Template for a Biography: What’s the Sense of Theory

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Certainly when many studies have been published of a certain person, it is important that a biography is based on a solid basis, on a theoretical plan. What accents does the future biographer stress and according to which method an individual, so often described, can be clearly emphasized. And above all, it is important to state in a theoretical plan why a theoretical embedding will be a useful addition to the existing historiography. Below an attempt is made to provide a template for a biography. It is not even necessary to know the person with a biography. This is about the framework. I try to illustrate this with a biography by Theo van Doesburg that is yet to be written.

Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), founder of the periodical De Stijl, theoretician, artist, architect, poet, novelist, interior designer, typographer, photographer and above all, propagandist for abstract art, had an influence on the international avant-garde which cannot be overstated.1 Between 1910 and 1920, he built up a large international network that he put to work in his effort to make De Stijl a revolutionary, innovative periodical about the practice of modern art in Europe. The ambitious style with which he manifested himself in the international art world made him a leader. At the end of his life, however, he found himself being abandoned by his original companions in the De Stijl movement. An early adept like the architect Cornelis van Eesteren failed him in 1926, when he pledged his participation to the international periodical i1o, a project of Arthur Müller-Lehning, J.J.P. Oud and others, which took over the role of De Stijl: ‘I’ve agreed to work on Oud’s magazine […] When you judge the magazine, you shouldn’t forget that the ‘Stijl’ has become entirely the personal expression of van Doesburg, with all of the consequences that that entails. The ‘Stijl’ has become a kind of private correspondence between you and the read-

ers. In that role, it is important; it has, however, simultaneously ceased to be the organ of the so called Stijl group.\(^2\)

Concerning Van Doesburg and the diverse aspects of his work, a large quantity of secondary literature has been published. His visual and literary work has been collected in Els Hoek (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg. Oeuvrecatalogus (2000)*, which contains an extensive bibliography of publications devoted to him.


A comprehensive study of Van Doesburg does not exist. In 1983, Evert van Straaten carried out pioneering work with *Theo van Doesburg 1883–1931. Een documentaire op basis van materiaal uit de Schenking van Moorsel*. Building on the foundation Van Straaten established, studies addressing Van Doesburg’s various roles, as theoretician of architecture, poet, periodical editor or painter, have appeared, but a publication in which all of his activities and their interconnections are brought together does not exist. Little is known about the sources of his inspiration, his background and his experiences. Van Doesburg was a theoretically orientated artist who took an interest in politics, religion, philosophy and sociology. He was a member of a political party, toyed, in the years preceding the First World War, with pacifism, maintained an association with the Bond van Revolutionair Socialistische Intellectueelen [Union of Revolutionary Socialist Intellectuals], was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Van Doesburg converted to Catholicism shortly before he died. The letter of condolence written to Nelly van Doesburg by Antony Kok, with whom Van Doesburg became friends during the First World War, is full of religious symbolism and contains an explicit indication of his conversion: ‘How glorious his soul must now feel, being close to God, in a wonderful light, with infinite possibilities of development surrounding him.’\(^3\) These developments

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2 Letter Cornelis van Eesteren to Theo van Doesburg, 26 December 1926 (The Hague, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie [Netherlands Institute for Art History], Van Doesburg-archive, no. 60).

in his thought will be understood in the context of the role which Van Doesburg played in various networks in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Eastern Europe, Italy, Switzerland and France.

Van Doesburg’s work has for the most part been effectively surveyed in the published catalogue devoted to his oeuvre, but about his personal life we know very little. A modest amount of research has been done on his life with his first wife, Agnita Feis, but about his life with his second wife, Lena Milius, we know little; about his third wife, Nelly van Moorsel, a biography has been published. Biographical information can also be gained from his published correspondence with Antony Kok, Alexander Archipenko, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter and Enrico Prampolini. A scattering of correspondence with Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky and Giorgio De Chirico and other Italian futurists has also been published. Systematic research into his correspondence has, however, never taken place.

Van Doesburg’s family history is still terra incognita; we know practically nothing about his biological father, except that he was a photographer who left his family when Theo was one year old and went to Germany. Van Doesburg’s period of military service in Alphen, near Tilburg, has only been investigated in relationship to his contact with Antony Kok, the railway man from Tilburg. The development of his literary ideas and their relation to his visual art has never been addressed. The manner in which he negotiated societies like De Anderen, Konstruktivistische Internationale, Abstraction-Création – to name just three of many – has never been described in detail. There are many such areas of interest which have hardly been investigated. Van Doesburg published – in some cases, under a pseudonym – literary work, wrote pamphlets and manifestos, established groups of artists, maintained a huge

5 Ottevanger, De Stijl overal absolute leiding; Tuijn, Mon cher ami... Lieber Does... Theo van Doesburg en de praktijk van de internationale avant-garde.
network of consonant personalities abroad and moved alternately in the Netherlands, Germany and France among his artist-brothers.

Many of the artists with whom Van Doesburg associated became world-famous, people like Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, Piet Mondrian and El Lissitzky. In Belgium, France, Germany and Eastern Europe, Van Doesburg played an important role. In the projected biography, we will attempt to reconstruct his network with precision in order to be able to understand better the life and work of Van Doesburg and to place them better in their national and international context. In that effort, we will not limit ourselves to artist colleagues, but will also concern ourselves in our research with art dealers, periodical editorial boards and the like. An important research question will be: if and if so to what extent, Van Doesburg influenced the leaders of expressionism, cubism, Dadaism, constructivism, surrealism and Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity] with his ideas. Van Doesburg’s reputation, the dispersal of his work and the reactions it provoked represent sufficient justification for writing his biography, which will be a contribution to our existing knowledge of all the domains where Van Doesburg was active.

1 Methodology

Research into Van Doesburg’s life is of importance for various areas of research in general history, art history, literary history, European history, the history of the Netherlands and of the First World War, artistic movements, like constructivism and Dadaism, architectural history and art theory. Biography, as a form of microhistory, would seem to be an ideal method for undertaking this research. Microhistory is not to be considered as research into something ‘small’, but rather a way of addressing the large story surrounding one participant (Theo van Doesburg). This manner of investigation can provide answers to questions about the representativeness or uniqueness of Van Doesburg. To what extent was he an innovative theoretician? What did he know about art in 1914? Did political developments like the First World War and the Russian Revolution play a role in his thought about changes in the visual arts, as he describes them in many essays in De Stijl? How did he conceptualise war and politics and in what ways was that different from the accepted ideas in the artistic world?

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One important focus of attention is of course Van Doesburg’s relation with Piet Mondrian. How did these two artists influence one another? And was their estrangement really only caused by their attitude toward the straight line? Van Doesburg’s relation with the architect J.J.P. Oud also deserves attention, because by analysing their divergent convictions about architecture and the use of colour, Van Doesburg’s can be defined with greater clarity.

By comparing experiences in his private life and its turning points with those in his public life, the interaction of private and public can be investigated, and we can answer questions about the influence Van Doesburg’s wives had on his work. A chapter will be devoted to the significance of art for social debates and how those debates reverberated in Van Doesburg’s *Nachleben*.

In this intended biography, much attention will be given to the international transmission of ideas, literature and art. To that end, Van Doesburg’s exchange of letters with artist colleagues domestically and internationally will be investigated; a comparison will be made, for example, between *De Stijl* and other avant-garde periodicals between 1916 and 1930, but attention will also be given to the role of art dealers and other mediators like Léonce Rosenberg, H.P. Bremmer or Jane Heap.

Although in the biography much attention will be devoted to Van Doesburg’s rich world of ideas, an express effort will be made to write a biography which is also accessible to a wide reading audience. We are aware of a number of biographies which define a type which we intend to match. Lucy Hughes-Hallett succeeded in writing a splendid biography of the comparably multi-dimensional Gabriele d’Annunzio, poet, novelist, fashion-guru and nationalist

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The relevance of this research: The transition from figurative art to abstract art is, in existing literature, largely associated with Piet Mondrian. The research on Van Doesburg will broaden this perspective, not only because Van Doesburg, more than Mondrian, placed the development of his art in the context of art theory, but especially because this revolutionary turn in the visual arts can be interpreted by means of the social convictions of Van Doesburg against the background of other types of modernising, in particular with respect to the reputation of art in public life, the status of the artist and the increasing role of public opinion.\footnote{See among others Aaron Jaffe, \textit{Modernism and the culture of celebrity}. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2005; Jonathan Goldman, \textit{Modernism is the literature of modernity}. University of Texas Press, Austin 2011.} Of great value in reconstructing public opinion and Van Doesburg’s reactions to it are the many publications and letters to the editor in small newspapers and weeklies, such as \textit{Eenheid}, \textit{De Avondpost}, \textit{Het Volksdagblad} and \textit{De Controleur}.

Since Van Doesburg was both a practicing artist and a theoretician in many fields, this research is exceptionally well placed to compare and discuss the diverse styles of social criticism (for example, his series of articles in \textit{Eenheid} about militarism and European warfare). A wide variety of contacts profoundly influenced Van Doesburg both philosophically and artistically. This research will investigate in which phases of Van Doesburg’s life he was receptive to, for example, the ideas of foreign artists like Guillaume Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters and others, or those of the religious-socialist Bart de Ligt, the Limburgian philosopher Mathieu Schoenmaekers, the artist Janus de Winter and the anarchist visionary Erich Wichman. The influence of these artists and thinkers will be measured in relation with Van Doesburg’s positions on faith and politics. On the basis of his first publications in left-orientated newspapers like \textit{Het Volksdagblad} and \textit{De Controleur} and his involvement with revolutionary-socialist brochures, we will consider the extent to which his political convictions played a role in his promotion of new art forms.

The typographer Van Doesburg, the photographer, the man of letters, the collage-maker, the designer, the architect with an interest in using new materials and technical applications, and the interior designer expressed, in many
publication, his perspectives about new possibilities which were appearing in
the arts and about how to incorporate those in his own art. Van Doesburg has
been considered an important and innovative architect right up to the present
day. His collaboration with J.J.P. Oud and Cornelis van Eesteren has been the
subject of a number of studies, as has his (realised) design for a house for
artists in Meudon (near Paris) and his collaboration with Hans and Sophie
Arp in the redecorating of the cinema-dance hall Aubette in Strasbourg, in
which his ideas seem to converge. What is the relation between his architec-
tural ideas and modernism in literature and painting?

In a number of cases, Van Doesburg employed an alias, especially for his lit-
ery work. In that way, he tried to give shape and foundation to a diversity of
parallel identities. This diversity of self-representation has never been the sub-
ject of research. In this biography, this practice will be associated with Van
Doesburg’s personal life on the basis of archival research but also scholar-
ship on representation, network analysis and ‘masked’ appearances in public
spaces.14

It is our intention to place this research in the context of the political
instability in Europe in the period leading to the First World War; the First
World War itself and the reactions to it in the arts; the international tensions
associated with the Russian Revolution, fascism and the tensions in Germany;
the economic crisis; and Berlin and Paris as foci of renovation.15

As a turning point, Kandinsky’s lecture Über das Geistige in der Kunst (1912)
demands notice, as does his introduction into the Netherlands in 1913 with a
sensational exhibition in Rotterdam. But is that actually a turning point? In
the first place, there is reason for doubt because Van Doesburg himself gave
it that label. He had read Kandinsky’s autobiography Rückblicke (1913); and
says that he was impressed by the theoretical support for Kandinsky’s decision
to produce abstract work from that time on. It was particularly Kandinsky’s
advocacy of the ‘spiritualisation’ of painting that had made a powerful impact
on Van Doesburg. He discovered, in his own words, what the consequences
would be of striving for ‘higher things’ in art and of presenting himself as a

14 Gerhart Söhn, Literaten hinter Masken. Eine Betrachtung über das Pseudonym in der Liter-
atur. Haude & Spener, Berlin 1974; Robert J. Griffin (ed.), The faces of anonymity. Anonym-
ous and pseudonymous publications from the sixteenth tot the twentieth century. McMillan,
New York 2003; Max Saunders, Self impression. Life-writing, autobiographiction, and the

15 Philipp Blom, The Vertigo Years: Europe 1900–1914, Basic, New York 2008; Sacha Bru, Demo-
cracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes. Writing in the State of Exception. Edinburgh
champion of modern painting during the period of his military mobilisation.\textsuperscript{16} Van Doesburg and his new friends from Tilburg even read Kandinsky’s two publications aloud to each other.\textsuperscript{17}

In retrospect, it is almost too beautiful to be true: Kandinsky who wrote about the ‘Geistige’ and the abstract in the arts, and Van Doesburg who not long thereafter founded \textit{De Stijl}, with which he sought and achieved great international attention for his geometrical perspectives. With these doubts in mind, we turned to Van Doesburg’s private life. We found material there that accounted far more persuasively for turning points than Kandinsky’s publications.\textsuperscript{18}

On 1 August 1914, the First World War broke out. Van Doesburg was mobilised and stationed near the border with Belgium, quartered in the house of the Milius family in Tilburg.\textsuperscript{19} There he became acquainted with Lena Milius. He was thirty-one; Lena was almost six years younger. In Tilburg, too, Van Doesburg became friends with the railway employee and poet Antony Kok and a fellow-conscript, the Frisian shoemaker and sculptor Evert Rinsema. Kok and Van Doesburg organised soirées, during which Van Doesburg read ‘modern verses’ aloud. Kok became Van Doesburg’s confidant in poetic matters, partly because Van Doesburg admired him and his poetry. When Van Doesburg met Lena for the first time, he was still married to Agnita Feis. Just like Van Doesburg, Agnita, two and a half years his elder, also had literary ambitions. Late in 1915, she self-published a collection entitled \textit{Oorlog. Verzen in staccato}. Agnita had debuted on 29 March 1913 in \textit{Eenheid} with aphoristic texts, but Albert Verwey, a figure important for the post-symbolist movement, also accepted her poems for his periodical \textit{De Beweging}. Van Doesburg’s literary work did not succeed in getting past Verwey’s critical filter, but in 1916 Verwey did accept Van Doesburg’s essay ‘De nieuwe beweging in de schilderkunst’ [The new movement in painting] for \textit{De Beweging}. This essay marks the transition from expressionism to neo-plasticism in Van Doesburg’s thought. Van Doesburg himself worked for the fluid \textit{Eenheid}, a weekly ‘for social and spiritual

\textsuperscript{16} Letter Theo van Doesburg to F.C. Waller, 28 February 1915. (Amsterdam, Special Collections, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Waller Collection.)

\textsuperscript{17} Letter Theo van Doesburg to Antony Kok, 31 May 1915. (Ottevanger, \textit{De Stijl overal absolute leiding}, p. 78.)


movements’, at first with reviews, moralistic essays about the abominations of war and, from 1913, also with narrative prose, drama and a few poems.

After Van Doesburg was demobilised in February 1916, he moved to Haarlem. A year later he married Lena and moved to Leiden. The poems which he wrote for her during the war represent a transitional phase in Van Doesburg’s verse, from a traditional idiom to the experimental poems which he published under the alias I.K. Bonset in De Stijl, after a period of comparative silence as a writer.

Despite his passionate love poems, Van Doesburg’s relationship with Lena did not last either. In early October 1920, he met the pianist Petronella (Nelly) van Moorsel, seventeen years his junior, with whom he would share the rest of his life.

Unlike Van Doesburg’s first and third wives, Lena did not publish. Agnita published a collection of poems and wrote articles. Nelly van Doesburg travelled with her husband throughout Europe; she became one of the artists with whom Van Doesburg collaborated – Tristan Tzara called her ‘the indispensable Dadaistic musical instrument of Europe’ – and she devoted the forty years of her life after the death of Theo entirely to his legacy. Nevertheless, there is every reason to assume that the turning point of Van Doesburg’s life was the moment when he met Lena Milius, the bookkeeper in the city where Van Doesburg was quartered as a conscript and about whom we know, as we have said, so very little. So far. The encounter with the railway employee Antony Kok and the shoemaker Evert Rinsma also appear to be more important than Kandinsky’s lecture Rückblicke or Über dat Geistige.

Why? First, his manuscripts reveal that he developed from a traditional to an experimental poet. We then see that around 1915, he does not depend on Kandinsky, Janus de Winter or Piet Mondrian, as he had previously done, but that he is interested in exerting his own influence, for example on Antony Kok and Evert Rinsema, while the inspiration which was generated from these friendships also had a considerable influence on his own development as an artist. A fruitful cross-fertilisation, then. And the period when he made the acquaintance of Lena acted as the incubation time for the ideas that would lead to the establishment of De Stijl two years hence.

In the company of Lena, the brothers Rinsema and Kok and freed from the creative competition with Feis, which he described in autobiographical prose, Van Doesburg was able to take up the role of visionary, and begin to practice for the later role which he played with so much verve: theoretician of art and propagandist.

We consider the acquaintance with Lena Milius, Kok and Rinsema as the turning point in Van Doesburg’s life. What should the biographer do with such
an insight? Interpret everything in its direction? No, not in the least. Turning points are also useful for giving structure to a biography, even if the turning points prove subsequently to be less than world-shaking. By selecting a certain structure, it is possible to be less preoccupied with constructing an inventory and more with argumentation. And that is an advantage. Turning points are important for interpreting someone's life, but they are equally important for the narrative of the biography. The most useful of these insights, however, is that the biographer allows himself to be a microhistorian, not so that he can seek out each and every detail; but rather, to be able, by means of a small story, to place a larger, pre-existing story in a more nuanced perspective – not simply to confirm that larger story. So microhistory is a method!

In 1913, art was moving everywhere in the direction of abstraction. Kandinsky in Munich, Robert Delaunay and František Kupka in Paris, Kazimir Malevitsj in Russia and Piet Mondrian in the Netherlands increasingly tried, each in his own way, to free their work of every reference to reality.20

At the time, Van Doesburg still painted in a traditional style, but his letters and other writings from the period make clear that he was preoccupied with the formulation of his new perspectives about art. He just had to share it with a few people who were willing to listen.

In an epilogue to this biography, a justification will be provided for the working method. A justification of the genre biography in relation to Van Doesburg is desirable precisely because so much has been published about him. The relation between biography and other kinds of literature will also be made clear. This biography will not be a re-interpretation of Van Doesburg in terms of art history, but rather an historicising narrative in which both Van Doesburg's uniqueness and representativeness will be implicitly discussed. Not all of Van Doesburg's work will be discussed. In that sense, there is a clear distinction between the research carried out for the biography and the form the biography takes. We research and analyse Van Doesburg as broadly as possible, but in the final biography, the results will act as illustrations for the story of the authors. That is to say that Van Doesburg's network, his methodology, the influences from his private life and his ambitions will be described on the basis of a synthesis of the genres in which Van Doesburg worked. We will do this to

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avoid producing a biography which is a catalogue of works with commentary, and to create for ourselves as microhistorians the possibility of detecting the turning points in the life of Van Doesburg. We will investigate the contacts and insights which influenced Van Doesburg to develop from a post-symbolist to a politically engaged champion of architecture and applied art; and how his personality, described by some as dogmatic, affected his network, for example the estrangement from J.J.P. Oud in *De Stijl*, his relation with the Flemish constructivist periodical *Het Overzicht*, his conflict with Bauhaus, his relationship with the Konstruktivistische Internationale, his exclusion of competing poets like Til Brugman, H. Marsman, Paul van Ostaijen and Hendrik Werkman and his *The Next Call*. The relation between anarchism and Van Doesburg’s Dadaism also provides the possibility of placing personality, poetics and political consciousness in a historical context.²¹

A biography is not a rolled out wikipedia page, but rather a booklength piece of work that can be discussed. A theoretically justified plan can mobilize its own criticism with which a biographer can benefit. Theory, and this does not mean ‘instruction’ of ‘how to do’, raises the awareness of a biographer. The biography will benefit from this. That is also the sense of theory.