

The Importance of De Stijl

An International Unity in Life, Art and Culture (1917-2017)

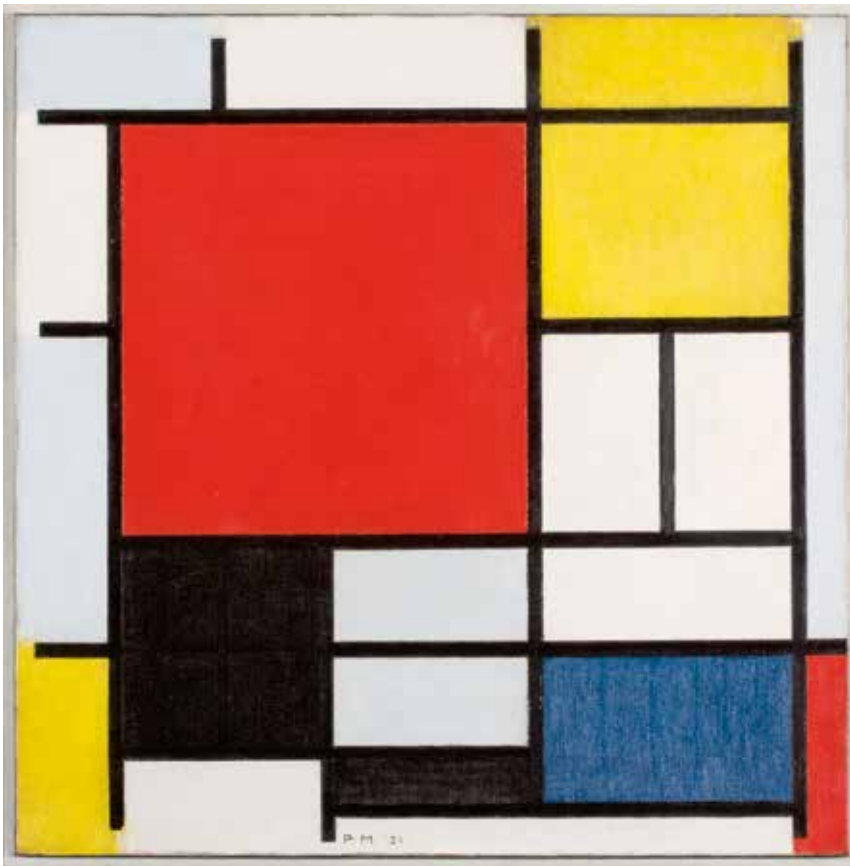
114

[L U T P I L]

This year, the Netherlands is celebrating the centenary of De Stijl, the avant-garde movement that grew up around the *De Stijl* magazine that Theo van Doesburg launched in Leiden in 1917 together with Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leck, Vilmos Huszár and J.J.P. Oud. Like Rembrandt and Van Gogh, De Stijl belongs in the canon of Dutch history. De Stijl is also the most important Dutch contribution to the modern art of the twentieth century. It has gained a permanent position for itself in surveys of modern art, architecture and design, with several members who are well known by the general public, including Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Van der Leck and Gerrit Rietveld. Their work confirms De Stijl's effort to employ artistic ideas in a range of disciplines and to arrive at a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Van Doesburg was the main driving force behind the group and took responsibility for editing the magazine from the very start. He worked to build up a broad network so as to establish an international art movement, and had contacts with Dadaism, Constructivism, the Bauhaus and other avant-garde movements. His death in 1931 signalled the end of the magazine, and the final issue, which appeared in 1932, was dedicated to him. The body of ideas lived on, however, both in the work of the artists linked to De Stijl and in the views of later generations. De Stijl is therefore not only considered an important historical movement, but has continued significance. After all, the multidisciplinary orientation and the aim of using art in society in concrete ways are once again topical notions, making De Stijl a relevant point of reference even for today's art and design world.

Nieuwe Beelding

In around 1917, Mondrian's work evolved towards a radical form of painting pared down to just horizontal and vertical lines, rectangular areas, primary colours and the non-colours white, black and grey. This abstract visual idiom is a direct expression of the universal harmony that cannot be seen in the visible reality around us. In the first issue of *De Stijl* (October 1917), Mondrian called this painting the 'nieuwe beelding' and later also used the term 'neoplasticism'. From the moment *De Stijl* was founded, Van Doesburg wanted to



demonstrate that this new concept of art could bring the various disciplines together. In the first issue of the magazine, Bart van der Leek and Anthony Kok wrote about the place of modern painting in architecture and the interior, and J.J.P. Oud argued that the image of the modern city would be defined by building blocks with flat roofs, strong emphatic rhythm and modern materials.¹ In this first issue, Vilmos Huszár applied the new concepts to the typography and Van Doesburg wrote about the way Oud's design for a 'housing complex for a beach boulevard', *Huizencomplex Strandboulevard* (1917), expressed the ideas of neo-plasticism in architecture. The first manifesto of De Stijl, which appeared in the magazine in November 1918, aimed for 'an international unity in Life, Art and Culture' and called upon progressive artists abroad to help give shape to it.

Furniture also fitted into this unity. Van Doesburg initially considered the chair made of uncoloured slats that Gerrit Rietveld designed around 1918 and which, in a later version, became world-famous as the *Red Blue Chair*, as an example of sculpture in the new interior. In a later issue of *De Stijl* (1920), Van Doesburg made a distinction between the work of a sculptor and that of a furniture-maker: the former expressed harmony on the basis of relationships of volume, and the latter on the basis of open relationships of space. Rietveld's slat construction was functionally distilled and stands free and clear in the

Piet Mondrian,
*Composition with Large Red
Plane, Yellow, Black, Grey
and Blue*, 1921,
oil on canvas, 59,5 × 59,5 cm.
Collection Gemeentemuseum
Den Haag



Gerrit Thomas Rietveld,
Armchair, ca. 1917-1918,
painted beechwood,
85.1 x 66 x 66 cm.
Brooklyn Museum,
Designated Purchase Fund

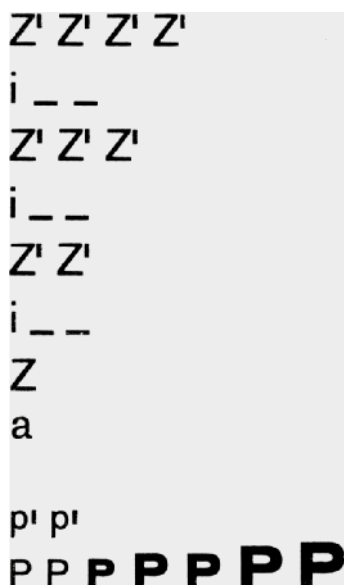
room. In a note on a children's chair of his that appeared in *De Stijl* (1919), Rietveld wrote that he was seeking 'the clear image of the thing itself, with no inessentials'. He restricted himself to standardised parts in keeping with machine production, even though he made his furniture in his own workshop. In the article entitled 'Schilderkunst van Giorgio de Chirico en een stoel van Rietveld' (Painting by Giorgio de Chirico and a Chair by Rietveld, *De Stijl*, 1920), an enthusiastic Van Doesburg referred to a high armchair by Rietveld as a 'slender space creature' and identified a 'dumb eloquence like that of a machine' in the chair. Van Doesburg used innovative typography and syntax to express the individuality of this piece of furniture *and* of the modern era.

Dada barks

These modern times also found an outlet in Dadaism, an avant-garde movement with which Van Doesburg and even Mondrian felt a kinship for a shorter or longer period. In Mondrian's case, this was expressed in a quest for what neo-plasticism might look like in the field of literature. His article entitled 'De groote boulevards' (The Grand Boulevards), published in *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* on 27 March 1920, was an experiment in which he did not describe the bustle on the boulevards of Paris in words, but showed it in concrete terms in the phrasing as a moving mass of sounds, images and ideas. Like his painting, language too could become 'plastic'. Mondrian continued to reflect on literature as neo-plasticism and in this regard referred to himself as 'Piet-Dada' in a letter to Van Doesburg in June 1920. In the meantime, he had joined Van Doesburg and the Dutch poet Anthony Kok in putting his name to the second Manifesto of *De Stijl* (*De Stijl*, April 1920). This manifesto was a call to express in literature the depth and intensity of the collective experiences of their time

by merging form and content. Their intention was, using sound poems, sound images for letters, and expressive typography, to give a literary construction to the 'manifold occurrences around and through us'. It was Van Doesburg in particular who, as from 1920, embraced Dadaism under the pseudonym I.K. Bonset, and in addition used the name Aldo Camini for the novel *Caminoscopia*, 'n antiphilosofische levensbeschouwing zonder draad of systeem, chapters from which appeared in *De Stijl*. Van Doesburg called I.K. Bonset 'the only real Dutch Dadaist' and for a long time left the art world in the dark about the fact that I.K. Bonset was the alter ego of the Van Doesburg whom people knew as the neoplasticist artist. Under the pseudonym I.K. Bonset, Van Doesburg published poems in *De Stijl* that referred to nothing and expressed no individual feelings, but which derived meaning from their image and sound. There was a lot of room for contributions by Dadaists in the magazine. *De Stijl* and Dadaism felt akin because both these art movements were opposed to a naturalist representation of reality and because they believed that abstract art was able to give shape to a new and modern culture. Van Doesburg invited both constructivist and Dadaist artists to the Konstruktivistische Internationale in Weimar on 25 September 1922. He was working enthusiastically on an international network and was in touch with Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and other Dadaists. He initiated a notable Dutch Dada tour that started with a Dada evening in the 'Haagse Kunstkring' (The Hague Art Circle) on the Binnenhof on 10th January 1923. Van Doesburg gave a lecture entitled 'What is Dada?', and when he paused briefly during the talk the German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters made various sounds including barking from his seat in the midst of the audience. Schwitters also read Dadaist poetry, Nelly Van Moorsel played eccentric music and Vilmos Huszár put on a shadow play with a mechanical puppet. In 1922, Van Doesburg launched the largely Dadaist magazine *Mécano*, which he published in parallel with *De Stijl*, but only four issues appeared before it closed down in 1923.

I.K. Bonset, 'Letterklankbeelden'
(*Lettersoundimages*), in *De Stijl* 4,
7 July 1921, p. 105



'Cubist'

The importance of De Stijl lies largely in the way it communicated. Its principles were disseminated and promoted in its magazine and the international avant-garde was invited to cooperate, which among other things led to contributions by foreign artists appearing in *De Stijl*. Contacts with progressive artistic circles in other countries, including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, also involved the exchange of ideas and/or influence. In Belgium alone, De Stijl influenced artists, architects and designers, mainly in the 1920s. Such people as Jozef Peeters and Victor Servranckx opted for an abstract geometric idiom and spoke of community art and 'pure plastic vision'. Peeters was the main driving force behind the founding of the 'Kring Moderne Kunst' (Modern Art Circle) in Antwerp (1918); he was in touch with Van Doesburg, who, in 1920, addressed his lecture 'Klassiek, barok, modern' (Classical, Baroque, Modern) to the group. In Antwerp, they were aware of the impact this might have. Van Doesburg's lecture in Brussels one month later also had an effect. According to Pierre Bourgeois, among other things it prompted the founding of the group of artists associated with the *7 Arts* magazine in 1922, which included Victor and Pierre Bourgeois, Karel Maes, Jozef Peeters, Victor Servranckx, Marcel Bagniet and Pierre Louis Flouquet. Georges Vantongerloo, who stayed in the Netherlands during the war years, abandoned his impressionist work in late 1917 and, partly under the influence of De Stijl, developed his own variant of abstract art. In 1918, his sculpture and painting resulted in compositions of horizontal and vertical planes in which the primary colours – red, yellow and blue – were joined by black, grey and white. However, from the very beginning Vantongerloo formulated his own personal version of abstract art, one in which he used his own colour theories and complex mathematical calculations.

The Belgian interest in the vision propagated by De Stijl is also apparent in numerous examples of architecture in the 1920s, including Huib Hoste's Kapelleveld garden district (1923) in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe and Sint-Pieters-Woluwe, and his De Beir house in Knokke (1924). The term 'cubist' was often heard as an ironic comment on architecture and design that involved rigid lines. Members of De Stijl used the term in a positive sense, to emphasise the link with major innovations in art. It was also an *epitheton ornans* among Bel-

Huib Hoste, *De Beir house*,
Knokke, 1924



gian artists. In 1923, Victor Bourgeois, who among other things imposed rigid lines on the Cité Moderne garden district in Sint-Agatha-Berchem (1922-25) and invited Pierre-Louis Flouquet and Karel Maes to design stained-glass windows and furniture for this district, had the street where he had built a block of flats renamed as 'Kubismestraat'. Louis Herman De Koninck remembered that the public mockingly called the house he had built for himself in 1924 'le trou du cubisme' (the cubist hole).

In Flanders, De Stijl was considered a revolutionary movement that deserved appreciation and support, but not blind allegiance. Huib Hoste, who published an article on modern architecture in *De Stijl* in 1918, in which he claimed that modern materials 'are most logically to be used horizontally or vertically', was later accused of treachery by Van Doesburg because he had also expressed a positive opinion on the pure visual effect of fluid lines in *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*. Jozef Peeters called it premature to view Mondrian's 'horizontal-vertical image' as the climax of contemporary cultural development. In his article under the title 'Gemeenschapskunst' (1921), he denied that neo-plasticism was *the* universal art form. In his own 'community art' he made room for 'any geometrical constructional principle whatsoever', which also included the circle and the triangle. Victor Servranckx also distanced himself sufficiently from what he considered too prescriptive in De Stijl. In the first half of the 1920s he showed that he had been influenced, but formulated clear criticism of the 'too academic system' that 'threatens to impoverish us'. Servranckx left room for other geometric forms, which were also allowed to overlap.

Bauhaus

At the end of 1920, Van Doesburg travelled to Germany and was intrigued by the abstract films of Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter. Here too the influence of Van Doesburg and De Stijl was noticeable. In the publication that accompanied the recent exhibition *Theo van Doesburg. A New Expression of Life, Art and Technology* at BOZAR in Brussels (2015), this influence was summarised as follows: 'Van Doesburg was not only important for the promotion of abstract films, but also for their continued development. In Klein Kölzig, where Richter worked, his temporary presence was one of the elements that persuaded this film-maker to limit his visual vocabulary to straight lines, squares and rectangles.' Richter's film *Rhythmus 21* (1921-24) illustrates this very fully.

In Germany, Van Doesburg also influenced teachers and students at the Bauhaus in Weimar. He organised a course to promote the principles of De Stijl in both theoretical and practical terms. At that time, the thinking at the Bauhaus was mainly in terms of individual expression and craftsmanship, whereas Van Doesburg advocated a modern art founded on a rational attitude and was interested in technology and machine production. This helped influence the change of course that took place at the Bauhaus between 1922 and 1923 and which Walter Gropius summarised in 1923 in the motto 'Art and Technology, A New Unity'. The impact of the ideas of De Stijl on the Bauhaus was sometimes abundantly clear, as for example in the architectural designs by Herbert Bayer, with their coloured planes. And the 'slatted chair' that Marcel Breuer made as a student in the furniture workshop in 1922-24 was directly influenced by De



Marcel Breuer/Tischlerei Bauhaus Weimar,
Lath chair, 1924. Bauhaus-Archiv/Museum
für Gestaltung

Stijl, more particularly by Rietveld's furniture. Publications in the Bauhausbücher series included not only Mondrian's *Neue Gestaltung: Neoplastizismus* (1925), but also Van Doesburg's *Grundbegriffe der neuen gestaltenden Kunst* (1925) and Oud's *Holländische Architektur* (1926).

Functional and economical

The Rietveld Schröder House (1924) in Utrecht, now open to the public and a World Heritage site, is an icon of the views of De Stijl. Gerrit Rietveld designed it in close cooperation with the client and occupant, Truus Schröder. The house is a three-dimensional composition built up using horizontal and vertical relationships. The structure of the architecture, the interior and the furniture are defined by straight lines, and this makes the house a unified experience. On the first floor with its open-plan and main living areas, rigid planes create variable spatial relationships instead of immobile masses. The Rietveld Schröder House is a flexible environment and the occupants' handling of it is conscious and based on practical needs: they can move a straight wall, fold out a table top, lengthen a rectangular bench. Colour is not decorative, but an organic element of the architecture. This house gives



The Rietveld Schröder House, 1924, Prins Hendriklaan 50, Utrecht.
Photo by Ernst Moritz

concrete form to the ideas of De Stijl as listed by Van Doesburg in 'De nieuwe architectuur' (1924), a piece that appeared in *De Stijl* in a slightly modified form as the manifesto 'Tot een beeldende architectuur' (Towards a plastic architecture) (1924). This new architecture – elementary, economical, functional – used an open floor-plan divided by rectangular planes and no longer separated indoor and outdoor spaces. The division is not symmetrical or in accordance with fixed patterns, but is in keeping with the functional requirements of a dynamic outlook on life. Such architectural elements as function, plane, mass, time, space, light, colour and material are at the same time visual elements of the composition. Since time had also become an element of architecture, Van Doesburg used the terms 'four-dimensional' and 'time-space image aspects'. The unity of time and space (where a coloured space is experienced as a sequence of colour planes, as 'the direct expression of the time and space relationships of the new architecture') contributes to a dynamic experience of space. Point 11 in the manifesto states that

'The new architecture is *anti-cubist*, meaning it does not endeavour to contain the various functional spatial cells in one single closed cube, but *casts the functional spatial cells* (e.g. canopy planes, balcony volumes, etc.) *outwards, away* from the middle point of the cube, whereby the height, breadth and depth, plus time, become an entirely new item of plastic expression in the open spaces. This makes the architecture look more or less as if it were floating (insofar as this is constructionally possible – a task for the engineers!), and as if, in a manner of speaking, it contravenes nature's law of gravity.'

Van Doesburg had previously already visualised this dynamic vision of architecture in his *Contra-Constructies*, such as in the architectonic sketches for the *Maison Particulière* (1923) that he had done with Cornelis van Eesteren.

Tributes to De Stijl

The ideas behind the artistic movement lived on after the demise of the magazine *De Stijl*. For example, in the 1930s and later, the influence of De Stijl was visible in designs for interiors and household textiles, such as the tablecloths and tea towels with blue and red stripes woven in by the Dutch textile designer Kitty van der Mijll Dekker (around 1935-40), and in the efficiency of the Bruynzeel modular kitchen by Dutch designer Piet Zwart in 1938. In addition, De Stijl continued to be a frame of reference as soon as red, yellow and blue rectangles were used in a rigidly geometrical design. The architecture and design of the 1950s and 1960s regularly played with striking areas of colour. Walls, doors and windows were divided up like a grid in which coloured panels created accents. Patterns of intense red, yellow and blue were popular: 'the primary colours that have previously been appropriated by De Stijl'. A series of photos entitled *RedYellowBlue – Salon van horizontalen en verticalen* (2009-10) by the Belgian artist Annemie Augustijns is a tribute to this late-modernist architecture and an explicit reference to Mondrian's painting. This reference is equally obvious in the renowned Mondrian dresses that Yves Saint Laurent designed

in 1965. This French fashion designer found that Mondrian's pared-down art summarised the spirit of the 1960s. The rigid design in lines and planes is also a cliché, but precisely for this reason is extremely effective. It crops up in the most diverse products and situations.

Still, many of the tributes to De Stijl are part of an artistic or design approach. Dan Flavin's two-part light installation – *Untitled (to Piet Mondrian through his preferred colours, red, yellow and blue)* and *Untitled (to Piet Mondrian who lacked green) 2* – which the American artist created specifically for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1986, and which was reinstalled in 2011 and later purchased, links Mondrian's art to the new views on art advocated by minimal art and related movements. In *Counter-Compositions* (2006-08), the Dutch artist Germaine Kruip took Van Doesburg and De Stijl as her basis and through art tried to make the beauty in reality visible. She also quoted Mondrian in her exhibition at De Vleeshal in 2006: 'Art is only a substitute as long as beauty is absent from life. As life gains in balance, art will gradually disappear' (vleeshal.nl). Even young artists who have grown up with multimedia and digital art play with the memory of Mondrian and Van Doesburg. *Odette* (2008), a temporary installation by the Belgian artists Boy & Erik Stappaerts and Nick Ervinck in the rotunda of the Royal Arcades in Ostend was an explicit reference to the *Aubette* amusement complex in Strasbourg (1928). In the *ciné-dancing* on the first floor of this complex, Van Doesburg gave shape to his dynamic vision of colour in space, just as, from 1924, he had injected movement into his painting by introducing diagonals into his *Contra-Composities*. Stappaerts's and Ervinck's installation used square building blocks to create a cheerful discotheque cum meeting-place. At the same time, its geometric decoration looked like a pattern of colour pixels in a digital model. It looks as if Mondrian and Van Doesburg had turned up in the hybrid space of a real-virtual world. The exhibition and publication entitled *The Bauhaus #itsalldesign* (Vitra Design Museum, 2015-16) also explicitly makes the link between the twenty-first century and the modernism of the twentieth. Rietveld's 1919 *Buffetkast* is exhibited there, or at least the version of it that the Rotterdam-based Italian-Japanese design firm Studio Minale-Maeda made of it in 2010, using Lego bricks. In this *Lego Buffet*, Rietveld's production on the basis of standard components is made playful and accessible to a broad public. And a human touch seems to be given to the

Studio
Minale-Maeda,
Lego Buffet,
2010





Annemie Augustijns,
Red Yellow Blue/Salon van horizontalen en verticalen, 2009.
 © Annemie Augustijns

standardisation found in the industrial processes that made such a mark on the twentieth century (minale-maeda.com). It takes no great step to reach a situation where one makes one's furniture oneself: in an open design context such as the one 'opendesk' creates, the user downloads designs and has the material cut out locally or 3D-printed using computer-guided machines (opendesk.cc). De Stijl and Bauhaus are in this instance fundamental points of reference in a reflection on the place of design, designer, production and user in the twenty-first century. So it is also possible for *The Bauhaus #itsalldesign* to state that

'Although the historical context was very different, the topics that were discussed by Bauhaus members are, a hundred years later, as current as they were then: humans versus machines, individual versus society, authorship versus the collective, unique products versus mass production. In order to address these changes, designers return to the origins of industrial design, to movements such as the Bauhaus or De Stijl, with ironic comments or critical reflection. At the same time, they test the transferability of tried and tested methods such as the manifesto, which was used to spread new ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century.' ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

NOTES

- 1 Oud, 'Het monumentale stadsbeeld' (The Monumental Townscape), translated by Hans L.C. Jaffé in Hans L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1971.

FURTHER READING

Avant-garde in België 1917-1929 (exhibition catalogue). Brussels: Gemeentekrediet, 1992
 Fabre, Gladys, Doris Wintgens Hötte and Michael White (eds.), *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde*. Constructing a New World. London: Tate Publishing, 2009
 Janssen, Hans and Michael White, *Het verhaal van De Stijl. Van Mondriaan tot Van Doesburg*. Antwerp-The Hague: Ludion-Gemeentemuseum, 2011
 Fabre, Gladys, *Theo van Doesburg. A New Expression of Life, Art and Technology*. Brussels: Bozar Books & Mercatorfonds / Yale University Press, 2016