

1982

## Arts and Humanities: Correspondence (1982): Article 01

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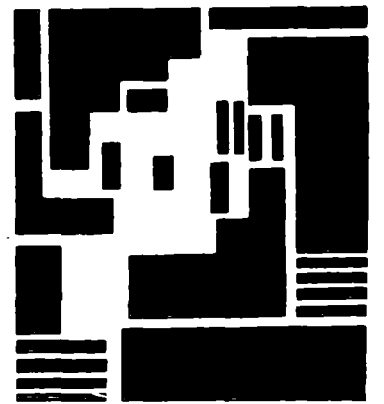
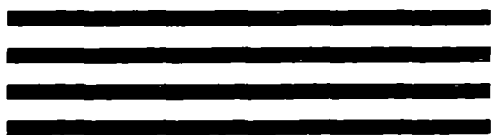
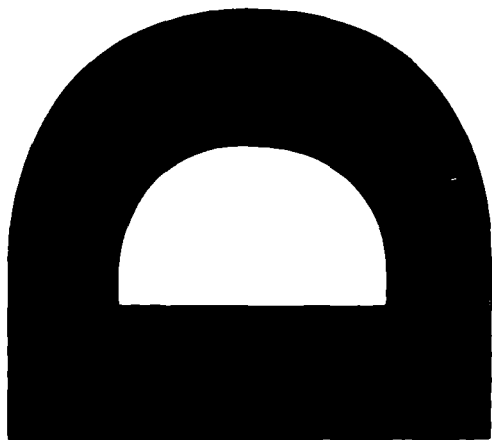
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# STIJL

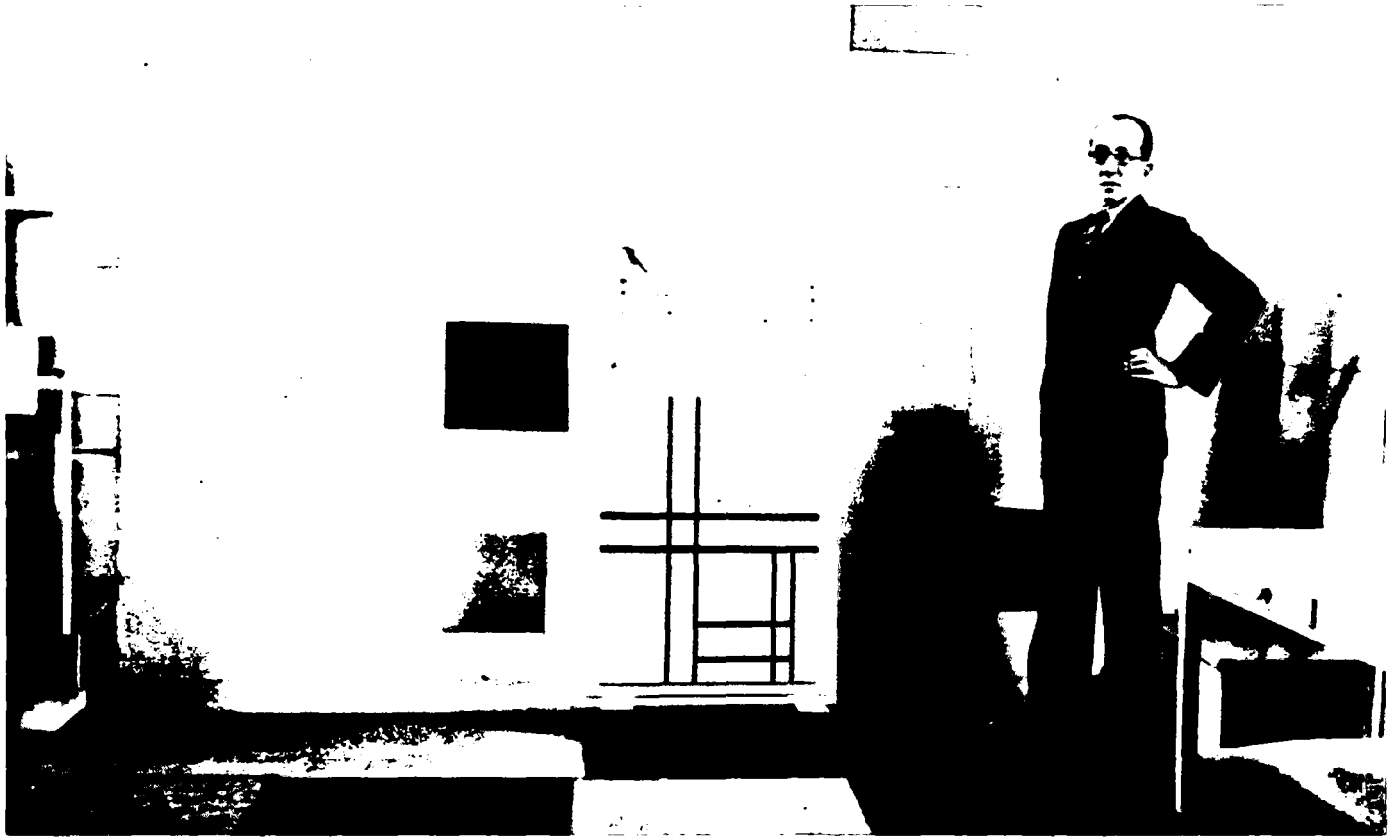
1917-1931



**Visions of Utopia**

# DE STIJL: 1917–1931

## Visions of Utopia



Piet Mondrian in his studio in Paris, 1926

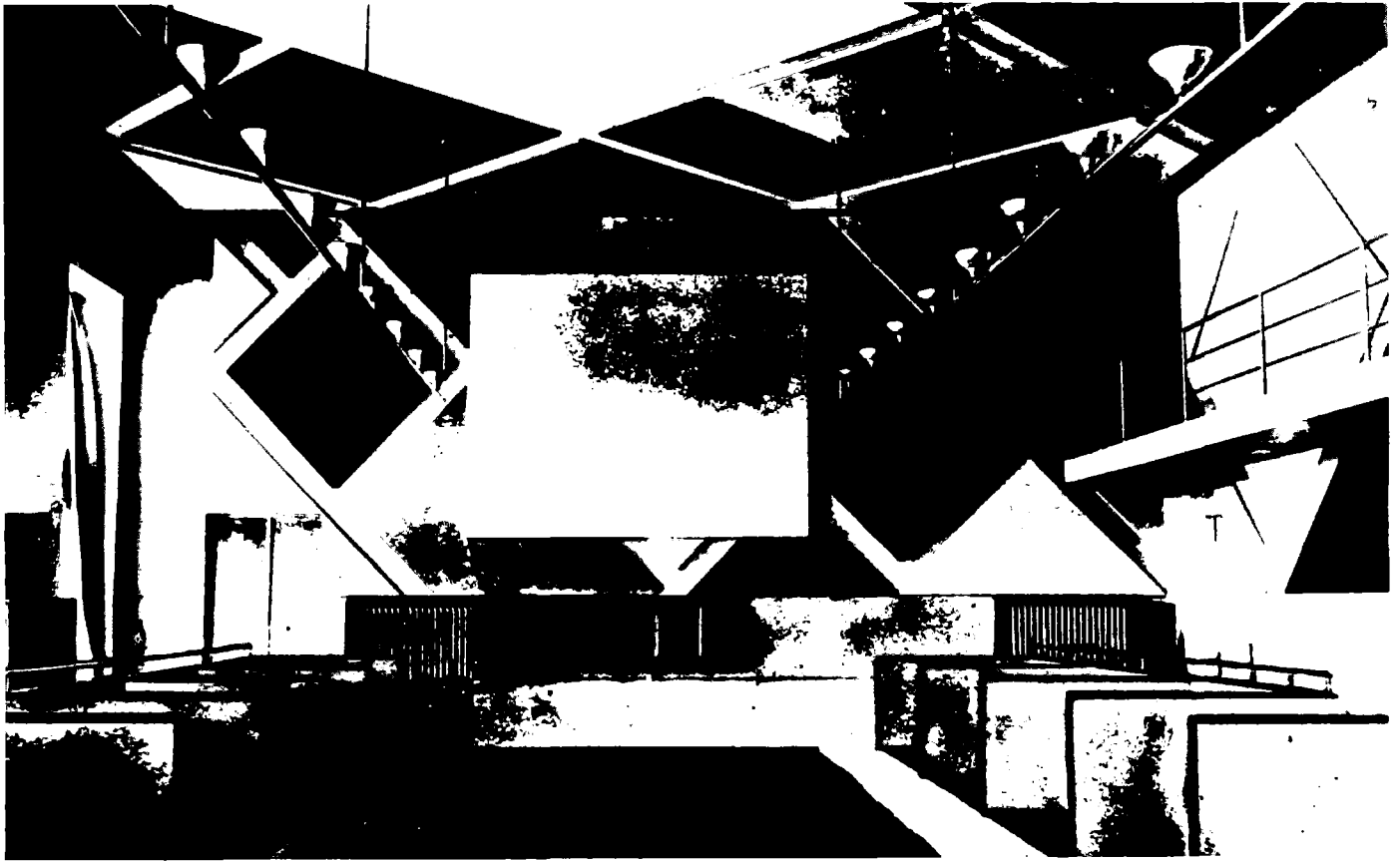
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**“Art is only a substitute while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion, as life gains in equilibrium.”**

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In the chaotic period toward the end of the First World War, a small and often contentious group of Dutch artists united under the banner of De Stijl or “The Style.” Between 1917 and 1931, the painters Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian, the designer Gerrit Rietveld, and such architects as Robert van’t Hoff, Jan Wils, and J. J. P. Oud sought to develop a universal style in painting, sculpture, architecture, and design. They and their collaborators, including such international modernists as the Belgian sculptor Georges Vantongerloo, the Hungarian painter Vilmos Huszar, and the French artists Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, were firmly committed to the principle of absolute geometric abstraction.

Pioneers of modernism in the Netherlands, the members of the De Stijl movement envisioned a utopian synthesis of art and life. Piet Mondrian, the foremost painter of the group, went so far as to predict: “Art is only a substitute while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion, as life gains in equilibrium.” From 1917 through 1931, this visionary artistic credo found expression in the pages of the Dutch magazine *De Stijl*, which served as the primary forum for the loose confederation of artists who belonged to the movement. De Stijl’s ideal of the fusion of all the arts into a harmonious, abstract environment profoundly influenced the course of twentieth-century art.



Cinema-dance hall in the Café Aubette, Strasbourg, designed by Theo van Doesburg, 1928

## The Heritage of De Stijl and the International Avant-Garde

De Stijl as a formal movement ceased with the death of Theo van Doesburg in Davos, Switzerland, on March 7, 1931. By then he had transformed a small, national movement into an internationally recognized vanguard aesthetic. During the decade of the twenties, he had enlisted the support of such key members of the international avant-garde as the German artist and filmmaker Hans Richter, the Italian futurist Gino Severini, and the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky. In his travels abroad, van Doesburg made contact with the leaders of the Bauhaus in Germany and with the members of the Dada movement in France and Switzerland. His interaction with these important artists proved to be mutually enriching for both De Stijl and the international movements contemporaneous with it.

The last issue of *De Stijl* magazine, published in 1932, was a memorial to Theo van Doesburg. Yet even before his death, the De Stijl principles of geometric abstraction were perpetuated through the formation of the Abstraction-Création group in Paris in 1930. Although van Doesburg, Mondrian, and the other participants in the De Stijl movement never fully realized their utopian aspirations, their bold works and visionary theories have had a continuing influence on the evolution of modern art, architecture, and design in this century.

**The Washington presentation of this exhibition is supported by a grant from Champion International Corporation.** The exhibition was organized by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, with major funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Champion International Corporation, and the government of the Netherlands. An indemnity was provided by the Federal Council for the Arts and Humanities.

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Smithsonian Institution  
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Paper: Champion International Corporation

## Origins of De Stijl

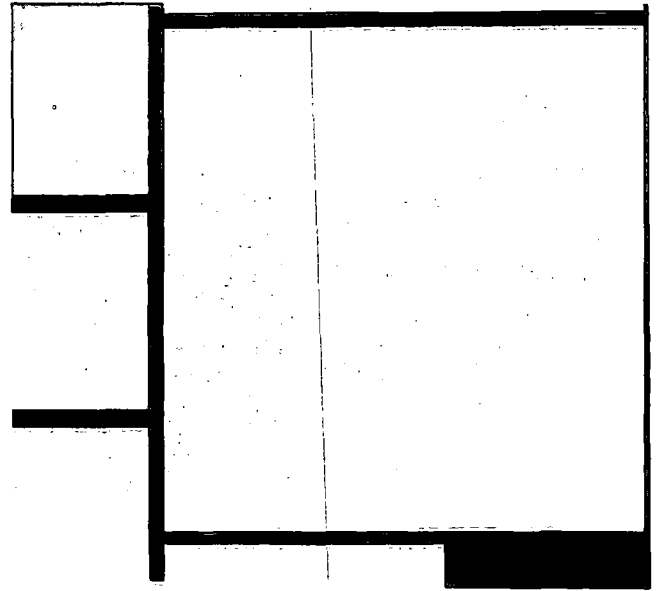
In May 1917, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and Theo van Doesburg (1833–1931) agreed in principle to found a magazine to promote their aesthetic ideals. From the inception of *De Stijl*, the versatile artist and writer van Doesburg remained the central personality and chief advocate for the movement. He served as editor of *De Stijl* magazine from 1917 until his death in 1931. Through his zeal and persistence, many other Dutch artists, architects, poets, and designers joined the cause of pure abstraction. Eventually, Theo van Doesburg extended the influence of *De Stijl* well beyond Holland's borders.

Conditions in neutral Holland during World War I favored the initial growth of the *De Stijl* movement in the Netherlands. The outbreak of the war prevented Mondrian from leaving his native land in 1914 to return to Paris, where he had been working before the war. For the duration, he was available to collaborate with his fellow countrymen, particularly Bart van der Leek (1876–1958) and van Doesburg. Similarly, the sculptor Georges Vantongerloo found a haven in Holland as a Belgian war refugee. The conflagration of the war convinced these artists that the old social order would not survive in the twentieth century. They felt compelled to reassess cultural, artistic, and social values.

The resulting utopian and collective ideals of the *De Stijl* movement had deeper roots in the art and theory of late-nineteenth-century Europe. The transcendental and visionary impulses of Symbolism and Theosophy inspired the Dutch artists. For example, both Mondrian and van der Leek were profoundly influenced by the writings of the Dutch philosopher and theosophist Dr. M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, who believed that the essence of reality could be expressed as a sequence of opposing forces. At the same time, their interest in creating a total, abstract environment may be traced to the tenets of the Arts and Crafts movement. Historians have also attributed the

rational idealism and austere imagery of *De Stijl* to the pervasive puritan ethic in Calvinist Holland.

## From Neo-Plasticism to Elementarism



Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1922, oil on canvas, 16 ½ x 19 ½ inches. Toledo Museum of Art, gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

While Theo van Doesburg was the chief founder and proselytizer of the movement, Piet Mondrian devised the theory of “pure plastic art” and created the abstract imagery for which the movement is best known. According to his precepts, visual expression would be limited to the use of the straight line, the right angle (that is, the interplay of horizontal and vertical axes), and the primary colors red, yellow, and blue with the addition of the neutral “non-colors” white, black, and gray. Application of these principles would produce an abstract, geometric art totally devoid of figurative or naturalistic references.

Van Doesburg summed up their rationale for anti-realistic art: “The object of nature is man/The object of man is style.” Mondrian called their new abstract imagery Neo-Plasticism, which he explained in these terms: “The truly modern artist is aware of abstraction in an emotion of beauty; . . . the emotion of beauty is cosmic, universal. This

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**“The truly modern artist is aware of abstraction in an emotion of beauty; . . . the emotion of beauty is cosmic, universal. This conscious recognition has for its corollary an abstract plasticism, for man adheres only to what is universal.”**

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conscious recognition has for its corollary an abstract plasticism, for man adheres only to what is universal.” By 1917 both painters had created completely non-objective paintings. Works such as Mondrian’s *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue* (1922), van Doesburg’s *Cow* (1916–17), or van der Leek’s *Composition* (1918–19) exemplify the collective style of Neo-Plasticism. This abstract geometry of neo-plastic painting represented the logical development of Cubism, a style that Mondrian had been gradually reducing to a gridlike opposition of horizontal and vertical elements.

Around 1925 Theo van Doesburg disrupted the solidarity of De Stijl and the collective vision of neo-plastic painting. The editor of *De Stijl* magazine deliberately “violated” the neo-plastic principle of orthogonal (right angle) orientation of vertical and horizontal axes; he introduced the diagonal axis into his compositions. Van Doesburg



Theo van Doesburg, *Countercomposition VIII*, 1924, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Peggy Guggenheim

claimed that the diagonal provided a dynamic resolution of the static opposition of the vertical and horizontal. He called this departure from neo-plastic painting Elementarism. Van Doesburg’s new theory alienated Mondrian, who continued to adhere strictly to the horizontal/vertical principle. This theoretical difference caused Mondrian to dissociate himself from the magazine and the De Stijl movement. Van Doesburg continued his passionate advocacy of De Stijl. His elementarist paintings, known as “countercompositions,” were directly related to his efforts to realize the ultimate ideal of De Stijl —the harmonious integration of all the arts in an abstract environment.

## Architecture and Environment

While the painters developed the visual vocabulary of De Stijl, architects and designers extended the principles of abstraction in the third dimension. Central to their endeavors was their collaboration with the painters in pursuit of a total, harmoniously designed environment. In 1924, van Doesburg and the architect Cornelis van Eesteren announced: “. . . we have examined *architecture as the plastic unity of all the arts.*”

Interest in the total environment and unity of the arts encompassed design and the decorative or applied arts. For example, Gerrit Rietveld’s furniture designs are among the most masterful translations of De Stijl principles into the third dimension. Like the neo-plastic paintings, Rietveld’s furniture was based upon rectilinear forms and primary colors. His classic red/blue chair (1918) has been likened to abstract sculpture.

Rietveld also designed the only extant example of De Stijl architecture. In 1923, Mrs. Truus Schröder-Schröder commissioned Rietveld to build a house on the outskirts of Utrecht. The completed residence fulfills the main goals of De Stijl architecture. The building is elementary,

functional, and non-monumental. Most important in terms of the tenets of De Stijl, the interior and exterior spaces interpenetrate through the suggested transparency of the seemingly weightless walls. According to van Doesburg: "The new architecture has broken through *the wall* and in so doing has completely eliminated the *divorce of inside and out. The walls are non-load bearing; they are reduced to points of support.*"



Schröder house, Utrecht, designed by Gerrit Rietveld, 1923-24 (photo: Frank den Oudsten, 1981)

Another goal of De Stijl architecture required direct collaboration between painters and architects. Anti-decorative application of color was meant to achieve a dematerialized abstract environment. Most architectural plans based on this principle either never were realized or have survived only through photographs and drawings. Examples of such collaborative architectural projects include van Doesburg's and van Eesteren's designs exhibited in an important architecture exhibition at the Galerie l'Effort Moderne in Paris (1923) and an interior designed by Huszar and Rietveld for the Greater Berlin Art Exhibition (1923).

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Perhaps the most ambitious and successful of the collaborative De Stijl environments was the redecoration of the Café Aubette in Strasbourg. Between 1926 and 1928, Theo van Doesburg supervised the design and furnishing of ten rooms in the Aubette, including a dramatic cinema-dance hall. His good friends Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp collaborated in the design of this large restaurant and night club. Van Doesburg created an abstract colored environment most successfully in the cinema-dance hall, where the decorative motif incorporated the diagonal "counter-movement" of his elementarist paintings. Van Doesburg explained that the purpose of his dynamic design was "to oppose to the material room in three dimensions a super-material and pictorial diagonal space."

Mondrian also ventured into the realm of the architectural environment. In 1926 he completed interior designs and a set design for a play by his friend, the Belgian artist and writer Michel Seuphor. That same year, he also transformed his own Paris studio into a colorful, neo-plastic environment by mounting carefully placed rectangles of primary colors on the studio walls. Mondrian's Paris studio embodied his belief that harmoniously designed environments ultimately would supplant traditional easel painting. "The abstract-real (or neoplastic) picture," he wrote, "will disappear as soon as we transfer its plastic beauty to the space around us through the organization of the room into color areas." Mondrian shared this ideal of a total abstract environment with Theo van Doesburg. It was largely through van Doesburg's efforts that the visionary principles and innovative creations of the De Stijl movement attracted international recognition.