

Visual Arts

Taut but Dynamic

Theo Van Doesburg at Tate Modern

Not one of his works has the iconic status of those of his compatriot and short-term companion in the *De Stijl* group, Piet Mondriaan, but thanks to his tireless efforts to promote Avant-Garde art, today the painter, poet, architect, designer and above all propagandist Theo van Doesburg (1833-1931) is also a staple figure in the history of modern art. In the spring of 2010 the Tate Modern in London is devoting a large exhibition to his work and network, under the title *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde: Constructing a New World*. It has already been on show, with a few local touches, in the Lakenhal at Leiden University in the Netherlands for some months in late 2009.

Today, a hundred years on, the question that comes up automatically at every Avant-Garde commemoration, event or exhibition is: what precisely was this movement the vanguard of? Where was it all supposed to lead? It is hard to give a simple answer to that question. The uncomprehending and sometimes even hostile reactions that, for instance, Futurism, the music of the Second Viennese School and the literary work of Gertrude Stein can still elicit today - from 'ordinary' people as well as from art, music and literature specialists and historians - suggest that these Avant-Gardists are *still* ahead of their time and that maybe they will always be so, that there will never be a period when they will be universally considered as 'contemporaries'.

However, the wet Sunday afternoon I spent in Leiden's Lakenhal at the *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde* exhibition suggests a quite different answer to this question. The museum was full to bursting, packed with amused and fascinated Dutch people aged about forty to ninety, all commenting on what they were looking at, all white, all visibly well-heeled. Considered in this way it seemed as if the object of the Avant-Garde was to provide a pleasurable afternoon for the well-educated upper-middle-class citizen.

The knowledgeable comments and cries of delight to be heard especially in the 'Architecture in colour'



Theo van Doesburg in the Aubette in Strasbourg, 1927.

and 'Integration of painting and architecture' sections lead to yet another assessment of this success: probably no other Western country has, relatively speaking, so many talented planners, designers, graphic designers, typographers and architects as the Netherlands. In these professional circles - and therefore also in the daily life of anyone who lives in a house with furniture, or among printed matter designed in this tradition - the spirit of Van Doesburg and *De Stijl* lives on uninterrupted. There are lines - sadly, not explored in the exhibition or the catalogue - that run from *De Stijl* to the



Theo van Doesburg and
Cornelis van Eesteren,
Model for an artist's house,
1923 (reconstruction: 1982).

influential periodical *Barbarber*, the simultaneously simple and innovative Droog Design, and Dick Bruna's world-famous minimalist figure Miffy.

In that respect the synthesis of life and art that Van Doesburg and other Avant-Gardists were aiming at appears to have been spectacularly achieved. Practically, however, in terms of the works displayed, the 'new world' in the title of the exhibition and catalogue refers primarily to the world of the artists themselves, their collective activities and mutual influences, across the borders of nation states and disciplines. The exhibition begins, literally and figuratively, at a very local level (with early Leiden works in which Van Doesburg experiments with Cubist and Futurist ideas) and then goes on to conquer huge areas of Europe via the network of the journal and artistic circle known as *De Stijl*. Subsidiary figures such as the Leiden artist Harm Kamerlingh Onnes (not included in the London exhibition or the catalogue, alas) and Bart van der Leek, who was for a short while a member of *De Stijl*, feature briefly, after which the focus quickly shifts to kindred spirits from abroad.

'It is impossible to breathe any new life into Holland. I am therefore focusing particularly on other countries,' said Van Doesburg to his friend the architect J.J.P. Oud in April 1920. And so it was. From the closest

neighbouring country, Belgium, the exhibition shows works by, among others, the Paris-based Marthe Donas, Victor Servranckx, the underrated Karl Maes and Josef Peters, who had invited Van Doesburg to give a lecture in Antwerp in February 1920. But this was only a brief stop-over. After all, the most important centres for Avant-Garde art were in France and Germany. Van Doesburg was quick to establish his network there. In Berlin he came under the spell of the abstract, almost animated work of Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter. He was intrigued by the Bauhaus, but of course he knew better. He moved *De Stijl's* editorial offices to Weimar and tried to get his radical ideas on abstract art accepted in the post-expressionist climate that prevailed there. His lectures on *De Stijl* at the Bauhaus caused something of a furore and generated work by a whole series of German disciples who are virtually forgotten nowadays, though their designs are really in no way inferior to those of the original *De Stijl* artists. The Hungarians who formed the KURI-circle in the Bauhaus wanted to create constructivist *Gesamkunstwerken* on Van Doesburg's principles. And so Central Europe too gradually became infected with his virus.

Despite the rigour of his constructivist work, early in 1923 Van Doesburg also went through an intense

Dadaist phase. Together with Kurt Schwitters he organised a sensational Dada in Holland travelling exhibition, showing work by leading Dadaists from the Swiss and German phases as well as the Parisian one. The latter city would become the most important centre of Van Doesburg's activities in the final phase of his life. During that period he was mainly concerned with architecture. A late high point in his work, and in the exhibition, is his plans for, and very concrete contributions to, the Aubette Building renovation project in Strasbourg, which he was invited to join by Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Taut but dynamic – *De Stijl* at its very best.

Right up to the end of his life Van Doesburg continued to try to form new groups that would be as influential as *De Stijl*. But his dogmatic image really did not help him in this. When he realised in the early thirties that modern art needed more breathing-space, he tried to launch the Abstraction-Création group with, among others, Arp, Giacometti and the *Stijl* protagonists – now restored to favour – Mondriaan and Vantongerloo. A month after the formation of the group Van Doesburg died of a heart attack. He had not changed the world, but his artistic fingerprint is still to be seen today, looking as fresh and sharp as ever.

Geert Buelens

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Gladys Fabre & Doris Wintgens Hötte (eds), *Van Doesburg & The International Avant-Garde. Constructing a New World*, Tate Publishing, London, 2009.

Book to accompany the exhibition with the same title, Tate Modern, London, 4 February-16 May 2010.

www.tate.org.uk/modern

James Ensor

A New Catalogue of the Paintings

Modern art has no frontiers any more. Down with glowering curmudgeons, selfish, syrupy cheese-makers... Long live art that's free, free, free.

James Ensor, 1900

James Ensor (1860-1949) is one of the most influential and admired artists in the history of modern art. In the two final, fertile, decades of the nineteenth century – the period that coincided with the rise of the Post-Impressionist and Symbolist movements – Ensor was one of the most experimental artists working anywhere in Europe. With one eye turned to the “Old Master” traditions of Flanders and Holland, and the other probing contemporary social mores and popular culture, Ensor created a body of work that broke new ground. His best-known works, from the mid-1880s onward, transmogrify caricature and other forms of popular culture into images of skeletons, masked figures, and religious scenes intertwined with contemporary politics, all rendered in hyper-charged, luxuriantly textured paint. Merging the lurid and the sublime, his paintings are both hilarious and visually seductive. Major retrospective exhibitions of his work in Belgium, Germany, France, and the United States have recently underscored his reputation as a master of technique, social criticism and visionary invention.

For these reasons – Ensor's fame, influence, contemporary resonance and social topicality – the new systematic catalogue of his paintings by Xavier Tricot is most welcome. Tricot first published a two-volume catalogue raisonné of Ensor's painting in 1992, illustrated almost entirely in murky black-and-white.¹ This new one-volume catalogue raisonné is illustrated largely in colour. Although many of the illustrations are diminutive – there are as many as seven to a page – they offer exponentially better references than those in the previous catalogue.

The new book is divided into three parts: a chronology, the catalogue of works, and a reference section. Tricot's most ambitious revision of the 1992 catalogue is a detailed introductory chronology en-