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“Induced Tension”: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of British Sculpture in the USA

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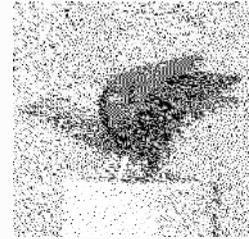
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British Constructivist Art

Article by Sam Gathercole

WORD COUNT:2,080



Abstract

This case study takes as its object the exhibition *British Constructivist Art*, which toured the United States and Canada in 1961 and 1962. The exhibition is discussed in relation to the interests apparent in the work that it presented, but the main subject of the essay is the problematic reception of the work in an American cultural context.

The exhibition *British Constructivist Art* opened at the Florida State University Gallery, Tallahassee, in October 1961, and went on to tour the United States and Canada, ending its run at Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, in September 1962. The exhibition presented constructed abstract works by six “British” artists: Stephen Gilbert, Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Victor Pasmore, and American-born John Ernest. Since the early 1950s, these artists had together developed theories and practices that responded to the material and aesthetic potential of geometrical systems. A common interest in the environmental consequences and architectural implications of their work further bound the informally constituted group. As reputations grew and networks expanded, the “British Constructivists” achieved international recognition: Hill, the Martins, and Pasmore participated in the *Konkrete Kunst* exhibition in Zürich in 1960; Ernest, Hill, and Mary Martin participated in *Experiment in Constructie* in Amsterdam in 1962. *British Constructivist Art* was the group’s first co-ordinated foray into the United States. The artists each lent between four and six works: Hill, Mary Martin, Pasmore, and Ernest lent relief constructions; Gilbert lent sculptural constructions; and Kenneth Martin lent sculptural constructions and mobiles. The works were “small to medium” in size, and “made of a variety of woods, metals and/or plastics assembled in combinations” (fig. 1 and fig. 2).¹



Figure 1

Installation view, *British Constructivist Art*, American Federation of Arts, New York, April–May 1962, showing works by, left to right, John Ernest and Stephen Gilbert. Digital image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 2

Installation view, *British Constructivist Art*, American Federation of Arts, New York, April–May 1962, showing works by, left to right, Anthony Hill and Stephen Gilbert. Digital image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

British Constructivist Art was organized by the Exhibitions Committee of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, at the invitation of the American Federation of the Arts (AFA), New York, where the exhibition travelled from April to May 1962. The ICA had been founded in 1947 to, in part, “promote and define new trends in the arts”. It had represented American culture in London and acted as “a centre for the flow of cultural information” between the United States and Europe.² Within this context, the *British Constructivist Art* exhibition was organized to “help make more widely known a group of artists whose talent and invention has already been recognized in Europe”. The AFA was founded in 1907 “to cultivate the appreciation and foster the production of Art in America”.³

The critic and curator Lawrence Alloway was responsible for co-ordinating *British Constructivist Art*. An important figure at the ICA and a prominent member of the Independent Group, whose activities centred on and around the ICA, Alloway was also an enthusiastic champion of postwar British Constructivism. In the exhibition catalogue he defined Constructivism as “the act of *assembling*”; as “the compilation of separate elements which, as they are made to cohere, do not lose their individual clarity”; as “abolishing” the “continuous surfaces” presented by painting and “solid sculpture” in favour of “open, visible structures”.⁴

Alloway stressed the “environmental” character of the work produced by the British artists, but was keen to distinguish its “domestic” scale from the monumental scale anticipated by Russian Constructivism. The environmental claims of the British work were said to be apparent on a more intimate, human scale: “The light in the room in which a shiny-surfaced construction is placed, and the movement of the spectator, in relation to the light source and the art object, continually modifies the appearance of the work.” Alloway stressed the formal purity of the constructions over the social and political aspects associated with “the history and theory of Constructivism”, whilst also foregrounding the contingency of the work and the playful responsiveness of its reflective and transparent materiality. Such factors, it was here claimed, phenomenologically offset the “discipline”, “method”, and “precision”—the depersonalized formality—of the constructions: “Thus the construction becomes, in the experience of the

spectator, a compound of the systematic and the unpredictable, of the formal and the unexpected.”

Alloway’s text for the *British Constructivist Art* catalogue can be read as an attempt to discuss the exhibition in terms consistent with those of the local (North American) culture. This necessarily involved a certain amount of de-theorizing of the work shown, so as to stress its visual interest, its material vitality, and its environmental sensitivity. In spite of his efforts—or perhaps, in part, because of them—the exhibition was politely, but rather indifferently, received in the press: a notice in the *New York Sunday Times* remarked upon “highly competent constructions”;⁵ another, in *Art News*, remarked upon “a pleasant, tidy exhibition”.⁶ The correspondent for the *Newark News* found more to marvel at, reporting on “an art as one might inspect in some cosmic terminal while changing missiles on route to Mars or Neptune.”⁷ However, such wondering was the exception, with commentators generally offering no more than faint praise for the exhibition. Indeed, such implicit damning was, on occasion, supplemented by a more explicit critique: “As pleasant as some of these constructions are”, *Art News* went on, “in their use of modern materials, in their craftsmanship, they are somehow non-vital.” It might be speculated that the quality of the works exhibited (as will be discussed shortly) in these particular exhibition conditions (as will be discussed later) could not transmit ideas sufficiently. The works needed theory, or at least something of the theoretical context that had informed their “method” of production (fig. 3).



Figure 3

Installation view, *British Constructivist Art*, American Federation of Arts, New York, April–May 1962, showing works by, left to right, Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin, and Anthony Hill. Digital image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The perception of the work as being “non-vital” comes, in part at least, from the constructions being handmade by the artists themselves. As they developed a constructive idiom, the artists had maintained a role as the primary makers of their work. Hill had experimented with ideas and practices of mass production in the 1950s, and the Martins both produced “multiple” works in the 1960s, but the artists predominantly fabricated the work themselves. The resulting combination of depersonalized geometries and (to an extent) rudimentarily skilled fabrication did not impress the reviewers: Brian O’Doherty (writing in the *New York Times*) reported on “weary” work of “a somewhat innocent vigor”.⁸ What O’Doherty referred to as the “very British”, “very

proper” restraint of the work—the modesty of its materials, scale, and facture—lends the constructions an experimental and provisional quality. Indeed, one might regard the works as prototype forms towards architecturally scaled projects. Such a reading is not entirely inappropriate as the artists all declared an interest in working in architectural contexts and some realized notable architectural works, but it also implies that the work is somewhat unresolved. In this sense, there is a necessity to acknowledge the theoretical concerns as well as the material fact of the work.

In another respect, remarks such as those made in *Art News* and the *New York Times* might be understood in relation to the anti-European position taken in America by a number of established and emergent figures around this time. Art history tends to rehearse this position with reference to the American painter Frank Stella’s characterization of “relational” European abstract art as “dreary” and “fussy”.⁹ For Stella, the “non-relational” abstract work being produced in America in the late 1950s and 1960s was more vital than anything being produced in Europe. Alloway himself later summarized the relational as applying to works that “are subdivided and balanced with a hierarchy of forms, large-medium-small”; non-relational “refers to un-modulated monochromes, completely symmetrical layouts, or unaccented grids”.¹⁰ He noted though that relationships persist in both categories, “even when the relations are those of continuity and repetition rather than of contrast and interplay”. Stella had painting in mind in his remarks, but others around him like Donald Judd used similar terms in relation to sculpture. For Stella and Judd, European work fussed and fiddled within its space or frame, whereas American art was direct, assertive, and expansive.

The relatively modest spatial interventions made by the British Constructivists were, it would seem, undifferentiated from the broader (house-painter’s!) brush cast over European abstract art. Although the British artists were, indeed, constructing internal relationships *à la* “relational” art, they were also—as Alloway was so keen to stress—extending the works’ particular space into that of the immediate environment both physically in terms of projected elements and perceptually through the use of reflective and transparent materials. Such extension opened the work up to levels of contingency that move beyond the caricature of works of European abstract art as being preciously configured. The constructions physically occupied and extended into space, and the construction processes typically involved formal systems of indeterminate growth that were similarly open and expansive.

The few installation photographs that survive of the exhibition show wall-mounted reliefs suspended on wires (see Figs. 1, 2, 3). The artists had intended the wall to read as the final level of the relief and as an integral part of the work. Works were therefore designed to be hung flush to the wall. The slight angle between relief and wall created by the suspension wires compromises this effect, as do the visible wires themselves. The potential of the work was not best represented in the installation, so its implications were not fully apparent to the exhibition’s audience and respondents. The finer points of this are somewhat by-the-by: the more significant point is that the work of the British Constructivists did not register within the American cultural posturing of the time.

Alloway himself developed terms that sought to overcome any sense of continental difference. He distinguished a “platonic phase” of interwar abstract art from an “existential phase” of postwar abstract art.¹¹ In the interwar period, geometry was regarded as “a mysterious symbolising agent”; as “a code by means of which absolute values could be signified”. In the postwar period, geometry had been “humanised” and was regarded as being of “a specifically human order”. With reference to the British Constructivists, Alloway had, as early as 1954, noted

a postwar emphasis on the “concrete”, material fact of the work in a physical environment.¹² Alloway’s model was developed in response to British Constructivism, but it accommodates (and anticipates) a range of postwar practices, including — latterly — American Minimalism. Again though, such modelling is not apparent in the reception of *British Constructivist Art*. O’Doherty (mistakenly) interpreted the exhibition in relation to interwar Constructivism instead of anything “existential”. Here, Kenneth Martin is described as “a good Pevsner-influenced constructor of spiral shapes around a vertical axis”.¹³ And, the absence of work made by Ben Nicholson in the 1930s (and beyond) rendered the exhibition as something like “Hamlet without the Prince.” What O’Doherty was apparently unaware of is the distinct ground occupied by these artists in Britain; the ground that they had negotiated in Britain over the previous ten years. When the works returned to Britain (after some delay) in 1963, they almost instantly formed the core of another exhibition, *Construction England*, which was organized by the Arts Council and toured England and Wales that same year. For this exhibition, the “*British Constructivist Art Six*” were joined by eight others (several of whom had been taught by one or more of the “Six”). In his introduction to the catalogue for this exhibition, Alan Bowness took the opportunity to (indirectly) respond to some of the criticisms levelled at *British Constructivist Art* in the United States. He indicated, for instance, that Ben Nicholson’s work was not included as “his reliefs are patently the work of a painter, and do not seem to accord with the spirit of this exhibition.”¹⁴ More significantly though, Bowness remarked on “considerable progress” in the previous decade “in that kind of modern art most aware of new tendencies in scientific and mathematical thought”. He went on, “But for a variety of mostly very obvious reasons, this has also been the least fashionable kind of modern art, with much of the best work done away from the centres of New York and Paris.” Out of step with the work celebrated in the “centres”, Alloway also remarked that the British Constructivists worked “in opposition to public and official taste” in Britain (where “the pressures of lingering Romanticism” prevailed).¹⁵ The artists thus occupied a peculiarly isolated position at home and abroad; an isolation that was unfortunate given the environmental and internationalist ambitions of the work they produced. Mary Martin wrote of working in the 1950s, “surrounded by Romanticism, English provincialism, Paris School abstract art and the first waves of Tachism and Action Painting. Without some detachment one could not have survived.”¹⁶ Reviewing the period from the vantage point of 1969, Martin indicated that the situation had not changed (“only some of the names”). With “detachment” being thus regarded as a strategic necessity, it is unsurprising that the patient project being pursued by Martin and those around her (committed, as it was, to rapidly fading principles drawn from the European modern movement) failed to significantly register in the United States, where a more urgent cultural discourse was being asserted.

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About the author

Sam Gathercole is a senior lecturer in Contextual and Theoretical Studies in the Design School at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. He has published widely on post-war British constructivist art. Recent work includes “The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy” (*British Art Studies*, Issue 18, 2020) and “The Geometry of Syntactics, Semantics and Pragmatics: Anthony Hill’s Concrete Paintings” (Tate Papers, No.31, 2019).

Footnotes

1. Anon., *British Constructivist Art* “Press Release”, in American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 50, Exhibition 61–21 (thereafter AFA).
2. ICA statement signed by Herbert Read and Roland Penrose (but likely written by Lawrence Alloway), in *British Constructivist Art*, exh. cat. (Tonbridge: Whitefriars Press, 1961), unpaginated.
3. AFA statement in *British Constructivist Art*.
4. Lawrence Alloway, “Introduction”, in *British Constructivist Art*, unpaginated.
5. Anon., “This Week Around the Galleries”, *New York Sunday Times*, 20 May 1962 (clipping in AFA records, see note 1).
6. “L.C.” in undated 1962 issue of *Art News* (clipping in AFA records).
7. Michael Lenson, “The Realm of Art”, *Newark News*, 15 Sept. 1962 (clipping in AFA records).
8. Brian O’Doherty, “British Constructivists Hold an Exhibition”, *New York Times*, 12 May 1962 (clipping in AFA records).
9. See Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd”(1966), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 148–64.
10. Lawrence Alloway, “Systemic Painting” (1966), in *Minimal Art*, ed. Battcock, 45.
11. Lawrence Alloway, “Lawrence Alloway on Max Bill”, in *Max Bill*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1974), 11–18.
12. Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954).
13. O’Doherty, “British Constructivists Hold an Exhibition”.
14. Alan Bowness, “Introduction”, in *Construction England*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council, 1963), unpaginated.
15. Lawrence Alloway, “Introduction”, in *British Constructivist Art*.^[fn]Lawrence Alloway, “Introduction”, in *British Constructivist Art*.
16. Mary Martin, “Notes on Biederman”, *Studio International* 178, no. 914 (Sept. 1969): 60.

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