

1959

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GERRIT RIETVELD

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For his entire oeuvre insofar as he contributed in this to the realization of the synthesis between space and color.

Rietveld was an ideal choice for the first Sikkens Prize. It was a choice like a manifesto, with which the measure and weight of the prize were calibrated. He was also a choice in terms of the programme, a gesture to the inspirational past as a starting point for new ideals. In those years, admiration for De Stijl was not yet a generally and internationally accepted phenomenon as it is now, but there was interest in this avant garde movement in a specialist circle. This was reflected, amongst other things, in a number of exhibitions and recent studies: in 1951 the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam devoted a retrospective exhibition to De Stijl and in the following year this was repeated in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1956, Hans Jaffe, the deputy director of the Stedelijk Museum and later Professor of Art History at the University of Amsterdam, published his monograph on De Stijl; in 1958, the art historian Theodore Brown did a doctorate on a study of Rietveld's furniture. The visionary power of this avant garde artist – by definition a peripheral phenomenon in his own time – was therefore taken seriously.

Rietveld made the following speech when accepting the first Sikkens Prize in 1959:

“I was very surprised to be awarded the first Sikkens Prize. Obviously it made me think: ‘Nowadays there are many color advisors whose use of color is much more generous than mine; I use only a few.’ But perhaps the motto of our American colleague Mies van der Rohe played a part in this: ‘Less is more’. Certainly, I gratefully accepted the prize and at the same time, I knew what I would do with it, and that is to continue my study of colors which I started almost half a century ago. At the time it was mainly for my own use. I will now endeavor to continue in such a way that everything can be accurately recorded for more general application and, I hope, in the interests of color in architecture.

After the First World War, there was an awakening of contemporary art which was closely related to the progress of industrialization. The imitation of styles or of the remnants of styles from past periods was generally detested, but no new form had yet emer-

ged. Everything that was made was and continued to be weighed down by the inheritance of the past. Even our great predecessor, Berlage, to whom we owe a great deal, could not free himself from the early European styles of architecture.

A small group of artists, later united in De Stijl movement provisionally decided to start working with the most primary colors and shapes. For myself I thought it was necessary to go back to the very simplest structures, preferably madrial (in order to escape once and for all from the influence of the professional building methods, with their abundance of form which had become stuck in a rut), and as regards what was visible, the laws of perception itself. This meant learning to experience the visible on the basis of the most primary perceptions.

Everything that was available to read in the field of perception and colors was read, and the disagreements between Goethe and Newton, the difference of the seven colors of the spectrum (wavelengths with color phenomena) and the three single color perceptions recognized by the color-sensitive eye, were difficult points. In those days I found a small book by Schopenhauer, *Das Sehen und die Farbe*, the most useful. In this he says, amongst other things: 'Farbe ist die qualitative Teilung der Tätigkeit der Retina' (Color is the qualitative division of the activity of the retina"). Looking for the most elementary things in visual perception eventually brought me to a point I will not easily forget because it was as though it showed me the birth of light and space.

I found myself facing a dark infinity while I knew there was a strong source of light behind me which was unable to bring the slightest light into that infinity. A wall of darkness remained until a few reflections gradually became distinguishable of some of the floating material elements. The light that was reflected suddenly allowed me to experience the space and the limitations of the space made the light visible. Space and light were born at the same time. The synthesis of light and space, and in principle of color and architecture. This vision has always been the background of the visual element in my work. In practical terms it is based on limitations so that our own human image of reality is created for our equally limited powers of perception. The more clearly this reality can be seen, the greater the experience.

This clarity was more than a so-called completion for me. Completion in the expression of color is, for example, colorless (white). Architecture is a particular spatial intervention. An intervention which is not sufficiently interesting can only be improved with a

new intervention. Completion blurs space.

I would like to spend this prize to write about these and other considerations about space and color, so that they can be compared to the ideas of others, and I hope they will lead to a clarification of the understanding of the reflection of light in architecture. I would like to thank the people who took the initiative to introduce this prize for their grand gesture, with which they have also proved that in addition to the permanence of color, the impermanence of the perception of color is also important to them, and I would like to thank the members of the Dutch Art Foundation for the way in which they formulated their presence.”

Rietveld

17 June 1960