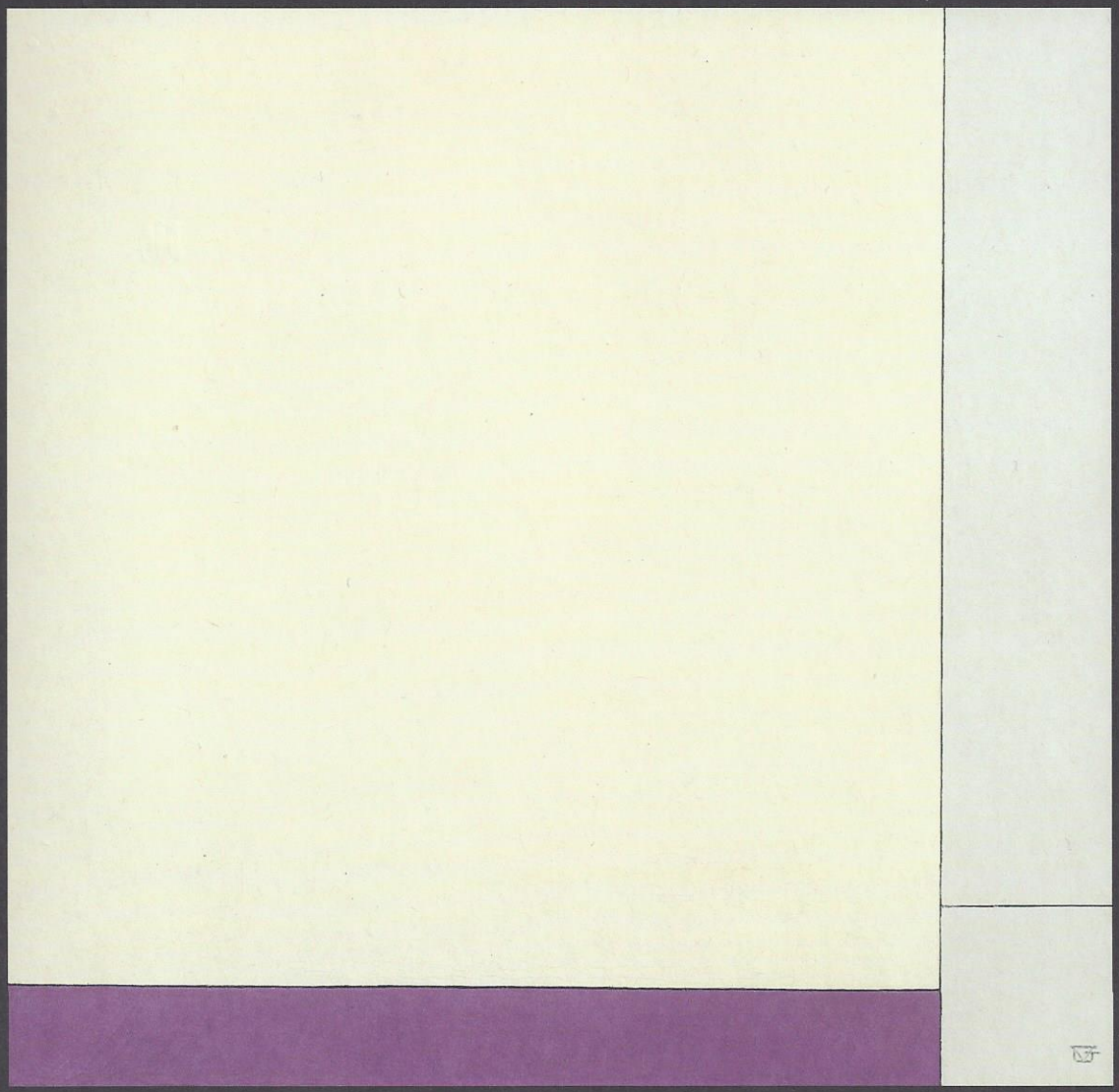

# GEORGES VANTONGERLOO

# GEORGES VANTONGERLOO

## A Retrospective

1 March – 22 April 2006

Annely Juda Fine Art
23 Dering Street (off New Bond Street)
London W1S 1AW
ajfa@annelyjudafineart.co.uk
www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk
Tel 020 7629 7578 Fax 020 7491 2139
Monday - Friday 10 - 6 Saturday 11 - 5

Cover: **Composition derived from the inscribed and circumscribed square of a circle, violet coloured**
1929 oil on linen 67 x 70.5 cm *cat. raisonné no. 56*

We first exhibited Georges Vantongerloo 35 years ago in a group exhibition 'The Non Objective World 1924-39' and subsequently in six more group shows. In 1996 we mounted the two-person exhibition 'Max Bill - Georges Vantongerloo - A Working Friendship'. It is 25 years since the Georges Vantongerloo major touring Retrospective was held at the Washington Corcoran Gallery of Art; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels and Kunsthaus Zürich. Therefore, it is with great honour and pride that we are able to hold this wonderful retrospective exhibition spanning his life's work of 50 years from 1915-1965. More than eighty works, not only paintings and sculptures but watercolours, drawings, models and even furniture design are shown, some for the very first time.

This exhibition would truly not have been possible without the generous support and help of Angela Thomas Schmid and her husband Erich. We would also like to thank Angela for her wonderful essay which gives a real insight into Georges Vantongerloo's philosophy. The making of this exhibition and catalogue was also only possible through the enormous help and dedication of our gallery colleagues especially Laura Henderson and Nina Fellmann.

Finally our thanks go to Georges Vantongerloo, a major figure in the development of abstract art of the twentieth century. It is more than 40 years since his death and we hope through this exhibition he will again awaken people's thoughts and re-open their eyes.

**Annely and David Juda**

## Georges Vantongerloo (1886 – 1965) - The innovative stranger

Although some representative works by the Flemish artist Georges Vantongerloo are in the collections of important museums (Guggenheim, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Kunsthaus Zürich; IVAM, Valencia), his oeuvre – due to its high degree of innovation – has not been recognised to its full extent by his contemporaries.

For Vantongerloo life and art were always closely connected. He spent his time and concentration on aesthetic research, continually seeking and developing an aesthetic balance between the relations of the volumes or planes within a composition ('Rapport des Volumes'). Throughout his life his thoughts were centred around the subject of space: initially finite and later infinite space. Vantongerloo sought and achieved lightness and clarity.

At school in his home town, Antwerp, Georges Vantongerloo was not taught in his mother tongue Flemish but in French, as was then common. His family lived in modest circumstances. Nevertheless, around the turn of the century, Georges was able to take evening drawing classes at the Académie des Beaux-Arts while assisting various sculptors during the day. When his father died in 1902 Georges had to work on the building of Antwerp's main station to earn a living. One month before his nineteenth birthday he moved to Brussels and enrolled at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts (fig 2), while additionally working as an apprentice at a sculptor's studio to learn the craft in practice.

At this time he was already receiving art scholarships and exhibiting some of his early works. The First World War then broke out, German troops invaded Belgium and Vantongerloo was mobilised with the ninth regiment in the suburbs of Luik on 4 August 1914. Towards the end of August a German gas attack caused Vantongerloo a serious lung condition and he was sent to a Belgian hospital. In October he was discharged from the hospital as 'unfit for service' and managed to flee to Holland. He was one of 900,000 refugees who left Belgium in October 1914. A group of Dutch artist colleagues expressed solidarity to the refugees by giving works to a charity raffle. From the proceeds of the raffle artists who had fled Belgium, amongst them Georges Vantongerloo, received materials. Thanks to the donated canvases and paints the destitute Vantongerloo was able to start working immediately on paintings as well as figurative plaster sculptures. These new works, all made in exile, were shown in his first solo exhibition at the Pulchri Studio in The Hague in March 1916.

The time spent in exile was of great significance to his life and work. He was welcomed, 'willingly and affectionately' by a Dutch family of Remonstrants called Kalis (at Ieplaan 20 in The Hague). Tine, the daughter of the family who was born in 1897, was nicknamed 'Puma' by Vantongerloo – and portrayed by him in his work. They fell in love and got engaged. Father Kalis,

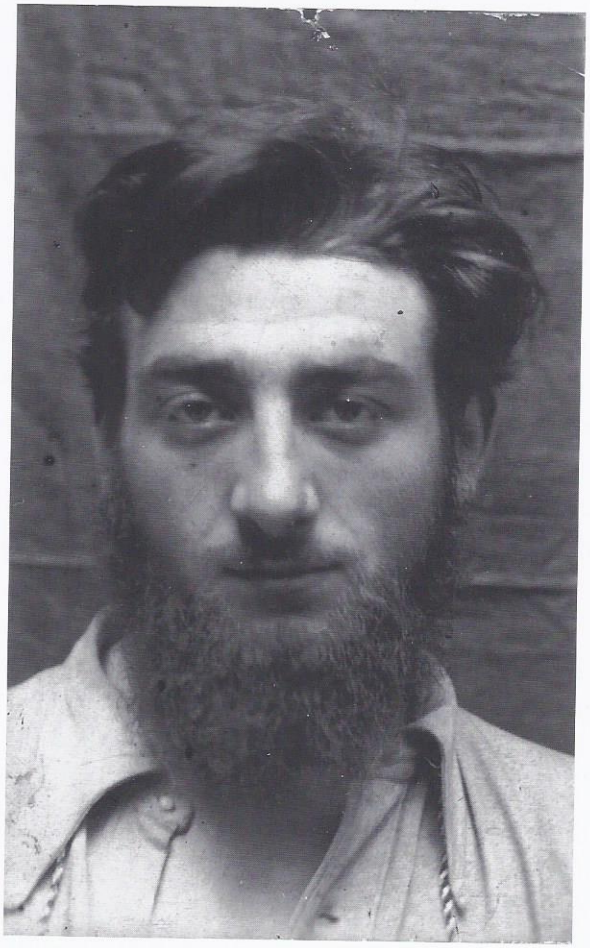

Fig 2 Georges Vantongerloo as Academy Scholar in Brussels, 1904

however, was inconsistent in his feelings towards his daughter's fiancé and suddenly instituted legal proceedings against him. The Hague police arrested Vantongerloo and placed him in the camp Nunspeet as a civil prisoner on 14 July 1917. As a foreign refugee he was given no rights to defence. Demoralised and hungry Vantongerloo was stuck, offended and unable to paint or sculpt. He was afraid to be imprisoned for an indefinite time and entrusted his indignation about the narrow-minded Mr Kalis to his notebook[1]. During his time in the camp Vantongerloo read a Dutch translation from Latin of Baruch de Spinoza's *Ethica – Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics)[2].

Spinoza's philosophy derived from the 'Nuova Scienza'. In *Ethics* he contradicted the assertion of 'resting' matter, which was established by the French philosopher Descartes. In contrast, Spinoza asserted that everything that exists in the universe does not rest but 'acts' – and because of this ultimately creates 'effect'. This definition of universal production is intended to be non-hierarchical and Vantongerloo adopted it for his own use from 1917 under the abbreviation 'unity'[3].

Minister Fallon, Belgium's ambassador in The Netherlands, who had attended Vantongerloo's one-man exhibition at the Pulchri Studio and had met the artist personally, repeatedly intervened to help free Vantongerloo from the camp[4]. Vantongerloo was discharged at the end of August 1917.

Soon afterwards, Georges Vantongerloo was seen immaculately dressed at his second solo exhibition which opened on 3 October 1917 at the Salle d'Art Hollando-Belge at The Hague. Despite his lung condition he was seen to hold a cigarette (Fig 3). At this show Vantongerloo exhibited a significant number of paintings in the 'Pointilist' style as well as figurative plaster sculptures.

[1] *"Mijnheer Kalis…door uwe klacht ben ik nog steeds gevangen in het kamp van Nunspeet" (Mr Kalis, because of your complaint I am still imprisoned at the camp Nunspeet) (Georges Vantongerloo, draft letter, summer 1917).*
*"de quell droit peut-on se permettre d'arrêter la vie, d'imprisonner? Il y a ici de la petitesse d'esprit." "La nourriture du camp ne consiste d'un pain par jour plus l'un jour de la soupe du riz, l'autre des pommes de terre" (note Georges Vantongerloo, camp Nunspeet, 6 August 1917).*

[2] *The copy of the book, which has handwritten remarks by the artist, is in the Vantongerloo-archive, Zumikon. Baruch de Spinoza was born on 24 November (in Amsterdam in 1632) – on the same date as Vantongerloo who did not only identify with Spinoza's ideas but also adopted some of them without quoting their source. Spinoza wrote* Ethics *between 1661 and 1675. It was his main philosophical work.*

[3] *This is of art historical interest as the painter Piet Mondrian, who lived at that time in Laren (Holland), used a very differently understood, namely a theosophically-hierarchically coined notion of 'unity'. Mondrian presented his theses in the art and architecture magazine* De Stijl. *The preparation work for the first issue of this monthly magazine* De Stijl *by Theo van Doesburg in Leiden (Holland) was well under way, but Vantongerloo was isolated from this information as he was in the camp of Nunspeet.*

[4] *"… à plusiers reprises j'ai fait des demarches auprès des authorités néerlandais en vue de votre liberation" (Baron Fallon, Légation Belgique, The Hague, 31 July 1917 à monsieur Georges Vantongerloo, interné à Nunspeet).*

Soon afterwards he abstracted the plaster sculpture in the foreground of the photograph[5] (*Volendamois* 1916) (for which the model was a fisherman from Volendam). Similarly, in an entirely new work phase which left the figurative behind, he abstracted the plaster sculpture of a woman standing on one leg while putting on a stocking, which can be seen further back in the room.

Mijnheer Kalis demanded that Vantongerloo pay the sum of 5,000 Guilders for his daughter's hand in marriage. However, although Vantongerloo had been extremely productive the exhibition had not been a financial success and he was unable to pay. Tine 'Puma' had turned twenty in August 1917 during Vantongerloo's imprisonment. Vantongerloo turned thirty-one on

[5] *The same photograph was dated mistakenly 1916 in the catalogues of the large Vantongerloo retrospective (1980-81) instead of correctly as 1917* (in Georges Vantongerloo A Travelling Retrospective, *Washington Corcoran Gallery of Art; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1980, p. 20 and in* Georges Vantongerloo, *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, 1981, p. 20*)

Fig 3 Georges Vantongerloo at his one-man exhibition at the Salle d'art Hollando-Belge at The Hague, 1917

24 November and four days after his birthday the couple were, however, finally able to be married[6]. After the wedding and due to his experiences in the camp, a clear departure occurred in the thinking and work of the artist and this marked the beginning of his oeuvre.

In April 1917 Vantongerloo had started to write down his thoughts ('réflexions') in a notebook (with the label 'de Konging's Schoonschrijftschriften'). In the same notebook Vantongerloo started an essay entitled 'Science and Art' (probably in November - December 1917) after notes which relate to his imprisonment (mid-July until end-August 1917). This essay is accompanied by analytical sketches of Vantongerloo's oil painting *Study* (catalogue raisonné no. 1, 1917).

In the notes written in the camp Vantongerloo vehemently opposed any 'system' or 'conventions'. The imprisonment was a dramatic, extremely unpleasant time which Vantongerloo felt was an assault on his freedom. It was the absolute low-point of his life. The experience, combined with his politically anarchistic reaction to it, unleashed Georges Vantongerloo's desire to distance himself from the conventional as much as possible and to radically change his way of life and art in the future. This attitude was greatly advantageous to developments in his oeuvre but at the same time was a disadvantage to the reception of the work which was misunderstood by some of his contemporaries.

In late March 1918 under his own initiative Vantongerloo took his notebook including the essay 'Science and Art' to Theo van Doesburg at his studio in Leiden (Holland). Theo van Doesburg, editor of the magazine *De Stijl* which had been published in Leiden since July 1917, kept Vantongerloo's notebook for a few days and was fascinated by it. Under the new title 'Reflections by G. Vantongerloo', 'Science and Art' was published in the July edition of *De Stijl* accompanied by four analytical sketches which were abstractions of the figurative motive of a sitting woman (*De Stijl*, Year 1, no. 9, pp. 97-102)[7].

[6] *After the '5,000-Guilders-paragraph', which had been desired by the father in law, had been replaced by a 'separate-estate-paragraph'. A Dutch art historian speculated, although with no knowledge of these facts, that Vantongerloo had become 'financially independent' through this marriage. (Nicolette Gast in:* De Beginjaren van De Stijl, *1982, p. 238).*

[7] *The fact that Vantongerloo joined the Dutch magazine* De Stijl *as an 'outsider' fled from Belgium, had a great deal of influence on the art historical reception of his position and importance there. The Dutch state had always supported art historical research about Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, both being known as established artists. Accordingly there is a tendency amongst Dutch art historians to evaluate and interpret the history of De Stijl by concentrating on these two artists. Some argue that Vantongerloo, the youngest of the* De Stijl *contributors was, like Piet Mondrian, influenced by the theosophic idea of Schoenemaker. Firstly, however, Mondrian and Vantongerloo never met during the time of Vantongerloo's exile in Holland and secondly Vantongerloo, the foreign outsider, set a very different ideological precedent to his Dutch counterparts: he chose to orientate himself, as mentioned above, on the philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza (see also: dissertation Angela Thomas:* Denkbilder, Materialien zur Entwicklung von Georges Vantongerloo, *Edition Marzona, Düsseldorf 1987). By limiting their focus to their own artists, the Dutch art historians overlooked Vantongerloo's progressive-constructive contributions. Vantongerloo's main thoughts have been outlined in his later texts 'l' art et son avenir' (written 1919-21 in Brussels and Menton, published 1924 in Antwerp) and 'Problems of contemporary art: painting and sculptures, reflections' (New York 1948).*

When Theo van Doesburg founded the magazine, Piet Mondrian was working on his 'plus-minus' paintings. Max Bill wrote that Mondrian "had just started, under the influence of Bart van der Leck, to occupy himself with colourful plane compositions with the use of primary colours... the youngest [contributor to *De Stijl*], Georges Vantongerloo, had been the most radical from the beginning... the contribution Vantongerloo made to the development of art can not yet be recognised today." (NZZ, 29 November 1956).

At the beginning of June 1918, after van Doesburg had travelled several times from Leiden to The Hague to visit Vantongerloo, he announced his interest to see Vantongerloo's latest sculpture. Following this, Vantongerloo posted him four analytical sketches of the sculpture *Construction in the sphere* (catalogue raisonné no. 2, 1917). *Construction in the sphere* is composed within the boundaries of a perfect sphere. This is clearly visible on the four construction sketches sent to van Doesburg, but is only implied in the sculpture. Theo van Doesburg acknowledged in August 1918 that such a clear thesis on space, 'volume + void = space' ('volume + vide = espace'), had not previously been formulated in Holland. Vantongerloo showed the finished sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in the exhibition *Belgian Modern Art* (30 October – 1 December 1918). The sculpture exploits the interplay between the actual and virtual form, it is simultaneously solid and immaterial. Vantongerloo used the expression 'volume plus void' to define the space enclosed by the implied sphere and the solid structure combined.

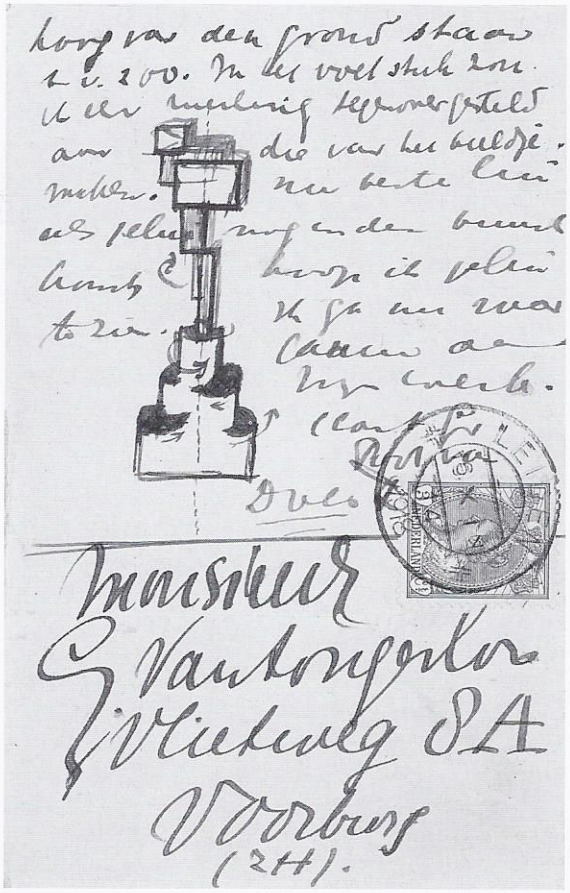

*Fig 4* Postcard from Theo van Doesburg to Vantongerloo suggesting an alternative plinth design for *Composition from the ovoid*. Photo: Peter Hunkeler

The sculpture *Construction in the sphere* (catalogue raisonné no. 3, 1917), which is shown here in London (cat. no. 8), is constructed like the sculpture *Construction in the sphere* (catalogue raisonné no. 2) discussed above. A sculpture created shortly afterwards (an abstraction of the woman standing on one leg previously mentioned) was not made in the 'sphere-form' but in an imagined ovoid that surrounded the sculpture and spatially confined it. Entitled *Composition from the ovoid* (catalogue

raisonné no. 9, 1917) it is mahogany painted in three colours and is also shown here (cat. no. 6). Theo van Doesburg was also very impressed by this newly created icon of classical modernism but sketched on a postcard an alternative solution for the sculpture's plinth to give the sculpture a 'counter point' (Fig 4). Vantongerloo, however, in preference to van Doesburg's suggestion, stayed with his own original concept.

Van Doesburg had a diverse theoretical overview of the art world since, due to his function as editor of *De Stijl*, he received a great variety of written material. He was an 'homme au courant' (i.e. someone who is well informed) while Vantongerloo, with only his education in Belgian academies, was a 'self made man'. At the beginning of August 1918, the Vantongerloo couple moved to a suburb of The Hague (Vlietweg 8a[8]) and after the First World War had ended they returned to his home country Belgium.

In Brussels-Schaerbeek in 1919 Vantongerloo abstracted his figurative sculpture *Volendamois*, which he had made in 1916 in The Netherlands. Analysing the relations of the volume he converted the early sculpture to a structural drawing with simple, geometric, horizontal and vertical lines. In the uninterrupted lines of this drawing one can recognise the outlines of the sculpture *Interrelation of volumes* (catalogue raisonné no. 14, 1919) which had recently been created from the abstraction (Fig 7).

True to his earlier resolution, Vantongerloo made the conscious decision to move away from the figurative conventions, the 'oude rommel' (old stuff). In Brussels he progressed to modernity through his innovation and analytical procedure.

After the phase of abstracting from his

[8] *Another contributor to the magazine* De Stijl, *the architect Jan Wils, lived on the same street.*

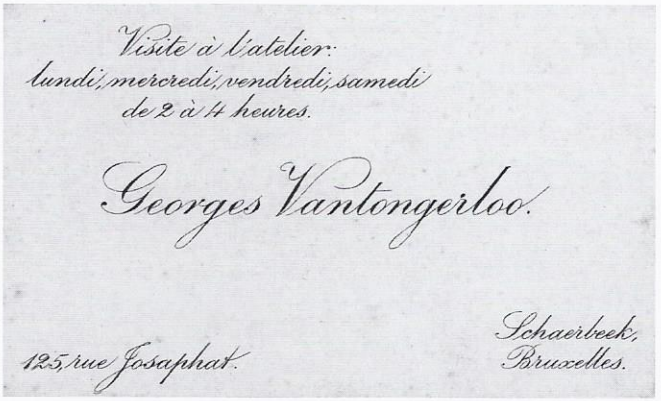


Fig 5 Vantongerloo's visiting card


Fig 6 Vantongerloo's membership card to the 'National Federation of wounded soldiers and invalids of war', Brussels 1919

early work, Vantongerloo developed new methods, partly based on mathematical procedures. He did not abstract anymore but directly developed 'concrete' paintings and objects, whose source had not previously existed in nature or anywhere else.

Theo van Doesburg informed Vantongerloo in writing from Paris on his De Stijl letterhead (i.e. in an official manner) that Piet Mondrian would like to meet him[9].

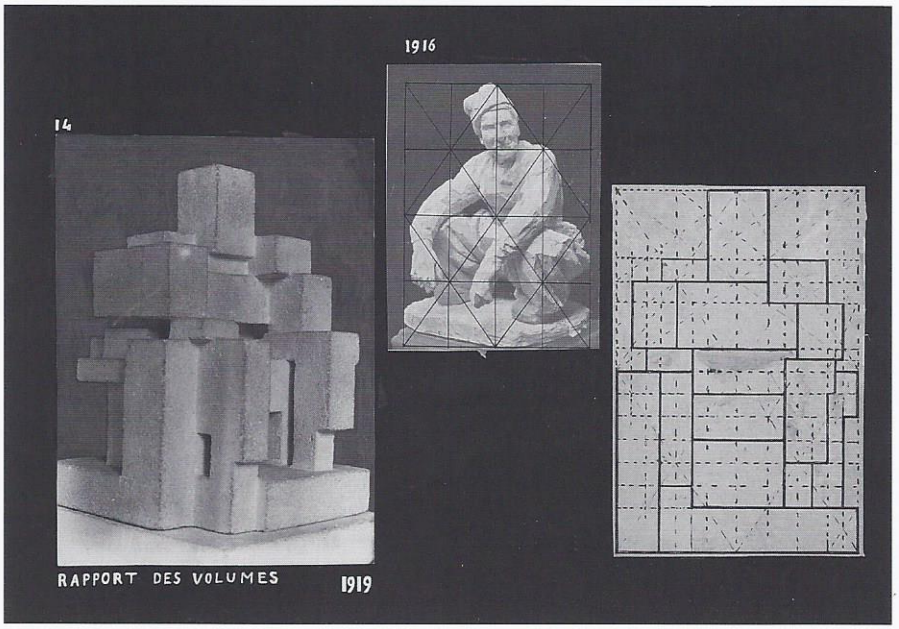


Fig 7 **Untitled** c. 1919 didactic collage on black cardboard 31.5 x 45 cm cat. no. 15

Georges Vantongerloo had some problems resettling in his home country so he decided to travel to France with his wife and to visit Piet Mondrian in Paris. (Following that he decided – maybe partly due to health reasons – to relocate to Menton on the Mediterranean.)

Vantongerloo visited his Dutch colleague in his studio near the Porte d'Orléans. Both were contributors to the magazine as well as signatories of the *De Stijl* manifesto. Mondrian had read Vantongerloo's essay in *De Stijl* and Vantongerloo enthusiastically relayed his research about colour which he had started shortly before in Brussels. During the conversation Mondrian asked Vantongerloo (14 years his junior) to write to him from his new home so that they could continue their discussion. After this first meeting an active exchange of letters ensued in which the 'colour problem' became the main theme. Additionally, Piet Mondrian and Georges Vantongerloo sometimes discussed the articles published in *De Stijl*.

Vantongerloo insisted on using seven specifically chosen colours for his own work. Piet Mondrian, on the other hand, wanted to use only three colours in his paintings. After Vantongerloo had read Mondrian's article 'le néo-plasticisme' in *De Stijl* (February 1921 edition) he gave Mondrian his own opinion: he was strictly against using colour 'emotionally', since so

[9] *(in the original): "... Piet Mondrian... zel heel graag met jou kennismaken", Theo van Doesburg, "Parijs 28.2.1920" to Georges Vantongerloo, Brussels: "Beste Georges", signed "Doesje".*

doing removed its 'constructive-creative possibilities'[10].

In his new home town, Menton, Vantongerloo tried to overcome his war trauma. The warm climate and the famous Mediterranean light were beneficial and, as a 'War Invalid' (Fig 8), he received a small pension from the Belgian state for the rest of his life which guaranteed him a minimum for survival.

The Vantongerloo couple moved to a flat with four rooms which Georges decorated in the 'new style' with furniture that he had designed. The Vantongerloos asked van Doesburg to come and visit: "It is always summer here! ... We expect you in great friendship" – and van Doesburg went on 11 April 1921 to Menton accompanied by his newly married third wife, the pianist Petronella ('Nelly') van Moorsel. Theo van Doesburg planned to travel on to Weimar where he wanted to introduce new works of art by the *De Stijl* contributors to the Bauhaus. On Vantongerloo's desk he saw a carefully designed sculpture that had just been finished, (Fig 10) Vantongerloo's *Interrelation of volumes* (catalogue raisonné no. 26, 1921) and he was excited by it.

He promised to suggest to the Bauhaus director Walter Gropius to consider Georges Vantongerloo as Master for the Sculpture Workshop in Weimar. Van Doesburg, however,

[10] *(in the original): "... een kleur al haar plastisch Caracter ontnemen met ze stemmig te maken" (Georges Vantongerloo, Menton, 9 March 1921 to Piet Mondrian, Paris). He, Vantongerloo, tried to avoid the emotional use of colours ("dat Stemmige") like the plague.*

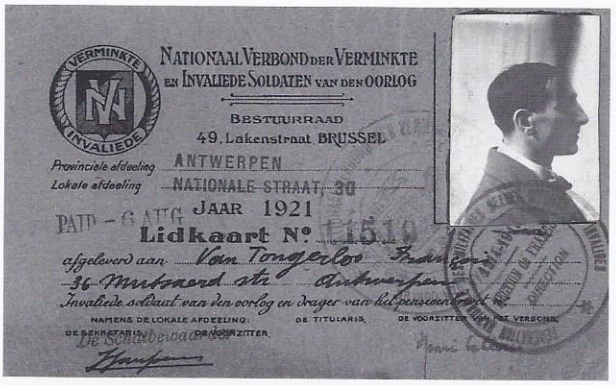


Fig 8 Vantongerloo's card of the 'National Union of Invalids of the World War', 1921

Fig 9 Undated portrait photograph of Vantongerloo

*Fig 10* Georges Vantongerloo in Menton, 1921 sitting at the desk which he designed (1920, catalogue raisonné no. 16). The sculpture on the desk is *Interrelation of volumes* 1921 (catalogue raisonné no. 26). Photo probably taken by Theo van Doesburg

received a rejection[11]. Unfortunately, just four weeks previously they had agreed with a German sculptor Hartwig that he would take on the direction of the sculpture workshop. Also in later years when Georges Vantongerloo was looking for jobs he was always unsuccessful.

In addition to the desk (shown opposite) Vantongerloo built a studio desk with a turning table top (cat. no. 22) for his own use in Menton, a *Typewriter desk* (catalogue raisonné no. 19, 1920, this cat. no. 20) and also in 1926 an electric[12] *Desk lamp* (catalogue raisonné no. 29, this cat. no. 21) which is still functioning today. Vantongerloo saw his furniture as expressions of both volume and colour; they were coloured forms which created space and rhythm.

In the period 1926-31 Vantongerloo worked almost exclusively on architectural projects. In 1926 he designed *Villa* (catalogue raisonné no. 33) – the model shown here is unique (cat. no. 24) and soon afterwards he designed colour-plane compositions for the walls of interior spaces.

In the conducive environment of Menton Vantongerloo persevered with the colour research that he had started in Brussels. He concerned himself with this almost obsessively as is apparent in the letters he wrote to Piet Mondrian. Vantongerloo understood colour as a physical phenomenon related to time and space and he systematised colour use for his compositions. Mondrian, in contrast, did not want to deal with the subject of 'colour systematisation'. At that time he followed a theosophical ideology of life which deplored 'material', including colour, as the 'most superficial' ('le plus extérieur'). Piet Mondrian: "... le plus extérieur domine en tout" he wrote in 'le néo-plasticisme' (*Bauhaus*, book no. 5, 1927).

With regret Mondrian wrote to Vantongerloo on 23 September 1920: "Although we both want to give form to 'unité' (unity) our perceptions stand diametrically opposed to each other, what a shame!" These differences were impossible to reconcile. Vantongerloo, who had adopted Spinoza's *Ethics*, disapproved of his works being included under the metaphysical notion of 'néo-plasticisme' as formulated by Mondrian. Vantongerloo's argument regarding a unified form of appearance ('unité') read as follows: "objects of utility, architectural projects and sculptures should be approached with a unified method, so they form a joined unity ('unité')". As his method to

[11] *In February 1922, when van Doesburg had asked 'for documents' for an article about the Bauhaus for the magazine* De Stijl *it had been recorded during a meeting of the council of masters of the Bauhaus that "there was no sentiment for van Doesburg's plans". (in: Claudine Humblet, 'le Bauhaus', l'age d'homme, Lausanne, 1980, p. 317). Hence it is no surprise when a politely formulated response letter arrived from Gropius who might have feared a rivalry situation: "Dear Mr van Doesburg, I thank you for the suggestion of the sculptor Georg (sic) Vantongerloo... I hear you are planning to come to Weimar again soon." (the director of the Bauhaus of Weimar, Walter Gropius, on 22 April 1922; to Theo van Doesburg, Leiden, Haarlemerstraat 73a).*

[12] *"Peu de maisons disposaient de bec de gaz et encore moins de la lumière électrique, pas de cinema ni d'aviation." (Georges Vantongerloo, Menton)*

achieve 'unité' he chose "a geometrical basic form from which a new form derives and which orientates itself towards an aesthetic goal"[13].

In Menton, apart from the theoretical engagement with the subject of colour and its practical use in his paintings and furniture, Vantongerloo devoted himself to intense and autodidactic mathematical and geometrical studies. "It was in 1920 during some research on colour that I said to myself that it would surely be indispensable to properly understand geometry if one wants to express artistic feelings using geometric forms and so I took it upon myself to take up again the

[13] *Georges Vantongerloo: 'principe d'unité' in: i 10, 1st Year, no. 3, Amsterdam 1927; published by the Dutch anarchist Arthur Müller Lehning. Important and later to be well-known authors, including Vantongerloo, Walter Benjamin, Leo Trotzky, as well as Lucia and László Moholy-Nagy, contributed.*

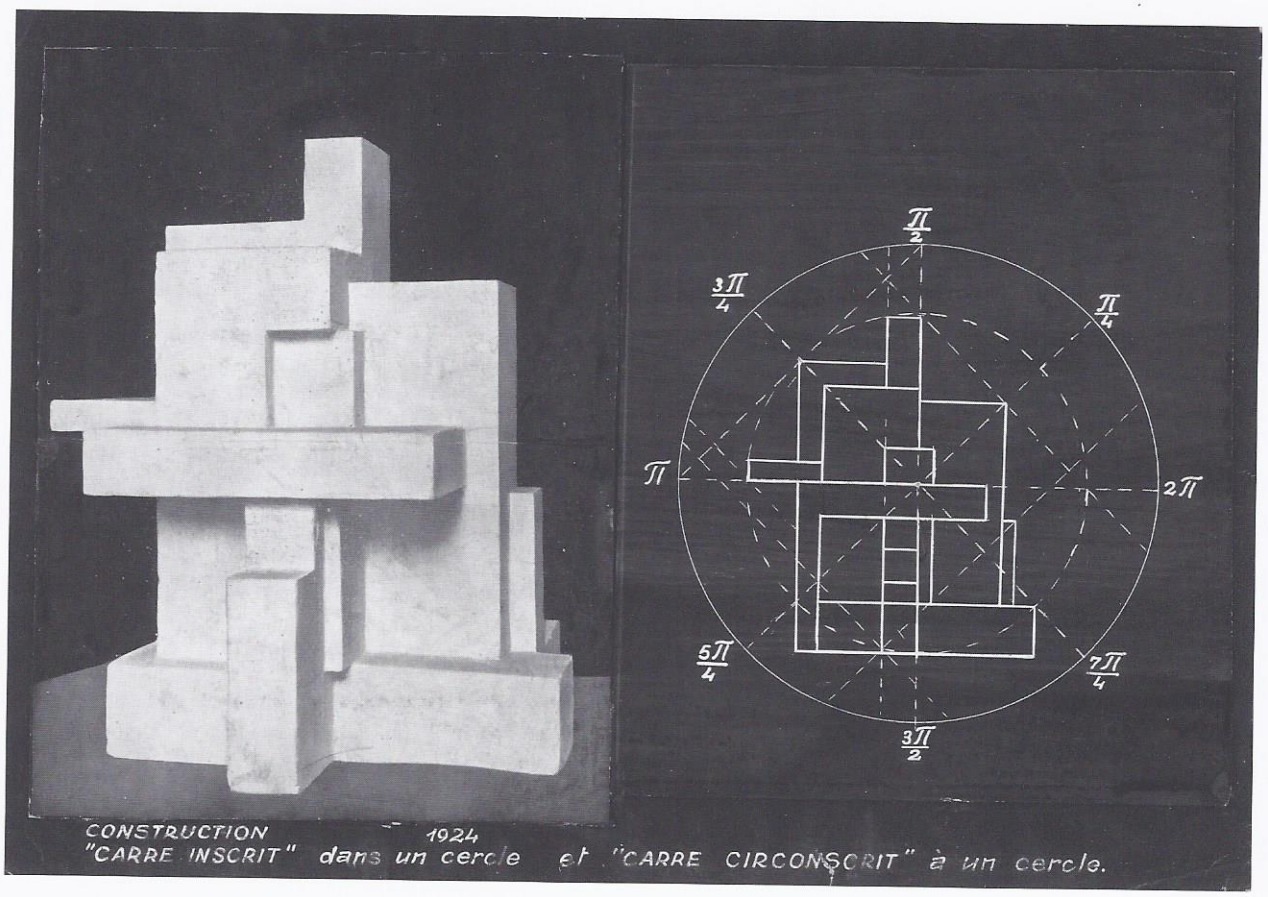


*Fig 11* Construction 1924, photograph and drawing of *Construction of interrelation of volumes from the inscribed square and the circumscribed square of a circle* (catalogue raisonné no. 27), mounted on card

study of mathematics – that is to say four years of study." (Fig 11)[14]. He also read new publications by and about Albert Einstein whom he accepted after Spinoza as an 'intellectual father figure', just as he did of the post-Euclidian scientists Lobatschewsky and Riemann shortly afterwards.

After the designs for furniture and some interiors Vantongerloo reached a high point when, in 1928, despite no architectural training, he became preoccupied by the development of a series of airport designs. Civil aviation was only in the development stages. Outstanding, immaculate and exceedingly innovative models emerged which appeared like sculptures

[14] *On the back the number '22' is written in pencil mistakenly. This is not catalogue raisonné no. 22 but a sculpture made of cement* Construction of interrelation of volumes from the inscribed square and the circumscribed square of a circle, 1924, *catalogue raisonné no. 27, which went to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.*

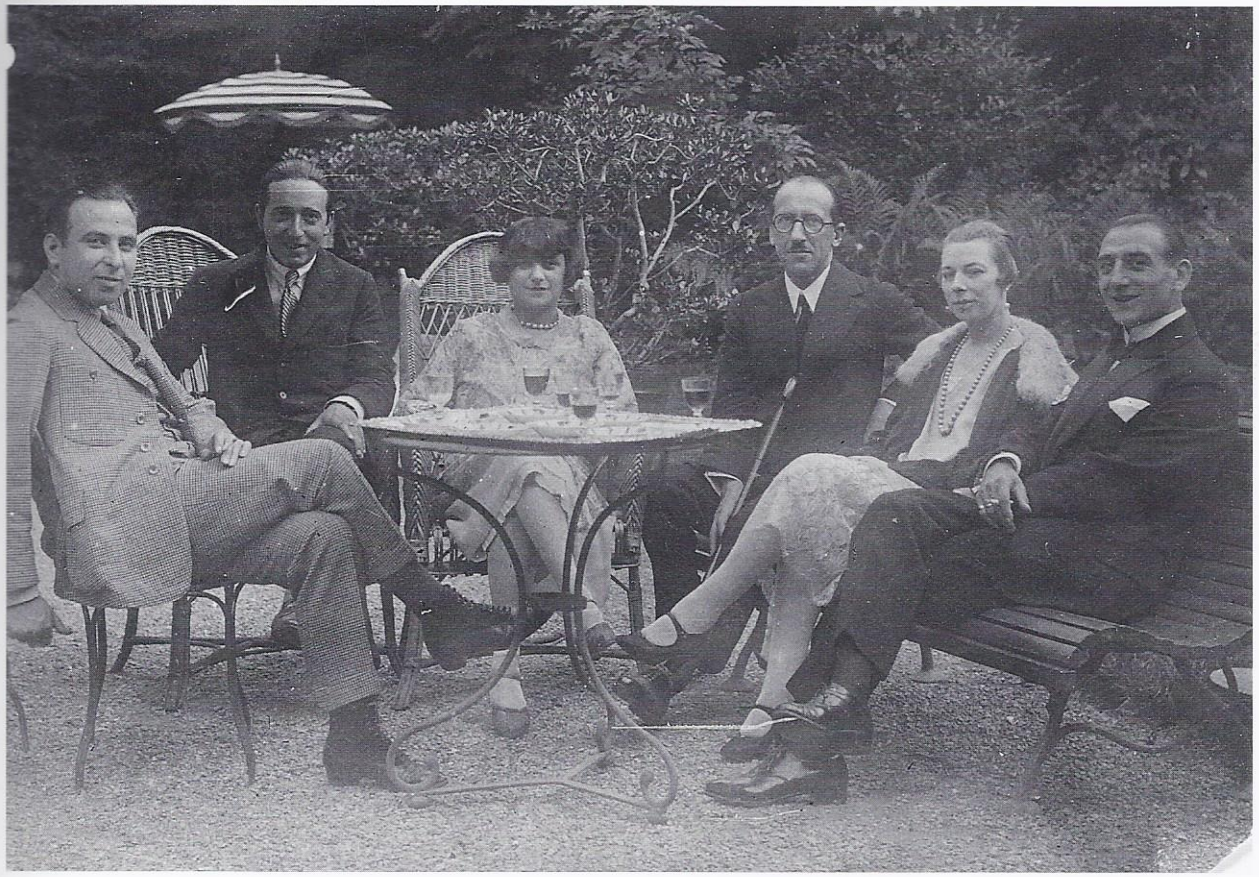

*Fig* 12 On the bench (from right to left): Georges Vantongerloo, Tine (Puma) Vantongerloo and Piet Mondrian in St Germain Laye near Paris, 1925

transformed into architecture or, put differently, large sculptures in space.

In the meantime he and his wife had moved from Menton to Paris. Despite ideological differences between Mondrian and Vantongerloo, the married couple initially stayed at Mondrian's home in the French capital. Vantongerloo endeavoured to gain financial stability and he signed a contract with the German company Industriewerke Lohwald AG (near Augsburg) as a sales representative in France for their product 'Keim' mineral paints.

In order to physically showcase the product Vantongerloo asked for 'a delivery of paint cans' free of charge. He wanted to use the paint for the design of the walls in his private flat in the rue de la Cretelle in the 15th arrondissement into which he and his wife moved at the beginning of April 1928 (Fig 13). The company reacted positively: "We give our agreement to deliver the requested amount of paint and fixative for your living space free of charge... We would like to ask you urgently to pay close attention to make sure that the painting is done absolutely immaculately so that it can count as promotional paintwork."[15] Vantongerloo was not able to gain any clients and the company terminated his contract 'according to the terms' on 30 April 1928 with the reason that he seemed 'to be more artist than salesman'. Vantongerloo's attempt had failed but his Flemish humour and occasional glasses of red wine kept his spirits high. From January 1929 onwards, Mondrian, Vantongerloo and another artist by the name of Russolo met at Michel Seuphor's every Sunday for tea. (Fig 14) At that time Seuphor lived opposite the church of Vanves.

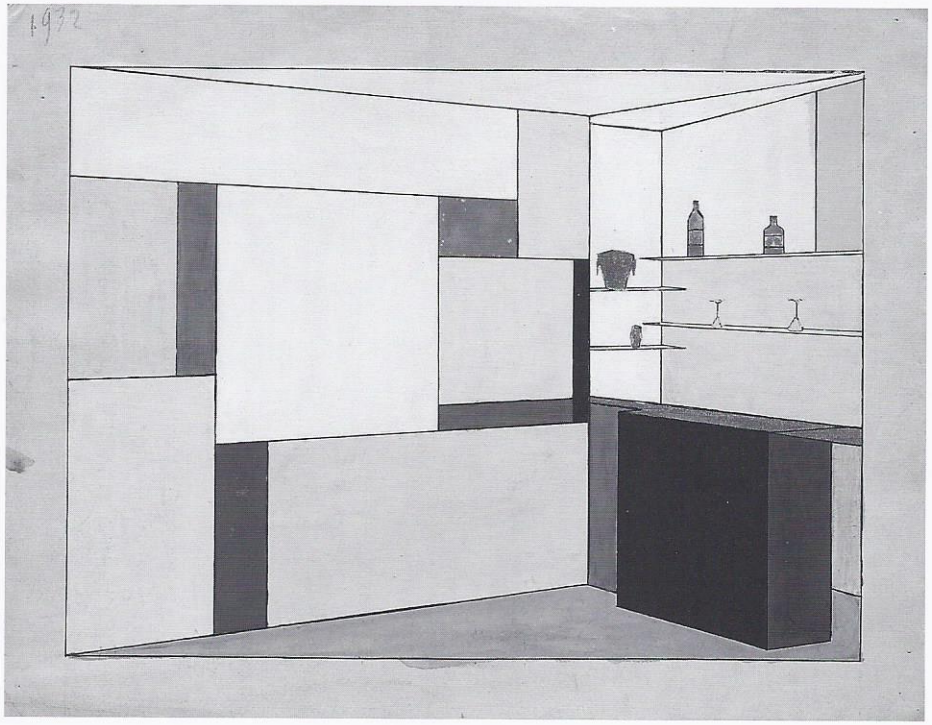


Fig 13 **Bar (interior) with red, orange, yellow, green, violet** 1932, ink and gouache on card, 28 x 36 cm, catalogue. raisonné no. 77, this cat. no. 42

[15] *Industriewerke Lohwald, 21 March 1928 to Georges Vantongerloo, c/o: Piet Mondrian, 26 rue du Départ, Paris 14th arrondissement*

Sometimes Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Jean Arp and Torrès-Garcia joined them. These artists formulated the idea to take a stand against the Surrealist movement in Paris. Torrès-Garcia proposed a group manifestation which was accepted by Mondrian, Vantongerloo and the Arp couple. Torrès and Vantongerloo were allegedly extremely 'discussion eager'. The newly found group, which named itself *Cercle et Carré* (circle and square), subjectively, artistically and ideologically referred to the concepts of 'Abstraction' and 'Structure'[16]. Seuphor, Torrès, Vantongerloo and Russolo signed a lease for Galerie 23 in which the artists of the newly found union *Cercle et Carré* could show their own

[16] *This was taken from a text by Michel Seuphor (pseudonym for Fernand Berckelaers, born 1901 in Antwerp): 'pour faire le point', the introduction for the reprint* Cercle et Carré, *Pierre Belfond, Paris 1971, p. 7-28*

*Fig 14* Luigi Russolo (left) and Georges Vantongerloo (right), Paris 1929.
Photo: Michel Seuphor

*Fig 15* Exhibition opening of the group 'Cercle et Carré', Paris 1930. From left: Michel Seuphor, unknown lady, Georges Vantongerloo, Marcelle Cahn, unknown lady (with light hat), Florence Henri, unknown man, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, directly next to her in the first row: Hans (Jean) Arp, behind him: Piet Mondrian, next to Arp: unknown lady, Joaquin Torrès-Garcia, behind Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, next László Moholy-Nagy

works (Fig 15). Most of the members exhibited paintings whilst Vantongerloo showed three new models for modern airports indicating the importance of architecture to him.

Pablo Picasso, who lived in the same house, went to see the exhibition, but generally the response was disappointing – and nothing was sold. It was particularly disappointing because Vantongerloo's models *Airport building* (catalogue raisonné no. 38, 1928, this cat. no. 26) and *Airport* (catalogue raisonné no. 40, 1929, this cat. no. 28) were modern and aesthetically and conceptually unrivalled. However, none of these designs was ever built (Fig 16).

The architectural phase ended in 1931 with the design of *Subterranean airport* (catalogue raisonné no. 72, this cat. no. 29) which from today's perspective seems like a predecessor to Pop Art.

The French left-wing artist Jean Hélion wrote on 10 March 1931 to Vantongerloo and informed him of van Doesburg's death. Hélion asked Vantongerloo to attend a meeting at the Café Voltaire, Place de l'Odéon on 16 March 1931 "...pour concevoir une formule durable, pour montrer l'art non figuratif...en prenant la peinture, hors sujet nature', de Arp à Herbin, et de Pevsner jusqu'à toi..." (to conceive a lasting formula, for non figurative art particularly painting, negating the subject of nature, from Arp to Herbin, and from Pevsner up to you...). Vantongerloo went to the meeting and was elected vice-president of the newly founded international artists' union *Abstraction-Création, art non figurative*. From 16 March 1931 until 11 February 1937 Vantongerloo continued as a member of the 'comité-directeur' of this group and due to the administrative duties he undertook and the information he received he also became an 'homme au courant'.

The group organised exhibitions in its own gallery (44, Avenue de Wagram) and published annual booklets *Abstraction-Création, art non-figuratif* (no. 1-5, 1932-1936). A prerequisite for having works reproduced in the booklet was that the artwork must not contain any figurative elements. In this important group which included, among others, Josef Albers, László Moholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian, Frantizek Kupka and Jean Arp, there were a surprising number of female artists including the two English artists Barbara Hepworth and Marlow Moss as well as Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Sonia Delaunay and Katarzyna Kobro[17]. Having been asked by Jean Arp, the young Swiss sculptor and painter Max Bill joined the group. At the age of 25 Bill exhibited at *Abstraction-Création* for the first time in December 1933. There he met Vantongerloo and the two maintained a close friendship until Vantongerloo's death[18]. (Fig 19)

[17] *One year prior to the foundation of this union of artists the first female doctor was permitted at a hospital in France; and Léon Blum called three female ministers into his Popular Front government for the first time.*

[18] *see:* Max Bill - Georges Vantongerloo, A Working Friendship, 50 Years of Sculpture, Painting and Drawing, *Annely Juda Fine Art, London 1996; and Angela Thomas Schmid: 'Max Bill und Georges Vantongerloo' in: retrospective catalogue* Max Bill, *Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Cantz Verlag, 2005, pp. 32-34*

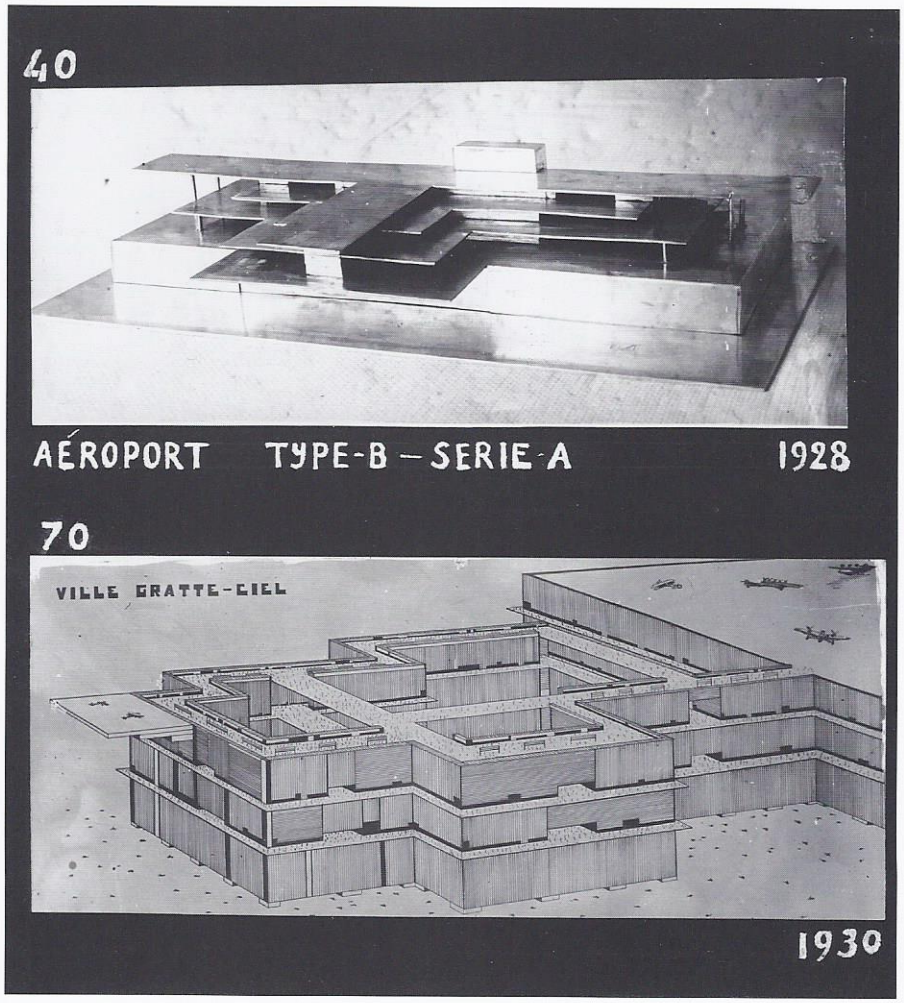


*Fig 16* Original black and white photographs mounted on cardboard. Inscribed '40 aeroport type B, serie A, 1928' (catalogue raisonné no. 40, this cat. no. 28) and '70 (Ville Gratte-Ciel) 1930' (catalogue raisonné no. 70).

Meanwhile, Vantongerloo had subjectively and thematically progressed to concepts of infinite space: the universe. He was an innovative purist who advanced his research in a focussed and determined way, at the same time as having been an utopian who seduced our senses. "Georges Vantongerloo", Max Bill wrote, "always pushes his experiments across the border of the aesthetics which seems valid at the time, and only years later these are truly understood...the key to their effectiveness lies entirely within the aesthetic processes." (NZZ, 29 November 1956).

At the beginning of October 1965 Vantongerloo fell down the stairs in his live-in studio and was found dead. Max Bill wrote: Vantongerloo's life "was filled by the constant search for the secret forces in space and time. His works from the twenties and thirties were the first of their

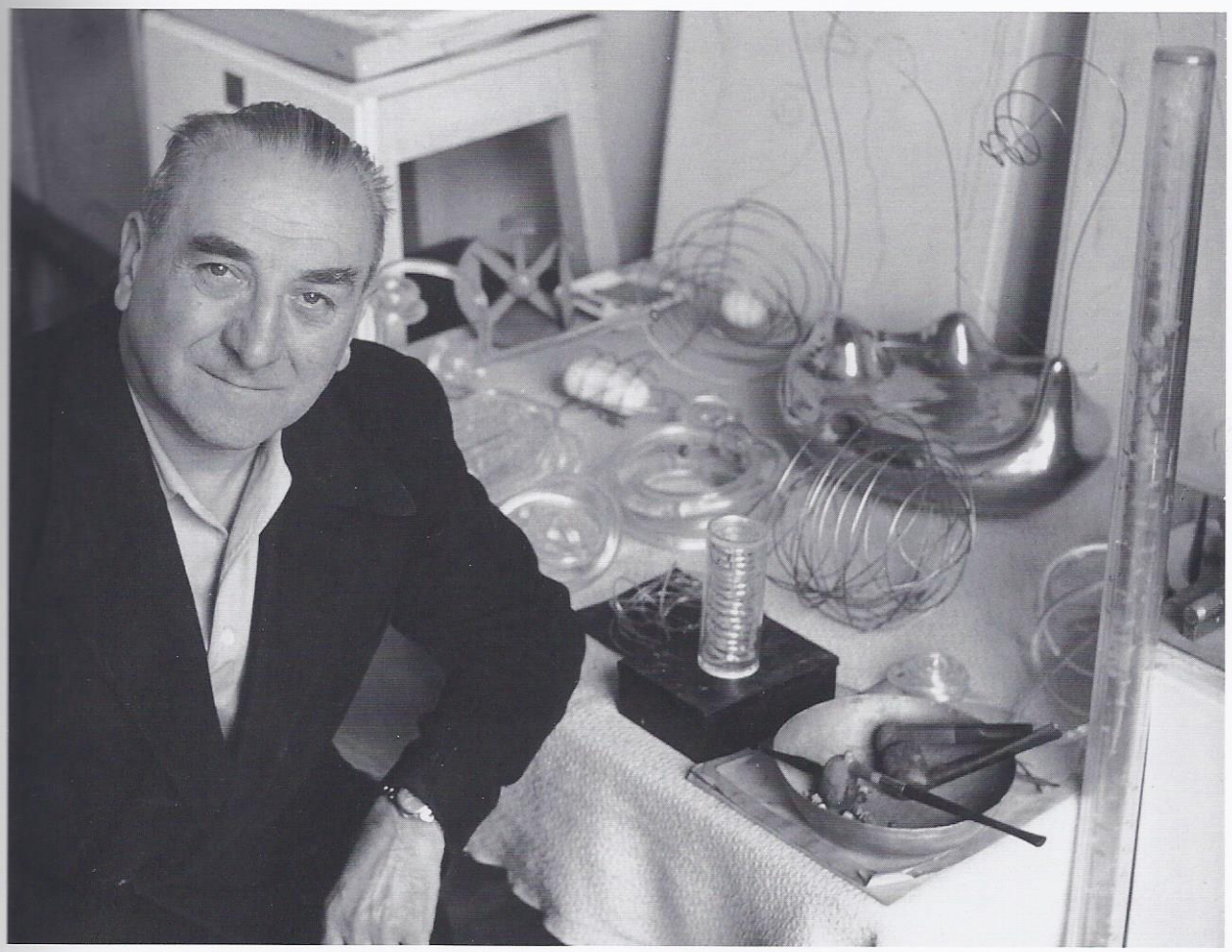

Fig 17 Georges Vantongerloo next to some of his sculptures (including *Revolution*, 1946, catalogue raisonné no. 179 and *Nucleus*, 1946, catalogue raisonné no 184). Photo: Reinhart Wolf

kind in the twentieth century to develop a mathematical way of thinking. From this he first developed a system of thought from which non-Euclidian, physical and finally universal ideas originated. The liberation from any sort of schematism and the constant development into the unknown led to Vantongerloo creating artworks which explored unknown territory in many ways. This is the reason that his work even today is only acknowledged and admired by a relatively small circle of people." [19]

[19] Max Bill, 'Fundstück aus einer fernen Welt' to Georges Vantongerloo in: Zeit-Museum der 100 Bilder, authors and artists about their favourite artwork, Insel Verlag, Taschenbuch 1213, 1989, p.328)

**Angela Thomas Schmid, Haus Bill, Zumikon, 2006**

Fig 18 Georges Vantongerloo in his studio, Paris, 1965

*Fig 19* Georges Vantongerloo and Max Bill at the opening of the exhibition '1re Biennale Internationale de Sculpture, panathenées', Athens, 8 September 1965. This is the last photograph in which both artists are seen together. They are looking and talking about the sculpture *Ecliptics. A sun in our galaxy with two of its planets*, 1963, catalogue raisonné no. 283. Photo: Carmen Martinez