Mon cher ami ... Lieber Does ... Theo Doesburg en de praktijk van de internationale avant-garde
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Summary

This book discusses the artistic avant-garde during the period between 1916 and 1930 from a practical point of view, with, as the main theme, the life and works of the Dutch avant-garde artist Theo van Doesburg. The nucleus of the study is a critical edition of the correspondence between Van Doesburg and four other avant-garde artists: Alexander Archipenko, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter and Enrico Prampolini. Preceding these letters is an extensive introductory essay, consisting of three chapters in which special attention is given to Van Doesburg's operating in the international avant-garde.

The first part of the book starts with a short biography of Van Doesburg in order to clarify the sequence of events.

In the first chapter the notion avant-garde is defined. It contains an attempt to disentangle it from its mythical ring; for in the correspondence written by these avant-garde artists the sidesteps and loose ends become apparent. In the literature on the avant-garde artists of the first decades of the twentieth century much attention has been given to their art and art-theory. This book tries to shed light on the practical side. It gives the direct context of the letters as much as possible, without looking too much ahead towards the effects of various matters; the future is not allowed to censor the material. Furthermore, the first chapter tries to provide insight into the similarities between the avant-garde artists of the first decades of the twentieth century and their predecessors from the nineteenth century. The political implications of being an avant-garde artist are dealt with briefly. In this context, the relation between the usually leftist avant-garde artists and their bourgeois patrons is discussed. The end of the chapter comments upon the existing literature, places the research topic in a larger context, and stresses the importance of publishing these kinds of artists-correspondences.

Van Doesburg was primarily an avant-gardist and in the second and third place an impresario of modern art and an artist. These three inextricable roles are discussed in the second and third chapter of the book. The background of Van Doesburg's fervent activity and his wide-ranging network is treated in chapter two. It inquires into sociological, economical and psychological motives. Sociological theories concerning networking and identification with a larger group provide a framework for Van Doesburg's activities in that area. Art-external factors such as personal sympathies and aversions, but also the First World War, were very influential in the decisions of these artists. Van Doesburg was very much internationally oriented. A quantitative analysis of his contacts and activities gives insight into the highest and lowest points during certain periods. Such an analysis could create some clarity in the tangle of data that is known about him. The sale of his works formed just a very small part of Van Doesburg's income; his main sources of revenue were his articles and his lectures. The end of the second chapter takes a psychological point of view. It is an attempt to discover sources for Van Doesburg's zeal for activity in his youth and in his personality. These very personal affairs are related to more general characteristics of other avant-garde leaders.

Chapter three contains a description of the resources of which Van Doesburg could make use in order to function as a professional in the avant-garde world. Exchanging services was an important factor. Van Doesburg was politically oriented to the left. In that respect he resembled many other avant-garde artists. His choice of vocabulary was influenced by and adjusted to his audience. Other instruments which were available for avant-garde artists were magazines, exhibitions and lectures for instance. In a consideration of the editing of magazines, a comparison is made between the Dutch magazines Wendingen and De Stijl. Organizing exhibitions, causing scandals and giving lectures are discussed. The attitude of the avant-garde artist towards his public was a mixture of contempt and missionary zeal. Chapter three concludes by pursuing the theme of three different artists groups with whom Van
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Doesburg was involved. Firstly, the French artists' society La Section d'Or is discussed. Then the artists'-group that became known as the Konstruktivistische Internationale is described. Finally the group of artists that was involved with the De Stijl magazine is considered. This chapter ends with an inquiry into some quarrels and friendships within these groups.

The second part of this book contains firstly in chapter four a short introduction of Van Doesburg as a letter writer. It also discusses the criteria on the basis of which the correspondents in this book were chosen. Following that, chapter five gives the editing principles to which it adheres.

Chapter six introduces the correspondence between Van Doesburg and the Russian sculptor Alexander Archipenko. A description of the letters that have been preserved is followed by a short biographical sketch of Archipenko. Van Doesburg's relationship with the cubists in general is considered, and more specifically his relationship with Archipenko. In their correspondence, practical and material aspects of the avant-garde come to the fore. Archipenko was a great networker and an opportunist as was Van Doesburg. He made use of a specific vocabulary. In two paragraphs describing the Section d'Or-exhibitions in the Netherlands in 1920 and the relation between the Section d'Or and the dadaists, the artists society La Section d'Or is described. Archipenko was one of its founding members. It is the first time that the letters which were exchanged between Archipenko and Van Doesburg, are transcribed and published in a critical edition.

Chapter seven presents the correspondence between Van Doesburg and the Rumanian dadaist Tristan Tzara in a similar way. Following a description of the relation between Van Doesburg and Tzara, preserved material and existing literature are considered. Thereafter follows a short biography of Tzara. Van Doesburg's attitude towards dada is then described. Van Doesburg had close contacts with several other dadaists besides Tzara. In that respect it is important to point out the relevance of the dadaists international network for Van Doesburg. The changing alliances between these artists and the influence of coincidence on their decisions are taken into consideration. The chapter describes Van Doesburg's attitude towards expressionism and Tzara's relation with cubism. Tzara's predilection for causing scandals is a known fact. Here a few dada-scandals are discussed, forming an introduction for the dada-campaign through the Netherlands in 1923 by Van Doesburg and company. Finally the connection between Van Doesburg, Tzara and Hans Richter is mentioned. The correspondence between Van Doesburg and Tzara has been preserved almost completely. This chapter presents it as a whole in a critical edition.

Chapter eight describes Van Doesburg's contact with the German filmmaker and painter Hans Richter. After a consideration of the preserved material and the existing literature, the relation between these two artists and the famous Bauhaus is briefly described. What follows is a biographical sketch of Richter and of his artistic partner in that period, Viking Eggeling. The reasons for Van Doesburg's enthusiasm for the works of Richter and Eggeling are addressed. In a description of the Konstruktivistische Internationale, the inextricability of the artistic and the political avant-garde is again pointed out. The dada-constructivist-congress in Weimar in September 1922 seems to have been the founding meeting for the artists' society the Konstruktivistische Internationale, which was intended to be an artists' trade union with representatives in several countries. In connection with this, Van Doesburg's love of the two seemingly contrasting movements dada and constructivism is described. Lastly the magazines and publication of articles and pictures are discussed. It is the first time that the correspondence between Van Doesburg and Richter has been brought together integrally.

Chapter nine introduces the correspondence with the Italian painter and designer Enrico Prampolini. It discusses elements that the previous chapters have also dealt with: the relation between the two correspondents, the preserved material and the existing literature, followed
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by the correspondent's biography. Following that, some light is shed on Van Doesburg's opinion of futurism. Prampolini's contacts with the artists of La Section d'Or are considered. The political situation in Italy at the beginning of the twenties is also discussed. This chapter deals with Van Doesburg as being a strategic presenter of his own oeuvre. Finally, the vocabulary of the avant-garde artists is again considered. The correspondence between Van Doesburg and Prampolini is published here integrally, including some concept-letters that had not been noticed before.

The concluding chapter ten reviews again the most important aspects from the first and second part of the book. Van Doesburg is again presented as an avant-gardist to the core. Also the relation to the bourgeoisie is discussed again. In a comparison of Van Doesburg and the other correspondents presented here, the most salient similarities and differences are pointed out. The chapter ends by indicating where this book provides new insights and in what areas more research could be done.

The third part of the book consists of the appendices. The first appendix contains the actual dates of appearance of the issues of Van Doesburg's magazine De Stijl. They are often much later than the dates printed on the front page of the magazine, which could mean a difference in the dating of some works of art, manifests and events. In the very extensive second appendix all known contacts and activities of Van Doesburg are listed, analysed and combined into bar graphs. The third appendix gives Van Doesburg's income per year, as far as it could be traced.