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MODERNISM IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20th CENTURY

SIX ESSAYS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THEO VAN DOESBURG AND GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

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More than forty years after his death the reputation of Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) remains beset by controversy and lack of definition. Although acknowledged for his role as editor of *De Stijl* and for an evangelical, if somewhat abrasive, fervor on behalf of a variety of "modernist" art movements, only in 1974 with the appearance of a monograph by Joost Baljeu was the full scope of Van Doesburg's career and accomplishments discussed in historical perspective.[1] This broad focus now having been provided, it is all the more important that further attention be paid the individual facets manifested within the veritable kaleidoscope of Van Doesburg's talent. Among other areas of inquiry his work as a painter deserves fuller analysis as an organic evolution than has been afforded in the numerous token tributes to such canvases as *The Cow* (plate 13) and *Rhythms of a Russian Dance* (plate 11) in survey histories of modern art. Doubtless, the publication in Dutch of his early essays and flagrant inconsistencies in his attribution of dates to his paintings have impeded detailed investigation.[2] But such barriers are not insurmountable, and the outlines of this development can be traced with surprising exactitude.

Van Doesburg's pre-*De Stijl* years as a painter are quickly described. Unlike Mondrian, he did not visit Paris before World War I in order to drink at the fountainhead of Cubist style. Instead, following a period of desultory experimentation in Native Dutch traditions of naturalism, he began in 1912 to publish in Amsterdam various exhibition reviews and articles which included accounts of Futurism, Cubism and Wassily Kandinsky, but which

[1] I.e., Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg* (London: Studio Vista, 1974). Since this volume appeared subsequent to submission of the present article for publication, it has been possible merely to cross reference several illustrations and footnote data (hereafter: "Baljeu"). Serving previously in lieu of a monograph was the excellect exhibition catalogue *Theo van Doesburg 1883–1931* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1968–1969); hereafter: *TvD* (n.b. German ed., Basel Kunsthalle, 1969, numbers works exhibited differently).

[2] Unfortunately, there is no consistency in the misdatings, since attributions in articles are variously earlier and later than dates accompanying signatures on works of art, which appear to be accurate, except for instances of later addition.

were most notable for an attempt to formulate an all-embracing theory of modern art. A period of wartime military service between 1914 and early 1916 did little to impede this activity, since in the neutral Netherlands he was allowed considerable free time from his station in Tilburg, even managing the courtship of Helena ("Lena") Milius whom he would marry in May 1917.[3] By late 1915 he was so impressed with the exhibited work of Piet Mondrian that he immediately sought to establish with him a group periodical to further modernist tendencies in art. However, Mondrian's answer that this would be premature for lack of artistically mature colleagues effectively postponed the final consolidation of artists around the periodical eventually named *De Stijl* until late spring 1917.[4]

Meanwhile, Van Doesburg's artistic and organizational activities continued unabated. During the intervening year and a half, he was instrumental in founding two Dutch exhibition societies[5] and completed a transformation of personal style so thorough that on May 21, 1917, Mondrian finally agreed to publish a series of articles in what he described to Van Doesburg as "your periodical." Mondrian had only written infrequently to Van Doesburg throughout 1916 and early 1917, which implies, contrary to general opinion, relatively little personal contact during this span of time.[6] Indeed, we shall see that Van Doesburg's development of a proto-geometric style of painting depended upon influences significantly different from those which had affected the ten years older Mondrian and that Bart van der Leck rather than Mondrian provided Van Doesburg with the initial models of "pure abstract art."

Among several surviving examples of Van Doesburg's early wartime production, the pastel *Cosmic Sun* (plate 1), dated 1915, and the oil painting, *Blushing Girl with Buttercups* (plate 2), of approximately the same date,[7]

[3] As documented from this ex-wife's archive, now private possession, Amsterdam.

[4] This and other here cited unpublished correspondence from Mondrian to Van Doesburg remains in the *De Stijl* archive (Estate of Mrs. Nelly van Doesburg).

[5] I.e., *De Anderen*, founded in March, 1916 (an exhibition was held in May in The Hague), and *De Sphinx* in Leiden (first exhibition Jan., 1917).

[6] From correspondence to the architect J.J.P. Oud (preserved Institut Néerlandais, Paris), it appears that by May 1916, Van Doesburg was discharged from service and residing in Haarlem, also frequently visiting Leiden where he later moved (see also Baljeu, p. 21). Since Mondrian normally announced his intention to visit by mail, the absence of such notifications (before one of May 21, 1917) in the *De Stijl* archive is telling. However, Van Doesburg early in 1916 did once visit Mondrian at the home of the composer Jacob van Domselaer in Laren, and occasional meetings at art exhibitions in Amsterdam might have occurred.

[7] The "1914" date was added later and may be early for a work publicly exhibited only in 1916 (i.e. at *De Onafhankelijken*, Amsterdam, no. 71, a sub-title of which states, in trans.: "An emotion which assumes visible form as line and color is a painting").

reflect a deep involvement with the art and theories of Kandinsky. Paintings by the Russian artist had been exhibited in the Netherlands in 1912, and between 1913 and 1916 Van Doesburg published several tributes to him and to his minor Dutch follower, Janus de Winter.[8] *Cosmic Sun* and *Blushing Girl* betray a generalized influence from Kandinsky's art theory by comprising brightly colored "impressions" of or "improvisations" upon natural subject motifs. They also exemplify the "middle road of limitless freedom" lying between the hostile extremes of sterile naturalism and of merely ornamental geometric abstraction, which was Kandinsky's stated ideal in his 1912 booklet, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.[9] These orbicularly conceived compositions and the pre-World War I writings of Kandinsky predicate equally the subsumption of geometric form within a style otherwise determined by painterly effusions of vivid hues. Significantly, in 1916 Van Doesburg employed the term "abstract expressionism" as a label for the art of Kandinsky.[10] A decade later he was to describe the *Blushing Girl* as having "closed off this [early] period with an abstract composition, abstracted from naturalistic form."[11] However briefly, this passing involvement with *Blaue Reiter* ideology represented a determining prelude to the adoption of a more fully geometrizing abstract style.

The following step in this direction was taken with *Heroic Movement* (plate 3), a canvas dated 1916 and exhibited in the spring of that year.[12] The preceding "abstract expressionism" was now refined into a taut configuration of color areas enclosed within "cloisonist" outlines reminiscent of Art Nouveau. Qua style this singular painting relates to the work of several minor Dutch artists who had visited Paris and who, apparently in some relationship to Otto Freundlich,[13] had evolved a relatively pure form of abstraction based upon curvilinear outlines and "orphic" coloration. Van Doesburg's design is similarly reductive in spirit, with expressively visible brushwork largely eliminated and the choice of colors restricted to evenly coated planes of red,

[8] See esp. "Proeve tot Nieuwe Kunstkritiek: Kandinsky," *De Eenheid*, Dec., 6, 1913, and *De Schilder De Winter en zijn Werk*.

[9] A tract Van Doesburg regularly quotes in his writings; see esp., chs. VI and VII. See also *TvD*, ill. A6, for another example of this influence.

[10] In *De Nieuwe Beweging in de Schilderkunst*, first published summer 1916, without ills., in *De Beweging*.

[11] *De Stijl*, VII, (1926), 73/74, p. 17.

[12] At *De Anderen*, no. 6. Van Doesburg twice dated a pastel version of this subject theme (*TvD*, ill. A49) to 1913, but the inscriptions occur on the mounting of the drawing and quite likely comprise later additions (the early signatures are uniformly a monogram) involving an error of memory.

[13] See M. Hoogendoorn, "Nederlanders in Parijs," *Museumjournaal*, XVII, (Dec. 1972), 6, pp. 247–253. Van Doesburg would have been familiar with the works exhibited by several of these painters beginning in 1913 at *De Onafhankelijken* in Amsterdam.

blue, green and yellow. A totally abstract approach is just barely avoided by the residual silhouette of a strutting, web-footed fowl with puffed-out chest which constitutes the central compositional motif and in part explains the title of the painting. In any case, this unusual example of biomorphic abstraction may be considered the swan song of attachment to organically expressive form within Van Doesburg's career.

A more definitive stage in the development of geometric abstraction was reached in a cohesive group of four other paintings all dated 1916; namely, *Triangular Composition: Still Life Motif* (plate 4), two similar subjects, and *Tree* (plate 5).[14] Rather than manifesting a predominant indebtedness to either Mondrian or Van der Leck, these works were intended as geometrically schematized transformations of typical Cézannesque or Cubist still life and landscape subjects, the mundane themes of which help to preclude an expressive lyricism that otherwise might occur due to the use of Orphic Cubist coloration.[15] Their eclectic derivation notwithstanding – and one could adduce additional influences from Severini, Archipenko, Toorop and even Chagall[16] – *Triangular Composition* and *Tree* fully assert the artist's growing powers of inventive synthesis. Apart from the still decipherable subject references, these paintings embody principles of "mathematically" defined form, including a background grid division in each, which are as advanced toward the ideal of pure geometric abstraction as the compositional conceptions of a comparable date by Mondrian and Van der Leck. To be sure, considering the minimal personal contact likely to have occurred among the three men before late spring, 1916, at the earliest, the question of influence in any direction is here less important than an explanation of the primary intention of each artist.

[14] The *Triangular Composition* was misdated to 1915 in *De Nieuwe Beweging*, but it and another "Cubist" *Still Life* (known only from ill. X in *De Stijl*, I, (March 1918), 5, likely figured among "Paintings 1–3" (all sub-titled "still-life motif") present as nos. 1–3 at *De Anderen*, May–June, 1916 ("No. 2" is inscribed *verso* on *Triangular Composition*). Another painting quite similar in style, composition and motif to the here cited "still life" paintings and also dated 1916 recently appeared on the Paris art market (photograph kindly supplied by Joop Joosten, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). The *Tree* (now sometimes known as "Three Houses") was first exhibited as No. 82 at *De Onafhankelijken*, Nov.–Dec., 1916.

[15] Whatever influence of Robert Delaunay's "disks" is present in the *Triangular Composition* may have been derived indirectly through reproductions or minor Dutch followers. In fact, Van Doesburg, in a transcribed lecture datelined Utrecht, Oct. 30, 1915, and published as "De Ontwikkeling der Moderne Schilderkunst," *Drie Voordrachten over de Nieuwe Beeldende Kunst*, p. 21, incorrectly cites Delaunay as a "physical" rather than an "orphic" Cubist in reference to Apollinaire's famous categories.

[16] On the basis of Van Doesburg's illustration of works by these masters in *De Nieuwe Beweging*, where, for example, *Triangular Composition* is juxtaposed with Severini's *De Modiste* of 1912.

Van Doesburg's chief concern in these works was a marriage of his painting style with more theoretical and historical considerations. Symptomatically, his involvement with the Cubo-Futurist ambient had been mostly second-hand, having been based as much upon the reading of theoretical tracts and art historical studies as upon any prolonged experimentation with this general stylistic mode. This is the message one repeatedly receives from Van Doesburg's early writings, which typically comprise an historical analysis of previous art forms terminating with a presentation of certain theoretical implications for the present. In his essays written approximately in 1916 the specific emphasis is upon resolving a residual respect for Kandinsky with a resolute conversion to the presumed principles of Cézanne and Cubism. A predication of the mathematical bases imputably underlying all art forms in greater or lesser degree is inherent to this analysis. At one point Cézanne is credited with having arrived finally at a dependence upon five basic forms of solid geometry, and the Cubists are praised for having destroyed perspective and having replaced forms in nature with their artistic equivalents, the mathematically pure forms of plane geometry.[17] Ironically, in his analysis of Cubism Van Doesburg may have remained indebted to Kandinsky, whose association of both Cézanne and Cubism with "the mystical triangle" might help explain the large centered triangular shapes found within *Triangular Composition* and *Tree*.[18] Likewise, Apollinaire's linking of "scientific" Cubism with geometry[19] also would have stimulated Van Doesburg to accept this preconception as a working axiom. In any case, these paintings of 1916 appear to reflect perfectly Van Doesburg's contemporary art theory in which flat geometric planes, although derived from forms of nature, are said to reflect as well the supposed discovery by the Cubists that Universal Beauty and God (or "the Godly") are identical.[20] While by no means a conventionally religious person or as deeply involved with the Theosophic movement as were Mondrian and Kandinsky,[21] Van Doesburg in 1916 nonetheless continued to

[17] *Drie Voordrachten*, p. 20.

[18] See *Concerning the Spiritual*, esp. ch. VI, note on Cézanne's "Female Bathers," a version of which was illustrated in *De Nieuwe Beweging*.

[19] However, Van Doesburg again confuses Apollinaire's original categories by attributing an abstract and mathematical basis to "physical" and "intuitive" rather than "scientific" Cubism.

[20] In *De Nieuwe Beweging*, pp. 24, 27 and 40; see also Van Doesburg's "De Nieuwe Stijl in de Schilderkunst," *De Avondpost*, May 2, 1916.

[21] As late as spring 1916 (in "De Nieuwe Stijl"), Van Doesburg praised Theosophy for possessing the same "new spiritual consciousness" which was serving the creation of a new universal style in art. Conversely, in a footnote to the 1917 edition of *De Nieuwe Beweging*, p. 39, he attacked any "quasi-supersensory or astral" manner of painting, by which the Theosophic paintings of De Winter almost certainly were meant (for De Winter, see Ineke Spaander, "Janus de Winter," *Museumjournaal*, XVII, (1972), 6, pp. 297–302).

share a conviction that artistic and religious pursuits are closely related. In publishing this view, he doubtless provided Mondrian a reason to think that eventual collaboration might prove fruitful.

When Van Doesburg finally did accept direct stimulus from one of his future *De Stijl* colleagues, the unavoidable choice was not Mondrian but Van der Leck. Whereas Mondrian throughout 1916 continued to define the elements of line, plane and color without strict recourse to regular geometric configurations,[22] mathematically sharp dividing edges and flat planes of color constituted a hallmark of Van der Leck's penultimate figural style. From the investigations of R.W. Oxenaar, we now know that Van Doesburg visited The Hague in the autumn of 1916, where he saw such Van der Leck paintings as *Dock Labor* (plate 6) and *The Storm*.[23] It is therefore not difficult to understand how Van Doesburg's *Card Players* (plate 7) of 1916–1917, despite a patently Cézanne subject derivation, embodies the same Egyptianizing, two-dimensional mural-like conception of design found in the Van der Leck models. Indeed, even Mondrian was later to acknowledge a debt to the flat planes of pure color in the schematic figural works from circa 1915–early 1916 of Van der Leck.[24] Admittedly, Mondrian's use of this source was for the creation during late 1916–1917 of his first abstract compositions not based ultimately upon some previously used natural motif, whereas *Card Players*, no less than *Dock Labor*, is still readily decipherable as a representation of human behavior. Yet Van Doesburg's style is now virtually purified of those remnants of expressively visible brushwork, tonal shading and *repoussoir* spatial effects still present in *Triangular Composition* and *Tree*. For this achievement it is clearly the example of Van der Leck rather than Mondrian that we must credit.

The next stage in Van Doesburg's stylistic development is difficult to plot with great chronological precision, but an enhanced relationship to the contemporary work of both Van der Leck and Mondrian now becomes evident. On December 31, 1916, Van Doesburg reported a visit together with

[22] For the chronological development of Mondrian's early abstract style, see J. M. Joosten, "Mondrian: Between Cubism and Abstraction," exh. cat. *Piet Mondrian Centennial Exhibition*, pp. 53–66, and J.M. Joosten and R.P. Welsh, "The Birth of De Stijl, Part I: Piet Mondrian," *Artforum*, XI, (April 1973), 8, pp. 50–59 and esp. plates 3, 4 and 6 (hereafter cited "De Stijl I"). Van Doesburg knew Mondrian's work executed during the early war years from public exhibitions in 1915 and 1916, and later (*Drie Voordrachten*, p. 90) he credited Mondrian in 1913 with having given "the first powerful thrust" to the evolution of a "new plastic creativity" based upon the cultivation of "painting as painting."

[23] See R.W. Oxenaar, "The Birth of De Stijl, Part II: Bart van der Leck," *Artforum*, XI, (June 1973), 10, p. 43 and col. ill. p. 37 (hereafter cited "De Stijl II").

[24] *De Stijl*, dernier numéro (Jan. 1932), p. 48.

the Hungarian born artist, Vilmos Huszar, to the Kröller-Müller collection in The Hague, where he had admired the most recent work of Van der Leck, particularly the *Mine Triptych*.[25] This and such related paintings as *Composition No. 5: Donkey Riders* (plate 9) inevitably would have revealed themselves to Van Doesburg as evidence of a newly found unity in the work of Van der Leck and Mondrian, both then residing in Laren north of Utrecht. In these paintings Van der Leck clearly had expanded the minimal linear syntax of Mondrian's "plus and minus" style from circa 1914–1916 into a pattern of rectilineated red, blue and yellow color bars set normally upon a pristine white ground surface.[26] Given this degree of abstraction, the figural content of, for example, the *Donkey Riders* would have appeared virtually undecipherable to the viewer without aid of the relatively realistic preliminary studies. In the final composition only the two animals seen in profile, facing the viewer's left and placed bottom center and right, might be deciphered from the title alone. The problem might have been less acute for Van Doesburg, of course, who further could have presumed that figural motifs continued to inspire the latest "abstractions" of Mondrian as well.[27]

Support for this assumption is provided in a canvas by Van Doesburg's friend Huszar, *Composition II: The Skaters* (plate 10), which bears the date "Feb. 1917" and thus appears to represent an almost immediate response to the most recent compositions of Van der Leck viewed two months earlier in The Hague. Although the loosely ovoid grouping of color planes within the picture plane is somewhat reminiscent of Mondrian's "plus and minus" style, the sixteen variously posed, diminutive abstractions of ice skaters which comprise the figural content of this painting are closer in conception to Van der Leck. Apart from the choice of red and green (that is, complementary) hues for the color planes rather than the Mondrian and Van der Leck preferred primaries, red, blue and yellow, Huszar's subject theme, though traditional to Netherlandish painting, is of a mundane genre character unconnected to the esoteric spiritual content sought by Mondrian.

[25] "De Stijl II," p. 43 and ills. pp. 38–39.

[26] E.g., ibid., col. ill. p. 41. Evidence that Van Doesburg grasped the interdependence of the Laren painters in 1916 is contained in his juxtaposed illustration in *De Nieuwe Beweging* of the *Mine Triptych* and Mondrian's *Composition in Line* in unfinished condition ("De Stijl I," plate 6).

[27] Since Mrs. Kröller-Müller on Dec. 11, 1916, requested Van der Leck to send the preliminary studies for his new abstract paintings, these might have arrived by the time of Van Doesburg's visit on December 31. Moreover, as late as Jan. 1918, Van Doesburg published in *De Stijl* (I, 3, pp. 33–35) an "aesthetic consideration" by Huszar of Mondrian's illustrated *Composition with Color Planes on White Ground* ("De Stijl I," col. ill. plate 9) in which it was incorrectly assumed that the composition evolved from a particular natural motif.

The direct indebtedness of Van Doesburg to the late 1916 style of Van der Leck is most apparent in *Russian Dance*, although this painting usually is attributed in date to 1918. In any case, it utilizes the color lines native to Van der Leck but foreign to the exclusive definition of lines in black by Mondrian during the early *De Stijl* years. Whatever the actual date of his own initial indebtedness to either Laren painter, it is significant that Van Doesburg chose to illustrate the *Donkey Riders* by Van der Leck rather than a work by Mondrian in the inaugural issue of *De Stijl* published in October 1917. Perhaps one should here again merely assume that Van Doesburg, in fact correctly, considered the works by Van der Leck viewed in December, 1916, as representing a novel, indeed revolutionary, stylistic manner evolved jointly with Mondrian. Undoubtedly, it was initially the impact of Van der Leck which prompted both Van Doesburg and Huszar finally to abandon a vestigial involvement with Cubo-Futurist style.[28] Instead, both were now to seek an innovative abstract mode which, though based in The Netherlands, would eventually constitute *the style* of the international avant-garde, as the name of the group's periodical was to imply. In managing to secure the cooperation of Mondrian and Van der Leck in this effort by May 1917, Van Doesburg not only consolidated an artistic movement of major historical consequence, but also, by implication, won final acceptance of his own work as similar in intention to that of the two Laren artists.[29]

At least initially for Van Doesburg in 1917, increased familiarity with the work of Mondrian appears to have produced increased dependence. This influence is most notable in several paintings composed from rectangular planes of color placed flat upon a continuous ground plane. As such they relate conceptually to the three paintings exhibited by Mondrian in May 1917, and to his related series of "compositions in color planes" from the same year.[30] Although sometimes actually thought to have influenced Mondrian,[31] such works by Van Doesburg as *The Three Graces* (plate 12) which was

[28] For illustrations of Huszar's geometrizing Cubo-Futurist style circa 1915–1916, see *Drie Voordrachten*, p. 91, and Ankie de Jongh, "De Stijl," *Museumjournaal*, XVII, (1972), 6, p. 271. The 1916 date affixed to Huszar's painting which reproduces his cover design for the *De Stijl* periodical (now on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague) is clearly too early, since the title of the journal was not selected, at least definitively, before spring 1917. Significantly, as late as May 21, 1917, Mondrian could write Van Doesburg that he was not yet acquainted with the work of Huszar, who lived in Voorburg near The Hague.

[29] I.e., in his letter of May 21, Mondrian announced the near completion of enough articles for a year of monthly issues of "your periodical," of which both he and Van der Leck agreed Van Doesburg should be sole editor (Baljeu, p. 25, note 3, cites a similar letter of May 17 by Van der Leck).

[30] E.g., "De Stijl I," plates 7–10.

[31] Cf., G.H. Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880–1940*, p. 323.

exhibited in the summer of 1917, and *The Cow* not only are antedated conceptually by Mondrian's work from the winter of 1916–1917,[32] but are typically informed by subject references already banished from the working method of the older artist. *The Cow*, in particular, evolved from a series of progressively less naturalistic (or more abstracted) pencil and gouache studies in a manner analogous to that used in 1916–1917 by Van der Leck, but abandoned in Mondrian's "compositions in color planes" if not already in his three works exhibited in the spring of 1917.

One may grant that the figural reference of *The Three Graces* is undecipherable for want of known preliminary studies, and the title might well represent little more than a metaphor for the use of the three primary colors.[33] Nevertheless, as very likely the first major essay by Van Doesburg in a basically non-figurative, geometrically pure form of abstract painting, this canvas is all the more striking for the synthesis of Mondrian and Van der Leck influences which it comprises. While following the wings of the *Mine Triptych* in the use of a black overall ground plane and while further departing from Mondrian habit through the inclusion of white as well as primary hues in the color planes, Van Doesburg also complicates matters by so proportioning his color areas as to render difficult a conceptual distinction between "lines" and "planes." Yet, the general sense of indebtedness in this nonetheless idiosyncratic work is weighted more to Mondrian than to Van

[32] In a letter of Jan. 16, 1917, to the critic H.P. Bremmer (published in J.M. Joosten, "Documentatie over Mondriaan (3)," *Museumjournaal*, XIII, (1968), 6, pp. 323–324), Mondrian reports considerable time spent and progress upon five paintings, which were clearly the three works exhibited in spring 1917, and two of the small "compositions with color planes" (for ills., see note 30, above). Although the latter category of work was not exhibited publicly until spring 1918, it could have been known to Van Doesburg from a spring 1917 trip to Laren, at which time contact with Mondrian was on the increase, or from photographs sent to Leiden (mentioned in a Mondrian letter of July 7, 1917). Perhaps symptomatically, the *Three Graces* (i.e., as cat. no. 8, "Composition 5; motif: The Three Graces") was exhibited at the *Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen*, Domburg, July–August 1917. Subsequent designation of this work and *The Cow* as, respectively, "Compositions 7 and 8" suggests the likely chronological sequence and proximity of the two paintings.

[33] See note 27, above. Even if one believes in a compositional derivation of the three works by Mondrian exhibited Spring 1917 (i.e., the *Composition in Line* and *Compositions in Color A* and *B*) from the plus and minus style works of 1914–1916, which do derive from identifiable subject motifs, the lack of preliminary charcoal drawings in the former group of paintings comprises a striking break with previous working habits. Moreover, since two of the "compositions with color planes," from which any sense of cohesive motif is missing, were begun in late 1916 before Van Doesburg had viewed Van der Leck's *Mine Triptych*, Mondrian's precedence in relation to non-figurative abstraction appears certain. While granting the apparent absence of preliminary studies for *The Three Graces*, an example of this theme from earlier art was illustrated by Van Doesburg in *Drie Voordrachten*, p. 96, and the painting was called a "motif" when exhibited in 1917 (see preceding note).

der Leck, as is the case with *The Cow* and with *Composition XI* from early 1918 now at the S.R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.[34]

Mondrian's chronological precedence in the creation of geometrically abstract "compositions with color planes" notwithstanding, Van Doesburg's own examples are by no means sycophantic copies. For example, in *The Cow* he included green along with the three primaries, and in general he shows a tendency to explore more complicated relationships of line, plane and color than was typical of Mondrian, who moreover often repeated compositional types in series. In contrast, each of Van Doesburg's several compositions involving color planes (or lines) on a continuous ground appears to experiment with differing relationships among the formal components.[35] Always restless in pursuit of the novel, Van Doesburg's haste in assimilating and then abandoning his chosen models was as typical of him as was the slow, relentless pace at which both Mondrian and Van der Leck worked in single-minded devotion to a steadfastly held ideal.

A second direction taken in the art of Van Doesburg in 1917 is epitomized in the *Abstract Transformation of the Card Players* (plate 8). Probably executed during the latter half of the year,[36] this large canvas (it measures more than a meter in each dimension) offers a composition so complex in the multiplicity of rectilineated components that an unscrambling of the subject reference is impossible without access to the antecedent version of *Card Players*. The intended historico-ideological tribute to Cézanne implied by the title *Abstract Transformation* is effectively effaced by a kinetic dynamics of line, plane and color (or, rather, non-color, since only several small blue planes intrude within an otherwise black, white and gray painting) which is only marginally derived from the antecedent version dated 1916–1917. The compositional ambiguities are such, in fact, that a successful visual unraveling of figure-ground relationships is virtually precluded – one suspects intentionally. While one might assume that the several vertical rows of four small

[34] Illustrated as A17 in *TvD*, this canvas is dated 1918 and represents the only abstract composition of that year for which no studies with identifiable subject motifs are known. The irregular dispersal of its component rectangular planes suggests indebtedness to Mondrian's "compositions with color planes," esp. the 1917 gouache reproduced in *De Stijl*, I, (Jan. 1918), 3, ill. no. VI (i.e., "De Stijl I," plate 9).

[35] Beginning as early as 1916, his listings in exhibition catalogues and illustrated publications involved a linear sequence for major works, which he maintained until his death as if certifying with each new compositional experiment further evidence of progress in forming the basis of a *catalogue raisonné* of his own painted oeuvre. Late in life he recapitulated this sequence in notebook copies of his major paintings (artist's estate).

[36] Dated 1917 *recto*, an exhibition label *verso* designates this canvas as "Composition 9," which immediately precedes *Composition X* (*TvD*, A16 and Baljeu, ill. p. 30), a work dated 1918.

horizontal bars deriving from the card players' fingers in the original version provide a key for solving the pictorial riddle of the later painting, this is not actually the case, since there is little further consistency between the *Card Players* and *Abstract Transformation* in identifying various body parts with either light or dark planes. Instead, one comes to realize finally that there is no true background as distinct from the figural configurations. Whereas in the lower areas of the *Abstract Transformation* one tends to read white (planes) against a dark (background) pattern, in the upper areas it is just as feasible to read dark against white. Little consolation is afforded the viewer by the fact that white can be found along all edges of the picture plane; and a double frame, a projecting black strip on the inner and an offset white strip on the outer perimeter, further emphasizes the artist's functionally ambiguous approach to the "form–space" (that is, figure–ground) relationship. As a total concept, this painting would not be out of place in an exhibition of so-called "op" or kinetic art of the 1960's. Within the early *De Stijl* movement, along with related essays by Huszar,[37] it constitutes an apparent anomaly which simultaneously illustrates Van Doesburg's capacity to develop without subservience to the styles of Mondrian or Van der Leck.

In his published comments upon two stylistically related paintings by Huszar from 1917, Van Doesburg also provides further insight into the theoretical preoccupations which accompanied his own *Abstract Transformation*. In discussing the illustration of Huszar's *Hammer and Saw* in the January 1918 issue of *De Stijl*, he described the opposing planes of color as constituting contrasting aesthetic metaphors for the respectively vertical movements of the hammer and horizontal movements of the saw. He explicitly denied that the color planes served as "positive elements of the painting on a negative background," adding that "through destruction of the background, an interaction takes place between the positive and negative, which is to say, between the color planes and the spatial ambient."[38] In discussing a second Huszar example of this kinetically motivated style, *Composition III: City*, Van Doesburg stresses the link to Severini's circa 1910 painting, *The Boulevard*, since both works express "the character... of the turbulent cityscape with its changing perspectives," although perhaps only Huszar accomplishes this in "an abstract manner." In further stressing the "compelling rhythmic movement" as well as the "balanced mutual relationships" within the Huszar painting, Van Doesburg doubtless was remembering

[37] E.g., the *Composition VI* reproduced in *De Stijl*, I, (April 1918), 6, p. 61, with its systematic confusion of positive and negative planar areas, presuming this to have represented the "woodcut" cited in *De Stijl*, I, (Oct. 1917), 1, p. 11, as the basis of the periodical's cover design.

[38] In reference to ill. no. VII in *De Stijl*, I, (1918), 3, pp. 35–36.

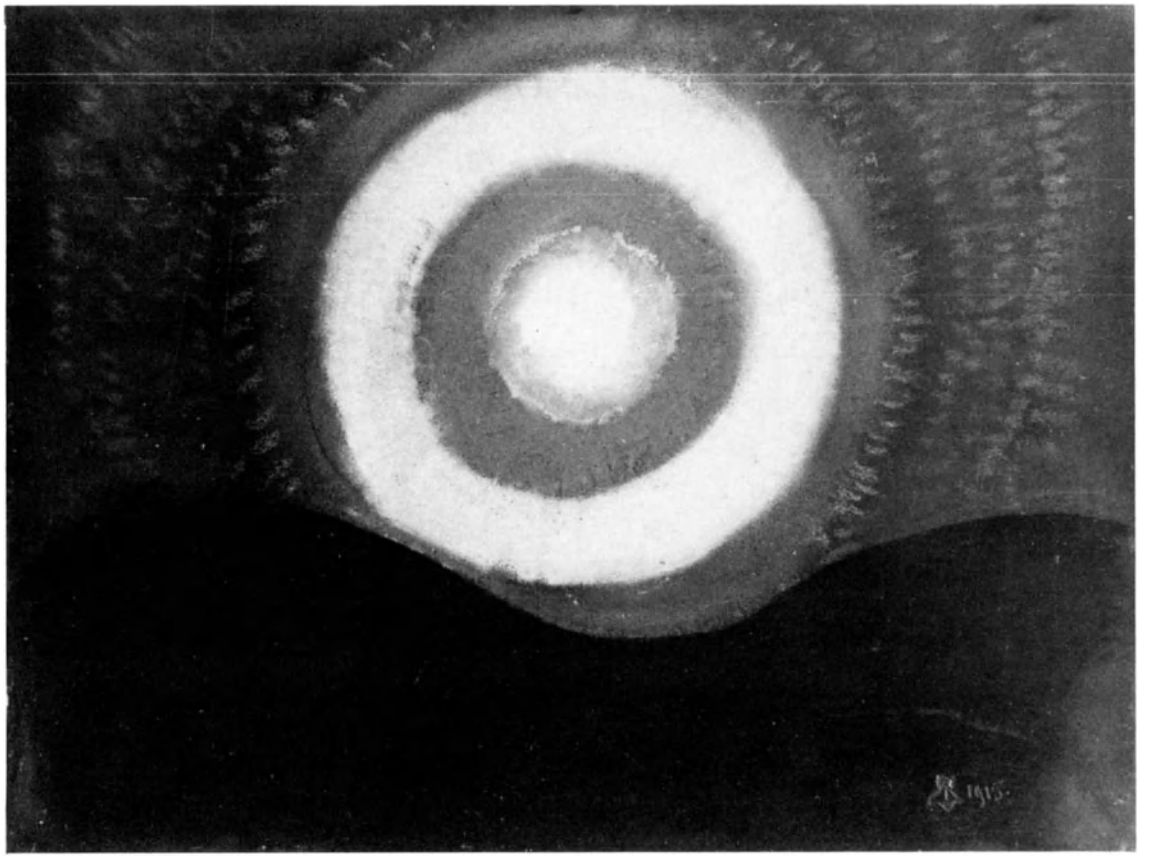


Plate 1. *Cosmic Sun*
Th. van Doesburg

Plate 2. *Blushing Girl with Buttercups*

Th. van Doesburg

Plate 3. *Heroic Movement*

Th. van Doesburg

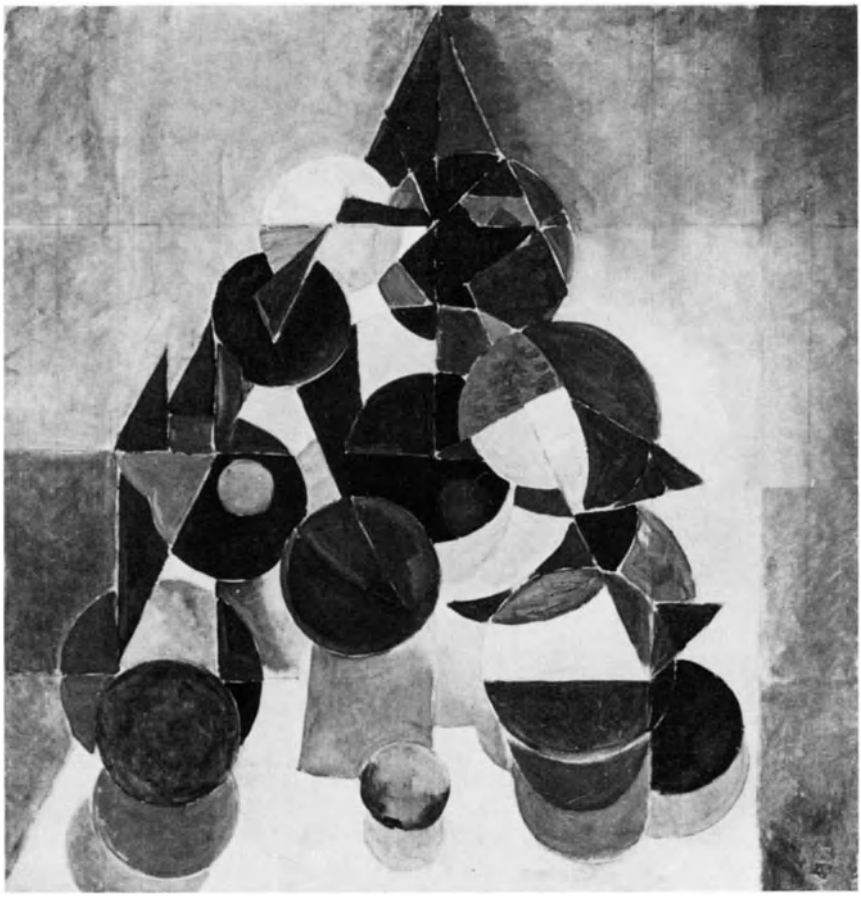


Plate 4. *Triangular Composition: Still Life Motif*

Th. van Doesburg

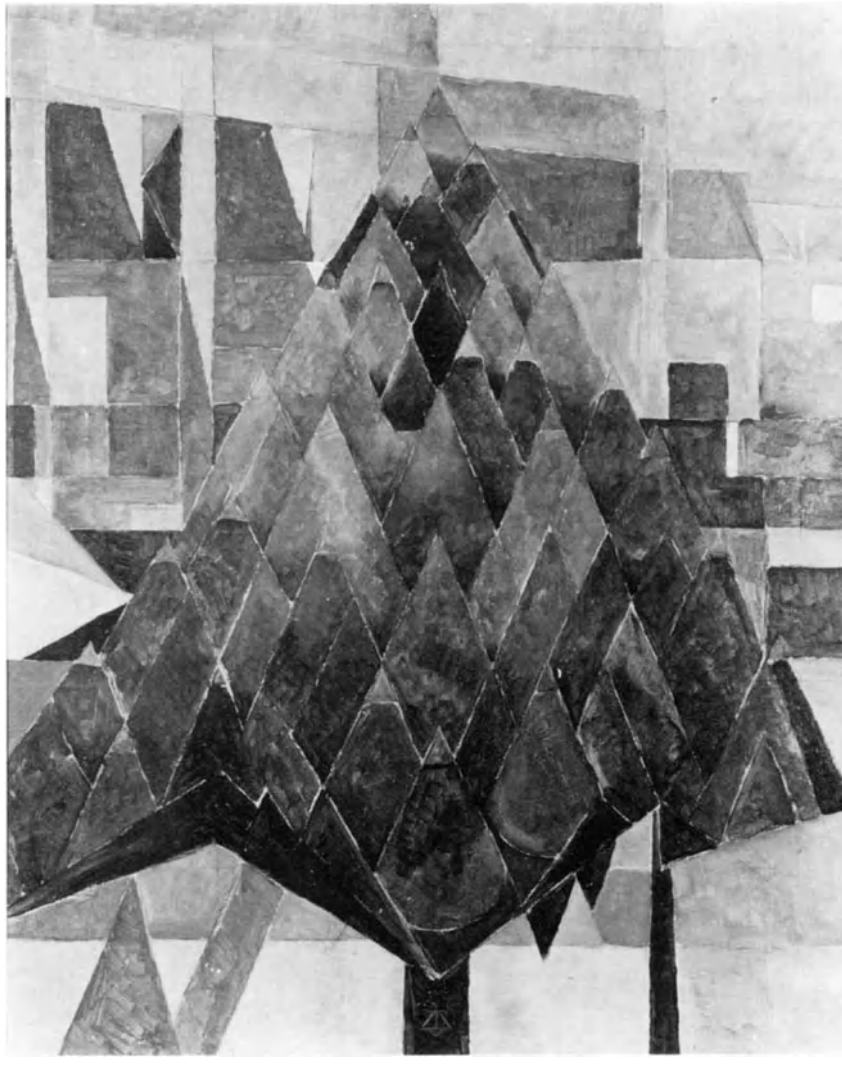


Plate 5. *Tree*

Th. van Doesburg

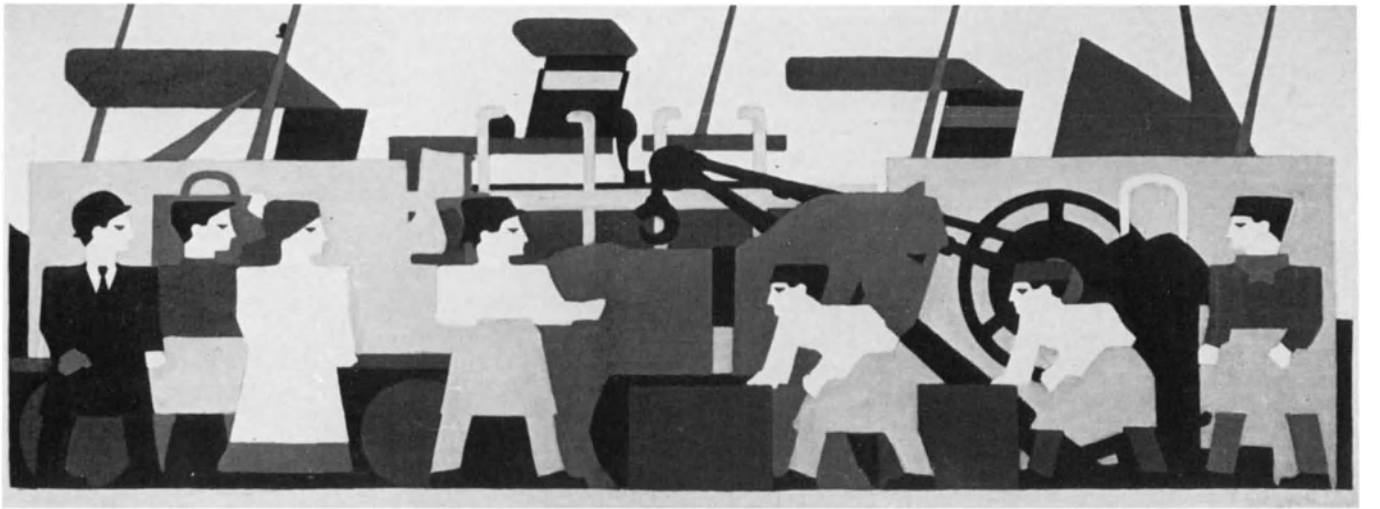


Plate 6. *Dock Labor*

Bart van der Leck

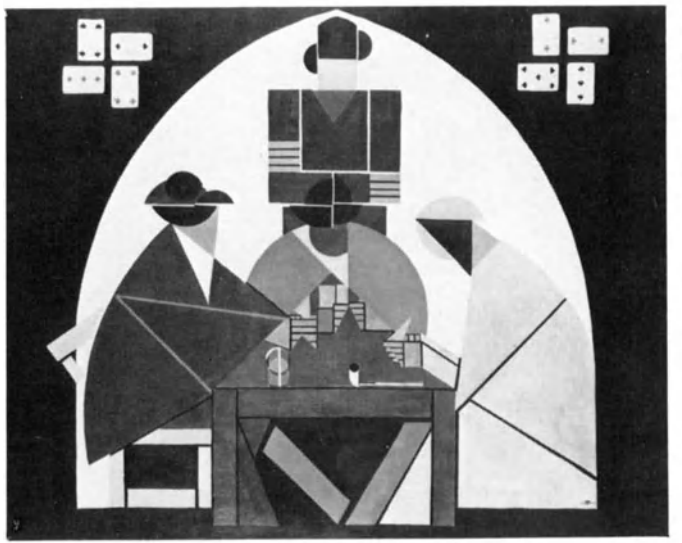


Plate 7. *Card Players*

Th. van Doesburg

Plate 8. *Abstract Transformation of the Card Players*

Th. van Doesburg

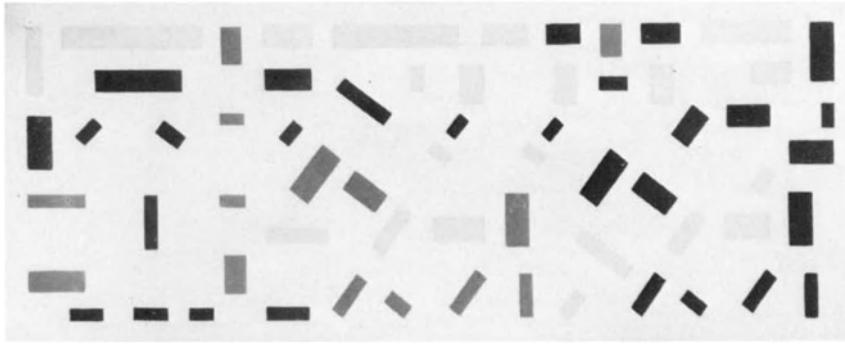


Plate 9. *Composition No. 5: Donkey Riders*

Bart van der Leck

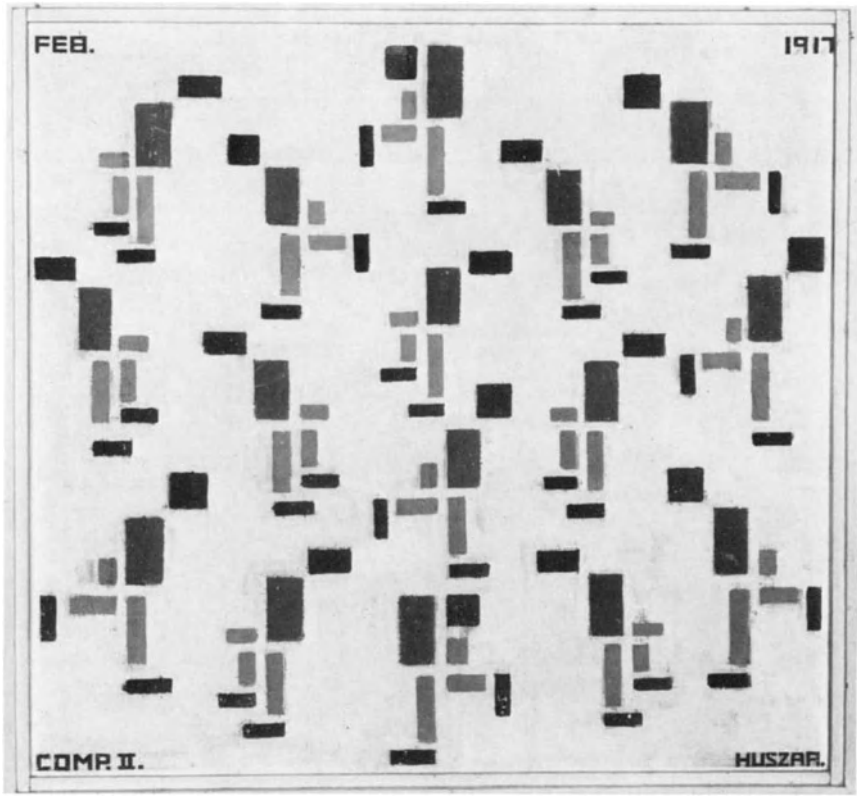


Plate 10. *Composition II: The Skaters*

Vilmos Huszar

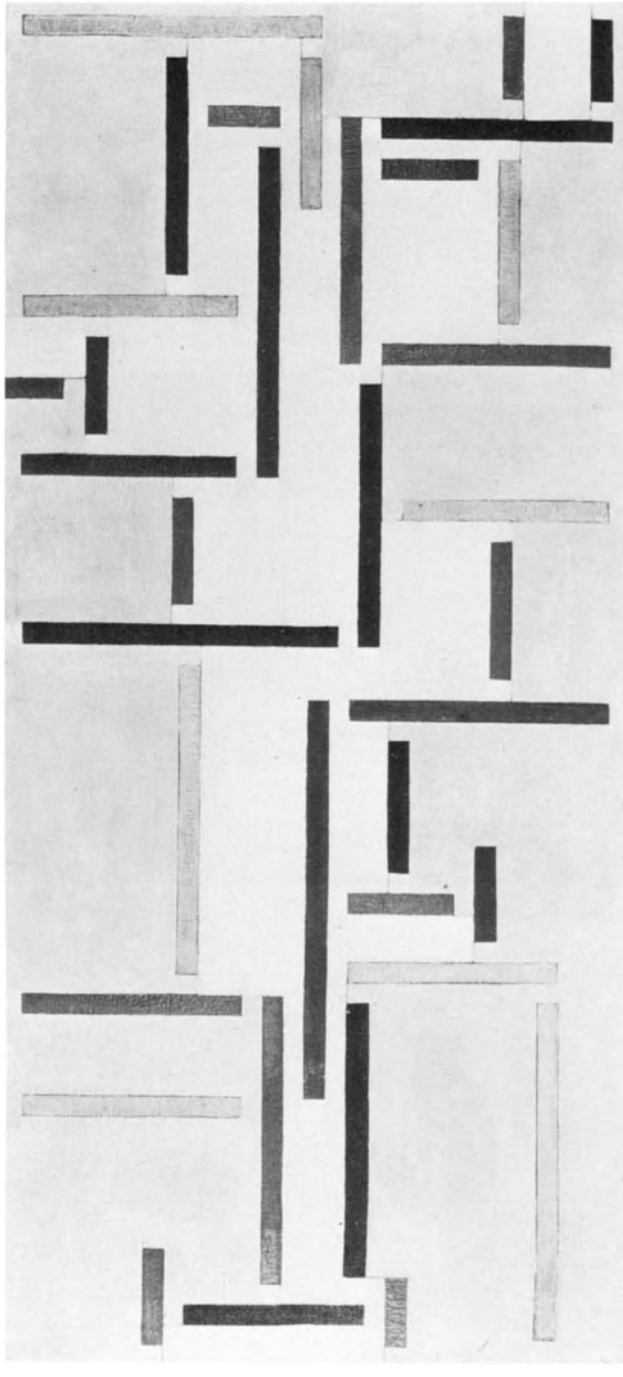


Plate 11. *Rhythms of a Russian Dance*

Th. van Doesburg

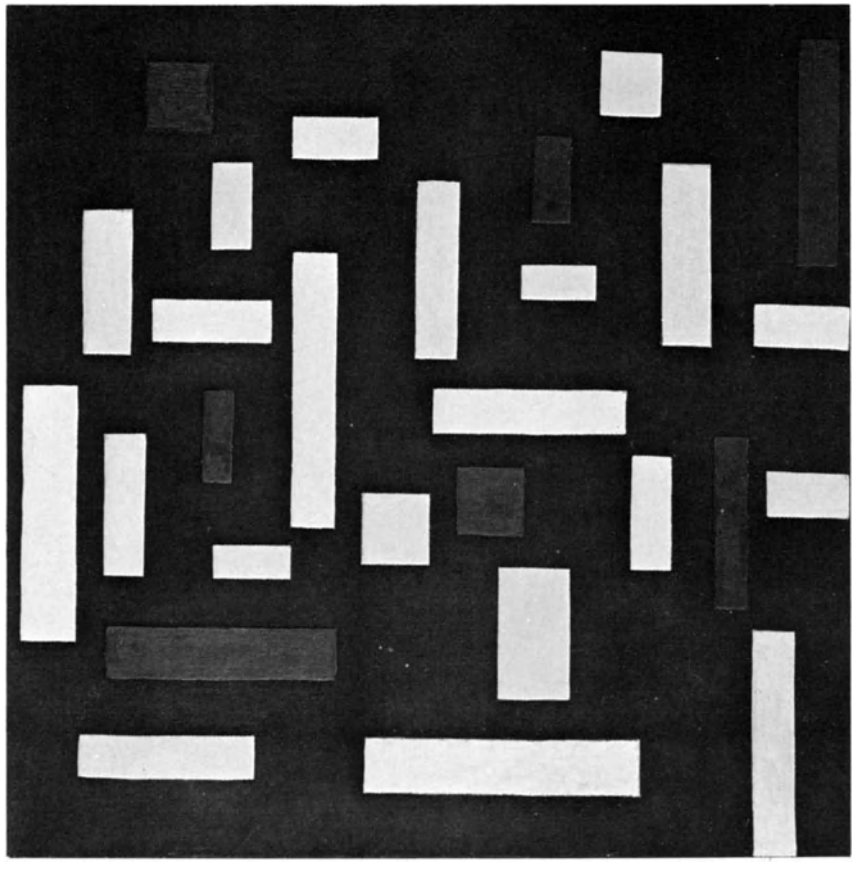


Plate 12. *The Three Graces* (also reproduced in color as the Frontispiece)

Th. van Doesburg

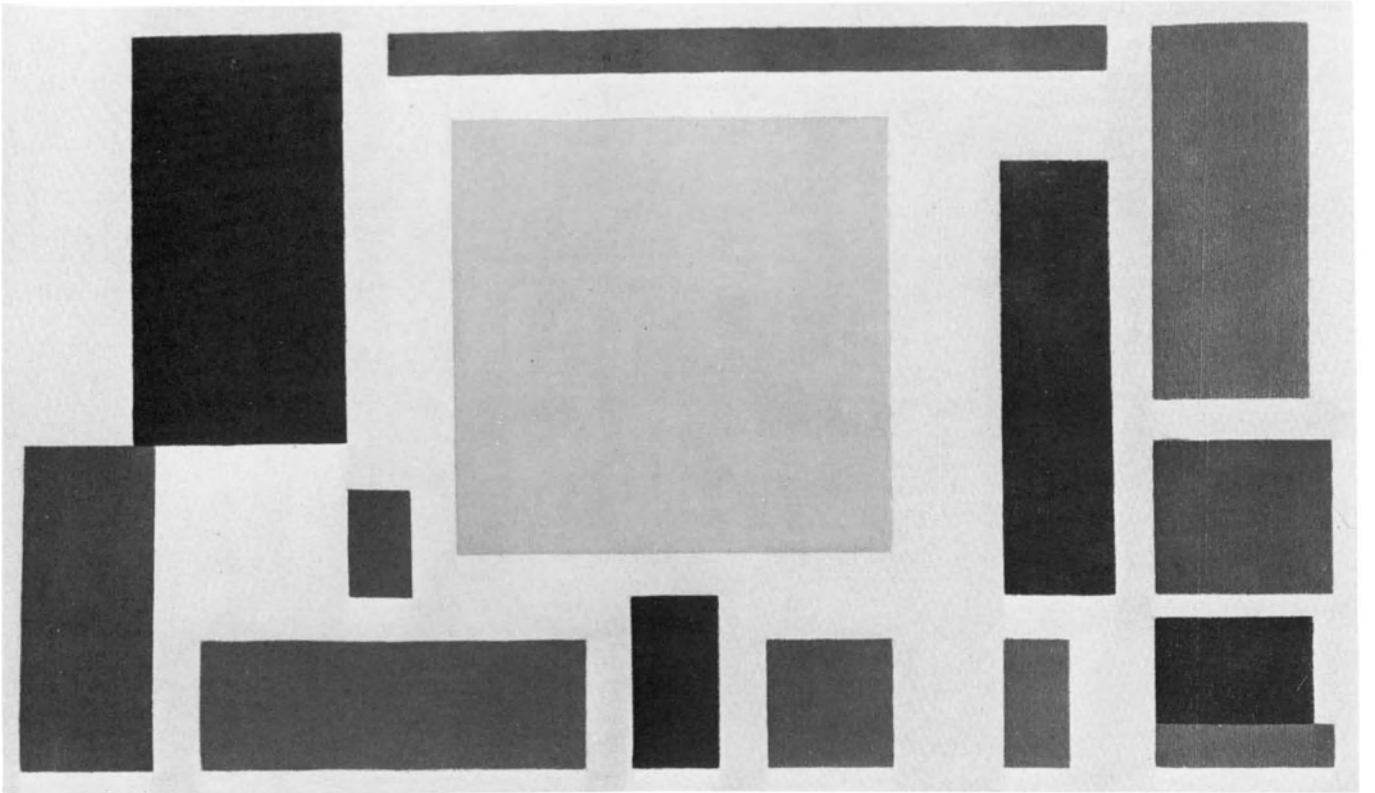


Plate 13. *The Cow*

Th. van Doesburg

Plate 14. *Tango*

Th. van Doesburg

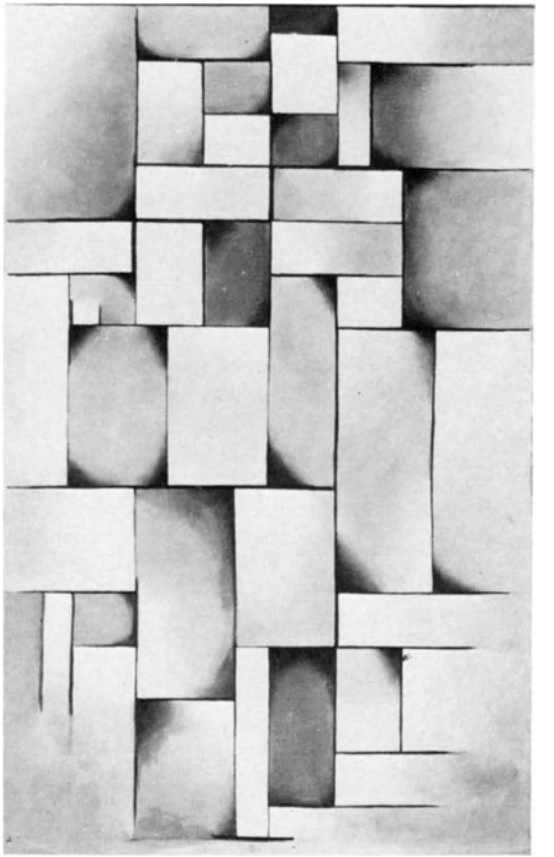


Plate 15.

Composition in Gray

Th. van Doesburg

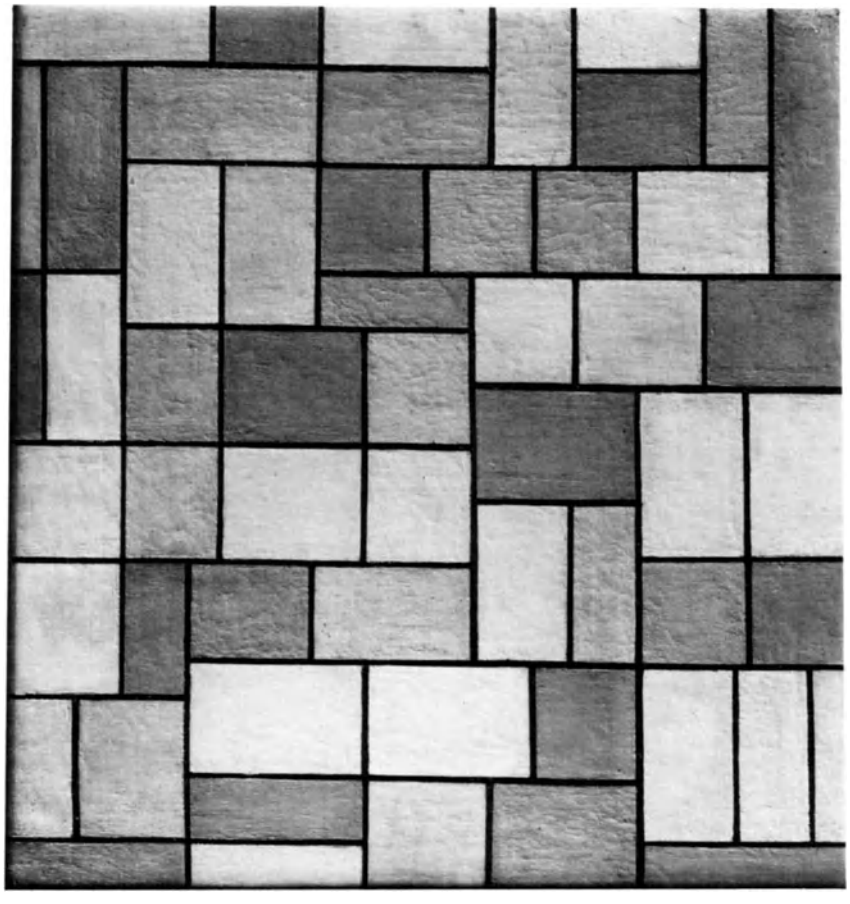


Plate 16. *Composition XVI: In Dissonances*

Th. van Doesburg

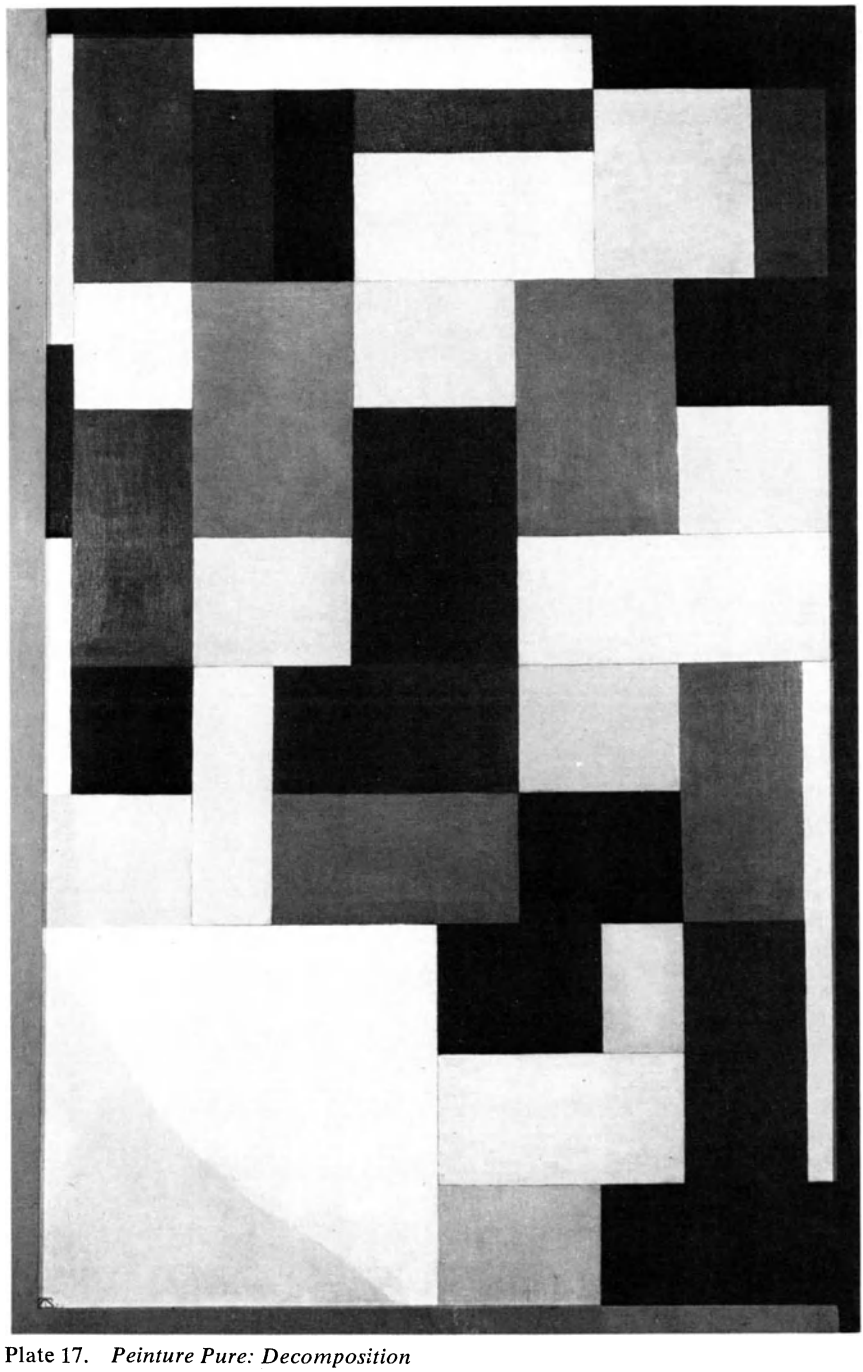


Plate 17. *Peinture Pure: Decomposition*

Th. van Doesburg

Plate 18.

Composition in White, Black and Gray

Th. van Doesburg

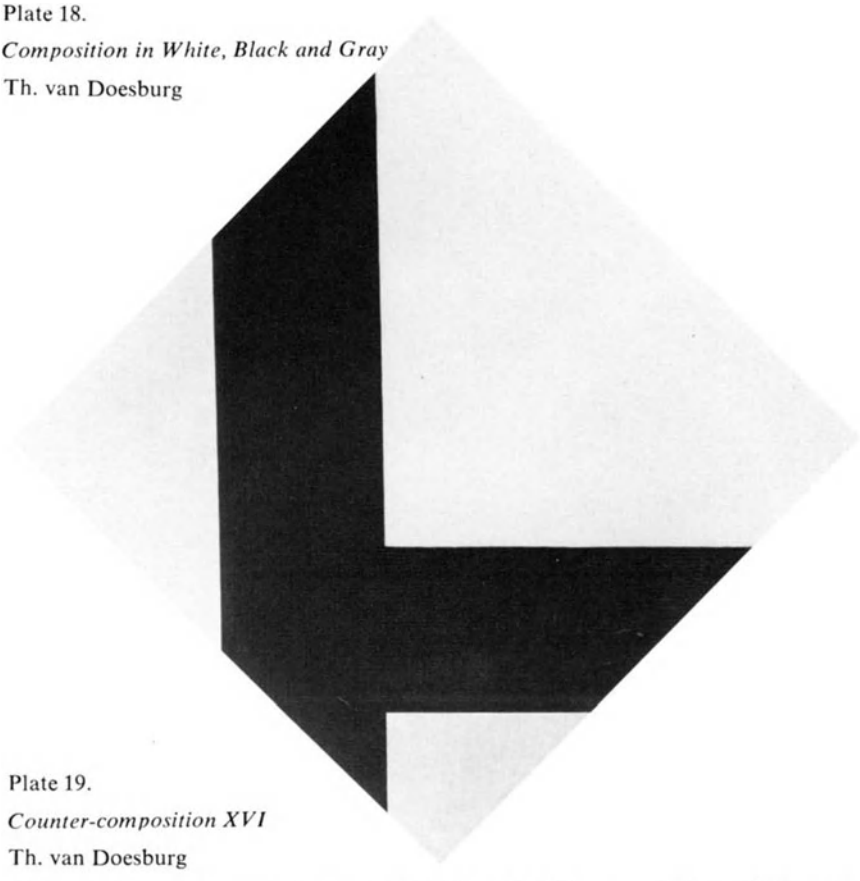
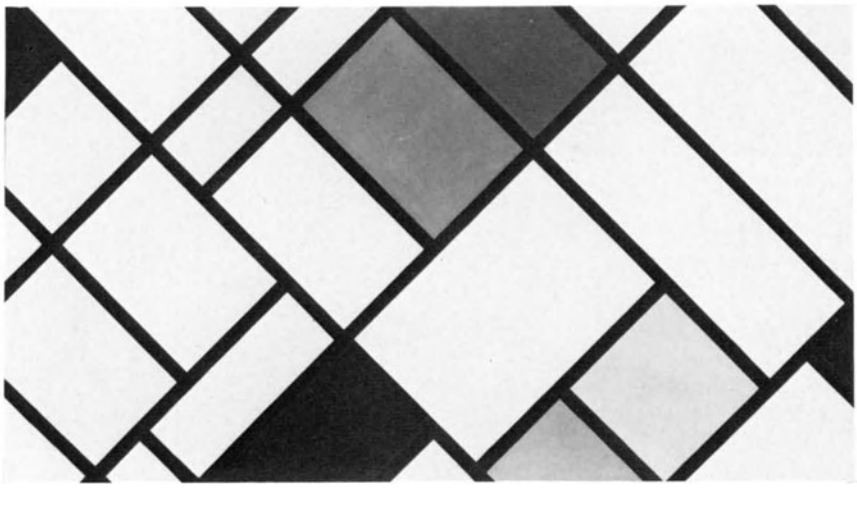


Plate 19.

Counter-composition XVI

Th. van Doesburg



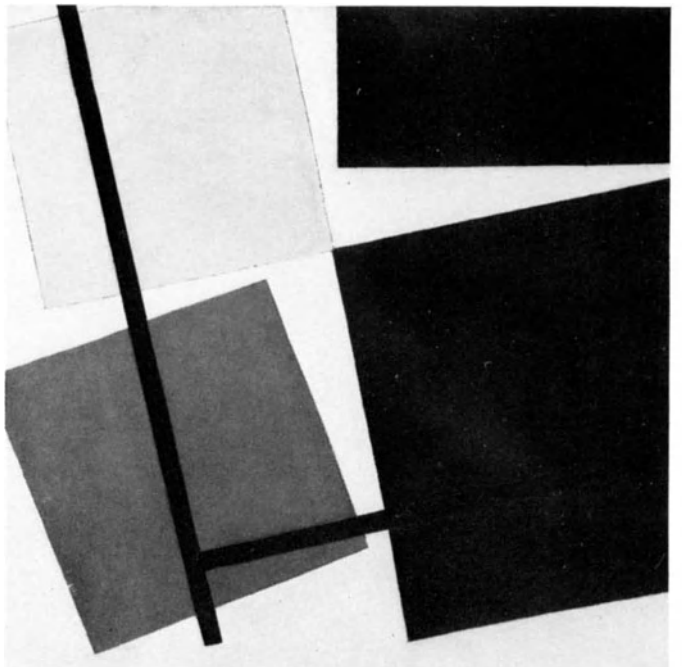


Plate 20. *Simultaneous Counter-composition*

Th. van Doesburg

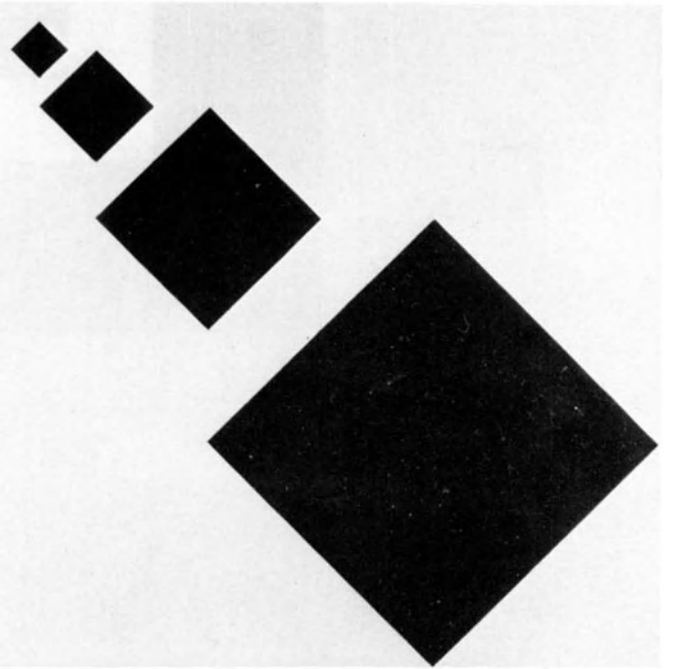


Plate 21. *Arithmetic Composition I*

Th. van Doesburg

one facet of his own painting in late 1917 as well.[39] Two things become clear from these quotations; namely the continuing interest of Van Doesburg and Huszar throughout 1917 in the theoretical conceptions, if not the peculiarities of style, of Italian Futurism and the relative independence from the influence of Mondrian and Van der Leck which this interest implies. For his part, Mondrian considered Severini merely a precursor of abstraction in art at best and, in correspondence with Van Doesburg from late 1917, excluded the Italian artist from those who truly represent Neo-Plasticism.[40]

The next fundamental change which occurred in the art of Van Doesburg brought a resolution of the figure–ground problem in a form of abstraction more closely linked with geometry than ever before. This was the use of an evenly spaced horizontal-vertical grid as the basis of planar compositions. These have become known popularly in the case of Mondrian as "the checkerboards," which he first introduced by the spring of 1918.[41] Van Doesburg again appears a follower in the adoption of this usage, since the majority of his several works dated or datable to 1918 still employ configurations of lines or planes placed more or less randomly against a visible or implied ground plane.[42] In overt form, a grid apparently appears initially within his production in the media of stained glass and floor tile decorations.[43] In paintings from 1918 it is restricted to a single major canvas, the *Composition in Gray* (plate 15), where it is scarcely recognizable. Indeed, due to considerable discrepancy in the sizes of component planes, to the scalloped shading effects and to several unterminated lines, the underlying grid comprising sixteen planar modules in each dimension might not be intuited if it were not for the existence of a related drawing in which such a grid is visible.[44] Neither would the uninitiated viewer suspect a subject derivation for this abstract exercise, since what the *De Stijl* artists had come to call "pure plastic relationships" among lines, planes and colors (in this instance, tones of gray) are here of paramount importance to the composition. Still, as for virtually all other paintings of 1918,[45] the internal planar divisions of *Composition in*

[39] In *Drie Voordrachten*, pp. 92–93, and ills. 22 and 27.

[40] In an undated letter, almost certainly written Dec., 1917.

[41] I.e., *Composition with Gray and Light Brown*; see R. P. Welsh, exh. cat. *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944*, nos. 86a and b, and "De Stijl I," p. 57.

[42] Apart from paintings already cited, see ill. no. XIII in *De Stijl*, II, (April 1919), 6, and ills. A19 and A21 in *TvD*, entitled respectively *Compositions X*, *XII* and *XIII*.

[43] I.e., see *De Stijl*, IV, (June 1921), 5, ill. p. 78, and floor for the *Summer Residence at Noordwijkerhout* designed by J. J. P. Oud (*Drie Voordrachten*, ills. 35, 37 and 38).

[44] Illustrated as "Composizione VIII," and attributed to 1917 in F. Menna, *Mondrian, Cultura e Poesia*, n.p.

[45] Preliminary versions with subject motifs for *Compositions X*, *XII*, *XIII* and *Russian Dance* are cited in *TvD* respectively as A15, A18, A20 and A57. The derivation of abstract

Gray, if examined closely, may be correlated with those of a drawing of the same year, in this instance, *Tango* (plate 14). The shared subject, if truly present, is more instructive as to the theme of "abstract rhythmic movement" which it uncovers than for any functional relationship in the execution of drawing and painting.[46] Hence, while depending upon Mondrian for the underlying grid format, the Van Doesburg painting, both for the radical asymmetry of its internal divisions and for the surviving spatial ambiguity of its principle of shading, contains an element of Futurist dynamics which the older colleague was at pains to mitigate in his own "checkerboards."[47]

The culmination of this development for Van Doesburg can be situated in very late 1918 or early 1919 and identified with *Composition XVI: In Dissonances* (plate 16). Although not as regularly divided as the immediately subsequent painting, *Composition XVII*,[48] which is a perfect square divided on the principle of ten modules in each direction, the *Composition XVI* can be read as a grid design of sixteen modules in each direction despite numerous misplacements of the linear intervals.[49] Whether we interpret *Composition XVI* to indicate that the grid was not yet fully accepted in principle or was accepted but here intentionally disrupted, it asserts its visual presence as forcefully as in contemporary examples by either Mondrian or Huszar,[50] and an explanation of its rationale is called for.

Fortunately, the artist himself has written extensively about this painting, which he described in 1926 as having closed off the period circa 1916–1918 and having witnessed his progress from "composition based on nature [that is, *Blushing Girl with Buttercups*] to composition based on painting."[51] A

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paintings from subject motifs in 1918 was illustrated by Van Doesburg in *Drie Voordrachten*, p. 93, and *Grundbegriffe der Neuen Gestaltenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main, Oehmsdruck, 1925), ills. 16 and 17.

[46] Conceivably the *Composition in Gray* was the painting cited by Van Doesburg (postcard to J.J.P. Oud dated July 7, 1920) with the name "Tango" as substituted for the unfinished "Decomposition" at an exhibition at the Rotterdam Kunstkring, although other letters mention "three small canvases" (i.e. *TvD*, A30) as sent.

[47] In a letter of Dec. 12, 1917, hence during the period in which Mondrian conceived his first grid composition, he wrote that, although sympathetic, he was not yet ready to defend in print Van Doesburg's idea that "the negative" (presumably meaning the color black), represented the fourth dimension. While admitting that this element was included in his own work, he wrote that "I now obtain more unity in my work – and the balance which I seek."

[48] I.e., *TvD*, A25 (dated *verso* 1919), illustrated in *De Stijl*, IV, (Sept. 1921), 9, p. 129.

[49] The modular basis of this work is easily deciphered in a final compositional study (ill. 5 in article cited note 52, below), whereas it is intentionally dissembled in the *Composition XVI* itself, as in various paintings of the 1920's.

[50] A related grid painting by Huszar was reproduced in *De Stijl*, II, (Feb. 1919), 4, ill. no. VIIA. For Mondrian's comparable works, see Joosten, "De Stijl I," pp. 57–59.

[51] *De Stijl*, VII, (1926), 73/74, p. 17.

more extended exegesis was contained in an article from 1919, which, to be sure, he had entitled "From 'Nature' to 'Composition'."[52] The article was accompanied by eight illustrations including a photograph of the original figural motif (called "Girl in the Studio" and almost certainly representing his wife Lena),[53] six preliminary studies and the *Composition XVI* itself. Among the studies, two are "naturalistic" approximating the manners of Manet and Cézanne, a third is called "destructive" being more or less Cubo-Futurist in style[54] and the rest are progressively more geometrically pure versions of the final grid composition. As a record of personal stylistic development these illustrations were intended to stress the syncretic character of Van Doesburg's final achievement. In overcoming the limitations of Realist-Impressionist tradition, he had had to reconcile the classic harmony and balance of Cubism with the interest in the fourth dimension expressed by Apollinaire, Severini and the mathematician, Henri Poincaré. While now condemning the emotional expressionism of Kandinsky as "modish," he nonetheless insisted that his own art avoided mere "formalism" through the "creative intuition" of the artist in controlling his chosen means of "number, size and position." This search for "balanced relationships" also included the use of color, which, in this instance, resulted from an "inner experiencing" of the original motif as "two dissonant pairs: orange plus red and blue plus green." Naturalism and abstraction, Cubism and Futurism, figure and ground, color and form, form and line, mathematics and intuition, time and space – all polarities are so inseparably wedded in this marriage of "balanced equilibrium" that the artist was now prepared to present *Composition XVI* as a definitive first stage in the attainment of a truly universal modern style.

The art theory which supported his analysis of *Composition XVI* is as dualistic as the explanation of style. Van Doesburg repeatedly posits such distinctions as compositions "in the manner of nature" and "in the manner of art," art which expresses particularity (naturalism) as opposed to totality or universality (abstraction) and, of course, the basic spirit-matter duality. Yet, if his explanation for the illustrations accompanying the article on *Composition XVI* describes them as tracing a "process of emancipation for the spirit from the bonds of nature," his point of reference is less religious than philosophical in character. Whereas Mondrian, in contemporary essays for *De Stijl*, still placed religion above art, spoke approvingly of Theosophy

[52] I.e., "Van 'Natuur' tot 'Kompositie'," *De Hollandsche Revue*, XXIV, (1919), 8, 470–476.

[53] I.e., from a comparison from *ibid.*, ill. 1, with a photograph of Lena dating circa 1918 (ill. in Baljeu, p. 31).

[54] Perhaps influenced by Van der Leck's "destructive" drawings for the *Mine Triptych*; see "De Stijl II," ills. pp. 38–39 and text p. 43.

and to some extent employed its jargon, Van Doesburg's essay mentions neither religious nor social – not to say political – concerns as relative to the evolution of modern painting. Just as, beginning no later than 1916, his subject references to card players, landscapes, still life objects, dancers and a cow qualify as mundane in the extreme, his art theory concentrates almost exclusively upon aesthetic considerations. Iconographic discussion is totally missing, both for the subjects from nature and for the vertical-horizontal opposition, which Mondrian continued to envisage as the very essence of the spirit-matter duality. If there is any message in Van Doesburg's philosophic position, it is that history expresses itself most effectively through art. In the words with which he ended his late 1918 tract, *Klassiek-Barok-Modern*: "The development of modern art towards abstraction and universality (hence in its denial of external and individual appearances) has made it possible, through common effort and insight, to realize a collective style, which, rising above persons and nations, reflects the highest, deepest and most general demands for beauty among all people in a very concrete and real form of expression."[55]

Despite the high-minded ethical tone of this utopian aesthetic, its obvious unconcern with all forms of narrative and symbolic content in painting was bound to offend those who were emotionally or ethically attached to such values. Conversely, for those prepared to follow his historico-aesthetic argumentation, Van Doesburg's entreaty for an art devoid of all particularized meaning – religious, political or otherwise – would have harbored a deep appeal. Although ultimately frustrated in his hope of seeing *De Stijl* abstraction become dominant in European art, the relative successes which he did enjoy doubtless owed much to the new found clarity and simplicity of his artistic vision as formulated in the period 1918–1919.

Ironically, whereas Mondrian, its apparent discoverer among *De Stijl* artists, ceased to employ mathematical grid composition beyond circa 1920, with Huszar soon following,[56] Van Doesburg was to make this usage a lifelong habit and a source of constant renewal and change in his painting. That the frequency of its occurrence in his paintings of the nineteen twenties has gone virtually unnoticed in writings about the artist is explained by several

[55] The essay in this booklet was datelined "Leiden, December, 1918," but was first published in 1920.

[56] Mondrian's gradual abandonment of the "checkerboard" grid has been traced in R.P. Welsh, exh. cat. *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944*, pp. 174–185. Although grid composition was used as late as 1921 by Huszar in a *Glass Composition* illustrated and attributed to 1921 in *De Stijl*, V, (Dec. 1922), 12, n.p., it was exceptional in his painted oeuvre throughout his *De Stijl* period. Figural motifs, as with Van der Leck, are typically decipherable despite the use of geometric color planes on a white ground; see, e.g., De Jongh, "De Stijl," ill. p. 276, bottom.

factors. In his own published commentary the use of a modular grid was never specifically elucidated, very likely in part because of apprehension that it would be attacked as too mechanical a method for art and in part in the belief that the visually sensitive would perceive the usage by themselves. Above all, Van Doesburg so thoroughly varied his manner of incorporating either a full or partial modular grid within his later paintings that the approach taken in one major canvas was virtually never repeated in another. If we add that in a number of true modular paintings this element was quite effectively camouflaged in a variety of ways, then the seemingly random structure in Van Doesburg's late painted oeuvre will be revealed as more apparent than real. Since instances in which a modular grid is overtly visible speak for themselves,[57] the examples to be cited here have been drawn from the camouflaged or borderline cases.

The so-called *Peinture Pure* (plate 17) illustrates the difficulty in deciding whether a grid is fully or only partly present throughout the composition. Most of the color planes easily can be read as multiples of the small vertically aligned rectangle placed towards the lower right of the composition. However, certain other rectangles along the left and top canvas edges are not divisible into units having the approximate three to two proportion of the small unit lower right (even if one excludes the thin planar strips left, top and right, which may be thought to result from truncation of a larger composition). One is thus forced to choose between predicating an irregular grid system or one based on modules considerably smaller than any single rectangular unit found in the painting. Since Van Doesburg produced this work in the summer of 1920, not long after having visited Mondrian in Paris, the latter's ambiguity at this date toward the use of an overall grid composition may be thought to have had some effect.[58]

Contrarily, the non-Mondrian aspects of this painting are its most striking features. Both green and purple hues are included along with the three primaries, "lines" are not present as entities separate from the planar edges and the large square lower left is uneven in coloration. In fact, this last-mentioned feature indicates the iconoclastic intention of Van Doesburg, since it allows us to identify this painting with the "Decomposition" which he intended for exhibition in June 1920.[59] In correspondence he explained his

[57] See, e.g., *TvD*, ills. A27, A30, A34, A40, A44, A45, A46, and *De Stijl*, VI, 9, p. 121, and VII, 78, p. 92, in certain of which examples, however, a single dividing line has been displaced so as to camouflage the grid in part.

[58] In a letter of Feb. 24, 1920, *Van Doesburg* wrote from Paris to Oud in The Netherlands and reported his perambulations with Mondrian in the French capital.

[59] See note 46, above; although "Decomposition" was listed as no. 16 in the exh. cat. *La Section d'Or – Paris* (Rotterdam, June 24–July 4, and Amsterdam, Oct. 23–Nov. 7,

novelty in placing the compositional middle point outside the painting, which, of course, represented a radical break with western traditions in art.[60] Although asymmetrical composition had been a major feature of *De Stijl* painting since 1917 at the latest, this usage previously had been intimately linked with the principle of balanced equilibrium, which implied a sensed "middle point" for every composition. By leaving the asymmetry of *Peinture Pure* unresolved, Van Doesburg already was manifesting a restlessness with the leadership of Mondrian several years before a definitive split occurred between the two men over the acceptability of the principle of diagonality within *De Stijl.*

Whereas the reasons which led Van Doesburg circa 1925 to introduce diagonal lines or directions into his paintings and thus knowingly antagonize Mondrian are varied and complex,[61] the act certainly was not accompanied by a diminution in the importance of geometry for his art. This can be illustrated by the two structurally disparate paintings, *Composition in White, Black and Gray* (plate 18) from 1924 and *Counter Composition XVI* (plate 19) from the following year. Although sometimes thought to have been planned as a Counter Composition to be hung as a square with the two black "lines" resultingly seen as diagonals, Van Doesburg in 1926 illustrated *White, Black and Gray* as lozenge in format and described it as having closed off his previous period of "classic abstract" composition.[62] Here, too, by implication the compositional "middle point" might be thought to lie close to or outside the picture edge, particularly if one reads the black orthogonal lines as defining only one telescoped intersection of three much larger planes. Such a possible reading should not blind us to the geometric basis of this design, however. For, since the only measurable components of the composition, the two black lines, are exactly equal in width, it is possible to project onto this design a regular grid of square modules, each equal in height and width to the width of the black lines. Even with this system, the viewer is powerless to measure the full scale of the incompletely bounded planes in white and gray.

In contrast to the expressive restraint of *White, Black and Gray*, the *Counter Composition XVI* includes not only variant light and dark shades of the three

1920), only on July 7, 1920, did Van Doesburg write to Oud that the "Decomposition is now finished."

[60] I.e., in the correspondence to Oud of June 6 and July 7, 1920.

[61] Van Doesburg explained this usage in his articles on the "counter compositions" and "elementarism" in *De Stijl* VII: 73/74, pp. 17–28; 75/76, pp. 35–43; 78, pp. 82–87 (1926–1927).

[62] I.e., *De Stijl*, VII, 73/74, p. 17 and ill. pp. 21–22. Significantly, although Van Doesburg's 1925 *Counter Composition I* (*De Stijl*, VI, 10/11, ill. p. 156) still employs a horizontal–vertical line structure within a square format, its displaced middle point and camouflaged grid principles are remarkably similar to those discussed here for *White, Black and Gray.*

primary colors, but a diagonally aligned grid which at first perusal is seen to contain several pairs of rectangles identical in the longer but disproportionate in the shorter dimension. This impression of disproportion is sustained by physical measurement of the color areas as such, from which one might logically conclude that an underlying grid structure, if present, is violated by numerous instances of irregular intervals between parallel lines. But this is not the case if one or both of the contiguous "lines" are calculated into the width of the smaller of two pairs of rectangles which otherwise appear to be relatively close but not identical in any single dimension. In other words a regular grid of square modules does underlie *Counter Composition XVI*, but conforms to the irregularly alternating edges where the planes and lines meet rather than to the heavy line structure itself.[63] If visual deception forms the core of this usage, it was appropriate to the "anti-static" and "anti-classic" ideology of his then novel Elementarist program for art.[64]

Two paintings from circa 1929–1930, *Simultaneous Counter Composition* (plate 20) and *Arithmetic Composition I* (plate 21) provide a final insight into the expanding stylistic vocabulary with which Van Doesburg could translate his Elementarism into increasingly dissimilar compositions. A modular system is inherent to both canvases, albeit only if one imagines the various planar and linear components recomposed within a regular grid of vertical and horizontal lines.[65] However, had the compositions actually been executed in this manner, the result would have been merely another, for Van Doesburg now historically outmoded, Neo-Plastic painting, limited to a classic balance of static horizontal and vertical components. Only an equal emphasis upon the "dissonant" diagonal component could produce the dynamic balance between stasis and kinesthesis which he had come to consider artistically appropriate to the "perpetual transformation" or space-time unity of modern life.[66] Produced during the year or so previous to his relatively early death in 1931, these paintings embody the conviction of his mature years that Elementarist abstraction best represented in art the long sought victory of the modern intellect or spirit (in Dutch, *geest*) over the world of nature and the naturalistic art styles of the historical past. In identifying the process of

[63] The same principle is operative in the *Simultaneous Composition, 1929* (*TvD*, ill. A46), in which, of the two immediately identifiable, small square modules in the ten by ten unit grid, the one at bottom center includes both, while the one near direct center includes only a single heavy boundary line as interior to its dimensions.

[64] See esp. *De Stijl*, VII, 75/76, pp. 38–39.

[65] In the *Simultaneous Counter Composition* the two squares at left are equal in size with a lateral dimension relating in three to four proportion to the single measurable edge of the large square at right. In the *Arithmetic Composition*, each black square has a lateral dimension double (or half, inversely read) that of its immediate neighbor.

[66] *De Stijl*, VII, 75/76, p. 40.

historical evolution with the development of the human intellect and, most recently, with "the desire for enriching our conception of space by means of mathematics,"[67] he believed himself to have discovered a philosophically sound basis for the further development of modern art. And in reaching this conclusion he granted additional meaning and primacy to a factor which had been under investigation in his own art throughout all important phases.

For Van Doesburg, more than for any other founding member of the *De Stijl* fraternity, the concept of abstraction in art had been linked with the ideal of geometric purity. In the ultimate form of realization for this ideal, the Elementarist modular paintings of the late 1920's, he achieved the unity within multiplicity of style for which his various earlier experiments in painting appear in retrospect to have constituted the necessary antecedents. Judged as a painted oeuvre *in toto*, the underlying preoccupation can be described as a devotion to the pursuit of a kinetic form of abstraction through the means of modularly conceived formal components. In this context, Van Doesburg's Elementarism might fairly also be known as modular geometric abstraction. As such it bespeaks the singularity of his personal version of abstract style and the uniqueness of his theoretical approach within the *De Stijl* movement. That Van Doesburg's personal abstract style did not fail to have an historical effect upon other contemporary artists is also a matter of no small importance to the study of twentieth-century painting. However, this is the subject of another essay, and for the present it is hoped that some new appreciation of the continuity within the development of his own painted oeuvre has been gained.

[67] *De Stijl*, VII, 73/74, p. 26.