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The War to End All Wars drew to a close in the fall of 1918. Europe had experienced more death, carnage, and destruction than previously thought possible. Out of the ashes of the ravaged continent new schools of thought emerged within the realms of religion, politics, and the arts. Europe saw its citizens questioning all that they had known to be true as a result of their lives being shaken in such a violent and disturbing manner. The growth of nationalism, the abandonment of religious and social beliefs once held sacred, and the desire to reassess the purpose and boundaries of fine art took shape. Pockets of new artistic movements arose as groups of artists separated by geographic borders organized and postulated new manifestos on art theory. Constructivism emerged in Russia, Futurism in Italy, and a movement known as De Stijl in the small neutral nation of The Netherlands.¹

Introduction

De Stijl, which is translated into Dutch as “The Style”, arose in 1917 with the publication of a magazine bearing the movement’s name. This magazine was edited and produced by the Dutch artist Theo Van Doesburg (figure 1). The son of a photographer, stepson of a factory owner, and failed actor, Christiaan Emil Marie Küpper organized, led, and sustained the movement after changing his name to Theo Van Doesburg. The name De Stijl was not meant to reflect an elitist sense of enlightenment. Instead it played on the duplicitous nature of the word “stijl” which in Dutch also refers to a “post, jamb, or support.” The name was meant to reflect the notion of stripping away the ornamentation of art and reducing it to its necessary functioning parts. De Stijl artists believed that only when this was accomplished could the elements be perceived individually and in their larger place as a collective whole.

Van Doesburg began the publication of the De Stijl magazine as a means of proliferating the principles that he and a small band of other artists, architects, and interior designers sought to create and showcase their various works. His compatriots were the painters Piet Mondrian, Vilmos Huzár, and Bart Van der Leck as well as the architect J. J. P. Oud and a handful of other collaborators, all of whom sought to create a new, all encompassing language of art as a path towards the utopian society they believed could rise out of the rubble of World War I. Van Doesburg described his far reaching aspirations for the movement in an article printed in the Croatian publication Hrvatska Revija in 1931 shortly before his death. In the article, while referring to the idea of a comprehensive approach to art and architecture where function and form are simplified and controlled, he said:

“The style that follows will be first of all the style of free and peaceful life. It will be far from romantic vagueness, decorative tendentiousness and animal spontaneity, it will be a style of heroic monumentality, and I would call it, contrary to all styles of the past, the style of the complete man—a style which keeps all great contradictions in balance.”

Van Doesburg and the artists of De Stijl sought to unify all art forms both of the applied and classical variations under the tenets of simplicity, basic geometry, asymmetry, and the exclusive use of orthogonals, primary colors, and neutral tones. These elements were meant to strip away illusion and the fingerprint of impulse and spontaneity from created works in order to only present what was necessary and true.

Figure 1: Theo Van Doesburg

6 Overy, De Stijl, 11.
De Stijl

Figure 3: The Café de Unié (1925) J.J. P. Oud
The practitioners of De Stijl created what they saw as pure form. By utilizing simple geometry they created work in a variety of mediums intended to impact every facet of modern life. They fashioned furniture such as the Red and Blue Chair (figure 2) by Gerrit Rietveld, they created architecture such as the Café de Unié (figure 3) by J. J. P. Oud, they worked in urban planning (figure 4), and they made paintings, the most famous of which was Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow by Piet Mondrian (figure 5). These works utilized primary colors and orthogonals exclusively along with simplified geometric composition. In this way the group of artists created works in a variety of disparate mediums which still exemplified and maintained a commonality of design. Their all encompassing artistic reinvention also created new typography where the principles of De Stijl were applied to text.

7 Michael White, De Stijl and Dutch Modernism (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 62.
Figure 6: Advertisement for Bruinzeel
(1917) Vilmos Huszár

Figure 7: Batavier Line Poster
(1916) Bart van der Leck
C. Bruijnzeel & Zonen
Rotterdam
Parketvloeren
Eikenvloeren met kopsche groef en messing
Om direct op de binten te spijkeren

Ontwerp, V. Huszar
De Stijl artists attempted to create fonts that adhered to their newly organized philosophies. These geometric type designs favored the use of straight lines over curves and possessed a nontraditional appearance. They built on the foundations of geometric abstraction in letterforms which can be seen beginning with the work of Van der Leck and Huzár in 1915 and 1916 as they experimented with display type in advertising where they created blocky, rectilinear text\(^9\) (figure 6 and 7). Many of these had a stencil like appearance, such as Bart van der Leck's poster for a gallery exhibition in 1919. The poster featured an abstract rendering of a horseman and utilized fragmented strokes to design the display type\(^10\) (figure 8). It was from this outgrowth of the larger movement, the typeface known as the Alphabet Van Doesburg emerged.

\(^9\) White, De Stijl and Dutch Modernism, 28-83.  
\(^10\) Meggs, Meggs’ History of Graphic Design, 304.
Collaboration and alteration

The Alphabet Van Doesburg is a constructed typeface utilizing orthogonals to create letterforms within a square. The square is divided into a 5x5 grid in which each of the 25 sections is either filled in or left blank to create a rigid geometric typeface with an even stroke weight throughout decidedly symmetrical characters.\(^\text{11}\) (figure 9) Working originally by hand Van Doesburg created the typeface in 1919 and continually altered and refined both its appearance and the philosophy behind it until his death in 1931. The type served primarily for display; it was used for titles, book, and poster design with less extreme variations being applied to inline text as the letterforms appear to blur together when greatly reduced due to their heavy stroke weight. (figure 10, next page) This being said, his early work was not a spontaneous creation unto itself as he borrowed heavily from several of his predecessors and contemporaries.\(^\text{12}\)

Figure 9: The Alphabet Van Doesburg
(1919) Theo Van Doesburg
Uppercase “A” Shown Magnified on Left

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12 White, De Stijl and Dutch Modernism, 38.
The Alphabet Van Doesburg possesses a direct correlation to the original masthead of the premier issue of De Stijl magazine. The design, although originally attributed to Van Doesburg, was created by the Hungarian painter Vilmos Huszár utilizing rectangles of varying size to create fragmented letterforms spelling out the name of the publication above an image of an abstracted figure in profile (figure 11). Huszár’s work throughout the 1920s with type continued in a similar vein as he experimented with rectilinear type design to create a variety of geometric based alphabets for use in advertising and public signage.  

Van Doesburg was also influenced by Dutch typographer H.T. Wijdeveld whose type did not adhere to the principles of De Stijl. Wijdeveld utilized ornamentation as well as diagonals and curves. Wijdeveld did however introduce type that was designed around the square in his font known as AF Wendingen (figure 12). He also utilized the brass rules used to set type as a means constructing

unique letterforms, a process which Van Doesburg borrowed in the early forms of his alphabet when printing. Wijdeveld's designs were often used in his own magazine, Wendingen. The publication adhered to different guiding principles than De Stijl, but the two sought a similar goal, to create something both beautiful and functional.\(^\text{15}\)

Van Doesburg was not above working directly with other artists and collaborating on ideas even if the other artists approached design with a different philosophy. In the same way as he utilized Wijdeveld, who was not a member of the De Stijl movement, to inform his work, he also worked closely with several contemporaries such as the dadist Kurt Schwitters and the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky. Van Doesburg even assumed aliases and published writings within different artistic movements, writing and publishing dadist poetry as I. K. Bonset and creating futurist philosophy under the pseudonym Aldo Camini.\(^\text{16}\) It was this interaction with other viewpoints and artists that enabled Van Doesburg and his type to remain true to his principles, but also allowed those principles to shift and bend as time progressed.

Van Doesburg's collaboration with Schwitters played a crucial role in the evolution of his alphabet as it was his work with Schwitters in the early 1920s which encouraged the first dramatic change within his typography since he began experimenting in 1917.\(^\text{17}\) After interacting with Schwitters, Van Doesburg's typefaces became more asymmetrical as the balance of some figures shifted slightly with the leg of the “R” moving to the left creating a more asymmetrically balanced letterform and the introduction of various asymmetrically placed counters especially those characters with prominent counters such as the “A”, “D”, and “O” resulted in noticeably uneven line weights (figure 13, next page). Van Doesburg and Schwitters attempted to marry the ideas of De Stijl and Dada within their designs as they believed that by joining the two disparate art forms

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16 Baljeu, Theo van Doesburg, 38, 47.
17 Baljeu, Theo van Doesburg, 37-38.
La Kubisten

EEPTIAA
INTERNATIONALE
TENTOONSTELLING
DEL I IV I

O'OR

KUBISTEN
they could create an art of both “destruction and construction together-in an active polarity”.¹⁸

It was this introduction to Dada, and its ideas concerning the malleability and elastic nature of art and words, that influenced Van Doesburg to begin designing his type in a manner that allowed for the shape of the letterform to be distorted both horizontally and vertically. This was an idea that ran countercurrent to the status quo of type at the time which maintained that letterforms were of fixed dimensions and therefore could be scaled up or down but would always hold a standardized ratio of proportions. Dada encouraged Van Doesburg to think of his letterforms more as pieces of art, subject to the needs of the artist, rather than static representations which implied rules upon the user.¹⁹ One could say that Schwitters influence on Van Doesburg encouraged him to make the type work for the designer rather than vice versa.

While Van Doesburg’s work with Schwitters encouraged him to break established typographic rules, his correspondence and friendship with one of the leaders of the Russian Constructivist movement influenced him to simultaneously embrace the practicality and machine-like nature of the philosophy of De Stijl.²⁰ After publishing an article of Lissitzky’s

on the interchange between architecture and art in a 1923 issue of De Stijl Van Doesburg became intrigued by the Russian’s work.²¹ He noted in an article of his own that the two movements were moving towards the same eventual goal “from the aesthetic to the material” as he wrote in an article in a 1924 issue of De Stijl.²² Influenced Lissitzky, Van Doesburg began to preach on his concept that the nature of art was becoming a mechanism for change. He saw art as increasingly defining the way people lived and interacted with their environments, and he saw artists as possessing the ability and responsibility to mold society.

²⁰ Baljeu, Theo van Doesburg, 47.
²¹ Overy, De Stijl, 162-163.

Figure 13: Poster for Cubist Exhibition (1922) Theo Van Doesburg
The ideas Van Doesburg had originally brought forth in 1917 had not changed in their scope of vision, but by 1924 they had shifted. Van Doesburg moved from a quasi-religious approach to art wherein art had a nearly metaphysical ability to affect man on a spiritual level and impact the fundamental nature of mankind through a universal functionalist art form, to a belief that the change was based on the logical progression of mankind within modern society as it looked to machines and technology to simplify and demystify the world. Van Doesburg saw art as another form of machine, perhaps the most powerful one, which could have a great impact if utilized properly. This newfound outlook slowly crept into Van Doesburg’s designs as he began in this period of time treat his typography as an exercise in logic rather than design. He attempted to design how the type fit together logically rather than attempting to assemble it aesthetically.

Even as Van Doesburg experienced and was influenced by new movements, De Stijl began to fall apart. By 1925 most of the original members had left it behind believing that the ideals and codices that the group adhered to quite stringently were either ill suited for reality, or were too limiting and did not embrace growth. After Piet Mondrian left De Stijl in 1927, Van Doesburg was left for all intents and purposes alone to champion the movement.

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25 Doig, Theo van Doesburg: Painting into architecture, theory into practice, 139-140.
26 Baljeu, Theo van Doesburg, 71.
Perhaps it was the split from his friend or the slow steady march of time spent believing in a philosophy that did not seem as strong as it once had, but it was in this time that Van Doesburg began to incorporate new elements into his type. Although he worked mainly in architecture from the late 1920’s to the end of his life, when one sees his work from this period one can see diagonals entering into his letterforms as seen readily in his new manner of forming the letter “Z”. Where he had previously utilized one horizontal and two vertical rectangles to connect the horizontal rectangles on the cap line and baseline, he now employed a single forty five degree joining stroke (figure 14, previous page). In his last two years he rekindled his friendship with Mondrian and wrote on his ever shifting beliefs that now held the diagonal to be important, but only as a foil to the strongest force of opposition, drama, and tension; the interplay between the horizontal and vertical.27

Van Doesburg remained active within the art world until his death, continuing to lecture and propagate his ideas. In a letter he wrote to friends in 1929 he stated that:

“I must work like a madman just to stay alive, and can hardly stop to catch my breath… When I returned from Strasbourg [the area in Germany which he had been operating out of from 1926-1928]… I was as good as finished and therefore had to start all over again.” 29

27 Overy, De Stijl, 93.
His tenacity and fervor of belief inspired the former members of De Stijl to reconvene and publish the magazine’s final issue in his honor as homage to the artist who had led them in their pursuit of a new view of art, life, and everything in between. The typography of Van Doesburg did not cease to be relevant and noteworthy with the passing of its creator, but rather has lived on in his absence.

Van Doesburg’s willingness to expand the rules and logic of typography influenced other designers. From Jan Tschichold who cited him in his 1928 work Die Neue Typograhie as one of the premier modern typographers to his influence on modern typefaces and design in an age of computers and chaos in which designers now are beginning to look to the simple, elegant solution. One of the more notable typographers to claim Van Doesburg as an influence is the Dutch typographer Wim Crouwel who is known for his font New Alphabet (figure 15, page 15) of which he has made three versions. New Alphabet like the Alphabet Van Doesburg is based on a grid and designed so that the letterforms can be scaled whether horizontally or vertically. The two also share a geometric appearance. However, Van Doesburg’s influence on other type designers is seen less in the physical manifestation of the letterforms, but rather in the spirit of experimentation in typography which he encouraged.

In 1993 David Quay and Freda Slack, the operators of The Foundry, a British type foundry, created a digital form of Van Doesburg’s early alphabet, imbuing it with a lowercase based on some varieties of letterforms that appeared in various designs. This font was released by the Foundry as part of a series of fonts based on modern typographic pioneers including the early fonts of Herbert Bayer and Paul Renner (figure 16). This font, as used today, is still primarily designed to function as a display font. It still relies on the original 5x5 square grid for its structure and maintains a heavy emphasis on the geometry and function of the letterforms as pieces in a larger design but also as individual works themselves. This illustrates the values of Theo Van Doesburg’s art to create something both beautiful and functional that did not rely on illusion for its beauty or strength of design, but was grounded in the reality of the world in which he lived, and designed.

29 Overy, De Stijl, 188-189.
30 Overy, De Stijl, 50.
31 Helfand, “Geometry Is Never Wrong”, par. 4-6.
bibliography


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