

In Search of Red, Yellow and Blue

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A sturdy cube arises from the lawn in the front garden of the studio house that Theo van Doesburg designed for himself and his wife, Nelly van Moorsel, in 1930. It measures 110 x 110 x 110 centimetres, is made of concrete and is painted white. Its function is the subject of speculation. Is it an empty pedestal for a sculpture? Or did the artist consider the cube an artwork in itself? These are unanswered questions. Although somewhat lost against the background of the white façade, the cube remains a striking and intriguing object.

The house in Meudon, a suburb of Paris, was unfinished when Van Doesburg, after camping there for a few weeks, left for Davos to recover from his asthma in a clinic. At that moment, unbeknownst to him, he barely had enough time to finish the house. A few weeks after arriving in the mountains, he suffered heart failure during an anxiety attack, and died at the age of 47. The house and studio would never be inhabited by its creator. Nelly remained there until her death in 1975. She managed Theo's legacy and devoted herself to the dissemination of his work and ideas. Her interesting life was documented by her niece Wies van Moorsel, who became Nelly's heir. Van Moorsel bequeathed the house to the Dutch state on the condition that it be made available to artists from different disciplines as a guest studio. This was in the spirit of Van Doesburg, who crossed the boundaries between the various disciplines in art.

This summer I was invited to live and work there for several months. I immersed myself in Van Doesburg. I actually knew little about him, except that he was the founder of De Stijl, the most important Dutch contribution to twentieth-century art history, and that he organized Dada evenings, was an impassioned initiator and networker, alert to and informed about the latest developments in art. As a painter he was radical, but not as refined, balanced and disciplined as Mondrian.

Only in photographs had I seen his masterpiece, the dance and banquet hall of the Aubette in Strasbourg. Now I was intending to study his thinking. Since I had completed several monumental painting projects in collaboration with architects last year and renovated my studio, I was particularly interested in Van Doesburg's ideas on painting in relation to architecture.

On a sunny afternoon in May, I unlocked the gate, walked past the whitewashed cube around the house and through the back door into a dark corridor, where a steep narrow staircase on the left led upstairs. I climbed the stone steps and stood in the high empty studio. I opened the windows to the garden. The first thing that struck me was the grey colour. The walls were not painted white, but a light pearl grey. This gave the room an air of calmness and serenity. The large north-facing windows and the narrow horizontal windows high in the opposite wall contributed to the atmosphere of transparency; a sober space with no stark contrasts. The dense foliage of the trees in the garden gave the grey walls a greenish hue. In front of the rear wall was a table like a sculpture: two concrete slabs, almost square, at right angles to each other, supported a third elongated slab that served as a table top. It stood immovable in exactly the right spot in the space, one with the floor, out of which it seemed to have grown, and large enough to sit around with a company of people.

After installing myself, I took a few books on Van Doesburg from the bookcase in the library. A study by the artist-writer Joost Baljeu, a thick oeuvre catalogue, a book of letters with the correspondence between Van Doesburg and his friend Antony Kok, and the biography of Nelly van Doesburg by Wies van Moorsel. I spent the first few days drawing and reading. In the morning I sat at the concrete table with a small sketchbook, in which I made black, white and grey drawings and watercolours in preparation for a new series of paintings that I intended to begin in this studio. My point of departure was the golden section, a size ratio that I had been using recently. This connected me

with Theo who had organized a promotional tour of the French group Section d'Or in the Netherlands. Grey seemed the only sensible colour in this setting. When I wasn't drawing, I read about the life of Theo (and Nelly). His voice in the correspondence with Anthony Kok sounded cordial. I read about his efforts to propagate Neo-plasticism, his admiration for Mondrian, their friendship and the end thereof. I refreshed my knowledge about the reason for the break. Van Doesburg had gone his own way with his Elementarism, and had presented his new conception in De Stijl in 1926 as a correction of Mondrian's theory of Neo-plasticism. In the manifesto, Elementarism, he advocated using mathematics to determine the composition, thus reducing the individual in favour of the universal, unlike Mondrian, who determined his compositions intuitively. Van Doesburg introduced the diagonal for more dynamism. In his thinking, the diagonal line represented the spiritual. Mondrian was seeking a balance between the horizontal and the vertical, or in his view between matter and mind. Van Doesburg rejected this and charted his own course, a journey through time and space.

In the final years of his life, Van Doesburg developed an interest in the fourth dimension. In order to make a representation of this invisible element, time, he used a mathematical figure, the tesseract, also called the hypercube. Theo made several drawings of this. These were schematic representations of a cube that contained a cross of seven cubes with arrows in six directions, inward and outward, comparable to the structure of a crystal. The hypercube was an image of the expanding universe, a new concept in those days. In 1930, during the construction of the house, Van Doesburg wrote a mystical text about colour as time in space. The artist must 'be colour, eat colour, be absorbed by colour'. The true universalism, he argued, does not tolerate intuition or impulse, but relies on calculation and numbers. In the last paragraph, he sketches the image of the studio as a laboratory. 'The palette must be made of glass, the brush sharp, square and hard.' The transparent structure of the hypercube

resonates in the advice: 'Your studio should be like a hollow crystal, a bell jar'. While drawing at the concrete table, I occasionally looked around me and thought: so it is.

The notion of an immaculate studio is in keeping with his time. In the heyday of modernism, around 1930, the artist's workplace was seen as a laboratory where the artist, unhindered by emotions, could conduct research into the cells of our existence in an almost scientific, surgical manner. Also, the dust of the nineteenth century had to be removed from every nook and cranny. Set against the respiratory problems that increasingly afflicted Van Doesburg, such a viewpoint about the studio also acquired a personal significance. Towards the end, he would sit up in bed at night for hours due to attacks of breathlessness, almost suffocating. The desire for fresh air and easy breathing is also expressed in the last sentence of the text: 'the studio of the modern painter must reflect the surroundings of the mountains, at an altitude of 3000 metres, covered with a permanent cap of snow. There, the cold kills the microbes'.

When I had filled the sketchbook, I chose eight of the designs, four with black lines in a white background and four with grey planes, to develop into oil paintings. Side by side they showed an ascending series, the planes divided into two, three, four or five smaller planes. I prepared canvases intended for paintings of 45 x 45 centimetres, a true De Stijl format, which fit in two rows above each other on two ledges on the wall. I placed a plank on high trestles, to paint on, in front of the open window. I mixed the grey tones with only the primary colours, red, yellow and blue, and white, to make them darker or lighter as required. In addition, I started working on three slightly larger canvases with a medium grey plane in combination with a bright red, yellow or blue plane. I painted myself into the surrounding grey space. Like a chameleon, the paintings took on the colour of the environment: Van Doesburg grey.

Theo van Doesburg had developed a colour theory which he visualized in a diagram. On the right he placed what he called the active colours: red, yellow and blue, and on the left the passive colours: white, grey and black. There is a beautiful little gouache in which the transition from one primary colour to the next, plus black and white, is represented in five by five squares. The twenty-five squares stand in a grey ground. In his paintings, following Mondrian's example, he used black, grey and white tones to create a structure in which the planes of different sizes could radiate with bright, primary colours. While Mondrian used black lines to provide a calm framework for the colours, Van Doesburg placed the planes adjacent to each other, which produced a dynamic effect. There was also a difference in the use of passive colours. Mondrian created space mainly with white and light grey planes, whereas Van Doesburg preferred a medium grey tone, perhaps in the absence of black dividing lines. His preference may also have derived from a typical Dutch phenomenon in the polder: bright colours in a neutral atmospheric grey.

To better understand the house, I studied the designs, which were printed and described in the oeuvre catalogue. At the same time, I began to measure certain eye-catching features of the house and draw them in a sketchbook. I started with the cube in the front garden and then turned to the basic design of the house, which consisted of two interlocking cubes, or rather two rectangular boxes, as they did not have the exact proportions of a cube. I measured the monumental windows with their narrow vertical sections in the studio and made a drawing of them. I did the same with the revolving walls, whereby the library and the music room could be made into one space. I noted the dimensions of the concrete table, the square window in the bathroom and the front door painted with a black corner. Upon closer inspection, an initially rather inconspicuous intervention like the painted planes around the stairwell proved to be an effective addition with transformative effects. With this simple wall painting, a separate space was created. A grey plane and

a black-framed kitchen window on the white outer wall of the terrace together formed a square of two by two metres. The tiled floors in the bathroom and kitchen with black, grey and red sections were designed on squared paper, in the same way that Van Doesburg determined the compositions of his paintings.

In the ceiling of the library was a skylight with a composition of coloured glass planes. In the oeuvre catalogue I saw that the design of this skylight deviated from the window that was there now. The colour design for Van Doesburg's stained glass window displayed a balanced composition of the three primary colours separated by white and light grey planes. The current window was not stained glass, but a grid of wide iron strips in which panes of coloured glass were placed loosely. The colours were different from those in Van Doesburg's drawing. Black was replaced by red, which now appeared twice, yellow had become orange and now bordered on one of the red planes. The result looked messy qua form and the colours seemed oppressive in comparison with the lucid original design. The current skylight turned out to be a replica of a window which, according to a note to the contractor, did not satisfy Van Doesburg.

In the catalogue, my eye was also drawn to a colour design for the front of the house. That too differed significantly from the current appearance. In the present façade, the yellow garage door and the blue front door appear as relatively small coloured rectangles. A third door, that of the roof terrace, is painted red but this hardly contributes to the whole when you are standing in front of the house. White is predominant. The façade looks a little Mediterranean and is not really conspicuous as you face it from the street. It is a house you could easily walk past without noticing. How different the design was that I found in the catalogue. In it, the rolling garage door was not yellow, which now makes an uncertain impression in the copious surrounding white, but a robust red. In the drawing, yellow was the colour of the front door, which seen from the front protrudes as a small plane

above the high parapet that covers the diagonal of the stairs. That parapet displays the greatest deviation from the current situation. It is now white, but according to Van Doesburg's sketch, it should be a large horizontal blue plane. Together with the vertical red plane of the garage door and crowned by the small yellow plane of the front door, the façade would then have a majestic presence. A façade as a coloured relief, an icon of De Stijl, which you could not just pass by unaffected.

How was it possible that this powerful design was never realized? The drawing in the catalogue is the only known colour design for the façade. The caption mentions no reason for the changes. Most likely, this resulted from the chaotic situation at the time of Van Doesburg's premature death when the house, including the paintwork, was not yet finished. During the restoration in the early 1980s, the work was based on what they found on location. This was proper according to the rules of professional ethics for restorers, even though in this case the outcome was less fortunate than it might have been for an artist who goes down in history with such an incomplete artwork. A building that was realized by people other than the designer deserves a different approach than a unique handmade artwork. Perhaps it is worth considering carrying out Van Doesburg's plan. Because it concerns a colour application, it can always be reversed.

Van Doesburg has written about the application of colour in architecture. In the article 'Kleur in ruimte en tijd' (Colour in space and time) from 1928, he wrote that colour and architecture should be forged together into a whole. When walls are divided into coloured sections, we no longer stand in front of a painting but are within it. 'Then people live in the atmosphere evoked by the planes.' I experienced that in a sober, restrained way in the house in Meudon and in an exuberant way in the halls of the Aubette in Strasbourg. The effect of unity of space and colour is reinforced in Strasbourg by the relief in the walls. The coloured planes are separated by wide white stripes, which recede in one

hall and protrude in another. By adding that extra dimension, the flat colours are accompanied by a play of light and shadow. The use of two shades of the same colour, a darker and a lighter tint, contributes to the spatial effect. The Aubette is a shining example of a successful marriage of painting and architecture.

After spending four months in Van Doesburg's house, reading about his life and work and being able to produce new work myself, my view of Van Doesburg has changed. Van Doesburg is always regarded in relation to Mondrian. I think it is time to see him separately and out of the great shadow of Mondrian. With his innovative ideas, proclaimed in Elementarism, Van Doesburg marks out his own place in art history. It is true that his desire for change and the latest developments sometimes makes his path impossible to follow. I occasionally lost him while reading his sometimes contradictory writings. But Van Doesburg was far ahead of his time. His use of arithmetic for his paintings made him a forerunner of later artists working with geometric abstraction, such as Richard Paul Lohse, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Tony Smith and Ad Dekkers. His desire to be absorbed into colour also resonates in the large colour fields of Barnett Newman. His experiments with colour in architecture were an important reference for Donald Judd, who stated that colour in architecture began and ended with De Stijl. In my case, Van Doesburg prompted me to increase my painterly space.

The empty pedestal in the front garden in Meudon could easily be the hypercube, an image of the expanding universe. Van Doesburg's last painting, *Aritmetische compositie* (Arithmetic Composition), shows a series of progressively larger or smaller black squares over a diagonal axis. As in the hypercube, time and space are depicted here in an elemental manner. Malevich paved the way for using simple squares and rectangles to find a form for the invisible and unnameable. His black square, Van Doesburg's white cube, and Donald Judd's box are zero points, basic forms, to which people constantly return to see the world anew.