

REGARDING
MAROON SPECTRES,
WINTI AESTHETICS
AND AFROPEAN
FUGITIVITIES IN THE
POST-MONDRIAN/
THELONIOUS MONAS-
TIC ART PRACTICE
OF REMY JUNGGERMAN

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There's a spectre haunting Mondrian and his name is Remy Jungerman. Per Ralph Ellison and Jungerman's countryman Stanley Brown, he is an Invisible Man from Suriname. Per his own proactive global citizenship, Jungerman is also an adopted (and highly adaptive) son of Amsterdam and Bushwick Brooklyn. So neither a motherless child nor an orphan of the postcolonial storm but an artist of many tangled pan-African roots, Afropean infusions and optional, chosen uprootings. Jungerman is an artist and a globalist in pursuit of a balanced and triangular exchange of several diasporic *ars poeticas*. He is also a seeker of the transnational bridges that link the Harlem of Thelonious Monk and Romare Bearden (see ill. p. 68), the Netherlands of Vermeer, Mondrian and Stanley Brown, and the Arawak ghosts and Maroon nations of his native Suriname. Unlike Jungerman, Stanley Brown designed himself to be the most ironic marker of Afro-Dutch art world presence imaginable: the best-known Brown man of African and Afro-Caribbean descent in the history of modern Dutch art and the one who dedicated himself (per the Dutch saying) 'to dazzle by his absence'. The performative aggression and trickster legerdemain operating behind Brown's self-negating gestures have now accrued mythic status. They actually belie the notion that he wanted to be forgotten. Too much of a Brown paper trail exists – there's even a published apocalyptic manifesto akin to the writings of Sun Ra, the godfather

of Afrofuturism. Taken together they tell us that going unremembered was hardly in Brown's long-game plan. That an artistic homeboy descendant like Jungerman enfolded Brown into his sculptural works using a sly mojo-trickster hand is a reclamation Brown might have demurely approved (see ill. p. 69).

So let us begin now to reimagine Jungerman as representing a decentred Dutch, diasporically informed but wholly inclusive Dutch Caribbean-Brooklyn worldview – one as visionary and Afropolitan as that of Mondrian himself. The same Mondrian who not only contributed to the creation of the De Stijl movement but also stated his belief in the 1927 essay 'Jazz and Neoplastic' that jazz and neoplastic painting were, at present, the only manifestations of 'the new life' in the midst of a culture of form in decline. Both, Mondrian insisted, are 'highly revolutionary phenomena, they are destructively constructive. They do not destroy the actual content of form but rather deepen form only in order to elevate it to a new order. They break the bonds of 'form as individuality in order to make possible a universal unity'. The rhythm-and-blues continuum of African American music has always embraced the destruction and recreation of paradigmatic popular forms at the peak of their commercial success. Decades before the Black Arts Movement, Mondrian presciently understood that the convergence of the social, aesthetic and spiritual energies he sought to unleash through painting were already harmonized in Black music and transforming the sacred/profane binary in modern life.

In the above essay, Mondrian venerated the bar rooms where the Charleston was shimmied as 'cathedrals', with their shelves of liquor bottles akin to altar candles, irreverently declaring that the jazz dance music he heard there had 'more depth than the Psalms'.



Remy Jungerman, *Promise IV*, 2018–19, painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin, yarn and nails, 134 × 136 × 489 cm



Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, 1964, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, mounted on fibreboard, 126.5 × 158 cm, collection Tate Modern, London, long-term loan Tate Americas Foundation 2017

Mondrian declared himself a 'theosophist' under the sway of Madame Blavatsky. But he knew the intersection he hoped to erect and effect on canvas between spirituality and everyday life had already been gifted to urban modernity by Black America when the Charleston and the Flapper went globally viral in the early 1920s.

In the 1960s, Beat poet Ted Joans composed a lyrical sermon which testified that 'Jazz is my religion and it alone do I dig / The jazz clubs are my houses of worship and sometimes the concert halls'. Mondrian would most likely have concurred. Mondrian's major canvases from the last two years of his life, following his emigration to America, explode his rigid framing of black lines and white space. Gotham compelled the artist to flood his last major canvases with expressionist bouquets of colour and chaos – gestures meant to unleash the democratic anarchy and radiant Africanity of 'the Big Apple'. The artist unabashedly and forthrightly pronounced his intentions by famously titling these works *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and (the unfinished) *Victory Boogie Woogie* (see ill. p. 70 top).

After hours spent labouring over his canvases, Mondrian would venture uptown from Midtown Manhattan to Harlem to roost in the legendary Minton's Playhouse: an underground improvisatory laboratory where Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk and others were seriously engaged in formulating and fomenting what was to become known as the Bebop Revolution. That revolution, which ran parallel to the secret military programme overseen by top nuclear physicists, has become known as Black American music's 'Manhattan Project'. This revolution didn't result in hydrogen bombs, *Enola Gay* and 'Little Boy' raining nuclear destruction on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but bebop – arguably the most influential art movement of the latter twentieth century.

Mondrian is said to have been particularly enamoured of Monk's playing and compositions. According to one apocryphal report, the feeling was mutual:

Curator Hans Janssen has noted that Mondrian's painting and Monk's music had a great deal in common, and speculates that they could even have talked together about structure and rhythm. Pianist Nelly van Doesburg became friendly with Monk when she stayed in New York in 1947. According to Janssen, when Monk explained his approach to timbre and dynamics to her, the musician made direct comparisons with the precision with which Mondrian placed a plane, a line or applied a color.

Statements by Mondrian and Monk certainly reveal how complimentary and mutually confident they were as fellow protean and idiosyncratic lone-wolf modernists.

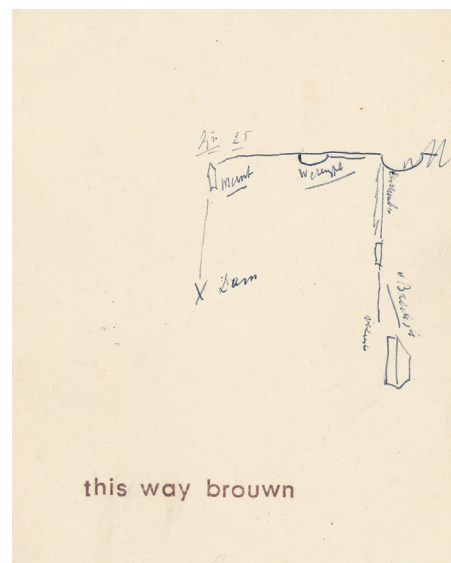
Mondrian: 'Experience was my only teacher; I knew little of the modern art movement. When I first saw the works of the Impressionists, van Gogh, van Dongen, and the Fauves, I admired it. But I had to seek the true way alone.'

Monk: 'I don't consider myself a musician who has achieved perfection and can't develop any further. But I compose my pieces with a formula that I created myself. Take a musician like John Coltrane. He is a perfect musician, who can give expression to all the possibilities of his instrument. But he seems to have difficulty expressing original ideas on it. That is why he keeps looking for ideas in exotic places. At least I don't have that problem, because, like I say, I find my inspiration in myself.'

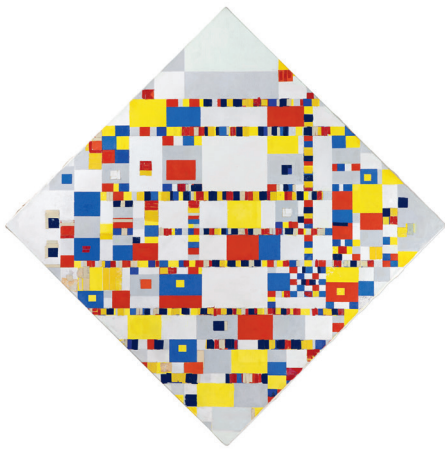
Real knows real, as we say in hip-hop kulcha, and presumably architectonic knows architectonic, constructivist knows constructivist, reductionist knows reductionist. The unintentional brotherhood of Monk and Mondrian looms over modern-day culture because of their shared idealism about the power of elemental visual and musical shapes and colours. They both rigorously composed works that were models of *self-reverential* abstraction and rhythmic intrigue. They also both came to abstraction through the funnel of disparate neo-spiritualisms: Mondrian via the pan-denominational dilettantism of Blavatsky; Monk through paying his rookie musician dues by playing in financially motivated revival tents where congregants routinely 'spoke in tongues' after being zapped by the Holy Spirit, then filled the collection plate for the privilege.

Remy Jungerman's work is also informed by a specific spiritual experience – his early childhood exposure to Winti, the dominant, hybridinous Pan-African faith indigenous to his native Suriname.

We have now thankfully reached a place in global consciousness where artists of multiple cultural heritages like Jungerman no longer need to waste



stanley broun, *this way broun*, 1962, ink (pen and stamp) on paper, 11 × 9 cm, collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, acquired with support of the BankGiro Loterij, the Mondriaan Fund and the Rembrandt Association



Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942–44, oil, tape, paper, charcoal and pencil on canvas, 178.4 × 178.4 cm, collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Loan Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands / Ministry of Education, Culture and Science



David Hammons, *Untitled (Night Train)*, 1989, glass bottles, caps, silicone, glue, and coal, 76.2 × 106.7 × 106.7 cm, collection Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of Lawrence D. 'Butch' Morris

time worrying whether the visual practices of their African diasporic birthplaces are as legitimate as the ensconced European modernists they learned about in their art-history courses at university. In fact it is difficult to imagine informed conversations today about visual modernity that do not address the mammoth impact of African sculpture, African American jazz and the energizing presence of Black popular culture (and what we'll indemnify as the mythopoeic power of Blackness itself) on the cubists, the Dadaists, the ab-ex painters, the Black Mountain Group – Cage, Johns, Cunningham, Olson, the pop artists, the minimalists, Warhol, Donald Judd, on through to revered African American visual modernists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, David Hammons (see ill. p. 70 bottom), Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall and Carrie Mae Weems.

For an Afro-Caribbean-nee-Afropean artist such as Jungerman, raised in the thriving heart of twentieth-century Winti-devoted Maroon culture, the encounter with Western modernism was one that bespoke correspondences between creative equals rather than a bow-down to European-dominated hierarchies. Among Jungerman's family and their neighbours was a deep regard for artistic technique imbued with lofty philosophical intentions derived from their Maroon and Winti *Weltanschauungen*.

At an event in Amsterdam marking the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, Jungerman exhibited a silk-screen portrait of his ancestor Captain Broos, a legendary Maroon freedom fighter (see ill. p. 71). Also attending was Jungerman's niece, Joyce Babel. Babel is extremely knowledgeable and appreciative of her people's revolutionary history – in fact, on that day she was adorned in an *Aisa*, a blue and white gridded mourning garment, in honour of her ancestors who, she knew, had died for her freedom. 'Thanks to them, I am free now', she told Jungerman.



Remy Jungerman, Captain BROOS, 2006, silkscreen, 70 × 100 cm, collection Veronsur

The area of Suriname that Captain Broos and his brother Kaliko settled in, far from the plantations of the Dutch slavers and colonizers, eventually became known as Bakabusi Nengre, 'the Blacks behind the Forest'. Incubated in those liberated zones within the Surinamese bush was an autochthonic tradition of grand visuality and art-making that persisted into the later twentieth-century Suriname of Jungerman's boyhood.

The wealth of resplendent Winti/Maroon art Jungerman grew up with – architectural, patterned and quilted textile and culinary object-making – compares favourably with that of any West-African society whose work we know from museums, monographs and scholarship.

Where the word winti came from must yet be looked into; but besides the common meaning of 'air in motion', – derived from the Germanic 'wind' – it also signifies all activities of the Afro-Surinamers resulting from and determined by their religious experiences as a practical expression of these experiences.

The word Winti is also specifically used to express the idea of a Universal Entity or Spirit. The aforementioned activities consist of rituals, beliefs and practices all tapped from a common African heritage.

The spiritual life is encompassed by the Power of Anana from four angles. These four-ways are further subdivided into various units each with its own specific functions and corresponding proper names.

According to the Winti belief disharmony between the akara and each one of these four-ways may result into a wrong/undesirable turn in life. A confessor of Winti may, in seeking spiritual wellbeing, turn to any one of these four-ways (or their subdivisions) in order to look for solutions for problems in life.¹

Jungerman being raised in Suriname means he matriculated in a place whose cultural definition was hard-fought and mystically wrought by Maroons – Black people of multiethnic African origins who had organized and liberated themselves from captivity before the end of the slave trade: the global trafficking in Africans which the Netherlands were the last nation in Europe to abolish. The savagery of the Dutch trade was as prolific as any of their European counterparts:

Between 1596 and 1829, the Dutch transported about half a million Africans across the Atlantic. Large numbers were taken to the small islands of Curaçao and St. Eustatius, in the Caribbean. Most of the Africans who landed there, however, were subsequently trans-shipped to Spanish colonies. The two islands were thus staging posts for the re-sale and dispatch of Africans who survived the Middle Passage to other American slave colonies. The Dutch also shipped about a half million Africans to their settlements in Dutch Guiana, notably Suriname, where they worked primarily on sugar plantations. In the eighteenth century, nearly one-in-ten enslaved people in Suriname had fled their brutal working conditions to establish or join Maroon communities, in attempts to live beyond the control of the surrounding slave society.²

¹ From *An African American Religion Called Went* by Stichting Tata Kwasi, Ku Tata Tinsensi Foundation, Paramaribo, Suriname.
² See: <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0145>.

The Maroons of Suriname not only escaped slavery but organized attacks against the Dutch and established free, self-governing societies in the nineteenth century. To an extent not paralleled anywhere else in the Afro-Caribbean or African American world, the Surinamese Maroons maintained control over their communities' architectural and visual expression. As seen in Sally and Richard Price's essential volume *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest* (1980), Jungerman grew up in a Black society where indigenous visual aesthetics and production not only flourished but were integral to the Maroons' ethnic identity and everyday social relations.

Before the turn of the century, they were also creating magnificently patterned textile works whose abstractions prefigured Mondrian's *Boogie Woogie* paintings by decades.

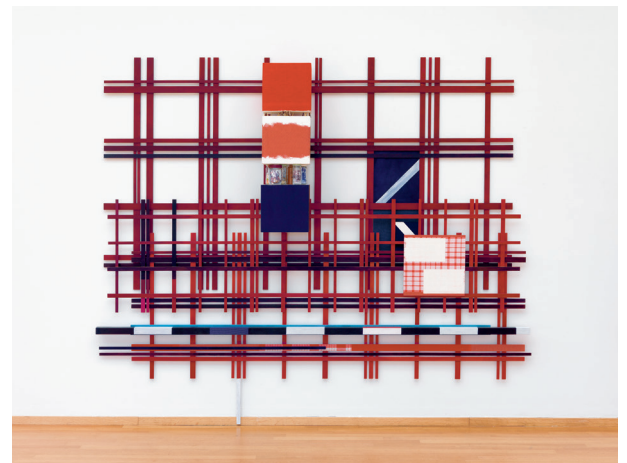
The Maroons' abstract art-making proclivities extend to their building façades, serving trays, canoes, paddles, door locks, stools, calabashes, and more, all of which bear the *sui generis* marks of a Pan-African culture unique to this side of what polyglot Yale Africanist scholar and author Robert Farrus Thompson deems the 'Black Atlantic'. A culture steeped in ancient African thought whose abstract art-making came into being already imbued with what Mondrian desired of his art – a visual formation in spiritual harmony with daily life which exuded a global universality that encompasses European modernism and its formal and conceptual sources in Africa, Asia and, via jazz, the US.

Jungerman's familiarity and fluency with Maroon aesthetics and those of the De Stijl legacy have always been an oblique feature of his art. But the invitation for the artist to represent the Netherlands at this year's Venice Biennale also presents an ideal forum for Jungerman to address the complexity of contemporary Dutch and Afropean zeitgeists. Particularly at a time when a crisis of xenophobic nationalism (and far right-to-neo-Nazi electoral victories in mainstream politics (provoked by anti-migrant sentiment) has beset Western Europe and the US.

The Biennale stage allows Jungerman to maintain a subtle edge in deploying his creative confluences while also drawing attention to his personal embodiment of a non-White Dutch cosmopolitanism.

Jungerman, like any contemporary visual artist working within the globalized world of galleries and biennials, has his own Promethean inner voice directing his expression as surely as Monk and Mondrian did. His works for the Dutch Pavilion are more than the sum of his heartland and art-historical inspirations, and they demand that we contemplate them with alert attendance to their nuanced originality and radiant soulfulness.

The decentring, over the past decade, of Europe and the US as the only sites where significant biennials can happen represents a welcome expansion of what 'humanity' and 'universality' mean in the global art world.



Remy Jungerman, *INITIANDS*, 2015, painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin and bottles, 284 × 244 × 41 cm