

# HEIDI WOOD

## **'We are in need of a new interior.'**

These words were written by Theo van Doesburg, artist and founder of the journal *De Stijl*, in a letter to the architect J.J.P. Oud in 1916.<sup>1</sup> He was seeking Oud's collaboration in the design and building of spaces that would fuse colour and architecture into spatial environments that exemplified the potential of abstraction and modernist ideals.

'Architectural space must be considered a blind, absolute void until colour turns it into something concrete. The spatio-temporal painting of the 20th century, with its plastic, structural possibilities, allows the artist to fulfil his dream: to place man, not before painting, but inside painting itself.'<sup>2</sup>

Now almost one hundred years later, van Doesburg's call for a new interior continues to have currency. I am reminded of his words when I look at the interiors of Heidi Wood which produce space through colour and abstraction. They are presented as displays that one might find in a furniture showroom where the latest lifestyle trends are arranged. New possibilities, new interiors, new buyers/viewers. But what is being offered up and suggested here? What is it about colour and space? Abstraction and space? What sorts of spaces is the viewer asked to step into?

These interiors are animated by form and colour. Wood's quirky shapes – abstracted from familiar contexts that you can't quite put your finger on – are placed in a series of relations that reorientate and displace form and perception. Space is animated through shape and colour and processes of doubling and obscuring, repetition and displacement; plays between positive and negative, between horizontal and vertical surfaces of floor and wall. Similarly, van Doesburg's concentration on form and shape – in his case, the orthogonal and diagonal also aspired to an abstraction of displacement and reorientation of the viewer; straight lines counter-composing the architectural structure. Colour animates the spaces: van Doesburg confined his palette to primary colours in an attempt to capture the universal; Wood uses colours like brown found in many domestic interiors to draw in the familiar.

The Baroque was another period concerned with the animation of space. Such conjunctions in this context may seem untenable but this overlooks the presence of the Baroque in current spatial thinking and philosophy and the potential for such interests to affect and find expression in a range of diverse practices. In drawing the Baroque into this text alongside van Doesburg and Wood is not through a focus on visual aesthetics – the three are dissimilar in image and form – but rather through a perceived commonality in a concern with activating and animating space. An interesting aside is that Wood has spoken about the 'ecstatic experience' as an aspiration of her work; ecstasy is also a condition that van Doesburg and Baroque artists and architects aspired to – where the spatial encounter is one of fullness and excess.

There is no appeal, however, by Wood to the architect as a collaborator in the construction of these new interiors. Rather she works within existing spaces and contexts such as the exterior neighbourhood visible through the end windows. She abstracts – draws out – relations to the domestic, familiar and decorative. This animates an interior space that is here rather than there, present rather than transcendental. I am reminded of a photograph titled 'Wright, Meier, Klein', by Louise Lawler in her photographic essay 'Arrangement of Pictures'.<sup>3</sup> As with Wood's interiors, there is no hierarchy between the surfaces that compose the space – architectural wall, painting, openings to other spaces – all read as an abstract composition of black and white. Is it art or door? The architecture does not dominate in these interiors. Edges are blurred between painting

and wall, between object and space. Becoming space, becoming material, becoming architecture, becoming art.

This spatial aspect creates a different frame for the incorporation of paintings within an interior. Wood's art shares similarities with interior design practice such as Australian corporate office design during the 1990s where designers would look for paintings that would suit the colour of the interior. Or with domestic spaces, paintings to match the curtains. A painting as a portable and autonomous object that could be moved from space to space reaches its zenith in such interior decoration projects. And this lineage is one Wood draws on and abstracts into her displays; the painting object becomes integrated and integral to the spatial composition.

Concurrently with a concentration on the actual space, there is also an emphasis on image. Wood frames her spaces: physically in the space, the art is framed like a series of display suites; as maquettes that draw the eye to visual relations; and as photographs which abstract and draw out the relations. In a sense, the camera is the corollary collaborator to van Doesburg's architect. It is also through image that Wood's art appears and is received. In my case, it is the only way I experience her art – through the photographic image. This is not an unfamiliar situation for an Australian. Throughout my art history and design education, I learnt about art, architecture and space through images. This is not to say that it equates with encountering the work in its materiality but neither does it support a privileging of one over the other. They are different encounters and engagements. I wonder if Wood, as someone who has lived in Australia, instinctively understands this and hence the dual dimensions of her work – producing both image and physical display.

In a sense maybe this is where the new interior is located. Not in form or colour so much as a space of reception rather than representation. Interiors as reception spaces; viewers as receivers where 'the illusion is not in the painting. It is outside'.<sup>4</sup>

I wonder what Theo would say.

### **Suzie Attwill**

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1: quoted in Nancy J. Troy, 'The Abstract Environment of De Stijl', *De Stijl: 1917–1931. Visions of Utopia*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, New York: Abbeville Press, 1982, p. 165.

2: Theo van Doesburg from 'Farben im Raum und Zeit', *De Stijl*, VIII, 87/89, 1928, p. 36. Quoted in Sergio Polano 'De Stijl/Architecture = Nieuwe Beelding', *De Stijl: 1917–1931. Visions of Utopia*, p. 92.

3: Louise Lawler 'Arrangements of Pictures' in Michelson, A. et al (eds.) *October. The First Decade, 1976–1986*, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987, p. 220.

4: Philippe Coubertergues 'Get the picture?' in Heidi Wood. *Serving Suggestions 2002*, Exposition à l'I.U.F.M. de Paris, 25 March to 13 April, 2002, footnote 14.