

# HISTORY

See separate PDFs for the *History, Timeline, PRO Conferences, PRO Magazine, PRO Drawing Collection, PRO Exhibitions, Publications, Collaborative Projects, Press, Picture Book*

## ORIGIN

The Foundation PRO – pro art and architecture was an ideological organization, mainly active 1986 -1995, dissolved 2012, aiming to stimulate the discourse on the value of constructive art and architecture as contribution to the improvement of society for all and to individual well-being. Like with all ideologies such endeavors depend on the founders' commitments. The foundation was initiated by Dutch artist Fré Ilgen in collaboration with his wife Jacqueline Ilgen. In some five intense years, together they established a vast international network and an astounding amount of activities, stirring new discussions about constructive art.

## PRELUDE

When Fré Ilgen graduated in 1981 from the Fine Arts Academy in Rotterdam, later named Willem de Kooning Academy, he was aware to hardly know about art and the art market in the larger world. He became a member of two different artists' unions. One focused on cultural politics, and public commissions as contribution of art in public urban spaces. The other focused on promoting sculpture. In both unions Ilgen volunteered to serve on the board, gathering his experiences as a member of municipal committees for public commissions, for purchasing art for a municipal collection and for curating a members-exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, plus committee meetings on a higher level in the governmental cultural administration. He soon became aware how such processes were hardly effective, because of games between persons with their own agendas. Democracy is important in decision processes, but not when circumstances demand effective acting.

Simultaneously, as young artist he knew he needed documentation of realized monumental sculpture for acquiring public commissions. For obtaining such documentation, he created two large white geometric 3-dimensional shapes in maximum sizes that fit into his van. Jacqueline, he and their dog Joy drove into the mountain-passes in Switzerland, where he experimentally made compositions of both shapes in immediate relationship to the rocky environment. These he photographed as impressions of monumental sculptures, and by doing so he noticed how the interaction geometry-nature intrigued him. In the Dutch city of Dordrecht, at a local gallery he exhibited these pictures and some alike sculptures, as well as the two larger white shapes. To simulate the intriguing relationship with nature in the Swiss mountains, he added pebble stones around their base. When Joost Baljeu, a prominent Dutch artist and Theo van Doesburg specialist<sup>1</sup> attended the opening, he told Ilgen he did not need to show actual nature (the pebbles), as geometry itself is already nature. Intrigued, Ilgen visited Baljeu, who introduced him to the roots, tradition and ideology of constructivism in art and architecture. This was the start of several years of intense reading, seeing exhibitions in museums and galleries, discussions with Baljeu and others. A pivotal experience for Ilgen was discovering the writings and catalogues by US artist Charles Biederman in Baljeu's library and in his 1950s magazine *Structure*.<sup>2</sup>

## THE BEGINNING

Because of Ilgen's early experiences with cultural politics, how democratic processes can only be limitedly effective, he understood that if one wishes to accomplish anything, one should have the courage

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<sup>1</sup> Van Doesburg founded in 1917 the Dutch *De Stijl* group with Piet Mondriaan and some other artists. Joost Baljeu published the magazine *Structure* 1958 – 1964, not to be confused with *The Structuralist* published by Canadian artist Eli Bornstein. Both, however, were inspired by US artist and theorist Charles Biederman's writings like his opus magnum *Art As The Evolution of Visual Knowledge*, 1948, and who's thinking and focus matched the general interest in structure in science and linguistics in the 1950s-1960s.

<sup>2</sup> Joost Baljeu published the magazine *Structure* 1958 – 1964, clearly influenced by Charles Biederman's writings.

## Foundation Pro - pro art and architecture

1986 – 2012

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to take up the responsibility and act accordingly. While acutely being aware that mistakes would happen, at least one can realize activities from which other artists may benefit. Ilgen understood himself as coordinator orchestrating an internationally necessary discourse on the potential value of constructive art and architecture for the contemporary world, providing tools (like a new magazine, many discussions and exhibitions), involving as many artists, art historians, curators, galleries and museums as possible. Knowing it would be counter effective to undertake this under his own name, and with Jacqueline as the perfect partner to help realize this challenging mission, they founded the Foundation PRO – pro art and architecture formally on 16th October 1986.<sup>3</sup>

### COMMITTEE OF RECOMMENDATION

In the prelude to the founding of the Foundation PRO, Ilgen had established contact with quite a few personalities known for their special interest in constructive art, like leading artists, art historians, and curators. They were briefed on Ilgen's intentions with the Foundation PRO and they allowed their names to be added as important reference. The full list is added on the next page.

### RANGE OF ACTIVITIES

Four international PRO Conferences in various countries, nine issues of the PRO Magazine, a series of catalogues and international exhibitions in galleries, museums, fine art academies and conference buildings, and magazine presentations at international art fairs (Basel, Frankfurt, Chicago). Quite a few collaborative projects evolved with other artist initiatives, especially in Belgium and Germany, or symposia in museums, universities, colleges, and with publishers.

See separate PDFs with more precise information.

### RESULTS

Metaphorical for the start of all activities was that at the 1st PRO Conference 1987 in Dordrecht most of the attendees, about 120 artists, art historians and a few curators, were astonished and intrigued to find so many others from so many other nationalities to have similar interests. The first presentation of the PRO Drawing Collection, then presenting 128 works on paper *en block* on a wall, drew much interest and discussion about remarkable analogies or even similarities in the works.

The stream of activities unleashed by the Foundation PRO motivated and encouraged other artists in various countries to organize conferences, exhibitions and publications. The gradual establishment of a reputation of an international movement, brought artists involved in the exhibitions of the Foundation PRO on the radar of important galleries. Based on a letter of reference by Ilgen, as president of the Foundation PRO, one colleague-artist got a professorship at a fine art academy. The PRO Foundation offered a large-scale international platform enabling artists to interact and establish new contacts and friendships.

Summarized, in the 5 years of the Foundation PRO's most extensive and international activities, many artists moved out of a kind of isolation, acquiring a broader platform and the desired international exposure. Exceptional for that time in Europe in constructive art, from the start these were artists mainly from Western-European countries, from the USA and Canada, but also from various countries behind the Iron Curtain, communist countries blocked from any international discourse. For many Western artists the activities of the PRO Foundation offered first glimpses of the existence of quite a few colleagues 'over there', and of deeper art historical information on art developments in the 1920s up to the 1980s. This reverberated throughout the next decade.

Interestingly, in that time early pioneers of digital art were involved, while not being distinguished as a separate group. Therefore, today it makes sense to shed new light on this artist's initiative, that did not aim at any particular political message or conviction beyond well-being for all.

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<sup>3</sup> At that time in the Netherlands, it was legal to start a foundation as single persons without a basic capital. At that time the Cultural Department of the City of Dordrecht stimulated such artist's initiatives and financed the notary to legally register the Foundation PRO – pro art and architecture. The word "PRO" was chosen as the shortest and internationally understandable notion that represents a positive ambition.

## COMMITTEE OF RECOMMENDATION

1986 - 2012

Upon the legalization of the foundation PRO – pro art and architecture, the following persons were asked for permission to use their names for reference as a virtual committee of recommendation. All agreed.

- Mrs. Celia Aescher, Director McCrory Collection, McCrory Corporation, New York, USA;
- Mr. Joost Baljeu, artist, publicist, Amsterdam, the Netherlands;
- Mr. Stephen Bann, art historian, critic, University of Kent, Canterbury, Great Britain;
- Mr. Charles Biederman, artist, publicist, Red Wing, Minnesota, USA;
- Mr. Prof. Dr. Ing. Max Bill, artist, architect, Zürich, Switzerland;
- Mr. Jürgen Blum-Kwiatkowski, artist, theorist, curator, Director Gallery New Space, Langenbieber, Poland/Germany;
- Mr. Dr. Dieter Bogner, Mrs. Gertraud Bogner, art historians, Verein Exakte Tendenzen, Vienna, Austria;
- Mr. Eli Bornstein, artist, editor of *The Structurist*, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada;
- Mr. Josef Müller-Brockmann, graphic designer, gallerist Galerie Seestrasse, Unterengstringen, Switzerland;
- Mr. Dr. Volker Fischer, Adjunct-Director Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt, Germany;
- Mrs. Jonneke Fritz-Jobse, art historian, curator, Haarlem, the Netherlands;
- Mr. Prof. Eugen Gomringer, arthistorian, poet, Rehau, Switzerland/Germany;
- Mrs. Adelheid Hoffmann, Edition&Galerie Hoffmann, Friedberg, Germany;
- Mr. Hans-Jürgen Slusallek, Edition&Galerie Hoffmann, Friedberg, Germany;
- Mr. Richard Paul Lohse, artist, publicist, Zürich, Switzerland;
- Mr. Max H. Mahlmann, artist, Hamburg Wedel-Holstein, Germany;
- Mr. Dr. Dietrich Mahlow, art historian, curator, Seeheim, Germany;
- Mr. Andréi Boris Nakov, art historian, publicist, Paris, France;
- Mrs. Gudrun Piper, artist, Hamburg Wedel-Holstein, Germany;
- Mr. Dr. István Schlégl, art historian, publicist, gallerist, Galerie & Edition Schlégl, Zürich, Switzerland;
- Mr. Heiner Stachelhaus, art critic, Essen, Germany.