

19-07-04-02/1

Art International N° X/c Finier 1966

MUSEO DE ARTE MODERNO	
SECRETARIA DE CULTURA	
Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires	
Nº ORDEN	Arch. Prozano
UBICACION	Carr. Belica



GEORGES VANTONGERLOO

BY MARGIT STABER

GEORGES Vantongerloo died between the 6th and the 8th of October, 1965, in his studio in Paris, 79 years old. His death did not break the silence which had surrounded him during his lifetime. It had been a voluntary silence. For unknown artists do not exist any more and Vantongerloo's achievements as a sculptor and painter were known by people who know. Known, yes, but his work had neither publicity nor a large public.

Several reasons explain this paradoxical situation of having been known and unknown at the same time. Vantongerloo had deliberately withdrawn from the world, from the so-called art world in particular. In 1920 he went to Menton, lived, worked and wrote there quietly, and from 1927 he lived a no less secluded life in Paris to the day he died. Yet it would not be correct to call Vantongerloo a misanthrope. Once the barrier of distrust broke down, he was a gentle, human, amiable and spirited man, never losing his quick Flemish humour. He was always ready to distribute little kisses and to rush the visitor out for lunch or dinner to the best bistro in the neighborhood. Swiftly he would take the necessary amount of money from the neat little piles of coins and bills which he kept in his self-designed writing table under the high North window of his overcrowded studio, where one had to navigate around the pieces of work and furniture, and, during the last years, the fragile, glittering plexiglass objects.

Vantongerloo was a sincere, down-to-earth man. If he had no faith in the sophistication and alertness of the international art set, he had strong faith in himself. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, and he felt strongly what he and only he must do. But even when he told his long and rambling stories about the past it did not become clear what had made him the solitary figure he was. But whoever really wanted to know him and was really interested in his work, was welcome, well received and with pleasure seen again, dropping in à l'impromptu, because Vantongerloo did not believe in noisy communication systems such as the telephone. He was the freest man I have ever known, having overcome the stress of society. *Vous savez*, he said, *je n'ai plus besoin de rien, et à mon âge même pas des femmes*. In spite of his self-manoeuvred isolation on which he lingered with love and loathing, he certainly was a happy man. And if these observations seem contradictory, I must say that they are contradictory, because Georges Vantongerloo was a contradictory man. In his work, however, he became clear, perceptive, articulate.

Obviously Vantongerloo would have liked to pull down the barrier of silence between himself and the world, at least during the last years of his life. A few exhibitions and an important contribution to a group show were an attempt to lower the shield: 1960 in Zurich "Concrete Art—50 years of development"; 1961 again Zurich on the occasion of his 75th birthday (Galerie Suzanne Bollag); 1962 a large and comprehensive retrospective show with 94 works in London (Marlborough New London Gallery). Switzerland probably had always had the best chance to see Vantongerloo's work: "Constructivists" in Basle 1937; "Concrete Art" in Basle 1944; and already in 1949 he exhibited at the Kunsthau Zurich together with Antoine Pevsner and Max Bill, the latter being a friend, maybe the only one, of many years. Max Bill also organized the London show and prepared the catalogue. This catalogue is still the only monographic documentation on Vantongerloo's work.

The London exhibition occurred in a moment when the fatigue of abstract expressionism asked again for a more rigid presentation of an artist's message. But even then, when one would have imagined understanding, Vantongerloo did not get through to the beholder of his work: be it in painting or sculpture, his ideas were still too pure, too unmodified, just structure and bones, and no sensory pleasure of flesh. When asked why he had never executed some of his most important sculptures in larger size and more adequate material, he used to answer: What for? the idea is there, everybody can see it. As to the plexiglass objects of his later years, he said that photography could bring out even better his intentions than the real thing, because the human eye would not yield to the planned effect. In other words, his vision was too large to be invested completely in material and execution at the moment of creation.

This brings us to two more points. First: Vantongerloo was less and less interested in making works of art. Second: he had difficulties to find a language appropriate to his ideas and comprehensible to the public. I will come back to that.

Vantongerloo had had a thorough Beaux-Arts training, studying sculpture at the Antwerp Academy, his native town, and in Brussels. The first World War took him to Holland. When in 1917 Theo van Doesburg started the "De Stijl" periodical, Vantongerloo became with Mondrian its most significant contributor. He met Mondrian, van Doesburg, van der Leek. But soon he outlived the dogmatic views of Neo-



plasticism without losing his strength of opinion. The horizontal-vertical system to which painting (and sculpture) had been reduced as a means to create purified order was for Vantongerloo a possibility but not an end in itself. Between 1917 and 1937 he created within its limits a number of surprisingly original paintings of classical perfection, just as perfect as Mondrian's of that time but quite different in intention.

Vantongerloo's research had little to do with Cubism, out of which Mondrian and Malevitch came, nor with the expressive liberation of form and color as in Kandinsky. He went straightout, without any ideological ballast, to define the function of the elements he used—the energy in between—and to present this net of energies in plane and in space.

In 1917 Vantongerloo was 31 years old; he was a young man, but not a very young man when he broke radically with the classical scheme of the human body as the supreme theme of sculpture, and the object in general as the theme of painting. Very quickly there was for him space, volume, plane, line and color alone. He began to explore the functionality of lines and points in plane, of cubic and spheroid bodies in space. His first innovation happened in sculpture. As a matter of fact he was the only one before 1920 who projected the newly won freedom in three dimensions. The way which led him to this shows clearly in the drawings of the years before, transforming, via a precise analysis, the human body into a framework of linear relationships—the reduction operated by geometry. Then, re-establishing his findings in space, geometry again became the only means to realize what he called "*le sens des rapports équilibrés*". And this we find perfectly realized in two sculptures which opened entirely new ways of plastic expression. Both ways have been trod heavily since then without coming to a dead end.

Construction dans la sphère of 1917 anticipates the sculpture of open and closed volume and flowing rhythm: Je Arp approached the same idea with his wooden Dada reliefs in a much freer, playful way. *Rapport des volumes*—with the undertitle "*émanant du carré inscrit et du carré circonscrit d'un cercle*"—is on the other hand a key piece to sculpture based on tectonic rhythm.

Vantongerloo was the true inventor of a mathematical approach in art. His art philosophy is comprised in two slender volumes: the first one published in 1924 in Antwerp under the title *L'art et son avenir* (essays he wrote between 1919 and 1924 in Brussels and Menton); the second one published in 1948 in the Wittenborn series "Problems of contemporary art" under the title *Vantongerloo—paintings, sculptures, reflections* with a preface by Max Bill.

The mathematical approach, Vantongerloo explains: "To speak of reducing art to mathematics is to express oneself poorly; instead we must say: to arrive at an artistic expression by geometric forms. We speak of a mathematician as we speak of a painter, a sculptor, a musician, etc. But is the thing that the mathematician seeks, finds and states in the form of an equation merely mathematics? Has mathematics discovered the laws of creation, or has it merely served to formulate and record ideas? It is the same in art. Geometry serves to formulate the relations of a new crystal, a creation, a composition." Vantongerloo was interested in the formative and hence aesthetic implications of mathematics. "A point can engender volume. Then the point serves no longer to measure an object, but to create an object." He was familiar with both Euclidian and non-Euclidian geometry, venturing, maybe without knowing it, into the tricky field of topology.

As I said before, because Vantongerloo's solutions are so crystal clear they escape interpretation. And I said that he lost interest in making works of art. More and more his work assumed experimental character and we should regard it as that. Always he realized his ideas both in the field of painting and sculpture. If the horizontal-vertical compositorial scheme had mostly been the function of an ovoid or a curve, now he put curves directly on display. His "curve" pictures on the typical white painted groundplane are a miracle of harmonious economy.

About 1948 he began to use plexiglass. Puzzling, self-penetrating, transparent objects, most of them handsized, whose secret it is to produce their own coloration and to be able to change it. As I pointed out, there was the problem how to make his ideas comprehensible to the viewer. This goes especially for the plexiglass objects. But then Vantongerloo always said: we must have the courage to realize our own ideas even when we don't understand in the beginning what the meaning and effect will be.—In a way, he was not better off with his creations than we are. But slowly we begin to understand what he was out for.

His key word had been "incommensurable". Max Bill wrote in the preface to the London exhibition of 1962: "His interest had turned increasingly to the 'incommensurable', the purely creative . . . to an ever growing degree his works became idea patterns, sketches of captured processes of nature. Sometimes, especially when reading his written statements, one is tempted to think of his work as the work of a new Henri Rousseau. As Rousseau was the *peintre de la réalité*, so Vantongerloo in a certain sense produced new realities, reducing the invisible by mental process to aesthetic facts. And this again is Art. But it is an art which defies classification. . . ."

This characterization has always struck me as especially poignant. There certainly was a naive component in Vantongerloo's way of reasoning and of seeing the world around him. Maybe it is the mixture



of logically trained thinking and naive (i.e. natural and direct) world-outlook which creates the difficulties of understanding we meet in Vantongerloo. He sensed a hidden quality and beauty of facts behind facts which we only begin to suspect. Vantongerloo went, already an old man, to see the color spectacle of the Aurora Borealis in Northern Sweden. Back in his Paris studio he made several models of what he had seen. These models combine the view of a child near to nature and the view of a scientist in the hands of an artist. Vantongerloo was a member of the Astronomic Society and an eager reader of books on astronomy. If he could have had the chance to ride in a space ship I am sure he would have made another model of his experience of light and radiation, speeding around the globe. And he would have tried to incorporate the traces of the "incommensurable" in his plexiglass experiments as a reflection of the beauty of the universe.

"*La splendeur de l'univers*", that was his vision, not to copy but to recreate anew in art. He had the sense of discovery and the newness of a world being constantly transformed by the developments of science and their application in technology. The future of an art adequate to these developments was for him only a matter of being able to find a medium which would make it possible to capture this state of change in a visible and tangible object of aesthetic value. Seemingly the abstractest of abstractionists he was in fact near to nature, trying to catch the laws which govern the appearance of things in space and time, and their impact on man. In other words, the relativity of view we have acquired. He always had been in advance of his time. In 1928 he designed airports for Paris, a bridge for Antwerp, in 1930 a skyscraper for Paris and in 1931 an underground airport. Utopian at that moment, quite normal today.—There is still much hidden in Vantongerloo's seemingly innocuous objects and writings.

Contemplating the change of view which science has brought, he speculated what might happen to the role of art: "... if we knew that the universe is not a fabricated object—we would create sounds in the universe, colors or maybe northern lights, or we would create thunder using different phenomena accompanied by light, producing the image of fairy-tale sunsets. An interplanetary concert where men would move in space instead of sitting in a closed room, or they could hear the performance from any chosen place. Yes, our curiosity deserves that we venture to think out such ideas. Who would have dared to predict, 200 years ago, that our good citizens of Paris could recline in their easychairs and listen to music transmitted to them from New York by radio?"

