Van Doesburg & the International Avant-Garde: Constructing a New World
Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden
20 October 2009–3 January 2010

Tate Modern, London
4 February–16 May 2010

All or Nothing: Robert van ’t Hoff, Architect of a New Society
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo
April 2–August 24, 2010

Two Dutchmen of contrasting destinies, whose lives overlapped and whose architectural influence greatly exceeded the
relatively modest number of buildings they executed, were celebrated last year in related but very different exhibitions. Typical Netherlanders of their generation in their utopian leanings, each left his birthplace to live—and die—abroad, but in many respects they were polar opposites. Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), a volatile chameleon who adopted multiple personae and unleashed a veritable eruption of paintings, ornamental designs, typography, and manifestos, was an incandescent but apolitical showman dedicated to dramatic aesthetic transformation, whereas Robert van ‘t Hoff (1887–1979), a social radical of feminist and communist sympathies, shunned the spotlight, husbanded his production, and sought to reform society through political action as well as architecture. Linked through membership in De Stijl (the movement founded in 1917 that, although not cited in either title, ran like a leitmotif through each exhibition), both realized collaborations with its members and published in its eponymous periodical, established and edited by Van Doesburg and financially supported by Van ‘t Hoff.

Both installations aimed to reconstruct a life as well as a career. Memorabilia and photos—in Van ‘t Hoff’s case the books he owned and the bicycle he fashioned out of spare parts, in Van Doesburg’s the many international journals he devoured and recordings of the music he enjoyed, some played by his pianist wife Nelly van Moorsel—communicated the interplay between the personal and the professional. In other regards the exhibitions, like the subjects, were necessarily antithetical in character and scope. Tate Modern documented the intricate web of connections woven by the avant-garde.1 Some eighty-four figures from more than fifteen European countries with which Van Doesburg made contact were represented across thirteen galleries. Three rooms sufficed at Otterlo for the key contributions of the contemplative and introverted Van ‘t Hoff. Yet each display was definitive and evoked a vivid, visceral immediacy that neither of the catalogues, exhaustive and indispensable to scholars as they are, can replace.

Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde must count as the most comprehensive survey ever devoted to this prolific polymath, who more typically appears as but one character amid the cast of De Stijl in particular and modernism in general. Its extent was necessary to capture the many facets of the man born Christian Emil Marie Küpper, aka the Dada typographic poet I. K. Bonset and the Futurist Aldo Camini. Embracing apparently antithetical ideologies simultaneously, Van Doesburg famously convened a congress of Dadaists and Constructivists in 1922, and explored (when he did not invent) almost every “ism” of the time: Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Neo-Plasticism, Purism, Constructivism, and Elementarism. The gargantuan number of exhibits, ranging from the everyday (cheese labels and stationery—such items of common use made manifest his desire to integrate art and daily life) to the esoteric (abstract films and optophone recordings), might have challenged the casual visitor but provided a rich array that proffered the intimate as well as the public for those interested in savoring the complexities of European modernism. Engaging and enlightening as the many items were, however, architecture and interior design are the focus of this review.

Although a number of relevant objects, such as templates for stained glass windows by Van Doesburg and design projects by Bauhaisler, appeared in other rooms, two of the Tate Modern’s galleries were devoted exclusively to architecture and furnishings. Models and drawings of proposed and completed buildings supplemented photos, publications, and films, now an essential component of architectural display. Video clips conveyed the essence of the interiors Van Doesburg prepared in 1917 for De Vonk, a children’s home by J. J. P. Oud, and of the little-known color schemes he made in 1921 for houses and a school in Drachten, Friesland. A movie documenting the Schröder house in Utrecht, the most complete instance of De Stijl architecture ever realized, included interviews with architect Gerrit Rietveld and client and co-designer Truus Schröder-Schräder. Collages and models of exhibition rooms by Rietveld and Vilmos Huszár, sketches for interiors by Jean Gorin, and furniture not only by the reliable Rietveld but also by Eileen Gray and Marcel Breuer demonstrated the international impact of Van Doesburg’s ideas.

This impact was recorded as well in the gallery devoted to the Bauhaus. While it has long been known that Van Doesburg’s presence in Weimar posed a challenge to the German school, this exhibition surely documented more thoroughly than heretofore precisely how powerful that presence was, inspiring not only students and faculty but even Walter Gropius. The director’s office, inserted in the Weimar building in 1923 with rectilinear furnishings marking out spatial coordinates, is unimaginable without the precedent of De Stijl. Another revelation was the early work of Frederick Kiesler, who joined Van Doesburg’s group in 1923 and while a member produced projects like La cité dans l’Espace of 1925, that subsequently he would seldom equal. The ingenious and inexpensive “Leger and Träger” systems Kiesler developed to display a maximum number of artworks in a restricted space resembled De Stijl sculptures and played a dual role as exemplary art objects and functioning devices; Tate Modern used them as an integral part of the show.

Initially content to create colorful enhancements to buildings by De Stijl’s architect-members, Van Doesburg added three-dimensional design to his own arsenal after meeting Cornélius van Eesteren in 1923. Possibly the most potent examples of his contributions, which incorporated the notion of the fourth dimension and space-time, were the two projects of 1923 that he made with Van Eesteren to be shown at Léonce Rosenberg’s Galerie de l’Effort Moderne in Paris. The inclusion of the Rosenberg catalogue and issues of his magazine, with photos of Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren setting up their models, recreated the excitement of that significant event. In addition to recently fabricated models in Plexiglas, card, and wood of the private house and the artist’s studio, Tate Modern featured the ravishing axonometric projections that the Dutchmen produced for their patron. Van Doesburg adopted this seductive technique, whose fashionability was renewed
in the 1960s, from his friend, El Lissitzky, also represented in the exhibition. Paradoxically perhaps, while Van Doesburg’s many paintings have generally been rated inferior to those of Piet Mondrian, a judgment born out in this exhibition, the influence of his rare architectural designs was far-reaching and enduring.

Despite his determination to succeed as an architect, Van Doesburg executed only two works. One was the reconstruction in 1927, with his Swiss friends Jean (Hans) Arp and Sophie Tauber-Arp, of the Cafe Aubette in Strasbourg. The trio replaced the interior of an existing structure with a cinema, dance hall, and café featuring Van Doesburg’s color-drenched dynamic diagonals, which gave the space a different character than had the hovering horizontals of earlier designs. Sketches, two large lighted models, and a generous complement of photographs and surviving fittings recaptured the energetic piquancy of the original complex. Van Doesburg also completed a studio house at Meudon, 1929–30, a compact cube reminiscent of the master, its slab roofs and interlocking verticals and horizontals made it an early example of Wrightian influence in the Netherlands, an influence indispensable for De Stijl’s development but, surprisingly, overlooked in Van Doesburg. Villa Henny was revolutionary in being constructed of concrete, a material then unusual for residences but one that the Dutch would subsequently exploit for dwellings. Rietveld apparently crafted the villa’s Wrightian furniture, a commission that left an indelible mark on the carpenter’s subsequent work.

The study Van ’t Hoff added to his house in New Milton, England, was donated to the Kröller-Müller in 2004 and formed the highlight of the exhibition. The spartan dimensions corresponded to the existenz-minimum that haunted dwelling designs in interwar Europe; with built-in bed and storage cabinets, it resembled a ship’s cabin or hermit’s cell. Used as a retreat for solitary meditation, it served also as a prototype for the units of a communal housing block Van ’t Hoff envisaged for the town of Coventry. Carefully calibrated proportions and an abstract rectilinear vocabulary established the sense of equilibrium demanded by De Stijl philosophy and Van ’t Hoff’s own temperament.

Showed at full scale as well was the wooden newel post that Van ’t Hoff designed in 1917, which was repeatedly praised by Van Doesburg in De Stijl as an icon of “spatial-plastic interior architecture.” Looking like a tiny American skyscraper, the newel post was but one of many items in both exhibitions that made manifest the potency of small objects placed alongside more monumental displays.

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Related Publications

Dolf Broekhuizen, Evert van Straaten, Herman van Bergeijk, Robert van ’t Hoff: Architect of a New Society, Rotterdam: NAi Publisher/Kröller-Müller Museum, 2010, 168 pp., 107 color and 50 b/w illus. $45 (hardback), ISBN 9789056627308

Note
1. After having independently planned exhibitions on Van Doesburg, curators at De Lakenhal and Tate Modern decided to join forces. Some 265 exhibits were shared, others appeared in only one venue: 42 in Leiden and 104 in London. As the reviewer saw only the presentation at the Tate Modern, references concern that alone.