

Georges Vantongerloo: A longing for the infinity

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**MUSEO NACIONAL
CENTRO DE ARTE
REINA SOFIA**

Georges Vantongerloo:

A longing for the infinity

Until now, exhibitions of the Belgian artist have been rare, yet he remains one of the most important artist-thinkers of the 20th century. His trajectory is unique, and the Reina Sofía exhibition seeks to reveal not only the grounding of his work, in the re-conceptualisation of pictorial and sculptural space that marked the abstract tendencies in art of the early 20th century, but also the radical leaps by which he arrived, in the last period of his work after World War II, at a totally original and deeply intuitive visual encapsulation of the energies of the universe. In doing so, he transformed the categories of painting and sculpture.

The exhibition traces Vantongerloo's evolution from his *Constructions in the Sphere* of 1917, through his years as a member of the De Stijl group in the 1920s and the Abstraction-Création movement in the 1930s, when he was producing geometric paintings based on the right angle and the relationship between lines and flat colour planes (or, in his sculptural equivalents, the relationship of volumes). Mathematics underlie these works, according to Vantongerloo, and he gave his paintings and sculptures titles in the form of algebraic equations, often long and complex (*Composition derived from the equation $y = ax^2 + bx + 18$ with green, orange, red and black harmony*, 1930; *$Y = 2x^2 - 13,5^2 + 21x$* , 1935).

The late 1930s saw his introduction of the 'curve' in paintings, which led him to a freer and more open space-creation (*Curves-straight lines-intervals, red-brown-greenish*, 1938; *Relations of lines and colours*, 1939; *Variants*, 1939). With their startling economy and elegant creation of a sense of movement and energy within a white void, these works constitute a unique episode in the history of abstract painting. After the war he began the series of wire nuclei, plexiglass and prism models and paintings seeking a sort of aesthetic equivalent of cosmic phenomena – radiation, radioactivity, fission, electromagnetism, attraction/repulsion, nebulosity – which continued up to his death (*Cosmic element*, 1946; *Two space zones : action-reaction*, 1949; *Formation of infinitely small globular clusters*, 1948; *Radiation of various zones*, 1949; *The comet*, 1962; *An unknown planet in a solar system situated a few billion light years distant*, 1963).

The radical formal transformations that marked Vantongerloo's trajectory made a forceful impression on contemporary observers. The artist François Morellet, for example, wrote: "But then [seeing]



Plusieurs éléments. (Several elements), 1960
Plastic, 29.5 x 13.5 x 11 cm
Collection Chantal and Jakob Bill
Photography Therese Büttler

all these pieces in plexiglass, these constructions in wire, it was completely baffling, outside anything one could have imagined coming from someone considered one of the great inventors of concrete art, geometric..."

While encompassing Vantongerloo's work from 1917 to his death in 1965, the Madrid exhibition is not being organised as a linear chronological retrospective. Rather, it takes his late work as a centrepiece, exploring it in more detail than perhaps any previous exhibition. His earlier work leading up to this moment is grouped in clusters marking important stages of his development, each with a character of its own. These comprise the *Constructions in the Sphere* of 1917, the *Interrelation of Volumes* (1919-1926), interaction of colours (1917-c1919), geometric abstract paintings and sculptures (1929 -1937) and the 'curve' paintings of 1937-1939.

It could be said that what Vantongerloo was seeking in his work remained essentially the same throughout his life – the notion of the infinite, or as he liked to call it, the Incommensurable. Only his means of expressing it changed profoundly. As he put it himself: "Essentially, I offer different solutions of a single problem. To be

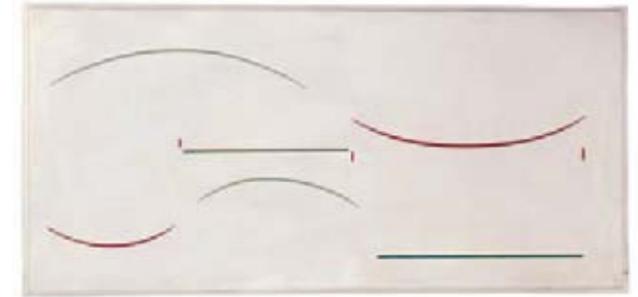
sure, there are several stages, but each is dependent on my individual degree of evolution at a given moment. To express oneself will always be difficult. One must constantly obey the infinite."

The fluid sense of form in Vantongerloo's late works, their reconciliation of the physical and the biological in plasma-like fluxes or force-fields, seems extraordinarily contemporary and perfectly in key with current scientific knowledge of the cosmos. As aesthetic objects they are "fundamentally different from anything else produced", in the view of Vantongerloo's long-term champion and supporter, Max Bill. What strikes us about them is their combination of a far-sighted vision and great modesty, for in relation to something so vast or so tiny as the universe may be, the work of art itself can only be a model. The problem his late works pose is: how can a delineated object suggest the limitless, how can an aesthetic object sensitize us to nature without defining it, since, as he himself said – "nature cannot be defined; to define it would be to set limits to it"?

Georges Vantongerloo has been considered as one of the great unknowns in 20th century art. This exhibition reveals his achievements to a younger generation and a much wider public.



Rapport de volumes. (Interrelation of volumes), 1919
Stone, 12 x 12 x 18 cm
Collection Chantal and Jakob Bill



Courbes - droites - intervalles rouges verts brunes verdâtres (Curves-straight-lines-intervals, red-brown-greenish), 1938
Oil on masonite, 37 x 80 cm
Collection Chantal and Jakob Bill

Biography

Born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1886, Georges Vantongerloo studied at the Académie Royale de Beaux Arts in Brussels (1906-1909). He was conscripted as a soldier in World War II and when wounded, he ran away to Holland where he was imprisoned. In 1916 he met Théo Van Doesburg. One year later, he made his first approach to abstraction by applying Neo-Platonist ideas to his works. He co-signed the first manifesto of De Stijl (1917) and collaborated in the making of the movement newspaper. In 1924, he published *L'Art et son avenir*, a group of essays about his mathematical theory and art. In 1930, he took part in the *Cercle et Carré* exhibition in Paris. Vantongerloo was also a founding member of the Abstraction-Creation movement in Paris (1931). Between 1919-27 he lived in Menton, France, and thereafter in Paris. He was a friend of Piet Mondrian, Max Bill and Antoine Presver among others. He died in Paris in 1965.

Selected Bibliography

Vantongerloo, Georges. *L'Art et son avenir*, Edition De Sikkel, Amberses, 1924

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Livingston, Jane; Mertens, Phil and Bill, Max. *Georges Vantongerloo – A Traveling Retrospective Exhibition*, Washington D.C., Dallas, Los Angeles, 1980

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Museum hours

Mondays to Saturdays: 10.00 - 21.00
Sundays: 10.00 - 14.30
Closed Tuesdays

Exhibition galleries will be vacated
15 minutes before the museum closes

www.museoreinasofia.es

Palacio de Cristal

Parque de El Buen Retiro, Madrid
Tel: 91 574 66 14

Free admission

Timetable

October to March (included):
Mondays - Saturdays: 10.00 - 18.00
Sundays and Holidays: 10.00 - 16.00

April to September (included):
Mondays - Saturdays: 11.00 - 20.00
Sundays and Holidays: 11.00 - 18.00
Closed Tuesday

Illustrations

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