

Thinking about De Stijl: Three Generations of Committed Historians in the Netherlands.

Historiography of modern art and architecture, History of De Stijl, History of critique, Feminist critique, Dutch historiography of art history

/Abstract

This essay focusses on the changing critical identity of the Dutch modern art-and architectural historian in the decades after the Second World War ranging from the 1950s to the early 1990s. As such, the focus of this essay is not upon the history of criticism per se, but instead on historiography understood as a frontier area between history and criticism. By adopting the De Stijl movement as a case-study, this essay traces the different steps in its historization. I state that its post-war historiography was not only defined by new insights concerning this avant-garde movement, but equally by a change in the subject position of the historian as a critical actor. During the 1950s in the Netherlands, it was the historian rather than the critic who played an important role in promoting and intellectually supporting groups of architects. Influential art historians such as Hans Jaffé proposed a form of operative history which entangled the past with contemporary artistic practice. Later generations created a break with the practices of engaged, operative history writing. In this essay this break is analysed as a change in the relationship between the subject (the historian) and the object (the past) and as the replacement of an engaged attitude by a more detached position in which the past increasingly became the focus of an exclusive epistemic concern. Historians now felt that too much engagement and partisanship would hinder the analysis of the past and the insight into its contents. The mission of the historian was now no longer to educate the public, but to gain scientific knowledge about the past. However, this did not mean its results remained unchallenged. In fact, the epistemic turn described in this essay – the exchange of engagement for a historical practice aimed principally at acquiring knowledge about the past - went hand in hand with the rise of postmodernism in the humanities, leading to relativistic claims concerning historical knowledge. In this way, a univocal history of architecture was fragmented into a plurality of historical practices. Although these practices were no longer overtly politically engaged, they remained politically implicated as the result of the complex correspondences between past and present that remained a part of the histories of artistic modernism. This essay concludes by stating that the departure from engaged history writing left unanswered crucial questions concerning the identity of the historian as a critical actor.

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Introduction

In an essay published in 1999, the Dutch architectural historian Ed Taverne called into question whether the Rietveld-Schröder House in Utrecht could be regarded as a “pinnacle of De Stijl architecture”.¹ In fact, so wrote Taverne, even though the house had been presented in numerous books as the sublime embodiment of the De Stijl ideas in the field of architecture, historians had nevertheless failed to demonstrate which relationship the “unique dwelling” had to the corpus of the De Stijl writings.² This questioning of the Rietveld-Schröder House as an icon of avant-garde architecture should not be regarded as a rebellious and isolated interpretation made by a maverick intellectual. Rather, Taverne’s text should be considered as a late outcome of a project that started in the early 1980s to rewrite the history of the Dutch artistic avant-garde. As I will state in this essay, the occasion for this reconsideration was formed not only by new insights regarding De Stijl as the Netherlands’ main contribution to early 20th century avant-garde movements, but also by a different thinking about the tasks and goals of the architectural historian. Indeed, it is in the field of the subject position of the historian that a break was forced with respect to an earlier generation of historians and critics, especially with the generation that in the 1950s had been responsible for the first historicizations of De Stijl. An engaged, committed relationship with a past that was still very much present – 1950 marked eighteen years since the last issue of the journal *De Stijl* was published – was exchanged in the 1980s for a more detached attitude with respect to a past that was slowly becoming more distant. Instead of regarding the immediate past as a source for moral, political and aesthetical lessons, now a generation of historians emerged that were interested in an more exclusive epistemic relationship with history: they wanted to gain knowledge about the past per se, apart from the need to evaluate, praise or criticize it.³ In this essay, I will analyse the changed relationship between the subject (the historian) and the object (the past) in Dutch art-and architectural history between 1950 and 1980 by focussing upon the historicization of the De Stijl movement as a case-study. As I will argue, even though the relationship with the past became more epistemic and less engaged for historians working in the 1980s, this did not mean that the histories produced by them were beyond debate. In fact, the epistemic turn described in this essay – the exchange of engagement for a historical practice aimed principally at acquiring knowledge about the past - went hand in hand with the rise

1 Ed Taverne, “The only truly canonical building in Northern Europe” in: Crimson ed., *Mart Stam’s trousers: Stories from behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 1999), 93-107.

2 Taverne, “The only truly canonical building”, 101.

3 I have borrowed the types of relationships – epistemic, moral, political and aesthetic – from the philosopher of history Herman Paul. Based upon the work of the philosopher Mark Day, Paul departs from the notion that “... people have different reasons to be interested in the past and as a consequence entertain different relationships with the past.” Paul also points to the work of the philosopher Jörn Rüsen who discerned a semantic, cognitive, esthetical, rhetorical and political dimension in the use of history. Both Rüsen and Day accentuate that although these relationships can be discerned on a conceptual level, in practice they only exist in interrelation, so that history is never completely epistemic for example, or completely political. See: Herman Paul, *Als het verleden trekt, kernthema’s uit de geschiedfilosofie*, (Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers, 2014), 50. Mark Day, “Our Relations with the Past”, *Philosophia*, 36, (2008): 417-427. Jörn Rüsen, “Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken”, in: Klaus Füssmann, Heinrich Theodor Grütter, Jörn Rüsen, eds., *Historische Faszination: Geschichtskultur heute*, Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1994, 3-26.

of postmodernism in the humanities, leading to relativistic claims concerning historical knowledge. This becomes clear from a number of studies that were produced from the early 1980s onwards. I will discuss Carel Blotkamp's *De Stijl: The Formative Years* (1982), Nancy Troy's *The De Stijl Environment* (1983), Yves Alain Bois' *The De Stijl Idea* (1982), Paul Overy's *De Stijl* (1992) and, finally, Alice Friedman's *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (2006). As I will state, in these studies a univocal history of architecture was fragmented into a plurality of historical practices. These practices were no longer overtly politically engaged, but they remained politically implicated: in fact, this was the result of the complex correspondences between past and present that remained a part of the histories of artistic modernism. For the historiography of De Stijl, the debates between different generations of historians resulted in an open-ended history and an ongoing dialogue that, despite its status as a Dutch avant-garde icon, has not yet reached its conclusion. At the same time, the departure from engaged history writing left crucial questions concerning the identity of the historian as a critical actor unanswered.

The discovery of recent history

Today, at the time of this essay's writing, the worldwide bibliography of De Stijl - the Dutch avant-garde movement based on the journal *De Stijl* founded in 1917 in Leiden by the artist Theo van Doesburg - lists some 10,000 publications, including books, pamphlets, articles and exhibition catalogues. In the first years after the Second World War, however, this list looked quite different. By then, although the first steps towards the institutionalisation of De Stijl as a major part of the international modernist canon had already been taken, its historization had not yet come about. De Stijl figured in a survey of modern architecture as early as 1929, when the American architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987) included this movement in his book *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration*.⁴ In 1932, Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud - one of the architects connected to De Stijl - was recognized as one of four modern masters in the exhibition *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* organized by Hitchcock and Philip Johnson for the Museum of Modern Art in New York and he was included in the accompanying publication *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*.⁵ Four years later, in 1936, the De Stijl movement was included in Alfred Barr's exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* organized by the same Museum. De Stijl figured in Barr's famous flowchart used to demonstrate the development of modern art from 1890 to 1935.⁶ Also in Europe during this period the first initiatives were taken to officially recognize

4 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration*. (New York: Payson&Clarke, 1929).

5 Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932).

6 Hanna Schouten, "De Stijl - From Amsterdam to New York, The (re) presentation of De Stijl in the historical retrospective De Stijl exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1951) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1952-1953)" („Ma thesis University of Leiden, 2016).

De Stijl and its protagonists. For example, when in the 1930s the international avant-garde movements threatened to become marginalized in Europe, Nelly van Doesburg - a Dutch avant-garde musician and wife of Theo van Doesburg - started her campaign to newly draw attention to the importance of De Stijl and to secure that her by then deceased husband was recognized as one of its main protagonists. Together with Willem Sandberg, who was by then a board member of the VANK (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Ambachts-en Nijverheidskunst, Netherlands Association for Crafts and Industrial Art), she organized an exhibition about Theo van Doesburg in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1936.⁷ In 1938, immediately after Sandberg had become a curator at the Stedelijk Museum, Sandberg and Nelly Van Doesburg organized the exhibition *Abstracte Kunst* (Abstract Art). However, Barr, Sandberg and Nelly Van Doesburg supported an avant-garde movement that in the 1930s was still alive and active; the information they presented to the public was a direct result of the promotional activities of Theo Van Doesburg, Piet Mondriaan and other designers attached to De Stijl. This situation changed after the war. With the death of Piet Mondriaan in 1944 the awareness grew that De Stijl belonged to a period that had already ended and that it was time to secure De Stijl's place in history. It is from this background that in 1947 Philip Johnson wrote to Sandberg that it was time to celebrate de Stijl as "the most important single movement that resulted in what we now call modern architecture" by organizing an exhibition and a publication dedicated to this movement.⁸ Thirty years after the foundation of De Stijl - De Stijl was founded in 1917 in Leiden - the time had come to express a final judgment on its relevance. It was also for this reason - presenting De Stijl as a historical movement that belonged to the past - that the architects Oud and Van Eesteren initially objected to the idea of organizing an exhibition dedicated to De Stijl.⁹ These architects had played major roles in the movement; for them, the evaluation of it was narrowly connected to their own fortune as architects. The first post-war attempts at historization thus heralded a period of confusion and dissent among these architects. Should De Stijl be regarded as a cohesive movement or rather as a collection of separate artists? Which architectural designs should be brought to the fore as the movement's main achievements? Should certain artistic disciplines assume a primary position? Despite these questions, in 1951 the first retrospective exhibition of De Stijl was organized by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, before being restaged by the Museum of Modern Art one year later.¹⁰ Also the Dutch entry for the 1951 Venice Biennale was dedicated to De Stijl - both exhibitions, in Venice and in

7 Max Arian, *Zoeken en Scheuren, de Jonge Sandberg*, (Amsterdam: Johannes van Kessel Advising, 2012), <http://www.jvank.nl/jongesandberg>.

8 "Both Mr. Barr and I consider De Stijl as the most important single movement that resulted in what we now call modern architecture (...) We feel that now is the time to celebrate its achievements with an exhibition and a book". Letter from Philip Johnson to Willem Sandberg, August 7, 1947. (Amsterdam, City Archives, Dossier: De Stijl exhibition 1951, folder nr. 3431), now quoted in: Hanna Schouten, "De Stijl - From Amsterdam to New York", 33.

9 Hanna Schouten, "De Stijl - From Amsterdam to New York", 34.

10 Nancy J. Troy, "Making History: De Stijl at the Stedelijk Museum", 2018, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/making-history-de-stijl-stedelijk-museum>.



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Amsterdam were designed by Gerrit Rietveld.¹¹ These initiatives were organized at a pivotal moment after the war when what had always been a living avant-garde for the first time turned into a chapter of the past. At the same time, for the protagonists discussed here this recent past was non-concluded since its ideas, aspirations and ambitions continued to play a role in the present. The recent past was something from which the protagonists discussed so far wanted to set themselves apart while at the same time continuing to identify with its contents.¹² In this way we may understand the creation in 1946, on the part of Sandberg and architects Mart Stam and Oud among others, of the journal *Open Oog. Avant-garde cahier voor visuele vormgeving* (Open Eye. Avant-garde cahier for visual design). The journal was founded with the idea to pass on to a younger generation the social engagement of the pre-war avant-garde as well as its *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideals.¹³ The recent past had just ceased to be, but its legacy needed to be kept alive.¹⁴ It is from the awareness of the new task to historicize the past that Hans Jaffé wrote the dissertation *De Stijl, the Dutch contribution to Modern Art* (1956), which was the first intellectual reflection upon the history of De Stijl as an artistic movement.¹⁵ With this dissertation, Jaffé received his doctorate at the University of Amsterdam. While for Sandberg, the curator, the recent past needed to be discarded in order to seize the momentum of his own

11 Nancy J. Troy, "Making History".

12 Ad Petersen, *Sandberg, Designer and Director of the Stedelijk*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 2004), 5-20.

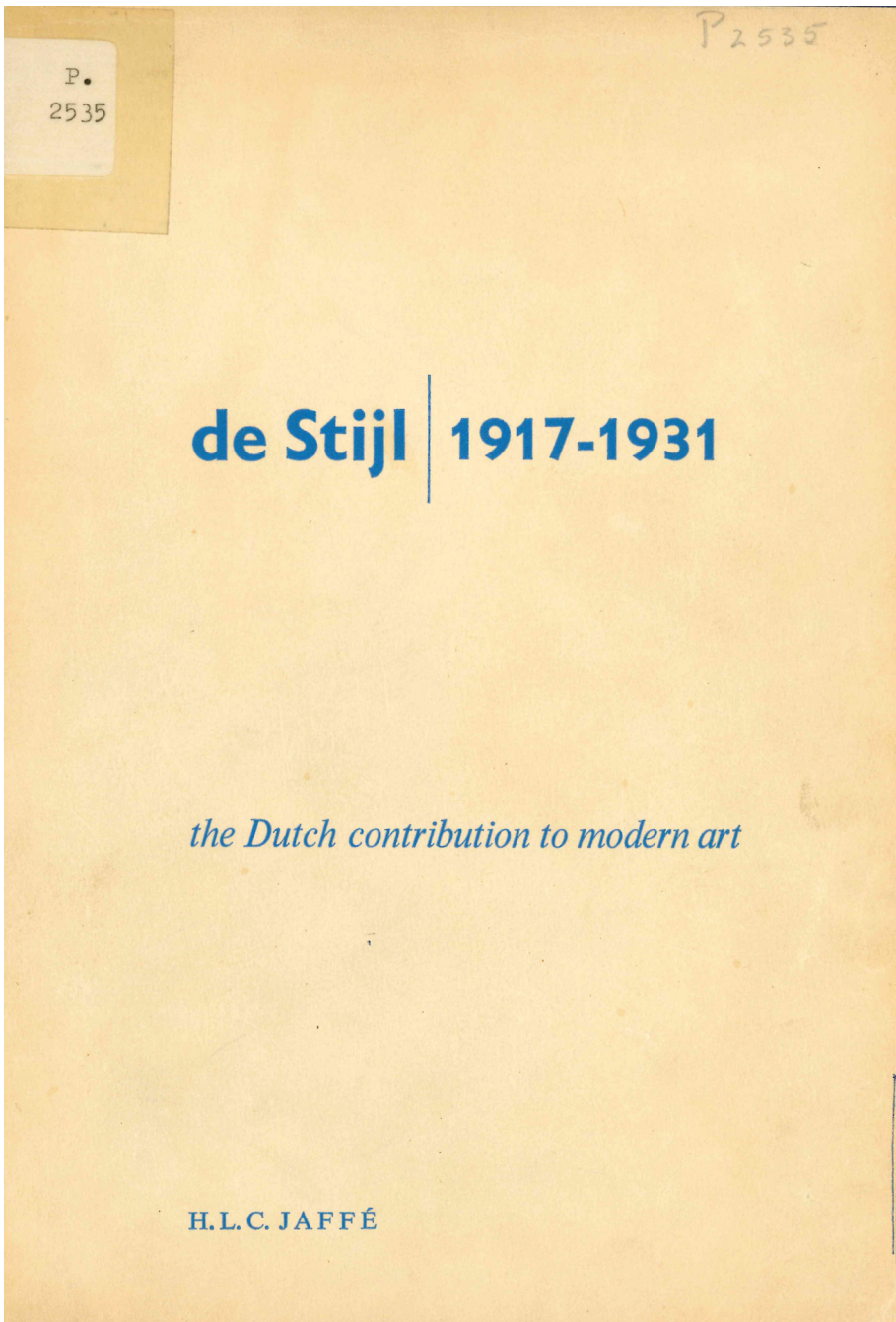
13 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland 1910-2000, Picasso als pars pro toto*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus Uitgevers 2001), 234.

14 See in this respect also the work of the architect and artists Joost Baljeu (1925-1996) who was the founder of the journal *Structure* (1958-1964): Marion Jobse, *De Stijl Continued. The journal Structure (1958-1964), an artists' debate*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005).

15 Hans Ludwig Cohn Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: the Dutch contribution to Modern Art*. (Amsterdam: Meulenhof 1956).

Fig. 1

Presentation of the Prix de la Critique by Hans Jaffé to Charlotte van Pallandt, 1959. Source: Nationaal Archief/Collection Anefo. Photographer: Joop van Bilsen.



time – hence his focus on new avant-garde movements like the Cobra group – Jaffé, the art historian, saw the task to reflect upon its contents.¹⁶ After the war, the engagement of Jaffé was rooted in the awareness of a critical moment when the present for the first time becomes the past: a non-concluded past whose substances continued to determine the present [Fig. 1-2].

16 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 240.

Fig. 2
Front cover of the book *De Stijl, the Dutch contribution to Modern Art* by Hans Jaffé, 1956. Photo by Patricia Bongers.

De Stijl: Kunstgeschiedenis als Geistesgeschiedenis

When Jaffé wrote his dissertation *De Stijl, the Dutch contribution to Modern Art*, he had already been working for the Stedelijk Museum for more than a decade.¹⁷ Hans Jaffé was born as Hans Ludwig Cohn in 1915 in Frankfurt into a left-wing Jewish family of intellectuals. His parents moved to the Netherlands in 1933 after Hitler's arrival to power in Germany: in search of a less Jewish-sounding name, he adopted, the surname Jaffé from one of his uncles.¹⁸ Jaffé began his studies in art history in 1933 at the University of Amsterdam and became a voluntary assistant at the Stedelijk museum in 1935. From this position he started to collaborate with Sandberg, who had become curator at the same museum in 1938. Jaffé spent the war years in Switzerland and became a curator at the Stedelijk in 1947, collaborating again with Sandberg who by that time had become its director.¹⁹ However, while Sandberg's engagement in the avant-garde was based on his personal acquaintance with its members – among others, with Johannes Itten, Mart Stam, Gerrit Rietveld and the photographer Eva Besnyö – Jaffé had a more intellectual and scholarly approach to the subject.²⁰ As an art historian, Jaffé displayed/manifested a strong sympathy for the art of his time; this also distinguished him from his art historical colleagues who kept a greater distance to the practices of contemporary art.²¹ Most of all, it was Jaffé's goal to explain the motivations behind the coming about of abstract art and to indicate a historical genealogy for it and, by doing so, to provide a legitimisation.²² For Jaffé, the coming about of abstraction in the visual arts marked a profound rupture in the representation of reality by the side of the artist. Where in the previous century sensory perception had been the point of departure for an art that had the mimesis of reality as its goal, around the year 1900 the awareness grew that in this way an insight into the nature of reality could no longer be obtained, since sensory perception no longer led to knowledge about reality. It was this insight, so wrote Jaffé, that formed the basis for a ground-breaking development in visual art: the turn towards a non-representative, abstract art.²³ However, for Jaffé this rupture with 19th century realism could not be explained by pointing at art history alone. Inspired by the Czech art historian Max Dvořák (1874- 1921) and his *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (Art history as the history of ideas), he claimed that it was rooted in a wider *Zeitgeist* – a spirit of the time – in which 19th century positivism was exchanged for a world view that was dictated by modern technique, science and urbanization.²⁴ While these tendencies were a universal phenome-

17 This paragraph is based upon: Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 328-333.

18 Arian, *Zoeken en Scheuren, de Jonge Sandberg*, 224.

19 Arian, *Zoeken en Scheuren, de Jonge Sandberg*, 247.

20 Ibid., 209.

21 See: Carel Blotkamp, "Kunstgeschiedenis en moderne kunst: een lange aanloop" in: Peter Hecht eds., *Kunstgeschiedenis in Nederland, negen opstellen*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus 1998), 89-105.

22 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 330.

23 Ibid., 330.

24 Ibid., 331. For Dvořák see also: Matthew Rampley, "Max Dvořák: art history and the crisis of modernity", *Art History*, 26 (2), 214-237.

non in the Western World, their precise expression depended for Jaffé on what he called the collective spiritual life of a nation and a people at a given time and place. For Jaffé, art was not autonomous but always the expression of a collectivity. This was the leading thought behind his dissertation *De Stijl, the Dutch contribution to Modern Art* from 1956.²⁵ Jaffé believed that the Dutch people were united by a set of national traits which were largely derived from their protestant background. In this way, while pointing at Mondriaan as the main protagonist of De Stijl, Jaffé sought to explain his work by placing him in the context of Dutch Calvinism. Inspired by, among others, the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), who in the essay *Nederland's Geestesmerk* - the Spiritual Characteristic of the Netherlands - had reflected upon the typical identity of the Dutch people, Jaffé claimed that most members of De Stijl had a Calvinist background, stressing that Mondriaan's father had been a vicar who had had contact with the neo-Calvinist theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920).²⁶ It was Jaffé's goal to embed De Stijl in a broader speculation about the history of collective cognitive structures and beliefs and their manifestations in art. In this way, as part of a wider history of ideas, Jaffé connected De Stijl to the tolerant humanism of Spinoza and the liberal Protestantism of the Remonstrant Church.²⁷ In Jaffé's view, Spinoza's philosophical work *Ethica more geometrica demonstrata* (1671) was particularly important in connection to De Stijl: Jaffé detected a parallel between the geometric and mathematical method of Spinoza's argumentation in which each contingency was cancelled and De Stijl's development towards a geometrical abstraction from which each subjectivity was taken away.²⁸ As part of a shared horizon of ideas, both Spinoza and De Stijl were engaged in a quest for an absolute standard: a radical project that, once chosen a specific road, attempted to pursue it to the last instance. In this way, so stated Jaffé, the members of De Stijl exchanged a long Dutch tradition of nominalist art – an art that observed the nature of objects in reality by mimetically depicting them – for an art that was universalistic, abstract and spiritual.²⁹

Engagement

As committed intellectuals, both Sandberg and Jaffé entertained a relationship with the recent past that was not merely aesthetical – based on a notion of artistic quality – but also moral and political. They believed that the modern art of the recent past contained moral lessons because, as a mirror of the time,

25 The following paragraph is based upon: Rob Lambers, "H.L.C. Jaffé, kunsthistoricus in dienst van het Stedelijk Museum, 1935-1961", (Ma thesis University of Amsterdam, 1987).

26 Rob Lambers, "H.L.C. Jaffé" 86-90. See also: Johan Huizinga, *Nederland's geestesmerk*, Leiden: Sijthoff's Uitgeverijmaatschappij, 1935.

27 Rob Lambers, "H.L.C. Jaffé", 90-91. As Dolf Broekhuizen noted, with this interpretation of De Stijl a tension was created between the attempts of Barr and Johnson to place De Stijl in an international canon of modernism and Jaffé's attempt to regard De Stijl as a specific Dutch contribution to it. See: Dolf Broekhuizen, *De Stijl toen/J.J.P. Oud nu. De bijdrage van J.J.P. Oud aan herdenken, herstellen, en bouwen in Nederland* (1938-1963), (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers 2000): 285-291.

28 Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethica*, Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers, 2012. Originally published as: Benedicti de Spinoza, *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, Amsterdam: Jan Rieuwersz. 1677.

29 Rob Lambers, "H.L.C. Jaffé", 90-93.

it could help experience modernity at a deeper level. From their viewpoint as left-wing intellectuals – Jaffé was a socialist and Sandberg a Communist fellow-traveller – the recent past also had a political meaning as it showed the superiority of a non-elitist art that was directly engaged with society.³⁰ Both Sandberg and Jaffé fully supported the avant-garde notion that art had to give up its “false autonomy” in order to integrate into society.³¹ Sandberg combined this conviction with an interest in Marxism, but he was not a member of the Dutch Communist Party.³² For both Sandberg and Jaffé changes in artistic production were a direct consequence of changes in society. In other words, art was determined by society; however, according to Sandberg and Jaffé, art was also able to influence society. They both believed that the potential of experimental and innovative approaches was not limited to the artistic realm: artistic change could make the people aware that social change was possible.³³ For both Sandberg and Jaffé important works of art reflected societal conditions but, at the same time, also heralded art’s future course. They believed that artists possessed an innate sensitivity to understand the “Zeitgeist” and translate it into artistic forms. Progressive artists therefore showed the people the way towards the “Brave New World” of a more equal, just and fair society. In this way, for Sandberg and Jaffé modern art was a reflection of and a catalyst for social change. While Sandberg and Jaffé’s thinking about art was clearly politically motivated, it was at the same time acceptable for a wide public and for many political purposes. In the Netherlands after 1945 the national government formulated for the first time a consistent cultural policy in which a fair amount of attention was paid to modern art.³⁴ This meant that museums of modern art were not only supported by city governments, but also by the national government which, by now, was convinced of culture’s social relevance. As a consequence, museums were given new responsibilities and tasks. Post-war cabinets of various political orientations were united in their belief that art could present an alternative for a commercial culture that merely focussed on consumption. The appreciation of modern art and architecture was necessary for the democratic *Bildung* of citizens: it was an instrument towards social justice and a free and open society.³⁵ In this way, in the 1950s the appreciation of modern art was part of the post-war reconstruction of society and the installation of a welfare state system. Under this condition, museums like the Stedelijk were able to reflect on early 20th century modernism through a series of exhibitions, lectures, and publications. These museums created an awareness of the existence of a “modernist tradition” by indicating a genealogy of modernism in which

30 Ad Petersen, *Sandberg, Designer and Director of the Stedelijk*, 21.

31 Roger Schumacher, *Museumjournaal en de ontvangst van de neo-avant-garde in Nederland in 1961-1973*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 18.

32 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 231.

33 Roger Schumacher, *Museumjournaal en de ontvangst van de neo-avant-garde in Nederland in 1961-1973*, 34-35.

34 Roger Schumacher, *Museumjournaal en de ontvangst van de neo-avant-garde in Nederland in 1961-1973*, 18.

35 For the way in which these convictions were translated by architects see: Dirk van den Heuvel ed., *Jaap Bakema and the Open Society*, (Rotterdam: Archis, 2018).

different movements succeeded each other in a linear way.³⁶ Although these initiatives received consensus and were supported by the state, they also faced criticism from conservative forces.³⁷ Conservative art critics equated modernism to a radical left-wing, if not Communist, agenda. In their criticism, they equally connected the developments in the art world with a moral message. However, instead of promoting a new social order, they stated that through its rejection of earlier artistic traditions modern art sabotaged this order by rejecting democracy.³⁸ Sandberg and Jaffé thus shared the same ideological horizon: for both of them innovative, abstract art was the materialized promise of a more fair and just society. However, there were also differences between them. Sandberg combined a strong identification with the artist with a dislike of both history and criticism, his relationship with Jaffé being characterized by a strong *jalousie de métier*. At the same time, Jaffé's craving for knowledge and classification worked very well in combination with Sandberg's intuitive approach. Even more, Jaffé's exploration of "historia hodierna" was representative of a development within art history as an academic practice.³⁹

Art History after 1945

With the new mission of Dutch museums to reflect upon early 20th century modernism, the contrast between what was going on in the museums and academic art history seemed to increase. In fact, in the university milieu the relationship between art history and modern art had been problematic during a large part of the twentieth century. Until well into the 1950s, art historical surveys at the most included the painter Van Gogh and the art of the fin-de-siècle, however, most art historians agreed that a painter or architect had to be dead for at least fifty years before being considered as a theme for study.⁴⁰ This attitude slowly began to change in the 1960s, as modern art hesitantly conquered a place within the curricula of art historical training. With this development, what had always been the exclusive territory of art critics became a subject for art historians as well. Nineteenth-century critics such as Carel Vosmaer (1826-1888), Joseph Alberdingk Thijm (1820-1889) and Jan Veth (1804-1925) had a broad multidisciplinary practice: departing from an aesthetical conviction, they wrote about literature, theatre, music as well as fine art.⁴¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, a generation of critics writing only about visual arts came to the fore and acquired an influential role in directing the attention of the general public and the artists. Important critics such as Henk Bremmer (1871-1956),

36 Roger Schumacher, *Museumjournaal en de ontvangst van de neo-avant-garde in Nederland* in 1961-1973, 19.

37 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 321-324.

38 Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland*, 326.

39 Jaffé mentions this notion in his dissertation: Hans Ludwig Cohn Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: the Dutch contribution to Modern Art*, 2.

40 Carel Blotkamp, "Kunstgeschiedenis en moderne kunst: een lange aanloop", 89.

41 Carel Blotkamp, "Kunstgeschiedenis en moderne kunst", 90-96. On this theme see also: Peter de Ruiter, Jonneke Jobse, Annemarie Kok, *Kunstkritiek in Nederland 1885-2015*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2016). This is a series of 11 books.

Jos de Gruyter (1899-1979) and Bram Hammacher (1879-2002) wrote at once about the art of the past and contemporary art. After the war, several art history professors developed an interest for modern art, as in the case of Henri Van der Waal (1910-1972) in Leiden and Jan Van Gelder (1903-1980) in Utrecht.⁴² They not only wrote about modern art, but also paid attention to it in their lectures, stimulating students to develop an interest in that direction. However, doctoral dissertations dealing with modern art were rare; indeed, Jaffé's thesis on *De Stijl* constituted a novelty. Modern art history became an integral part of university curricula for the first time in 1958, when Jaffé accepted a position as a lecturer in modern art at the University of Amsterdam, after he had left the Stedelijk because of a conflict with Sandberg. In 1963 this position was turned into a professorship in modern art.⁴³

Another post-war development was the introduction of architecture as a substantial branch of art historical study. Notably, the introduction of architectural history coincided with a new interest in the "recent art of building". Until well into the 1950s, in fact, architectural history had only been marginally present in the art historical curricula of Dutch universities.⁴⁴ This changed when in 1947 Murk Daniel Ozinga (1902-1967) was appointed extraordinary professor in architectural history at Utrecht University. Ozinga had previously worked for the Dutch Architectural Monument Service ("Monumentenzorg") and, in light of this, he had been trained in research necessary to determine which old buildings were worthy of preservation.⁴⁵ As a professor in architecture he specialised in the Middle Ages; at the same time, however, he had a broad view and a wide range of interests. It was Ozinga's goal not only to anchor architectural history firmly into the art historical program, but also to change the way in which it was studied.⁴⁶ As Ozinga wrote in 1960, architectural history had to become a scientific practice and, for this goal, staff had to be hired. Moreover, Ozinga stated that architectural history had to start the study of the recent past. According to him, architectural history had failed in this respect and, as a consequence, little was known about late 19th - and early 20th century architects such as Pierre Cuypers and Hendrik Petrus Berlage. While still available, documentation on their work was already starting to get dispersed, he wrote.⁴⁷ The career of Pieter Singelenberg (1918-2007) may be held representative for the careers of the first art historical researchers specializing in architecture.⁴⁸ Singelenberg began to study art history in 1941 at the University of Utrecht. He was first attracted to

42 Carel Blotkamp, "Kunstgeschiedenis en moderne kunst", 99.

43 Carel Blotkamp, "Kunstgeschiedenis en moderne kunst", 100.

44 Lex Bosman, "De oratie van M.D.Ozinga (1948), het ontstaan van de gotiek en het probleem van de stijlperiodes", *Bulletin KNOB*, 95 (1), 1996, 1-11: 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7480/knob.95.199.6.1.418>.

45 Lex Bosman, "De oratie van M.D. Ozinga", 2.

46 M.D. Ozinga, "Werkzaamheden van de Afdeling Geschiedenis van de Bouwkunst van het KHI en het oprichten van een ikonografische monumentenindex van de Nederlanden", unpublished report, Universiteit Utrecht, november 1960, 1-2. Universiteit Utrecht, Archief van het Kunsthistorisch Instituut, Archief van prof.dr.M.D. Ozinga, 364-369, 369.

47 M.D. Ozinga, "Werkzaamheden van de Afdeling Geschiedenis van de Bouwkunst", 2.

48 Bram de Klerck, "Pieter Singelenberg", *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden*, 2007-2008, 144-145. Also available at: https://dbnl.org/tekst/jaa04200801_01_0015 (visited 10-1-2021).

medieval art and to the field of iconology. In 1946 he became an assistant in the department of medieval art and kept this position until 1955. However, as a consequence of a series of visiting professorships in the United States in the middle of the 1950s, Singelenberg became increasingly interested in the history of modern architecture. His interests included, among others, the Jugendstil movement, Frank Lloyd Wright and Berlage. In 1965, he exchanged his job as a lecturer at the department of medieval art for the new department of architectural history created by Ozinga.⁴⁹ In that same year he started his doctoral thesis on Berlage, which would be defended in 1971⁵⁰ In it, Singelenberg had made a number of remarkable choices. First, he discussed only the first part of Berlage's career, because he believed that later on in his life his ideas had not really changed. Activities in the field of urban planning were not included, because Singelenberg believed they had little connection to modern architecture. The design for the Amsterdam Stock Exchange was for Singelenberg an absolute highlight in Berlage's work.⁵¹ What Singelenberg had in common with Jaffé and Sandberg was that their engagement for modern art and architecture was based upon friendship and first hand contacts with the members of the avant-garde. Together with his wife and son, for instance, Singelenberg lived from 1951 to 1995 in a house designed by Rietveld.⁵² In 1957, he asked the architect for help in redecorating it, and this formed the basis for a lifelong friendship. Singelenberg also had friendly contacts with the architect Hendrik Wijdeveld (1885-1987), the four children of Berlage and with Truus Schröder-Schräder. The only student he supervised in the writing of a doctoral thesis was Hans Oud, who wrote a dissertation about his father, J.J.P.Oud.⁵³ As a consequence, modern architectural history as practiced by art historians had an engaged and moral undertone for a fairly long time after the war. For example, also in the historical sciences in the 1950s and 1960s a moral approach of the recent past – concerning most of all the evaluation of the Second World War – dominated. However, in the 1970s this was replaced with a historicist approach. By now, the consensus among historians was that too much partisanship and judgment would stand in the way of analysis and insight into the past.⁵⁴ In art history this change would not come about until well into the 1980s.

49 Bram de Klerk, "Pieter Singelenberg", 146.

50 Pieter Singelenberg, *H.P. Berlage, Idea and Style, The Quest for Modern Architecture*, Utrecht: Hoentjes, Dekkert, Gumbert, 1972. Singelenberg was fifty-three years of age when he wrote his dissertation.

51 Singelenberg's thesis was the starting point for a discussion about Berlage's place within Dutch architectural history. See: Manfred Bock, *Anfänge einer neuen Architektur: Beiträge zur architektonischen Kultur der Niederlanden im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert*, Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij, 1983. Auke van der Woud, *Sterrenstof, honderd jaar mythologie in de Nederlandse architectuur*, Rotterdam: NAI010, 2008.

52 Singelenberg lived in Robert Schumannstraat in Utrecht. This was a series of four row houses, built as a continuation of the houses designed for the Erasmuslaan. See: http://architectuurgids.nl/project/list_projects_of_architecture/arc_id/1213/prj_id/610, visited 11-1-2021.

53 Bram de Klerk, "Pieter Singelenberg", 150.

54 Boudewijn Smits, *Loe de Jong 1914-2005, historicus met een missie*, (Amsterdam: Boom, 2014), 861.

A concluded past

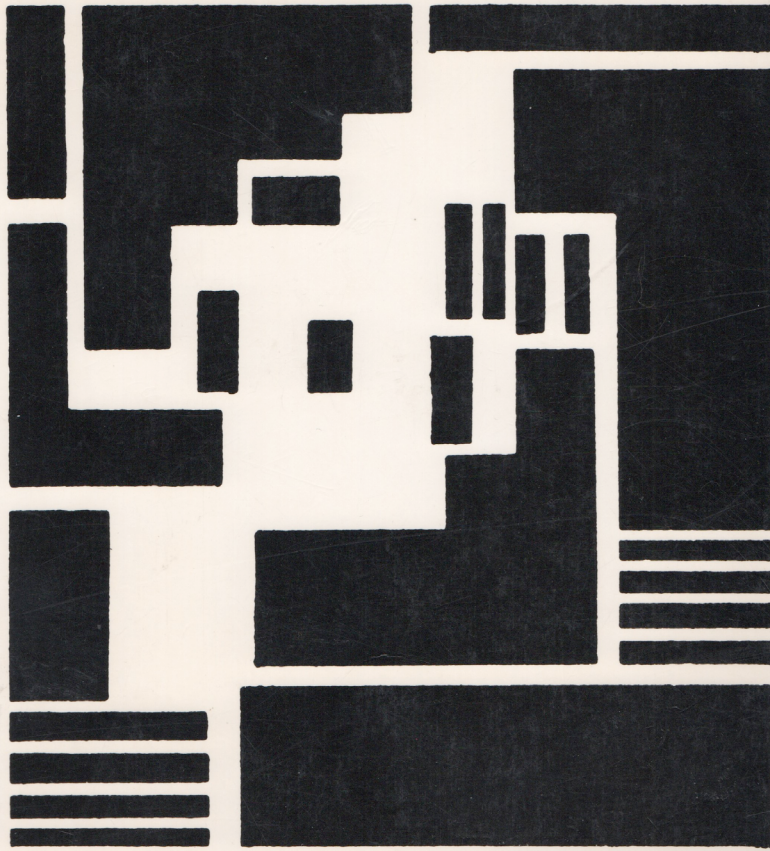
The historiographical perspective proposed by Hans Jaffé remained unchallenged for two decades. In fact, his interpretation of De Stijl as primarily a group of artists who, led by the painter Piet Mondriaan, fought in unison to introduce abstract painting remained dominant for a long time. However, this situation changed at the start of the 1980s. By then, a new generation of art historians emerged for whom De Stijl was increasingly at a temporal remove to themselves. De Stijl, in other words, had become “a thing of the past” and that past now assumed the traits of a concluded chapter, with which scholars entertained first of all an epistemic relationship. Instead of valuing the past for its moral and political lessons, this generation posed questions like: what has exactly happened in the past? Who were the involved actors? The availability of new archival sources played a role in this shift: while historians were now at a temporal remove with respect to a movement started some fifty years ago, they were at the same time at a spatial proximity to sources as they could lay their hands more easily on key documents. In fact, for a long time Nelly Van Doesburg, the wife of Theo Van Doesburg, had kept the De Stijl archive in her house in Meudon, France. After her death in 1975 the fate of this archive remained at length unclear. At the start of the 1980s, the art historian Wies van Moorsel, who was the sole heir to the Van Doesburg estate, decided to donate the archive, along with Van Doesburg’s house, works and library, to the Dutch state.⁵⁵ In the new wave of De Stijl studies from the 1980s onwards, this archive played a major role. An important characteristic of these studies is that they were concerned to counter Jaffé’s postulation of De Stijl as a homogeneous group consisting most of all of painters. A key contribution was made by a group of researchers from the Art Historical Department of Utrecht University led by professor Carel Blotkamp.⁵⁶ These scholars started a research project that departed from the singularity of De Stijl as an avant-garde movement. In contrast to Jaffé, who had placed De Stijl on a par with groups like *Die Brücke* in Dresden or the Dadaists in Zürich, the researchers from Utrecht based their interpretation on the fact that De Stijl members had had little personal contact with each other and were geographically dispersed. De Stijl, so wrote Blotkamp, was to be viewed primarily as the name of a magazine: it did not have a common program or a coherent shared aesthetic theory.⁵⁷ In this way, there was little ground to assume their coherence as a group. This new outlook on De Stijl was accompanied by a different art historical method consisting of close philological “readings” of individual artists and their work coupled with a painstaking gathering of historical documents and other

55 See the website of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) for information about the custodial history of the Theo and Nelly Van Doesburg archive: <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/archives/details/NL-HaRKD-0408/keywords/van%20doesburg%20history%20of%20archive>. On the basis of the archive, Evert van Straten compiled a documentary biography about Theo Van Doesburg and a selection of the archive was displayed at the Haags Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, as part of an exhibition on De Stijl architecture. See: Evert Van Straten ed., *Theo Van Doesburg 1883-1931: een documentaire op basis van materiaal uit de schenking van Van Moorsel*, Den Haag: Staatuitgeverij, 1983.

56 Among these researchers were Marijke Küper, Sjarel Ex and Els Hoek, who would later become recognized De Stijl scholars.

57 Carel Blotkamp eds., *De beginjaren van De Stijl 1917-1922*, (Utrecht: Reflex Uitgeverij, 1982), 9.

DE BEGINJAREN VAN DE STIJL 1917 1922



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sources. In this way, De Stijl was broken down into a plurality of artistic practices. This was also reflected in *De Beginjaren van de Stijl 1917-1922*, a publication of 1982 which consisted of a collection of biographies of individual artists and architects so as to fragment the narrative of De Stijl into a loose assembly of artists and architects.⁵⁸ The book derived its periodization from the fact that the amount of archival material had been so enormous that the researchers had to limit their scope. As Blotkamp later wrote, one third of the images in the book were new discoveries, and the archives permitted the researchers to correct dates and other pieces of information. Also, mutual influences and differences between De Stijl members could now for the first time be analysed. To further underline the above-mentioned lack of coherence, the book also pointed to the manifold frictions and disagreements between the members of De Stijl.⁵⁹ Besides criticizing the assumed unity of De Stijl, another line of critique was aimed at the dominance of painting as its core activity. Therefore, in *De Stijl: The Formative Years 1917-1922* architects such as Rietveld, Oud and Robert

58 Ibid., 5.

59 Carel Blotkamp eds., *De beginjaren van De Stijl*, 10.

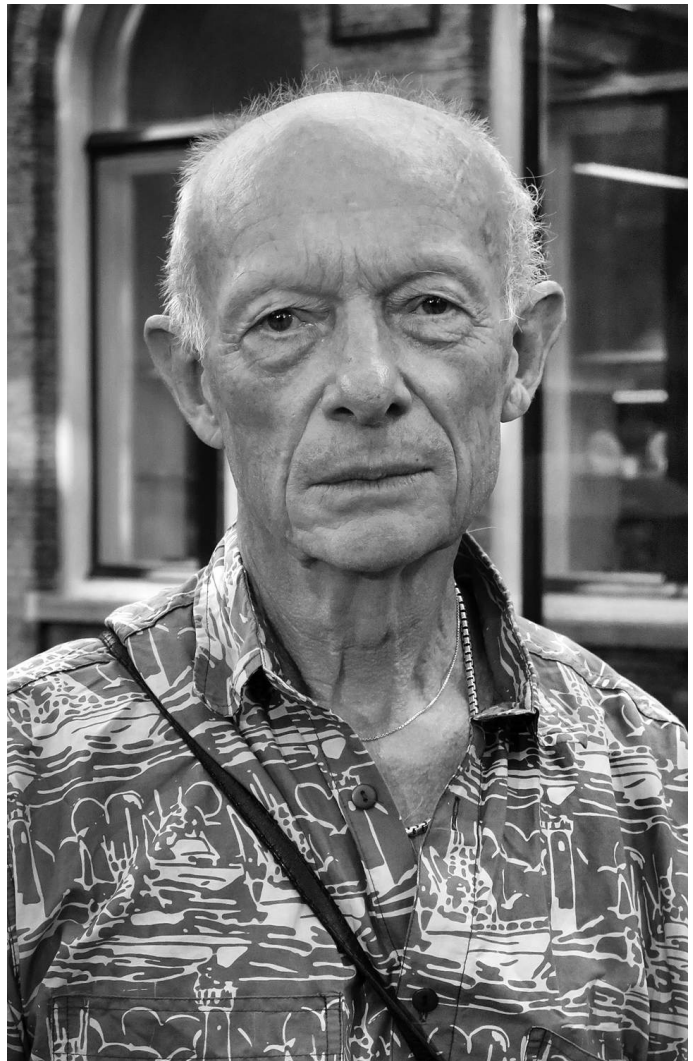
Fig. 3

Front cover of the book *De Beginjaren van de Stijl 1917-1922* by Carel Blotkamp, 1982. Photo by Rixt Hoekstra.

van 't Hoff were discussed alongside Mondriaan and Van Doesburg.⁶⁰ However, the decisive push in this direction came from abroad: in 1983 the American art historian Nancy Troy published the book *De Stijl Environment* in which she underlined the relevance of interior design for the De Stijl members and the importance for its members to place painting within three dimensional space.⁶¹ On this account, Troy positioned the interaction between architects and artists at the basis of the De Stijl group. A year before, in 1982, the second large post-war exhibition on De Stijl was organized at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis. This show, titled *De Stijl 1917-1931 Visions of Utopia*, was accompanied by a catalogue in which De Stijl was related to political events and developments in urban planning and interior design, in other words, within a contextual analysis that had been previously excluded by Jaffé and others in the 1950s.⁶² [Fig. 3-4]

The debated past

From the 1980s onwards a new generation of art and architectural historians appeared that entertained a more exclusive epistemic relationship with the past. However, this did not mean their findings were beyond debate. The most profound comment on Blotkamp's approach of De Stijl was formulated by the French historian Yve-Alain Bois, who in 1990 published the essay "The De Stijl Idea" as part of the book *Painting as Model*.⁶³ By the time Bois published his book, he had been teaching and working in the United States for almost a decade. He was a part of the group of scholars who were involved in a revision of art history that was referred to with the umbrella term of "New Art History". Coming from France and influenced by intellectuals such as the art historian Hubert Damisch and the literary theorist Roland Barthes, Bois represented a particular branch of it, called the "New Art History in France".⁶⁴



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60 The book contained chapters on the architects Jan Wils, Robert van 't Hoff, J.J.P.Oud, and Gerrit Rietveld and discussed Van Doesburg's architectural designs.

61 Nancy J. Troy, *the De Stijl Environment*, Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1983.

62 The essay by the art historian Manfred Bock for this catalogue should be in particular mentioned. By focusing on the relationship between architecture, urban planning and the other arts within De Stijl, Bock confirmed the heterogeneity of the De Stijl group. The architects discussed by him only shared to his contention the fact that they had come under the influence of Mondriaan and Van Doesburg. Manfred Bock, "De Stijl en de Stad", in: Hans Jaffé et al., *De Stijl 1917-1931, Visions of Utopia*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 197-206.

63 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea" in: Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press), 1990: 101-123.

64 Stephen Melville, "Matter, Model, and Modernism", *Art History*, 3, 1992, 387-391, 387.

Fig. 4
Photo of Carel Blotkamp, 2016.
Photographer: Gijsbert van
der Wal.

As Blotkamp confirmed, from the perspective of the New Art History his book *De Stijl: The Formative Years 1917-1922* could be criticised in many ways.⁶⁵ For example, the strong focus on the artists left little space for the analysis of the social and cultural structures in which De Stijl was embedded; also, by emphasizing the individual path of each artist leading to abstraction, the book still participated in the ideology of modernism rather than taking a distance from it. However, in his essay Bois chose a different strategy. He addressed what constituted the core of Blotkamp's book: the assertion that De Stijl was primarily the name of a magazine and that there was little ground to belief in the cohesion as a group. In response to this statement, Bois debated on what constituted the absolute specificity of De Stijl as an avant-garde movement, concluding that De Stijl's peculiarity lay in the fact that it was, despite of all the differences between its participants, a movement based upon a common ground shared by its members. At the same time, refusing to become caught up in an opposition between "De Stijl as a group" and "De Stijl as a magazine", Bois indicated a third possibility. He thus pointed to the fact that, since 1928, three definitions of De Stijl had been used simultaneously: as a magazine, as a group, and as an idea shared by a number of artists.⁶⁶ For Bois, it was this last option that ultimately bound its members together. Bois used an interdisciplinary and theory-informed approach to define this specific De Stijl idea: his definition of it reflected the structural convergence of literary studies and the newer art histories that was characteristic of the French revision of art history.⁶⁷ Therefore, Bois indicated two basic principles at the core of De Stijl whereby especially the last principle reflected the syntax of language. According to him, De Stijl was defined by the proposition that each collaborator, whether painter, architect or sculptor, should strive towards the reduction of the work to its irreducible core. This operation of elementarisation was followed by a structural act of integration through which the distinct fields could be united into a "syntactically indivisible and non-hierarchical whole", in much the same way as "the phonemes of verbal language receive their meaning only through their differences".⁶⁸ In addition, also the notion of autonomy was an important part of De Stijl idea for Bois. In fact, so argued Bois, while the effect of the principle of integration was exponential in that it formed a totalizing and all-embracing De Stijl landscape, it was exactly this totalizing environment that secured the autonomy of each form of art.⁶⁹ For Bois, modern art is justified insofar as it invents models of social and individual autonomy. Modern art seeks to be "plastically self-sufficient and does not seek a transcendental justification outside of itself."⁷⁰ Notably, in his essay about De Stijl Bois continued to use Jaffé as his main source, just as Mondriaan was still at the physical and historical centre of his book. However, resisting easy

65 Carel Blotkamp, "Inleiding" in: Carel Blotkamp ed., *De Vervolgjaren van De Stijl 1922-1932*, (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen) 1996, 9-14, 10.

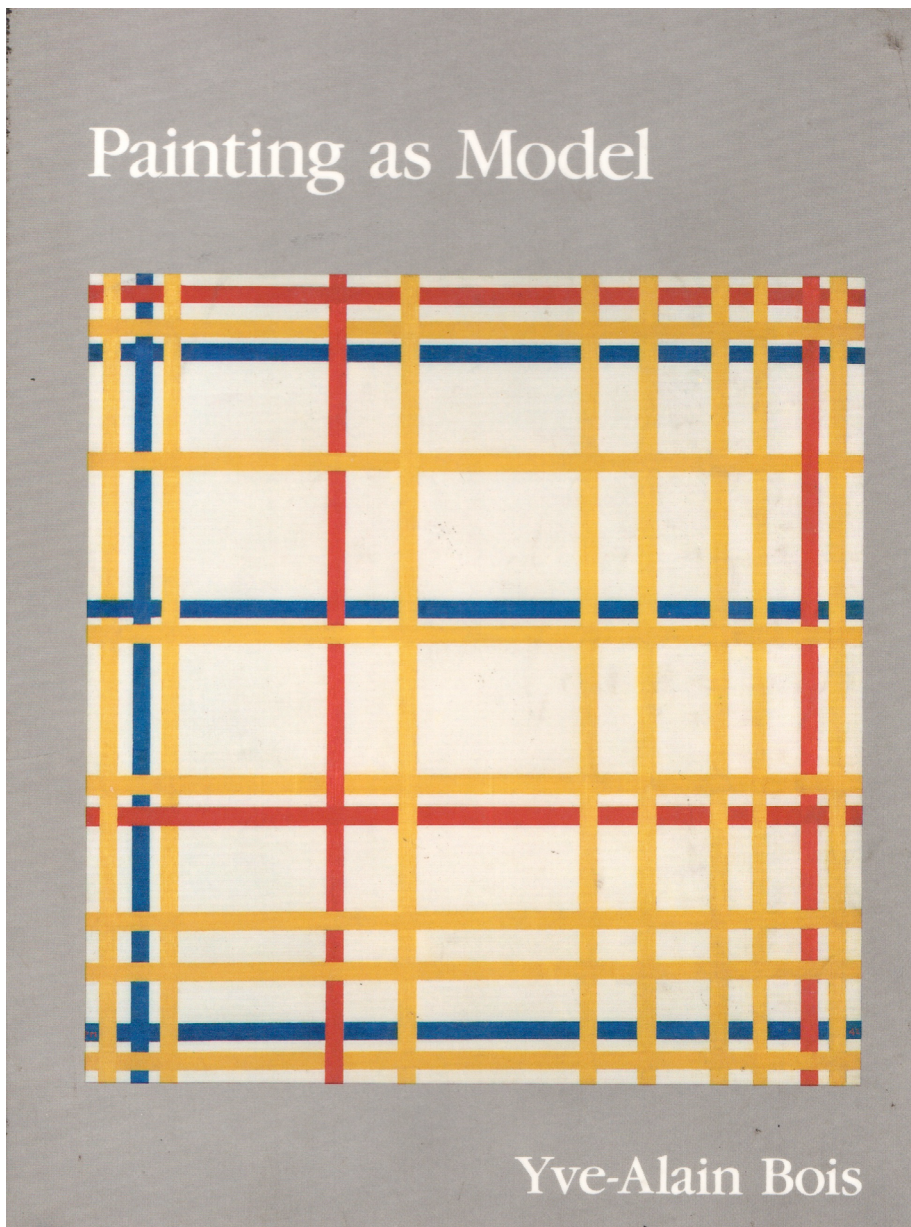
66 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea" 101.

67 Stephen Melville, "Matter, Model, and Modernism", 154.

68 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea" 103.

69 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea" 103.

70 Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, 154.



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dialectical schematizations - he spoke of the “blackmail of political demand” and, in the same strain, of the “theory-antitheory” opposition – Bois refused to take sides between Jaffé’s collectivism and Blotkamp’s fragmentation.⁷¹ Rather, his search for the specificity of the research object led him to acknowledge, as a kind of third truth value, the relevance of De Stijl as an idea that despite all the differences between its members, made it into a movement. Bois’s essay exposed the faith in positivist history that was present in Blotkamp’s enterprise – of going into the archives to find out the “truth” about De Stijl. However, it equally countered the relativism that was behind the view that the ideological and spatial aesthetical orientations of De Stijl were manifold, depending on which artist or architect one investigates. Instead, Bois’s analysis was once more value-laden, foregrounding the ongoing relevance of De Stijl as a program. It also forced the historian to take a stand, to commit oneself or, in Bois’s words,

71 Yve-Alain Bois, *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Fig. 5
Front cover of the book
Painting as Model by Yve-
Alain Bois, 1990. Photo by Rixt
Hoekstra.

to “stand for or against”.⁷² For the purpose of of this essay, even if the past was concluded, in Bois’s view its political weight was ongoing and required an engagement by the side of the historian [Fig. 5].

The missing past

At the end of the 1980s, it was the British historian Paul Overy who pointed at the consequences of recent De Stijl interpretations. Overlooking the historization of De Stijl since the Second World War, he concluded that there was no way to escape from the swamp of historical interpretation and that a firm ground in the form of a “true” De Stijl did not exist. Instead, Overy stated that De Stijl was made and remade with each publication: such was the *perpetuum mobile* of history.⁷³ In other words, the embrace of an epistemic and fact-based method did not lead to universal truths regarding De Stijl; rather, the appreciation of its manifold orientations opened the door to the relativistic perils of historization. In this way, Overy introduced an explicit postmodern argument into the debate. However, Overy’s book *Het Rietveld Schröder Huis*, published in 1988, added yet another element to the debate.⁷⁴ While in this book Overy did not question the status of the Schröder House as an icon of De Stijl architecture, he did introduce the female subject as a relevant category for a De Stijl history. The Rietveld-Schröder House was now no longer the sole accomplishment of Rietveld: on the contrary, Overy acknowledged the contribution of Truus Schröder and introduced her as an actor in the history of the building. With that, he opened the door to issues concerning authorship – in this case, the shared authorship of the house. In the Netherlands in the late 1980s feminist art history was marginally present. As the art historians Halbertsma and Zijlmans confirm, in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s feminist art historians were present most of all in museums and cultural institutions but outside of the university, as academic art historians tended to not be at ease with their critical approach.⁷⁵ An exception to this situation was the career of Wies Van Moorsel (1935). At the end of the 1970s, she became a lecturer at the Art Historical Institute of the University of Amsterdam. As the heir of the estate of Theo and Nelly Van Doesburg – the latter was her aunt – and as the wife of Jean Leering (1934-2005), who was the director of the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven in the 1960s, the career of Wies van Moorsel was characterized by an engagement with both modernism and feminism. Van Moorsel was also one of the first women to pose the question about the status of the women connected to De Stijl. With her monograph on Nelly Van Doesburg (1899-1975), published in 2000, Van Moorsel faced the challenge to research the life of a woman who had spent great energy to pro-

72 Yve-Alain Bois, *Ibid.*, 6.

73 Paul Overy, *De Stijl*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 7-17.

74 Paul Overy, Lenneke Büller, Frank den Oudsten, Bertus Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröder Huis*, Houten: De Haan, 1988.

75 Marlite Halbertsma, “Vrouwenstudies Kunstgeschiedenis” in: Marlite Halbertsma, Kitty Zijlmans eds., *Gezichtspunten. Een inleiding in de methoden van de kunstgeschiedenis*. (Nijmegen: SUN Publishers, 1993): 212-213.

mote and protect the legacy of her husband, but who had never claimed a place in the spotlights for herself.⁷⁶ While Nelly van Doesburg left a carefully composed archive of Theo Van Doesburg, her own activities as a dada musician, dancer, artist and promotor of De Stijl were much harder to trace.⁷⁷ With the volume dedicated to her aunt, Van Moorsel opened up a discussion on who could count as a subject in the history of art and architecture: was the history of the avant-gardes only about artists and architects or did intermediaries like Nelly Van Doesburg also play a role?⁷⁸ Van Moorsel's monograph worked as a touchstone opening up insight into other women whose careers were connected to De Stijl: for example, the poet, linguist and author Mathilda Brugman (1888-1958), who made translations for the De Stijl magazine, published a poem in it, and decorated her apartment according to De Stijl principles.⁷⁹ Or the British painter and sculptor Marjorie Jewel Moss (1889-1958), on whose work Mondriaan's influence is manifest.⁸⁰ The history of these women clarified what had already been implicit in the approach of Blotkamp and de Bock: that De Stijl should not be regarded as an exclusive gathering of canonical artists and designers, but rather as a diffuse network of diverse actors with different and often conflicting ideas. What should also be mentioned in this context is Alice T. Friedman's ground-breaking publication *Women and the Making of the Modern Home* (2006) in which she analysed Truus Schröder not just as a muse to Gerrit Rietveld, but also as a client and a design partner who acted as an important catalyst for the innovation introduced in the Rietveld-Schröder House.⁸¹

Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed three generations of historians who, each from their own critical position, interpreted De Stijl. I have analysed the changed relationship between the subject – the historian – and the object – the past – as the exchange of an engaged attitude for a more detached and cognitive position. Today, few would consider Jaffé's panoptic visions of the totality of art history as an example for art historical scholarship. The method of "art history as the history of ideas" has come to be seen as theoretically undetermined, simplistic and even nationalistic in its undertones. The adoption of a successive epistemic

76 Wies Van Moorsel, *'De doorsnee is mij niet genoeg'. Nelly van Doesburg 1899-1975*. Nijmegen: SUN Publishers, 2000.

77 Based on a conversation with Van Moorsel, Amsterdam, October 5, 2018.

78 See among others: Marjan Groot, "Women as Patrons and Intermediaries. A Footnote Introducing the Articles of the First MoMoWo e-book" in: Helena Seražin, Caterina Franchini, Emilia Garda, eds. *MoMoWo Women's Creativity since the Modern Movement, Women Designers, Craftswomen, Architects and Engineers between 1918 and 1945*, (2015), 22-28, <http://doi.org/10.3986/wocrea/1/momowo1>, and <http://omp.zrc-sazu.si/zalozba-zrc/catalog/book/2>.

79 Marjan Groot, "Women as Patrons", 24-25. In the 1990s, Carel Blotkamp already published the correspondence of Brugman: "Liebe Tiltel, brieven van El Lissitzky en Kurt Schwitters aan Til Brugman 1923-26" *Jong Holland*, 13 (1997) 1, 32-46 and *Jong Holland* 13 (1997) 4, 27-47,62.

80 Katjuscha Otte, Ingelies Vermeulen, *Vrouwen in het leven van Piet Mondriaan*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, Doris Wintgens, *Peggy-Nelly, Peggy Guggenheim and Nelly Van Doesburg advocates of De Stijl*, Rotterdam: NAI010 Uitgevers, 2017.

81 Alice T. Friedman, Maristella Casciato, "Family Matters: The Schröder House by Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder", in: Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House, A Social and Architectural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2007) 64-92.

paradigm as the touchstone for art history has led to heteronomous art historical practices. In fact, rather than leading to a final truthful history, it has revealed the complex ideological commitments of the discipline. With the rise of postmodernity in the 1980s, the Weberian ideal of a value-free science seemed more remote than ever. As the feminist historians discussed in this essay proved, history as a pure positivist science appears problematical because, despite its epistemic merits, already through the activity of selecting, excluding and focusing the historian displays a personal and normative stance. The historians discussed here exchanged a critical attitude, under the form of advocacy for modernist ideals, for a criticality that aimed to test, debunk and thus gain reliable knowledge. An overt political engagement was now replaced by a history that nonetheless was politically implicated, because historical research is never free from political interferences. However, this exchange also came at a price. In fact, it is questionable whether the epistemic approach to De Stijl, with its concern for the correct contextualisation of texts, ideas and works of art, left enough space for other approaches in the analysis of the past. In particular, it is open to debate whether the exclusive emphasis on “how did it all come about” did not go at the expense of “what do we really think about it.” While in the Netherlands the physical reconstruction of the sites of De Stijl is ongoing, as is their utilisation in national narratives, one is left wondering where this rediscovery ultimately positions the historian of art and architecture. For example, the 2017 centennial of De Stijl was celebrated in the Netherlands with the slogan “From Mondrian to Dutch Design: 100 years De Stijl”, thus suggesting that De Stijl was a precursor of a supposed national character in design that is nothing more than a brand invented to sell the Netherlands abroad. Exhibitions such as “Rietveld’s Masterpiece: Long live De Stijl” displayed an uncritical embrace of long worn-out tropes, as it is evidenced by the placement of a gigantic plexiglass red-blue chair in the city centre of Utrecht, which turned what was originally meant to be an object of use into a sculpture or even a monument, reducing it to an image for photos taken by a smartphone. Should the historian, despite his or her epistemic virtues, be willing to leave the study room to take a stand? Should the historian adopt a position of criticality or complicity vis à vis these developments? The debates about the nature of De Stijl as analysed in this essay were also meta-debates: they were at the same time discussions about the tasks and responsibilities of the historian. The historians presented here did not just deal with the question of how De Stijl should be interpreted, but also of what historical interpretation ought to be and what we may ask from it. This debate remains in large part unresolved in the Netherlands: while operative history belongs to the past, the critical identity of the architectural historian remains an open question.

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