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## Arts and Humanities: Correspondence (1982): News Article 03

Douglas Davis

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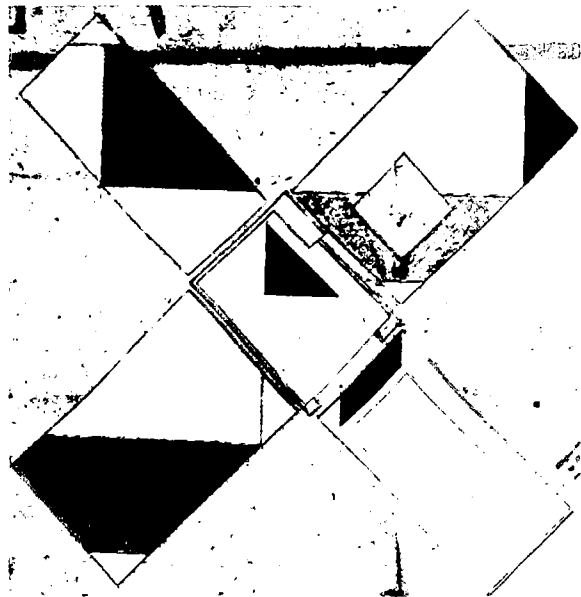
# 'Stijl' Is Not Enough

Idealism as well as arrogance prompted a small but potent band of Dutch artists and architects to identify themselves as "De Stijl" (The Style) in 1918, during the last days of World War I. "The war is destroying the old world . . ." they announced in their first manifesto. "The new consciousness is ready to be realized in everything, including the everyday things of life." They predicted the rise of a new abstraction, a "pure art" that would wipe the old slate clean. In this sense, they were the first modernists. Led by such brilliant talents as painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and designer Gerrit Rietveld, they invented many of the cultural icons that now surround us—rectangular, flat-roofed houses; unadorned white walls; spare, streamlined chairs and tables; paintings composed of geometric fields of bold color—all testaments to van Doesburg's proclamation that "the object of nature is man, the object of man is style." Now the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis is celebrating the movement in "De Stijl: Vision of Utopia," a lavish exhibition that has been three years in the making.

Funded by the national endowments for both the arts and humanities, as well as the Champion International Corporation, the government of the Netherlands and other donors, the show will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and finally to Holland itself. It's a remarkably thorough and instructive display. Mildred Friedman, the Walker's curator of design,

*Van Doesburg's plan for walls and ceiling (center) of his 'Flower Room'*

Collection Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



has painstakingly gathered more than 275 paintings, drawings and architectural models from collections scattered around the world. She has also edited a superb catalog, published by Abbeville Press (255 pages, \$39.95, paper \$24.95), with essays by leading scholars on every aspect of this optimistic and Utopian movement.

**Fantasies:** But De Stijl was a limited, intensely human movement, as flawed as any quest for Utopia. From the beginning, there were strains within the group. The obdurate Mondrian and the tempestuous van Doesburg quarreled often about the relative importance of painting and architecture. Van Doesburg wanted to transform art into a "tool of progress" by collaborat-

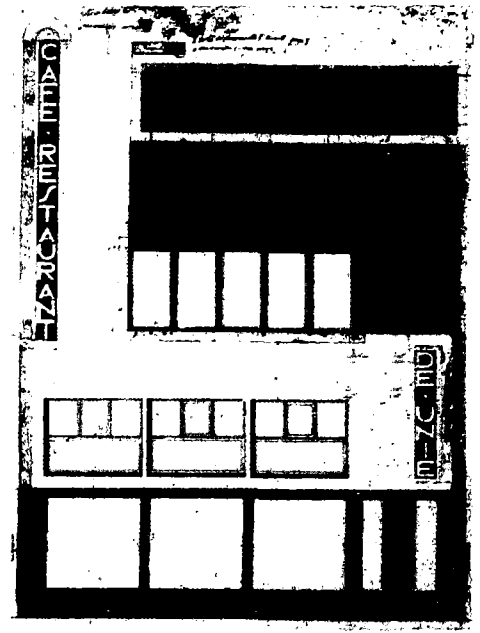


Photo by Frank den Oudsten

*Rietveld-Schröder house: Monument to the Utopian promise of modernism*

ing with architects. In his first letter to the architect J. J. P. Oud, he called for a "spiritual equilibrium" between the two professions, offering to enhance Oud's houses and factories with dazzling "coloristic and formal" schemes. But Oud, a practical man, continually modified van Doesburg's high-spirited fantasies. In the end van Doesburg called off their collaboration.

However much the De Stijl group debated and argued and misjudged the future, their work had a consistent look—sleek and bright. Beginning with the early paintings of



Private collection

*Oud's drawing for a Rotterdam café: Brave new drinking world*

Mondrian and van Doesburg, and with the extraordinary "Red/Blue Chair" designed by Rietveld in 1918, the "new consciousness" was very much a monolith. Inspired by the Neoplatonic theories of the Dutch mathematician M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, Mondrian and his colleagues had a mystical faith in geometry, in bold and simple outlines, in primary colors and, finally—thanks to the postwar industrial renaissance—in the machine itself.

They disdained any sort of ornamentation. Oud designed vast, low-cost housing projects in the 1920s, each unit repeating the form of the others in assembly-line fashion. His elegant drawing for a Rotterdam café exactly matches the square-cut composition of Mondrian's paintings, and Rietveld's brightly colored chair anticipated Mondrian's later works. The Walker is also displaying the extraordinary series of

elegantly simple furniture pieces by Rietveld that followed the red/blue chair. Ranging from a sharply angled end table to a hanging lamp made of bare, nested incandescent tubes, they are the prototypes for modern furniture.

**Amazing House:** This is the "high" Stijl, characterized at its best by a harmonious blend of disjointed, asymmetrical elements. Its masterpiece is surely the amazing house designed jointly by Rietveld and its owner, Mrs. Truus Schröder-Schröder, a painter, in Utrecht in 1924. The Walker has recreated the house with a marvelous series of large-scale color photographs. From the front the house appears to be a series of flat, colorful planes joined together at random. Its spacious upper floor is flooded with light. Sliding panels allow constant change

in room style and structure. "The new architecture has broken through the wall," declared van Doesburg, inspired by the Rietveld-Schröder house, "and in so doing has completely eliminated the divorce of inside and out."

Alas, the Rietveld-Schröder house now stands as a monument to the promise of modernism, not its reality. In 1924 the house was a daring act in an old neighborhood of brown-brick row houses. Since then, countless copies of it have been dumped by unimaginative architects into suburbs everywhere. It is no wonder that the once fresh ideas promoted by De Stijl—and later by the Bauhaus, in a heavier, less colorful way—are currently under severe attack by all the "post-modern" architects.

**Pastiche:** In the end, De Stijl's fondness for geometric razzle-dazzle turned into a kind of obsession, short-circuiting its early Utopian ideals. Van Doesburg deserted Mondrian's clean-cut harmonies in the mid-1920s when he began to explode his once calm rectangles of color. In a tiny "Flower Room," designed for a villa in Hyères, France, he turned the rectangles 45 degrees, running them into the corners of the room. On a flamboyant ceiling in the Café Aubette in Strasbourg—reconstructed at the Walker—he openly indulged a "dynamic" diagonal line. The ceiling is a dizzying pastiche of raised rectangular reliefs. Their lines dart here and there in an attempt to create what he called a "super-material space" beyond mundane architecture. But the ceiling was and is profoundly disorienting. That the café's decor was rejected by its patrons and painted over within the year is often blamed on public ignorance, but the truth is otherwise. The customers knew what the brilliant leaders of De Stijl didn't know. Pure style—divorced from basic human needs like comfort, ornament, meaning—is not enough. "The style," any style, is only the beginning.

DOUGLAS DAVIS

*Rietveld chair: Sitting in geometry*

Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

