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International Journal of Creative Multimedia

Mondrian in Action! *Internet Art Built Using the VR Technology*

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Abstract

Western aesthetic is built on empiricism that severs the unification of reality and metaphysics of ancient times. This restricts knowledge to the world of senses consequently shaping our modern way of operating in the world that tends to objectify and separates the world from the self. In doing so, the sense of 'I' enforces a viewer to externalize the world. However, with experiential technologies such as VR, this external, objectified world collapses as the viewer becomes immersed in a particular, virtual environment – overcoming the limitation of physicality by being engrossed in information as an extension of self. This paper argues such experience is reflective of an epistemology coming from Eastern cultures and philosophy. Specifically, by examining an early internet art build on VR technology called 'Mondrian in Action!' the article critiques the idea of High Art to resist secular fence of knowledge that marginalize other ways of experiencing the world.

Keywords Epistemology; Virtual reality; Internet art; Immersive environment

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Introduction

“The Great Malaysian Landscape” is an artwork by Redza Piyadasa that was produced in 1972. Through this work, we can observe Piyadasa’s criticality when it comes to the context in which art is produced, defined and valued. Yap Sau Bin clearly explains this posture; “This is a succession of propositions, of unveiling the myth in painting, in sculptural forms, the structures of art objects and leading to the investigation of the cultural and social context of the production of art.” (Yap et al., 2007). Through art, Piyadasa was able to critique Malaysian art practice to rework Malaysian identity. This was achieved by emulating the Eastern philosophies, simultaneously reflecting on himself as a Malaysian artist as “...the intention of articulating an eastern/localized aesthetic as an artistic practice” (Yap et al., 2007). Recognizing the rapidly inflating discourse on postmodernism, Piyadasa realizes that the canonical narratives such as historiography of art were no longer restricted by a single stylistic taxonomy (Sitharan, 2009). Instead, it should welcome the heterogeneity in articulation hinged upon the specificity and context of art production. Piyadasa’s approach is not new, and to some extent such posture was articulated by David Craven as he explains “...if art history can no longer periodize... cultures by stylistic categories... [the] discipline nevertheless must deal critically with the ‘visual languages’ and discourses of nation-states and national institutions... suggesting a replacement of traditional art historical periodization of style with a sense of the visual languages of nations” (Craven, 2002).

By investigating the items that surround the painting, such as the label, signature, textured surface, wooden frame, nail to hang the work, etc., Piyadasa highlights the manner in which “The Great Malaysian Landscape.” is presented (Sitharan, 2009). Such materials, or elements that surround the work construct a peculiar mode of presentation that comes from the Western ideology of art and aesthetic study, an ideology injected into Malaysian culture, art and society in general. Indeed, it is due to this artificial assertion that we see alienation between the art and the Malaysian society today (Ismail, 1997). The effect of this alienation is clearly demonstrated by the number of visitors to these institutions. This claim is supported by the writing of Rahah Haji Hasan as he elaborates about Sarawak Museum “To date however, the natural history museum that is going to celebrate its 120 years of existence has revealed that there is a decrease in interest and attention from the general public and international visitors towards its exhibitions” (Hasan, 2016). Along with the efforts of modernization, the National Art Gallery was established for the development and collection of the country’s visual art, and custodian of National Heritage. Adopted from the West, the concept of institutionalized art is a by-product of secularism that replaces asceticism with rationalism (Duncan, 2010). The purpose for institutionalizing art is to

connect secular values that could potentially usher local artworks into the global art discourse. This is achieved by adopting “a feasible philosophy and device and organizational structure...now standard in developed countries as well as in some developing countries” (Zain, 1995).

The necessity of these institutions to advocate and sustain Malaysian art scene is not in question here, especially as Malaysia is to embrace the globalized art market. However, it is also crucial to understand the origin of such institution to fully grasp its function and existence amidst our society today. This brings us back to the Enlightenment and Renaissance when the shift in epistemology happens as to how art historian, Coomaraswamy puts it; “the Renaissance gave rise to an ‘extroversion of human consciousness’” (Coomaraswamy, 1934). Hence, the emergence of rational reflection, seeing the world as the product of sensory perception and rationalism whereby art to deal with pure aesthetic contemplation. The famous Anthropologist, Alfred Gell explains “We have to recognize that the aesthetic attitude is a specific historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of the Western science, and that it has no applicability to civilizations, which have not internalized the Enlightenment as we have” (Gell, 2013). Piyadasa was aware that the notion of art practiced in Malaysia originates from the religious crisis of the West as he explains “Clearly, the link with a traditional culture is all but severed today as far as the plastic arts are concerned. What with 20th century scientific and psychological advancements, the serious Asian modernists have been left with little choice but to lean heavily on a modern art tradition that has its origin in the western scientific and intellectual climate” (Piyadasa & Esa, 1974). This is acutely reflected in “The Great Malaysian Landscape” as the very notion of art is accentuated by pointing at mundane elements of presentation which forces the viewer to ponder the ways in which art is defined. Such way of understanding art is not natural to the context of Malaysian culture.

Mondrian in Action!

“Mondrian in Action!” a VRML artwork that was created by Ling Siew Woei in 1997 and was later enhanced in 2002. It was exhibited in local and international exhibitions during the late nineties as the internet was becoming widely accessible to the larger public. The work was perceived to be deconstructing the ideals of modernism by extending, or rather extruding a 2D high art into an interactive 3D objects that could rotate, pan, zoom in and out as per the

discretion of the viewer ((Rajah, 1999). This paper revisits this artwork 20 years later to reconsideration the critique that the work was attempting to make during the early years of VR technology as we are exposed to the promises of metaverse in our contemporary culture (Ball, 2022). “Mondrian in Action!” was an attempt to negate the discourse in aesthetics that stems from the Western viewpoint that have come to dominate all discussion on art and its value. Thereupon the artwork demanded an alternative theory and philosophy of art, one that can better accommodate the cultural identity of Malaysia and arguably a non-western frame of reference. Picking from this proposition, the aim here is to propose a modest reciprocity between “Mondrian in Action!” and certain inclination coming from traditional and theological paradigm that are outside the enlightenment worldview.

In “Mondrian in Action!” Ling Siew Woei adopted a work by abstractionist artist Piet Mondrian entitled “Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue” 1921 (fig.1) to be developed as an interactive sculpture. This perhaps could be argued as following the steps of Reza Piyadasa by emulating the strategy found in “The Great Malaysian Landscape”. The artwork appropriates a prominent work by Piet Mondrian to critique the social value derive from the cultural currency of privileged viewing as fine art encounters the classification of society. When Piet Mondrian’s artwork was presented in a museum, it only serves for the purpose of viewing pleasure, specifically the pleasure of privileged few (Hemingway & Vaughan, 1998). This is achieved when the conventional museum or gallery settings stress the segregation and classification of society by maintaining a distance, or gap between the artwork and the viewer. Such act is enforced with the sign ‘Please Do Not Touch’. In doing so, the museum establishes certain work of art to be distinctively different to popular art by accommodating to certain norms of ritualistic reverence in exhibition practice that dictates the commodified value for that particular artwork and its purpose for certain class of society. In “Mondrian in action!” Ling transformed “Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue” into a 3-Dimensional digital sculpture, and placed it on the web, thus enabling access and interaction by anyone who has access to the internet. Viewers are prompted to interact with the piece due to the contextual presence of the web; established for its browsing activities and interactive information norms.

“Mondrian in Action!” is a 3-dimensional digital artwork that invites navigation, exploration and interaction from a viewer using the GLView software. While initially when it loads the work might appear like a digital image of Piet Mondrain’s painting on the screen (fig.1),

however the image quickly transforms into a digital object as a viewer navigates the virtual space of the GLView. This interaction continuously deconstructs the illusion of space, perspective and light as one begins to play with the artwork (fig.2). When a viewer pans, rotate or walk through the scene or even changes the setting within the application, the digital objects become jagged and appear with dissimilar illumination. Meanwhile when one zooms in, the objects become pixelated (fig.3) and could even possibly appear in a form of wireframe (fig.4). Undeniably these interactions, appearance of 3D objects on screen, its pixelation, wireframe and even simple movement within the virtual space of GLView on the web is extremely crude when compared to the VR technology we have today. However, for the work to be properly evaluated, it must be understood within the context of its time – the late nineties when the internet technology was in its infant stage as it was just becoming accessible to the public. During that moment, interactions and visualizations of “Mondrian in Action!” were perceived to be cutting edge, sophisticated and radical. Crucially, as the focus of the paper dictates, the theoretical critique made by the “Mondrian in Action!” is deemed relevant today, even though its technological foundation is antiquated by today’s standard.

Following this theoretical and contextual premise, the paper argues that the original artwork of Piet Mondrian “Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue” was deconstructed by “Mondrian is in Action!” through actions such as rotated, pan and zoom in the VRML model. This transforms the viewers into an artist themselves as the boundaries between the author and audience is deconstructed with the new found accessible, interaction and importantly the removal of restriction that enables an engagement with the artwork beyond mere viewing pleasure. The viewer becomes a creator by interacting with the artwork, thus manifesting a new and fresh dimension to the idea of experiencing art. This is made possible through the Web and VR technology as “Mondrian in Action” would not be any different from the original painting of Piet Mondrian if a viewer does not interact. The connectivity of the Web enables for mass access and participation meanwhile interactivity facilitates the encounter between the viewer and the artwork. The convergences of several media elements such as images, animation and text sanctions the liberation of “Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue” from a canvas painting to a lively, vibrant piece of art form.

The Correlation

According to Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib, the worldview of Islam is not merely the mind's perception of the external world experienced through our senses - the empirical that shapes our notion of history, social, political and cultural groundings. He explains that it is inaccurate to refer to the worldview of Islam as a *nazrat al-islam li al-kawn*. Islam, as far as its worldview is concerned is contrary to *nazrat* for it does not rely primarily on speculation derived from observations coming from sensible experience such as what is perceivable by humans, nor is it limited to *kawan*, which is the world of sensible experience, the world of created things (Al-Attas, 2014). Rather, the Islamic view of knowledge incorporates life and existence, blurring the boundaries between the observer and the observed. Dr. Syed Muhammad elaborates on the way Islamic theologians, philosophers and metaphysicians operate, "They combined in their investigations, and at the same time in their persons, the empirical and the rational, the deductive and the inductive methods and affirmed no dichotomy between the subjective and the objective, so that they all affected what I would call the *tawhid* method of knowledge" (Naquib al-Attas, 2007).

This description of Islamic worldview is deliberately placed here to recognize the way in which reality is theorized in certain way to the point of normalization that it perpetuates discourses of exclusion and foreclosure to other, cosmological forms of articulation (Rajah, 1999). This perhaps becomes obvious as the description above might seem to be at odd against the way in which contemporary realm of secular knowledge operates; in which the scientific discipline reaffirms an objectified view of reality thus demanding us to safeguard materials as essential cultural memory for the future. One such material is the work of art as the representation of lucid rationality that embodies aesthetic experience. We can take Piet Mondrian's work "Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue" as an excellent example of this. Ensuing such thought, artworks that create reality especially through technological means are also theorized in similar, restrictive way that supposedly signifies a progressive, technological imperative – a very technocratic view of technology and art (Friedman, 2019). It is this constrain that is being articulated by Piyadasa and rebuked by Ling through the creation of "Mondrian in Action!". As the critique in Ling's work allows for consideration of other means of articulating reality to frame the work of art – embracing the call, the author modestly attempt to inscribe the thoughts of Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib on Islamic philosophy to theorize "Mondrian in Action!".

In particular, apprehending the blurring between the observer and observed is being manifested when a viewer interacts with artwork. This dimension of the artwork could possibly align to the Islamic worldview following the words by Dr.Syed Muhammad “What is meant by ‘worldview’, according to the perspective of Islam, is then the vision of reality and truth that appears before our mind’s eye revealing what existence is all about; for it is the world of existence in its totality that Islam is projecting” (Naquib al-Attas, 2007). It is a view without the existence of “I” as how the mind of the observer becomes one with the reality being observed. Clearly this philosophical tenet could possibly be used to explain what the artwork is trying to do. Just as how Reza Piyadasa highlights the existence of Western Centric framework amidst the Malaysian art landscape through “The Great Malaysian Landscape”; “Mondrian in Action!” could possibly draw the parallel between New Media theory and local practice to capsize the presentation mode of a Western centric art using the technology for a virtual, interactive version of the work.

Whereas thinking about the works of Piet Mondrian, the artist is portrayed as a High Modernist producing works that heavily depended on the empirical readings. The constant use of basic form and colour to paint on canvas is deemed as highlighting the basic structures of nature and the surrounding reality. Advance technologies of today are used to deepen our knowledge and declare his works as a precocious declaration of Modernism. This is done through “instruments of traditional scholarship (texts, comparative visual material and connoisseurship) supplemented by a range of scientific procedures, including microscopic scanning, X-ray photography and digital imaging. Routinely applied to premodern painting, these investigatory tools give literal, physical access, subcutaneous and invasive, to Mondrian's work” (Cotter, 2001). Furthermore, Clement Greenberg affiliated Piet Mondrian’s work with Cubism, thus placing him along with the grand narrative history of Western modern art. In his influential essay, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting" Greenberg states that Mondrian's greatness was founded even when his work was wholly abstract art (Greenberg, 1992). As a pure abstractionist artist, Piet Mondrian produced works based on materials and painterly gesture that involve form, colour and texture. His works are aesthetic expressed as a conveyance for metaphor and symbol that are difficult for some people to understand including art critics.

This surely made the contemplation of the work difficult for an audience, concurrently enforcing the segregation of the observer from the artwork. Indeed, Piet Mondrian’s work is a perfect example of a High Modernist art, thus influencing the choice of artwork for the VR

appropriation by Ling. The intention is to challenge the fundamental assumptions about artistic production of the modernist era, as well as the relationship between the author and audience by referring to a local, cultural worldview. This is the crux of “Mondrian in Action!” as Western modernist ideas are strongly rooted within the Malaysian artistic practice, consequently forming a division between the art and society. What has happened is that “the production of cultural objects that connotes ethnicity and identity (modern and modernized pre-modern) is increasingly becoming a form of myth factory...meaning produced by such “modern myth factory” are in reality not natural, but can be changed according to the desire to control and dominate docile cultures (to gain consensus)” (Saidon, 2006).

Epilogue

Reflecting upon “the Great Malaysian Landscape”, it is no doubt that Piyadasa had a very strong stance against the Western understanding of art and aesthetics. This is a necessary posture to weaken certain normality in understanding our world and ourselves. More than this, it also enables marginalized knowledge that are inherently local to be brought to the center stage in order to address issues, questions and curiosities that are pertinent to our local conditions. However, it must also be noted that the critique and questioning of the western aesthetics was done purely through the method of historicizing and theorizing inherited from the West - in particular the way in which art is theorized through the discipline of art history. This is also true of the way in which this paper is written, the arguments made by the authors and the way in which this paper is accepted based on certain merit of ‘objectified’ evaluation, reviewing and credential. It is explicitly acknowledged here to point out a pertinent point - the application of Islamic philosophy is an attempt by one of the authors to demonstrate the mailability of ideas, theories and concepts that could potentially be activated given the right language is used to articulate an argument. In this case, Ling’s work was used to demonstrate the possibility of enacting certain philosophy by the way of criticism.

By no means what is being proposed here is not to reduce nor undermine the complexity and relevancy of Islamic philosophy, however the limitation of the author’s worldview, and embodied experience in enacting a lifestyle reflective of Islamic teaching must openly be acknowledge to do justice to the rapport given to support the arguments presented here. This exercise also reveals a concept, philosophy or even artwork could be hijacked/re- appropriated to

distort the discourse in ways that privilege certain views and perpetuates certain ideas at the cost of other ways of articulating. By saying this, we return to the labeled High Art echoes of Piet Mondrian's work, where a perpendicular clarity in his work could also be read as causing asceticism to look more religious than worldly by channeling "his intellectual and emotional energies into artmaking, which he regarded as an intellectual and spiritual enterprise, one in which existential questions -- all the whys and wheres, the yeses and noes of life are acknowledged and held in balance" (Cotter, 2001). Picking from Ananda Coomaraswamy words "For naturalism is antipathetic to religious art of all kinds, to art of any kind, and the spirit of the traditional Islamic interdiction of the representation of living forms is not really infringed by such ideal representations as are met with in Indian or Christian iconography, or Chinese animal painting" (Coomaraswamy, 1934). At the end, what comes out of "Mondrian in Action!" is more of a gesture than a critique of a unification that has always been there within the labeled Eastern and Western part of the world.

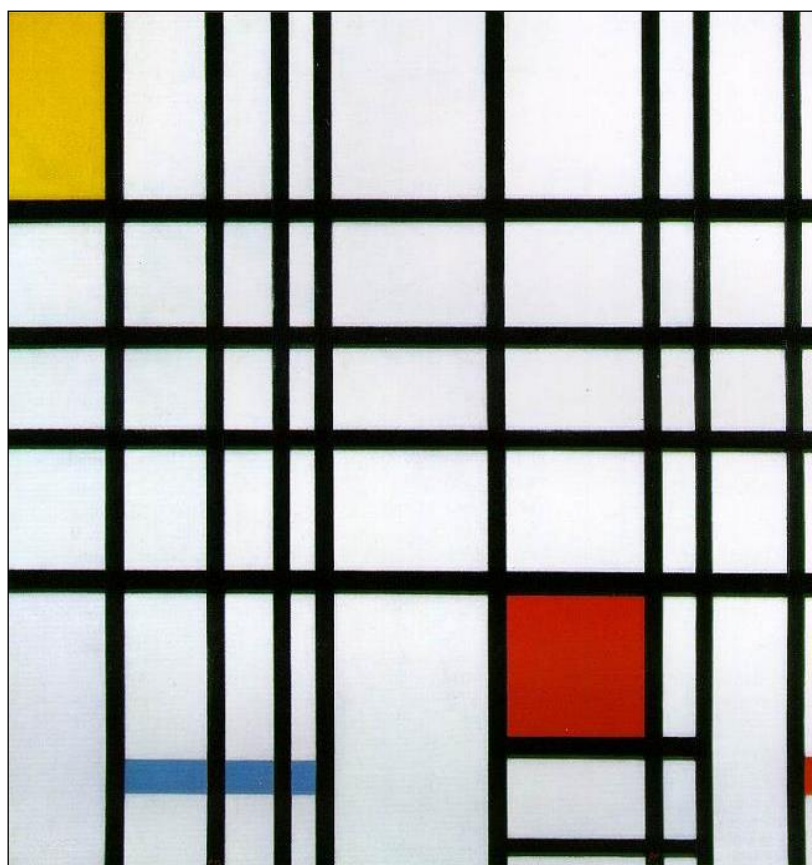


Figure 1 "Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue" by Piet Mondrain
(Courtesy of Tate Britain)

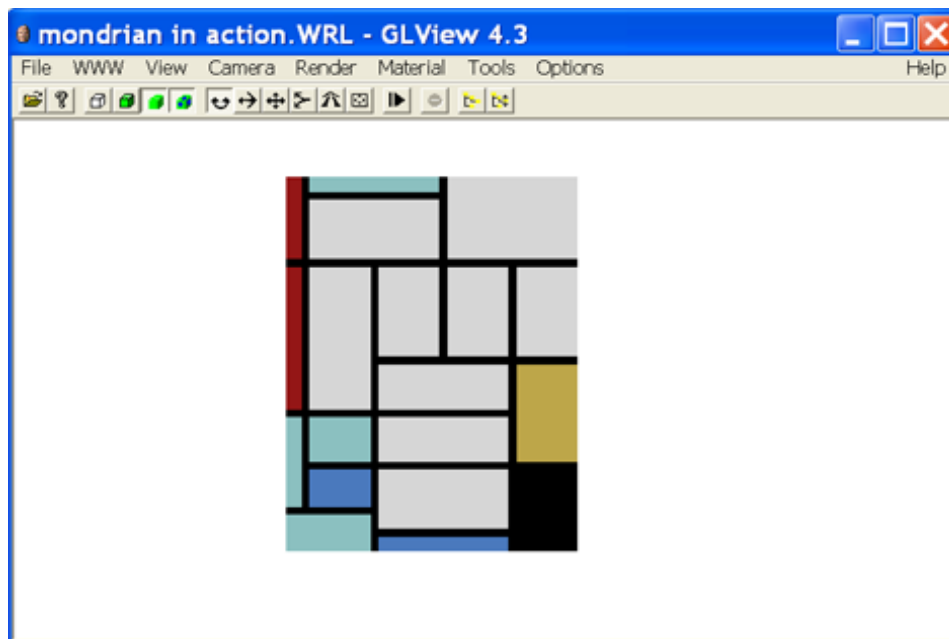


Figure 2 “Mondrian in Action!” in its Original Position
(Courtesy of the Artist)

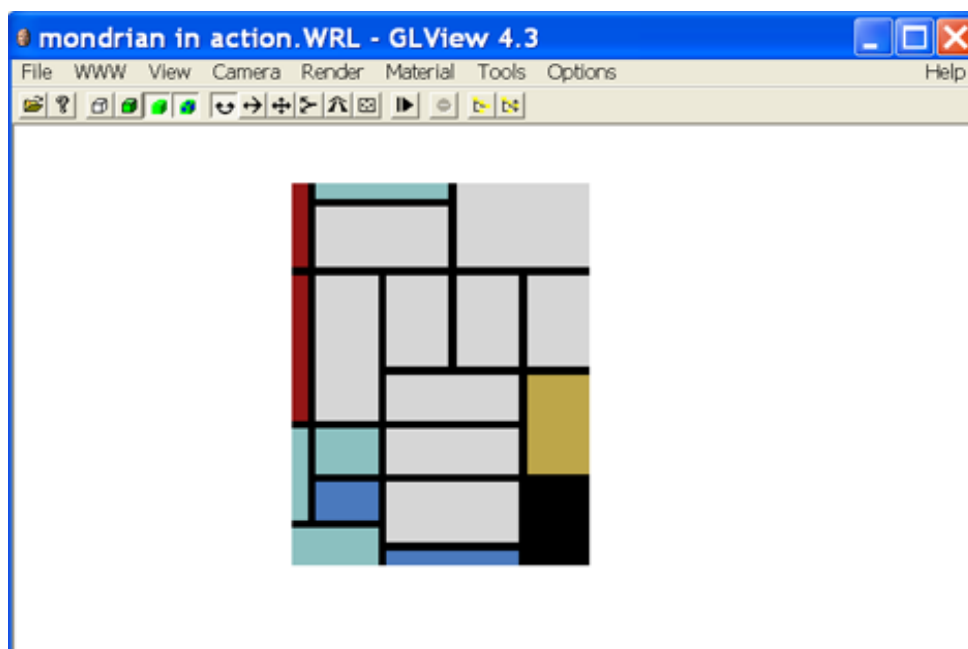


Figure 3 Mondrian in Action! In Full Shading after Viewers' Interaction
(Courtesy of the Artist)

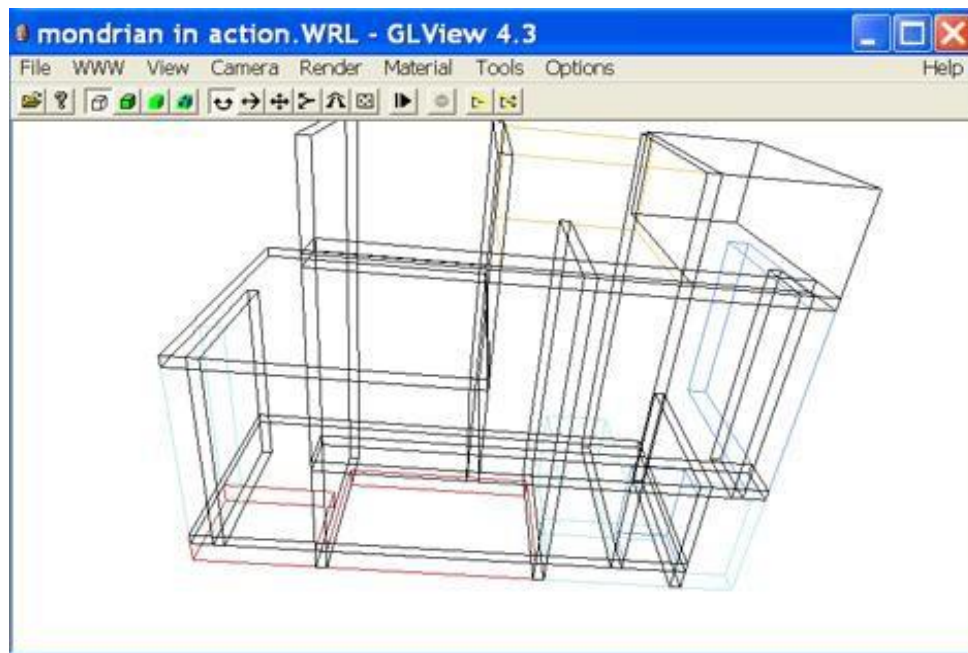


Figure 4 Mondrian in Action! In Wireframe after Viewers' Interaction
(Courtesy of the Artist)

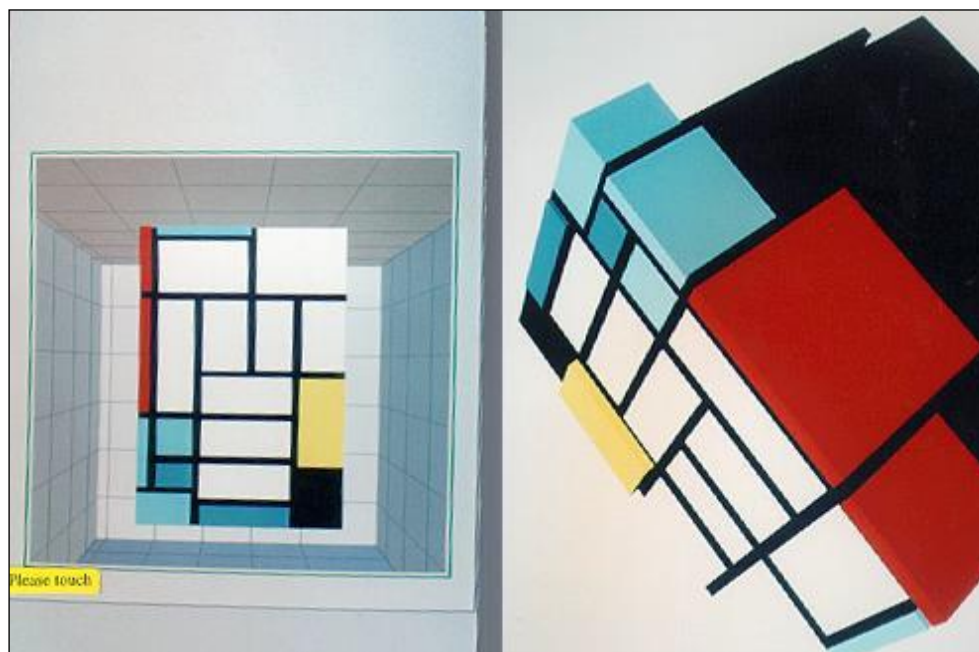


Figure 5 Mondrian in Action! In 2D and 3D View
(Courtesy of the Artist)

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