Georges Vantongerloo: A longing for the infinity
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Until now, exhibitions of the Belgian artist have been rare, yet he remains one of the most important artist-thinkers of the 20th century. His trajectory is unique, and the Reina Sofia exhibition seeks to reveal not only the grounding of his work, in the re-conceptualisation of pictorial and sculptural space that marked the abstract tendencies in art of the early 20th century, but also the radical leaps by which he arrived, in the last period of his work after World War II, at a totally original and deeply intuitive visual encapsulation of the energies of the universe. In doing so, he transformed the categories of painting and sculpture.

The exhibition traces Vantongerloo’s evolution from his Constructions in the Sphere of 1917, through his years as a member of the De Stijl group in the 1920s and the Abstraction-Création movement in the 1930s, when he was producing geometric paintings based on the right angle and the relationship between lines and flat colour planes. In his sculptural equivalents, the relationship of volumes. Mathematics underlie these works, according to Vantongerloo, and he gave his paintings and sculptures titles in the form of algebraic equations, often long and complex (Composition derived from the equation $y= ax + bx +18$ with green, orange, red and black harmony, 1932; $y= 2x^2 + 15x$, 1935). The late 1930s saw his introduction of the ‘curve’ in paintings, which led him to a freer and more open space-creation (Curves-straight lines-intervals, red-brown-greenish, 1936; Relations of lines and colours, 1939; Variants, 1939). With their starting economy and elegant creation of a sense of movement and energy within a white void, these works constituted a unique episode in the history of abstract painting. After the war he began encapsulating the energies of the universe, which led him to a freer and more open space-creation (Curves-straight lines-intervals, red-brown-greenish, 1936; Relations of lines and colours, 1939; Variants, 1939). While encompassing Vantongerloo’s work from 1917 to his death in 1965, the Madrid exhibition is not being organised as a linear chronological retrospective. Rather, it takes his late work as a centrepiece, exploring it in more detail than perhaps any previous exhibition. His earlier work leading up to this moment is grouped in clusters marking important stages of his development, each with a character of its own. These comprise the Constructions in the Sphere of 1917, the Interrelation of Volumes (1919-1926), interaction of colours (1917-1918), geometric abstract paintings and sculptures (1929-1937) and the ‘curve’ paintings of 1937-1939.

It could be said that what Vantongerloo was seeking in his work remained essentially the same throughout his life – the notion of the infinite, or as he liked to call it, the Incommeasurable. Only his means of expressing it changed profoundly. As he put it himself: “Essentially, I offer different solutions of a single problem. To be sure, there are several stages, but each is dependent on my individual degree of evolution at a given moment. To express oneself will always be difficult. One must constantly obey the infinite.”

The fluid sense of form in Vantongerloo’s late works, their reconciliation of the physical and the biological in plasma-like fluxes or force-fields, seems extraordinarily contemporary and perfectly in key with current scientific knowledge of the cosmos. As aesthetic objects they are “fundamentally different from anything else produced”, in the view of Vantongerloo’s long-term champion and supporter, Max Bill. What strikes us about them is their combination of a far-sighted vision and great modesty, for in relation to something so vast or so tiny as the universe may be, the work of art itself can only be a model. The problem his late works pose is: how can a delineated object suggest the limitless, how can an aesthetic object sensitize us to nature without defining it, since, as he himself said – “nature cannot be defined; to define it would be to set limits to it”?

Georges Vantongerloo has been considered as one of the great unknowns in 20th century art. This exhibition reveals his achievements to a younger generation and a much wider public.

Selected Bibliography
Vantongerloo, Georges. L’Art et son avenir, Edition De Sikkel, Amberes, 1922
Georges Vantongerloo: Escritos, écrits, writings, Fundacion Provano, Barcelona, 1982
Livingston, Jane; Mertens, Phil and Bill, Max. Georges Vantongerloo – A Travelling Retrospective Exhibition, Washington D.C., Dallas, Los Angeles, 1980
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Museum hours
Mondays to Saturdays: 10.00 - 21.00
Sundays: 10.00 - 14.30
Closed Tuesdays

Exhibition galleries will be vacated
15 minutes before the museum closes

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Parque de El Buen Retiro, Madrid
Tel: 91 574 66 14
Free admission

Timetable
October to March (included):
Mondays - Saturdays: 10.00 - 18.00
Sundays and Holidays: 10.00 - 16.00
April to September (included):
Mondays - Saturdays: 11.00 - 20.00
Sundays and Holidays: 11.00 - 18.00
Closed Tuesday

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