

Transcript Frans Timmermans, Minister for European Affairs
Tate Modern, London

Good evening to all of you.

Tonight I'd like to speak to you briefly about the importance of what we in the Netherlands call 'De Stijl', and Theo van Doesburg and other artists of that period. It is not because I live in a building designed by Jan Wils, who was a friend of Van Doesburg's and shared his views. Nor is it, I have to acknowledge, because so much of their thought permeates Dutch society today, even if people don't always see it. The use of colour, lines, symbols, the use of simplicity in beauty – this has been absorbed by Dutch society, and even includes the creation of such wonderful characters as Miffy - by Dick Bruna - who would not have been possible without De Stijl, I'm sure. No – all that is certainly important, but it's not the reason why I'm so fascinated or perhaps even obsessed by this period.

I want to read something, which was quoted in a book by Hannah Arendt on evil. The words are actually by Winston Churchill. Let me read it to you. 'Scarcely anything material or established, which I was brought up to believe was permanent or vital, has lasted. Everything I was sure or taught to be sure was impossible has happened.' He wrote this in the 1930s, and in the Netherlands, his words are very often interpreted as a sort of premonition of what was going to happen afterwards. But that is not what Churchill meant. He was writing about the First World War and its effects. And there was a fundamental difference between most of continental Europe and the UK, on the one hand, and the Netherlands on the other. We Dutch had no involvement at all in the First World War! The notion that everything that was seen as essential and certain – all such values would be overturned and would disappear, in a sense. This notion of colossal, European collective suicide in the trenches of Flanders underlies the ideas of artists like Van Doesburg. They had the audacity to try and reconstruct a world that had completely disappeared and was in tatters and chaos immediately after the First World War. They thought that they could recreate this world so that it would be a better place. They did not yet know that Utopian thought could also lead to the aberrations of Hitler and Stalin. They only discovered that later. But they had the ambition and the audacity to think of a better world.

I think this is important today because I believe that shortly, we will be facing the same tectonic changes in Western society that occurred then – on a completely different basis, for completely different reasons. But nevertheless, I think Churchill might have repeated his statement that everything we thought was normal, natural and self-evident might be different

five or ten years from now. And I wonder: will our present-day artists and architects have the same audacity as De Stijl had in the past, to try and redefine the world for the good of everyone? So much was achieved in the 1920s and also the 1930s in terms of social housing, in accordance with De Stijl's principles, especially in Amsterdam and The Hague. And by the way, the Amsterdam School did have curves, whereas the new Hague School had no curves, only straight lines.

I think the tremendous success of these politicians and artists was their ambition to share beauty and excellence with people of low income – people who had never had access to excellence or beauty. And it was only possible because they believed in this idea developed by the Modernists and De Stijl, that the world could be constructed in a better way, so that it could be shared by everyone. That it could be uplifting for the working class in a way that would change the world. And in many ways, that is precisely what it did. I think that post-war architecture – when the concept of a Utopian world was abandoned because we saw the perversions of that idea – represents a totally different approach to building. Unfortunately, you can see quite a few examples in this city, when you look out of this window! That reminds me of something that Jonathan Ross said about Wayne Rooney. He said - it's a quote, so don't blame me for the language! - 'It looks like crap but it gets the job done.' To some extent, that's what we did with architecture in the 1950s and 1960s! But I think what we're seeing now – and I find it truly inspiring – is an ambition among the newest generation of architects to work with concepts, to have ideas and to build for a better world. To not just have a Gherkin or some other iconic building sitting there on its own. But to build in the context of a better and more sustainable society. And I think that in this context, the lessons taught by Van Doesburg and others in the period of De Stijl could be extremely valuable, particularly today.

This is a very personal view. There are people in this audience far more knowledgeable than I am about this period, these ideas and these artists. I just wanted to give you an impressionist view of why I think I am so fascinated by this period and by these people. They were driven by an audacity that is both humbling and enticing. That invites us to try and create a better world. In my job and yours, in everyone's job. Because the only way for us to reconnect to this society and to this world is by sticking together and doing things jointly. So – and although I may sound somewhat American when I say this, I mean it from the bottom of my heart – enjoy!