

Marc Doesburg: Form and transience

Over the five decades of Marc Doesburg's photographic practice the medium has changed radically, the possibility of a simple interpretation of the visual vanishing almost at the speed of light as pre- and post-shooting interventions compete with the decisive moment. But, in its reduction, its dependence on tonality and the way it rotates around the act of decision, lens-based photography retains the essence of the vision of Doesburg's key interests, Ansel Adams, Henri Cartier- Bresson, Brassai and Laurence Aberhart. The combination juxtaposes an interest in formalism and mood with a love of what was known as the decisive moment: the image provided by the photographer's continual attention to what is occurring around them; and the sense of capture, of something that might be transient and unrepeatable. This approach entails the company of a camera, constant attention to what the camera might perceive and the capacity to act quickly.

Doesburg has been photographing since the 1980s. His early work documents his experience of returning to the Netherlands, where he had spent time as a child, finding multiple casual jobs and work in a hostel before moving to Germany and working as an industrial painter. While he later studied languages, literature and linguistics and then worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language, his interest in photography remained. His practice began when the camera had few automatic functions and has continued into a time when the eye seems to have to wrest control back from the camera's anticipatory moves. Doesburg's work is driven by the formal design entailed in the photographic print's geometry. His pictorial world is arranged into bisections, diagonals and recessions, held together by implied or explicit verticals and horizontals. Even the roughly-grassed rolling hills display the geometries of their geologies.

Doesburg is adamant that there are no tricks here: images are only manipulated tonally, but somewhere there is a glitch in the field of vision that makes the viewer re-evaluate what is being seen. The photograph becomes Escher-like, yet still holds the touchstone of verisimilitude as only photography can. Sea ripples in a way that is both vertical and horizontal. Chairs arrange themselves as line-drawings. A child merges with a bollard of posters. A stairwell wraps itself around a woman's neck as though it were a folded yellow napkin. These images present themselves to the viewer as indexes of the act of seeing; indexes that are abstracted from their places within genre and subject matter in order to force an immediate response.

In conversation about the extent of his practice, particularly in landscape imagery, Doesburg says that certain images must be taken: they are the natural fodder of the camera, and it would be rude to ignore them. But these sit in the background; the ones he chooses to exhibit are those that provoke. What they provoke are reflections on the

preoccupations of the time, clashes between industrialisation and what was there before: the striations of metal railings against bare-leaved deciduous trees; metal roads moving through stripped fields, and the architectures of industrialised farming.

For Doesburg, decision arrives when the photographer's visual field is challenged by a paradox that locks the image into something that seems teasingly unreal, visually impossible or emotionally painful. That this is a knowing practice is made clear by the image of a sculptured boy, his slipping chiton centred just below the sill behind it. Window blinds almost obscure the view behind, as does the chiton; the sculptor shows the boy both proud and shame-faced, but the shame, or the consciousness, is that of the artist, the curator, the photographer, and the viewer.

Such ethical, formal and architectural interventions inhabit Doesburg's art. Curved concrete steps enfold trees provided with a restricted urban habitat. The appeal of the modernist architectures that Doesburg photographs lies in their formal coherence, but Doesburg finds this in the past as well, rendering the architecture of late Gothic curtained walls half dissolved by light.

When he turns to the impacts of industrialisation on the landscape, Doesburg's eye is ruthless. In *Ferry Hill*, enfolded hillsides and valleys hold the strata of the commercial development of the landscape. Stacked slash at the heights, nursling pines on the slopes and then, in the steep depths of the valley, the fragile remnants of kanuka. Doesburg's editing brings the forms together in claustrophobic conjunction.

In this constant relay between the disturbing, the threatening and the beauty of transience, Doesburg's oeuvre shows a sensibility that is a product of the turbulent contradictions of the past half century.

Bridie Lonie

July 2026