

# REMY JUNGHERMAN: 'TO SAY WITHOUT SAYING': ABSTRACTION AND THE BLACK ATLANTIC

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‘Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.’ — Édouard Glissant<sup>1</sup>

Remy Jungerman’s installation *Promise* (2012–present) comprises a couple dozen tall wooden sticks, which are gathered within a dark-grey cubic vessel and splayed out towards the ceiling. Each is decorated in rhythmic intervals of accents and adornments, as alternating sections along the length of the sticks are painted in different colours and grey tones, wrapped in textiles bearing plaid and micro-dot patterns, punctured with iron nails, or masked with kaolin (white clay).

This dynamic interplay of textures, patterns and colours appears, at first, to be spontaneous. However, the sections are sized and ordered according to a predetermined system of measurements that Jungerman has adapted from that developed by the late conceptual artist, Stanley Brouwn, who created several works based on three numerical values related to his own body: F (26 cm, the length of the artist’s foot); E or ell (47 cm, the length of the artist’s forearm); and S (75.6 cm, the length of the artist’s step). In tribute to Brouwn, Jungerman adds two more values which are signified by his own initials: R (37.8 cm, half of Brouwn’s step) and J (23 cm, half of Brouwn’s ell). These numbers determine the length of each decorated interval, while their

permutations – which result in 120 different combinations, from EFJRS to SRJFE – guide the placement of each measured section of paint and textile along the sticks that comprise this version of *Promise*.

Reminiscent of the flag altars that are placed at the entrance to Surinamese Maroon villages and at burial sites throughout the nation’s interior rain-forests, *Promise* also recalls the long sticks used by Maroon boatmen, who stand at the heads of small rafts as they traverse a vast network of intraforest canals and rivers. Their ancestors had once followed these same rivers to freedom from enslavement on Dutch plantations, which stretched across the coastal colony of Paramaribo from the sixteenth century. Envisioned in connection to Brouwn’s systematic translation of measured distances into values drawn from his own body, *Promise* invites reflection on the ways we navigate, occupy or mark the natural environment, while also blurring the boundaries between signification and abstraction.

*The Measurement of Presence* – which brings together new work by Jungerman and Iris Kensmil – is conceived, in part, as a tribute to Brouwn, who was obsessed with the concepts of measurement and distance. Brouwn’s practice raised complicated questions about ‘place’ and identity in contemporary artistic discourse. The artist refused to allow his work to be written about or illustrated in reproduction, and always substituted a blank page in place of the obligatory biographical entry in exhibition catalogues. While his works were often *about* forms of signification, they were also clouded by a sense of absence: in the seminal work *this way Brouwn*, for instance, he asked random passers-by to draw, from memory, a route between any two points that they frequently travel. The resulting drawings feature winding lines that meander across blank pages, with no place names or markers for scale; as ‘maps’ they are abstracted and functionally illegible

<sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 190.

to the viewer. In his artist book *Afghanistan–Zambia*, brouwn transcribes the phrase ‘the total number of my steps in’ followed by each nation state, listed alphabetically; yet, he never includes such a number, nor does he explain exactly what it would measure.

What is known about brouwn’s life, however, is a trajectory: one that was followed by Jungerman decades later. He was born in Paramaribo, Suriname in 1935, and moved to Amsterdam in 1957. As Oscar van den Boogaard writes, he was ‘the man who wishes to remain invisible’.<sup>2</sup> I find myself tempted to consider how brouwn’s identity as an immigrant might have influenced his interest in notions of place, distance and measurement, or his investigations of the body’s motion through space. Yet, such conjectures must be suppressed if one is to respect the artist’s wishes to remain all but anonymous, off the map. One has the right to Opacity, after all.

In Jungerman’s practice, on the other hand, questions surrounding heritage and cultural identity are made central. Born in Moengo, Suriname in 1959, the artist was raised by his third-generation Dutch father and his mother of Maroon descent. He attended art school at the Academy of Higher Arts and Culture in Paramaribo before moving to Amsterdam to study at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in 1990. Since then, he has become widely known for sprawling wall-mounted and floor installations that interweave references to modernist abstraction with objects and images linked to histories of slavery, migration and creolization across the Dutch Atlantic world. In many cases, he begins with latticed or gridded frameworks of wooden beams that are arranged in compositions reminiscent of De Stijl geometries, or with minimalist stacks, cubes and grids, which are then wrapped or adorned with material remnants of Suriname’s colonial and postcolonial diversity: West and Central African sculptures, Indonesian batiks, bottles and plates, nails and kaolin, Winti (Afro-Surinamese religion) textiles, and even modern maps and Dutch garden gnomes.

Yet, as with brouwn, the interplay of visibility and invisibility is absolutely vital to Jungerman’s practice. While engaging with questions surrounding colonization and global material culture, he employs the distancing mechanisms of abstraction and conceptualism – a reliance on systems, the use of non-representational geometric patterns, and the flat application of monochromatic colour – as well as processes of masking, concealing, covering, revealing, sealing and layering patterns and materials. By continuously overlaying the gridded designs of Winti textiles, fields of kaolin clay and linear De Stijl abstractions, in particular, Jungerman renders these forms and patterns all but indistinguishable from one another: woven together, so to speak, and yet concealed.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar van den Boogaard, ‘In Search of stanley brouwn’, *Frieze*, Issue 161, March 2014, <https://frieze.com/article/search-stanley-brouwn>, accessed 2019.

With these tensions in mind, this essay thinks through Jungerman’s treatment and reframing of geometric



Peepina, Totikampu, *Man's Shoulder Cap*, 1920–40, textile, collection Richard and Sally Price

abstraction with the aid of concepts borrowed from the writing of Martiniquan theorist, Édouard Glissant. Glissant proposes the idea of Relation as a useful model for envisioning cultural or aesthetic histories as rhizomatic, interconnected networks rather than isolated chains of filiation or lineage. The indefinable concept of Opacity describes forms of cultural expression that emerged in New World societies in the wake of the Middle Passage, and which are often marked by a sense of invisibility, illegibility or improvisation. Opacity and Relation constitute strategies of resistance against the scopical and political regimes of imperialism, filiation and hyper-visibility. In broader applications, Opacity might also speak to the aesthetics of abstraction, the emphasis on the work's 'surface' by twentieth-century modernists. Finally, it describes the use of abstraction by artists of colour in response to what Kobena Mercer has called the 'burden of representation', or the widespread expectation that Black and non-Western artists must speak for and about racial and cultural identity; in this regard, the radical invisibility of brouwn's own identity and nationality serves as just one example.<sup>3</sup>

In his work, Jungerman imagines multiple histories of abstraction in and of migration – intersecting, evolving and migrating across history and geography. In the artist's own words, 'these historical and material sources collide in the same way that wind carries seeds to new ground, or people to new lands'.<sup>4</sup> His work, as such,

calls into question notions of 'centre' and 'periphery' that dominate narratives surrounding the history of abstraction in twentieth-century art, but also marshals abstraction itself, or Opacity, as a method through which to express, navigate or grapple with questions surrounding identity and place at a global scale. In the context of a national pavilion, and as a representative of the Netherlands in the 2019 Venice Biennale, Jungerman explores abstraction in and of migration, within and across the heavy waters variously known as the Black Atlantic, the Dutch Atlantic World, the Middle Passage or, in Glissant's terms, 'the abyss'.

#### KAOLIN AND CLOTH

In the studio, Jungerman mixes dry kaolin powder with water to create a smooth, white paste. Using his hands, he spreads the clay in a circular motion across a board that has been wrapped with gingham-patterned *pangi* fabrics. Jungerman aligns the vertical and horizontal stripes of this pattern to the edges of the board. When the kaolin dries, he intricately carves out a selection of the lines, accentuating their parallel and intersecting paths. The abstract field of kaolin both conceals and reveals the grid underneath, as its exposed lines map new topographies that recall both plantation grids and De Stijl compositions across its textured surface.

*Visiting Deities* (2019) assumes the form of a *kabra tafra*, a table altar utilized in Winti ritual meals that honour one's ancestors. For this installation, Jungerman creates the altar in three parts: a long table comprised of 14 textile- and kaolin-covered panels, spanning 8 metres in length; a basin that refers to dry riverbed soil; and three horizontal sculptures that are assembled from painted wooden beams and hang suspended from the ceiling. The sculptural forms

<sup>3</sup> Kobena Mercer, 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation', *Third Text* 4/10 (1990), pp. 61–78.

<sup>4</sup> Remy Jungerman, Artist Statement for *The Measurement of Presence*.

are inspired by medicinal oracle bundles carried on the shoulders of Maroon Winti priests.

Through his primary use of both kaolin and cloth, Jungerman pays homage to the spiritual traditions of Afro-Surinamese Maroons. Kaolin is a white soil that is often found deposited on coastlines and the banks of rivers: places that signal the meeting of water and land. Its spiritual application is just one of many traditions, with African roots, that migrated to the Americas as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, only to be reinterpreted in New World contexts. In many West and Central African cultures, it symbolizes liminal states, rites of passage, and communication across realms. The Mende peoples of West Africa, for instance, apply it to the faces of Sande initiates, marking the transition they are about to undergo. In the Kikongo language, kaolin is called *mpemba*, a word that also names the lower half of the Kongo cosmogram, the world of the ancestors. Kaolin soil is used by Kongo artists to mask the faces of *nkisi nkondi*, and it is sometimes placed inside *minkisi* oracle bundles along with cemetery earth and medicinal substances. In Suriname, kaolin is called *pimba*; Winti practitioners rub it on their hands and faces as a form of protection against negative spiritual influences.

The spiritual potency of kaolin is just one of many beliefs, with African roots, that migrated to Suriname in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. Situated along a region once referred to as the 'Wild Coast', the nation is home to a narrow strip of fertile lowlands, nestled between the north-eastern edge of the Amazon rainforest and the coast of the Atlantic, where the ocean waters feed into the Caribbean Sea. It is home to one of the world's largest population of Maroons, the descendants of Africans who escaped plantation slavery by fleeing into the forest, where they formed new communities in hiding.

In the early pages of *The Poetics of Relation*, Glissant inserts a modest, hand-drawn diagram into a footnote that is meant to represent the fragmentation and dispersal of cultures across the Middle Passage. Like a twig or a branch, it appears as a straight line with frayed edges, as both ends fracture off in multiple directions. 'African countries to the East', he explains, 'the lands of the Americas to the West'.<sup>5</sup> The belly of the ship, the expanse of the sea, and the loss of connection to one's home culture collectively constitute what Glissant calls the 'abyss': the 'reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except – more and more threadbare – in the blue savannas of memory or imagination'.<sup>6</sup> The process of creolization, he posits, begins in the wake of the

abyss, and in resistance to the oppression of plantation societies that spanned the Americas, from Louisiana and Haiti to the Guyanas and Brazil. Glissant describes the plantation as an 'enclosed place' defined by 'boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden'. It is in this 'universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization', that new creative practices and forms of cultural survival were invented.<sup>7</sup>

The individuals who banded together and formed Maroon communities in Suriname had originally come from a myriad of African cultures, primarily Akan, Fon and Kongo. While the geometric patterns of *pangi* fabrics reflect clear connections to rhythmized textile traditions of West and Central Africa – on account of their 'colour-clashing, alternation of patterned and unpatterned strips, and staggered accents,' as Robert Farris Thompson has suggested – Maroons did not share a singular, common heritage that could simply be 'revived' in South America.<sup>8</sup> Art historians Sally and Richard Price have critiqued the widespread perception of Surinamese Maroons as being 'Africa's lost tribes' or a 'Little Africa in America', instead describing their visual cultures as a form of 'inter-African syncretism'.<sup>9</sup> For several centuries, Maroon life was marked by itinerancy, nomadism and precarity: conditions that made the 'task of creating a whole new society and culture' all the more monumental.<sup>10</sup> This perspective echoes Glissant's own assertion that for creolized cultures, the 'experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange'.<sup>11</sup> The literatures of creolization, broadly defined – 'oral expression ... tales, proverbs, sayings, songs' and visual aesthetics – share a sense of discontinuity and errantry, which Glissant terms *Opacity*.<sup>12</sup>

As Jungerman traces and carves out lines that run across the surface of the kaolin-covered *kabra tafra*, he invokes the violent topographies of the Paramaribo plantations. There are many more lines in hiding, however, which run through, across and underneath the surface, implying the crossing of borders, or the cultural traditions that remained latent, only to be preserved in memory.

5 Glissant, op. cit. (note 1), p. 5.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

8 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 218.

9 See: Sally and Richard Price, *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 204–08.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

11 Glissant, op. cit. (note 1), p. 8.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 68.





Remy Jungerman, *Peepina*, 1988, mural, c. 450 × 250 cm, Paramaribo Art Academy

The linear, gridded and geometric designs that characterized *pangi* textiles attest more broadly to the ways in which African and Afro-Atlantic textiles contain migrant and opaque forms of knowledge. From Ghanaian *kente* and Sierra Leone country cloth to the Gee's Bend quilts of the US South and 'the creolized cloths of Bahia', textile artists have long made use of abstraction, narrow-strip techniques and contrasting colour patterns in order to encode political and social meanings.<sup>13</sup> Christina Checinska has also reflected on the ways in which textiles embody the conditions of diaspora: cloth 'can be cut, worked, embellished, manipulated, and transformed, then folded, packed and transported across continents', she writes, 'on the move just as the people that make and use it are on the move'.<sup>14</sup> She notes the 'cut-and-mix' or 'bits-and-pieces' techniques that are common across African and Afro-Atlantic textiles, including Surinamese *pangi*, which attest to the senses of fragmentation and disruption – but also retrieval, recycling and reinterpretation – that are central to the experience of creolization. Such tacit forms of expression and abstraction 'were striving for disguise beneath the symbol', Glissant writes, 'working to say without saying'.<sup>15</sup>

## MODERNITY, FABRIC AND THE SEA

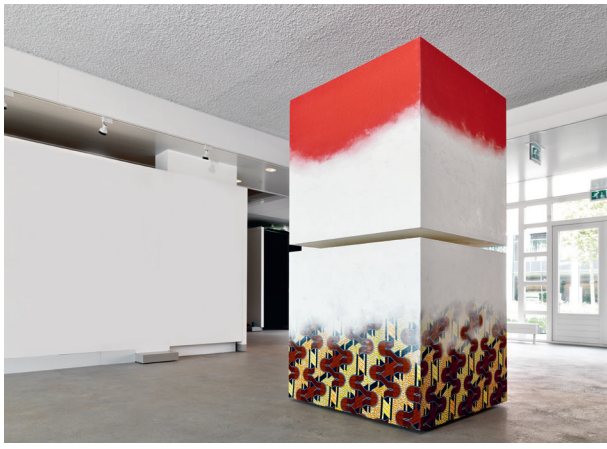
Jungerman has created works inspired by *pangi* textiles for the last several decades. One of his final works in Paramaribo was a painted mural that adorned an exterior wall on the art school's campus in 1988. Entitled *Peepina*, the mural retained the earthy palette of early twentieth-century *pangi* – ochre, navy, burgundy and white – as well as their typical compositional structure wherein horizontal and vertical stripes of colour are interspersed with bands of lozenges, squares and triangles, much like *kente* designs. In a more recent series of screen prints, also titled *Peepina*, Jungerman translates these patterns into playful, abstract compositions wherein shapes float in colourful fields of flat pigment.

In more recent installations, these textiles are combined with references to geometric abstraction in modernism. Jungerman has wrapped ritual glass bottles in images of De Stijl paintings and built wooden frameworks that create black grids reminiscent of Piet Mondrian's neoplastic compositions. In *FODU: Ultimate Resistance* and *Fodu Composition*, Jungerman covers massive wooden cubes or square-shaped panels with *pangi* fabrics and textiles known as 'Dutch Wax Fabrics': Vlisco-manufactured prints that are marketed as African, and yet copy the designs of Indonesian batiks. He then covers these surfaces in kaolin and carves their designs out from underneath the clay. Such works call attention to the colonial and aesthetic networks of the greater

<sup>13</sup> See Robert Farris Thompson, 'Round Houses and Rhythimized Textiles: Mande-Related Art and Architecture in the Americas', in: *Flash of the Spirit*, op. cit. (note 8).

<sup>14</sup> Christine Checinska, 'Aesthetics of Blackness? Cloth, Culture, and the African Diasporas', *TEXTILE* 16/2 (2018), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Glissant, op. cit. (note 1), p. 68.



Remy Jungerman, *FODU: Ultimate Resistance*, 2014, cotton textile, wood and kaolin, 118 × 118 × 248 cm

Dutch Atlantic, as Jungerman has explained, while seamlessly embedding non-Western aesthetics into modernist discourse.

The artist has often cited a *New York Times* advertisement for an exhibition of Maroon patchwork (from which the gridded Winti textiles have developed), which reads: 'If We Didn't Tell You It Came From the Surinamese Rainforest, You'd Think It Was Modern Art.' This tagline positions Western modernism as a primary point of reference for readers and attempts to elevate the status of Surinamese arts through this affiliation, raising more questions than it answers. For the artist, the use of geometry was 'ubiquitous' in the rainforest all throughout his childhood in Moengo. Why should modernist abstraction be lauded as innovative, genius, of universal significance, while Afro-Atlantic abstraction is so often disregarded as naive or irrelevant? Jungerman's employment of modernist technique might be imagined as similar to the aim of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, whose gridded installations of Vlisco fabric such as *Double Dutch* (1994) sought to 're-introduce supposedly non-art material – the functional, the ethnic other – that then would contaminate the "pure" space of high modernism'.<sup>16</sup>

In Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay on the emergence of the 'grid' in modernist art, for instance, she asserts that this form was 'invented' by artists like Mondrian and Malevich, and that it stands as an 'emblem of

modernity'. The grid is the 'form that is ubiquitous in the art of *our* century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one'.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the highly sophisticated, gridded compositions of *kente* date back at least to the seventeenth century, to use just one example, while many premodern societies arranged pictographic or hieroglyphic scripts within tightly gridded matrices. As Esther Pasztory points out, examples of abstraction in premodern or non-Western art are all but invisible from discourses of modernism, despite serving as key points of inspiration for European artists in the twentieth century: 'For the modern artist, abstraction is a choice, but for the non-Western artist it is a given', she writes. Moreover, 'for the modernist artist abstraction is a great achievement, while for the non-Western artist it is merely an inadequate attempt at representation'.<sup>18</sup> In a telling complement to Krauss's assertion, Amiri Baraka muses that 'it is strange to realize that even in the realm of so-called high culture, Western highbrows have only in this century begun to think of African, Pre-Columbian, and Egyptian art, as well as the art of other pre-literate and/or "primitive" cultures, as art rather than archaeology'.<sup>19</sup>

While Jungerman does not claim a derivative or direct relationship between Piet Mondrian and Winti textiles, his work encourages us to reconsider their unequal placement within narratives of modernism and to reimagine histories of abstraction in Relation. For Glissant, Relation is 'the repercussions of cultures, whether in symbiosis or conflict – in a polka, we might say, or a *laghia* – in domination or liberation, opening before us an unknown forever both near and deferred, their lines of force, occasionally

16 Yinka Shonibare, 'Yinka Shonibare: Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnavalesque and Power: A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor', in: *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (Ghent: Snoeck, 2004), p. 164.

17 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* 9 (Summer 1979), p. 52.

18 Esther Pasztory, 'Still invisible: The problem of the aesthetics of abstraction for pre-Columbian art and its implications for other cultures', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 19/20 (1990/1991), p. 110.  
19 Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1963), p. 16.





Remy Jungerman, *FODU Composition 24*, 2015, cotton textile, wood, bottle, yarn and acrylic paint, 410 × 270 × 35 cm, 9 panels in collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag



Asante, *Kente* cloth, textile, 324 × 204 cm,  
collection British Museum, London

divined, only to vanish instantly'.<sup>20</sup> Relation is the force behind syncretism, synthesis, improvisation and *detour*. It is History conceived as a rhizome, not a timeline.

The Asante people of Ghana explain the origin of *kente* in a folktale, wherein two brothers happen upon the spider, Ananse, as it spins an intricate and marvellous web. While textile is woven along the gridded structure of warp and weft, the image of the spider's web serves as an apt metaphor for the multiple narratives, histories or images that inform the patterns of African textiles, or which unfold and converge across the sea: an expanse that scholar Jeremy Prestholdt describes as a kind of cloth, itself composed of 'diverse threads of social and economic relation woven together to form a discernible fabric'.<sup>21</sup> Viewing the history of abstraction through the lens of Relation, as Jungerman's practice compels us to trace points of contact, collision and convergence with such images and frameworks in mind.

The sculptures that hang suspended above the *kabra tafra* in *Visiting Deities* are constructed from dense assemblages of wooden beams, shelves and cubes. As with *Promise* and across Jungerman's practice, the faces of each element are painted in different colours and grey tones or wrapped in patterned textiles and kaolin, with lines carved through and across their surfaces.

When I first saw these works in progress, in Jungerman's Brooklyn studio, I imagined them to be barges: a fleet of seafaring vessels that traverse rivers and canals, and appear at ports bearing cargo from distant lands. A flat, vertical element runs underneath the centre line of each work, for instance, just like the keel of a ship: the fin-like member that

<sup>20</sup> Glissant, op. cit. (note 1), p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Prestholdt, 'The Fabric of the Indian Ocean World: Reflections on the Life Cycle of Cloth', in: *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures, and the Material Worlds of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

stretches from bow to stern, and guides the hull as it cuts through the waters of the sea.

The metaphor is apt: Paul Gilroy famously describes the 'ship' as a 'living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion' – the quintessential literary trope of the Black Atlantic. As objects-in-motion that pass between Europe, Africa and the Americas, ships 'immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts; tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs'.<sup>22</sup> The sea is an 'interaction-based arena', to borrow the words of Pedro Machado and Sarah Fee, and serves as the perfect conduit of Relation.<sup>23</sup>

The sea has nurtured multiple histories of art and abstraction. Stowed in the bellies of imperial ships, for instance, pillaged and looted African artefacts reached the shores of Europe at the start of the twentieth century. Before long, Parisians could examine works of African art at ethnographic museums like the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and in flea markets across the cosmopolitan capital. Among their admirers were Picasso, Braque and others who became captivated by the possibilities for abstracting the human figure: the zigzagging forms of Baule sculptures from Côte d'Ivoire, or the protruding, cylindrical eyes of Grebo masks.

In traditional accounts of art history, African art plays a supporting role to the artistic genius and masterful innovation of modern artists. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., former director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, upheld the Cubist cohort as protagonists in the evolution of abstraction, writing in 1936 that they 'had grown bored with painting facts, and by a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance', as if *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* had been the product of nothing more than a bout of ennui.<sup>24</sup> In his diagram networking flows of abstraction in twentieth-century art, Barr includes foreign influences such as 'Japanese Prints', 'Near Eastern Art' and 'Negro Sculpture', yet positions them as external, static and peripheral. These terms are placed within red borders, and their arrows flow in one direction, towards the European masters.<sup>25</sup> While the Cubists' so-called primitivist phase was relatively short-lived, one might imagine that a kind of *présence africaine* – a 'subterranean trace of the voice of Africa', as Stuart Hall puts it – has lingered throughout all experimentation in abstraction that would follow.<sup>26</sup> Jungerman imagines the evolution

22 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 4.

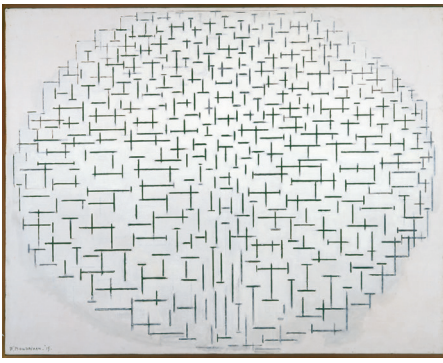
23 Pedro Machado and Sarah Fee, 'Introduction: The Ocean's Many Cloth Pathways', in: *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures, and the Material Worlds of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* op. cit. (note 21).

24 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. 'Cubism and Abstract Art', Preface on the inside flap of *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: MoMA, 1936).

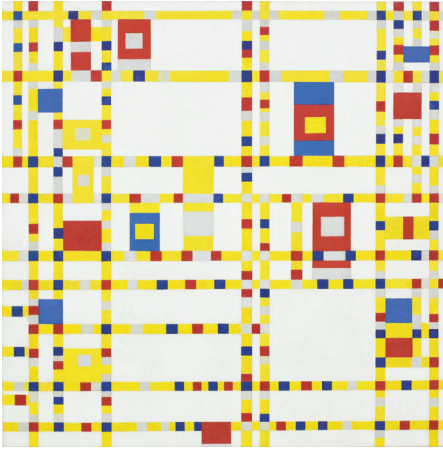
25 *Ibid.*

26 Stuart Hall, 'Creolité and the Process of Creolization', in: *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 16.





Piet Mondrian, *Pier and Ocean (Composition No. 10)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 85 × 108 cm, collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo



Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1943, oil on canvas, 127 × 127 cm, collection Museum of Modern Art, New York

of visual culture in migration, as the ‘wind carries seeds to new ground’, yet one cannot predict how that seed will blossom or adapt in new environments.

In another milestone within the canon of abstraction, we find Piet Mondrian staring out towards the sea from Domburg, on the Dutch Zeeland coast, as the First World War rages around him. Throughout the period of 1914 to 1919, he painted the sea as an increasingly abstracted field of horizontal and vertical lines – crossed, elongated or isolated in space – that are rhythmically interspersed across circular and oval compositions. Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean* series and related works are among the last to contain remnants of Analytic Cubism. The rounded vignette of his pictorial field, the muted colour palette and his placement of linear forms within a gridded structure all attest to his exposure to paintings by Picasso and Braque, on view in 1911 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. When he saw their work, he promptly relocated to Paris. But in 1914, the artist’s father fell ill, and he returned to his hometown of Arnhem for a brief, weekend visit. Suddenly, Belgium was invaded by German forces, the war broke out, and trains stopped running to Paris. He remained in the Netherlands for four years.

At first, the artist dutifully rendered familiar scenes – trees, church façades, pastoral landscapes – in the curving, fragmented forms of cubism, but it was the sea that

ultimately led him to pure abstraction. As Michel Seuphor comments, ‘even though the sea was unchanged ... it suddenly appeared’.<sup>27</sup> For Yve-Alain Bois, both the sea and the starry sky above it are the closest things to a real ‘all over’ composition, a kind of abstraction *in* nature, rather than *of* nature.<sup>28</sup> The only allusion to nature in these works is the horizon, an illusory line that would symbolize, for Mondrian, the idea of ‘repose’ or positions between forms in space. In his 1919 ‘essay in Trialogue form’, published a decade before the development of his mature, neoplastic style, he explains his use of geometric abstraction through the prescient lens of Relation:

Thus everything that is regarded as a thing in itself, as *one*, must be viewed ... as a *complex*. Conversely, everything in a complex must be seen as *part* of that complex: as part of a *whole*. Then we will always see *relationships* and we will always know one thing through the other.<sup>29</sup>

Years later, at the onset of the Second World War, Mondrian crossed the Atlantic and moved to New York. His *Boogie Woogie* paintings transcribe the rhythm and energy of the modern city – the rising verticals of its skyscrapers, the grids of city blocks, and most of all, the syncopation of jazz, through which the legacy of the Middle Passage, the *présence africaine* in the New World is most assertively expressed. With their rhythmic accents in paint and textile, the surfaces of Jungerman’s *Promise* and *Visiting Deities* resemble Mondrian’s final works most of all. Created during a period spent in New York, these pieces echo the city’s energetic and discordant streets. They, too, take on the energy of the island

27 Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960), p. 114.

28 Yve-Alain Bois, ‘The Iconoclast’, in: *Piet Mondrian: 1872–1944* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1994), p. 319.

29 Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: An Essay in Trialogue Form, 1919–1920*, trans. Martin S. James (New York: George Braziller, 1995), p. 26.

city: a mass of clashing fragments, many voices, blending in against the backlit scene of steel bridges and skyscrapers. The *Boogie Woogie* paintings come to feel like a kind of return, or reconnection, that reaches across the chaotic field of Relation.

## OPACITY, SILENCE AND THE SACRED

For Krauss, the neoplastic grid was revolutionary in that it upends the very foundation of traditional art: the relationship between viewer and artwork, reality and illusion. The grid abolished the techniques of Transparency, to use Glissant's terminology, that had previously linked art to structures of social and political power, especially between the Renaissance and the Age of Imperialism: Cartesian perspective, the Panorama, Orientalism, or the Picturesque Landscape are all examples through which viewers could attain a sense of *possession* through looking at images. Instead, abstraction made possible 'a mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself. It is a mode of repetition, the content of which is the conventional nature of art itself'.<sup>30</sup> Krauss illustrates her assertion by enlisting the metaphor of the windowpane as a kind of 'found' grid. The material of glass transmits light, but also reflects it; it absorbs our gaze, but also arrests it, reminding us of its own materiality. 'Flowing and freezing', she writes, '*glace* in French means glass, mirror and ice: transparency, opacity, and water'.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Sarat Maharaj writes similarly of textile art, and employs Derrida's notion of the 'undecidable' to describe the medium's positioning between craft and fine art, abstraction and narrative, materiality and image. Writing on a work by Duchamp that integrated textile with painting – not unlike Jungerman's own installations – Maharaj muses: 'We are called to look on [cloth] as a painting, but without paint or pigment. Cloth stages the syntax of its own forms and textures'.<sup>32</sup>

Modernist grids and textiles like *pangi* fabrics, therefore, are each poised to eradicate the distance between art and life. Rather than merely juxtaposing Western and non-Western aesthetics – a gesture reflective of theories of 'hybridity' which assume the combination of two discrete sources – works such as *Fodu Composition* and the table of *Visiting Deities* embed and overlay these disparate geometries into one another – *kente*, *pangi*, plantation landscapes, and De Stijl compositions – spreading and enmeshing them across the same tactile surface. The modernist grid becomes a structure not of distance, separation or taxonomy, but rather of Relation, in much the same way that Ananse's web informs the spinning of warp and weft.

30 Krauss, op. cit. (note 17), p. 61.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

32 Sarat Maharaj, 'Textile Art – Who Are You?', in: *Weaving & We, 2016 Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art*, ed. Si Shunwei and Shi Hui, Hangzhou, 2016, p. 46.

33 Krauss, op. cit. (note 17), p. 50.

34 Piero Manzoni, 'Free Dimension' (1960), as quoted in: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp.723–24.

35 van den Boogaard, op. cit. (note 2).

Through this lens, we might reimagine Krauss's assertion that the grid signals modernism's 'will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse' through the lens of Opacity, of the tacit and inherited forms of collective knowledge often embedded in non-Western abstraction.<sup>33</sup> This will to silence would reverberate for decades in postmodernism. When Stanley Brouwn arrived in Amsterdam, he met artists of the Zero movement, whose work often comprised monochromatic fields of colour or textured surfaces bearing authorless marks. In 1960, Zero-affiliated artist Piero Manzoni described his *achromes*, a series of kaolin-soaked canvases, as 'a completely white surface (or better still, an absolutely colourless or neutral one) beyond all pictorial phenomena, all intervention alien to the sense of the surface'.

A white surface which is neither a polar landscape, nor an evocative or beautiful subject, nor even a sensation, a symbol for anything else: but a white surface which is nothing other than a colourless surface, or even a surface which quite simply 'is'.<sup>34</sup>

This sense of *presence* in the absence of signification may have inspired Brouwn's own desire for invisibility. Opacity is a means of transcending the strictures of identity, transparency and hyper-visibility. When van den Boogaard writes of the blank page that stands for Brouwn's identity, he echoes the charge of Manzoni's utopian poetics: 'A blank is something that is empty', he writes, 'something not filled in'.

Blank can mean everything and it can mean nothing at the same time. Blankness can stand for infinity, for every possibility. Blankness leaves everything open and admits everything. Blankness also stands for a refusal to speak.<sup>35</sup>

Jungerman's own use of kaolin and textile recovers the often-overlooked connections between abstraction, opacity and spirituality; Krauss even refers to this as the 'shame' of modernism. While asserting a formalist





Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958, china clay on canvas, 100.3 x 100.3 cm, collection Tate Modern, London

theory of the grid as a self-reflexive mapping of the painted surface, she admits that Mondrian (and Malevich) 'are not discussing canvas or pigment or graphite or any other form of matter. They are talking about Being or Mind or Spirit'.<sup>36</sup> The grid's demonstration of both centripetal (absorbing) and centrifugal (reflecting) forces, in other words, is a function of its inherent mysticism, its 'mythic power' as a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms. Modernist art 'makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic)', she writes, 'while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)'.<sup>37</sup>

Manzoni may not have known of kaolin's significance in African and Afro-Atlantic spiritual and aesthetic traditions, but the sensation that he sought through its pristine materiality is not misplaced. Kaolin is most often utilized as a kind of mask, whether applied to the body, a *minkisi* or a work of art. Likewise, cloth, as Maharaj muses, 'is all even as it is nothing'. Each carries an inherent capacity to signify through silence, and each is associated with the invisible: the ancestral realm, the world of the dead, the shame of mysticism in modern art.

One of the most important materials in Jungerman's work seems, also, to be silent or to disappear. He has often saved bottles of water collected from the rivers that he has lived nearby: the Amstel of the Netherlands, the Hudson of New York, the Cottica of Suriname. Jungerman integrates these waters into *Visiting Deities*. The container at the base of the installation references a dried-up riverbed, a material that implies, through its absence, the water that might swell and flow across its sands. Water transforms dry kaolin powder into the slip that masks his *kabra tafra*. It is the invisible, immeasurable pulse that breathes life into his works. Water – a conduit of Relation, an abyss, an abstraction – speaks volumes about place.

<sup>36</sup> Krauss, op. cit. (note 17), p. 52.  
<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.







