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IS is Is

author: Jan Maarten Voskuil

It just happens. While Dutch museums and art institutions try to connect to the bigger international artworld (apparently without much success), IS arises in an ordinary living room in Leiden. From almost nothing a truly international project space arises. Just like that. The list of international artists in it's first exhibition, UND Jetzt seems impressive. IS could mean International Space, but on the weblog it states Intimate Space. Herein, a bigger contrast between International and Intimate seems impossible.

This Intimate Space is the home of Dutch artists lemke van Dijk and Guido Winkler. At first glance, the building appears as a regular house built in the beginning of the twentieth century in Leiden, the Netherlands, just outside the old city walls. The house has been recently restored. With smooth plastered walls, both floorboards and an open kitchen made from bamboo, and a lot of stainless steel, the living room is rather narrow with a large cupboard-like object dividing the space in two. The facades of neighbouring houses on the street side provide a lot of shade. At the back, there is plenty of light with a view of the garden. It's a house where children play, where people live and work, and which will now be open to the public as an exhibition space. This is all IS, but the space doesn't stop at the front door. It spreads itself like an ink stain, travelling around the corner to Le Petit Port Gallery where the show continues there also.

Like many other spaces, IS is also a virtual space on the internet - a blog. Here the space stretches far beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The space links itself to locations in Amsterdam, Groningen, Brussels, Bonn, Basel, New York and Sydney. The images on their websites are displayed in low resolution, but it's obvious that the spaces are like-minded. The space of IS spreads itself all over the world - a world that will seemingly come together for this opening show in Leiden. Artworks arrive from Sydney, New York, Graz, Bonn, Brussel, Paris, Melbourne, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Apeldoorn, Rotterdam, Haarlem and Leiden. It all comes together in the one location of Leiden. Perhaps it is possible after all for IS to be simultaneously intimate and international.

In UND Jetzt the artistic intentions of IS become visible. The international group of artists could be described best as modernist and abstract. Maybe IS means 'International Style', as modernism is referred to in some circles? In any case it's abstract, although I'd better not use that word again; participating artists like Billy Gruner, Tilman and Jan van der Ploeg do not like the a-word. And it was the substitution of this very word for UND that formed the main incentive for the exhibition that they curated a couple of years ago in Amsterdam.

They prefer to use the words 'Non Objective', a label originating from the discussion of abstract art. Abstraction means a way of reducing reality. But it's also used for work that is completely separate from the familiar visual world. In this case art doesn't refer to any objects. 'Non objective' means just this and has nothing to do with objectivity as being the counterpart of subjectivity.

Referring to Theo van Doesburg, I prefer the label 'Concrete Art', although these words do call to mind certain associations I'd rather not face. Van Doesburg wanted to express with these words his desire to break loose those connections abstract art still had with mimicry and interpretation of the visible world outside the artwork. In a work of concrete art there is no relevant outside world. It is what it is. It is from this conception that van Doesburg argues that artists should not need to sign their works of art. A pure concrete work does not refer to anything but itself and therefore not the intentions or feelings of the artist himself or herself. This aspect of the 'impersonal' in 'Concrete

Art' might be the the result of an predetermined procedure or system. In this, process art and the systematic art of later years also became synonymous with concrete art as well.

Although I don't think van Doesburg actually refused to sign his work, the concept is interesting, especially in times where personality culture and individualism reign supreme. Of course art is much more than a personal expression. If it is a human need to express oneself in cubism, constructivism or whatever -ism, why didn't people do this before in history? Why didn't the Romans or the Greeks practice abstract art, impressionism or pointilism? The environment, the art of others and the period of time in history have always been of major importance to the production of art. In my opinion, these factors have a far greater influence on an artist's work than the characteristics of that artist specifically.

Could the definition of a work of art be used to summarize the ideology of art-space also? Instead of observing the space as something in itself, can a space be defined without concerning oneself with the intentions of the artists who will show there? Or does the space represent some other essence, such as the collective identity of the curators or the artists? Questions like these touch the area of ontology. They are questions of being. The being of a work of art or the being of a space. And if a new space is launched, showing concrete art and called IS, then I can no longer insist on it being an abbreviation of Intimate Space, International Space, International Style or anything else.

IS is then everything that it is. IS is just Is and people should see it for themselves.