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Rietveld's Egocentric Vision

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DURING the last year of his life Gerrit T. Rietveld, the unpretentious leader of De Stijl architecture, said that he had been motivated by "pure selfishness"; a "*gezond egoïsme*," he insisted, was the mainspring of his artistic drive.

As modest as his works, Rietveld's writings are not in the same literary class as Wright's Whitmanesque effusions, Le Corbusier's verbal pyrotechnics, or Gropius' messianic dicta, all on international display for many years. Nevertheless, in over seventy published pieces and countless unpublished fragments, the taciturn Dutchman constructed a powerful artistic statement which is still relatively unknown.

He wrote only when asked; and his major articles are hidden in such insular publications as *De 8 en Opbouw*, *Bouw*, and *De Werkende Vrouw*. Unlike Oud, Van Doesburg, and Mondrian, all of whom wrote in German, French, and English, Rietveld published exclusively in Dutch, a method guaranteed to insure obscurity outside of Holland. And one suspects that, despite decades of overt Dutch interest, his architectural colleagues did not regard his ideas worthy of serious consideration.

The published works fall into four parts. The earliest to appear in print, short and fragmentary, are in the *De Stijl* of 1919: rationalizations of the form-space-construction systems of his early furniture. In 1927 he began to write about questions of a more general nature; and a series of foundational essays were clustered around 1930. Three more, ca. 1940 and in 1948, continued the monologue. A lean period followed; but during the last six years of his life, a prolific and popular time, Rietveld was asked to publish frequently.

Although he did not codify his view systematically, a selection from his essays adds up to a coherent architectural statement. Yet no development is discernible; from 1919 to 1964 Rietveld's ideas are ramifications of a single-minded intellect.

Assuming that "All . . . experience is based upon the activity of our senses," Rietveld wrote that "the absorption and digestion of sensory information" develops ourselves, awareness of our surroundings, and our grasp of reality.

Selfishness is calm, a force of nature: you might say the trees were selfish.

R. L. Stevenson, *Ethical Studies*

"The process of becoming conscious [*bewustwording*] of reality determines both our nature and our image of environment" (1928: p. 89).¹

But what is reality? Neither the Neo-Platonic absolute of Mondrian nor the inner psychic realm of Klee, Rietveld's reality is restricted to that conscious awareness of the visible world which we gain through sensory experience.

If I looked at something, for example a newspaper clipping, I saw dots [and] understood that I was not supposed to see them; because there is a definite scale whereby I should see the paper. With a magnifying glass I saw only different dots without any image; and had I looked through a microscope I would have seen fibers, threads, and specks. I knew that I was supposed to see a newspaper, letters, and an image; and I determined for myself the scale necessary for this experience. Such a scale is obvious for the newspaper; but there are things and ideas where the scale is not so easily determined and can be observed only through proper scale. And there are many realities; and different creatures have special sensory systems [to experience these realities]. What then is reality . . . ?

[Rietveld's conclusion:] . . . reality is that experience which is circumscribed by our humanly scaled percepts to see, hear, and taste. (1959: "Architectuur," p. 561)

"Sensory activity is very limited [however] and varies from person to person" (1928). Inherently, awareness is closely restricted; since only a small fraction of external stimuli penetrates our sensory apparatus. As Gyorgy Kepes expressed it, "we perceive the world only through a narrow biological filter . . . The most keenly sensitive of us experience nature partially and dimly."²

We peek out at the world through the slightly open doors of our restricted human systems, unless we extend their range through sensory instruments. But this extension Rietveld rejected, limiting his field of vision to that which can be constructed by those data allowed to pass

1. This article was written with the assistance of a grant from the American Philosophical Society. Quotations are followed by date of publication; complete data are obtainable in the bibliography. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

2. *The New Landscape in Art and Science*, Chicago, 1956, p. 102.

through the screen of unaided senses. With this information we create the outer world for ourselves in accordance with the specialized nature of our systems, thus creating our reality; and

This reality develops gradually in correspondence with the awakening of our consciousness. Step by step we gain meaningful awareness of our surroundings: a single, finite world-image [*wereldbeeld*]. (1959: "Architectuur," p. 561)

Through our own existence we feel partnership with cosmic events; the growth of our consciousness *to be* enlarges with the urge to be a part of general life. This is a healthy selfishness [*gezond egoïsme*] . . . Our *Umwelt* and our *I* grow each time a snapshot of life is absorbed by our consciousness.

Growth=joy. (1942: pp. 19, 21)

In the same way, other creatures create their own universe; even

those flat, gray insects that live under . . . stones also form a world image for themselves, infinite in terms of their own system, [as] the fly that lives for one day must [too] have an idea about infinity, because every system is self-contained. Outside of it there is an endless nothingness. (1958: "Levenshouding . . .," p. 162)

Art, in Rietveld's scheme, is an activity which identifies, clarifies and intensifies reality, that segment of experience bracketed by our limited senses. Each of the visual arts must specialize in a different aspect of reality, however; painting for color, sculpture for form, architecture for space. Each requires a special vision; and it is the job of the artist to formulate his material to maximize experience within his particular sphere.

Through an art object we enter joyfully into a piece of reality, in contrast to the perceptions which we usually undergo passively . . . From what height or depth came the spark of consciousness, we do not know; but certainly we experience joy through growth and melancholy through withdrawal of our being. Every passive sensation shrinks us . . . [what Herbert Read calls "a corruption of consciousness"³].

Every art work contributes something to the activity of the senses, not because the artist is greater than others; but, through his specialized application of the senses, the artist concentrates on only one aspect of nature. (1939: p. 54)

This last sentiment is affirmed later by the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim who, approaching art from an entirely different viewpoint, argues that "the capacity to deal with life artistically is not the privilege of a few gifted experts but belongs to the equipment of every sane person whom nature has favored with a pair of eyes."⁴

Instead of lamenting our inherently human limitations, Rietveld rejoiced in them; because

These limitations of seeing are necessary, [as] unlimited space is not visible (and actually does not exist). The spatial value of a tower is that it defines place and measures height, thus making the space around it "real."

Unreflected light does not illuminate space. Material is visible only through its limitation, the separation of material and environment; [and] environment becomes color only through a limited color surface. (1939: pp. 54, 55)

In 1960 he received the first Sikkens Prize; and in his acceptance speech Rietveld described an imaginary scene where he found himself before a dark endlessness. Behind him was a strong light source which did not produce even the slightest twilight in the endlessness, a wall of blackness. Slowly, some reflections began to appear through a number of drifting particles; and, as Rietveld explained, suddenly he experienced space through the reflected light; and the limitation of space made the light visible. Simultaneously, space and light were born.

Rietveld introduced Tagore, as he did frequently in his writings:

Tagore says, speaking about the nature of art: through limitation of the unlimited, truth becomes real. Every art work illuminates a facet of the reality of the observer and gives us the joy of creating the basis of our existence. (1939: p. 55)

If *art* is not *reality*, then we live *outside* of reality. (1942: p. 18)

Sweeping aside most artistic assumptions of the past and present, Rietveld stated that

Perception of an art work is not contingent upon impetuosity of brushstroke; virtuosity of line; or the dramatic, comic, or epic quality of its subject. It depends only on its clarity. We can absorb space, color, and material only through their clear limitation. (1939: p. 55)

Art and beauty are different conceptions [and] art is not a matter of beauty . . . Through appearance of form, color, sound, odor, and . . . hardness [a] thing becomes real (perceptible) for us. That we find this reality beautiful or ugly is a question of relationship and insight. In each case it is a personal preference or aversion . . . Art clarifies reality and carries personal beauty to a general form language. (1927: "Nut . . .," pp. 90, 92)

Rietveld concluded his earliest essay with:

Art in general, architecture in particular, is not concerned primarily with beauty but with the clear expression of the appearance of form . . .

Tagore says: "Art has no other objective than that it appears to be" [and, Rietveld added,] what it is. (1927: p. 92)

In a talk delivered three years after the publication of the above essay, Rietveld shocked an Utrecht audience when he explained that "art will destroy itself; only a great artist can create pure artless work." In reply to the objections of an irate art-lover, Rietveld insisted that

Art is not a luxurious excess or, even worse, a kind of spiritual sublimity which stands outside, above, or beside society. Art is an important economic factor which creates awareness and sharpens discrimination. Art is not self-sufficient; the words "L'art pour l'art" are as degrading as the words "applied art."⁵ [And two years later,] . . . art is action.

Art is not a matter of liking . . . [and] is *certainly not concerned with the making of beauty*; it has no transcendental objective or tendency.

3. *Icon and Idea*, Cambridge, Mass., 1955, p. 137.

4. *Art and Visual Perception*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954, p. ix.

5. "Kunstloze Kunst," *Utrechtsch Prov. en Sted. Dagblad*, Fri., 8 May 1931.

The purpose of art is to develop and nourish a definite sense organ. Art is the one-sided, yet immediate, experience of reality, the ordinary, simple experience for which we need only open the eyes or extend the hand. (1932: p. 22)

As the painter induces in us awareness of color, the sculptor of form, "*the reality which architecture can create is space*" (1928: p. 90), the most fundamental reality of all, in Rietveld's view.

Space is the first discovery of man; through separation of *I* and *environment* there originates a sense of *becoming conscious* [*bewustwording*], what for convenience we call consciousness. (1960: p. 13) The first step toward consciousness is the knowledge of an individual existence, and this begins with the separation of the *I* and the space around the *I*. One can observe this in a growing baby. *Therefore space means more than other elements as a necessity of life.* (1964: "Kleur . . .," p. 51)

For selfish reasons we must love our environment and our neighbor as ourself. And architecture is the best profession constituted to realize the spatial expansion of our *I* and to create a livable human scale; because the medium of architecture is space. Therefore we must never abandon the artistic element in architecture, as it is the most direct of all the arts. (1959: "Architectuur," p. 563) Characteristic of all architecture is that we live in it, on it, around it, and between it. (1930: "Architectuur," p. 318)

Since the aim of architecture is the clear formulation of sensory-limited space, elements that promote this objective are to be cultivated, all distractions from spatial clarity are to be avoided. Thus, Rietveld established an architectural program for himself that remained constant throughout his career, a goal that explains much about his attitudes, actions, and works.

To maximize awareness, sensory activity must be focussed as sharply as possible; as "The more senses that work simultaneously the less intensive is the experience of reality" (1928: p. 89). And it follows that integration of the arts, a goal of the Bauhaus, was anathema to Rietveld: "the three plastic arts must develop completely free of each other" (1939: p. 55) to avoid dilution of the experience peculiar to each.

Form, composition, color, module, and number were chosen and manipulated by Rietveld for their capacity to clarify experience. With few exceptions—the outstanding one is the summer house in Breukeleveen of 1941—rectilinear planes and straight lines constitute the chief formal elements of Rietveld's furniture, typography, and architecture. They were chosen as the simplest units with the least association with nature, Art Nouveau, and, closer to home, the Amsterdam School.

These elements were composed to maintain integrity of the discrete parts—point, line, plane—to comprehensible volume. Commenting on the design of his well-known Red-Blue chair of 1918 Rietveld said that

With this chair an attempt has been made to have every part simple and in its most elementary form in accordance with function and material, the form, thus, which is most capable of being harmonized with the whole. The construction is attuned to the parts to insure that no part dominates or is subordinate to the others. In this way,

the whole stands freely and clearly in space, and the form stands out from the material. (1919: "Letter to . . .")

The wood connection used here is obvious [talking about another chair] because of its simplicity and clarity of expression . . . the greatest advantage [of the system] is that one is very free in placing the rails, thus giving the object a greater spatial expression, which liberates one from the constructive-bound plane. (1919: "Aan-teekening . . .")

If physical organization achieves the desired spatial characteristics, color should be avoided as a distracting element. If the goal is not reached by choice and arrangement of material, however, color should be used to adjust the *de facto* space visually.

The clearer and purer the architecture, the less color is needed; [but] frequently space is improved by color through the absorption of some planes and reflection of others. (1964: "Kleur . . .," p. 52)

In the same essay Rietveld explained his working method of handling color. He determined the desired light reflection for all surfaces, in order to gain proper light distribution. This depends upon the function of the room, which must be considered for all times of the day and night, inside and out. The actual light reflection is then determined by various grays, lighter for surfaces that should advance, darker for those to recede. Grays are then replaced by colors, chosen for other reasons, with the same reflective properties.

As early as 1918, with the design of the Red-Blue chair, Rietveld used a modular system as an aid toward achieving clarity, in that case a 10cm unit on a three-dimensional grid. But the module did not have the mystical and practical quality for Rietveld that it did for others such as Mies and Le Corbusier; for Rietveld it was but one of many tools to be used, or ignored, as the occasion warranted. So, although one sees no module in the Schröder house of 1924, the equivalent of the chair modular-system appears, for example, in Zonnehof of 1959, a 3m vertical and horizontal grid, within which solids and voids are orchestrated.⁶

In approaching a reconstruction job—he did many during his lifetime—Rietveld first examined the existing space, hoping to discover an inherent proportional scheme. If the original space did not provide the clue, he would impose a framework on it; although he preferred that the space skeleton grow out of the problem itself. In choosing a modular unit Rietveld was careful to point out that, although small units are technically valuable, only large units are optically effective, since small dimensions are swallowed up by the space.⁷

Number was also used for spatial expression. Rietveld

6. See T. M. Brown, *The Work of G. Rietveld*, Utrecht, 1958, pp. 19–21, and *Bouwkundig Weekblad*, LXXVIII, 8 July 1960, pp. 323–326.

7. The contents of this and the following paragraph are based upon conversation with Rietveld in 1957.

observed that eye and mind can grasp only a limited number of units at one time, somewhere under ten. We comprehend a composition of five more readily if it is broken into simpler groups, say 3+2. Four is easily recognized in units of 2+2 or 3+1; six can be read in 3+3 or 4+2. Beyond six, however, things become more complicated; yet seven can be quickly assimilated if reduced to 3+2+2. Ten is probably the maximum to be absorbed at a glance in a distribution of, perhaps, 3+3+3+1. Beyond that we lose clarity of the whole.

Art forces the activity of one, or a part, of our senses; for architecture it is our space sense. Isolated fragments of primary reality enlighten our consciousness, through clarification of our discernment. They *provide* and *maintain* our joy of living, which then becomes less dependent on "having," on property and power. (1942: p. 21) [And this "primary reality"] broadens the scale of our *wereldbeeld*. (1960: p. 19)

Clearly, Rietveld was not concerned with taste, beauty, monumentality, self-expression, functionalism, "space-time" (Giedion), "a new sense of space" or "the machine aesthetic" (Banham). Hearing the beat of a different drummer, he believed that art in general, architecture in particular, does not deal with *things* but with *activities*. They are essentially psychobiological processes, in Conrad Fiedler's terms "a continuous, incessant working of the mind to bring one's consciousness of the visible world to an ever richer development."⁸ Supporting this position, Kepes writes that "By deepest instinct, we reject chaos and try to order our experience. We seize upon means to bring coherence into the welter of signals furnished by nature as though our life depended on it—as it does. The basic instrument that we use to make our experience intelligible is our body itself."⁹ And in Rietveld's words,

To realize one's existence, to discern the self from that which is outside oneself and to awaken one's consciousness seems to me to be the sense and drive in the actions of all that exists. (1958: "Levenshouding . . .," p. 162)

As an instrument in the process of realization, architecture creates tentative conditions which bring life to an ever richer fulfillment.

[Since] Life as a whole is like a balance eternally seeking its center of gravity . . . the practice of architecture is a sober self-maintenance . . . [Therefore] we must not consider the human scale, which in our field is so highly praised, as a cultural attainment. Because . . . we must bring things into a human scale, in contrast with the inhuman in nature, as a means of self-preservation.

. . . I see architecture more as a tenuous equilibrium than as an unshakable monumentality!

Each work is only a part of the unending expressional possibilities; and an attempt toward completeness in a single work would injure the harmony. (1958: "Levenshouding . . .," p. 162)

When he ended this essay with the statement that "These

words are not truths but attempts toward orientation," Rietveld was not offering merely a modest estimate of his position. Since "attempts toward orientation" expresses a sentiment deeply rooted in his existential position: human thought and action are contingent elements which scribe a perpetually shifting inner-diagram of outer conditions. And his architecture, as Colin St. John Wilson so aptly expressed it, "was a spontaneous improvisation to serve the occasions of life, not a monument to conserve values."¹⁰

Twentieth-century architectural thought and practice have been attempts to scrape away ancient accumulations of conceptual crusts to reveal the essentials of architecture in totally unprecedented conditions. The ground had to be cleared in order to build a fresh, new civilization.

In this way, all artistic pioneers were radicals; yet all saw different problems and different "essences." Where Mies focussed on technological determinants, Gropius concentrated on art in a democratic-industrial society. While Wright built before the Romantic background of nineteenth-century "nature," Le Corbusier formulated the new environmental conditions of twentieth-century man. All, however, concentrated on one or more aspects of the *outer* world.

By viewing the problem biologically, Rietveld emphasized the *inner* world of man. He looked not so much at the object as at the relationship of object to subject, a human optical system within the turbulence of visual stimuli. It is a position closer to Monet's "innocent eye" than to the socio-technical-aesthetic-organic frameworks of other twentieth-century architects. Rietveld is perhaps still closer to Cézanne, in his "attempt to realize an objective world," in Herbert Read's words, "without abandoning the sensuous basis of his aesthetic experience."¹¹

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s a deluge of architectural literature was issued by Gropius, Oud, Giedion, Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer, Sartoris, et al., all framing an external facet of the problem and all, as Reyner Banham has made clear,¹² propagandistic in approach. Perhaps the closest to Rietveld's egocentric and didactic position during these years was Moholy-Nagy, whose *Von Material zu Architektur* of 1929 was structured by the new vision that had been germinating since World War I. "The experience of space," Moholy wrote, "is not a privilege of the gifted few, but a biological function . . . We must acknowledge that in every respect, space is a reality of our sensory experience. Man becomes conscious of space . . . first through the sense of sight. Man, not the product, is the aim."

10. "Gerrit Rietveld: 1888–1964," *The Architectural Review*, cxxxvi, 1964, p. 402.

11. *Icon and Idea*, p. 130.

12. *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, London, 1960, ch. 21. The following statements of Moholy-Nagy are from this book, p. 318.

8. In H. Read, *Icon and Idea*, p. 88.

9. *The New Landscape*, p. 204.

More recently, Gyorgy Kepes also views the problem through the biological constitution of subject and through relationship of subject and outer world. And with Rietveld, Kepes argues that "Sharpening our awareness, heightening our sensibility, disciplining our vision, will increase our power to understand the world, appreciate its richness and cope with its problems,"¹³ and assumes, with Rietveld, that "man's emotional life—his experience of pleasure and pain, of order and chaos—is . . . anchored in the sensed field." But "Beyond the familiar human landscape loom[s] the ultrasensory world [where] technical aids [are] needed to breach its barrier,"¹⁴ Kepes points out. Though he reached outward toward the harmonization of the world beyond human sensibility, Rietveld consciously limited himself to the old world perceived by man five feet from the ground.

Herbert Read assumes that "art has been, and still is, the essential instrument in the development of human consciousness,"¹⁵ and that "The specifically aesthetic act is to take possession of a revealed segment of the real, to establish its dimensions, and to define its form."¹⁶ "Reality," in Read's view, "is a construct of our senses, a chart which slowly emerges as we take soundings of our feelings, trace the contours of our sensations, measure distances and altitudes of experience."¹⁷ And, with Rietveld, Read believes that "There can be no artificial separation of art and life."¹⁸

Also close to Rietveld's position is Rudolf Arnheim's premise that "No longer can we consider the artistic process as self-contained, mysteriously inspired from above, unrelated and unrelatable to what people do otherwise. Instead, the exalted kind of seeing that leads to the creation of great art appears as an outgrowth of the humbler and more common activity of the eyes in everyday life . . . the artist's conceiving is an instrument of life, a refined way of understanding who and where we are."¹⁹

Lacking formal education; distrusting the past; not primarily concerned with nature, materials, or engineering; and skeptical of theory, Rietveld was dependent upon his native resources for direction. In a world staggered by violence; numbed by man's inexhaustible inhumanity to man; bewildered by an indigestible proliferation of knowledge, Rietveld, intent on finding his own way, wore blinders. This was his strength as well as his weakness. And miraculously, in this shattered world, he became, and remained, a whole man, a healthy blend of inner and outer, of self and work.

13. *The New Landscape*, p. 17.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

15. *Icon and Idea*, p. 17.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

19. *Art and Visual Perception*, p. viii.

With an innocent reverence for "The immediate life, the ordinary, simple, direct experience of reality" (1928), he formulated his goal: intensification of life-enhancing sensory experience and orientation for himself and for others willing to participate. His means: direct, cumulative, visual experience. Material, emotional, intellectual, and traditional elements were avoided in favor of the perceptual.

Rietveld's egocentric world, taut, limited, and lucid, orbits around his central notion of reality: space, intensely experienced, tailored to the scale of human sensibility, ever changing, enriching, and expanding ourselves.

All perceptions and experiences unite in knowing; and all alter our condition, either toward joy (expansion) or melancholy (contraction) . . . (1939: p. 54)

Architecture is not a matter of beauty or ugliness, but of clarity . . . Good architecture is a fragment of reality which forces a partial expansion of ourself . . . It is the background of our life, neither more beautiful nor ugly; but if it is good: clear. (1964: "Kleur . . .," p. 48)

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