

VINCENT SCHELIENS

BREAK AND CONTINUITY IN ACTING AND THINKING

The Case of War Van Overstraeten, 1910-1945

The existing historiography of the Belgian painter War van Overstraeten (1891-1981), emphasises a radical break between the period during which he founded and led Communist and other far left organisations, and his later life as a painter who developed an introverted artistic style inspired by religion and known as Animism.

A study of the time-line of Van Overstraeten's activities between the 1910s and the Second World War, combined with an analysis of his discourse during this same period, reveals a more nuanced evolution, with elements of continuity. On the one hand, like many of his contemporaries, Van Overstraeten was motivated by a distrust of bourgeois parliamentarism. This led him to be attracted to radical and global alternatives, as he moved via personalism from orthodox and Trotskyist Communism via Personalism to near collaboration with the Nazis. On the other hand, we can see throughout these periods a continuity and coherence based on an anti-modern position in which the integrality character of nature and a certain mystical spiritualism were deeply interconnected and always dominate Van Overstraeten's interpretations of societal projects.