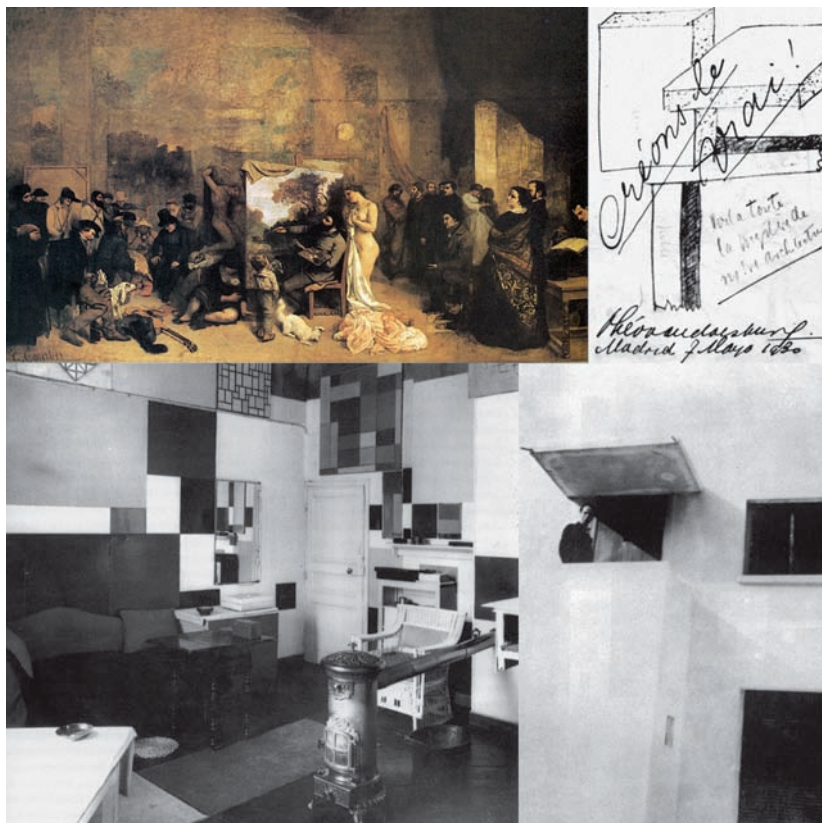


Jorge Tárrago Mingo

**The Morality of an Artist's House: a Laboratory  
for Modern Dwelling. From 1923 «Maison d'Artiste»  
to van Doesburg's «Maison-Atelier»**



Fig 1  
Montage by the author,  
see figs. 2, 3, 8, 10



What relationship can this canvas have, this small sketch, one of the photographs from Piet Mondrian's studio, and one of the last photographs of Theo van Doesburg in his studio?<sup>1</sup> What relationship can these four images (fig. 1) have? Apparently none. More importantly, what do we mean when we say the «morality of an artist's house»? Or, worded differently, what can be understood by morality? And what do we want to say by a laboratory for modern dwelling?

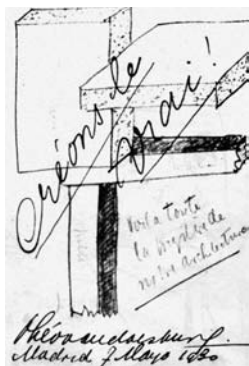
The first image is quite well known (fig. 2). Between 1854 and 1855 Gustave Courbet thought his work *The Artist's Studio* (*L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique*) was accomplished, as a synthesis of seven years work: «It is the moral and material history of my studio [...]. The scene occurred in my Paris studio. The painting is divided into two parts. I am in the middle, painting; on the right are all the active participants, artist friends, collectors. On the left are those whose voices have meaning: the common people, those in need, the poor, the wealthy, the exploited, the exploiters; those where death prospers.»<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the artist divided the huge canvas into two sections, over a vague

Fig. 2  
Gustave Courbet, *L'Atelier de peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique*, 1854-55  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 3  
Theo van Doesburg, Autograph drawing sketched in the lecture held in Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid, May 7, 1930



background that represents the inside of his Paris studio. On the right, one can see significant representatives of the cultural and intellectual life of this time. They appear facing beggars, vagrants and the common people, who occupy the left side of the canvas in poses that are nearly specular. In the centre, Gustave Courbet is being observed by a little boy and by the nude model, while he retouches a landscape, perhaps a conciliatory still life of the two faces of a single society.

We can interpret the *The Artist's Studio* as one of the first canvases in which an artist reveals how he worked in his studio, what his concept of art was, and who was his new clientele.<sup>3</sup> Inside their studios, 19<sup>th</sup> C artists met with each other, recreating, selecting and blending the world as if in a laboratory. However, while the studio is deemed a private space where the myths are supported of bountiful solitude and the isolation needed for creation, the topics announced by the artist pay homage to Charles Baudelaire's works on the ephemeral and fleeting nature of present life.<sup>4</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who, like Baudelaire, is depicted on the right-hand side, emphasised this contradiction. In 1865, ten years after the painting was created, he published *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, a text with an aesthetic and political motivation in defence of the artist's individual freedom and a belief in progress, also in the arts. If, until this time, as Proudhon observed, «art remained within a mystical, transcendental sphere», in which artists, constituting a world apart, were located «outside of human life, outside of practical reason, of business matters and customs», now a change occurs: «Artists from now on will be citizens, men like any others».<sup>5</sup> This was maybe nothing but a false argument and it probably stated the exact opposite: that the artist would not be like any other, but would put himself before society.<sup>6</sup> Being «of his times», being a citizen and a man like any other meant being capable of translating and interpreting reality. «It is the moral and material history of my studio».

The second image is undoubtedly less renowned (fig. 3). At the beginning of May 1930, in the midst of the construction of his studio-house, Theo



Fig. 4  
*Les Architectes du groupe «De Stijl»*. De Stijl first exhibition in the Galerie L'Effort Moderne, Paris, 1923

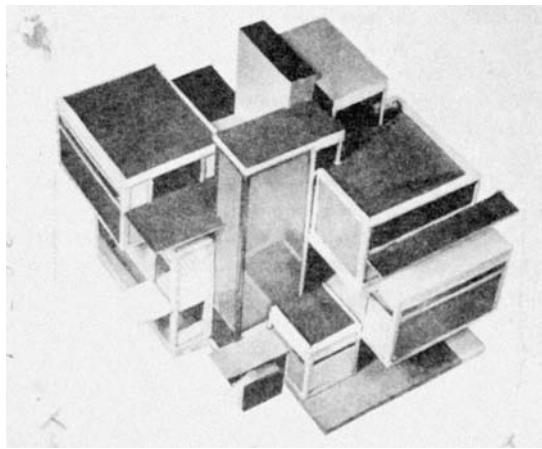


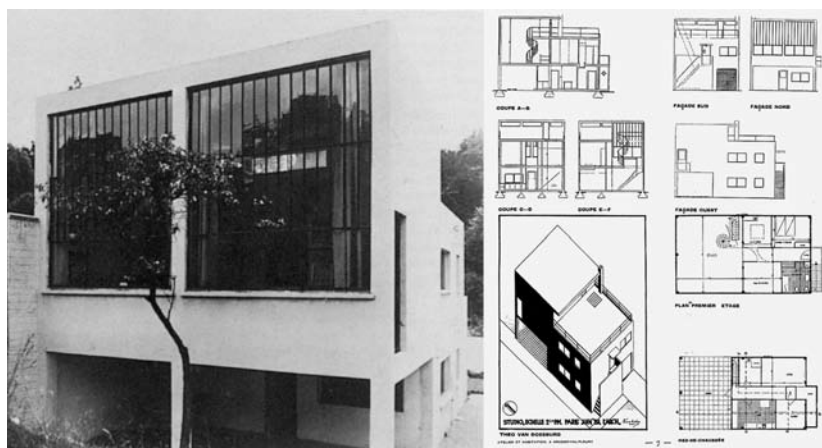
Fig. 5  
Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren, *Maison d'artiste*, 1923

van Doesburg – painter, writer, architect, city planner, critic, theorist, lecturer, amongst other activities – travelled to Spain, where he had been invited to give two conferences in Madrid and Barcelona. We see the autograph drawing that van Doesburg sketched in Spain, revealing new architectural interests, somewhat different from those started in 1923.<sup>7</sup> Between October and November 1923, the Dutch group *De Stijl* organised its first group exhibition: there were nearly 52 works divided between paintings, drawings, photographs and scale models.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the exhibition, besides undisputed propaganda, was the idea of collaboration between architecture and painting and the first attempt to demonstrate the real possibility of constructing the utopia that would bring together art and life.<sup>9</sup> In the well-known photograph of the exhibition walls, several works by the group can be identified (fig. 4). Among them, Cornelis van Eesteren and Theo van Doesburg, with the somewhat shadowy collaboration of Gerrit Rietveld<sup>10</sup>, presented to the french public a scale model: *une maison d'artiste* (fig. 5).

Built for the occasion, the model was created using a metal framework, over which cardboard and glass planes were mounted in primary colours. The outside of the structure was marked, indicating the volume of each element and the integration of painting with architecture. The *assemblage* showed its construction measurements and revealed a further objective: the real possibility of standardisation.<sup>11</sup> The exhibition of the scale model was completed with floor plans, an axonometric projection and several sketches, coloured abstracts of the design sketches and a «contra-construction».

In a way, the *maison d'artiste's* plan was adapted to van Doesburg and his wife Nelly. It included a bathroom (*salle de bains*), a gym (*salle de culture phisique*), a music room (*salle de musique*) for Nelly, who was a pianist, a two-story studio and above this a guest room (*chambre d'amis*) to house artist friends as temporary guests. All facets of this architecture were reflected in the 16 points of the *manifesto* about this new type of architecture that the group had been formulating for some time.<sup>12</sup>

Fig. 6  
 Theo van Doesburg  
 studio-house in  
 Meudon-val-Fleury  
 Plans, elevations, and  
 an axonometric view  
 as published in  
*L'Architecture Vivante*,  
 no. 39, printemps 1933, I  
 (right)



Leaving the detailed description of the architectural achievements aside for the moment, it may be more important to stress three issues: the group effort to transform architecture and, through that, society; the final abandonment of the idea of art as an independent field and, most importantly, the assimilation of formal processes to a normative and scientific logic.<sup>13</sup> The *maison d'artiste* is an experiment from whose results one can expect new spatial possibilities that could be transferred to a broad standardisation of houses. Indeed, the *maison d'artiste* would be the starting point for van Doesburg to create other projects on standardised studio-houses. These proposals present the studio-house as a testing ground, a laboratory. And they also introduce an artist-scientist, and a place to carry out, in the words of van Doesburg, an authentic «scientific search».<sup>14</sup>

Let's return to the 1930 autograph drawing. It is a very simple pencil sketch. Here we see the pillars, walls, beams and framework, terms (*pilier, mur, poutre, sol*) hand written over each of the sketched elements, and not the floating planes of the *maison d'artiste* from 1923, all the mystery of its architecture. «Voilà tout le mystère de notre architecture». The construction of his studio-house in the outskirts of Paris forced van Doesburg to abandon his more utopian proposals of 1923 and redirect them to others that were closer to the reality of the building processes (fig. 6). However, he did not lose his conviction that art and architecture must be scientific methods and must both contribute to assigning life a new meaning on an aesthetic and also ethical plane, having an influence on society. He would say: «The problem of architecture is a scientific problem, the solution of which is dependent on social and bio-genetic relations. Every innovation should respond to a need engendered by the development of life itself. The life function cannot be projected in two dimensions on the drawing board. Our gait, manner of sitting, eating, drinking, sleeping, working, etc., are subject to a certain order, a rhythm in time. This order, the sequence, defines the arrangement of things in space».

In 1930 he also established the *Art Concret* group.<sup>15</sup> Mathematics, arith-

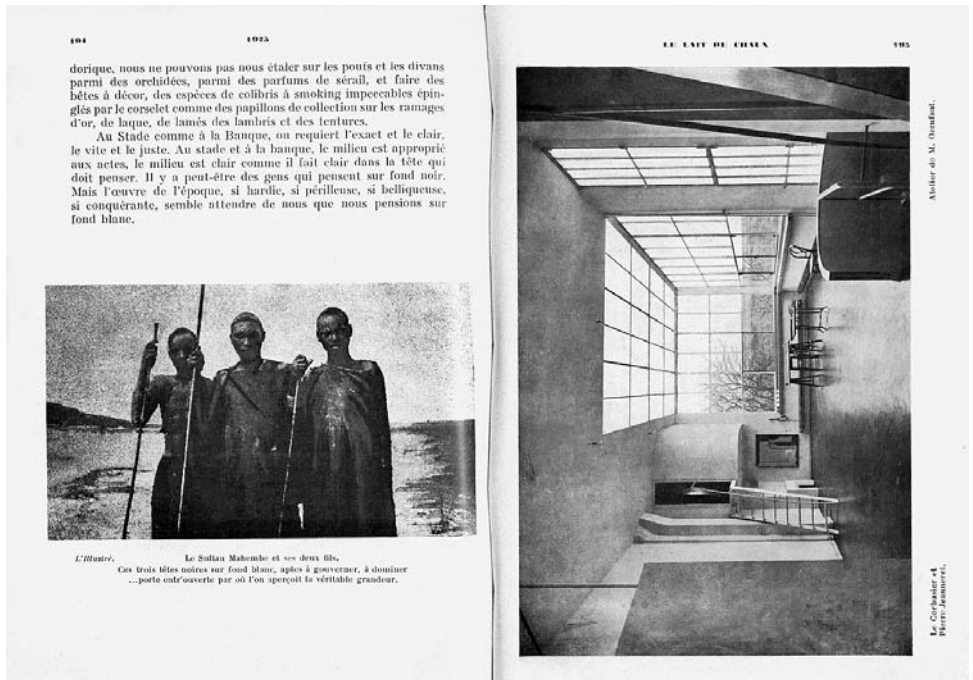


Fig. 7  
Pages from Le Corbusier,  
*L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*,  
Paris, 1925. On the right  
page «Atelier de  
M. Ozenfant»

metic and geometry were the tools employed to attain an exact expression of art and architecture. In the single issue of the magazine that the group ended up publishing<sup>16</sup>, *Art Concret* started with a manifesto. It consisted of six points on «concrete painting» and six comments were added.<sup>17</sup> We can summarise them in two fundamental ideas: the need for universal aesthetics and language, and for means of expression that were mechanical, exact, and precise. They read: «If you cannot draw a straight line by hand, use a ruler. Typewriter font is clearer, more legible and more beautiful than handwriting. If you cannot manage to draw a circle by hand, use a compass. All instruments are recommended that were intellectually created by the need for perfection».<sup>18</sup> And they would add: «We are painters who think and who measure».<sup>19</sup> Thinking and measuring were firm fundamentals for achieving this necessary and absolute clarity, the need for perfection of «a new culture». In other words, these foundations should be applied to art and to architecture and, then, to life. Therefore, the only colour admissible in this «new culture» was white, which was identified in *Vers la Peinture Blanche*, the only article in the magazine signed solely by van Doesburg, with its «perfection, purity and certainty».<sup>20</sup>

Exactitude, geometry, mathematics and precision were not original concepts in the field of architecture in 1930. And we will not speak of white paint as spiritual purification here. «*Aimer la pureté!*» Love purity!, wrote Le Corbusier in 1925 in a chapter of *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, to set on record that they were also acts dense with morality.<sup>21</sup> In *Le lait de chaux, la loi du Ripolin* (*A coat of whitewash, the law of Ripolin*),

Le Corbusier reacted against the excesses of the 1925 Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris. Returning the focus of attention to objects, as a moral act, under a layer of white paint was an act of «candidness and loyalty» so that «architecture was expressed just as it was» and clarity was returned to a confusing era. The house, completely bare and white, would show its moral values in the same valid expression for all social strata. And to exemplify it, Le Corbusier included the image of an artist's studio: Amedée Ozenfant's studio (fig. 7). To van Doesburg, white was also the «spiritual colour», or «the colour of the new era». The future would bring an art and architecture based on science and technique, employing the same tools: geometry and mathematics. And, of course, white.

The third image shows the studio of Piet Mondrian (fig. 8). We know of several photographs of Mondrian's different studios. The majority of them are from 26 *Rue du Départ*, in Paris, where he would work between 1921 and 1936<sup>22</sup>, and the last in New York.<sup>23</sup> At some time in the beginning of the 20s, he started to transform his studio according to the neo-plastic principles that he had enunciated. With an intense commitment to an ideal, everything reflected the principles of order and harmony that were also transferred to all aspects of his stringent life. He installed several fixed planes and other movable ones on the walls, which were painted in primary colours and in white, grey and black. All furniture, all objects of daily use and even the carpets were coloured, completing an exceptional neo-plastic environment. He wrote the following in a letter to van Doesburg at the end of 1919: «My new article [*Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*], like others, is about the decorative aspect related to my studio, where I have been experimenting a bit. [...] Now I realise that in this way it is feasible to create neoplasticism in a room. [...] I also went to see the renowned "Studio of Courbet"».<sup>24</sup>

The transformation of the studio responded loyally to his ideas and search for a «new environment», being a type of pictorial machine. But, what was Mondrian looking for in Courbet's canvas? What could he learn? Courbet's painting was a manifesto of the new relationship of the artist with respect to art. It was a statement of leadership intentions the artist should exercise in society. The two segments of society can be analysed and interpreted and a new model offered. In his laboratory-studio the artist recreated, selected and combined the world from inside. Circumventing the differences, Mondrian's studio is at the same time an example of his ideas about art and society and forms an inseparable part of the artist's creative and essential process. In parallel, it was an experiment in which he tried to verify, taking himself as the subject, the results of his artistic and architectural theories. In fact, in 1920 when Mondrian published *Le Neo-Plasticisme*, he wrote an inscription, a declaration of intentions, on the first page of the text. It reads in capital letters: «AUX HOMMES FUTURS», to the men of the future. He meant: «Other men will one day demand rooms like this!».<sup>25</sup> Logically, art is the plastic expression of our whole being. However, the result of the experiment is that



Fig. 8  
Piet Mondrian's studio. 26,  
rue du Départ, Paris, 1926



you have to be willing to adopt a new aesthetic sensibility with a demanding formal purity; to do without daily objects if they do not shape a balanced whole; to sacrifice yourself to the ideal.

In his studio-house in Meudon, with the collaboration of Abraham Elzas, another architect, van Doesburg would finally have the chance to put all his theories into practice. The house is formed of two white, cubic volumes, of which the one containing the studio is raised on pillars and has a large glass surface that illuminates it. The identically-proportioned volumes soar upwards vertically, introducing the diagonal that dominates the design. The entire house follows a mathematical structure. Resonant with his most recent ideas, the layout of the plan on the first floor follows, in the same way, a geometric composition though permitting usage variations through the presence of two doors. They inevitably bring to mind one of Duchamp's most famous ready-mades. Like Duchamp's *11 rue de Larrey* door, always closed and open at the same time, these doors let the studio, the library and the music room to be opened up, closed off, joined or separated (fig. 9). They provide a level of domesticity of whoever inhabits the house. Architecture should be adapted to daily needs, although the more impersonal it is, the more it would permit the creation of different "ambiances" by its inhabitant. If its inhabitant, said van Doesburg, is «as modern as his house, then he will give it an aesthetic emphasis that will be, involuntarily, in harmony with its architecture».<sup>26</sup>

But, for van Doesburg, how should the studio be for the artist? In the last issue of the magazine *De Stijl*, one of his texts signed in July 1930 was



Fig. 9  
Van Doesburg studio-house  
interiors. Photographs taken  
from the music room to the  
library (left)  
Marcel Duchamp's door.  
11, rue Larrey (right)

published posthumously: «The best work is that which does not reveal the human hand. This perfection depends on everything surrounding it, absolute lucidity, stable light, a bright atmosphere. [...] The artist's studio will be like a bell jar or a hollow crystal. The painter must be white, unadorned and spotless; the palette must be glass, the paintbrush square and hard, free of dust and as clean as an operating instrument. One can surely learn much from a medical laboratory. Don't artists' studios tend to be like cages with the ambience of a sick monkey? The studio of the painter must have the atmosphere of mountains at 3000 metres high; the summit crowned with eternal snow. The cold kills microbes». <sup>27</sup>

The identification of the everyday and artistic activity was summarised in the absence of any trace of what was traditionally expected in an artist's studio. In one of the most well-known photographs of the inside of the Meudon studio, it is not hard to discern how the values of the "new culture" – perfection, control, exactitude and the absence of the human hand – are reflected in their full rawness. Illuminated by a large glass window, the inside of the studio depicts an absence of painting materials, a tidiness on floors, walls and ceiling. The sheer coldness of everything surrounding it, provides proof of the successes he achieved. That is, «absolute lucidity, stable light, a clear atmosphere». This «bell jar» or «hollow crystal» was already and finally, the ideal place, the suitable atmosphere for modern art. Art that as a consequence of its interior design was «clear, logical, solid». <sup>28</sup> As much as or even more so than experiments in a medical laboratory. The absolute cleanliness and hygiene of a hospital were reflected in the white volume. <sup>29</sup> And this was absolute morality.

Fig. 10  
 Theo van Doesburg in  
 Meudon-val-Fleury, 1930



Let's now introduce a last image (fig. 10). This is also one of the last images of van Doesburg. Construction on the house was finished at the end of 1930 and he would die in Davos in March 1931. He poses, staring at the camera at the entryway to the home. In the photograph, taken from below with an intense lighting, there is an absolute lucidity. The edges, planes and lengthened shadows blend together, the limits of the building even blur into the sky, in an intense white. Van Doesburg's silhouette stands out against the almost insubstantial white, the same as the windows and doors, which are reduced to black rectangles. He looks pleased. A short paragraph from *Vers la Peinture Blanche* read with a sense of irony, can be used as a summary, and as an epitaph: «Enjoy yourself down there below, in the mire, we want to go higher, to the highest summit of truth, where the air is pure and only iron lungs can bear it».<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion<sup>31</sup>

The documentary and indicial value of photography – one of the medium's fundamental characteristics – is undeniable as a primary source in the reconstruction of architectural space, so as in the particular case of artist's houses. However, the evolution of mechanical means of representation, foremost among them photography, holds inherent contradictions, as Palaia Pérez and Casar Pinozo have pointed out: «in the same way that they lose subjectivity being closer to technological procedures, they gain in apparent objectivity», although these indicators of objectivity «may not, in any way guarantee the transmission of all the

values that the object holds».<sup>32</sup> Because of this, we could ask ourselves if we can, and even if we should, reconstruct through photographs the atmosphere transmitted by dozens of images in which an artist shows us everyday, intimate scenes. Even though the conscientious inspection of photographs allows us to identify and place every object in its original position so that we achieve a very close reflection of a frozen instant, it is questionable whether the use of photography as the primary means of reconstructing architectural space reconstructs, as Roland Barthes said, «the necessarily real thing that has been placed in front of the lens»<sup>33</sup> or, to the contrary, reconstructs only the photographic image itself. Herein lies the original aspect of discussion.

Trying to reconcile the reconstruction with the original architectonic aspect, and even its furnishings, in our opinion, shows some fundamental limitations, at least, none that are explained or discussed in depth from critical positions in the reconstruction environment. Usually, the result is a faithful portrait of the original artist environment. Even more, we could say it is the reflection of the space at the very moment the pictures that were used for its reconstruction were taken. Can the same be said about the traces of its inhabitants? Or are there any differences between what was photographed, what is reconstructed, and what was inhabited? Could we affirm that what we see now has the «soul» of the artist? Isn't it important, considering the life experiences – deeply intense in the particular case of most artists – of their houses? What should be, in any case, the so-called original state we should aim to recuperate? The spaces could be more-or-less empty of objects; they could also hold a collection of these that are an extension of the lifestyle of their inhabitants. The objects may soften the roughness of the house, adjusting the scale, creating a favourable environment. Domestic objects, drawers, closets, or other useful or useless objects, reproduced or originals, that have some intimate and personal character. Or objects that are part of the museum, impregnated by the artistic condition of its creator.<sup>34</sup> Belongings that have had their significance altered by their proximity or by their position, changing constantly with time, became the object of an analysis. Therefore, the first issue this question raises in the debate – that is not a debate exclusive to the restoration of architecture – regards the value of both photography and the power of its representation.

The same use of photography that allows us to document those spaces, also permits us to follow their transformation and to find the best state to which to restore it to. Always in a low voice, even amongst those who raise the question, they refer to the possibility that these photographs give us «as a state of mind and an emotional re-creation of the architecture», giving more importance to their documentary value, never questioned, for the conservation and restoration.<sup>35</sup>

As John Tagg writes, we have to consider that «every photograph is the result of specific distortions, and in all cases they are significant enough, which makes that their relation with any other anterior reality is some-

thing very problematic» and so «they raise the question of determining the level of the material apparatus and of the social practices that within all photography takes place». Summing it up, «the nature of photography is extremely complex, irreversible, and it cannot guarantee anything in terms of its meaning». <sup>36</sup> In this sense, photography itself becomes another reality, and for that same reason it needs a previous history. Therefore, neither the experience nor the reality should be separated. The evaluation of the interior, transformed by its inhabitants, is a crucial history and in our opinion absolutely necessary for its reconstruction, which in the common methodological procedures used in restoration and conservation of artist's houses, seems not always to have enough importance. Unfortunately, even though we may reduce our critical approach, paradoxically we have no other option but to work with the material we have: photographs. <sup>37</sup>

Finally, the principal use of photography for reconstruction raises some questions: What is the thing that we restore? The architectonic space? And which space of all those possible? Or, on the contrary, are we not just restoring a photograph itself? And how do we classify them? Is it enough to reconstruct faithfully the architectonic space by only using the «documentary» photographs? Or does the reconstruction also make sense from the context and objects that appear in many other images? And if this is the case, how do we transmit the intensity of a specific space and the modifications that it underwent through the traces left by its inhabitants?

## Note

1

The author has preferred to fully transcribe the 20 minute presentation at the Museo Vincenzo Vela to be faithful to what was showed, just adding notes and bibliography and a final postscript.

2

All the characters and a full description of the canvas and of its intentions are included in a letter by Courbet to Champfleury dated January 1855. See Gerstle Mack, *Gustave Courbet*, Westport, 1970, pp. 128-130. See also a description by Champfleury in *Su mirada y la de Baudelaire*, Madrid, 1992, pp. 186-188.

3

Cf. Albert E. Elsen, *Los propósitos del arte. Introducción a la historia y a la apreciación del arte*, Madrid, 1971, pp. 15-16; see also Nikolaus Pevsner, *Las Academias de Arte. Pasado y presente*, Madrid, 1982, pp. 151-152. Interpretations of the canvas related to Fourier's social ideas can be found in Linda Nochlin, *El realismo*, Madrid, 1991, pp. 109-113. And around possible symbolisms of the content of the canvas in Mack, *Gustave...*, *op. cit.*, pp.130-132. The main source for studying the canvas is René Huyghe, Germain Bazin, Hélène Adhémar, *Courbet, l'Atelier du peintre: allégorie réelle*, Paris, 1944 (Monographies des peintures du Musée du Louvre 3).

4

See Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, originally published in three chapters in *Le Figaro*, 1863.

5

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, Paris, 1865.

6

René König has pointed out how, for realist artists, the language of art is not the language of daily life. It is true that the artist has the same social role as a citizen, but as an artist he is in «another place». The artist is not a common person in the social use of the term, being perceived «in a distance». See René König, *Los artistas y la sociedad*, Barcelona, 1983, p. 174.

7

Theo van Doesburg visited Spain in May 1930 to give a lecture in Madrid organised by the Sociedad de cursos y conferencias de la Residencia de Estudiantes de Madrid under the title *L'Esprit fondamental de l'architecture contemporaine*. He lectured the same conference in Barcelona, invited by the Asociación de Alumnos de Arquitectura. See Alberto Jiménez Fraud (1883-1964) *y la Residencia de Estudiantes (1910-1936)*, exh. catalogue, Madrid, 1983-84.

8

Sergio Polano (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg. Scritti di arte e di architettura*, Roma, 1979, pp. 120-122. The invitation to the exhibition announced: «Projects et maquettes par Theo van Doesburg, C. van Eesteren, Huszar, W. van Leusden, J.-J. P. Oud, G. Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe, Wils».

9

In 1929 van Doesburg remembered the goals achieved by the group and wrote them year by year in articles. Writing on the 1923 exhibition he did not deny the «active propaganda» of the show: «Rosenberg predicted us real possibilities for our plans; the first exhibition [...]. Instead repeating ourselves, we wanted to raise architecture and painting, by means of the maximum connection between them, to a never imagined position». See Theo van Doesburg, *Principios del nuevo arte plástico y otros escritos*, Murcia, 1985, pp. 190-192. Truly, the exhibition allowed him to be known in the international panorama. The same exhibition was showed again in Paris in 1924 in the *Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture*, included in *L'Architecture et les arts qui s'y rattachent* curated by Robert Mallet-Stevens, with several works by Mallet-Stevens, Gabriel Guévrékian, Le Corbusier and Gustave Perret; then in Nancy and in the Weimar Städtische Museum. Theo van Doesburg, *On European Architecture. Complete Essays from «Het Bouwbedrijf» 1924-1931*, Basel-Berlin-Boston, 1990, pp. 24-30.

10

The contribution of each member is not clear at all, considering that van Doesburg was 40 years old, and van Eesteren was 26. Van Eesteren probably was in charge of drawing the plans and axonometric views, van Doesburg of the coloured contra-constructions and Rietveld could participate in the scale model, though this is unclear. See Sergio Polano, «De Stijl / Arquitectura = Nieuwe Beelding», in *De Stijl 1917-1933. Visiones de utopía*, Madrid, 1986, pp. 95, 97.

11

«In the same room (that is to say, the one where the uncoloured model of the maison Rosenberg is exposed) there is a model of an ideal house fully coloured. I have done it the week before the opening of the exhibition. I have worked on it night and day. The skeleton is in copper, the rest in wood, mica, cardboard and glass. The staircase is specially beautiful». Letter from van Doesburg to A. Kok. 18 October 1923. In Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg. Peintre et Architecte*, Paris, 1993, pp. 129-134.

- 12  
See Theo van Doesburg, «L'Évolution de l'Architecture moderne en Hollande», in *L'Architecture Vivante*, no. 9, Autumn 1925, pp. 14-20.
- 13  
See Eduardo Subirats, «Cinco tesis sobre las vanguardias», in Francisco Jarauta (ed.), *La transformación de la conciencia moderna*, Murcia, 1991, pp. 178-179.
- 14  
«We must understand that life and art are not separated lands any more. For that reason the “idea” of “art” as an illusion separated from real life must disappear. The word “Art” does not mean anything for us. On the contrary we demand the construction of our environment according to creative laws based on fixed principles. This laws ruled by the ones of economy, mathematics, technique, hygiene, etc., drive us to a new plastic unity. [...] The field of human creation, with his constructive laws, has never been until now object of a scientific search». Comments by van Doesburg and van Eesteren to the Vth Manifesto. Ulrich Conrads, *Manifesti e programmi per l'architettura del XX secolo*, Firenze, 1970, p. 59.
- 15  
See Charo Crego Castaño, «El fin de la aventura: el Arte Concreto», in *El espejo del orden. El arte y la estética del grupo holandés «De Stijl»*, Madrid, 1997, pp. 227-238.
- 16  
The group members were Otto Carlund, Léon Tutundjian, Justine Martor Wantz, and Jean Hélion.
- 17  
*Art Concret*, I, April 1930.
- 18  
*Ibid.*
- 19  
*Ibid.*
- 20  
«Vers la Peinture Blanche», in *Art Concret*, *op. cit.*
- 21  
Le Corbusier, «Le lait de chaux, la loi du Ripolin», in *id.*, *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1925, pp. 187-195.
- 22  
See Frans Postma, 26, *Rue du Départ. Mondrian's studio in Paris, 1921-1936*, Berlin, 1995. See also Herbert Henkels, «Mondrian in his studio», in *Mondrian. From figuration to abstraction*, exh. catalogue, Tokio, 1987-88, pp. 165-191; Paul Overy, «The cell in the city», in Eve Blau, Nancy J. Troy (ed.), *Architecture and Cubism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London, 1997, pp. 116-140; Nancy J. Troy, «Piet Mondrian's Atelier», in *Arts Magazine*, LIII, no. 4, 1978, pp. 82-87.
- 23  
Mondrian worked in several studios from 1919 to 1944: 26 rue du Départ (June 1919-November 1919); 5 rue de Coulmiers (November 1919-November 1921); 26 rue du Départ (December 1921-March 1936); 278 Boulevard Raspail (March 1936-September 1938); 60 Park Hill Road, Hampstead (September 1938-September 1940); 353 East 56th Street, New York (1940-October 1943); 15 East 59th Street, New York (1943-44).
- 24  
Letter from Mondrian to van Doesburg. (4 December 1919). Henkels, «Mondrian in his...», *op. cit.*, p. 203. He refers to the studio in 5 rue de Coulmiers, though he would do the same manipulations in all his studios.
- 25  
Piet Mondrian, *Realidad Natural y Realidad Abstracta*, Madrid, 1989, p. 107.
- 26  
*Ibid.*
- 27  
Theo van Doesburg, «Elementarisme», in *De Stijl*, January 1932, pp. 15-16; see also «Neoplasticisme. Elementarisme», in *D'ací i D'allà*, numero extraordinari dirigit per J. Ll. Sert i J. Prats (GATPAC i ADLAN), vol. XXII, no. 179, December 1934; Theo van Doesburg, *Scritti di arte...*, *op. cit.*, p. 502.
- 28  
Bruno Zevi, *Poética de la arquitectura neoplástica*, Buenos Aires, 1960, pp. 59-60.
- 29  
The issue of color in the Meudon studio-house is a still unclear topic. Today the only coloured exterior elements are the black chimney, the grey entrance door on the first floor, and the yellow garage door on the ground floor. Though there is some evidence that van Doesburg expected to introduce more colour in the interiors. See van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg...*, *op. cit.*

30

«Vers la Peinture Blanche», *op. cit.*

31

The following postscript tries to put in context the presentation I made during the 2009 Conference held at the Museo Vincenzo Vela with some of the reflection on artists' houses transformed into museums thematised on this occasion. By chance it now coincides with the elaboration of an article recently published, that deepens on the same ideas. See Jorge Tàrrago Mingo, «Preserving Rivera and Kahlo. Photography and Reconstruction», in *Future Anterior*, vol. 6, no. 1, Summer 2009, pp. 50-67.

32

Liliana Palaia Perez, José Ignacio Casar Pinazo, «Representación, estudio y conocimiento de los monumentos», in *Papeles del Partal: Revista de Restauración Monumental*, no. 3, November 2006, p. 5.

33

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, London, 1981, pp. 76, 87.

34

Cf. José Ramón Sierra Delgado, *Sobre el destino poético de los objetos cotidianos. En la casa del artista no adolescente no habita el diseño*, Barcelona, 1996.

35

For some keys regarding the relationship between photography and the possibility to represent architectonic preservation, it is interesting to look into Ignacio G. Varas Ibáñez, «La representación del monumento en el siglo XIX: Tiempo, lugar y memoria ante las transformaciones de la representación gráfica de la imagen monumental», in *Papeles del Partal...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-70.

36

John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories*, New York, 1988, pp. 8-9.

37

*Ibid.*, p. 11.

#### Photo credits

Fig. 2: © RMN (Musée d'Orsay) / Gérard Blot / Hervé Lewandowski; figs. 4, 5, 6, 9, 10: © Theo Van Doesburg Archive, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst / Netherlands Office for Fine Arts, The Hague; fig. 8: © Haags Gemeentemuseum, photo P. Delbo.



### Summary

In June 1929, Theo van Doesburg, almost 46, finished the plans to build his own maison-atelier in the outskirts of Paris. Facing for the first time a real project to be built, his former theories of 1923 *maison d'artiste* for the *De Stijl* exhibition in Paris (Galerie Rosenberg) changed into a more concerning and possible architecture. In May 1930, while his house was being built, he visited Spain and lectured in *Residencia de Estudiantes*, Madrid. The lecture gives some clues of this change.

But as in the very beginnings of his career, he will go on in his own aspiration of breaking the limits between art and life. The maison-atelier is the test ground. For him, as in 1923, architecture had an important role to contribute to life and society not only in an esthetical but in a moral and ethical way. «We are, he said, painters that think and measure» as a way to reach a different and new culture. But also, he said: «functions of life can not be projected in two dimensions on the drawing-board. Our step, our way of sitting, eating, drinking, sleeping, working, etc., are arguments of a certain order, a rhythm in time. This order, defines the arrangement of things in space.»

In *Vers le Peinture Blanche*, he identified white color as «perfection, purity and certainty». So does his own maison-atelier. Some years before, Le Corbusier had talked about the *ripolin blanc* or the *lait de chaux* (*L'art decoratif d'aujourd'hui*, 1925) as a moral argument toward the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs*' interiors excesses. In both cases, they will be thinking in artist's houses to exemplify his theories. The former in his own house, the latter in Ozenfant's maison-atelier.

A more detailed study on van Doesburg's house in Meudon-val-Fleury shows it as a laboratory for modern dwelling in which the manipulation of space deals with a peculiar understanding of the modern atmosphere to live in. The last issue of the *De Stijl* magazine included a van Doesburg postume article, we can read: «The qualities of our "environment" depend on the qualities of our work. The artist-atelier will be as a glass box or an empty glass. The painter must be white, to say, without drama and without dirty; his palette must be of glass, the brush square and hard, without dust, pure as a medical instrument...».

### Riassunto

Nel giugno del 1929, a quasi 46 anni, Theo van Doesburg ultimava i piani di costruzione della sua casa-studio nei sobborghi di Parigi. Trovandosi per la prima volta di fronte a un progetto concreto, le sue precedenti teorie per la *maison d'artiste*, disegnata per la mostra parigina di *De Stijl* (Galerie Rosenberg) del 1923, virarono verso un'architettura più semplice e di più agevole attuazione. Nel maggio del 1930, durante i lavori, l'artista visitò la Spagna e tenne una conferenza alla *Residencia de Estudiantes* di Madrid. Il testo della conferenza offre qualche ragguaglio sul cambiamento intervenuto.

Eppure van Doesburg, come agli esordi della sua carriera, aspirava ancora a dissolvere i confini tra arte e vita. In tal senso, la casa-studio rappresenta un banco di prova. Per l'artista, che ribadiva quanto sostenuto nel 1923, l'architettura doveva rivestire un ruolo cruciale nella società, non solo sul piano estetico, ma anche su quello etico e morale. «Noi siamo» diceva «pittori che ragionano e calcolano», allo scopo di fondare una cultura nuova e alternativa. Ma diceva anche: «Le funzioni vitali non possono essere proiettate sulla bidimensionalità del tavolo da disegno. Il nostro modo di camminare, di stare seduti, di mangiare, bere, dormire, lavorare e così via sono elementi di un dato ordine, di un ritmo che si sviluppa nel tempo. Questo ordine determina la disposizione degli oggetti nello spazio».

In *Vers la Peinture Blanche*, van Doesburg identificava il bianco con «la perfezione, la purezza e la certezza». Il principio trova un riscontro pratico nella sua casa-studio. Alcuni anni prima, Le Corbusier aveva parlato del *ripolin blanc* o *lait de chaux* (*L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, 1925) come argomento morale contro gli eccessi della *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* del 1925. Entrambi gli architetti applicheranno le loro teorie alle case d'artista. Van Doesburg alla propria, Le Corbusier alla casa-studio di Ozenfant.

A un'analisi più dettagliata, la casa di van Doesburg a Meudon-val-Fleury si presenta come un laboratorio dell'abitare moderno, in cui la manipolazione dello spazio comporta una specifica comprensione della moderna atmosfera abitativa. L'ultimo numero della rivista *De Stijl* includeva un articolo postumo di van Doesburg, in cui si legge: «Le qualità del nostro "ambiente" dipendono dalle qualità del nostro lavoro. Lo studio d'artista sarà simile a una scatola di vetro o a un bicchiere vuoto. La pittura deve essere bianca, senza contrasti e senza sporcizia; la tavolozza deve essere di vetro, il pennello duro e preciso, libero dalla polvere, puro come uno strumento chirurgico...».