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| **British Constructivism** |
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| Prior to the Second World War, Constructivism attracted little interest from British artists apart from the few involved with Circle in 1937. Circle consisted of a publication and accompanying exhibition and was the first comprehensive presentation of constructivist work in London. It was organised jointly by Ben Nicholson (1894 – 1982), the Russian émigré sculptor Naum Gabo and the architect Lesley Martin, and was publicised as an international survey of constructive art. |
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After the 1960s, this utopian concept was abandoned and the focus became the internal constructional logic of the individual art work. Although there has been no group activity since 1976, surviving artists from the Constructionist and Systems groups, together with other younger artists, are still working in a constructivist mode.  Marlow Moss (1890 – 1958) was the first British-born constructivist artist, though at that time, 1928, she was living in Paris and her work made little impact in Britain. In the late 1930s, many European artists, including the Russian constructivist sculptor, Naum Gabo (1890 – 1977), came to London to escape Nazi and Soviet oppression. Befriended by Ben Nicholson, Gabo proposed a collaboration in the production of a book and exhibition as a survey of international constructive art and architecture. They were joined by the modernist architect, Leslie Martin. Their book, Circle, published in 1937, featured fifty six participants of whom ten were British, although the constructivist identity of several was weak. Circle’s activity was ended by the Second World War.  In 1951, the Constructionist group was founded by Victor Pasmore (1908 – 1998) with the painters Adrian Heath, John Ernest, Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Gillian Wise and the sculptor Robert Adams. During the 1950s they exhibited in group shows with other abstractionists, organised exhibitions of their own and published three broadsheets. In their second broadsheet, Pasmore wrote that the artist “can practice scientifically … and can make constructions according to objective principles.” (Broadsheet No. 2, 1952, unpaginated). His reference to making constructions related to the production of three-dimensional reliefs instead of two-dimensional paintings, while by objective principles he indicated the use of mathematical or geometric systems to determine the structure of the art object. Anthony Hill became a leading exponent of this approach. Kenneth Martin distinguished between imagery abstracted from the natural world and constructive abstraction when he wrote: “It is not a reduction to simple forms of the complex scene before us. It is the building by simple elements of an expressive whole.” (undated note, Tate Archive). The Constructionist group disbanded at the end of the 1950s, though most members continued to work in a constructive mode for the remainder of their careers.  Groupe Espace, founded in Paris by André Bloc in 1951, was a successor to the pre-war De Stijl movement and the Bauhaus. Bloc invited Paule Vezelay (1892 – 1984), who until the Second World War had been living in Paris, to become the Groupe’s London delegué. She enrolled two architects, two sculptors and eight painters, but failed to attract the Constructionists after an abortive attempt by Victor Pasmore to take over the group’s leadership. The group’s sole London exhibition in 1955 included entries from leading European constructivists, and members also took part in the parent Groupe’s exhibitions abroad. Vezelay was dedicated more to abstraction in general than to constructivism, though she supported the constructivist concept of a synthesis of the arts. The best known of the other members were the sculptor Geoffrey Clarke, the painters Vera Spencer and Charles Howard, and the architect Vivien Pilley. Marlow Moss, now back in Britain, was also a member. The group folded in 1960.  In 1969, several British abstract painters working in a constructivist mode exhibited in Helsinki in a show, organised by Jeffrey Steele (1931 - ), entitled “Systeemi-System: An Exhibition of Syntactic Art from Britain”. The term ‘syntactic’ referred to the constructivist concept of the art work being built-up from a vocabulary of geometric elements. Steele and Malcolm Hughes (1920 – 1997) invited all the artists involved to form the Systems Group – the term ‘systems’ referring to the use of rational underlying ‘rules’ (often mathematical) in determining the art work’s structure. The members were Steele, Hughes, Jean Spencer, Peter Lowe, Colin Pope, Michael Kidner, Peter Sedgeley and David Saunders, plus Wise and Ernest from the Constructionists. During the 1970s they held three of their own exhibitions, and participated in numerous other group shows in Britain and abroad. The group disbanded towards the end of the 1970s. However, all its members continued to work in a constructivist mode throughout their careers, and its survivors are among the artists still producing constructivist work today.  Constructivist art has featured far more strongly in mainland Europe than in Britain, and most constructive British artists see their work as aligned with that of European artists such as Max Bill, Richard Lohse and Georges Vantongerloo. The Systems Group artists established close links with similar art groups in Germany, Poland, Switzerland and Italy, and exhibited far more frequently there than in Britain, where American abstract expressionism has made a more powerful impact than the cooler, precise and more rational characteristics of European Constructivism.  File: Nicholson.jpg  Figure 1. Ben Nicholson, Abstract, 1934, woodcut, 15.9 x 20.3 cms  Source: <www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nicholson-abstract-p07202>  File: Pasmore.jpg  Figure 2. Victor Pasmore, Abstract in White Black and Ochre, mixed media relief, 1962, 61 x 63 cms  Source: <www.artnet.com/artwork/426082464/147/victor-pasmore-abstract-in-white-black-and-ochre> (from Osborne Samuel gallery)  File: Vezelay.jpg  Figure 3. Paule Vezelay, Eight Forms Three Circles, 1959, oil on canvas, 73 x 116 cms  Source: <www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/paulevezelay-eight-forms-three-circles/t03956> (if permission of Vezelay estate needed: contact Mrs S. Jarman, Wyke Hill House, Cheriton Close, Winchester, SO22 5HN)  File: Steele.jpg  Figure 4. Jeffrey Steele, Y Cynllwyn, 1954, oil on cotton duck canvas, 61 x 61 cms  Source: <www.osbornesamuel.com/artistgallery.asp?id=43311&show=18771&  showorder> (Osborne Samuel Gallery, 23a Bruton Street, London, W1J 6QG) |
| Further reading:  (Alloway)  (Constructionists)  (Fowler)  (Fowler, Constructivism and Systems Art in Britain)  (Fowler, A Rational Aesthetic: The Systems Group and Associated Artists)  (Gabo, Martin and Nicholson)  (Grieve) |