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John Carter – British Concrete Art? Some Thoughts

Sometimes in the discussion about Concrete Art the issue of national differences arises, particularly when talking about the 'Zurich Concrete' group or the Parisian 'Section d´Or'. Therefore, it seemed natural to wonder whether there was a specifically British attitude to the realisation of Concrete Art and if there was, whether it was possible to characterise the artist John Carter as an exponent of it in this way; but I fear that it may not be possible to answer this question. The movement which we now call 'Concrete Art' ultimately emerged from a variety of sources and was the result of particular artistic concerns; a quick look shows that its beginnings appeared in several different countries more or less simultaneously. 'Concrete Art' did not begin by being a single definitive school, rather, it slowly crystallised from various trends, ideas and theories. It never reaches a final unambiguous definition however, and there have been no categorical rules for defining the legitimacy of works themselves.

At the end of the nineteenth century there was a conscious drive among artists to break away from academic traditions and to create 'modern' works: many of these artists united to form movements to promote their demands for artistic renewal. Naturally, these new developments were to appear first in the metropolitan centres. Subsequent radical political changes, combined with the migration of many artists at that time, led both to increased exchanges between them and to the internationalisation of these movements. The ideal of establishing a social purpose for art gave rise to the need for the integration of the various separate artistic disciplines into the form of a Gesamtkunstwerk. Humanistic social concerns had already played an important role in the Arts and Crafts Movement, in Jugendstil and in the Vienna Secession; but they later became a major concern of the de Stijl group, Suprematism and of the Bauhaus. These same ideas continued to have an influence on artistic thought within the 'Concrete' movement up to the present time.

Taking as an example: 1935, the title of a white wooden relief by Ben Nicholson (Tate, London) – we find that the whiteness of its appearance helps to make us aware of the work's reality as an object. With the aid of its clear, well defined lines, the white monochrome surface takes hold of our attention. We can see that the interplay between the surface areas and recesses are the result of the harmony of its composition. This relief can be considered also as presenting us with an aesthetic model for potential social harmony, and it is this aspect which takes us into the framework of the international movement. Lászlá Moholy-Nagy, best-known for his *Light-Space Modulator* developed between 1922 and 1930, lived in London from 1935 to 1937, before taking up the directorship of the New Bauhaus in Chicago. He and Naum Gabo, who lived in London in 1935 (and then in Cornwall until 1946), were both pioneers of the Modern Movement. In England, John Cecil Stephenson, a neighbour of Moholy-Nagy in Hampstead, was, alongside Nicholson, another prominent modernist. Stephenson's Painting 1937 (egg tempera on canvas), also in the Tate, with its overlaid linear forms, has an architectonic grace. These artists placed a clear emphasis on the interconnection of art, architecture and design, which the international abstract movement and the Bauhaus were endeavouring to achieve. As many areas of life as possible were to be determined by these new principles of design, and it was vitally important that they should be made accessible to larger sections of the population, both in the necessities of everyday use but also for the purposes of aesthetic education.

In this context it is also possible to place John Carter in this larger tradition. We can do this in the clearest way by referring to his Darmstadt Double Arch of 1993, which is both architecture and sculpture – in equal measure. Two parallelograms of the same size, each with identical square openings, a rejoined together, but seem to tilt in different directions. Both parts of the work function as if they were frames placed in a landscape. Like the windows of a Mies van der Rohe modern villa, they too look out on to a vista which can be seen as a framed 'landscape painting'. But in spite of the fact that these openings having a clear connection with the world of Concrete or geometric art, they also bring to mind Romanticism's Sehnsuchtsmotiv (yearning motif), which Caspar David Friedrich was to realise in his painting Woman at a Window of 1822.

But let us return to the 'concrete' aspect of this work, which, as we have already seen, is composed of two parallelograms: what is significant is the fact that both halves of the work are identical – and more than this – that they are divided into equal positive and negative areas. However, the tilt which introduces an angle to each side of the work causes the surfaces and volumes of each half to appear unequal in size.

The openings, too, fail to convince us that they are equivalent to the areas of the solid parts of the sculpture – even though each element has been calculated to be exactly so. In contrast, 'stability' and 'instability' in the work are qualities which are instantly recognisable; they have an immediacy which attracts our attention, engaging us on an emotional level which goes far beyond any considerations of mathematical principles or physical facts.

In this respect Carter's work has affinities with some of the artis connected with the French tradition, such as Victor Vasarely, Günter Fruhtrunk, Marcelle Cahn or Charles Bézie. These artists came to modify the strict geometry of Theo van Doesburg or Richard Paul Lohse by positioning individual accents within the painting which act as a counterbalance to its geometric forms. In this way pictorial signs can appear which can take on meanings which go beyond any scientifically determined, mathematical or structural function. If we take the democratic principle, important in any theoretical discussion, and consider that Lohse in his practice insists on the equality of all pictorial elements within a framework of serial ordering, then surely Carter's *Double Arch*, with its equality of masses and spaces, conforms to this theoretical rule, despite – or even because of – the apparent visual disparity of its forms. Before examining more of the compositional characteristics of Carter's oeuvre, we need to talk about the essential nature of Concrete Art. Firstly it is important to understand that unlike Impressionism or Expressionism, for example, the term Concrete itself is not the name of a style. It is rather a set of criteria for the composition of a work and in this way is a more fundamental concept. In this context, it is worth looking at the work of Cezanne, who was not concerned with realistic imitation, but rather the abstraction of his perceptions. Max Imdahl, in considering Cezanne's late watercolours, demonstrated just how difficult it is to differentiate between abstract ideas and perceptual reality.[1] Can the marks that form Cezanne's compositions be traced back to the real world or do they belong to a new system of pictorial reality (in which case should we no longer talk of abstraction)? No unequivocal answer to this is likely to be found, and yet it is only in relation to a new system of pictorial reality that discussion of Cezanne's work as a fore-runner of Concrete Art seems to make sense. In its manifestos Concrete Art renounces narrative and representation and thus also every form of abstraction from an object. Carter's *Double Arch* demonstrates – in the ambiguity between its mathematical, geometric structure, its architectural form as an arch, and in its openness to a potentially symbolic interpretation – how problematic and creatively constraining such a requirement can be.

The term 'Concrete Art' was first used in 1930 in Paris. Theo van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, Otto Gustaf Carlsund and Leon Tutundjian, in their role as editors of the journal 'Art Concret', laid out the principles of the new movement, in which non-figurative modes of expression which employed geometric or amorphous forms were to be used. These were to be intellectual and universal, derived exclusively from the laws of colour and the process of construction. For these protagonists it was important to exclude individuality and to make the work refer only to itself. What mattered to them was therefore 'concrete' and not 'abstract' painting; a key statement from the publication 'Art Concret' emphasised: 'nothing is more concrete, more real, than a line, a colour, a surface.'

Max Bill, a member of the Concrete movement in Zurich, underlined this principle in the 1940s when he stated that: 'we give the name "Concrete" to those works of art which are developed through their own innate means, in accordance with their own compositional laws - they bear no relation to external phenomena or natural appearances - or their transformation, which is to say, are not the result of any kind of "abstraction".[2] He defined 'concrete' as present, visible and tangible and saw the artist's task as giving visual form to abstract ideas through purely artistic means, in this way introducing new objects into the material world. The aim was to develop objects for spiritual use (to refresh the human spirit) – the analogue of physical things made for material use. Here again, then, the idea of art's social role and task recurs, also an intention to contribute to the exercise and expansion of intellectual abilities. For Bill, who also worked with the Parisian group 'Abstraction-Creation' from 1932 to 1936, this did not only mean precise and disciplined intellectual productions but also the freedom of the creative imagination. This approach may have been influenced by the noticeably more open attitude of his French colleagues, but it is also an essential aspect of John Carter's work. Richard Paul Lohse, along with Max Bill also a member of the Zurich Concrete group, called for a typology of formal elements that excluded expressive tendencies. After 1960 he even rejected the use of the concept 'concrete' in relation to his work. In its place he substituted the term 'constructive' and thereby signalled his distance from other less rigorous versions of concrete art.

John Carter's way of working is fundamentally more analytical and systematic than it is intuitive. He develops his objects on the basis of mathematical or geometrical ideas. Expressive statements do not appeal to him. Despite this, he himself speaks of the poetry of visual appearance and describes the state of suspension we find ourselves in when we encounter the ambivalence between seeing and

knowing. This is something which happens, for example, when looking at the series of works which Carter produced in the 1970s. These works explore the bewildering transformations of a disc. Three Discs of 1974 (oil on board with metal) appears at first sight to be a set of circular forms, as its title suggests. In reality, the work consists of two ellipses turned away from one another at an angle of 45° and a circle. All three are lined up along a central lateral axis within a rectangular box. At first the eye only sees identical forms, but these forms change shape with every movement of the head and seem to start moving between themselves. The third disc, however, remains circular throughout. It distinguishes itself from the two ovals, not only by remaining visually static, but in contrast to the blackness of the others it appears to be a noticeably lighter grey. In reality, however, all three elements are black. The distinction between 'actual fact' and 'factual fact' propounded by Josef Albers proved to be a fruitful subject in this and other works which function in a similar way.

In the 1980s, too, Carter concentrated on the contradictions between perceived facts and objective facts when he explored various possibilities of the equivalence between surface areas and voids. Corner – Equal Areas and Spaces (1985, oil on wood) may serve as an example. The work consists of two divided rectangles; at the centre of each is an open space. Although our perception may suggest otherwise, the spaces framed in this way are equal to the frames themselves in terms of the areas and volumes of both halves. One half of the work is painted blue and the other half yellow. Were we to read the work in a conventional way, we would see a painted double frame, but where the enclosed 'pictures' should be, we see only two empty spaces. In fact, the negative spaces operate as constituent elements of the work in as strong a way as the positive elements. Beside the principle of equivalence, Carter employs here two further compositional strategies introduced in Concrete Art. He combines rotation and mirroring, using an autonomous module in each of the two halves of the work, similar to that seen in the work of Heijo Hangen or Paul Uwe Dreyer.

Things become noticeably more complicated when Carter overlays different structures, or interweaves them, as he does in a work from 1988, Untitled Theme: Coinciding Elements. Complex Version. Systems and principles of ordering are clearly felt to be present, but without any explanation of their basis they cannot be fully grasped. Works like these are reminiscent of Manfred Mohr, whose paintings are produced with the aid of computers and random number generators. Here the viewer is no longer able to recognise the system, but is aware that a small section of some greater whole is being presented. Carter's objects, too, often give the impression of being fragments and some have the appearance of complicated modules. We feel that if we were able to decode the system and know how to use it – we would know how to extend the work, if only in a lateral direction. We imagine these works to be part of a larger whole from which the artist has chosen a particular section to give visual form to his idea.

Here, once again, they contradict the principles set out by Richard Paul Lohse, according to which a Concrete work should be constructed by means of a hermetically selfcontained system. Since the emotional aspects of a work are suspect for him and he demanded that not only form but also the choice of colours should be deindividualised, his im-portance in Carter's frame of reference steadily decreases. The latter's 'fragments' by contrast, convey a strong sense of relationships of greater sophistication, and they therefore correspond to our more complex societal structures. They involve harmonies and internal orders within which even apparently dissonant elements are integrated. Apart from this, they also play with the relations between their three-dimensional and two-dimensional aspects – they are painting and sculpture. These works juggle confidently with the relationships between volumes, in-tervals and surrounding spaces, relationships which Johannes Itten had explored in his 'Würfelkomposition' of 1919. And when combined with Carter's sensitive way of using colour, it brings a very special radiance to his work. Carter mixes his paint from acrylic medium, pigments and – an entirely individual peculiarity - marble dust. He applies a coating of this mixture to the plywood surfaces of his work, then, once it is dry, he sands it smooth. In this way, the depth and brilliance of the colours are amplified, their texture and tonality are of gossamer lightness, seemingly alive with the turbulence of a cloudy sky. The precision and clarity with which Carter realises his ideas in form and colour enter an inviting and simultaneously challenging symbiosis with the poetry that resides in his objects. The viewer is invited to pause and reflect upon these intelligent and elegant products of creative enquiry and imagination.

All considered, then, is this typically British art? Can there be a national characteristic, if we view Concrete Art as an independent, mathematically founded intellectual investigation.

John Carter is English; he works in England and is one of a circle of protagonists committed to mathematically and scientifically orientated composition. In the history of Concrete Art, Carter

(b. 1942) belongs to a recent generation. The ideas and theories that form the basis of their practice have, since the first decade of the twentieth century, developed in an international context containing myriad variants, a context which itself would allow no universally applicable and unambiguous definition of the concept Concrete. At the time when Carter and his colleagues came to Concrete Art, its principles had been thought through many times, the ideological battles fought and the compositional possibilities arising largely realised. Concrete artists needed to find forms of expression that were new, that is to say, forms in which individuality played a greater role.

Easier means of communication, multiregional grants, travel and international exhibitions have led to exchanges among artists becoming the norm. For these reasons national characteristics can only be ascertained in the rarest of exceptions and within certain limits.

So, if John Carter is to be categorised, then it would be as a marvellous proponent of the universal language of forms, colours, structures and systems, whose richly variegated oeuvre, by dint of the concise structure and exceptional colour composition of his works, is suffused with an unmistakable character.

1 Cf. Max lmdahl, 'Die Rolle der Farbe in der neueren franzosischen Malerei. Abstraktion und Konkretion', pp. 195-225 in Wolfgang Iser (ed.), /mmanente Asthetik, Asthetische Reflexion, Munich, 1966, p. 211
2 Cited in Max Bill, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 20.10.-9.12.1990, p. 41

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