

## constructivist forum

After the criticism someone kindly suggested that as Martin was the only tutor interested in abstract art, I should ask his opinion. But when I did he talked not about abstract art but about the spirals and figure-of-eight compositions in the work of Degas. In fact he had already been developing these topological forms and ideas in his linkage and screw mobiles. Much later he drew my attention to similar concerns in the notebooks of Paul Klee and the endless surface constructions of Max Bill. He also referred to the writings of Kingdom Clifford. Although I was interested in sculpture, these early encounters decided me to join the painting school.

Although he was a very imaginative person Martin laid great emphasis on practicality. He was always urging his students to be practical and encouraged an empirical approach to making constructions. One learnt to test things by trial and error. Realism is at the core of his thought and work. As a realist he disliked sentimentality which he regarded as false feeling. He loathed a cosmetic approach to art or human conduct. Even during the mid-Fifties the art school was still redolent with that boudoir atmosphere evoked by the autobiographical writings of Denton Welch who studied there in the Thirties. Martin later described the school as 'aspiring to a schoolboy's wet dream'. Whatever it was, it remained anathema to him.

Martin used to arrange a showcase of books in the corridor to illustrate his studio talks. Figurative and non-figurative works would be juxtaposed. One learnt that the history of constructed art was not confined to any one period or style. An outmoded examination system conspired to reinforce the status quo and restrict academic freedom. Students knew that they would fail their examinations if they departed from making plaster dummies or figurative painting in shades of brown earth pigment. Perhaps for that reason Martin's teaching at Goldsmiths tended to be within the context of the life-class but he also conducted formal classes in composition which were a vehicle for learning about constructed art. As books became available on abstract art the library became more and more important as a source of information. Martin's own published writings became an important adjunct to his

## constructivist forum

actual lessons. As well as the articles on his and Mary Martin's work in Lawrence Alloway's 'Nine Abstract Artists' there was the magazine 'Structure' edited by Joost Baljeu with articles by Baljeu, Mary Martin, Kenneth Martin, Anthony Hill, John Ernest and others.

Many years later Martin confided to me that books that he ordered for the library were vetted by the Principal and he jokingly likened teaching abstract art in Goldsmiths to trying to teach communism in a fascist state. For a growing number of students however abstract art became of interest precisely because it was proscribed.

During one of his composition classes Martin required us to draw the relationships that occurred when matchsticks were dropped onto a surface and cited chance methods of Arp and Duchamp. These random configurations of matchsticks now seem to have been a preview of the 'Chance and Order' paintings which were to occur some fifteen years later. For the most part such ideas fell on stony ground. The young fogies amongst us dismissed them as tedious exercises that might help life-drawing. The more trendy were impatient to do sensational and original things like action painting and failed to see the irony of their position.

He also gave a practical course on the use of the moving format and brought in J.W.Power's book: 'Elements de la Construction Picturale' (1932). The opinion among many students was that cubism was a moribund style and mathematics had nothing to do with art. I failed to grasp the implications of what Martin was saying about cubism until much later. I remember being surprised when he made a comparison between analytical cubist methods and technical drawing for example. It was unusual at that time for fine-artists to make use of engineering drawing techniques to construct a sculpture as he was doing for his screw mobiles. He recommended, as a text-book, W.Abbott's 'Practical Geometry and Engineering Graphics' which was already in its fifth edition.

# constructivist forum

Martin could draw superbly and I confess that in my eyes this gave him immense credibility and made it easier to consider seriously his more controversial ideas. His ability to teach drawing may have been a factor in his survival in a somewhat conservative and parochial school.

There was a philistinism, if not hostility, throughout Goldsmiths towards his teaching. Martin once told me, with great merriment, how the College ordered that an exhibition of abstract panels, done by Martins students, be removed from the staff dining room but when it was found that the Times Educational Supplement carried a front page photograph of these works they were reinstated.

As a first year student I found the most pernicious thing about most art school teaching was the value placed on taste, and mystical jargon. One was told that paintings 'worked' or did not 'work' or something had 'presence' etc. Taste as a basis for art and art teaching was something Martin inveighed against. He encouraged his students to seek or invent principles which could be subjected to scrutiny and experiment. His strict involvement with chance methods and predetermined systems allowed him to make discoveries. It also presented an alternative to arrangements based purely on taste which like Picasso he regarded as the enemy of creativity.

Martin's impromptu lectures in the life-room were lively events because he was able to give information and make us laugh. It took a while for his ideas to sink in but meanwhile his humour was very dry and he had a comedians sense of timing. To see him suddenly notice the ridiculous in something and laugh with wholehearted spontaneity is something I shall always remember. His teaching was an antidote to the half-baked aesthetic so solemnly purveyed elsewhere.

Martin was skeptical about the Basic Design theories that became popular in the Sixties but he involved himself in the reform of art school teaching. He faced up to the need for some form of academic programme but he envisaged a developing academic and was critical of the fragmented content of most Basic Design courses which threatened to remain as static as the traditional courses they had begun to replace.

# constructivist forum

In the Spring of 1960 Mary Martin gave a three or four day course at Goldsmiths. Her style of teaching was arch and very low key. By that time Colin Jones and I were both seriously interested in concrete art and we were curious to hear her version. Kenneth Martin frequently contributed to the teaching but I seem to remember Mary being mostly in charge. She illustrated her morning talks with drawings on a black-board. During the afternoons we were free to develop the ideas she had presented. I still have the drawings I made. On Mary Martins course we progressed from chaotic free doodles to controlled drawings and the conscious choice of formal limitations. Mary Martin presented unfamiliar aspects of drawing. For example she applied the simplest possible rhythm to a minimal grid of four squares and produced the two unique possible configurations. It now seems obvious but at the time it had not occurred to me that there could be a simplest possible rhythm or grid. The search for fundamental principles of form was a very important aspect of their work. According to Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin was working on a theory of minimal drawing shortly before her death.

The ideas of Klee were freely acknowledged by the Martins. Kenneth Martin told me that the pendulum permutation that they had used in certain works was derived from Klee. Since I found no evidence of Klee having used it, I asked Martin to show me where it occurred. He was seldom mistaken about his facts but we both searched in vain. He telephoned the next day to tell me that he had spent hours searching and seemed genuinely puzzled at not finding the original source. I seem to recall that his assistant, Hilary Lane, was a witness to this search.

Martin often talked of 'construction through movement'. He drew my attention to a quotation from Klee printed on the inside cover of 'Paul Klee : The Thinking Eye' edited by Jurg Spiller (1960) :

"Ingres is said to have created an artistic order out of rest; I should like to create an order from feeling and, going still further, from motion."

# constructivist forum

At Barry Summer School, over a period of several years, Martin developed a course on constructed art which I first attended as a student and later as his assistant. The programme always began with a set exercise which involved joining no more than six identical units. I have never discovered a more concise introduction to the practical nature of constructed art. Although he was continually revising and reappraising the way things were done, identical units remained an integral part of the scheme. For some students it offered a natural introduction into mobile and transformable works.

I was used to Martin explaining things in terms of painting so it was a revelation to hear him talk in the context of the workshop. He was quite knowledgeable about machine tools and derived a certain satisfaction from working the lathe.

In contrast to Goldsmiths he enjoyed the social life at Barry for which he had tremendous stamina. He often engaged in public and private discussions during the evening with the other artists. Sometimes these discussions went on into the early hours. At the same time he kept aloof from the campus and stayed at a small modern hotel on the sea front. Barry Summer School was a kind of annual working holiday for him.

During the rapid expansion of the art schools in the Sixties the curriculum became more liberalised and various forms of art were tolerated under the new examination system. I gave up my full-time teaching at Leeds College of Art and joined Martin on the part-time staff at Goldsmiths in 1966. He eventually withdrew from teaching a couple of years later. We remained friends until his death in November 1984.

The richness and depth of his ideas made it possible for even his most fervent disciples to learn from him without necessarily becoming fixated on his style. He was not interested, like so many teachers, in the authoritarian imposition of his own taste upon those who studied under him. On the other hand he very wisely advised one not to be afraid of being derivative. Imitation, however, was not built into his work or his teaching. He invented his own system and encouraged others to invent theirs.