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| *Circle* is a book-length survey of international constructive art, first published in London in 1937. The joint editors and organisers of the parallel Exhibition of Constructive Art were the émigré Russian sculptor Naum Gabo (1890-1977), the British abstract artist Ben Nicholson, and the modernist British architect Leslie Martin. Gabo was one of several European artists and architects who came to England in the late 1930s to escape Nazi and Soviet oppression. In London, he became a friend of Ben Nicholson, with whom he discussed starting an annual publication that would promote the constructivist concept of a synthesis of modernist architecture with constructivist painting and sculpture. *Circle* was the outcome of these discussions, and the book and exhibition constituted the first comprehensive exposition of constructive art in Britain. *Circle* featured fifty-one participants, including ten from Britain. While the contributors from overseas included major international figures such as Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, the British artists — with the exception of Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore — were far less well-known and the constructivist credentials of several were very weak. The intention to publish *Circle* annually was frustrated by the outbreak of the Second World War and the departure of Gabo and others to the USA. |
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Gabo, Nicholson and the architect Leslie Martin co-edited the book, which was published in 1937 alongside an exhibition of constructive art at the London Gallery.  File: circle1.jpg  Naum Gabo, Stone with a Collar, 1936/7, limestone, brass, slate, 37 x 72 55 cms. www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gabo-construction-stone-with-a-collar/t06975 Contributions to *Circle* The book’s editorial claimed that ‘a new cultural unity is slowly emerging out of the fundamental changes which are taking place in our present-day civilization’ and that this unity was ‘the constructive trend in the art of our day.’ To support these claims, the book included 170 photographs of the work of twenty-one painters, ten sculptors, and twenty architectural practices. The exhibition was less comprehensive. *Circle* also contained a number of essays by artists and architects whose work was illustrated, with additional essays by the art critics Herbert Read and Sigfried Geidion, the modernist typographer Jan Tschichold, and the scientist J. D. Bernal. Read, who had earlier commented that Nicholson’s white reliefs were ‘the best type of painting to go with the new architecture’, wrote about the search for new forms of artistic expression and suggested that ‘there is no one way of doing this […] we are at a stage of experimentation.’  File: circle2.jpg  Ben Nicholson, White Relief, 1935, painted wood, 42.3 x 67.6 cms. www.mutualart.com/artwork/1935-white-relief/084F603C64BBD135  Authors interpreted their topic broadly, addressing a wide range of sometimes contradictory ideas in their essays. For example, Mondrian, unlike Gabo, made no reference to constructivism in expounding his philosophy of neo-plasticism. Bernal was concerned with art’s search for social utility, while Nicholson suggested that ‘painting and religious experience are the same thing.’ That said, the concept of the artwork as being essentially rational and constructed from basic elements underlays almost everything illustrated and written about in *Circle*.  The artists and architects illustrated in *Circle* included many major figures from across Europe, among them Hans/Jean Arp, Gropius, Paul Klee, Le Corbusier, Léger, Moholy Nagy, and Mondrian. It is up for debate as to whether some of the British artists, excepting John Cecil Stephenson (1889-1965), merited the constructivist label.  File: circle3.jpg  John Cecil Stephenson, Painting, 1937, tempera on canvas, 71.1 x 91.4 cms. www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/stephenson-painting-t00617  Hepworth and Moore were making biomorphic sculptures, while the painters Arthur Jackson, John Piper, and Winifred Dacre were experimenting with hard-edge abstraction. Nicholson, too, slowly abandoned a constructivist approach, becoming the dominant landscape-influenced abstractionist of the St. Ives School. Nevertheless, *Circle* is significant as the first occasion in British art history in which a comprehensive array of international constructive art, including a British component, was presented to the British art world.  The organisers’ intention to make publication an annual event collapsed when, in response to the worsening international situation in 1938 and the outbreak of war in 1939, the European émigrés associated with *Circle* began leaving Britain for the USA, and Nicholson left London to live in St. Ives. |
| Further reading:  (Checkland)  (Harrison)  (Martin, Nicholson and Gabo)  (Nash and Merket)  (Read) |