

Concrete Art, some pros, some cons

Peter Lowe

If Picasso had not existed, is it possible that Kandinsky would then have been the main inspiration and source of 20th century art? He concerns us here, not because he was a Constructivist - he clearly was not - but because of his endeavour to lay the foundations of a grammar of colour and form - using music as a model - from where he could defend and justify the new abstract art which he had pioneered, and which - had things turned-out differently - might have had to carry the whole future of Modern Art.

Anyone who argues for or against Concrete Art risks committing a fallacy of composition because what may be true of Concrete Art as a whole may not be true of individual works. Conversely, what is true of individual works may not necessarily be true of the whole of Concrete Art. On the other hand, thought is impossible without some form of generalisation and the idea of abstract art or Concrete Art would be literally unthinkable.

Painting and sculpture have been practised in various forms for thousands of years and it is easy to forget that 'Fine Art' is a comparatively recent idea. Although the agenda for Concrete Art was largely initiated during the early twentieth century, it continues to evolve. Concrete Art is a developing aesthetic which responds in a positive way to new ideas and new technology and is characterised by its clarity and economy of means. It has been shaped by principles and ideas rather than stylistic appearances. The writings and ideas of scientists, philosophers and artists have made an impact upon Concrete Art but unlike 'Impressionism', 'Cubism' and 'Post-modernism'; the term 'Concrete Art' was invented by artists. Furthermore, the theoretical texts of some of the main protagonists of Concrete art have been at least as influential as the objects they produced. Kasimir Malevich, Theo van Doesburg, Max Bill and others made claims and predictions concerning logic and technology in relation to future art. Their visions of the future are becoming reality within the context of the present information technology revolution which a synthesis of electronics and logic has ultimately brought about.

The journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* of

February 1921 provides evidence to suggest that the Cubist Juan Gris was one of the first artists to publish a clear distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete'. Gris wrote: "I work with the elements of the intellect and the imagination. I try to make concrete that which is abstract." ¹

Kasimir Malevich and Liubov Popova also used the term 'concrete' in the context of their work. Malevich wrote:² *But in reality 'non-objective arts cannot be abstract, as they are the most concrete of all, both by their very nature and in their expression of a particular Welt-empfang. - On the contrary every object is abstract and demands concrete artistic definition in a work of art.'*

Liubov Popova wrote in her unpublished papers dated 1921³: *Our work on each of the elements (line, plane, volume, space, textural colour, material, etc) goes beyond the bounds of mere abstract exercise in elements. The results of this research compels us to set ourselves a specific aim: to concretize the element, i.e. to reduce it to a defined and concrete form so that the artist can use it freely and assuredly for his general constructive objectives.*

By 1930 the term 'abstract' had ceased to describe the methods and work of many who showed in exhibitions of *Abstraction Création*. Although this group exhibited under the banner of *Abstraction Création* until 1936, some members were aware that 'abstraction' misrepresented their position. Hans Arp wrote:

"Man calls abstract that which is concrete. I understand that one calls a cubist picture abstract because the parts have been taken from the the object that served as a model for this

Tobey or Georges Mathieu was also likely to have raised questions at the time. Bill anticipates these in his introduction in which he describes Mathieu's painting as representing 'the extreme border of expressive possibilities of Concrete Art'. He is somewhat less accommodating regarding Jackson Pollock and the 'flood' of informal painting seen at the Kassel Documenta exhibition and the 'supposed' liberation of painting by Tachism. These developments, he recalls, were celebrated by many as a 'revitalisation' of art after the supposed death of Concrete Art which, forty years on, is currently approaching its centenary.

According to Max Bill the 1960 exhibition 'Konkrete Kunst' took stock of fifty years of development of Concrete Art away from these 'celebrations'. There have since been exhibitions by clever and talented people that purport to be 'new' art but these are often reaffirmations of Dada and Surrealism. It is a supreme Dadaist irony that universities now confer academic qualifications in such ersatz Dada 'disciplines'. More recent celebrations of 'new art' are enacted against a background of Post Modernism. This term originally described eclectic mixtures of architectural styles but has since enlarged its scope to encompass fine art and art criticism. Some of the more blatant excesses of acclaimed Post Modernist writers were exposed by Sokal and Bricmont⁸ and it is possible to access an Internet site where Andrew Bulhak's 'Dada Engine' proliferates meaningless Post Modernist texts at the click of a mouse.⁹

However to dismiss eclecticism, Surrealism or Post Modernism would be to indulge in the fallacy mentioned in the first paragraph of this essay. My main conclusion is simply that the extravagant

eclecticism characteristic of Surrealism and Post Modernism is irreconcilable with the fundamental aesthetic of Concrete Art which aspires to clarity and economy of means. Although Surrealism and eclecticism are enduring expressions of humanity, so too are the values expressed in many works of Concrete Art.

June 1999

references:

1. Kahnweiler. D., Juan Gris, His Life and Work. Lund Humphries 1947
2. Anderson, T. Ed. K.S. Malevich. Essays on Art 1915-1933. Borgens Forlag 1968
3. Rakatin, V. From Her Notes and Manuscripts. Liubov Popova. Women-Artists of the Russian Avant Garde. Galerie Gmurzynska 1979.
4. Fabre, Gladys C. Abstraction Création 1931-1936. Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster.
5. Malevich. K. The Non Objective World. Paul Theobald 1959
6. Max Bill, Konkrete Kunst. exhibition catalogue statement. Helmhaus Zürich 8 June- 14 August 1960.
7. van Straaten E., van Moorsel W. Leering J. Theo van Doesburg. Staatsuitgeverij, The Hague 1983
8. Sokal, A., & Bricmont, J. Intellectual Impostures 1998. Profile Books.
9. www.csse.monash.edu.au/community/post-modern.html

picture. But I find that a picture or a sculpture, which has not had an object for a model, are just as concrete and sensual as a leaf or a stone."

According to the historian Gladys Farbre⁴ 'this enlarged concept of Art Concrete allowed non figurative surrealists and partisans of geometric art to regroup.' This might explain why assemblages and informal geometric paintings are described as 'concrete' when they conform to none of the defining rationalist characteristics that were ascribed to Concrete Art by van Doesburg and Max Bill for example.

With remarkable prescience, Malevich wrote: *It is the logical spirit that will obtain the greatest result, and I understand by the logical spirit, in art, he who has the possibility of ordering his sensibility. The artist who wishes to develop his art beyond the potentialities of conventional painting is forced to resort to theory and logic and thereby to place the creative activity of the subconscious under the control of the conscious mind.*⁵

Mindful of the misleading connotations that had enveloped the term 'abstract art', van Doesburg proposed the term 'Concrete Art' and in 1930 he edited and published 'Art Concret'. The cover of the first and only issue proclaims a manifesto of Concrete Art bearing the names of Carlsund, Doesburg, Helion, Tatunjian and Wantz. If there is such a thing as the 'logical spirit' envisaged by Malevich, then van Doesburg's late paintings come close to it. By this time however Malevich himself had already abandoned (or been coerced into abandoning) any expression of such ideas. Van Doesburg's comments published in Art Concret include the following:

"We speak of concrete and not abstract painting, because we have finished with the period of research and speculative experience. In their search for purity artists were obliged to abstract from natural forms and to replace them with artist forms...."
"Painting is a means through which thought is expressed in a visual manner; every painting is a colour thought. . . we use mathematical data (whether Euclidian or not) and science, that is to say, intellectual means."

Drawing the line between what is Concrete Art and what is not still presents a dilemma, especially if we try to accommodate Arp's definition and that of van Doesburg. For van Doesburg this was a crucial issue. Concrete Art opened up a way of escape from the limits imposed by abstraction. The great achievement of Concrete Art was the introduction of syntactic content. This was the beginning of the new experimental phase predicted by Malevich and it marked a watershed between rationalist and anti-rationalist art.

Fortunately, the 'logical spirit' of Concrete Art was sustained after the untimely death of van Doesburg in 1931. In 1936 Bill wrote: *The term Concrete Art refers to those works that have developed through their own innate means and laws - in other words, works that bear no relation to external phenomena, and are not the result of any kind of abstraction.... Concrete art is autonomous. It has an independent existence. It sets out to be the expression of the human spirit and is designed to satisfy the human spirit. It must be clear and unambiguous and aim at perfection.*

In 1938 Max Bill's article on Concrete Art appeared in Werk no 8. In 1944 he curated the exhibition

'Konkrete Kunst' at the Kunsthalle in Basel. His essay 'Die Mathematische Denkweise in der Kunst unserer Zeit' (1949) is probably the most influential post war contributions to the debate concerning the theory and practice of Concrete Art. It has since been reprinted in many languages and countries. Through it, Bill established and re-established links with groups and individuals world wide. Altogether, one hundred and fourteen artists took part in the exhibition: 'Konkrete Kunst' which he organised at the Helmhaus, Zürich in 1960.⁶

We know from his letter to Anthony Kok⁷ that van Doesburg was sharply critical of Arp's working methods which he regarded as arbitrary and tasteful. For whatever reason, it seems that neither van Doesburg's nor Bill's definitions of Konkrete Kunst were strictly applied to the selection of exhibits. It could be argued that this would have resulted in a less comprehensive survey and one which did not reflect the complex and contentious nature of concrete art.

The catalogue introduction to 'Konkrete Kunst' contains Bill's own definition of the terms: 'gegenstandlos' (non-objective), 'abstrakt', 'abstraktion', 'konkret' and 'konkretion'. Apart from van Doesburg, the exhibition included the work of two of the five cosignees of the manifesto of Art Concret: Otto Gustav Carlsund and Jean Helion. Leon Tatunjian and Wantz are absent.

In the light of Max Bill's clear definitions, the inclusion of surrealists like Arp may seem anomalous although Arp's work fits in with Arp's own revised definition of Concrete Art which we have already cited. The inclusion of Mark