

CONCRETE DUTCH

Huib Mous: The Dutch Connection in Constructivism

The geographical structure of The Netherlands has developed qualities in Dutch people which have also played a part in Mondriaan's art: precision, abstract calculation and mathematical discipline.

H.L.C. Jaffé.

This exhibition deals with the work of five artists who not only belong to the same generation but who also seem to continue, each in their own manner, the tradition of constructivism. They also come from the same country and this fact adds an extra dimension to the affinity which is so clearly expressed in their work. Whether one likes it or not, the Dutch flag covering the cargo does influence the overall impression. Before one knows, the wish is father to the thought. It cannot be more coincidence that the rightful heirs to the constructivist tradition should turn out to come from The Netherlands. It is common knowledge that engineers struggled with the sea for a great part of that flat country, where roads, dykes and canals cross at right angles and where the stream-lined horizon measures every emotion with its unobtrusive ruler. In short, are not these artists the true descendants of Mondriaan?

First impressions may contain a grain of truth but may also be rather misleading. The Netherlands is not the only birthplace of constructivism. In addition to the schools of De Stijl and Bauhaus, the experimental art in Russia in the second decade of this century made important contributions. The term Constructivism means quite literally: the kind of art which looks as if it has been 'constructed' by an engineer and not 'created'. Tatlin used this term for the first time (1914). In this introduction, the term is used in the generic sense as Rickey used it in *Constructivism*, 1967, to denote movements and trends in twentieth century art in which this particular starting point is in some way recognizable. Moreover, this exhibition is not about five artists who pride themselves on representing the latest exponents of this school. Nor are they as a group representative of the current state of affairs in Dutch art. Constructivistic or not, there is, however, an unmistakable affinity in their work. They share strict starting points, restrained visual imagery, a consistency of method and perfectionism in the way they work their material. To quote Jaffé: *precision, abstract calculation and mathematical discipline.*

Should there be such a thing as 'The Dutch Identity in Art', then it surely cannot be resolved exclusively into Mondriaan's art. Very often the openness of Dutch art is seen as its most important characteristic. On account of its geographical location. The Netherlands has always been singularly receptive to influences from abroad. Traces of nearly all the twentieth century trends can be found in The Netherlands and this has

resulted in an international amalgam with a few peculiarities. There is, for example, very little lightheartedness. *Jugendstil* has never really been able to root in The Netherlands. There is no sensual painter like Bonnard. Clergymen and merchants have left their mark on the Dutch national character which leaves little room for romantic pathos or heroism. There is, however, in the tortured conscience of the successful merchant a craving for the absolute. Edy de Wilde, former director of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, once pointed out two extremes in the identity of Dutch art: on the one hand there is the liberating élan of strong emotionalism, and on the other a strict discipline which at times is carried to such lengths that it becomes systematical. In other words, van Gogh's emotion as opposed to Mondriaan's system.

Seen from this angle, this exhibition should, therefore, represent at least one side of the Dutch identity in art: 'the Dutch connection in Constructivism'. But even so some caution is necessary. The constructivists of the present day cannot be aligned with the pioneers of the early days. Mondriaan had high ideals which went far beyond art itself. He wanted to produce in a literal and concrete form the 'language of the universe' and not the 'inner language' that is moved by the universe. This universal vision would have to be applied to all areas in life. There would have to be, for example, a new synthesis between art and life. Not only was a new alliance between aesthetics and ethics needed but aesthetics itself would have to be embedded in geometry, as Spinoza had done for ethics three centuries before: *more geometrico demonstrata*. These utopian principles which form the basis for De Stijl, have faded into the background of constructivism as it is today.

It is appropriate to make some modifications, not only where the past is concerned, but also in the current situation. It is a fact that Constructivism is no longer a predominant movement, even in The Netherlands. The overall impression of the current state of affairs in The Netherlands is one that hardly differs from the international scene and that is one of pluralism and diversity. The trends that opened up new horizons everywhere, also in The Netherlands, in the sixties have made way for a reevaluation of painting in the expressive style. Post-Modernism, which arose in the eighties, resulted in new forms of expression on the borderlines of art, design and architecture. A new state of mind, coloured by irony and cynicism, in which the artist puts his own mode of expression into perspective, came into vogue and this did not provide a fertile breeding ground for a 'revival' of the pre-war ideals of De Stijl and Constructivism.

Alternatively, constructivism has never completely disappeared from the scene in The Netherlands. On the contrary, from Mondriaan onwards, we can say that it has been a permanent undercurrent, which at times

seemed to dry up as in the forties and fifties when Cobra and Abstract Expressionism arose. But precisely in those years of post-war reconstruction, it was that utopian aspect of pre-war constructivism that was often expressed in monumental art. The idea of 'a new synthesis' and 'a new role for art in society' survived in that field. Art academies in the post-war years often fell back on the ideas of Bauhaus and De Stijl as well. Artists like Joost Baljeu and Carel Visser attempted a reconciliation between Mondriaan's spiritual formalism and the more organic outlook on form and structure.

At the beginning of the sixties, with the emergence of the *Groep Nul* movement, Constructivism is once again the centre of attention. Within a relatively short space of time, the primitive symbols, the myths, the childlike spirit, the clamour and passion, in short, the whole murky business of Abstract Expressionism was replaced by an urgent need for a composed, austere and cool kind of art. All at once, it was necessary for a work of art to be 'fresh' and 'new', as if it had just been bought in a department store. Aspects like serialization, fortuity and impersonal execution were seen in a new light. The tendency which began in many areas in the sixties of denuding art of its myths, also had its repercussions on constructivism. From then on, sobriety and professionalism were the order of the day. To artists like Armando and Jan Schoonhoven, who were the leading representatives of the *Groep Nul*, references to the universe and cosmos meant very little, even though they were still popular in the German Zero movement.

When conceptual art and Minimal Art found their feet in The Netherlands later in the sixties, every subjective mode of expression, including the art of painting as a discipline, seemed to disappear completely. And for a short while, around 1970 in fact, it looked as if the new forms of Constructivism were to become predominant. A new generation had taken charge. In his work, Ad Dekkers began to employ elementary geometrical shapes, such as lines, circles and flat surfaces again but he did this with a minimum of means, using saw-cuts, for example, or the effect of light and shade. The work of art, as Ad Dekkers saw it, was no longer a vehicle for spiritual aspirations but rather a means of investigating, within preconceived limitations, the transformation of forms in one's perception. As far as that goes, Ad Dekker's work was exemplary for the revival of Dutch constructivism in the sixties and seventies. Within extremely restrained points of departure, a large range of possibilities were tested and gradually the conceptual aspect was given more scope. Possibly these tendencies are expressed most lucidly in the work of artists like Peter Struycken, J.C.J. van der Heyden and Jan Dibbets.

As far as the post-war appreciation of the constructivist principles in The

Netherlands is concerned, it seems in retrospect, that we should speak of an oscillatory movement rather than a saltatory development. The present has always contained something of the past, and artists regularly fall back on either spiritual or formal antecedents. The principles applied by the pioneers were continually corrected and revised. The dogmatism of Bauhaus and De Stijl were put into a sharper perspective. The grand utopian concept vanished into thin air and new starting points were found for the changed context and spirit of the times.

Strangely enough, a recent reconsideration of Constructivism, referred to as Neo-Geo, has hardly made an impression in The Netherlands. This concept, introduced by Donald Kuspitt in 1986, refers to the basic application of abstract, geometrical forms without the spiritual or utopian connotations and is hardly relevant to the Dutch situation. Actually this is not so strange when one considers the almost unbroken tradition of constructivism in The Netherlands. Perhaps an attitude of ironical detachment is only possible when utopia has suddenly vanished or, in the other extreme, when it is taken very seriously. In the Netherlands, however, the high ideals of the first hour were reduced step by step to a more manageable aesthetical thesis. In any case, 'the Dutch connection in Constructivism' does not appear to provoke a game of hidden meanings.

The five artists whose work is on display in this exhibition, all belong to the generation of Dutch artists who emerged at the end of the seventies and who have made a real name for themselves in the past decade. In the sixties they were still too young to have participated actively in the great developments of that time. However, the austere and restrained influence of constructivism in Ad Dekker's day is easily discernible. Their artistic direction was also formulated in that period. Each artist is consistent in the way he works within the restrained principles of his own choice. There are neither utopian prospects nor hidden meanings. Averse to the present spirit of the times, that is to say, unhindered by irony or cynicism or thwarted expectations - they all allow the work of art to speak for itself. The work of each artist is a personal sequel to the best in a long tradition.

COR VAN DIJK (b. 1952) is the youngest of the group. His work is characterized by simplicity and lucidity. Geometrical forms made of metal, composed of staves or sheets are placed on the ground either in a plain arrangement of linked in series. A slight irregularity in the symmetry or the cumulative effect arising from the linkage, can have far-reaching consequences for the viewer's visual experience of the whole form. By alternately using wide and narrow basic shapes, for example, an unusual slanting diagonal can suddenly materialize. In a series of cross-

shaped elements a specific arrangement can lead to a sizeable aberration within the whole latticed pattern, There is a constant search for that one variable which, within a large range of possibilities, has the most effect with the least means.

In his most recent work, Cor van Dijk has simplified the basic forms even further into an elementary whole, consisting in some cases of only two or three components. The tension created by these compositions has to do with the extent to which it is no longer possible to define form and space unequivocally. One wonders where the dividing line is between 'shutting in' and 'opening up'. Where does 'outside' end and 'inside' begin? The energy equivalent of the sculptured form seems at times to spread literally into the surrounding or enclosed space.

HENK VAN GERNER (b.1942) concentrates on marginal incongruities in both three-dimensional forms and in the flat surface, which occur in the perception of geometrical forms. For example, a tension is evoked between an 'ideal form' and the composition of the wooden beams which are there in reality. His interpretation of size, mass and equilibrium never quite meets our expectations. There is, for example, an unexpected difference in the width of two U-shaped rectangles which have been put up against each other. The effect is minimal but it does bring out quite explicitly the friction between perception and reality. And just when that friction is felt, it seems to vanish again. There is always a twist which the eye cannot entirely get at.

This element is expressed in a different way in the drawings. Clearly the single lines are drawn freely by hand but they remind one strongly of geometrical forms and constructions. Here too, there is a discrepancy between the ideal conception and the shape made by the hand that gropes and gauges. Compared to the objects, the friction in the drawings is not external but internalized. The hand that draws is after all kind of counterbalance which evokes the tension from within during the drawing process.

Finally, it is the combination of form and colour in the paintings that causes the friction between background and foreground, form and framework. One strip of colour, for example, which is just out of plumb, begins to 'pull' in a strange way at the edge of the painted surface. In another instance, it is the strip of colour itself that tries to stabilize a toppling picture surface within the picture as a whole. These paintings also have an elusive element which is somewhat similar to an optical oscillation, a tremor which is almost physical, but, irritatingly enough, cannot be seen. Time and again there is a fleeting impression of incongruity that is part of perception itself.

ANKE KUYPERS (b.1945). Her work is primarily concerned with the discrepancy between spatial illusion and a flat surface that occurs in the perception of geometrical shapes. Space presents itself to the eye but is constantly being constituted at the moment of perception itself. The interaction of these factors can lead to an unresolved dichotomy between perception and reality. Until now the ambiguities in perspective which arise in such situations were examined in many ways by using three-dimensional constructions, paintings, drawings and multiples.

Her recent work concentrates on serialized combinations of one basic element that is based on the projection of a square on a surface. These basic forms are linked together: two by two in a serialized pattern on the wall or in smaller, more complex combinations drawn on paper or sawn out in relief which so establish an intercommunication. The contours of the resulting new forms sometimes look as if they are the shadows of an "impossible" shape in space. Sometimes a vague remembrance of a representation occurs: an architectural form or a pictographic-like drawing.

Till now Anke Kuypers has made use of fixed principles of arrangement and execution but in this recent work they seem to have been relaxed somewhat. There is room for a certain degree of fortuity and capriciousness and at times even a rudimentary figuration. And yet the framework in which the work is carried out remains under rigid control. The work of art remains an object referring ultimately only to itself.

JEAN LE NOBLE (b.1940). Energy, contrast and geometry are the central concepts in Jean le Noble's work. Until recently, these concepts were translated into objects and installations where energy and power were literally the mode of expression. For example, neon light was used in many different ways and also the forces of gravity, magnetism and static electricity. Even the potentialities of the imperceptible energy of high audio frequencies were investigated in austere objects.

In his three-dimensional work, particularly the elementary geometrical figures such as squares, triangles and circles are subjected to the disturbing influence of physical forces. The invisible force field only becomes visible when the mental representation of the 'ideal form' is upset and this raises questions about the nature of perception.

In his latest paintings, the colours cadmium red and ultramarine blue play an important part. Both are related to the colours of the light which neon and aragon radiate as a gas. These primary colours are approximated as closely as possible in carefully built up layers of pigment which stand out in numerical surface areas against various gradations of dull black to glossy black. Fundamental associations of heat and cold, of life and death which are related to this polar combination of colours, are grouped in a

subtle way on the surface area. In this manner, contrast, energy and geometry find a new synthesis within extremely limited means.

WIM ROOSE (b.1946). A significant starting point in Wim Roose's work is the intrinsic experience of three-dimensional space. His sculptures can be interpreted as contraptions which sooner structure space than that they take up space. Intractable metal objects lying on the floor or fixed on the wall produce vague suspicions that there might be a purpose or use in their construction but they never divulge their secrets. There are often several ways of setting up the sculptures. Depending on the spectator's point of view, the objects present various appearances so that three-dimensional space can be experienced in many different ways.

A subtle feeling for size, relationship and scale is decisive for each construction. The variations in texture resulting from electrolytic processing on the metal surface contribute to the hermetical perfection radiated by the object as a whole and expressed in every detail. The perceptible area of space seems not only to be defined by the sculpture but held in check also. This coercive quality has definite consequences for the surroundings and this makes his work outstandingly suitable for architectural purposes.

In his recent work, functional associations are presented more emphatically. While maintaining a reference to a tool or implement, the object never lets that association prevail but makes it inferior to the structuralization of space which ultimately defines the autonomous nature of the object. Space is framed in staggered lines, segmented in hinge-like constructions, perforated in metallic trellis-work or diffused in the light of glass. The weight of the material is not only relieved by the tactile qualities of the surface but even seems to evaporate at times in the near physical experience of space produced by the sculpture as a whole.

Huub Mous is an Art Historian in Leeuwarden

Translation: Mieke van der Leij

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