

Introduction

At a crucial moment in his career as an artist, Theo van Doesburg focused his attention on the tectonic, or 'structural', qualities of painting. Formal experiments in two dimensions soon led him to consider the third, and a painterly conception of architecture emerged. In 1929 he looked back to the early years of De Stijl in an article called 'The Struggle for the New Style':

It is unquestionably the *architectonic* character of their pictures which finally enabled the more radical painters to convince the public that their endeavours were serious, and not only to *influence* the developing architecture but also to dictate the way towards collective construction.

In 1917, however, things had not got as far as collective construction, although certain painters, in collaboration with architects (Van der Leek with Berlage, myself with Oud, etc.), were attempting to transfer their ideas about painting . . . into three-dimensional space, instead of onto canvas. The idea of a universal stylistic idea was already latent in the attempt to forge an organic link between architecture and painting.

Van Doesburg, more than any of his contemporaries, consistently tried to bring about a union between architecture and painting on such a fundamental level as to revolutionise them both. By the early 1920s a considerable amount had been accomplished, and he felt justified in continuing his reminiscences with the following summary:

1921–23: *Architectural* projects were now being executed in rapid succession. The most important ones were Rietveld's work in Utrecht, Jan Wils's garden city, *Daal en Berg*, in The Hague and Oud's large, neat housing complexes for workers in Rotterdam.

Theory was turned into practice; the country was given a new impulse, a new mentality as to material structure.¹

An inspection of this interface between painting and architecture involves a search for the most fundamental source of form and style. Not surprisingly such a search can quickly expand to encompass stained glass, sculpture, and eventually even typography, film, music, and poetry. This was Van Doesburg's all-consuming passion, to analyse the arts to the point of identifying their fundamental means of expression, to reduce, or perhaps better to distil them, and then to experiment with all manner of ways of recombining the essential primary elements to create a purer artistic result. The analytical stage in this process is

familiar to those who know the work of Piet Mondrian and it has long been seen as the central idea in De Stijl theory. The experimental stage in the process of recombination, on the other hand, has been viewed as antithetical to Mondrian's slow, patient, and undeviating search for the fundamentals of form and style.

Van Doesburg's varied experiments, with a resulting appearance of inconsistency, have troubled an otherwise rather comfortable view of De Stijl as a consistent, not to say orthodox or even homogenous, body of theory and artistic production. Van Doesburg was aware, from the earliest days of De Stijl, of the difficulties involved in presenting a united *avant-garde* front as a revolutionary cell of artists, while at the same time participating in the most diverse artistic activities. In order to distance himself from some of his more outrageous experiments he assumed two pseudonyms, Aldo Camini for his simultaneous writings, and I. K. Bonset for his Dada poetry.

Although not a pseudonym in the narrowest sense, the name Theo van Doesburg had also been assumed. He was born Christian Emil Marie Küpper on 30 August 1883 in Utrecht. As has become well known through the writings of Joost Baljeu, Wilhelm Küpper may have been registered as the father, but Christian Emil Küpper believed strongly that his mother's second husband, Theodorus Doesburg, was his natural father.

Van Doesburg's earliest ambition was to be an actor, but when his aspirations turned increasingly towards painting, the disapproval of his parents led him to decide at the age of eighteen to leave home. One of the earliest known paintings by Van Doesburg is a naturalistic painting of a dog, dated to 1899. From these early laboured essays as a self-taught painter, he quickly (and characteristically) became totally absorbed in what seemed to be the infinite expressive possibilities of the medium. The first entry in his diary (like so many of his original documents, it is kept in the Van Doesburg Archive, National Art Collections Department – *Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst*, The Hague – hereafter referred to as R.B.K.²), begins: 'If life touches me then I feel the need to return *this* touch by means of paint or words' (3 May 1902; Van Straaten, p. 26). Not long after, he explained the nature of that 'touch':

Passion. Harmony has passed through me. It is the harmony of life *in* colour. Now I have a god. Harmony. I want to reveal him in form and colour.

Colour is God.

God is colour. [Diary I, 10 September 1902; Van Straaten, p. 26]

From very early on indeed, spiritual, religious, and (broadly speaking) philosophical notions were basic concerns in Van Doesburg's art. The early works themselves at times achieve a certain intensity, particularly in his self-portraits, but on the whole he had both technical and formal difficulty in penetrating beyond the material world to reveal the essential 'touch' or 'Harmony' he felt. The artist, in Van Doesburg's conception, was a creative genius and mediator between Harmony and man; the artist can create and order experience through colour.

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Form and style in art were, somehow, to form the bridge between the material and the spiritual world. During the first decade of the century, that is during the first decade of Van Doesburg's intensive artistic activity, the form and style of his paintings were not exceptional. His intentions far outstripped his hard-won technical achievements and his formal development. As before, his intensely vital artistic drive made him 'feel the need to return *this* touch by means of paint or words', but at this stage he had to resort to words to indicate the necessary line of development for art to be able to create this bridge between the material and the spiritual. His diary entry for 1 August 1905 cites the accomplishment of a fellow Dutch painter:

I have seen a 'bride' by *Thijs Maris*.

This bride listens to her own soul. She anticipates the touch of her lover. Here Thijs Maris depicts the unconscious process of anticipating the touch of love.

The less reality in form, the greater the reality in Spirit, because the spirit is without form. [Van Straaten, p. 28]

The search remained intense. The diary entry for 3 April 1907 reads:

In art we must conquer the material *with* the material. . . . I am always reproached for being too demanding. But truly I do not demand much. I do-not-see-much-I-see-something that is almost nothing: Spirit. [Van Straaten, p. 29]

Form as spirit, or rather form as an iconic presence of spirit, was a frequent theme in his writing, but despite his belief that 'less reality in form' was the most effective revelation of the spirit, his explorations in this direction during these early years were limited to the distortions of caricature and the growing influence of the experiments of the Impressionists. Van Doesburg did meet with a degree of artistic success, however, and in the spring of 1914 he sent three paintings to the Salon des Indépendants in Paris.

On 1 August 1914 Van Doesburg's world was shattered. The tale is poignantly told in letter number three, dated 18 November 1914, of his 'Letters to Bertha':

Only in the last while, since 1908, have I been able (and then only very briefly) to push aside the curtain that kept my spiritual existence hidden away, and show the world what I have in me. I had chosen a name for the fight (Theo van Doesburg). . . . I had to win. . . . Within a small circle I had a good reputation. I had planned a daring spiritual campaign across the whole of the artistic and philosophical map of Europe. This was a possibility only whilst Europe cherished the works of Peace.

Do you not preach the brotherhood of all men of all nationalities through Art?

Did I not preach Love as a basis for all forms of Art. Yes I did. . .

But now for the tragedy of this confession, Bertha! I was just on the verge of rounding up the whole old world of art and its intellect, and taking it all on board, when as suddenly as a grenade can bring horror, the *thought* hit my mind of the *possibility* of a European war. (For me that means the conquest of the spiritual and noble world by the filthy hypocritical world.)

Already I felt that I had been *personally* conquered by the possibility of this war which would destroy all beauty and culture.

I had had too much trust in higher nature and the spiritual in man. There

I stood, suddenly confronted by raw Reality. Not Art, not love, not wisdom, but grenades, grenades, grenades!

Once again I sang, though not as before . . . through Love, 'The Song of the Wild Beast' (Eenheid 1 August 1914 [published in *Eenheid*, no 218, 8 August]). I could feel them approach, so I warned of all the horrors of this disaster. I posted the article one hour before the mobilisation and said goodbye to everything: my ideals, my passions, everything.

Can you imagine how I felt?

Can you imagine what it was like for me to be a soldier? [Van Straaten, pp. 37–38]

Around the same time Van Doesburg suffered another loss when his marriage to the poet Agnita Feis collapsed. The 'letters to Bertha' were written on the Belgian front. They were never posted and most likely 'Bertha' was a literary character invented as the object of a poetic catharsis.

The crucial change in both Van Doesburg's artistic and theoretical work occurred between 1914 and 1916. There are sketches dated, perhaps in retrospect, to 1914 which are completely abstract. Van Doesburg's enormous personal collection of sketches (now in the possession of the R.B.K.) gives a complete picture of his painstaking development through these early stages and includes a sketch of a church, with the unlikely dating 1914, that is very close in spirit to the well-known Mondrian sketches, c. 1914–15, of the church at Domburg. Whether or not that particular sketch by Van Doesburg is correctly dated, there are many other works dating from 1915 and 1916 which demonstrate a similar linear, analytical, neo-Cubist tendency. His development away from natural form towards an elusive spiritual essence had entered an entirely new stage. In a review of the 1915 autumn exhibition of the Independents (*de Onafhankelijken*) in Amsterdam, he defined the three great periods of art:

- I. The expression of the visually perceptible, or nature: *Realism*.
- II. The expression of the psyche *by means of* the visually perceptible: broadly speaking, *Naturalism*.
- III. The expression of the spiritual without the natural as an aid, with no other means than the pure elements of painting – colour and line: *Spiritualism*. [De *Avondpost*, 20 November 1915]

Not surprisingly Van Doesburg's theoretical development in his critical writings betrays a similar evolutionary pattern. His earliest publications were concerned with the study of the main lines of historical progress in art, and with drawing conclusions from that study for application and guidance in his own advancement and that of modern art in general. In 1915 and 1916 Van Doesburg wrote two decisive theoretical tracts: 'The Development of Modern Painting' ('De ontwikkeling der moderne schilderkunst'), a lecture in 1915; and 'The New Movement in Painting' ('De nieuwe beweging in de schilderkunst'), a series of articles of 1916. These consolidated the results of his own early experimentation and study of historical developments, and brought forward a thoroughly worked out theory from which a completely new style

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could emerge. In the earlier work he discussed the basic means of the arts and the necessity of a purification of those means for the new style. In the later work he developed further the ideas concerning art as the balanced relationship and proportion amongst those elements. These purely abstract relationships were for him the only acceptable content for art, and as a result the natural subject had to undergo a complete 'transformation' to achieve such a 'universalised' aesthetic balance. In 1926 he summed up this early development in the introduction to his article 'Painting: from Composition to Counter-composition':

In 1912 I published my first paper entitled 'Specimen for a New Criticism of Art'. I attempted to place my own development in the context of the general development of art and came to the recognition that the universal was the new content of art and that the straight line was the new expressive means. In my eyes these two elements would lead the way to the new style.

I rounded this period off with *Girl with Buttercups*, a composition abstracted from a naturalistic form. When I was released from military service in 1916, I set up *De Stijl*, and did that not without enthusiasm. . . . In an article 'From "Nature" to "Composition"', published in *De Hollandsche Revue* in 1918 [sic], I drew my ideas together and demonstrated through a series of illustrations progressively abstracted from a subject how I moved from a realistic composition through such a series to arrive at a painterly composition.³

The ideas discussed in the articles written prior to 1915 were primarily concerned with painting since that was, after all, Van Doesburg's profession, but his concern was by no means exclusively with painting. As he wrote in 'From "Nature" to "Composition"':

Architecture as well as painting and sculpture, and for that matter even music, literature, and dance, display certain common features. We can see that architecture is gradually turning away from the arbitrary and picturesque, the capricious and disorderly, and is turning towards constructive necessity and mathematical order, in a word the monumental. For years the same has been true of painting and sculpture. The result is that all the arts in the final analysis have *the same problem* to solve, whether on their own or together.

This problem is the problem of *balanced relationship*, of creative harmony.⁴

Between 1915 and the early part of 1917 Van Doesburg came into contact with a number of artists, architects, and even a poet who were in sympathy with his ideas. The central figures were Antony Kok, Bart van der Leek, Vilmos Huszar, Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondrian, Robert van 't Hoff, and J. J. P. Oud. In their enthusiasm for his, at this point, very generalised theory of abstract art, they were willing to range themselves behind the magazine *De Stijl* in order to contribute more effectively to the already furious debate between the advocates of naturalism and abstraction in art, and to do so with the added force of a unified radical cell. While the unity on this very generalised theoretical level would last, problems arose very soon when it came to particular applications of the theory, the developmental line to be followed, and the specific tactics to be used in the fight against naturalism. Their general agreement allowed them to produce a group *oeuvre* despite their many aggressive arguments which have recently caused some critics to question whether they can be called a group at all.

Beyond this general level it is impossible to define precisely what is meant by the phrase ‘the De Stijl theoretical position’ (which, it must be stressed, did not find its sole well-spring in the early theoretical work of Van Doesburg). Professor H. L. C. Jaffé, in his seminal work *De Stijl, 1917–1931: the Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, tends to equate ‘De Stijl theory’ with ‘Mondrian’s [specific] theory’ since Mondrian produced the paintings which have become accepted as the stylistic paradigms of the movement. On the other hand, the movement De Stijl could easily be equated with the journal *De Stijl* and hence the specific theoretical position of its editor Van Doesburg. But that would be to deny that Mondrian’s works after 1925 and Oud’s housing at the Hook of Holland have the status of De Stijl (that is *De Stijl*) objects just because they did not always enjoy the favour of the editor. To equate the magazine and the movement in such a way is highly questionable, not to say unacceptable. But, for all that, Van Doesburg did provide the impetus and almost evangelical conviction which brought the artists of De Stijl together as a movement and set the course, however briefly, towards certain commonly adopted goals at a crucial point both in terms of their personal careers and in the development of modern art as a whole.

Considering Van Doesburg’s special position within De Stijl and therefore European modernism, it is important to analyse his theory, to locate it within its broad intellectual tradition in order to understand his art more fundamentally, to watch the way he was able to bring his discoveries in painting to bear on the question of style in modern architecture, and finally to recognise the ramifications of this for his eventual practice of architecture. Such a study as this is the biography of an idea, which is quite different from a personal biography. It addressed itself to the ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘what’ of artistic production, relegating the ‘when’, and to some extent even the ‘who’ to a subsidiary role. Thus, the question of the respective contributions of Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren to the design of the Paris Models will be superseded by the questions: how were those ideas developed; why, in terms of the theory, did the architectural designs take those particular forms; and how in practice was the theory in the end ‘translated’ into form? The story of modern architecture is not just the story of personal accomplishment, it is the story of the origin and development of style, and on this point Van Doesburg would, in principle at least, have agreed whole-heartedly.

The notion that theory can be ‘translated’ into form was entailed in Van Doesburg’s belief that art, religion, and philosophy express the same truths in different modes. In ‘Thought – Vision – Creation’ (‘Denken – aanschouwen – beelden’), written in October 1918 and published in the December issue of *De Stijl*, he formulated the idea and at the same time made a clear reference to the group’s work:

Pure thought, in which no representation is taken from passing phenomena, but instead number, measure, proportion, and abstract line appear, reveals itself conceptually (as reason) in Chinese, Greek, and German philosophy, and aesthetically in contemporary Neo-plasticism. [p. 24]

That art and philosophy were capable of expressing the same content was a commonly held belief, even amongst the rivals of De Stijl. On the

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opening page of *The Symbolism of Art (De symboliek der kunst)*, published in the same year as Van Doesburg's article, Just Havelaar phrased it as follows:

Art reveals the world-view, or feeling for life of the artist and of mankind, through the forms of nature. Just as philosophy does, art expresses the relationship between man and his world – just like philosophy, but in another mode, because it expresses itself in images and within the sphere of emotion.⁵

The two writers obviously had very different attitudes to nature, and this was enough to make them ideological enemies, but they were in full agreement that art and philosophy have the same subject, and both men relied on the same source for their ideas. That source was Hegel, who was currently enjoying great popularity in intellectual circles through the work of G. J. P. J. Bolland, Professor of Philosophy in Leiden, and the professor's former student Dr A. Pit.

In Hegel's Introduction to his *Philosophy of Fine Art* there is a passage strikingly similar to that just cited from Havelaar:

Fine art is not art in the true sense of the term until it is also thus free, and its *highest* function is only then satisfied when it has established itself in a sphere which it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby merely one mode and form through which the *Divine*, the profoundest interests of mankind, and spiritual truths of widest range, are brought home to consciousness and expressed.

Later in the book, Hegel further developed this idea of forms or modes of expressing the divine or Absolute Spirit, and concluded that:

The differences which are perceptible in these modes of presentment are due to the notion of the absolute Spirit (Mind) itself. Spirit, in its truth, is essential substance brought home to itself. It is, therefore, no essence which lies outside and in abstract relation to objectivity, but rather is, within the compass of that objectivity, the re-recollected presence of the substance of all objects within finite spirit. It is the finite which grasps its own essential universality, and, in doing so, grasps essential Being in the absolute sense. The *first* mode of this comprehension is an *immediate* one, that is to say, it is a sensuous cognition, a cognition in the form and semblance of the object of sense-perception, in which the Absolute is presented directly to the understanding and feeling. The *second* form is that of the *conceptive* or imaginative consciousness. *Last* of all, we have the *free thought* of absolute Spirit.⁶

The same categories can be found in Van Doesburg's article 'Thought – Vision – Creation', but there they are not used as different modes appropriate either to art, religion, or philosophy. Most ingeniously, he has used them as categories or rather developmental stages in art. Moreover, he maintains that 'my own development in the plastic arts has moved through these stages during the period of the past twenty years'. These stages he called: 'concrete thought' as embodied in representational or 'physio-plastic' art; 'deformative thought' as embodied in 'ideoplastic' art; and 'pure abstract thought' as embodied in pure abstract art. In 1919 he published *Three Lectures about the New Plastic Art (Drie voordrachten over die nieuwe beeldende kunst)* where he illustrated these *Three Creative Moments of a Composition* and described

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Excerpt

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1 Theo van Doesburg, *Still Life*, 1918 (oil on paper, 33.5 cm × 27.5 cm) Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (A29245); reproduced in Van Doesburg's book *Drie voordrachten over de nieuwe beeldende kunst* (p. 93), as the first in the series of *Three Creative Moments of a Composition*



them as 'impression, expression, and plasticism' (p. 93). The three paintings (figs. 1, 2 and 3) show a development from a Cubist still-life, according to Van Doesburg still an immediate presentation of the sense object; through an intermediate stage where references to nature all but disappear, as in his geometrical works (fig. 4); culminating in a Neo-plastic painting 'in which no representation is taken from passing phenomena . . .', thus rising to the level of pure thought.

Hegel had reserved the first category of immediate representation of the objects of perception to Mind as appropriate to art and denied the capacity of art to rise beyond perfect representation to conceptive consciousness, let alone to abstract thought itself. The same sort of restriction was placed on the function of art by Schopenhauer, whose work was being studied and occasionally cited by Van Doesburg and Mondrian during these early years of *De Stijl*. Schopenhauer's conception of the viewer in pure, will-less contemplation of form sparked Mondrian's imagination in particular, and although Schopenhauer never completely divorced the notion of painting from a representational subject, he did anticipate the possibility of a highly abstract art:

The product of plastic and pictorial art does not present us, as reality does, with something that exists once only and then is gone forever – the connection, I

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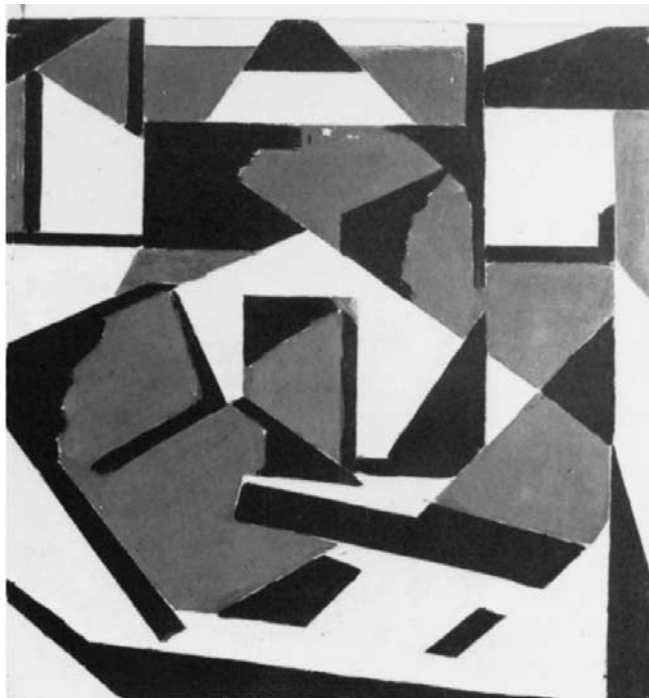
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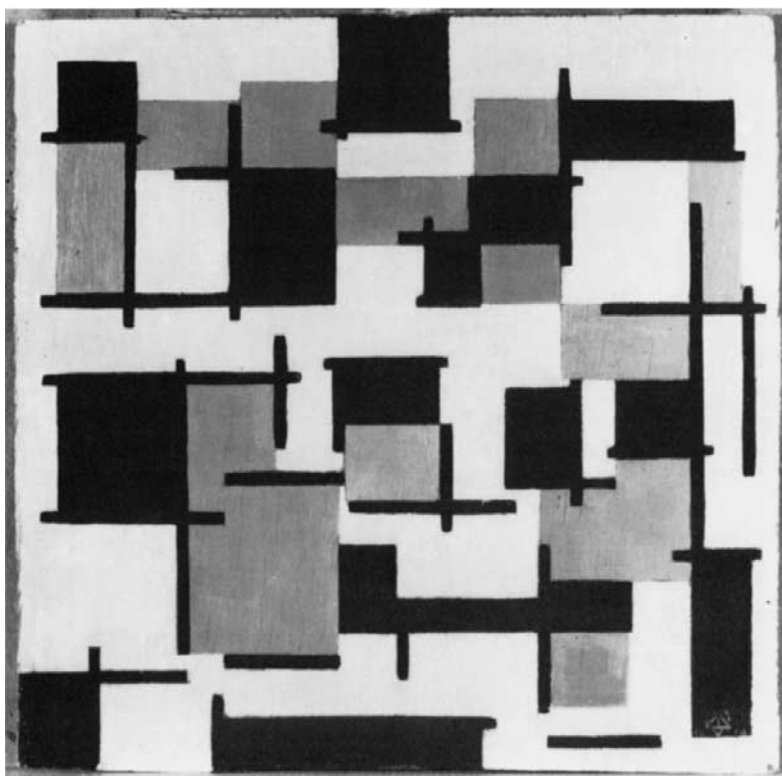
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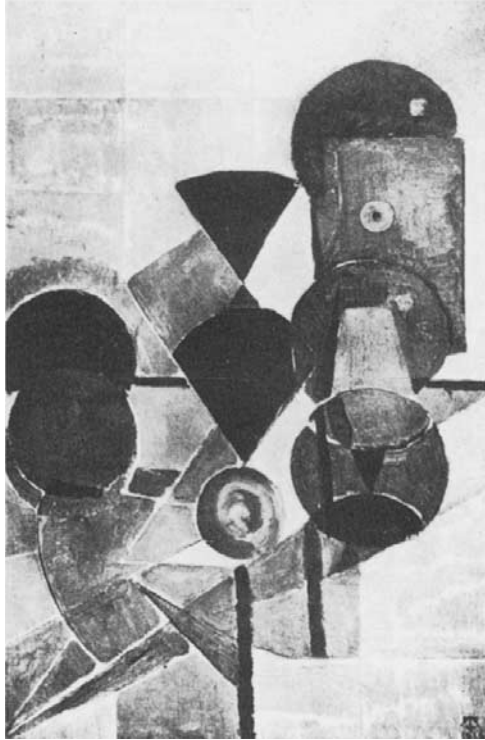


2 Theo van Doesburg,
Composition, 1918 (gouache,
26.6 cm × 25.4 cm) Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam
(A6672); an almost identical
version is reproduced in *Drie
voordrachten* (p. 93) as the
second in the series of *Three
Creative Moments of a
Composition*



3 Theo van Doesburg,
Composition XIII, 1918 (oil on
wood, 29.2 cm × 29.8 cm)
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam (A29685);
reproduced in *Drie
voordrachten* (p. 93) as the
third in the series *Three
Creative Moments of a
Composition*

4 Theo van Doesburg, *Still Life*, 1916 (whereabouts unknown); reproduced in *De Stijl*, I, no. 5 (March 1918), plate X



mean, between *this particular matter* and *this particular form*. It is this connection which is the essence of any concrete individuality, in the strict sense of the word. This kind of art shows us the *form* alone; and this, if it were given in its whole entirety, would be the *Idea*. The picture, therefore, leads us at once from the individual to the mere form; and this separation of the form from the matter brings the form very much nearer the *Idea*.⁷

Van Doesburg took the argument one step further, claiming that the *Idea* itself could be reached if the form were entirely divorced from the 'matter' (that is to say the individual circumstances), and thus it would be possible to go beyond the mere example to the rule itself; the 'universality of the concept', which was for Schopenhauer the preserve of philosophy alone, would be conquered by art. Havelaar accepted Schopenhauer's more conservative view, but was willing to admit the enormous expressive capabilities of art, writing of 'the manipulation of signs and symbols in the creation of plastic form for spiritual life, the illustration of idea. "Idea" as thought alone is conceived, but not yet born' (p. 114). However, Havelaar upheld, as did Bolland and Pit, Schopenhauer's conclusion that art 'never quite reaches its goal', that it can never reach perfection. There are limits to its expressive capacity. Paraphrasing Schopenhauer, Havelaar acknowledged that in man's dreams he becomes a great intuitive artist, sometimes creating images whose changing colour and rhythmic line conjure up extremely strong emotions. He continued, claiming that 'Kandinsky's art, being devoid