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Edited version of a magazine article originally published in French.

This essay examines the reasons why it has taken so long for the artistic importance of Theo van Doesburg to be recognised in Great Britain. It also considers the implications of the last paintings of van Doesburg, referring in particular to the *Arithmetical Composition* of 1930, and looks at the real and possible aesthetic objective, which led to the rejection of composition based on taste.

The paintings of van Doesburg are only part of his contribution to the modern movement. He was also a theoretician, writer, graphic artist, journalist and an architect of international stature. The diffusion of his ideas, even the knowledge of his work among the British public, was sparse. His reputation among the English-speaking public was much more limited and grew much more slowly than that of Piet Mondrian. This could be partly explained by the fact that Mondrian had a much longer career, surviving 13 years more than van Doesburg and living towards the end of his life in London and New York. It is also probable that van Doesburg's ideas about art were too radical for the orthodoxy that prevailed in matters of art in this country. Although van Doesburg had written to Wyndham Lewis and Sacheverell Sitwell in 1921, there is apparently no mention of any closer contact with England or with English artists during his life.

In spite of the fact that van Doesburg (alias I K Bonset, alias Aldo Camini) had written more than four hundred literary works, most remain untranslated and unpublished. Compared to the Dutch, we British are poor linguists, and unfortunately are less well informed about Dutch literature than the Dutch are of ours. The Dadaist side of van Doesburg is more often expressed in writing than in painting. The absence of translation effectively confines this production to a Dutch-speaking public.

There remain the paintings from 1918, and the elementarist and concrete works of the period 1920-31, which have the greatest pertinence for the last generation of artists for whom constructed syntactic art remains viable. One can discern the influence of van Doesburg in all artistic work of today which places emphasis on rational procedures, geometry, grids, although such characteristics

do not belong uniquely to the paintings of van Doesburg.

The development of art of the 20th century was as much a theoretic and political enterprise as it was a stylistic one. It is also a process that took place over decades. In spite of a lack of reliable information on van Doesburg, the reproductions of his last paintings, including *Arithmetic Composition*, are sufficiently numerous to have provoked a strong impression in me as a student during the 1950s. In 1966 I bought the first number of *Form* because it contained an article by van Doesburg originally published in *Die Form* in 1929. This was illustrated by a series of modular drawings dating from 1926, which I believed were perhaps the first examples of serial construction in abstract art.

I later discovered that this honour belongs to the work of Jules Bourguin, who composed a treatise on drawing under the title *Etudes Architectoniques et Graphiques*, published in 1899. It is true that the remarkable studies of Bourguin already anticipated the appearance of a syntactic geometric art, but until 1980 I was unaware of such a work. It is improbable that van Doesburg knew of it since none of his drawings resemble those of Bourguin.

The serial principle is undeniably present in both the work of Bourguin and in the drawings of van Doesburg. The drawings of van Doesburg were evidently inspired by cinematographic animation of image after image. Bourguin for his part found inspiration in Islamic art.

Van Doesburg was neither the first nor, of course, the only one to realise compositions based on a mathematical principle. Jay Hambidge, Matila Ghyka and the Cubist J W Power demonstrated the potential of geometry and gave various examples. Georges Vantongerloo also made paintings and constructions derived from mathematical formulae. However there is an important difference between the work of Vantongerloo and the last period of van Doesburg's work. In the compositions of Vantongerloo during the same period the relationship between the formulae and the works themselves is in no way evident. In his analysis of a triptych by van der Weyden, Vantongerloo seeks to prove the existence of a geometric schema underlying the composition. On the basis of this assumed historical precedence he claims that abstract artists

should follow the same path in the use of geometry. His writings and the titles of his compositions prior to 1938 indicate that he probably did use geometry and algebra to organise his paintings.

The geometric organisation of *Arithmetic Composition* by van Doesburg is clearly evident, as distinct from Vantongerloo's less obvious approach. Geometry is not the basis of the composition, it is the composition. In this painting one finds no concession to arbitrary arrangement or taste. *Arithmetic Composition* is intelligible not because of any reference to objects but because of its logical construction. A self-sufficient painting, which can be understood without reference to nudes or landscapes or fruit, etc. *Arithmetic Composition* is not spectacular from the point of view of scale or complexity, but it remains a seminal work because it is the beginning of what has since taken place in Art Concret.