of 1914–7. The viewer enters a dark, silent room. Small dots of light appear on the walls, accompanied by what sound like individual droplets of rain hitting a hard surface. As the rain intensifies, the dots multiply and stretch out into short vertical and horizontal lines. They form local clusters of plus and minus signs, isolated from one another as they are in Mondrian's paintings. Halfway through the animation, the downpour intensifies to a deafening roar, there is a clap of thunder and the overlapping lines become an

irregular web, denser and more agitated than anything in Mondrian. Then the rain lets up. The clusters dissolve; the lines shrink, become scattered dots and vanish, while the rain ceases. Where nineteenth-century scientists understood energy as waves moving through matter, quantum theory offers only a statistical description. Einstein's quantized view of nature is now part of everyday life: TV screens swept by moving electron beams have been replaced by LED screens where each pixel flickers on or off independently of all the others. The coherent patterns of reality dissolve into random accumulations, like the web and roar of *2iPM009*.²⁴

[2.21]