

MODERN ART MOVEMENTS AND ST IVES 1939–49

RACHEL ROSE SMITH

PH.D.

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a view of modern art in St Ives between 1939 and 1949 by focusing on two interlinked concerns: the movement of objects, people and ideas through communication and transport networks, and the modern art movements which were developed by artists working in the town during this period.

Drawing especially from studies of place, hybridity and mobility, Chapter 1 provides an account of two artists' migration to St Ives in 1939: Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth. It considers the foundational importance of movement to the narrative of modern art in St Ives and examines the factors which contributed to artists' decisions to relocate. Using this information, it probes presumptions surrounding St Ives as an artists' 'colony' and proposes it as a site of 'coastal modernism'.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the contribution by artists in St Ives to two developing art movements: Constructivism and Cubism. Both investigations show how artists participated in wide-reaching artistic networks within which ideas and objects were shared. Each chapter also particularly reveals the value of art movements for providing temporal scales through which artists could reflect upon and establish the connections of their work to the past, present and future. Chapter Two focuses on the Constructive project associated with the publication of *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937), revealing how modern art in St Ives inherited ideas and styles from earlier movements and continued to reflect upon the value of the 'Constructive spirit' as Europe changed. Chapter Three is an examination of Nicholson's connections to the Cubist movement and an analysis of the long-standing impact this had on his work and critical reception both before and after the Second World War.

To conclude this thesis, two narratives centred on 1964, the year often used to define the end of an artistic period in St Ives, suggest how the internationalism of artists and artist groups in St Ives changed during the period which followed 1949.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Excerpts from the conclusion of this thesis have previously appeared in the below published chapter.

Rachel Smith, 'Sculpting for an International Community: Exhibitions through the 1960s', in Curtis, P. and Stephens, C. (eds). *Barbara Hepworth. Sculpture for a Modern World*, exh. cat. (London, Tate Gallery, 2015): 90–97.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the contribution of artists living in St Ives, a harbour town in West Cornwall, to international artistic communities and modernist movements as they extended over time and crossed geographical boundaries. It considers the processes, meanings and effects of contact between artists in St Ives and their collaborators, and positions artworks within networks connecting key modernist precedents to shared contemporary concerns. Without disputing the significance of the place of St Ives, which often satisfied artists' practical, aesthetic, personal or political concerns, it deconstructs boundaries constructed by notions of art as belonging to or emerging from rigid concepts of geographical location and period. Positing an alternative to previous literature on 'St Ives art', it reimagines and reconstructs connections and conversations which reflect the ways artworks connect across time and place. In doing so, it establishes a mode for thinking about the role of St Ives within a chain of modernist movements, and the implications of St Ives's relationship with these movements for studies of its artistic community as a unified modernist group.

This introduction first presents existing scholarship on modern art in St Ives in texts and exhibitions, and my own experience co-curating an exhibition at Tate St Ives. Secondly, it outlines the theoretical and practical use of studies centred on concepts and experiences of place, hybridity and mobility and the role of network theory for my considerations of 'local' and 'international' artistic communities. Next, it reflects upon the art historical and curatorial tool of mapping artists and art movements upon geographical and temporal scales, before introducing my own approach to relationships across time and place. It then outlines my research methods and use of key terms, before describing the structure of this thesis and its limitations.

i. LITERATURE AND DISPLAYS

The existing literature on art and St Ives in the twentieth century is entwined with the history of its display, especially through its changing relationship with Tate. Until fairly recently, writings and displays have taken an inward-looking view, tracing the development of the town's artistic communities and privileging the idea that artists and artworks were intrinsically formed by the local area. The Tate Gallery's 1985 exhibition *St Ives 1939-1964: Twenty Five Years of Painting, Sculpture and Pottery* formed the institution's first substantial attempt to narrate this history.¹ This exhibition presented St Ives as an artists' colony with its own local history, which

¹ *St Ives 1939-1964: Twenty Five Years of Painting, Sculpture and Pottery*, Tate Gallery, London, 13 February–14 April 1985.

was emphasised in the exhibition catalogue by the inclusion of a ‘personal memoir’ by local resident and art critic David Lewis and a chronology of local events.

Just months before this exhibition opened came the publication of a portrait of the town, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun: St Ives Artists 1930-1975* (1984) by Tom Cross, which was accompanied by a three-part television series produced by Television South West.² Taking their title from a letter written by the artist John Wells, both the book and programme series privilege the view that St Ives was a landscape setting for artistic production and subject to be depicted. The introduction by Cross begins with a comment by a nineteenth-century visitor to the town: ‘Seldom have I enjoyed a sea view more than when descending the hill that overlooks the town of St Ives.’³ Together, these projects created a strong reading of the local place as the prime determinant of the artists’ works and as the central unifying force between their works. This thesis refutes this perspective on both accounts.

Following Millbank and Liverpool, Tate opened their third site in St Ives in 1993, and this reinforced the association of a range of artists with the local landscape. Tate St Ives has since become the institutional face of the town’s artistic heritage and the town has developed a public image strongly related to this aspect of its past. In this regard, the building’s location and architecture has had a profound effect. A white modernist building sited just beyond the beach and curved-fronted like a shell or lighthouse, Tate St Ives has become a cultural beacon representing the town and attracting visitors from afar (Fig. 1). Incorporating a sweeping view of the Atlantic and infused with natural light, the surrounding landscape enters the Gallery to be experienced alongside the work on display. Designed to be porous, the Gallery’s public spaces are open in different ways to the changing conditions of light and weather, to the coastal rhythm of tides or vessels, and to seasonal changes upon the beach, the town and its inhabitants. In *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (2007), Paul Williams defines ‘sited-ness’ as a ‘non-verbal’ or ‘particularly visible sense of spatial orchestration’ that distinguishes the museum’s means of historical narration.⁴ While the ‘sited-ness’ of Tate St Ives contributes a great deal to visitors’ experiences, its visual openness to the Atlantic coast also reflects the dominance of the landscape in earlier accounts. Today, as the centrality of local place to modern and contemporary art in St Ives is being challenged, the Gallery’s architecture has proven especially difficult to counteract.⁵

² The series was first shown on Channel 4 and each programme took a different subtitle: ‘St Ives’ (first broadcast on 7 April 1985), ‘The Years of Development’ (8 April 1985) and ‘The Middle Generation’ (9 April 1985).

³ A visitor to St Ives, c.1832, quoted in Cross, [1984] 1995: 9.

⁴ Williams, 2007: 77.

⁵ In 2009, artist Heimo Zobernig responded directly to this challenge, in an exhibition at Tate St Ives which combined works from the Tate collection, his own work and interventions to the gallery space. Recognising the dominance of the sweeping Atlantic view in one of the galleries, he partially obscured the view with a red curtain normally used in film and television production. He responded to the

Publications which followed the opening of Tate St Ives continued to describe an artistic history foregrounded in the local place, landscape and local communities. In *St Ives: 1883-1993: Portrait of an Art Colony* (1994), Marion Whybrow characterises St Ives as a mystical force which inspired artistic creation. She writes, ‘Cornwall exerted its magic and they [the artists] extracted the essence of their experiences processed through the mind and imagination.’⁶ The layout of text and images in her book, therefore, built upon earlier presentations of St Ives as a creative stimulus and site. Books by Cross and Whybrow, and the 1985 catalogue each begins with maps or aerial views of the town, and their texts are punctuated by photographs of the harbour and surrounding landscape. By rooting artists and artworks within the locality of St Ives, each project generates the impression that their work was equally inward-looking, landscape-focussed and provincial.

From its outset the complex web of relations surrounding Tate St Ives, the local area and the town’s cultural heritage has proved hard to define. Shifting perspectives are inscribed even in the introduction to the new Gallery, *Tate St Ives: An Illustrated Companion* (1993). Two forewords start this publication: the first by Sir Richard Carew Pole, Chairman of Cornwall County Council and member of the Gallery’s steering group; the second by Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate since 1988. Carew Pole describes the project’s aims first, writing, ‘The Tate Gallery St Ives project is unique. It allows the visitor to see the works of art in the area in which they were conceived and close to the landscape and sea which influenced them.’⁷ For him, the Gallery’s purpose was to present work made in St Ives, ‘to house the internationally known school of St Ives’ and to allow the visitor to appreciate the links between art, the local area and its landscape. Serota, however, immediately offers a different perspective: ‘The Tate Gallery St Ives will present twentieth-century art in the context of Cornwall.’⁸ While recognising the centrality of art associated with the place – ‘At the heart of its programme of displays and activities will be the body of work for which the town of St Ives is internationally known’ – he emphasises the importance of relating this loosely defined collection of works to art made in other times and places. He describes the range of work the Gallery would include:

The Gallery’s displays will reflect the many different ways this body of work may be understood. Works of art will be seen with varied comparative material. The Gallery will also present new works made by younger artists, responding to the Gallery’s displays or to the broader Cornish scene. [...] Moreover, the links

permanent stained glass window by Patrick Heron in the gallery’s entrance similarly, by including drapes of the material in blue. *Heimo Zobernig*, Tate St Ives, 4 October 2008–11 January 2009.

⁶ Whybrow, 1994: 8.

⁷ Carew Pole, Sir R. ‘Foreword’ in Tooby, 1993: 6.

⁸ Serota, N., ‘Director’s Foreword’ in *Ibid.*: 7.

between the art and artists of West Cornwall and other centres for making and showing art around the world will mean that Tate Gallery St Ives will also display related works by non-Cornish artists as an integral part of its programme.⁹

Since it opened Tate St Ives has been sensitive to its parallel responsibilities to represent a ‘body of work’ for which the town is artistically known and to show wider narratives. Understanding these dual roles has been central to the Gallery’s changing programme. In the introductory publication, founding Director Mike Tooby recognised the need to offer multiple perspectives. Noting that publications and displays tend ‘to freeze one version of events,’ he explains the necessity for a changing programme which offers a variety of approaches and inclusions. He writes, ‘As works leave for other displays and exhibitions, or arrive as new acquisitions and long loans, and as new works by younger artists emerge, the picture the Gallery presents of modern art in the Cornish context will fracture and evolve.’¹⁰

Tooby’s description suggests how the Gallery acts as a frame through which visitors encounter the town’s art histories. As discussed, the building’s physical location plays a strong role in shaping visitors’ experiences of the objects and narratives presented in changing exhibitions. On the other hand, the architecture of Tate St Ives could equally be described as non-vernacular and in keeping more with Tate’s international brand than with the town of St Ives. Today, the Gallery’s narratives are also experienced through printed and digital media, including exhibition catalogues, magazines, photographs and online platforms. In *Museums and the Public Sphere* (2011), Jennifer Barrett connects the convention of online digitised collections, for instance, to André Malraux’s concept of the *musée imaginaire* or ‘museum without walls’, from which objects can be experienced ‘without sticking to prescribed avenues of movement’ or views. Stories are thus not so distinctly geographically ‘placed’ and ‘sited’ but rather circulate in a wider sphere.¹¹

Despite the shifting demands generated by online and offsite encounters, the relationship between exhibitions and geographical settings can be further unwrapped. Tate Liverpool and The Hepworth Wakefield offer helpful comparisons regarding the connections between geographical setting and the art each gallery displays and represents. Each strives to resonate with local histories and communities, and to present broader networks of modern and contemporary art. Although the appropriation of local histories into broader narratives deserves more focus than given here, changing programmes have shown that exhibitions of international modern and contemporary work can meaningfully connect with local sites and cultural

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tooby, 1993: 9.

¹¹ Barrett, 2012: 108.

memories.¹² Tate Liverpool's 2014 exhibition *Mondrian and his Studios*, for example, presented Piet Mondrian's working environments as he moved across Europe to the United States – a subject with local significance which was suggested by the display and accompanying texts.¹³ Especially in marketing materials, the exhibition's focus was explicitly connected to Mondrian's emigration through Liverpool's docks. The exhibition website explained that it would take visitors on a journey 'through Paris, London and eventually New York.'¹⁴ Some content was also introduced: 'Leaving the UK via Liverpool for America, the exhibition includes the passenger list bearing Mondrian's name, and poignantly, his departure point can be viewed out of the gallery window.'¹⁵ The inclusion of a passenger list and this exterior view were therefore presented as points of intersection between the art on display and widely recognisable social histories with particular local resonance.¹⁶

The Hepworth Wakefield, open since 2011, is founded upon the legacy of a single artist. The webpage describes the gallery's 'journey' by explaining that Hepworth 'was born in Wakefield on 10 January 1903.'¹⁷ Its name, collection and programme is openly presented as a move to return (from St Ives) Hepworth's work, name and legacy to Wakefield as a place of origin. One long-term display, *Hepworth in Yorkshire* (May 2015–Spring 2016) encourages visitors to 'discover Hepworth's Yorkshire roots' through material relating to her family and childhood.¹⁸ Celebrating the achievements of Hepworth and Henry Moore, both connected to the local area, the gallery's first report recognises the need to use these artists' stories 'to build strong civic pride in the city of their birth.'¹⁹ Accordingly, Hepworth's sculptures are used as meaningful threads connecting the local area to the gallery's changing programme of modern and contemporary British and international art. Alongside permanent displays of Hepworth's work, the gallery strives to provide local audiences with 'inspiring, world-class art on their doorstep' which, by connecting the area's past, present and future inspires regional regeneration.²⁰

¹² Museum theory and practice has increasingly demanded recognition of the diversity of histories relevant to museums' local communities. Since the late 1990s, in particular, museum theorists have made use of postcolonial criticism to question romanticised notions of a 'local community' and to work from what Barrett describes as 'a concept of "diverse publics" that recognizes multiplicity, asymmetrical power-relations and fissions within "communities."' Barrett, 2012: 111.

¹³ *Mondrian and his Studios*, Tate Liverpool, 6 June–5 October 2014.

¹⁴ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/mondrian-and-his-studios> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

¹⁵ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/mondrian-and-his-studios> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

¹⁶ Within the wider narrative of the exhibition, however, this played a relatively small part and the topic was presented primarily as a story of central importance to an international history of modern art. The catalogue foreword begins: 'The invention of abstract art is universally recognised as one of the most important milestones of modernism.' Nixon, Manacorda and Pomery, 'Foreword' to Manacorda and White (eds), 2014: 7.

¹⁷ <http://www.hepworthwakefield.org/about/our-journey/> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

¹⁸ <http://www.hepworthwakefield.org/whatson/hepworth-in-yorkshire/> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

¹⁹ The Hepworth Wakefield, Annual Review 2011–2012

²⁰ Ibid.

For Tate St Ives, a particular concern has been its potential to embrace artists associated with the town to an unrepresentative degree. Led by curatorial interests, visitor expectations and the Tate's collection, over time the programme has created a loose group of 'St Ives artists' who are regularly included in displays and surrounding materials. This risk was something consciously opposed by early programme directors, who actively denied the prospect of the town's art histories as reducible to a specific group. Most of the first publications, including the 1993 Gallery introduction, exhibition guides and visitor leaflets demonstrate this stance (see Fig. 2). Their plain white covers propose critical neutrality and the 'unwritten' openness of its visual, artistic identity.²¹

Despite attempts to propose alternative perspectives, the place-based label of 'the St Ives artists' continues to play a role in texts and displays. In *The St Ives Artists: A Biography of Place and Time* (2008), Michael Bird offers a place-based approach which opens the narrative to important intersecting histories including political events, as well as trends in literature and popular culture.²² Despite this, Bird's concentration on local communities does not allow for detailed examination of exchanges between those in St Ives and elsewhere which occurred on the town's peripheries through correspondence, travel and display. Personal and professional relationships between artists in St Ives and a wide range of contemporaries therefore remain unexplored. Describing a long narrative at a relatively fast-moving pace, furthermore, Bird rarely considers broader cross-historical connections which would be revealed through more sustained focus on particular works of art. While building from Bird's historically-grounded and relatively open account, this thesis focuses on modes of communication between St Ives and other places. Most importantly, this approach problematises Bird's conflation of different periods and artistic networks into a singular 'biography' of 'the St Ives artists'.

Alongside place-based studies, monographic texts and displays have formed an alternative approach to art associated with St Ives. These have sometimes been framed within the 'St Ives artist' label by how they are written, illustrated, marketed or sold.²³ Focusing on a single artist, monographs cannot reflect the diversity of art, people and networks associated with the place but they can provide invaluable information on artists' interactions with a vast range of contacts and places. For this thesis, monographs have proved especially useful where artists' archives have been limited, difficult to trace, widely dispersed or inaccessible. Texts by Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, in particular, have provided a vast source of information on the life and

²¹ See Tooby, 1993. Examples include *Alison Wilding: New Works at Tate Gallery St Ives*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate Gallery, 1994) and *Mark Rothko in Cornwall*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate Gallery, 1996).

²² Bird, 2008.

²³ Tate Publishing, for example, sells a 'St Ives series' of monographs 'on artists from the St Ives School in Cornwall, including Ben Nicholson and Alfred Wallis.' <http://shop.tate.org.uk/st-ives-series/icat/stivesartseries> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

work of Russian artist Naum Gabo.²⁴ Piecing together the facts of Gabo's life and work, they have traced and where necessary translated a broad and widely-dispersed body of archival material and texts to create an account reflective of Gabo's itinerant life, career and scattered contacts.

The monographic and place-based approaches to art in St Ives have been crossed in a range of formats and a number of Ph.D. theses, exhibitions and collection displays have contributed to my view of St Ives as both a locally-placed and outwardly-connected artistic network. In his Ph.D. thesis, "'St Ives' Artists and Landscape" (University of Sussex, 1996), Chris Stephens critically examines the professional and social make-up of the artists' community in St Ives and the subsequent genesis of 'St Ives' as an art historical term. Throughout he stresses that this label is both 'a historical construct' and 'a grouping which had currency within itself'.²⁵ The two meanings of the term are for him inseparable. As 'St Ives' came to mean something to artists and those around them, he argues, so its networks and components had an effect on participants and their work.²⁶ This thesis develops Stephens's interrogative approach to the label of 'St Ives' which, although constructed and perpetuated for critical and commercial effect, is founded upon networks formed by the artists. It argues foremost that these networks were widely spread. Especially during the period between 1939 and 1949, St Ives as a labelled artistic centre played little role in determining artists' personal or professional identities as they developed in the town and were exported elsewhere. As my conclusion suggests, while St Ives was certainly seen by artists as a unique wartime location and a growing artistic centre, the development of 'St Ives' as an apparently recognisable 'school' or 'group' more strongly characterises the next stage in the narrative, which begins around 1949.

Stephens's approach also recognises that studies of 'St Ives' art should not exclude other important places and histories.²⁷ Similarly, the artworks I have chosen to discuss do not belong to a geographical 'school' but instead participate in networks connected to a wider range of places, people and histories. The second part of Stephens's account focuses on the various uses and meanings of the local landscape to artists Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter and Patrick Heron. Nevertheless, he uses this topic to explore how each artist's creative relationships with the surrounding terrain connected them to broader philosophical approaches and artistic styles. His discussion of Lanyon's work, for example, stresses the importance of contemporary discourses connected to Henri Bergson's concepts of time and space which were disseminated among interested people in a range of countries. Yet, as his thesis remains centred on the landscape

²⁴ Hammer and Lodder, 2000.

²⁵ Stephens, 1996: 3.

²⁶ Stephens uses the Bloomsbury group (also associated with place and an ambiguous range of values, ideas and protagonists) as a comparison. He explains that 'just as individuals associated or dissociated themselves with "Bloomsbury", so artists defined themselves in relation to "St Ives".' Ibid.: 3.

²⁷ Ibid.: 3.

specific to St Ives or West Penwith, Stephens's text suggests the need for more outward-looking perspectives. Noting that "St Ives" has almost always been treated in isolation [...] decontextualized from art production elsewhere,' he explains the need for 'an alternative history' which challenges this exclusivity by 'relocating its artists in broader contexts and longer trajectories.'²⁸ It is hoped that this thesis goes some way to proposing such alternative and broader views.

In his thesis, 'Between Tradition and Modernity: Patrick Heron and British Abstract Painting, 1945-1965' (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2000), Andrew Wilson positions Heron's work within the context of postwar regeneration in Britain and its cultural relations with France and the United States. Drawing widely from the artist's critical writings, Wilson considers the impact of national and artistic allegiances on Heron's work. Aesthetic and critical decisions are therefore tied to the artist's cultural scene, which is described by Wilson in terms of three sets of conflicting concerns. First, he proposes the central importance of 'tradition' and 'modernity' to Heron's critical and artistic work, in which the demands of 'an optimistic, forward-looking, modernity' met the demands of 'tradition and history that could be interpreted as offering possibilities of language of retrenchment, nostalgia, myth.'²⁹ For Heron, these were conflicting but not entirely opposite values and the French modern masters, as Wilson notes, 'he saw as constituting a living tradition and not something to be reacted against negatively.'³⁰ Although focussing on an earlier period, this thesis similarly recognises the role of 'living' artistic traditions in connecting St Ives to broader developments and international artistic circles.

Heron's changing aesthetic and ideological allegiances between Europe and America form the second aspect of Wilson's enquiry. Despite critical admissions of influence and disavowal, the artist's allegiances to Europe and America were, Wilson describes, not clear-cut but subtly moderated by specific encounters. While 'Heron's painting was still conceived in resolutely European terms,' 'its look and his evolving understanding of abstraction had been changed by this encounter with American painting.'³¹ While recognising that postwar practices of criticism and display positioned artists within national frames, his own discussion retains the complexity of Heron's multi-layered and shifting connections with France, Britain and the United States.

Wilson's third critical binary concerns the local and international settings for Heron's practice. Again, he describes how these spheres overlapped and encountered one another in Heron's work. Without reverting to characterisations of 'local' or 'international', he therefore recognises how communities and discourses intersected to form Heron's changing understanding of the

²⁸ Ibid.: 3.

²⁹ Wilson, 2000: 12.

³⁰ Ibid.: 10.

³¹ Ibid.: 2.

relationship between art and place. Interweaving specific encounters with more diverse diffusions of ideas, Wilson's exploratory structure has influenced my approach. I also draw from direct correspondence and more widely published texts to explore the effect of such dialogues on concepts and works of art. Yet my own account is less dominated by conflicting binaries which were of more importance to Heron's career during the competitive climate of the Cold War than to my period in question. This research is less rigorously structured by sharp contrasts and shifts but instead aims to reflect the complex picture of ideological, aesthetic and social concerns during the wartime and immediate postwar period.

Through both its wider strategic programme and specific displays, Tate St Ives has generated fresh perspectives on both the town's art histories and wider modernist trends. Defining the Gallery's approach as Artistic Director (2007–13), Martin Clark stressed the importance of internationalism for this story. In an internal document describing his programme, he wrote,

Despite its relatively remote location, what distinguished the colony, and the artists who comprised it, was the ambition, radicalism and internationalism of both the art and the community. This was reflected in their links with artists, curators and institutions in Europe and the US.³²

This was further linked to the Gallery's contemporary aims and practice:

The vision for Tate St Ives, as it moves forward in the twenty-first century, is to both celebrate, and consistently re-evaluate, the work of those artists and their developing position in the story of avant-garde modernism, whilst applying the same spirit of internationalism and radicalism that distinguished the modernist colony, to a programme of contemporary exhibitions, commissions and displays.³³

During this period, Tate St Ives took an emphatically 'international' stance towards both historical narratives and contemporary programmes, with the latter justified by the geographical connectivity and international relevance of the former. The Gallery considered its work as part of a causal chain: the presence of an international colony contributed to the construction of a Tate Gallery; subsequently, this Gallery was able to bring works by leading international, contemporary artists to the local area. Under this scheme, the international reputation of Tate St Ives as a venue for contemporary art grew considerably. Central to Clark's vision – and that of a number of predecessors – was that art associated with St Ives was not only 'international' in participation but also 'radical', 'ambitious' and 'modern'. The values of artistic 'modernism'

³² Clark, M., 2012: n.p.

³³ Ibid.

were not defined in statements related to the approach but instead left open to multiple readings and potential debate.

Three exhibitions initiated under Clark's directorship have particularly encouraged the framing of art in St Ives within discussions of 'international modernism'. Each exhibition positioned work made in St Ives within specific structures identified as relevant to wider modernist production. *Object, Gesture, Grid: St Ives and the International Avant-Garde* (15 May–2 September 2010) provided a formalist framework centred on three broad characteristics (Fig. 3 shows 'Gesture'). Devised primarily as a display of the Tate's permanent collection, the introduction explained how 'post-Second World War art in St Ives' had been used as a 'starting point' for considering 'some of the common characteristics of Modern Art and the shared visual language of artists working in Europe and North America around the mid-twentieth century'.³⁴ While geographically diverse groupings opposed an isolationist approach, few facts were presented to explain the meanings of or potential reasons for common forms and interests.³⁵ International displays can undoubtedly create meaningful responses and, especially when free from the expectations that accompany knowledge of contact, surprising correspondences can emerge. Nevertheless, information regarding contacts and connections can make formal connections more meaningful. Although different in medium and purpose to the exhibition *Object, Gesture, Grid*, this thesis combines formalist analysis with art-historical evidence.

The Far and The Near: St Ives and International Art (6 October 2012–13 January 2013) presented key works made in St Ives alongside international contemporary art. As the title and catalogue make clear, geographical and temporal dislocations in the display allowed shared forms and themes to emerge, creating dialogues across time and place. The introduction states, 'Shifts in time and location create a sometimes surprising dynamic within the displays, disrupting established alignments of art historical chronology and introducing geographical perspectives inflected by globalisation'.³⁶ For its curators Miguel Amada and Sara Matson, the work *Palm Sign* (2010) (Fig. 4) by Moroccan-based contemporary artist Yto Barrada symbolised the interaction between regional places and international audiences: a theme of great significance for St Ives. In a published discussion between the two curators, Amada explains, 'Ironically, the palm tree is not native of either Cornwall or Morocco, and yet it has become a powerful icon of each region's imagined – and globally recognisable identity'.³⁷ The analogy could extend to the majority of modern artists associated with St Ives. Like the palm tree, many

³⁴ *Object, Gesture, Grid: St Ives and the International Avant-garde*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate, 2010).

³⁵ Some information suggested the role of social and professional networks, travel and correspondence, but remained unexplored. For example, the catalogue introduction to the first section, 'Object', noted that Hepworth and Nicholson were 'inspired by' their trips to various artists' Parisian studios in the early 1930s. This shows that although it was not necessarily aimed at generating art-historical interpretation, the selection was done with the knowledge of certain connections in mind.

³⁶ *The Far and the Near: St Ives and International Art*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate, 2012–13): n.p.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of these figures were not native to Cornwall, yet their works have become icons of the region's imagined and internationally recognised artistic past. Referencing Heron's stained glass window (1992–93) at Tate St Ives, with which Barrada's work was paired, Matson adds,

In relation to Barrada's work, which presents an explicitly cynical narrative about the palm tree's appropriation by the Moroccan tourist industry and its use in the construction of a sense of place, we might question how the Heron painting, as part of a national museum experience set within a Cornish resort, has itself been appropriated as a 'brand' of modernism that distorts wider cultural contexts of artists working in St Ives – aside, that is, from Heron's original intentions for the work.³⁸

Explaining the exhibition's juxtaposition of these two artworks, Matson questions the Tate's role in the development of a 'brand' of St Ives and reads Heron's window as emblematic of discrepancies between broader cultural affiliations and the use or commissioning of works of art for the purposes of 'image-making' by cultural and tourist destinations.

By including non-Western artists, *The Far and the Near* also responded to 'international' art histories. In the catalogue text Amada describes how the 'Western perspective' can be challenged by new perspectives offered by globalisation. He explicitly describes the exhibition's aim 'to contribute to such an undertaking, in which art practices once defined uniquely from a Western viewpoint are recontextualised through the dynamics of art scenes across the globe.'³⁹ The inclusion of a wide international range was a key feature of the display, arranged not to generate readings of modernist diffusion and influence but to de-stabilise the structures and canon of 'modernism' itself. However, as with other broad cross-cultural exhibitions, cultural and biographical contexts remained slightly obscured when a wider view is taken. Especially when incorporated into cross-cultural exhibitions or readings, artworks can appear as extraordinary representatives of unfamiliar areas. For those examining themes and forms which cross a broad geographical field, therefore, supporting texts and events play a pivotal role. Although this thesis does not cover such an expansive geographical terrain as *The Far and the Near*, it is similarly guided by ideas surrounding the relationships between modernity, modernism, colonialism and the canons of art history.

International Exchanges: Modern Art and St Ives 1915–1965 (Tate St Ives 17 May–28 September 2014; Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 24 October 2014–25 January 2015) built upon this exhibition history and provided me with an invaluable insight into the connective

³⁸ *The Far and the Near: St Ives and International Art*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate, 2012–13): n.p.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

curatorial processes of researching, selecting and staging an exhibition.⁴⁰ Working on the exhibition with Sara Matson and Chris Stephens, the curatorial concepts of each gallery's display were developed in parallel with my doctoral research and drove certain interests and emphases. Discussions surrounding the first gallery room proved particularly central to my approach. Conversations centred on how to represent the continued presence of Constructivist forms and ideas in St Ives. It was decided that the selection of this first room would be based on works reproduced in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937), as a publication reflective of how key artists understood the movement when they relocated to St Ives. Edited by Gabo, Nicholson and Leslie Martin, the book was presented in a small archive display with associated materials. As suggested by the range of work in *Circle*, the selection in this first part of the exhibition formed a longer chronology and broad presentation of 'Constructive' art drawing from a range of connected abstract movements, such as Suprematism and Neoplasticism (Figs 5–7). Mirroring the publication's chronological breadth, the earliest works included in the exhibition were made in 1915, at the time of the inaugural exhibition of Suprematist art in Petrograd. Abstract works made up to 1937 were presented in formal and historical groupings suggestive of the professional contacts and formal dialogues which had emerged in the journal's pages. Constructive works made in wartime St Ives were also added to this history and showed the persistence of *Circle's* aesthetic and ideological aims in St Ives through its key players in the five or so years following its publication.

Working on this display directly impacted the second chapter of this thesis, which also uses *Circle* as a means for evaluating the international networks and lineages surrounding Constructive art in St Ives. This thesis, however, more specifically investigates the impact of geographical power relationships on the changing legacies of Constructive art during this period and informed how artists in St Ives developed collaborative and individual projects. This highlights the role of texts and teachers associated with the Bauhaus, which, due to the predominance of narratives centred on Gabo and Russian modernism, is an undervalued but vitally important history for Constructive art in St Ives.

It is significant for *International Exchanges* and this thesis that the story of *Circle* begins in the pages of a journal which brought together an international range of participants at a time when opportunities for collaboration were reduced by Nazi regimes. This story could also be said to begin among the community of artists, architects and designers who fled other areas in Europe to London during the mid-1930s. For the purpose of the exhibition, archival displays included correspondence and photographs associated with these artists' convergence in London and highlighted the impact of political change upon this artistic community.

⁴⁰ Hans Ulrich Obrist has described curating as a process of 'connecting cultures, bringing their elements into proximity with each other' and 'making junctions, to allow different elements to touch.' Obrist, 2015: 1.

Subsequent sections of *International Exchanges* developed from research on the networks through which ideas were shared and goals of international collaboration maintained during the postwar period. Research areas included: the continued impact of the European pre- and interwar ‘modern masters’, the resurgence of international fairs and commercial markets, new communication and travel technologies, international friendships and alliances and exhibitions with emphases on the internationalism of certain styles. Themes were chosen to demonstrate how artists in St Ives continued to participate in international artistic communities. Exhibition themes included: the materiality of postwar representation and expression, approaches to nature and the environment in the 1950s, and new perspectives on Pop Art, Minimalism and Constructive art which emerged in the early 1960s. The difficulty of deciding the key themes with which to narrate the continued international exchanges of St Ives helped to show that the collaborative and collective spirit that had characterised wartime St Ives had become increasingly multi-faceted and diverse in its postwar form. Following the collective project unifying the first gallery space, it appeared as an array of conversations and nuclear groupings. Although the period beyond 1949 is not the focus of this study, my conclusion suggests some reasons for this development and the potential implications of this reading on the longer chronology of art in St Ives.

Having examined the existing scholarship on modern art in St Ives in books, theses and displays, including my own involvement as researcher and curator with Tate St Ives, I next introduce my theoretical approach, which draws from texts across the humanities. By examining how others have tackled key terms used to describe modern life in their own disciplines, I explain my approach to concepts of place, hybridity and mobility, and suggest the importance of journeys and interpersonal connections for understanding the shape of art movements.

ii. PLACE, HYBRIDITY, MOBILITY

During the last four decades, definitions of ‘place’ and ‘space’ have had a significant impact on how places, their inhabitants and productions are understood. Henri Lefebvre’s notion of space ‘production’ has been particularly influential and has caused widespread recognition of the processes by which spaces are formed and conditioned.⁴¹ In particular, Lefebvre’s description of space as ‘a social reality – that is to say, a set of relations and forms’ has called attention to the role of social differences and interactions in the ‘production’ of space, upheld over Euclidean concepts of space as an abstract terrain.⁴² In her descriptions of ‘space’ and ‘place’, Doreen Massey draws both from Lefebvre’s approach and from contemporary presumptions surrounding these two terms which, I propose, continue also to affect how ‘St Ives art’ is often

⁴¹ Lefebvre [1974] 1991.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 116.

understood. In her book *For Space* (2005), Massey highlights the conventional characteristics of 'space' and 'place'. 'Space', she writes, has been conceived 'as in the voyages of discovery, as something to be crossed and maybe conquered,' whereas 'place' has come to mean an inherently 'local place'.⁴³ She explained,

In the context of a world which is, indeed, increasingly interconnected the notion of place (usually evoked as 'local place') has come to have totemic resonance. [...] For some it is the sphere of the everyday, of real and valued practices, the geographical source of meaning, vital to hold on to as 'the global' spins its ever more powerful and alienating webs. [...] For others, a 'retreat to place' represents a protective pulling-up of drawbridges and a building of walls against the new invasions. Place, on this reading, is the locus of denial, of attempted withdrawal from invasion/difference. It is a politically conservative haven, an essentialising (and in the end unviable) basis for a response; one that fails to address the real forces at work.⁴⁴

Massey suggests how these distinctions can be challenged by recognising the convergence of the two terms and she advocates for treating 'place' more like 'space'. As a 'product of interrelations', space is more commonly understood as a sphere where multiplicity creates interactions. As an open area, space is also always under construction and in process, *never* closed or defined. As such, it is always relational and multiple, unfinished and open for future interrelations. This is a helpful way to consider the place and artistic community of St Ives, which have both evolved through a long process of interactions made possible by the presence of 'difference'. St Ives is not a secure or essentially authentic space but the result of exchanges, encounters and multiple narratives. To recognise this is not to undermine differences between spaces or to create a universal narrative of 'space'. St Ives is not the same as any other space, because it has been produced by specific interrelations. Working within an art historical lineage which has emphasised the 'authenticity' and relative remoteness of the 'place' of St Ives, however, it is useful to bear in mind that this is a terrain which remains in continual flux and production.

Massey's critical convergence of 'place' and 'space' also highlights the inseparability of artworks from the agencies associated with place. For example, while a work of art may not have been made to engage directly with a place as a theme, subject or site, the circumstances of its conception and production are always dependent on specific interrelations connected to that site. Many of the works of art discussed in this thesis were not made by artists with the goal of

⁴³ Massey, 2005: 4.

⁴⁴ Massey, 2005: 6.

representing 'St Ives', but rather to push forward ideas and to create forms which had wide-reaching currency and significance. Yet these works were also composed of materials and ideas which are likely to have been conditioned by aspects of the artist's location. It is also important to recognise that the relationship between art and place is a two-way process; as artworks are continually informed by place, so they also contribute to its production, whether through subtle association or conscious representation.

Massey's 2005 insistence on the existence of multiplicity and difference in space responds to Homi K. Bhabha's earlier description of hybridity as the producer of identity. In the introduction to his influential collection of essays *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha upholds hybridity as the component of culture which produces similarities and differences through processes of 'recognition' and 'disavowal'.⁴⁵ He positions hybridity at the centre of discourses on cultural identity and argues that it is inseparable from notions of authority and power. Because of this, Bhabha advocates for a better understanding of processes of cultural differentiation.⁴⁶ Like Massey's description of space as open and never authentic, Bhabha describes societal ties as formed *from* difference and interaction. Both therefore identify that no spaces or communities are natural, i.e. beyond production, but Bhabha goes further in stating that it is in 'inbetween' spaces where differences come into play and where one can best investigate identity formation.

Bhabha's insistence on the importance of 'inbetween' spaces continues to shape current thought on the relationship between local and global networks and social ties, which is of central importance to the artistic community of St Ives. Approaching the distinction between these terms in a similar way to Massey, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain how a false distinction between 'global' and 'local' leads to a number of incorrect presumptions:

In many characterisations the problem rests on a false dichotomy between the global and the local, assuming that the global entails homogenisation and undifferentiated identity whereas the local preserves the assumption that the differences of the local are in some sense natural, or at least that their origin remains beyond question. Local differences pre-exist the present scene and must be defended or protected against the intrusion of globalisation. [...] This view can

⁴⁵ Bhabha, 2004: 1-2.

⁴⁶ Bhabha writes, 'What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'inbetween' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.' Ibid.

easily devolve into a kind of primordialism that fixes and romanticises social relations and identities.⁴⁷

In order to be free from such presumptions, Hardt and Negri stress the need to recognise the hybridity of all places and communities, and to focus on interactions in which shifts of perspective from local to wider concerns (or vice versa) take place. They also advise studying the structure of networks in which paths and obstacles exist and can encourage or suspend mobility, flows and developments. It is to the structures of interaction and exchange, and to the obstacles within those systems that my own view of St Ives frequently returns. As Chapter 2 shows, younger artists in St Ives worked from particular versions of the Constructivist past which were passed on to them via networks, while other parts of the narrative remained less well-known due to censorship and other barriers.

As the title of this thesis suggests, I particularly respond to key texts associated with the so-called ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences, which, among other outcomes, have returned movement to its key role within the production of place and hybridity. A number of these studies have developed from the writings of sociologist Georg Simmel, who as early as 1909 described society as a web of interactions inspired by a natural and *active* ‘will to connection’.⁴⁸ Tim Cresswell’s *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (2006) offers contemporary reflections on the application of the term ‘mobility’, which he defines in an array of interconnected terms:

Mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity, sit side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance. Mobility, then, is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before. And yet mobility itself, and what it means, remains unspecified. It is a kind of blank space that stands as an alternative to place, boundedness, foundation, and stability.⁴⁹

Cresswell further emphasises that mobility, as a form of ‘displacement – the act of moving between locations’, is a process in which power relationships take effect.⁵⁰ He explains, ‘The movements of people (and things) all over the world and at all scales are, after all, full of

⁴⁷Hardt and Negri, 2000: 44.

⁴⁸ Simmel wrote, ‘The men who first laid out a road between two places accomplished one of the greatest of feats. By coming and going between the two they may have linked them subjectively in a manner of speaking, but those places were not objectively joined until they had impressed the Road onto the surface of the earth: the will to connection had become the Form of things.’ Simmel, [1909] 1994.

⁴⁹ Cresswell, 2006.

⁵⁰ Ibid.: 2.

meaning. They are also products and producers of power.⁵¹ Not an abstract concept, mobility is, Cresswell argues, an action which, although tied to wider power relationships, is practised, experienced, embodied on an individual, human scale. Mobility, therefore, is able to ‘jump’ from the ‘scale of the body to mobility at other scales.’⁵² Cresswell’s definition offers a crucial framework for my study of how artists’ movements to St Ives connect to wider power relationships. Throughout, experiences of travel and mobility were recognised by artists as characteristic of modern-day life. While Lanyon’s physical exploration of the Cornish landscape is relatively well known, it is rarer to hear other artists’ views on the impact of new modes and the increased speed of travel on modern experience.⁵³ In 1934 Hepworth wrote an account of a journey in which she particularly noted dislocations across time and space. In an artistic statement for a journal, she conflated into a short sequence several experiences of old and new places and objects:

In an electric train moving south I see a blue aeroplane between a ploughed field and a green field, pylons in lovely juxtaposition with springy turf and trees of every stature. [...] The sounds of unseen birds and droning aeroplanes in the sky, part hidden by the leaves of a tree so very much older than I am, the feeling of easy walking down the street with green red traffic lights, the earth revealing its shape to the feet and eye as I once walked up a long white road between trees and saw a stone arch two thousand years old [...].⁵⁴

As key texts from emigration and exile studies remind us, it is important to take an especially careful and critical stance on mobility as an enactment of power relations of varying degrees of force. Raymond Williams was one of the first to recognise the interdependence of modernity and human migration and modernity, and he called specifically for ‘the émigré’ to be more adequately represented in histories of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ In *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (2011), Saloni Mathur offers a response.⁵⁶ Noting the centrality of migratory experiences to modernism’s development, she stresses the importance of non-separatist approaches. For her the ‘universality of the conditions of global migration and interdependence’ mean that there can be no separate project defined as the ‘art of diaspora’ or the ‘art of migration’.⁵⁷ Stressing the importance of different categories of migration, she recommends that studies ‘attempt to take seriously how the so-called “mobility turn,” an

⁵¹ Ibid.: 2.

⁵² Ibid: 6.

⁵³ Lanyon, for example, took up gliding in 1959 as a means of generating new experiences of the landscape centred on movement and modern transport. See Stephens, 2000.

⁵⁴ Hepworth, Statement for *Unit 1: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, edited by Read, London 1934. Reproduced in Bowness, S., 2015: 20.

⁵⁵ Williams, 1982.

⁵⁶ Mathur, 2011: viii. See also Williams, 1982: 84.

⁵⁷ Mathur, 2011: viii.

emergent paradigm within the social sciences, has come to bear in a number of powerful ways upon a range of practices, both material and intellectual, belonging to the visual arts.⁵⁸ The emphasis on modernist ‘movements’ in this thesis reflects the centrality of ‘movements’ (as both migratory experiences and collaborative artistic groups) to modernity and to the development of modernist criticism through the twentieth century. Although it is necessary to recognise the differences between these two uses of the term, I keep in play their interdependency, as it was especially during the mid-twentieth century that stylistic movements continued and dispersed into new ground as a direct consequence of human migration.

Modernity has been described by many theorists and writers as a phenomenon which flows through networks of goods, money, people and power. Walter Benjamin, for instance, paid close attention to how forms of industrial and urban movements, including commodities, materials, people and transport, characterised modern experience.⁵⁹ Zygmunt Bauman’s more recent diagnosis of globalising capitalism also draws substantially from travel as both a factual and metaphorical key to modernity’s compulsive reliance on change, development, exploration and progress into new ground. In language reflective of its evolving myth, Bauman describes modernity as ‘an obsessive march forwards’ which ‘must go on because any place of arrival is but a temporary station.’⁶⁰ Reflective of capitalist economies, Bauman’s description highlights differences between accounts of modernism as the product of an inevitable diffusion across an undifferentiated terrain and those which describe it as something emerging from hierarchies of place ordered according to concepts of ‘modernist’ progress. This thesis recognises modernity as a condition which, as Bauman suggests, spreads along channels including economic and industrial routes, in parallel with discourses of artistic modernism as a journeying cultural force capable of locking places and artists into relations dependent upon their proximity to its route. Having explained my approach to place, hybridity and mobility, I next introduce a central theme of this thesis: the survival and adaptation of art movements across historical time.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: viii.

⁵⁹ Benjamin, 1969.

⁶⁰ Bauman, 2000, quoted in Cresswell, 2006: 19. Bauman also uses descriptions of modernity’s systems of mobility to question the notion of the Holocaust as an aberration to the ‘normal’ progress of modernity, juxtaposing the destructive and progressive impulses in his suggestive quotation of Henry Feingold’s description of Auschwitz as ‘a mundane extension of the modern factory system.’ See Bauman, [1989] 2007.

iii. MOVEMENTS AND TIME

If we allow Art History to remain isolated inside its own fences, absorbed in its abstracted history of art, it ceases to be a historical discipline at all.⁶¹

Griselda Pollock's 2014 article 'Whither Art History?' added to calls for the discipline not to exclude history from its narrative of change, citing in particular the use of art historical diagrams. Pollock had begun her 1988 book *Vision and Difference* with a criticism of Alfred Barr's 1936 chart for *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Fig. 8).⁶² Twenty-two years later, she again contrasted her approach with that of Barr's. Noting how historical time is lost in the blank white field, Pollock criticised how a plain, abstract ground symbolising 'time' failed to account for the devastating impact of 'massive historical upheavals' of the twentieth century, including 'the horrors of war, revolutions, colonial and imperial campaigns, the rise of fascisms, the Third International, Stalinism [...]'.⁶³

Pollock's criticism also featured in contemporary reactions to Barr's work. In a 1937 essay for the *Marxist Quarterly*, Meyer Schapiro noted how abstraction lay false claims for 'absoluteness of the aesthetic' and had thus established a 'pretended autonomy' of art from social conditions.⁶⁴ He examined the links between this notion of independence and other factors of modernist ideology, such as its responsiveness to primitive art as instinctive, 'essentially human' and mythically timeless. Describing these ideas as symptoms of a broad 'devaluation of history, civilised society and external nature', he evoked a process increasingly autonomous from real time:

Time ceased to be an historical dimension; it became an internal psychological moment, and the whole mess of material ties, the nightmare of a determining world, the disquieting sense of the present as a dense historical point to which the individual was fatefully bound – these were automatically transcended in thought by the conception of an instinctive, elemental art above time.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Pollock, 2014: 13.

⁶² Pollock, 1988: 50. *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 March–19 April 1936.

⁶³ Pollock, 2010: 808. Leah Dickerman has recently argued acknowledged Barr's awareness of the contemporary impact of political events on narratives of abstract art. Citing his visits to Europe in the early 1930s, articles on artistic censorship and actions to save various works of art from the National Socialist regimes, she describes how political and social issues 'served as key motivations' for developing a clear formalist narrative. L. Dickerman, 'Abstraction in 1936: *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art' in L. Dickerman (ed.), 2012-13: 364-369.

⁶⁴ Schapiro, 1937.

⁶⁵ Schapiro, 1937.

For Schapiro, the breadth and length of abstract art's development could not be fairly represented by a self-contained track determined by sequential or generational development. Conversely, for him the 'nature' of abstraction was such that it would bear 'within itself' at each point and work of art marks of 'the changing material and psychological conditions' of its time.⁶⁶ Turning to the discourses of abstraction, he suggested that the myth of abstraction's 'final goal' or 'destiny', its tendency towards the absolute, had been 'smuggled in' to suggest its freedom from historical circumstances. Schapiro's text offers a critical view which, although unknown to many artists in this study, created the grounding for a mode of criticism developed over the following decade which saw abstraction as embedded within the 'mess' of social, political and economic conditions. A prominent figure in this thesis, Clement Greenberg recognised the value of this approach in his essay 'Towards a New Laocoon' (1940). In a brief introductory statement, he wrote, 'It is quite easy to show that abstract art like every other cultural phenomenon reflects the social and other circumstances of the age in which its creators live'.⁶⁷ As discussed in Chapter 3, these ideas were at the heart of critical debate at the very moment when Nicholson was closest to its key thinkers.

The latest attempt to map the networks surrounding abstract art, developed for the exhibition *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012–13), is relatively successful. An extensive map, like Barr's earlier model, it establishes connections which occurred during the fifteen-year period from 1910 to 1925 (Fig. 9). Expansive to the extent of near illegibility, the diagram is most successful in its interactive online format where users can focus on particular sections.⁶⁸ The overwhelming mass of participants is, in this instance, important to the message of both the exhibition and online resource: the range and number of participants presents the plurality of abstract arts and theories of abstraction rather than a singular, hierarchical lineage of inventors and followers. Key protagonists are highlighted in red, while other types of contact in the diverse map remain undifferentiated. Abstraction is presented as a communal invention, but the diagrammatic representation lacks scope to suggest the network's structures and processes such as correspondence, travel, publication or exhibition, or to describe the effect of this contact on creative work.

Although offering impactful visual representations of macro-narratives of modern art movements, diagrams have not easily satisfied calls for multiple art histories. Yet others developed over the mid-twentieth century have mapped art movements upon the axis of time in meaningful ways. Stephen Bann's 'Brief Chronology' diagram in his book *The Tradition of*

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 4, July–August 1940: 296–210, 296.

⁶⁸ <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/> (Accessed 7 July 2015).

Constructivism (1974) takes an approach surprisingly different to Barr.⁶⁹ Artists' movements, plotted in place and time, are presented not as static nodes but as active forces making their own artistic paths (Fig. 10). The resulting picture particularly highlights where the coming together of individuals caused and facilitated collective identities and actions, as movements both responded to and impacted power relations within the network. Overlaid on Bann's chart are shapes indicating the location and duration of projects such as Obmokhu, the Bauhaus and the journal *Cercle et Carré*. Hubs of artistic activity are therefore shown by Bann as ranging from short-lived moments in relatively isolated locations (see *Art Concret*) to wider-reaching projects of longer duration (see *Structure* magazine). Thus, his mapping shows that transnational collectivity increasingly characterised Constructive art; by the 1960s, *Structure* magazine is shown to have footholds in France, Switzerland, Holland, England and the U.S.A. These patterns support a reading of Constructivism as a movement which inspired dissemination over time and place, and Bann's mode of description accounts for temporal gaps within the history of Constructive ideas and forms. As the movements of individual artists are shown to determine collective identities, so the resurfacing of Constructivism is shown not as an inevitable continuation but as the result of artists' decisions to extend, relocate or appropriate previous projects.⁷⁰

John Willett used two diagrams to illustrate 'Art streams of the 20s' in his book *The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period, 1917–1933* (1978) which offer a middle-ground between Barr's and Bann's approaches (Figs 11–12). Using parallel diagrams subtitled 'The main movements' and 'Organizations and political links', history is presented as a narrative of connections between a range of actors, including individuals, explicitly political groups and looser cultural collectives (his second chart, 'Organizations and political links', for example, incorporates references to sub-networks such as 'Jazz 1907' and 'Swedish Ballet 1920-24').⁷¹ Showing the proximity of an international range of groups in Central Europe and suggesting how organisations provided frameworks for the founding, development and dispersal of art movements, Willett's charts present a rounded picture of the transnational breadth of interwar Constructivism. The relationship they suggest between organisations and political structures, furthermore, implies the potentially unique character of St Ives as a location for Constructive art which, in the context of war and homeland opposition, functioned

⁶⁹ Bann, 1974: xviii.

⁷⁰ Bann's book and historical chart have also been criticised for their selectivity. Donald McNamee, for example, has drawn attention to the absence of Poland and the prominence of *Structure* magazine. He wrote, 'a more helpful chart would consist of the names and dates of the artists both by nationality and by theoretical groups (and possibly another giving the schools, both formal and informal, as well as the diverse groups to the present). [...] Such comprehensive charts would have been useful guides to the whole development that Bann has attempted to cover and to place his selected had in it.' McNamee's preferred layout, therefore, would have returned to an arrangement which privileged artists' nationality and stylistic groups over movements and collaborative actions. McNamee, 1976: 78.

⁷¹ Willett, 1978: 14-15.

independently from official institutions and relied instead upon an array of individuals and more temporary connections (e.g. with publishing houses and galleries) to reach wider audiences. As shown in Chapter 2, when the movement took on a more official character in the United States, questions surrounding the need for a more permanent institutional home or printed presence both strengthened the group's competitive drive and caused internal fractures to emerge.

As in Barr's chart, influences occur over time according to power relationships. Above all, Willet's pictures of 1920s Weimar culture describe condensed and short-lived networks which were censored and restrained. Movements and organisations which had survived on the margins of his 'mainstream' narrative threads are shown to return from peripheral positions and contribute to the demise of others during the Third Reich. The returns, ruptures and cessations within these relatively short tracks are therefore as important to Willet's narrative as the continuations, illustrating the censorship and/or destruction of modernist connections and collectives from 1933, when many sought new marginal ground. At a slightly later date St Ives offered such a site from which activities, networks and organisations could be rehabilitated and continued.

In 'Whither Art History?' Pollock's focus on Barr's more formalist diagram of 'isms' failed to point out how diagrams could reflect the view of history that she sought to promote. The rest of her article focused on the discipline's obsession with newness, progress and change, and called instead for perspectives accounting for persistence, return and regeneration. Key to her argument was a description of the contribution of Aby Warburg in the early twentieth-century, focussing on his concept of time as 'not directional, developmental, and historicist but bending, recurring, repetitive, and, above all, traumatic.'⁷² In Warburg's wake she called for ways of looking, presenting and analysing the history of art which could simultaneously consider newness and 'Nachleben', a term he used to signify survival, persistence and afterlife ('that which resurfaces and recharges'). Taking leave therefore from Warburg's study of the crucial role of antique pagan themes within Italian Renaissance culture, Pollock described how images and objects form connections between the past, present and future. I have tried to follow Pollock in turn by maintaining a view of works of art as human-like entities which wander across 'a *temporal-spatial planetarity*' unbound by nation and historical period. Connecting cultural ideas held at different times, they can be described as '*thinking machines*' which are motivated by thoughts from the past and ready to inspire new thoughts in the future.⁷³

Each chapter of this thesis shows that notions of persistence, survival and reformulation held special significance during the period from 1939, when artists and critics were conscious of the

⁷² Pollock, 2014: 13.

⁷³ Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of thoughts as machines, Pollock describes Warburg's approach to images as '*thinking machines*'. Pollock, 2014: 13 and 22, footnote 10.

need to consider future and then present postwar needs. At these moments abstract art movements including Constructivism and Cubism became important references for wider debates on art, politics and the need for persistence or change in the face of mid-twentieth-century trauma and then distance from the past. Pollock's translation of Theodor Adorno's concept of 'Nach Auschwitz' as both 'after' and 'toward' that place and history offers a poignant visualisation of the bending of time through the 'multiple shocks' of the Holocaust (with memories of the First World War) and the following period of nuclear armament and the Cold War.⁷⁴ Criticising repeated calls for a 'new art history' upon this basis, Pollock expresses anxiety concerning the discipline's relationship with time. Referencing Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity', she contests portrayals of late modernism as reliant on change and 'constant newness' and advocates instead historical materialist approaches revealing cross-temporal connections.

Texts by Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben and Alex Danchev form another compelling cross-historical discourse which has extended my reading of temporal repetitions in the art of wartime St Ives. In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940) Benjamin describes a man who has lost a sense of connection with the past and can no longer locate his own historical place. With this example he stresses the redemptive function of temporal scales between past and present and explains how the past 'carries with it a temporal index' through which time can be understood and reclaimed.⁷⁵ In an essay response written thirty years later, 'The Melancholy Angel' (1970), Agamben describes 'tradition' as a process of 'entering into a relation' with the past.⁷⁶ He notes how in 'traditional' societies, 'culture' is the present and 'living act' of its own tradition. Where traditions have lost their 'vital force', on the other hand, gaps separate the 'accumulated treasure of ideas' and contemporary actions.⁷⁷ Using similarly evocative spatial and emotional terms, Agamben describes how Benjamin's angel character is 'wedged between' an oppressive past that 'incessantly accumulates behind him' and a future that 'he does not yet possess' and which cannot help him to understand his past.⁷⁸

For Benjamin, Agamben and Alex Danchev later, Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920) (Fig. 13) is at the centre of these ideas. Benjamin, who owned the work, first saw it as representative of his ideas and explained, 'This is how one pictures the angel of history.'⁷⁹ Recalling Klee's

⁷⁴ Ibid.: 13.

⁷⁵ Benjamin, 1968; 1969: 253–264, 254. For Benjamin, however, the intangible nature of the past meant that it was grasped only through fleeting images which 'flash up' and fall immediately away.

⁷⁶ Agamben, 1970; 1999.

⁷⁷ He elaborates on traditional societies: 'There is no discontinuity between past and present [...] because every object transmits at every moment [...] the system of beliefs and notions that has found expression in it.' Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Benjamin [1940], *op. cit.* in Benjamin, 1968: 257.

experiences of flight and destruction during the First World War, Benjamin narrated how the image evoked for him the propelling forces of historical circumstances:

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings [...]. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. This storm is what we call progress.⁸⁰

Benjamin's text is contemporary to the dominant rupture described in this narrative. In 1940, near the beginning of the War, artists were settling into new lives in St Ives. As following chapters show, from here they questioned the effect of this break to their work and they discussed how to respond to society's new needs. Benjamin's text also reveals that he was especially close to centres of political conflict. His ideas therefore prefigure the realisations of artists living in St Ives regarding the changing relationships between art and society which, as I will show, pulled more sharply into focus a few years later.

Agamben and Danchev both describe Klee's *Angelus Novus* as a connective object which wanders the 'temporal-spatial planetarity' characterised by Pollock. Exploring the image's poignancy to a range of individuals, Danchev particularly highlights the image's 'connective reach'.⁸¹ A small (32 x 24 cm) surviving 'witness' to history, he notes that Klee's work itself passed through the hands of Benjamin, Adorno and others, and has been cast as an exile from Germany to France and the States, before returning to Germany and Jerusalem. Following Benjamin's description of it as suggestive of the connective reach of time, each of the other authors demonstrated the longevity of Klee's image. To conclude his essay Danchev conjures Klee's consciousness of creation as an act which might survive the precarious circumstances of his life and art. A statement by the artist, first published in 1920 and which later became his epitaph, resounds with awareness of the difficulties of creating vital contemporary art at a time characterised by desperation and destruction. In his diary Klee wrote, 'I cannot be grasped in the here and now. For I reside just as much with the dead as with the unborn. Somewhat closer to the heart of creation than usual. But not nearly close enough.'⁸² As will be shown in Chapter 1, artists who moved to St Ives at the outbreak of the Second World War were intensely aware of the value of holding onto small-scale works which could move with them and inspire future work. Some also recognised that such mementoes of the past could help to form a picture of their development, which might be required for future professional opportunities. After leaving London Hepworth and Nicholson kept in mind the works they had left behind. When these

⁸⁰ Ibid.: 257–258.

⁸¹ Danchev, 2014: 369.

⁸² Klee, *Diaries*, 1920, quoted in Danchev, 2014: 375.

objects were able to circulate, furthermore, they were instrumental to the development of interest in their work in London and further afield.

As a statement at once private and public, Klee's diary entry also demonstrates artists' awareness of the potential longevity of artwork and writings. Throughout this thesis I consider the range of motivations and effects of artists' written thoughts and correspondences. As a form of processing and presenting past and present events, artists' own narrations were often made to be read and used by them and others within and after their lifetime. When these statements and stories have been found in archives, they have been treated with some criticality, keeping in mind varying motivations for artists to describe their work and to collect, preserve, publish or catalogue these traces for future use.

iv. METHODOLOGY AND TERMS

This penultimate section introduces the theoretical background to my research methods and use of key terms. Focusing on the impact of social interaction and collaboration facilitated by mobility and contact, texts by Jean-Luc Nancy have particularly shed light on the different kinds of relationships this thesis describes. As the analysis of Nicholson's Cubism in Chapter 3 shows, art movements can grow and resurface when individual artists encounter other creative work and when a range of precedents and contemporaries cluster together. In *Being Singular Plural* (1996) Nancy shows that each of these types of connection centres on the collaborative generation of meaning. Focusing on the co-dependency of meaning and sharing, Nancy lays the foundation of his hypothesis: 'There is no meaning if meaning is not shared [...] because meaning is itself the sharing of Being.'⁸³ The generation of meaning is for him dependent upon the state of 'being-with-one-another' and the circulation of ideas between one and another.⁸⁴ This is especially relevant to the arts, Nancy explains, because creative work is itself a 'plural singular', the result of a creative process done for its own circulation.⁸⁵

This philosophy is developed in Nancy's concept of reciprocal relations of 'touching', which can be applied to works of art as things which 'touch' and 'are touched' through encounter, display, understanding and appropriation.⁸⁶ Reciprocal 'touching' is at the heart of each kind of contact I discuss, whether it is a partnership, collaboration, larger artistic movement or other. Nancy's descriptions can also help to judge the changing importance and centrality of 'being singular-plural' to the small group of artists who arrived in St Ives in 1939. It is worth noting

⁸³ Nancy, 2000: 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid.: 3.

⁸⁵ Nancy writes, 'What counts in art, what makes art art [...] is access to the scattered origin in its very scattering; it is the plural touching of the singular origin.' Ibid.: 15.

⁸⁶ Nancy, 2000 and 1997.

that this wartime group formed around a core relationship between two artists which was both professional and personal. Hepworth and Nicholson's work from the early 1930s reveals not only these two artists' closeness but also their desires to communicate the value of togetherness as a spiritual and professional way of living and working.⁸⁷ Although evident throughout Hepworth's work from the 1930s, this value is especially clear in the intimate closeness between identifiable forms in sculptures such as *Two Heads* (1932) (Fig. 14). Nicholson presented corresponding images of togetherness in a vast body of paintings, drawings and prints. The creative and spiritual impact of 'touching' or 'being with' is especially strong in works which converge the outlines of two beings, as in the merging of profiles and hands in *1933 (St Rémy)* (Fig. 15).

Visual and material forms of togetherness continued to characterise Hepworth and Nicholson's work in the 1940s. Hepworth's co-appearing forms developed into new kinds of spatial arrangements which construct a communal and embracing viewing space. Nicholson continued to make arrangements of objects which, connecting his personal and artistic paths, suggest the image's power to bend time and space. As indicated by *St Rémy*, the distinction between intimate, personal encounters and the artist's engagement with wider art movements was also not clear cut. On the contrary, as Nicholson's relation with Cubism highlights, his contribution to the movement as it broadened was founded on intensely personal encounters with specific works of art. The merging of intimate contact and broader international networks also characterises the collective ambitions of *Circle* described in Chapter 2. Around 1935 Hepworth and Nicholson positioned one each of their most recent works within an arrangement which was displayed and photographed (Fig. 16). Presenting their work alongside a mobile by the American artist Alexander Calder, each work is distinctly recognisable and combined within the single framed shot. Hepworth and Nicholson's curatorial and creative staging reveals their eagerness to create formal conversations among artworks and for their works to co-appear with those they admired and saw as in keeping with their own aspirations. As a collection of artworks united by shared interests in geometric and organic abstract form, *Circle* was arguably used as a virtual exhibition space which, as pages were turned, presented formal rhythms and a shared 'Constructive' impulse. This comparison further highlights that the journal's white pages provided a more neutral ground than the domestic and working studio spaces in which Hepworth and Nicholson continued to arrange the international range of abstract art they owned.

Research methods and approaches advocated by network theoreticians have been used to examine the social structures through which the ideals of contact and co-appearance elucidated by Nancy's philosophy could be instigated and take effect. Beginning with the question of what

⁸⁷ On Hepworth and Nicholson's artistic relationship in the 1930s, see also L. Beard's essay 'Reflections on a Relationship: Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, the Early Years' in Curtis and Stephens (eds), 2015: 20-25.

could constitute an ‘international context’ for modern art in St Ives, I was especially drawn to Bruno Latour’s descriptions of ‘the social’ as a network that can be ‘reassembled’.⁸⁸ Latour’s *Reassembling the Social* (2005) begins with the claim that discussions of ‘society’ easily lack focus on what that word describes. He writes,

It is no longer clear whether there exist relations that are specific enough to be called ‘social’ and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function as ‘a society’. The social seems to be diluted everywhere and yet nowhere in particular.⁸⁹

Noting that ‘the social’ ‘does not designate a thing among other things’ but rather ‘a type of connection between things which are not themselves social’, Latour describes its presence in traces left behind.⁹⁰ Subsequently he calls for more rigorous treatment of things which socially connect, stating, ‘it is necessary to scrutinize more thoroughly the exact content of what is “assembled” under the umbrella of a society.’⁹¹ Methodologically, this suggests the importance of tracing ‘social’ connections in a wide range of residual materials (described by Latour as ‘the missing masses’), which includes archival documents and artworks as well as places, buildings, other objects and people. Bringing traces together, Latour describes the researcher’s own action as a ‘peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling’.⁹²

Regarding the researcher’s approach to the ‘masses’, Latour poses the problem, ‘Should we focus on the micro-level of interactions or should we consider the macro level as more relevant? [...] Is it better to view markets, organizations, or networks as the essential ingredients of our collective life?’⁹³ This is followed by two options: to focus on specific groups, levels or kinds of connection, or to explore material traces as they appear. Latour advises the latter:

Your task is no longer to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities, to teach actors what they are, or to add some reflexivity to their blind practice [...] you have ‘to follow the actors themselves’, that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ My Collaborative Doctoral Award position came into being under the title: ‘The International Context of the Art of St Ives’.

⁸⁹ Latour, 2007: 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid.: 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.: 2.

⁹² Ibid.: 7.

⁹³ Ibid.: 28.

⁹⁴ Ibid.: 11-12.

Following Latour's advice, this research began as a form of 'fieldwork' in which the processes of forming links, collaborative connections and artistic 'movements' were surveyed before specific lines of enquiry were chosen. The primary subject of attention was therefore a mass of material residue replete with traces of how networks and collective expressions developed across time and place.

Latour's description of agencies in terms of their effect or 'difference' has been central to my understanding of the function of broader collaborative projects and art movements. He contrasts the effects of agencies in relation to an inactive being, writing, 'An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is *not* an agency.'⁹⁵ Discussions of 'agency' must therefore also provide an account of the action affecting change.⁹⁶ However, Latour advocates that not all 'actants' (actors of agency) are of equal value. For example, some occupy privileged spots, cause great 'difference' and can freely cross different networks. The network of artists surrounding St Ives was shaped by active power relations which can be evaluated according to 'difference' or effect. Following Latour's description of networks as webs of 'uncertain, fragile, controversial [and] ever-shifting ties,' I have considered how the networks of St Ives persisted or changed over time.⁹⁷ Networks surrounding St Ives between 1939 and 1949 could be variously contingent and short-lived or longer-lasting, and ties constantly shifted according to the range of participants as well as their needs and motivations. The international contacts surrounding St Ives especially reveal important changes to this network's shape and character. My conclusion particularly suggests how different kinds of 'internationalism' emerged in postwar St Ives during the period leading up to 1964.

My examination of local and international networks also draws from Latour's theoretical explanations of the nature of networks which cross narrower and wider terrains. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Latour stresses the inseparability of local and international networks and the inescapable impact of 'local' actants. His view is encapsulated in a chapter in this book titled 'Even a Longer Network Remains Local at All Points'. Using the example of a railroad, he provides both question and response:

Is a railroad local or global? Neither. It is local at all points, since you always find sleepers and railroad workers, and you have stations and automatic ticket machines scattered along the way. Yet it is global, since it takes you from Madrid to Berlin or from Brest to Vladivostok. [...] There are continuous paths that lead from the local

⁹⁵ Latour, 2007: 53. Original italics.

⁹⁶ Ibid.: 53.

⁹⁷ Ibid.: 28.

to the global, from the circumstantial to the universal, from the contingent to the necessary, only so long as the branch lines are paid for.⁹⁸

Oppositional concepts of ‘local’ and ‘global’ are found to work poorly for discussions of network. He explains, ‘One never crosses the mysterious lines that should divide the local from the global.’⁹⁹ Similarly, international networks described in this thesis remained subject to highly specific and local factors. This does not, I argue, diminish a hypothesis that international art movements such as Constructivism and Cubism were of prime importance to modern art production in St Ives between 1939 and 1949. Conversely, views which encompass intensely local, personal circumstances often reflect the significance of wider international networks and concerns to artists’ personal and professional lives.

Describing cross-cultural networks requires using terms which have their own histories and associations. As Kobena Mercer has highlighted in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (2005), terminology can also significantly limit analyses of cross-cultural modernity. Introducing his ambition to understand how a ‘shared history of art and ideas’ has been experienced differently around the globe, Mercer queries the appropriateness of terms including ‘the global’, ‘the international’, ‘the cross-cultural’ and ‘the culturally diverse’.¹⁰⁰ In their place he suggests ‘the cosmopolitan’ as able to cut through this congested vocabulary.¹⁰¹ ‘The cosmopolitan’, he suggests, emphasises ‘the idea of a world citizen’ while remaining ‘open and receptive to what is strange or foreign.’¹⁰² This definition provides a helpful reminder of an often under-recognised aspect of artistic internationalism. Not connecting primarily to self-promote or to project an influence, artists were often drawn to distant people and places through a cultural inquisitiveness which enabled them to locate their position on a broader cultural map. As my conclusion outlines, by the late 1950s and early 1960s Hepworth was in a better position to connect with new audiences, and while it is impossible to separate motivations completely, she arguably remained primarily driven by her beliefs in a global community and the cross-cultural potential of abstract art.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Ibid.: 117.

⁹⁹ Ibid.: 121.

¹⁰⁰ Mercer, 2005: 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.: 7, 9.

¹⁰² Mercer, 2005: 10.

¹⁰³ Mercer also highlights that ‘the cosmopolitan’ should not be used ‘as an evaluative or judgemental banner heading (in the sense that it is a good thing if you have it, too bad if you don’t).’ (Mercer, 2005: 13). While most of the artists I discuss were open to playing a role in cross-cultural endeavour, for others this openness to foreign traditions, exhibitions and markets could be impossible, impracticable or even considered undesired, especially in relation to more pressing concerns. The relative isolation of Marlow Moss in Lamorna, south-west of Penzance, who, despite their common interests, failed to establish a strong connection with Nicholson in St Ives, is one of the better known cases in point. See Howarth, 2008. Arguments that the term ‘cosmopolitan’ should not be read as a value judgement are also central to political philosophy. See Brown and Held, 2013.

While ‘cosmopolitanism’ is often used to describe artists’ ambitions, lives and outlook, ‘internationalism’ remains an important term for describing the function or effect of connections which cross geographical borders. ‘International’ is an easily-translatable adjective that was widely used during the 1930s to describe the composition, ideology and outlook of artistic styles and groups. *Circle* (1937) presented an ‘International Survey of Constructive Art’ which reflected its editors’ desire to describe the multinational nature of their creative approach and artistic contacts. The impression that the ‘Constructive idea’ could equally emerge within or be applied to cultures around the globe was framed in terms inherited from earlier abstract art movements. In his *Third Manifesto of De Stijl* (1921), for example, Theo Van Doesburg had introduced abstract art as connected to a moment of international spiritual reawakening. Artists all over the world, he explained, were being driven by an ‘international spirit’ of an ‘internal’ nature.¹⁰⁴ Such ideas provided the grounding for *Circle*’s internationalist stance in which abstract art was deemed capable of inspiring a utopian project of spiritual unity. Terminologically, there are important differences between an ‘international’ connection and a ‘cosmopolitan’ outlook. In particular, the extent to which the international projects of *De Stijl* or *Circle* are cosmopolitan (i.e. ‘open to what is strange and foreign’) have the potential to inspire endless debate. For the purposes of this thesis, both terms are used to describe artists’ practices and outlooks at different moments and stages of their careers.

Other terms can be used to describe processes of globalisation and the outward-looking stance of artists or groups. Some of the networks surrounding art in St Ives might, for instance, be described as ‘transnational’ links between individuals rather than between nation states. The extent to which individuals were free from national structures and identities during the middle of the twentieth century, however, is questionable and using the term requires specific justification. Furthermore, collaborative projects which sought to transcend national borders often continued to tie artworks and artists to a country of origin or residence through their internal structures. Many exhibitions, publications and groups at this time which consisted of an international range of artists or artworks in fact continued to reflect the dominance of territorial markers in their attempts to describe the cultural unity of sub-groups. While processes of globalisation, including mass migration, exile, transportation and communication are highly relevant to this study, the term ‘global’ is rarely appropriate for describing the forms of connection I discuss. Although, as Van Doesburg’s statements reflect, the concept of a ‘world-citizen’ was evoked in rhetoric surrounding international art movements, ‘globalism’, which suggests the incorporation of each area or human into a world-wide structure, plan or operation, is rarely suited to the kinds of connection put in place by artists in St Ives, who, while upholding

¹⁰⁴ Van Doesburg, ‘Manifesto III. Vers une nouvelle formation du monde’, *De Stijl*, iv/8, August 1921: 126.

the value of cosmopolitanism, rarely imagined the world as a terrain that was wholly unified and freely traversable.

v. STRUCTURE AND LIMITATIONS

The structure of this thesis reflects the emphases of its title 'Modern Art Movements and St Ives, 1939–49'. The opening and concluding chapters both take their lead from moments at either end of this date range and examine not only the events which occurred at these times but also how they have been used to frame a narrative of modern art in St Ives in both helpful and restricting ways. Both, furthermore, help to explain how the movements leading to and from St Ives resulted from potent political circumstances and power relationships. Chapter 1 begins in 1939, at the moment when St Ives became a new location for Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, who moved to the town to continue their lives and work. Although the story of modern art in St Ives starts with this journey, this narrative must back to earlier times in order to embrace the continuations, repetitions and ruptures which connect these artists' activities in St Ives with their prior work and ideals. To analyse the motivations, experiences and effects of artists' movements to St Ives, I give particular attention to the range of events and circumstances which led to these relocations, as well as those which impacted the varying ways in which artists' relations with St Ives changed. Focussing on the lives of Gabo and Hepworth shows important similarities and differences between these artists' circumstances and reveals how their decisions to take separate paths following the war's end were impacted by factors both internal and external to the community in St Ives.

Although 1939 marks the moment when Hepworth, Nicholson and Gabo moved to St Ives, the largest chapters in this thesis consider the lineages of art movements, which, as they connect wartime and postwar St Ives to widely-used and followed modern 'isms', necessarily have a wider chronological span. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the paths of two artistic movements which were developed from St Ives by these artists and the younger generations they inspired. Through the narratives of Constructivism and Cubism, St Ives is shown not as an artistic destination or 'group' but as a conduit for important movements as they were dispersed and adapted to new locations between Russia, Europe and the United States.

For artists and writers being introduced to such traditions as they moved across spatial and temporal axes, interpretations of these lineages depended on how they were presented in different forms and fresh contexts. Chapter 2 evaluates the contribution of artists in St Ives to the Constructive movement during the 1930s and wartime period, focussing on how the publication *Circle* (1937) connected interwar aspirations in Paris and Hampstead with wartime St Ives. As a venture with the potential for future editions and other associated publishing

projects, *Circle*'s aims were continued with the relocation of two of its editors, Gabo and Nicholson, who maintained regular contact with Leslie Martin via correspondence. Discussions surrounding potential future projects expose how the movement's past provided impetus and justification for present and future work. They also reveal that the relationship between historical, present and future work was considered in terms which were charted geographically. The range of work included in this 'International Survey', furthermore, opens the geographical picture of Constructive precedents for St Ives, showing how Constructivist legacies from Russia were mediated as they, like Gabo, passed through Europe.

Chapter 3 explores the continuation of Cubist trends in St Ives with a particular focus on Nicholson's work. The relationship between art made in St Ives from 1939 and the Cubist past was manifest in less explicit terms but became equally important to Nicholson's work and subsequent reputation as an international and British modern artist. Positioning Nicholson between the categories of 'late-' and 'post-Cubism', I highlight the continued relevance of Cubist approaches to space and representation, and show how Nicholson's use of this lineage changed over time. Considering his network of correspondents in the wartime and immediate postwar period also demonstrates how the Cubist past offered a shared area of interest and debate within key correspondences between Nicholson and the United States. Conversations with George L.K. Morris particularly reveal the nature of Nicholson's internationalist outlook and help to position his work within the wider context of critical thought on the future of Cubist and more broadly European projects of modern art.

My conclusion focuses on developments after the main period of research to demonstrate wider changes over time which justify my focus on the ten years of modern art in St Ives between 1939 and 1949. 1964 is the date which has been used most often to mark variously the culmination and progressive decline of international modernism in St Ives. Two events draw this into focus and to suggest the gradual changes which distinguish between the types of 'internationalism' which can be said to characterise the collaborative projects in St Ives from 1939 until the later 1940s and those which occur over the following years. Events of 1964 are analysed to pull into focus discrepancies within this longer period while offering recognition that examples of Cubist and Constructivist legacies continued to resurface in St Ives beyond 1949. They also particularly reveal changes to the shape of the international network surrounding artists in St Ives and to the ideas (of them and those around them) regarding what it means to be 'international' in one's life or artistic work.

The first event discussed in my conclusion is Hepworth's commission to create a sculpture to stand outside the United Nations headquarters in New York, which was revealed in June 1964 and which followed a number of high profile British Council displays, including a South

American tour in 1959–60. The UN's *Single Form* (1961–4) and the reflective criticism it received ten years later emphasise that, despite continuing to present the ideals of community and commonality of human experience through her work, Hepworth was internationally present as a singular figure. The second event represents the culmination of a different, interrelated narrative. In 1964 the Czech critic J. P. Hodin posted a questionnaire to artists he considered part of the local artistic culture of St Ives. The project, questions and range of responses he received each demonstrate the diffusion of interests, artistic approaches and attitudes to place encapsulated in current artistic projects in the town. Taken together, Hepworth's international individualism and the clashing identities present in the responses to Hodin expose important differences between two communities: first, the interwar and wartime community of artists who worked in consciously collaborative and reflexive ways to extend the international and modernist ideals of Constructivism and Cubism; second, a later group of different practices, variously local, national and international in effect and identification, which were grouped in 1949 under the collective but highly divisive society, 'The Penwith Society of the Arts in Cornwall'.

Throughout this thesis the networking, internationalism and vast temporal lineages of modernist movements are considered alongside in-depth engagement with the forms of creation and connectivity visible in works of art. The account fluctuates, therefore, between factual descriptions (e.g. of correspondences and collaborations) and visual analysis to explore the correlation between networking structures and the visual character of works of art. The narrative also fluctuates between specific locales and structures which provide a greater sense of placelessness, internationalism or adaptability, as inspired by the shape of the networks which have been traced.

Given its potentially expansive scope, my account is focussed on the decade of modern art in St Ives between 1939 and 1949. As a discussion of the place of St Ives within longer movements, however, the narratives begin in earlier times and other places, most notably in Hampstead during the 1930s but also in Paris during the 1920s. Constructivism and Cubism, I propose, were the most significant international art movements for artists who gathered in St Ives from 1939. As such, they also offer the most fruitful lines of enquiry for evaluating St Ives's role to these movements and to a broader international picture of changing tendencies and ideas. Legacies of Constructivism and Cubism continued to be felt in work made in St Ives following 1949, in the work of Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter, among others. Despite these continuations, 1949 is proposed as a marker of a changed mode. As a place, St Ives continued to offer artists a space to work as individuals or collective groups. Yet, in the years following the immediate postwar period, as the community of artists expanded and opportunities for international connections increased, the 'local' artistic community

consisted of a much more fractured and diverse range of artists. Less united in aim, they both responded and contributed to an equally varied array of contemporary movements which, while connected to the earlier twentieth-century artistic projects, enveloped new ideas and generated new approaches. While my concluding chapter provides some account of this change, an in-depth consideration of the fascinating range of connections characterising art in St Ives following 1949 would entail another project.

1. 1939

So, one afternoon in late August 1939, they all filed into the ancient car and drove to Cornwall, arriving at midnight in pouring rain. And the war came down on them from there.¹

The above extract forms a vivid impression of how modern art movements arrived in St Ives. In London, two artists packed their children and most essential items into an ‘ancient’ modern motorcar and arrived in Cornwall at midnight. Details of their journey are not included, but by the time they arrived, in ‘pouring rain’, their prospects had changed.

1939 has become a foundational date within histories of modern art in St Ives.² Indeed it was on 25 August 1939 that Hepworth, Nicholson and their triplets moved from Hampstead in London to Carbis Bay. Within the previous few days, all British subjects had been advised to leave Germany and all German citizens advised by their embassy to leave Britain. By 3 September Germany and Slovakia had invaded Poland and Chamberlain had declared that Britain was in a ‘state of war’. Margaret Gardiner, who recalled the above events in her autobiographical *Scatter of Memories* (1988), was not with Hepworth and Nicholson on their long journey but was close enough to both artists to have received an accurate description. This movement started a trail of subsequent events.

Taking its lead from this journey, this chapter focuses on artists’ movements to St Ives. Through the contrasting examples of Gabo and Hepworth, it explores artists’ motivations to relocate to St Ives and their experiences living and working in the town and its surroundings during the war. It draws on the words of the artists as recorded in diaries, letters and later accounts as well as on those of their friends. Where possible, descriptions of these artists’ decisions and movements are connected to the artworks they made which, often produced under itinerant circumstances, reflect the experiences of their makers. Gabo and Hepworth shared similar concerns throughout the war, yet at its end one decided to leave St Ives while the other decided to stay. Events surrounding these decisions reveal changes within the modernist community at St Ives and on different artists’ work. The final part of the chapter probes presumptions surrounding St Ives as a ‘seaside’ artists’ colony at a time of war and suggests what St Ives, as a town towards the end of a peninsula on the British Isles, can contribute to discussions of ‘coastal modernism’.

¹ Gardiner, 1988: 195.

² Stephens, for instance, describes the first period of the modern artists’ colony as ‘the war’. Stephens, 1996: 18.

i. WARTIME MIGRATION: GABO AND HEPWORTH

The crossing of geographical boundaries is central to the development of modern art in St Ives but is not a purely modern phenomenon. Cresswell writes, 'People and things have always moved and mobility did not start in the twenty-first century or even with the industrial revolution.'³ Cornwall had been the chosen destination for many travelling artists since the early years of the nineteenth century; both Newlyn and St Ives were receiving regular visitors by the early 1880s. The story of artists' movements to Cornwall, therefore, reaches further back than 1939. Yet, given the importance of Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson to the development of modern art in St Ives, it is helpful to probe the motivations of these artists' first movements to St Ives and the resulting dislocations, limitations or creative possibilities each subsequently experienced.

Gabo's move from Paris to London in March 1936 was a positive step both professionally and personally. He had disliked Paris and found relatively little interest in his work in its artistic circles and galleries. However, in London he was enthusiastically received by a number of people who became his friends and who helped him to settle into London life.⁴ When Gabo first decided to extend his stay in the city, both Nicholson and Jim Ede made enquiries on his behalf regarding potential employment.⁵ In turn, Marcus Brumwell, collector and advertising executive to whom Gabo had been introduced by his new friends, encouraged him in design projects which provided him with much-needed income.⁶ To assist her friend financially while she remained in Paris, Nicholson's first wife Winifred also commissioned the sculpture, *Construction in Space: Stone with a Collar* (1936).⁷ The presence of fellow émigrés within the vicinity of Hampstead, where Gabo soon moved, probably also provided assistance and comfort.⁸ Hungarian designer Marcel Breuer allowed Gabo to stay in his home while he was

³ Cresswell, 2011: 555.

⁴ Hammer and Lodder note that Winifred Nicholson facilitated Gabo's entry into Britain. Her brother Wilfred Roberts was an MP who introduced Gabo to fellow MP Arthur Duckworth, who secured Gabo's visa success. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 233.

⁵ Gabo had probably met Nicholson and Hepworth during his first visit to London, when he definitely met Jim Ede of the Tate Gallery. Hammer and Lodder note that by the end of 1935 both Nicholson and Ede were making enquiries on Gabo's behalf as to how he might earn a living in Britain. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 221.

⁶ Hammer and Lodder explain that it was through Nicholson that Gabo met Brumwell, who was then director of Stuart Advertising Agency, and that by August 1936 Brumwell had obtained permission from the Ministry of Labour to employ Gabo 'as an occasional consultant'. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 234.

⁷ Gabo referred to this work in correspondence as 'Shale' [Shell]. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 235.

⁸ In Hampstead, Gabo lived at 11 Lawn Road, near the Isokon flats. It was in the Isobar that he met fellow Russians and Europeans whom he had already met or known. See Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 233.

away.⁹ By the summer of 1936, Gabo had met his future wife Miriam, an American living in London. They married late in 1937 with Nicholson and Hepworth as witnesses.

The enthusiastic interest in Constructivist art in London during the 1930s provided Gabo with practical support, recognition and artistic confidence, and this stood in sharp contrast to his relative isolation in Paris.¹⁰ Speaking later in the 1960s, Gabo described how London offered ‘such a contrast with Paris which was violent, gossipy and full of intrigue and jealousies’.¹¹ He continued by differentiating the two places using metaphors associated with his times. He wrote, ‘London to me was like coming to a place of peace from a place of war.’¹² Although France was not officially ‘at war’ during the mid-1930s, Gabo seems to have connected an atmosphere of political and artistic competition, rivalry and suspicion with the country’s proximity to Germany, which was by then under Third Reich control.

In London Gabo’s Constructive forms and ideas were received particularly enthusiastically by Nicholson and Hepworth. In January 1936 Nicholson wrote to his friend, the English critic and poet Herbert Read, ‘Gabo is directly in touch with Today & with a very wide & far reaching grasp of life. Potentially he is one of the most important people working,’ thus establishing Gabo’s cosmopolitanism and contemporary importance.¹³ Nicholson also understood the reciprocity of respect that Gabo and Hepworth held for each other’s work. He continued, ‘He [Gabo] seems to hold a very high opinion of Barbara’s work – he said her sculpture is the most important being made today either abroad or in England.’¹⁴ Such a sense of unity of purpose and mutual respect helped Gabo to feel secure in England and to feel its potential as an area from which his work could grow and expand. Central to this development was the production and distribution of the journal *Circle* (1937).¹⁵ As the following chapter shows, *Circle* was created in a spirit of opposition to other contemporary movements (most notably Surrealism and Socialist Realism) and to the spread of Fascism. It was also more positively driven by aspirations to consolidate an international Constructive movement and to associate that movement with the editors’ own work.¹⁶ Gabo was featured as a father-figure of the movement

⁹ In a letter to Leslie Martin written probably in 1937, Nicholson notes that Gabo would be ‘staying at Breuer’s until 22nd when Breuer returns’. Nicholson to Martin, 16 November [c.1937], GMA A70.3.3.12.

¹⁰ Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 235.

¹¹ ‘Naum Gabo talking to Maurice de Sausmarez,’ in M. de Sausmarez (ed.) 1969: 23.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nicholson to Read, 24 January [1936], Herbert Read Papers, Victoria.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Martin, Nicholson and Gabo (eds), 1937.

¹⁶ In 1936 Germany occupied the demilitarised Rhineland and held the Olympic Games. In 1946 Martin recalled the significance of *Circle* as an opposition to Surrealist art. In a letter to Nicholson Martin wrote, ‘I don’t think that we should forget that all this was happening just about the time of the Surrealist development in the country and there was some need for a term for a form of art which was quite opposite in character.’ Martin to Nicholson, 21 January 1946, enclosed with Nicholson to Summerson, 25 January 1946, TGA 20048.1.78, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 240.

and his essay 'The Constructive Idea of Art', which was placed at the beginning of its first edition, allowed him to present his own view of past and present form to new audiences.

From the start St Ives was for the Gabos a temporary location. At the outbreak of war Gabo decided they should leave London for America, where he had been planning a joint exhibition with his brother Antoine Pevsner. A crossing from Glasgow was booked for within a month, yet plans were thwarted on 3 September when the SS *Athenia*, a passenger ship sailing from Glasgow to Montreal, was sunk in the Atlantic by a German submarine. Although it was an isolated event, news of the disaster (over one hundred passengers and crew members lost their lives) was widespread and, like many others, the Gabos cancelled their forthcoming departure.¹⁷ Persuaded by Nicholson to join them in St Ives, they arrived in the town one week later, on 10 September 1939, and immediately found lodgings in a new bungalow nearby.¹⁸ Writing to Alfred Barr in New York on 1 October, Gabo explained that he would be staying in Cornwall 'for the time being', hopeful that a New York exhibition in the autumn of 1940 might enable him to move on to the States.¹⁹ Although they made intermittent plans to leave, Naum and Miriam stayed in St Ives until 1946.²⁰

At times Gabo came to feel very much at home in Cornwall and England. In May 1940, he wrote to Leslie Martin, 'Personally I do not regret for a moment that the circumstances have forced me to stay in this country for the time being,' although he added that he 'may have lost some material advantages which I have not at all here now'.²¹ The above letter continues to suggest that in 1940 Gabo was no longer looking towards the States as an aim or inevitable destination. Despite the difficulties, he resolved, 'I do not look upon America as the promised land or the lost paradise as the others do.'²² Nicholson and Hepworth were both aware of Gabo's change in feeling, which must have offered a positive contrast to Mondrian's departure from London to New York that autumn. Following the start of the Blitz, on 26 September 1940 Nicholson reported to Martin that Mondrian had just departed and hypothesised, 'I doubt if

¹⁷ Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 269.

¹⁸ Hammer and Lodder note that Gabo arrived in St Ives by 15 September 1939. Correspondence between Nicholson and Martin suggests he arrived on 10 September. The following day, Nicholson wrote to Martin, 'We persuaded Gabo & Miriam to come down here & they arrived yesterday.' Nicholson to Martin, 11 Sept 1939, GMA 70.3.8.9. Nicholson continued by reporting that he had found Gabo a 'very nice' and 'unfurnished bungalow', Faerystones.

¹⁹ Gabo to Barr, 1 October 1939, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 269.

²⁰ The Gabo's plans were further complicated by the fact that by mid-October 1943, Miriam had become pregnant.

²¹ Gabo to Martin, 10 May 1940, GMA A70.1.2. Letters sent over the following months show that Gabo hoped Martin might assist him in finding employment. A few months later, for instance, Gabo wrote more plainly to Martin, 'there is something that is pressing me quite urgently [...] The point is, to put it plain, that I need a job' Gabo to Martin, 23 August [1940], GMA A70.1.1.

²² Gabo to Martin, 10 May 1940, GMA A70.1.2.

Gabo & Miriam will now go – I hope they don't.²³ Possibly comparing his own position to Mondrian, Gabo himself described feeling more settled. In October he wrote to a friend, 'I cannot help myself feeling to be a part of this country and the people.' He continued by expressing his awareness that, as a Russian of Jewish descent, this feeling connected him with a large population of refugees and exiles who had found new homes in strange lands. He explained simply, 'I am sure that there are many strangers in the world who feel that.'²⁴

Gabo's wartime diaries provide an important record of his migration to St Ives and of the war which continued around him. Essayist Philippe Lejeune describes diaries as 'terra incognita', spaces to be filled and which are open to a range of roles according to needs and circumstances.²⁵ Similarly, a scholar of Virginia Woolf's diaries describes how they often 'spring from the greatest need'.²⁶ Gabo's diaries were especially important to him as he moved between countries and communities, and as he sought to capture or to explain his experiences of new places and concerns about personal and world events. His diaries could also be transported with him individually or as a whole; they thus provided him with a stock of information and memories to which he could return. Very soon after his arrival in Cornwall, on 15 September 1939, Gabo turned to one, writing, 'I am living in a distant part of England. This is far away from any of the places threatened by air attack – although I don't perceive any conviction anywhere that the plunderers of the air will not fly in over these fishing villages.'²⁷ While he described St Ives as 'far away' from places directly under threat, Gabo was clearly aware of the potential danger from beyond the coast.

In another diary entry, written in June 1940, Gabo explained the complex effect of his relative peace. He wrote,

Meanwhile one looks at the sea (for the past few days it has been especially calm, especially blue and especially endearing). It lies stark naked between my window and the horizon and captivates one by its simplicity. The heart suffers looking at it and the contrast with what is happening in the world. One looks and thinks how many more days or weeks will this peace last on this little plot of land?²⁸

²³ Nicholson to Martin, 26 September [1940], GMA 70.3.7.8. Mondrian arrived in New York on 3 October 1940.

²⁴ Gabo, draft letter to Arthur Duckworth, 8 October [1940], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 273.

²⁵ Lejeune, 2009: 76.

²⁶ Lounsbury, 2014: 10.

²⁷ Quoted in *St Ives 1939-64*, exh. cat. 1985: 100 (trans. Lodder).

²⁸ Gabo, diary entry for 15 June 1940, 'Diary, handwritten in a ringbound notebook, with enclosures', 15 September 1939–17 March 1941, TGA 9313.2.4.1, quoted in Tooby, 1993: 37; Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 272.

Feeling displaced from harsher realities, Gabo was plagued by uncertainty about the future of peace in his current location. Referring to the 'little plot' of St Ives, the Cornish peninsula or the British Isles, he imagined his position within a larger terrain engulfed by war. He expressed his sense of dislocation by juxtaposing the calmness of the sea with the immense social and political disruptions happening over 'the world'.

During the early summer of 1940 Gabo was especially affected by news about world events, especially that which concerned the fates of his family members, fellow Russians and the wider Jewish community. Having not been in direct contact with his family since 1936, he was especially alarmed by the Fall of France in the spring of 1940, as his brother Antoine had been living in Paris. Hammer and Lodder have recalled that Gabo did not learn that his brother was safe until that July.²⁹ Gabo's experiences of war from St Ives were, as for many others', characterised by a sense of temporal arrest, as he waited for news of different countries' fates. For Gabo such news also affected his work by imposing limitations to materials, space and selling opportunities. Responding to a lack of commercial public audience for his work in England, he described the situation starkly in the summer of 1940: 'Living here I cannot sell anything to America either. So I am sitting here and look at black-out.'³⁰

Although comparatively less than London, there was an element of real risk in St Ives which, combined with knowledge of events taking place not that far away, caused Gabo significant concern. By 1940 a number of his contemporaries, including Bernard Leach, Adrian Stokes, Denis Mitchell and Borlase Smart, had joined the St Ives Home Guard. Alongside Nicholson, Gabo acted as an air raid warden in Carbis Bay. In April 1941 he described, as a witness might, a major bomb attack at the Royal Dockyards in Devonport, Plymouth. On the evening of Monday 21 April ninety-six sailors were killed when a Luftwaffe bomb was dropped over the naval barracks. His diary entry from 22 April 1941 reads,

Yesterday taking down the shutters before going to bed I saw the sky glowing. Plymouth was burning. It was about 100-120 kilometres from us yet the glow was enormous and explosions of the bombs and the red rockets of the defending guns were all visible.³¹

Gabo's detailed description suggests his deep connection to the historical significance of events and his awareness of how his diary could help him to process experiences of exile and fear.

²⁹ Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 272. On 16 June 1940, Nicholson explained to Martin that Gabo was 'very anxious at the moment about Pevsner.' Nicholson to Martin, 16 June [1940], GMA A70.3.7.4.

³⁰ Gabo to Martin, 23 August [1940], GMA A70.1.1.

³¹ Gabo, diary entry for 22 April 1941, 'Diary handwritten in a slim red notebook, with enclosures', 30 March 1941–27 May 1942, TGA 9313.2.4.3.

Having spent much of his life in self-imposed exile (he had moved to Germany to study in 1911) he was profoundly affected by events in Russia and tried to stay connected in some way with his homeland. In one of his first diary entries in February 1929, which has been translated by Lodder, Gabo explained the purpose of his writing:

my long stay abroad, my constant and exclusive relations with foreigners – the use of German in my family life, the absence of intimate Russian friends with whom I could from time to time talk or correspond, my separation from all my relatives [...] all this has developed in me a depressing anguish about [...] my native language, about Russian structures of thought. [...] I have discovered a need in myself to speak Russian to Russians, and as there are none of the latter who are close to me, that at least to speak Russian to myself.³²

Gabo's complex sense of geographical belonging was strengthened by the sense of loss he felt for his homeland. Recognising his use of the German language in his family and 'constant and exclusive' contact with foreigners, he felt a need to maintain his native language and 'structures of thought' at this time when his family and childhood culture were particularly under threat.

Gabo continued to use his diaries as an emotional outsource for the rest of his life and accounts are especially full during times of difficulty, including his last years in Germany and the war years in St Ives. In September 1941 Gabo wrote that he had been 'paralysed by the military events on the Russian front,' describing in physical terms the effect of snapshots of wartime events at home following Germany's break of the Nazi-Soviet pact and invasion from that June.³³ He wrote,

When the German locusts reached Bryansk and I began to catch fleeting glimpses in the newspapers of the names of villages and towns so dear to me, I felt only one thing, that these robbers had burst into my own father's house and my heart trembled for the fate of those there.³⁴

Recognising place names in newspapers helped Gabo to feel close to his native country and family so that, despite geographical distance, he empathised with victims in a strikingly physical way. Following his time in Germany, Gabo particularly despised that country's animalistic turn on his native people. Raised in a non-practising Jewish family, Gabo later recognised that the

³² Gabo, diary entry for 9 February 1929, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 161.

³³ Gabo, diary entry for 27 September 1941, 'Diary handwritten in a slim red notebook, with enclosures', 30 March 1941–27 May 1942, TGA 9313.2.4.3, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 278. In the previous month, the Germans had attacked Leningrad, beginning what has become known as the three 'black months' of 1941. See Chapter 15, 'War and Revolution' in Figes, 2014: 305–321.

³⁴ Ibid.

Holocaust had led him to embrace his cultural Judaism, which was complex. He later explained, ‘People have made and continued to make me a Jew [...] I have only one answer for them: To those who ask kindly are you a Jew? I answer no. To those who ask if I am anti-semitic, I reply I am a hundred [percent] Jewish.’³⁵

Over time Gabo’s hesitation to commit to St Ives became increasingly clear to those around him who noted the disruptive effect this had on the artistic community and on his own state of mind. Around the spring of 1942 Hepworth expressed her frustration to him. She wrote,

During the times you have mentally decided to stay here, in England, you have been the most happy – expressing constructive thoughts about the war, society and ourselves [...] when you have mentally toyed with the American idea you have been most unhappy, tending rather to sabotage our common effort. [...] I cannot help feeling that the ‘stone wall’ feeling you spoke of is not caused by events but by the conflict within you. You harden your heart to justify yourself.³⁶

Hepworth’s words demonstrate an important paradox defining this moment. While Gabo remained a key member of their community (Hepworth uses the word ‘ourselves’), his conflicting feelings and actions were disrupting ‘our common effort’. Quoting Gabo’s material description of a hard, cold and heavy “‘stone wall’ feeling”, she called for resolution.

The trauma of war and feelings of displacement continued to resurface so that Gabo realised he could not stay in St Ives long after the war. During the summer of 1942, he again expressed the dislocation of not being ‘at the front’ while witnessing events across the world through his own wartime environment. In July 1942 he described the empathy he felt for those living along ‘all the fronts’ of Europe, which is worth quoting at length:

I do not know what is worse – to be in the trenches and to have only one concern – to kill as many of these vile reptiles as possible and think of nothing except that; or to live above these blue bays and to have in one’s mind every day and every hour, all the fronts, all the burning towns and villages of this crippled planet of ours, to cry with every wounded soul in the ashes of my native land, to cry with the sorrow of the Czechs, the Jews, the Norwegians and the Poles, to die with the Greeks on the hills of Athens, with the Jews in the stonestacks of Poland, to hang with all those who have been hanged in the devastated squares of Europe and not to have the strength or ability to even shoot, and not to be considered to be at the front,

³⁵ Gabo, Scratchpad, 1970s, TGA 9313.2.6, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 15.

³⁶ Hepworth, letter to Gabo [before Summer 1942], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 276.

even though our front is here – there it is shaking hands on the other side of the bay, the aerodrome and the sirens are wailing at this very minute.³⁷

This passage shows how Gabo's experiences of the Second World War were affected by other times and places. For instance, his awareness of not being himself 'at the front' recalls accounts of trench warfare during the Great War.³⁸ He specifically contrasted the experience of being underground 'in the trenches' with his current wide view of 'these blue bays' from which he could sympathise with other landscapes which had faced or were facing frontline attack, including 'the hills of Athens' to 'the stonestacks of Poland' and 'the devastated squares of Europe'. His description of 'all the burning towns and villages' was probably informed by events in Russia and shows him considering the impact on isolated, rural communities and the resultant trail of devastation overwhelming a 'crippled planet'. The end of the passage also hints that the bay (his own outlook and 'front') was equally dependent upon leaders' decisions and international agreements.

As Hepworth's letter that Spring suggests, her relationship with Gabo had become increasingly fraught by 1942. Although earlier he had been eager to share his ideas on art and life, Gabo by now opposed the formal similarity of Hepworth's works to his own. Still working in the close quarters of Carbis Bay, by 1943 Gabo and Hepworth had not simply ceased working co-operatively but were actively distancing themselves from each other. Around 1946, Hepworth recalled, 'The trouble started three years ago when he accused me of stealing the OVAL.' 'Since that time,' she continued, 'I haven't seen any of his work thank goodness!'³⁹ Growing increasingly isolated from the artistic community in St Ives, by the autumn of 1945 Gabo wrote persuasively to James Johnson Sweeney of the Museum of Modern Art in New York: 'the sooner I get out of this seclusion and come in contact with the world again, the better it will be for me and for my work.'⁴⁰ Gabo again desired a more cosmopolitan environment and a wider reach for his work. He attempted to reignite discussions of an exhibition at the Museum by offering Sweeney *Spiral Theme* (1940) as a sign of his commitment. He also set out on important networking trails in the States and was backed by Read, who provided recommendations to Bauhaus émigrés Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, both of whom Gabo had known in the 1920s.⁴¹ Gabo eventually secured a visa to visit the States on the premise

³⁷ Gabo, diary entry for 10 July 1942, 'Diary handwritten in a thick brown notebook', 1 June 1942–7 December 1944, TGA 8313.2.4.5, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 284.

³⁸ In Germany on the outbreak of the First World War, Gabo and Pevsner fled to Norway, where he also lived in relatively peaceful exile between late 1914 and early 1917.

³⁹ Hepworth to Ramsden, Monday [1946], TGA 9310.1.1.38.

⁴⁰ Gabo to Sweeney, 9 September 1945, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 310.

⁴¹ Read provided Gabo with letters of introduction to 'the people who matter most'. He wrote, 'Gropius will help you in Boston and Harvard, and Moholy at Chicago.' Read to Gabo, 25 April 1946, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 311.

that he would be holding discussions with the Museum about a potential exhibition.⁴² In August 1946 he sent some works across in anticipation and booked his family on a boat. They left Southampton on 23 November and arrived at New York Harbour one week later.⁴³

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For Hepworth, a profoundly idealist believer in the unity of mankind, the war was also a traumatic experience. St Ives offered her family a means of escaping London and the potential to continue to work as best as she could in a relatively safe environment. Nicholson had made a visit to Cornwall in 1928 with Christopher Wood, where he had found inspiration in the local landscape and the untutored painter Alfred Wallis. He had subsequently returned a couple of times in the early 1930s.⁴⁴ Crucially, his friends Adrian Stokes and Margaret Mellis had lived in Carbis Bay since April 1939 and in August they invited Hepworth, Nicholson and the young triplets to their house as a temporary measure.⁴⁵ The family stayed with Stokes and Mellis at Little Park Owles for four months, before moving to Dunluce, their own rented house, on 27 December.

Living with their friends, both Hepworth and Nicholson experienced a relatively sudden shortage of working materials and space. Coming from their separate studios on the Mall, where they had enjoyed their own professional space, they had to adjust to life without studios and with only limited tools and materials.⁴⁶ Deciding to leave for Cornwall, Hepworth later recalled taking her most prized possessions: ‘when I took the children to Cornwall five days before war was declared I took the maquette [*Sculpture with Colour*, c.1939] with me, also my hammer and a minimum of stone carving tools.’⁴⁷ Taking a small model and some tools would, she hoped, help her to continue to work on ideas which had started to develop. However, Hepworth was immediately faced with little time and space to carve. She later remembered the first two years of the war starkly: ‘I was not able to carve at all.’⁴⁸ Hepworth’s recollection of the move and following period, both published in Read’s 1952 monograph, omits an interesting detail of story. In September 1939 a van financed by Gardiner delivered Hepworth’s other evacuees – ‘quite a few of Barbara’s precious carvings’ – to her in St Ives.⁴⁹

⁴² Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 311.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 311.

⁴⁴ See ‘Chronology’ in Lewison, 1993.

⁴⁵ Nicholson recounted his encounter with Wallis in a later article for *Horizon*. Nicholson, 1943.

⁴⁶ In 1936 Nicholson described the difference that having separate studios had made: ‘a new freedom to work for us both.’ Nicholson to Martin, 4 September [1936] GMA A70.3.2.5.

⁴⁷ Read, 1952: n.p.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: n.p.

⁴⁹ On 28 September 1939, Nicholson wrote to his brother-in-law John Summerson, ‘I expect Barbara told you Margaret Gardiner paid for a van to evacuate a lot of our work down here – quite a few of Barbara’s precious carvings & my big pts.’ Nicholson to Summerson, 28 September 1939, TGA 20048.1.2.

From September 1939 Hepworth lacked the time to devote the attention that settling into work in a new environment would require. Instead, she began a successful market garden with Stokes. Nicholson spent some time working in the garden and made landscape paintings which both the Leicester and Lefevre Galleries in London had asked him to make.⁵⁰ Hepworth had no comparable means of attaining an income through art at this time. Nicholson reported to Martin at the end of the year that Hepworth was even working ‘on Sundays as gardener to the Gabos’ to make ends meet. She had not ‘done a stroke of sculpture since war started.’⁵¹ Nicholson was keen to impress the burden of financial hardship and lack of space upon Martin, who he knew to be a supportive patron capable of offering occasional financial assistance. Around the same time he asked Martin whether he could provide a guarantee on the rent of their own property, Dunluce, which would give both Hepworth and Nicholson their own space to work. Having described the difficulties, Nicholson outlined his ‘reasons for living here [in Cornwall] at the moment’, which combined financial, practical, familial and creative concerns. The list is as follows:

1. that we already have a lot of our beds, furniture etc... here –
2. that Barbara says we can live here more cheaply than anywhere else
3. that it is perfect for the children –
4. that I can get some landscape painting out of it as I find this particular country & sea v. stimulating to ideas - & Barbara says it is full of sculptural ideas for her – she says perhaps more so than any other part of England etc etc⁵²

Living in Dunluce from the turn of 1940, Hepworth, who was more dependent on a studio environment for sculpting, was able to do some work, although she remained limited by time and a shortage of materials. Yet by 1941 she was stimulated by sculptural drawings and paintings which were sold among an existing network of family and friends.⁵³ This inspired a fresh desire to commit time and attention to her own work – so much so that in February Nicholson reported to Martin that she ‘has been doing drawing for the first time for about a

⁵⁰ After initially thinking he might need to spend some time in London to earn some money, Nicholson wrote to Martin late in 1939, ‘it is still be possible that I may be able to earn more by staying here & painting landscapes (as I have just sold a G & R landscape at Leicester Galleries) & can at the same time justify my war existence by working ½ a day in the market garden Adrian & Barbara are arranging here.’ Nicholson to Martin, n.d. [late 1939], GMA A70.3.6.12. In December 1939 Nicholson wrote to Martin again to say that he had sold a landscape at the Leicester Galleries, which helped him to pay some bills, and that both the Leicester and Lefevre Galleries had written to him asking for landscapes. He was especially pleased that the Leicester Galleries had asked him to send three in time for an exhibition in January. Nicholson to Martin, n.d. ‘Friday’ [November/December 1939], GMA A70.3.6.14.

⁵¹ Nicholson to Martin, n.d. ‘Friday’ [November/December 1939], GMA A70.3.6.14.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Friends who bought paintings included Gardiner, C.S. Reddihough, Alastair Morton, John Wells, Tim Bennett, Ramsden and Eates, Martin and Hepworth’s parents and Hepworth’s sister and brother-in-law John Summerson, who bought *Drawing for ‘Sculpture with Colour’ (Forms with Colour)*, 1941 (Tate).

year'.⁵⁴ This offered Hepworth a much-needed creative outlet following the first few years of war when she regularly remarked that sculpting materials were 'almost impossible to get hold of'.⁵⁵

Hepworth's experience of wartime St Ives was intertwined with the practical and emotional implications of being a mother to young triplets. Simon, Rachel and Sarah were four years old when the family moved to Cornwall and Hepworth's experiences of her familial role often dominate her own accounts of wartime life and work. Writing to her friend the writer E. H. Ramsden in the winter of 1941, Hepworth described the implications of motherhood on her working routine. She wrote,

I've slowly discovered how to create for 30 mins, cook for 40 mins [*sic.*] create for another 30 & look after children for 50 & so on through the day. It's a sort of a miracle to be able to do it – I think the secret lies in not resisting the chores & drudges & in carrying the creative mood on within oneself while cooking so that it's unbroken. [...] Normally I used to need 8 hrs continuous work to really create something.⁵⁶

Hepworth was positive about having found a creative solution to new working conditions, yet it was clearly difficult to combine her two roles. With her work and private life entwined even more than before, she noted the possibility of considering her artistic and household work in similarly creative and practical terms. When it was possible, Hepworth relied on nannies. In August 1944 she expressed the impact of such help to Ramsden's partner Margot Eates, writing with joy reflective of her earlier confinement to the indoor domestic environment: 'To-day I had amazing news – that Nanny is to be released forthwith! I can't quite believe it or what it entails – more freedom to work & freedom to go out, even go away.'⁵⁷ In personal letters Hepworth continued to display frustration at the restrictions that being a mother and housewife had imposed. In mid-1943 she wrote to Ramsden concerning another critic's suggestion that she had not produced many carvings. She was clearly desperate to explain:

He must know why I haven't produced many carvings – it's the WAR-WORK. He must know that. If I didn't have to cook wash up nurse children ad infinitum I should carve carve & carve. The proof of this is in the drawings. They are not just a

⁵⁴ Nicholson wrote, 'Barbara, too, has done some drawing for the first time for about a year & looks a different person'. Nicholson to Martin, 17 Feb [1941], TGA 70.3.8.1.

⁵⁵ Hepworth to Ramsden, 7 May [1940], TGA 9310.1.1.3.

⁵⁶ Hepworth to Ramsden, 'Tuesday', n.d. [late November 1941], TGA 9310.1.1.7.

⁵⁷ Hepworth to Eates, 21 August 1944, TGA 9310.1.1.30.

way of amusing myself nor are they experimental probings – they are my sculptures born in the disguise of 2 dimensions.⁵⁸

At a particularly low point, therefore, Hepworth described familial responsibilities as her own wartime challenge – a disruption to the normative practices and routines of her career. She considered her drawings as proof that she remained thinking in sculptural terms and she promoted them as child-like premonitory sculptural forms to be realised at a later date.

For Hepworth, living in St Ives during the Second World War was a mixed experience replete with frustration and occasionally punctuated with a sense of pride at continuing both familial and creative work against the difficulties of the time. Foremost, this was a challenging period in which the dislocations and restrictions imposed by the war combined with those of her family's quick relocation to West Cornwall as well as the on-going challenge of being a mother to three young children. Hepworth also hinted, however, that overcoming such trials was crucial to the development of her ideas and work. In January 1942 she wrote to Ramsden expressing her pride in the advances made by Gabo, Nicholson and herself: 'Gabo has done a fine new construction. Ben some lovely new work & I feel on top of my form also. But difficulties are super difficult!'⁵⁹ Together Hepworth felt that they were creating new forms and ideas, which, in each other's presence, contributed to a greater aim. In face of war, difficulties and destruction, their combined artistic persistence, striving forward in an era of tragic impediments, were all the more replete with ideological constructive meaning. In 1944 Hepworth wrote to Read explaining her desire to 'carve at all costs, to create quicker than things can be destroyed.'⁶⁰ Her proximity with Nicholson and Gabo in St Ives, furthermore, undoubtedly provided a sense of comfort and unity in aim, which was at the time profoundly difficult to attain. Writing to Ramsden in mid-1943, Hepworth revealed, 'Gabo & I sometimes comfort each other by confiding our secret feelings about sculpture in relation to life, to each other.'⁶¹

Throughout the war St Ives remained in Hepworth's mind a temporary wartime location. Recognising how it had suited her family's needs, in August 1944 she wrote hopefully of future possibilities: 'There will be plenty of work soon & more easily seen when I get back to London.'⁶² However, a growing sense of individuality and trust in the direction of her own work, combined with increasing professional and personal divergence from Gabo from 1943, contributed to her desire to stay. At the end of the war Hepworth considered important tensions between her work and the historical Constructivist approach. Her feelings were so strong that

⁵⁸ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. 'Saturday' [mid 1943], TGA 9310.1.1.20.

⁵⁹ Hepworth to Ramsden, 8 January 1942, TGA 9310.1.1.8.

⁶⁰ Hepworth to Read, n.d. [1944], Herbert Read Papers, Victoria.

⁶¹ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. [mid-1943], TGA 9310.1.1.20.

⁶² Hepworth to Eates, 21 August 1944, TGA 9310.1.1.30.

around 1946 she wrote to Ramsden, 'I hate the word "Constructivist" & wish to be absolutely disassociated from it.'⁶³ After using the more open term 'Constructive', she suggested that connections to historical 'Constructivism' had slowly seeped into how 'Constructive' art was portrayed, making it unsuitable to her own work, time and artistic freedom. She expressed her distance from it by enforcing changes in time and place: 'It implies adherence to some Moscow tenets of 1916 (?),' she wrote, 'which I have never seen & know nothing of!'⁶⁴

In the same letter Hepworth expressed particular caution surrounding the suitability of the label 'Constructive' to her artistic approach. Explaining how it could be helpful if used to describe 'an attitude of mind only', she analysed its associations with Gabo's sculpture and resolved that it could not be used to describe a carving.⁶⁵ Her words then reveal that her affirmation was connected to other growing interests. In particular she stressed her longing to reveal the sensual potential of a material by responding to its touch, explaining, 'the sensuous joy of material & touch, hardness, softness, colour, weight texture are all bound up (for me) in the emotional experience of past & present.'⁶⁶ Hepworth explicitly contrasted this responsive approach with what she saw as Gabo's value of an *a priori* Constructive 'idea' which existed independently of the material from which a sculpture was made. She explained, 'I only have a partial idea of what I'm going to do. Constructive seems to imply a clear & total idea of what is going to be done coupled with a strict adherence to certain laws & principles.'⁶⁷

Hepworth associated a lack of material responsiveness in Gabo's approach with an ideological dogmatism concerning the purity of the 'Constructive idea' and her language constantly expressed a desire for artistic and personal freedom from collective codes or impositions. In the same note to Ramsden, she described an important decision concerning her future path. She stated her artistic independence: 'I want to be free to impose my own discipline. I don't like theories or doctrines because I wish to be free to break laws if necessary!'⁶⁸ This, she felt, she could not achieve if she was bound to 'a clear & total idea' of the work, or to Gabo's Constructive ideals. Evoking both her material process and professional identity, she wrote, 'I feel the necessity for complete pliability & that is why I am deliberately breaking with the group of "constructive" artists if such a group exists, which I very much doubt!'⁶⁹ The conclusion of Hepworth's letter to Ramsden reveals the distance at which she considered her neighbour:

⁶³ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. [c. 1946], TGA 9310.1.1.39.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. After Gabo left St Ives, Hepworth again described her relationship with Gabo in terms of doctrines. She wrote, 'He may be too deeply wounded about me not wanting to be called "Constructivist" [...] it's such a religion with him [...] I doubt whether Gabo would like what I do now and in any case it is not important to me what one is called!'. Hepworth to Gardiner, quoted in Gardiner, 1988: 45.

⁶⁹ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. [c. 1946], TGA 9310.1.1.39.

‘Gabo might be in Siberia for all we see of him.’⁷⁰ It is clear that Gabo’s decision to leave St Ives in 1946 and Hepworth’s sense of increasing freedom from his version of ‘Constructive’ art were strongly interlinked and central to Hepworth’s decision to stay in St Ives following the war and to continue on a more singular path.

Hepworth’s fresh confidence in a more sensual and responsive approach to materials was related to her growing connection to Cornwall, its landscape, vernacular materials, geology and prehistory. Around 1945 she described this change to Ramsden as an unlikely consequence of war. She wrote, ‘I think I’m slightly intoxicated these days by the beauty round us here in living things too great a contrast to “all the rest”. But Thank God for it.’⁷¹ In statements, Hepworth also now frequently included Cornwall in a chain of places which she considered important to her life and work. In 1951 she summarised that Cornwall was the culmination of two experiences of form and light, one in the North of England and the other further south in the Mediterranean. She wrote, ‘Here in Cornwall I have a background which links with Yorkshire in the natural shape of stone structure & fertility, & it links with Italy because of the intensity of light & colour.’⁷²

More practical aspects influenced Hepworth’s decision to stay. In 1944 she was greatly preoccupied with the health of her daughter Sarah, who had suffered a bone infection and been hospitalised in Hayle. The family, furthermore, was still too insecure financially to make returning to London’s accommodation and way of life an attractive option. In Cornwall, on the other hand, they benefited from a series of kind gestures from friends which helped them to stay. In January 1945 Stokes released the family from a debt of rent for Dunluce, where they had lived between the end of 1939 and 1942.⁷³ In her reply Hepworth highlighted the significance of this gesture by offering Stokes a sculpture.⁷⁴

Throughout the war Hepworth had relied on the generosity of friends in London to support her needs in the capital, which included housing sculptures and facilitating their dispatch to much-needed exhibitions and sales. Ramsden and Eates kept a number of Hepworth’s and Nicholson’s works in safe storage during the war and were frequently asked to pass them on for exhibitions or sales, which steadily increased in number. In the spring of 1943, for example, Hepworth told Ramsden that she had been invited to exhibit alongside Paul Nash at Temple Newsam in Leeds

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. [c. 1945] TGA 9310.1.1.35.

⁷² Manuscript of text written by Hepworth in 1951, published in *Barbara Hepworth: Retrospective Exhibition 1927-1954*, exh. cat. (London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1954).

⁷³ Stokes explained that while he had before been released financially from a debt to his father. Stokes to Hepworth, 10 January 1945, TGA 965.1.95.1. He wrote, ‘Concerning the Dunluce rent-rates-Olive debt. With the turn of the year I am now able and glad to write it off, cancel it: and that is a satisfaction to me.’

⁷⁴ Hepworth to Stokes, 13 January 1945, TGA 965.1.95.2.

that April. As a retrospective exhibition requiring ‘all the work I can get hold of,’ she asked for help locating *Infant* (1930).

One of the v. early works which I most want to get hold of is a carving called “Infant” Burmese wood, 1930 bought by Dr G.F. Hill at that time head of the British Museum. Do you think you or Willy [Gibson] could track him down for me? There’s an awful hurry as you can imagine – the show opens April 10th & transport is so slow.⁷⁵

In March 1944 Hepworth again asked Ramsden to dispatch a work held at the London Museum for an international show. Although assistance enabled Hepworth to bypass the high costs and time delays of transporting works from Cornwall, her letter reveals the precarious circumstances in which her London ‘agents’ were managing the movement of sculptures across the city. She wrote,

I’ve been asked to send a sculpture to the C.I.A.D. [Central Institute of Art and Design] show which is going to U.S.A. I want to send the teakwood “Two Form” sculpture which Margot has at the L.M. [London Museum]. Would it be possible for you to deliver it, by Taxi at my expense, at the National Gallery sometime during the next 7 days – before March 17th. I should be so grateful if you could [...]. We were more than thankful to get good news of you all – when there are raids we cannot forget you all for a moment & feel terribly worried.⁷⁶

Assistance from Hepworth’s and Nicholson’s friends continued following the war, when rationing of food and materials remained in force. As late as 1948 the family was still receiving supplement food parcels from generous correspondents. In October that year, Hepworth thanked Curt Valentin, a German-born American art dealer, whom the family had known since at least 1943, describing the critical importance of such help. Reasoning the need, she described factors of life in St Ives, including her distance from cafés, her children’s needs, the physical demands of sculpture and her professional isolation. She wrote,

Your parcels have really saved our lives. We are badly hit living out here without cafes near where one can fill up a bit (as in London). The children are wolves (14 is the ravenous age) and every single item has been received with joy. Also it has meant that we have been able to eat our own rations! So often one has to give them to the kids and then ones stamina (especially a sculptors!) declines. Some groups in

⁷⁵ Hepworth to Ramsden, n.d. [Easter 1943], TGA 9310.1.1.13.

⁷⁶ Hepworth to Ramsden, 8 March 1944, TGA 9310.1.1.25.

this country fare better – workers with canteens etc but others are in real need of fats & meat especially in houses with adolescent children. So we cannot thank you enough.⁷⁷

As Gabo and Hepworth's stories show, St Ives was at once defined by its distance from London and connected to it via networks of travel and communication. Through these routes, information was shared, friendships maintained and letters and objects sent. These enabled both artists not only to continue their work in St Ives but also to respond, when possible, to opportunities arising elsewhere.

ii. THE COASTAL COLONY AS SITE OF MODERNITY

Gabo's and Hepworth's links from St Ives to networks spanning London, Europe, Russia and America can be used to probe how discourses of modernism and colonialism have affected presumptions surrounding the relationship between war, conflict, modernity and regional arts locations.

The relationship between modernism and empire offers an expansive theoretical ground. Based on perceptions that modernism and empire developed and peaked in tandem, their processes have been frequently connected by theorists who perceive shared mental attitudes and physical properties.⁷⁸ Bhabha is one of the most influential authors in this field and describes modernity and colonialism as mutually constitutive, with the phenomenon of modernity utterly dependent upon concepts of colonial space. He writes,

For the emergence of modernity – as in ideology of *beginning*, *modernity as the new* – the template of this 'non-place' becomes the colonial space. [...] The colonial space is the *terra incognita* or the *terra nulla*, the empty or wasted land whose history has to be begun, whose archives must be filled out; whose future progress must be secured in modernity.⁷⁹

Edward Marx, who has written about the role of colonies in modernist literature, describes modernism as a process involving two conflicting drives. He asks, 'Isn't modernism – the relentless, progressive drive to make it new – necessarily accompanied by a shadow of primitivism, reflecting deep anxieties about the loss of cultural foundations?'⁸⁰ Given the amalgamation of these two drives in a 'single cultural movement', the two instincts cannot be

⁷⁷ Hepworth to Valentin, 30 October [1948], TGA 8213.1.

⁷⁸ For example Hardt and Negri, 2000; Booth and Rigby, 2000; Wee, 2003; Marx, 2004; Dube, 2009.

⁷⁹ Bhabha, 2004: 246.

⁸⁰ Marx, 2004: 12.

separated but exist always in opposition and crisis. He explains, 'it is only when they are separated that primitivism appears as a neurotic effect within the economy of modernism, and modernism as an unexpected characteristic of primitive objects.'⁸¹ For both Bhabha and Marx, therefore, modernity encompasses an element of anti-modernity as it involves delving into uncharted territory.⁸²

In *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870–1910* (2001), Nina Lübbren emphasises the role of nostalgia in the emergence of artists' colonies in the nineteenth century. After highlighting the role of daily rituals within colonies, Lübbren explores how the pre-industrial subjects observable within colony environments suited the nostalgic taste of educated middle-class art consumers. Building from post-colonial theory, she argues conclusively that 'it was this nostalgia for the pre-modern that placed artists' colonies firmly within modernity.'⁸³ While the subject of works she discusses might arguably be classified as modern, anti-modern or both, the phenomenon of artists' colonies emerged alongside and in response to industrial progress and modernisation. Lübbren's account of the history of artists' colonies sheds light on the traditions to which modern artists' communities in St Ives have been consistently connected in writings and displays.

One text in particular reveals presumptions surrounding discussions of St Ives as an artists' colony and highlights the need for sensitive approaches to the circumstances surrounding artists' movements to a 'colony' space. In his article 'The Place of St Ives' (1985), Charles Harrison describes a conceptual divide between St Ives as a rural artists' colony and locations of crisis, modernity and war. Provoking others to consider this difference, he asks,

What of 'the painting of modern life', the metropolis, the bomb, the people? How do we come to terms with the fact that the best English art - Nicholson's large still-lives, Hepworth's refined carvings in guarea, Lanyon's St Just with its potentially embarrassing iconography [...] was produced so far, conceptually and for the most part geographically, from where we would otherwise mark the salients?⁸⁴

In his following discussion Harrison recognises that St Ives satisfied artists due to certain 'themes of Modernist culture', noting especially the 'simplicity' of life, 'innocence' in

⁸¹ Ibid.: 13.

⁸² The terms 'modern anti-modernism' and 'anti-modernism', for example, are, when used, often shown to be transferable. In *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience*, Lynda Jessup explains that the term 'antimodernism' has often been used to refer to 'the pervasive sense of loss that often coexisted in the decades around the turn of the century along with an enthusiasm for modernization and material progress.' She states that antimodernism was often 'ambivalent and Janus-faced, smacking of accommodation as well as protest.' Jessup, 2001: 3.

⁸³ Lübbren, 2001: 2.

⁸⁴ Harrison, 1985: 12.

representation and the ‘authenticity’ of naivety, primitivism and the handmade.⁸⁵ He explains that ‘these and other features of the refined ideology of the modern movement could plausibly be developed in West Penwith and were readily associated with such powerful symbols as the paintings of Alfred Wallis and the work of the Leach pottery’.⁸⁶ By reducing the modernist contribution of ‘the place of St Ives’ to the characteristics of colonial space, he contrasts the authentic ‘local place’ with the modern, war-damaged, hybrid city. Relying on further oppositions, his text ends by conflating two vastly different terms to describe wartime St Ives – as ‘an exiled (or holidaying) community’.⁸⁷

Massey’s descriptions of ‘space’ and ‘place’ are especially helpful for interpreting and moving beyond Harrison’s remarks. Crisis and modernity are usually equated with the metropolis as a place where things happen, people meet and hybrid identities conflict. However, if place is viewed with the same openness to interaction, invasion and difference, it is evident that the artists’ colony (a place where people and cultures meet) and St Ives (the site of interaction and opposition) are neither essential nor enclosed. Despite the context of political turmoil, migration to St Ives during the twentieth century should not be seen, to use Massey’s terms, as a process involving artists’ retreat to a place surrounded by drawbridges and walls.⁸⁸ Paradoxically, the very possibility of artists’ migration to St Ives highlights the openness of that place to a range of purposes, identities and paths.

Bhabha’s and Marx’s ideas on the integral relationship between modernity and colonial space also provide a helpful framework for considering how St Ives has been read as a terrain from which modern art movements could grow or arise. Although primarily a practical wartime location, the place’s pre-modern characteristics visible prehistory increasingly played a role in artists’ descriptions of the town. Not only reflecting their changing interests, this development shows artists’ and writers’ growing awareness of modernist discourses which described both an avant-garde search for new beginnings and a rediscovery of something original, pre-modern or lost.⁸⁹ At times St Ives did function as a ‘colonial’ space described through the terminological binaries of ‘native’ and ‘foreign’, ‘natural and ‘industrial’, ‘nostalgic’ and ‘modern’. These ideological associations, it must be recognised, were often formed by artists’ ‘cosmopolitan’ desires to experience, to inhabit and to get to know a new place and culture in which, for a range of practical reasons, they now lived. This should not always be conflated with a colonialist motivation to conquer or claim new ground; on the contrary, the hurried nature and supposedly temporary nature of movements to St Ives in 1939 demonstrate that relations with the town,

⁸⁵ Ibid.: 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid.: 12.

⁸⁷ Ibid.: 12.

⁸⁸ Massey, 2005: 6.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, Nicholson’s article on Wallis. Nicholson, 1943.

until the end of the war at least, were characterised more by conditions of exile than of empire. It is, however, arguable that attitudes and processes of the latter became increasingly relevant during the following period when, from the war's end, the growing number of artists in the town called for the development of groups and structures which, although not imposing in aspiration, significantly impacted the workings and identity of the local place. Further factors are suggested in my conclusory chapter.

Bhabha's, Marx's and Harrison's texts each suggest how St Ives might contribute to debates on the relationship between modernism and rural, coastal and regional environments, which is a topic both particularly resonant to the British Isles and potentially connective with other coastal areas. *Modernism on Sea* (2009), a collection of essays edited by Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris, is the most recent attempt to probe coastal forms of modernism in Britain. The introduction poses the question, 'Why [...] is modernism so often linked with the life of the city and so rarely with the shore?'⁹⁰ Their own book's content and presentation, however, suggests a particular reading of the British coast. Its red and white striped front cover, for instance, sets the dominant image of the British coast as a location of consumerism, optimism, tourism and play. This is also revealed by the headings of its six sections: 'Seaside Holidays', 'Sand and Stucco', 'Seaside Poetics', 'Nautical Style', 'Social Change on the Promenade' and 'Modernism and After'. Its resulting emphasis on a specific kind of British seaside destinations creates an impression of British coastal modernism which is less fitting for the artistic histories of St Ives, especially between 1939 and 1949. While providing a space for some important narratives, *Modernism on Sea* in effect highlights dominant presumptions surrounding the character of the British coast and its relationship with modernism, and it suggests the need for readings reflective of a more diverse range of locations and communities.

Theoretical readings of the relationship between modernity, artistic modernism and coastal locations can yet offer much more to a reading of modern art in St Ives. In particular, discussions of the sea's characteristics as a moving, traversable and varying terrain offer a view of the coast as a site not of insularity and essentiality, but of difference, interaction and movement. As shown, being on the coast during the war was for artists in St Ives an experience characterised by 'looking out' across the ocean for both incoming danger and future events to come. As a constantly changing shore, the sea was also a vital source for creative ideas and materials. Gabo is known to have frequently collected shells from the beach at Carbis Bay, which provided an important source of formal experimentation. Furthermore, he found ways of extending the creative potential of natural shapes and patterns visible around the coast into his work. In the summer of 1941, towards the end of the stream of major aerial attacks nearby, he took a series of photographs of images and patterns reflected onto surfaces, which he developed

⁹⁰ Feigel and Harris (eds), 2009: 3.

and printed.⁹¹ Capturing these dematerialised configurations of complex moving substances around a central nebula or core (see, for instance, Fig. 17), these photographs assisted his development of a more organic approach to spatial construction evident in *Spiral Theme* (1941) (Fig. 18). Returning the camera to a friend, he described how they would spark future work, refreshing his memory of the ephemeral patterns he saw ‘even if they are very faint’.⁹²

As discussed in the next chapter, a number of artists working from St Ives during the war developed Constructive forms based on scraps of materials and driftwood regularly found washed up along the shore. The coast acted, therefore, as a constantly changing source of materials which, appearing in altered or weathered form, were often enigmatic in origin and function. As a ground generative of materials which had become discarded, lost or unused but contained Constructive potential, the marginal coast functioned as a modernist site. In “Suffer a Sea Change”: Spatial Crisis, Maritime Modernity, and the Politics of Utopia’ (2006), Antonis Balasopoulos discusses the ‘maritime realm’ as a space enacting the ‘free flow of goods’ central to modernity and capitalism, enabling also processes of map-making, the rise of a maritime working class and the Atlantic slave economy.⁹³ Although centred on a broader oceanic terrain, many of his descriptions also apply to the town, harbour, beach, shore and coastal waters of St Ives. He describes the maritime space as ‘at once at the heart and in the margins of capitalist modernity [...] at once “inside” and “outside” society and history, simultaneously inscribed and semiotically empty.’⁹⁴ This description of an ‘inscribed’ and ‘semiotically empty’ terrain particularly resounds with Gabo’s description of ‘stark naked’ ‘blue bays’ onto which he projected his empathy, imagination and fear. It also points to the range of ways in which the coast as a theme unites many different artistic interests in St Ives, acting variously as a physical and psycho-geographic threshold, a tidal rhythm of interconnected natural forces, and as a site which, when taken away from notions of centre and periphery, can be seen to contain its own ecology and depth of space. These themes would provide fresh perspectives for future research.

⁹¹ See Gabo, ‘Experimental Photograph’, 1941, TGA 9313.6.9, reproduced in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 281.

⁹² Gabo, draft letter to Hammond, 10 September [1941], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 281.

⁹³ Balasopoulos, 2006.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: 133.

This chapter examines how art made in St Ives during and after the Second World War drew from a rich and multi-layered heritage of Constructive art and the role of historical change in driving that process. I consider the continued value of Constructivist art from Russia and the processes of reappraisal and rejuvenation it saw following geographical dispersal. In particular, I assess how Constructivism and other abstract styles were presented as historical movements or living traditions through the content and design of two publications: *The Isms of Art* (1925), edited by Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, and *Circle: An International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937), edited by Gabo, Martin and Nicholson. Both documents presented works of different styles and times side by side to represent or promote particular artistic movements and art historical narratives.

As the variety of work included under the heading of ‘Constructive art’ suggests, Hepworth, Nicholson and the younger artists in St Ives drew from a wider stock of abstract precedents. Particular focus is given to Hepworth’s and Nicholson’s contact with key protagonists of the Bauhaus School in Paris and London during the 1930s, which impacted their understanding of the wider application of Constructive ideas. The second and third sections of this chapter, ‘Constructivism across Europe’ and ‘New Ground: Dispersal and assemblage from 1937’ examine the continued relevance of ideas and forms associated with the Bauhaus to artists in St Ives after the School closed. As Jeffrey Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei claim, the Bauhaus survived physical closure in April 1933 as a public-facing concept or ‘palimpsest’ which was constantly refigured to support or stimulate ideas, individuals and enterprises.¹ Its educational methods, centred on personal experience and physical creativity, held particular significance for younger artists in St Ives during the war. Its history, furthermore, dispersed by individuals, images and published texts, formed both a key precedent in St Ives and, as it was adapted by ‘New Bauhaus’ projects in the United States, became a competing movement.

The final section, ‘Towards Reconstruction’ examines the continued importance of theories and models of Constructive art in St Ives during the latter stages of the Second World War and following its end in 1945, when actualities of the recent past shed more light on contemporary social and artistic needs. Continued discussions surrounding *Circle*, including future editions and reprints, demonstrate editors’ conflicting opinions on the legacies of Constructivism in Europe and on artistic and political relations between the East and West, as marked by the Cold War. Correspondence bridging artists and architects in St Ives and elsewhere reveals processes of comparison between the survival and development of Constructive trends in Europe and

¹ Saletnik and Schuldenfrei (eds), 2009: 2.

America, as well as increasing anxiety regarding the relevance of interwar Constructive approaches to the postwar period in the West.

Previous writings suggest the danger of obscuring artworks by positioning them within wider political narratives. In 'Cold War Constructivism' (1990) Benjamin Buchloh describes Constructivism's movement to the United States in terms of the de-politicisation of Gabo's work. Principally, he notes the 'unlikely synthesis' of Gabo's version of Constructivism with his critical reception as a lone survivor of the Stalinist state.² For Buchloh, Gabo's postwar work was not simply apolitical but actively 'fetishised' earlier Constructivist approaches in its adaptation towards the individualist rhetoric of the capitalist West. Buchloh's view develops from his earlier proposal, expressed in 'From Faktura to Factography' (1984), of the necessity for post-1920 Constructivist art to refer explicitly to systems of collective representation, production or distribution.³ His later account then prejudges Gabo's postwar work according to these values; he proposes the inherent 'failure' of Gabo's new 'Constructivism' as it moved away from the culture in which it had first grown. Although drawing from little visual evidence, Buchloh compares the meaning and function of Gabo's later work to the Constructivist desire 'to abolish the work's cult and exhibition value', 'to deny its falsely auratic status' and 'to gradually anchor aesthetic practice to the social and political reality of the new mass-audiences'.⁴

Buchloh is arguably unrealistic in his expectation that Gabo's work should remain exclusively tied to the social ideologies relevant to Constructivism at its origin rather than adaptive to the subsequent stream of social and cultural changes experienced by the artist. However, Buchloh's argument suggests the importance of considering how ideologies associated with art movements in earlier moments interact with new social circumstances. In a period characterised by shifting political views, this is best explored through specific narratives which can highlight the range of forces causing a movement's aspirations and formation to develop with continued or altered values. This chapter suggests how key social factors surrounding wartime St Ives contributed to such changes within a period of Constructivism's history that Buchloh ignores. The provision of an altered adjectival title 'Constructive art' was seen by many as a crucial recognition of the new work as a connected but adapted version of Constructivism. Providing a more nuanced reading of how artists have negotiated the ideologies of art movements in the context of their own and society's wider needs, Victor Margolin's analysis of Lissitzky's and Rodchenko's 1930s work for the Soviet state provides a helpful contrast.⁵ Both authors raise important

² Buchloh, 1990: 85 and 91. In his chapter, 'Representing the Regime: Lissitzky and Rodchenko 1930–1941', Victor Margolin reports on the relationship between Stalin's 'totalitarian' regime and perception of artistic suppression and 'decline' among Russian avant-garde artists. Margolin, 1997: 162–213.

³ Buchloh, 1984.

⁴ Buchloh, 1990: 93.

⁵ See 'Representing the Regime: Lissitzky and Rodchenko 1930–41' in Margolin, 1997: 163–213.

questions concerning the continuation of ‘Constructivism’ in St Ives as a point on the axis between the diverging artistic and political outlooks of the East and West.

i. TRANSFER POINTS

El Lissitzky’s *Proun 1A, Bridge I* (1919-20) (Fig. 19) and Gabo’s *Construction: Stone with a Collar* (c.1936–7) (Fig. 20) both appear in interwar publications surveying longer histories of abstract art and wander the ‘temporal-spatial’ axes described by Pollock as tangible objects and photographic images.⁶ Each of their makers, furthermore, was central to the networks through which Constructivism was shared, interpreted and translated throughout the West during the twentieth century. Because of this, the artists’ moving lines intersected and they were actants within each other’s cultural field.

Lissitzky’s *Proun 1A, Bridge I* was made in Russia between 1919 and 1920. In 1925, it was reproduced in *The Isms of Art* (Fig. 21), a survey of twentieth-century artistic movements which Lissitzky edited with Hans Arp.⁷ Presenting his *Proun* works as an ‘Ism’ in this publication, Lissitzky described them as a ‘station for change from painting to architecture’.⁸ As points of transfer between two- and three-dimensional space, he suggested their potential extension and effect beyond the flat surface.⁹ Lissitzky made his *Prouns* while teaching at the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk. There, a group of students and teachers known as UNOVIS led by Kazimir Malevich promoted the universal significance of abstract art and its role in daily life.¹⁰ New departments and courses were conceived by the group to teach the values of Suprematist painting and to apply them to other fields of design, including book covers, homeware, posters, textiles and theatrical sets.¹¹ Malevich’s own art historical charts (1925-27) formed a new visual means of presenting relationships between different abstract movements and highlighting important similarities and differences.¹²

⁶ Pollock, 2014: 13 and 22, note 10.

⁷ Lissitzky and Arp (eds), 1925, reprint 1968.

⁸ *Ibid.*: xi.

⁹ Victor Margolin translates the Russian definition of *Proun* using the term ‘transfer point’ rather than ‘station for change’. Margolin, 1997: 33.

¹⁰ Christina Lodder, ‘El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism’, in Perloff and Reed (eds), 2003: 28.

¹¹ Margolin, 1997: 29.

¹² Glenn D. Lowry discusses the relationship between Barr’s chart and Malevich’s own ‘Analytical Charts’ (1925-7) which were made a decade earlier and formed an important source for Barr, and notes that four of them were included in Barr’s 1936 exhibition. Malevich made his charts with the help of students in the ‘Department of Bacteriology of Art’ at the State Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad. Once made, they were used as teaching aids, to demonstrate art’s progression towards abstraction. See Lowry, G., ‘Abstraction in 1936: Barr’s Diagrams’ in Dickerman (ed.), 2012–13: 359-363, 363.

Lissitzky's *Prouns* are a series of drawn architectural compositions which float over flat geometric terrains.¹³ Although some titles suggest architectural functions, they were not conceived as realisable models but rather as imaginary compositions suggestive of the processes of structural integration.¹⁴ In *Proun IA (Bridge I)*, a base of intersecting blocks and planes supports a long horizontal bar which reaches over a semi-circular blue space to suggest an aerial view of a structure in a limitless space.

Gabo's *Construction: Stone with a Collar* has a soft limestone core which extends into space through a plastic collar and brass tail. Like Lissitzky's *Proun IA*, it is also part of a group or series. Made in London between 1936 and 1937, it is a remake of a work which although possibly made slightly later, was dated 1933 by Gabo to mark its original conception.¹⁵ Gabo considered *Stone with a Collar* of such importance that he included it in *Circle* (Fig. 22) to represent his own work. Extensive in both form and project, it reflects Gabo's ambition for Constructivism to spread over time and space. It also marks an important step in Gabo's career, when he responded to artists nearby in England, including Hepworth and Henry Moore. Specifically, Gabo's inclusion of tangible, bounded forms within constructions was inspired by the 'spatial' effect of stone carvings he saw in both Paris and London, and especially in Hepworth's contemporary works.¹⁶ The earlier version of *Stone with a Collar* was the first in which Gabo incorporated a carved element, and it forms part of a larger configuration of different materials.¹⁷ Around the limestone circles an opaque 'collar' of cellulose acetate and a thinner tail of black-painted brass which orbits the stone and fixes to the bottom of a slate base.

In 1922 Lissitzky wrote a text about his *Proun* works titled 'PROUN: Not World Visions, But – World Reality'. In this text, which was published in *De Stijl* magazine, Lissitzky described his *Proun* series as responsive to the human form. He wrote, 'We have set the Proun in motion and so we obtain a number of axes of projection; we stand between them and push them apart.'¹⁸ He described how they related to the human inhabitant who could use their 'axes of projection' to draw elements into configuration.¹⁹ While not practical architectural projects, the *Prouns*

¹³ As both Peter Nisbet and Victor Margolin note, Lissitzky did not use the term *Proun* until late 1920 or early 1921. Nisbet, 1987: 20 and Margolin, 1997: 31.

¹⁴ T.J. Clark notes the varying substantiality of founding structures in Lissitzky's *Proun* works, using this as a form of comparison between *Town* (1919-20) and a photograph of a propaganda board (1920). Clark, 1999: 225.

¹⁵ Hammer and Lodder write that Gabo had 'only made a very rough, small scale model before his arrival in Britain in March 1936.' Hammer and Lodder, 1995: n.p.

¹⁶ Gabo seems to have been aware of Hepworth and Moore's work since before he moved to London.

¹⁷ Hammer and Lodder note that it marks the transition 'between the planar constructions and forms which Gabo subsequently carved from a single block.' Hammer and Lodder, 1995: n.p.

¹⁸ Lissitzky, 'PROUN: Not World Visions, But – World Reality' [1920], *De Stijl*, vol. 5, no. 6 (June 1922), from Margolin, 1997: 32.

¹⁹ It was not until 1923 that Lissitzky developed his *Proun Room* at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition, where he translated his drawings into structures which clung to the walls of a room.

suggest values of construction, progress and architectural design through structures which float without fixed perspective.²⁰

As a publication showing the progression of modern movements over the previous decade, *The Isms of Art* formed an important precedent for later surveys of abstract art. A source-book of the twentieth-century, it included abstract groups such as 'Konstructivism', 'Neoplastizism' and 'Kubism' alongside more figurative and representational movements, including 'Expressionism' and 'Verism'. Presented in a strong design by Lissitzky, the survey also showed statements by each movement's principal artists, whose profiles floated alongside images of key works. In this publication, Gabo was represented by a construction (1922), alongside others by Vladimir Tatlin (1917), an installation photograph of the 1921 OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists) exhibition in Moscow and a 1923 architectural model by the school of VKhUTEMAS teacher Nikolai Ladovsky. Gabo was shown therefore as one of the latest contributors to a group broadly characterised by the construction of planes in space, in relief, sculpture, architecture or installation formats.

Although not explicitly stated in an introductory text, *The Isms* progresses backwards in time. The publication begins with a diagram connecting 1925 to a question mark via a simple black line, thus posing the question of the origin of its narrative (see Fig. 21).²¹ Elsewhere in the book, however, the chronological range is defined as a decade. The cover prominently features the dates 1924 and 1914 at the top and bottom of the page, and the inside cover includes a repeated list of years between 1924 and 1914 stacked in a column to the side.²² Correspondingly, movements included also progress backwards in time. Edited in Germany, the publication both begins and ends in that country, starting with the contemporary 'Abstract Film' of Berlin-based filmmakers Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, and ending with 'Expressionism' represented by three artists associated with the Blaue Reiter group until 1914: Marc Chagall, Klee and Franz Marc. Although many other national movements are presented between and the presence of a number of Futurist works included pre-date 1914, the narrative is framed by the significant social and political changes associated with the outbreak of the First World War and cultural and technical developments in contemporary Germany. Although prioritising contemporary work by its primary placement, the wider chronological view emphasises the originality of

²⁰ Margolin contrasts Lissitzky and Rodchenko's approach to constructive drawings: 'Whereas Rodchenko believed that revolutionary consciousness could be represented in material objects such as kiosks, buildings, and furniture, El Lissitzky, whose idea of consciousness was transcendental rather than material, held the conviction that an object pointed to something beyond itself. This is to be seen particularly in his abstract paintings called Prouns.' Margolin, 1997: 22. Lissitzky's denial of fixed perspective negated the possibility of them being read as architectural drawings or as 'representations' of space behind the picture plane. On this point Lissitzky criticised Malevich for keeping 'the form of the picture' in his works by the possession of 'one specific perpendicular axis.' Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920–21) quoted in Margolin, 1997: 33.

²¹ Arp and Lissitzky (eds), 1925: 1.

²² Ibid.: iii.

Cubism and its interaction with social revolutions around 1914 by positioning it as the earliest ‘ism’ in the seemingly chronological narrative. Edited collaboratively by artists from Russia and Central Europe, *The Isms* is a consciously international publication. All elements (including the contents page, quotations and artists’ biographies) are presented in three parallel languages: German, French and English. This range, which excludes Lissitzky’s native Russian, mirrored the editors’ foreign contacts and the wider trend during the mid-1920s for protagonists of post-revolutionary Soviet culture to develop networks, projects and audiences across Western Europe. In 1922 Lissitzky had co-founded the magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* in Berlin with Soviet writer and activist Ilya Ehrenburg.²³ Written in parallel columns in Russian, French and German, *Vesch* was clearly an important trilingual prototype for the *Isms* but also demonstrates the *Isms*’ shift of geographical focus.

The publication of *The Isms* in 1925 coincided with Lissitzky’s return to the Soviet Union following three years of European travel. He had been sent to Germany as a cultural ambassador, where, with Gabo, he played a key role in Berlin’s 1922 *First Russian Art Exhibition*.²⁴ The following year Lissitzky gave lectures on Soviet art throughout Germany and the Netherlands and developed his *Proun Room* installation at the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, where visitors could stand between the three-dimensional parts of his *Prouns* attached to the walls of a room.²⁵ *The Isms* marks a highpoint in Lissitzky’s output as an international abstract artist, an identity from which he subsequently became detached. By the time of *Circle*’s publication in 1937, he was an official artist of the Soviet state, working on propaganda campaigns such as the magazine *USSR in Construction* (1930–41), which exported images of the Soviet Union to Europe throughout the 1930s.²⁶ In 1937 he proudly stated in its pages, ‘Our country has been transformed from an agrarian into an industrial country’ in a piece which contrasted the country’s agrarian and industrial outputs between 1913 and the present

²³ The founding editorial of *Veshch* described ‘a Europe grown fat and drowsy,’ in need of change, and ‘the sultry gloom of a Russia that has been bled white’ by Civil War between pro-revolutionary communist ‘reds’ and counter-revolutionary ‘whites’ preceding the creation of the Communist-led Soviet Union in 1922. Ehrenburg and Lissitzky, ‘The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End’, *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* (Berlin), nos. 1-2, March–April 1922, trans. and reprinted in Bann, 1974: 53. Briony Fer writes that a 1923 cover of the journal paired Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) with a modern locomotive, aligning Russian abstract art with technological progression. Fer, 1997: 11. Ehrenburg later wrote the novella *The Thaw* (1954), the title of which became an important label for the period of liberalisation following the death of Stalin in 1953.

²⁴ *The First Russian Art Exhibition*, Berlin, 15 October 1922–December 1922. This was a large display at Berlin’s Van Dieman Gallery of works from a wide range of media, including paintings, sculptures, theatre designs, architectural models and porcelain. Lissitzky had also attended the Congress of the Constructivists and Dadaists in Dusseldorf in May 1922.

²⁵ For example, in December 1922 Lissitzky delivered an important lecture on Soviet art in Berlin. After contracting acute pneumonia in October 1923, he relocated to a sanatorium near Locarno in Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his European trip and continued to work on some publishing and advertising projects.

²⁶ The aim to project progressive Soviet society across Europe via multi-lingual publications also led to more explicit Soviet propaganda projects, such as *USSR in Construction*, which was distributed in German, English, French and Spanish during its run between 1930 and 1941. By the mid-1930s Lissitzky’s grand ‘epic narrative’ photomontage style was forming an iconography for this magazine.

day.²⁷ In *Circle* Lissitzky was represented by a single *Proun* painting from the previous decade which, due to its date, appeared as a work of historical Constructive importance.²⁸ While it is uncertain how much *Circle*'s editors knew of Lissitzky's position and projects during the second half of the 1930s, it is likely that they would have found his new role within a totalitarian regime difficult to relate to their publication's broad emphasis on political freedom. The first *Circle* editorial meeting report shows that Lissitzky (alongside Tatlin) was listed as a possible permanent contributor for Gabo to approach.²⁹ Although no explanation is given, by the second meeting one month later, his name had been dropped and, in Nicholson's handwriting, other potential contributors listed in his place. These were all artists associated more strongly with other modern movements in Paris: in order, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Arp and Joan Miró.³⁰

The earlier *Veshch* (1922) and *Circle* (1937) explained their international projects in similar ways. In an editorial statement which appeared in *De Stijl*, Ehrenburg and Lissitzky explained the international range of artists in *Veshch* as a consequence of their perception that common interests had emerged across different lands. Despite 'a seven-year-period of complete isolation from the outside world,' they explained that the same problems had been approached in Russia as by 'our friends here in the West' but 'without any knowledge of the others'.³¹ While laying down their independence and originality, the 'internationalism' of their project was inspired by the perception of broad formal and cultural trends rather than by direct contact. *Circle*'s opening statement similarly placed emphasised cultural changes across a wide sphere of 'civilisation' rather than direct contact or influence. *Circle* begins: 'A new cultural unity is slowly emerging out of the fundamental changes which are taking place in our present-day civilisation.'³² For its editors, this 'cultural unity' was proven by the fact that 'ideas represented by the work in this book have grown spontaneously in most countries of the world.'³³ Constructivism was then framed as a far-reaching set of 'ideas' which, as a far reaching cultural force, could become manifest in different areas of art and life around the world. Although it would have been relatively easy for the editors to arrange for the translation of the journal's texts into other

²⁷ He presented a visual historical narrative which, like *The Isms of Art*, had a set chronological span. El and Sophie Lissitzky, *USSR in Construction*, no. 2, 1937: 9–12.

²⁸ Buchloh describes the ideological transition of Lissitzky's work for the USSR: 'Thus, what in Lissitzky's hands had been a tool of instruction, political education, and the raising of consciousness was rapidly transformed into an instrument for prescribing the silence of conformity and obedience.' Buchloh 1984: 109.

²⁹ *Circle* Report No. 1, 1 July 1936, GMA 96.1.1.1.

³⁰ *Circle* Report No. 2, 1 August 1936, GMA 96.1.1.3.

³¹ Ehrenburg and Lissitzky, 'Statement by the Editors of *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*' in *De Stijl* (Amsterdam), vol. 5, no. 4, 1922, trans. N. Bullock, reproduced in Bann, 1974: 63. This statement appeared in *De Stijl*, therefore, two issues before Lissitzky's *Proun* statement.

³² Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: v.

³³ *Ibid.*

languages, such as Russian, French or German, the text remained only in English.³⁴ Lacking a precedent for multi-lingual British journals, *Circle*'s single language presentation also reveals its main audience of English-reading artists in Britain and the United States, and of the journal's identity as a presentation of 'Constructive art' from an English perspective.

Gabo, Martin and Nicholson described how impulses in work reproduced over the pages of *Circle* (1937) were part of a long tradition which had slowly developed to attain a fuller integration with non-artistic life. The opening editorial paired the longer history of Constructive ideas with this manifestation: 'The fact that they have, in the course of the last twenty years, become more crystallized, precise, and more and more allied to the various domains of social life, indicates their organic growth in the mind of society [...].'³⁵ In the essay which followed, Gabo further explained how the movement had grown into maturity. The Constructive Idea was, for him, the 'spiritual state of a generation' – a whole historical phase pervading societies and people not necessarily in contact.³⁶

The journal's title was chosen to reflect this expansive range of participants who were at once dispersed and united. Choosing the word 'Circle' over 'Direction' in the autumn of 1936, editors had selected a shape containing a field or surface rather than a singular line more reminiscent of Barr's recently published and selective chart.³⁷ Although later dismissed, suggestions also included 'Concentric', which also evoked the potential for limitless expansion, although via a structure with an inherent hierarchy between centre and periphery. Writing to Nicholson at the time, Martin pointed out that 'Circle' might also have the negative impression of a closed 'circle' of friends. He wrote, 'Perhaps if we still retain the title 'Circle' we might make a point of saying in the editorial that a circle may be small or large & that ours hasn't any limited size.'³⁸ Early meeting reports show that editors envisaged a 'Diagram of the Review' immediately following the journal's title page, probably as an alternative visual schema to

³⁴ Nicholson could conduct correspondence in both French and German, and the range of the editors' contacts could easily have provided translation services.

³⁵ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: v.

³⁶ Gabo particularly stressed its non-dogmatic nature, writing, 'The Constructive idea is not a programmatic one. It is not a technical scheme for an artistic manner [...] it is a general concept of the world, or better, a spiritual state of a generation, an ideology caused by life, bound up with and directed to influence its course.' Gabo, 'The Constructive Idea in Art', in Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: 6.

³⁷ In September 1936 Nicholson wrote to Martin, 'Gabo seems to think we ought to pin the name question down to the two "Circle" & "Direction" & decide finally on one of these.' Nicholson to Martin, 4 Sept [1936], GMA A70.3.2.5. Other suggestions included 'New Order' and 'Document 1936', but none of these seem to have been as seriously considered.

³⁸ Martin to Nicholson, n.d. [1936], GMA 96.1.2.4. In a different letter, Martin wrote, 'Personally I'm still not very sure about that title as I feel we must do everything to avoid the idea of a group etc. How do you like COSMOS. I have the faintest suspicion that it may be the name of a wireless set or something but its dictionary definitions are good if perhaps a bit high flown: COSMOS: 1.the universe as an ordered whole / 2. ordered system of ideas / 3.sum-total of experience.' Martin went on to suggest 'SYNTHESIS', which he described as having 'good definitions which imply a constructive purpose but may be more difficult than COSMOS from the pronunciation point of view.' Martin to Nicholson, n.d. [1936], GMA 96.1.2.

Barr's.³⁹ While it is fascinating to consider how the journal's diagram might have taken shape, it is present neither in future correspondence and reports nor in the final publication. In its place, the order of reproductions, grouped across double-page spreads, created a looser and more allusive web of formal associations better suited to the editors' definition of Constructive art.

As the absence of a diagram and the journal's subtitle 'International Survey of Constructive Art' both suggest, *Circle* straddled the purposes of a long international survey and a platform for contemporary work. Varying greatly from a traditional manifesto group, its weave of historical and contemporary work held it between a singular and serialised project. Early discussions reveal that it had always been considered as the foundation for subsequent numbers. That only one number of the journal ever appeared, however, speaks for the circumstantial difficulties. Published during the late-1930s in Britain, its editors must have been aware that a second number might not be financially viable or materially possible, or that it would have to wait a long time to come to fruition. Thus all efforts were put into the first number while considering that a future related project of unknown scope and appearance might be possible at a later date.

Circle presented Constructive art as a broad movement embracing a range of works from earlier times and other 'isms', including Suprematism, Neoplasticism, the Bauhaus and Cubism. The editorial statement made clear the editors' aim: 'to gather here those forces which seem to us to be working in the same direction and for the same ideas.'⁴⁰ Claiming no intention of creating a manifesto-led collective, they described how the selection showed common ideas and feelings which offered evidence of a Constructive *historical* phase. Throughout the publication extraordinarily little attention was placed on individual contributors. Even those submitting texts were encouraged to reflect on wide cultural developments rather than provide artist statements. The editing process was therefore one of veiling, where possible, 'the personalities of the artists' in order to foreground their work and draw out instead the relationships from one work to another and 'to the whole social order'.⁴¹ Encouraging readers to oversee individual contributions and to focus instead of vaster commonalities is what makes *Circle* so innovative and highly original at the time, when most other journals, manifestos and historical surveys presented artists as alluringly profiled participants in relatively bound and competing groups.

While 'Constructive art' is presented in *Circle* as an open and embracing movement, its organisation is not entirely free from hierarchies between participants, media and places. Most crucially, Gabo's essay was given the most prominent place and signified his importance to the project as a whole. Contributors were also drawn from the editors' network of friends and existing professional contacts surrounding their community in London. For instance, the

³⁹ *Circle* Report No. 2, 1 August 1936, notes on occurrences 'since the last meeting', GMA 96.1.1.2.

⁴⁰ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: vi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

'Painting' section (which preceded 'Sculpture', 'Architecture' and 'Art and Life') included writings by Mondrian, Winifred Nicholson (writing as Winifred Dacre), Read, Le Corbusier and Nicholson himself, who were each chosen over contemporary or historical figures associated with or still residing in Russia or Berlin.⁴² Despite London's strong presence in the journal via its network of contributors, many of whom lived in Hampstead, this editorial home is strangely absent from discussion and subsumed into a description of a trend which could emerge in any place. Throughout, specific contexts and local situations of the artworks, texts and projects were largely removed from sight. Even in the architecture section, buildings which performed specific local functions were presented primarily as formal designs which, like the other reproductions, could easily be transposed across place.

Circle's presentation of the 'Constructive idea' through such a wide range of work and media created contradictions which are noticeable in the groupings of works in the sections. For example, one double-page spread in 'Painting' includes vastly different works by Arp, Kandinsky, Klee and Pevsner.⁴³ Several of those works included were also recognised by Gabo as having a complex and often oppositional relationship with his view of Constructive art. Even in his statement, Gabo contrasted the optimistic perfection and co-ordination to which Constructive art aspired with the revolutionary 'bursting points' in art such as 'the sermons of Picabia' and Dadaists manifestos. These had, he explained, 'celebrated the funeral of Art'.⁴⁴ For Gabo, therefore, Dada (represented only by specific works by Arp and Duchamp) was a revolutionary stage from which a renewed Constructive approach had emerged.⁴⁵

Earlier in their 'Realistic Manifesto', Gabo and Pevsner had denounced the 'shattered' surfaces of Cubism for the same reason, as well as its association with the picture format, which they saw as less able to penetrate social life.⁴⁶ Repeating this in *Circle*, Gabo described Constructivism's 'repulsion' to Cubism as a revolutionary form which had left nothing on

⁴² In August 1936, Gabo acquired addresses of Rodchenko, Tatlin and Lissitzky, each living in Moscow, from Barr. A meeting report of meetings held between 15 and 19 August notes that Gabo was 'to obtain quotations from Moscow.' It is unclear whether Gabo approached these artists or received replies. 'Circle Report 3', 1 September 1936. Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

⁴³ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson, (eds), 1937: 39-40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 1 and 5.

⁴⁵ *Circle* correspondence suggests that the editors at times considered the journal's selection a process of negotiation between a fair historical representation of abstract movements or professional groups and their need to maintain a critical Constructive stance. This was especially true of Dada. In August 1936 Martin reported that he had discovered that a report from Giedion on the 1936 Congress would help them to 'make some use of the Zurich group without having to include any DADA.' Martin and S. Speight to Nicholson, 26 August 1936, GMA 96.1.2.1. Michael White attributes Duchamp's inclusion in *Circle* in part to his strong reputation in the United States. M. White, 'Circulars and Squares: Abstraction and Internationalism Between the Wars,' in *Modern Art and St Ives*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate, 2014): 36-41.

⁴⁶ According to Gabo and Pevsner, this 'shattered' surface led 'to the same old graphic, to the same old volume and to the same decorative surface as of old.' Gabo and Pevsner, 'The Realistic Manifesto' (Moscow, 5 August 1920), reprinted in Hammer and Lodder (eds), 2000: 25 (Gabo's translation).

which artists ‘could base even the flimsiest foundation.’⁴⁷ His own generation, he explained, had found a ‘new concept’: the Constructive idea.⁴⁸ Like Dadaism, the Cubist-Constructive relationship was, according to Gabo, also one of progressive reconstruction within a cyclical narrative of destruction and repair. Although this cycle was outlined in Gabo’s text, the inclusive flow of Dadaist and Cubist work in *Circle*’s pages, including key works by Braque (1911) and Picasso (1911), did not acknowledge their position as precursors which had been positively reacted against. Instead, their more seamless inclusion perhaps points to the preferences of Nicholson (who continued to admire Cubist work during this time) to embrace Cubism’s vital contribution rather than present its value in an entirely oppositional way.

Set up in contrast to the fragmented Cubist surface, the Constructive trends presented in *Circle* centred on the values of spatial integration and expansion, and on the convergence of art and life. Importantly, Gabo developed his ideas about spatial and social integration during a period of contact with Lissitzky and his work. Both artists had participated in the *First Russian Art Exhibition* in Berlin late in 1922 and had spent considerable time in that city and its artistic social circles in the following years (Gabo stayed in Germany for over a decade).⁴⁹ At this time a sociable group of artists regularly met at the Romanisches Café or in Moholy-Nagy’s studio, providing a social milieu in which Gabo could mix socially and professionally with others including Lissitzky, Raoul Hausmann, Hans Richter, Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters.⁵⁰ After falling ill, Gabo was cared for in Berlin by Richter and his wife Elisabeth. What is more, with his hosts’ marriage failing, Gabo struck up a relationship with Elisabeth and they would live together until her death in 1929.⁵¹ The two artists remained friends and in July 1923 Richter printed an excerpt from Gabo and Pevsner’s the ‘Realistic Manifesto’ in his journal *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*. Nearby appeared an image of *Proun Room* (1923) with Lissitzky’s statements denouncing bounded interior space, such as, ‘We no longer want the room to be a painted coffin for our living bodies.’⁵² In an essay written around 1925 Gabo expressed his opposition to decorative surfaces in similar terms to Lissitzky. In an essay titled ‘The Problems of Space and Time and Their Falsification’, Gabo criticised those models which had integrated art and architecture by reducing art to a form of decoration.⁵³ Derogatorily describing a contemporary ‘rush to a new form of interior decoration,’ he contrasted two metaphors for

⁴⁷ Gabo, ‘The Constructive Idea in Art’ in Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 6.

⁴⁹ *The First Russian Art Exhibition*, Berlin, from 15 October 1922, Amsterdam from December 1922. Lodder notes that having studied in Munich for four years before the First World War, Gabo already ‘had a good grasp of the German language and culture’ which assisted his integration into the artistic networks of Berlin. Lodder, 2010.

⁵⁰ See ‘Russians in Berlin’ in Willett, 1978: 74-76 and Lissitzky-Küppers, [1967], 1980: 26.

⁵¹ Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 113.

⁵² *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no. 1 (Berlin), July 1923, in Jennings and Martins (eds), 2011. Other collaborators on this issue were listed as Werner Graff, Raoul Hausmann, Pevsner, Van Doesburg and the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

⁵³ Gabo, ‘The Problems of Space and Time and Their Falsification’ [c.1925], trans. Lodder, in Hammer and Lodder (eds), 2000: 41-44.

space: ‘as a closed room/cell’ (which encloses the human frame) and ‘as cosmos’ (which implies a more outward-reaching embrace).⁵⁴

Three years later Gabo described the treatment of space more explicitly as a social responsibility, which coincides with a period of contact with the Bauhaus School. In 1928 he was invited to give a series of papers at the Bauhaus in Dessau on the fundamentals of design. A questioning article ‘Design?’ was published in the *Bauhaus* magazine that year and records the topics he addressed. In this written statement, Gabo criticised the use of abstract art in objects of luxury fashion and design sold to an upper-middle class audience, seeing this as a form of art’s ‘application’ to the spheres of daily life in which art was applied as decoration to bound, marketable objects.⁵⁵ For Gabo this represented an imposition of life on art rather than its integration within it. The result was superficiality. He wrote, ‘Nothing is further from the constructive idea than the deliberate aim of imposing a new style artificially upon our life.’⁵⁶

Gabo’s aversion to bourgeois artistic design was probably strengthened by his social contacts of the mid-1920s. Around 1928 the Bauhaus became involved in a debate about the relationship between artistic production, social responsibilities and middle-class consumerism. Following the departure of Gropius that year, two new appointments at the School affected change. Hannes Meyer took over as the School’s Director and Ernst Kállai became Editor of its magazine. Both were at the time critical of the School’s production of objects which had a fashionable, middle-class audience. In her recent essay ‘The Irreproducibility of the Bauhaus Object’, Robin Schuldenfrei shows how the Bauhaus had by 1928 become increasingly centred on working with and for a social elite, creating a ‘repertoire’ of specialised and expensive objects rather than products which would enhance the lives of working class people.⁵⁷ Schuldenfrei notes that, despite the School’s willingness to call the status of objects into question through their educational methods, the organisation ultimately catered rather for the educated middle classes of Germany’s Weimar Republic.⁵⁸

Such debates provide important context for *Circle*’s later presentation of the aspirations of Constructive art to have direct relevance to society and spaces of daily life. Foremost, *Circle*’s

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Gabo, ‘Design?’ *Bauhaus* (Dessau), vol. 2, no. 4, 1928: 2-6. Reprinted in and Lodder (eds), 2000: 52-60.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 54.

⁵⁷ Meyer, who was known to have held some Marxist convictions, for which he was later removed from his post, advocated that the School needed to regain focus on “people’s needs rather than luxury needs”. Schuldenfrei ‘The Irreproducibility of the Bauhaus Object,’ in Saletnik and Schuldenfrei (eds), 2009 : 37-38.

⁵⁸ Schuldenfrei writes, ‘Practically speaking, Bauhaus objects were not mass-produced in any number, nor picked up by industry in general. It is important to differentiate between objects that were genuinely mass-reproducible and the visual propagation of an idea of modern, reproducible products.’ Ibid.: 38 and 51.

stated interest in ‘Constructive art’ rather than ‘Constructivism’ contrasted the movement’s image against the proliferating range of artistic ‘Isms’, putting in its place a term less exclusive in tone and evocative of its embeddedness within daily life. Although considered a foundational text of the movement, Gabo and Pevsner’s ‘Realistic Manifesto’ of 1920 did not use the term ‘Constructivism’. This was probably first used the following year by the Moscow-based ‘Working Group of Constructivists’ led by Rodchenko, who had used it to describe the group’s aim to create a utilitarian, ideological and formal means of inspiring the collective values of workers’ councils.⁵⁹ Gabo and Pevsner’s ‘Realistic Manifesto’ did however share the ideals of Rodchenko’s ‘Working Group’ regarding the potential of art to inspire the post-revolutionary reconstruction of everyday life. In 1920 Gabo and Pevsner specifically called for art to inhabit Russia’s ‘squares’ and ‘streets’, to ‘attend us everywhere that life flows and acts’ and specifically in the spaces of the labouring workforce. They called for it ‘at the bench at the table’, ‘at work’, ‘at rest’ and ‘at play’.⁶⁰ Similarly, when ‘Constructivism’ first appeared in print by the ‘Working Group’, artists were called ‘into the factory, where the real body of life is made’.⁶¹

Seventeen years later the editors of *Circle* described the need for the Constructive idea to reach the more vaguely described ‘domains of social life’.⁶² However, *Circle* related its artistic ideology much less explicitly to the labouring workforce and this aspect of the movement’s history remained largely absent. Despite multiple discussions regarding the editors’ differing opinions on the emphasis given to historical Constructivism and contemporary Constructive art, Gabo does not seem to have explicitly stated disagreement at an early stage with this lack of focus. On the contrary, he may have considered it an inevitable consequence of a more emphatically trans-historical approach, as well as the shift in historical circumstances as the project was continued in London in 1937. On the other hand, the journal retained for many the impression of a broadly socialist outlook through characteristics such as its title, red type, selection of abstract work and the content of texts. It is arguable that this placed the journal within a problematic zone similar to that Schuldenfrei describes facing the Bauhaus almost one decade before. As a physical publication, *Circle* is a sourcebook of images and text which has a strong design, is printed on glossed paper and bound, thus forming an attractive and alluring object to be bought, held, kept and consumed. As a consequence of its quality, Nicholson consistently noted the issue of its ‘terrific price’.⁶³

⁵⁹ Gabo and Pevsner, ‘The Realistic Manifesto’ (Moscow), 5 August 1920, trans. Gabo, reprinted in Hammer and Lodder (eds), 2000: 24-28.

⁶⁰ Gabo and Pevsner, ‘The Realistic Manifesto’ (Moscow), 5 August 1920, trans. Gabo, reprinted in Hammer and Lodder (eds), 2000: 9.

⁶¹ *The Constructivists. KK Medunetskii, VA Stenberg, GA Stenberg*, exh. cat. (Moscow, The Poets’ Café, January 1922), quoted in Lodder, 1983: 2.

⁶² Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: v. My italics.

⁶³ Nicholson to Martin, 19 November [1943], GMA A70.3.10.4.

In place of the earlier Constructivist focus on the role of art in the spaces of the working classes, *Circle*'s predominant means of expressing the inseparability of art and life is through the variety of media in which the Constructive impulse was shown to play a part. This is most evident in the diversity of projects contained in the last two sections, 'Architecture' and 'Art and Life'. The 'Architecture' section included an essay on 'Town Planning' by Maxwell Fry as well as more aesthetic-oriented approaches such as Breuer's 'Architecture and Material' and 'Colour in Interior Architecture' by Italian-Swiss architect Alberto Sartoris. The section was, therefore, only broadly idealistic in its vision that Constructive ideas could improve the lives of citizens through its presence in architecture and design projects within towns and cities. The range of topics in 'Art and Life' included those with social relevance to the lower classes and art forms aimed at a more middle-class audience. The selection consists of essays outlining the presence of a Constructive impulse in different artistic media, including 'Choreography' by Léonide Massine, 'Light Painting' by Moholy-Nagy and 'New Typography' by Jan Tschichold.⁶⁴ While texts highlighted the different ways in which Constructive trends could be seen in closer proximity to daily life, the specifically labouring workforce remained predominantly absent. However, one text in this section stands alone for the directness of its application to a social public need. Gropius's 'Art Education and the State', which was taken from an earlier essay in *The Year Book of Education* (1936), described a necessary change in art education away from the 'isolated individual work' towards a 'standard' type, which had formed a principal tenet of the Bauhaus. Gropius specifically called upon the State and public authorities to support initiatives developed by artists which could enable art to come into greater contact with each level of social life.⁶⁵ Focusing on education from the ground up, he particularly recommended 'a preliminary artistic training' for all schools (not just specialist art schools), to include 'manual skill, the understanding for materials and the power of observation and thought'.⁶⁶

Although not explicitly stated in *Circle*, political aspects of the earlier Constructivist movement played a key role in how the network of artists and thinkers surrounding Hepworth and Nicholson during the 1930s understood its social significance. The basis of Constructivism in the principles of Soviet council democracy in pre-Stalinist post-revolutionary Russia meant that it was widely received as a movement politically on the left in which art had played an integral social role. Despite Stalin's increasingly totalitarian rule, which became more widely known through news surrounding the Moscow Trials (part of his 'Great Purge' of 1936–38) and the rise

⁶⁴ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: 245. Moholy-Nagy promoted a new idea for an educational 'Academy of Light' and Tschichold presented differences between 'New Traditionalism' and 'New Typography' in a table.

⁶⁵ Ibid.: 239.

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 240.

of economic inequality through the 1930s, Constructivism's abstraction ensured its association with earlier post-revolutionary society rather than with Stalin's political programme.⁶⁷

The links between historical Constructivism and *Circle*'s version of Constructive art were most recognisable in the combination of abstraction and leftist ideals surrounding the relationship between art and social life. Most crucially, this formed a helpful stylistic and ideological counter to the ideals and aesthetic of Fascism. In their opening statement *Circle*'s editors recognised the difficulties of working at this moment and described the journal's ambition to provide participants with a form of expression and means of contact at a time when they had been censored, scattered and lacked opportunities for exchange.⁶⁸ In the first sentence of his essay Gabo described the 'revolutions and disintegration' of the twentieth century, framing his view within a picture of cyclical patterns of social disintegration, revolution and war, which were followed by renewal and reconstruction.⁶⁹ Around 1936–37 Hepworth, Nicholson and Martin would not have taken lightly the parallels between the contemporary moment and the First World War, which was within their memory. Their alignment with Constructivism through the appropriated heading of 'Constructive' art resounded to them and others as an anti-traditionalist, socialist stance opposing Fascist and totalitarian regimes and independent from the Surrealist branch of anti-fascist liberalist politics.

Towards the end of its production, Gabo became especially concerned by what he saw as a lack of specificity concerning the relationship between the Constructive project of *Circle* and his memory of Constructivism in the 1920s. When expressing this to Nicholson, he mentioned his co-editors' decision to exclude a 'historical section' which could have explained this connection. While an account or separate section outlining the historical development of Constructivism may have created a more accurate picture of the movement's previous forms and circumstances, it would arguably have weakened the journal's overall presentation of a trans-historical 'Constructive idea' which united the historical movement with its living tradition. Nevertheless, Gabo came to be ill at ease with the situation and wrote to Nicholson describing how the decision had led to an unbalance so that now 'none of such artists as Tatlin etc are included whose works I consider of not only historical but still vital importance.'⁷⁰ He imagined therefore how a clear outline of the movement's earlier history could have provided a solid foundation for upholding the importance and meanings of both past and present work.

⁶⁷ From 1934, Stalin's regime also mounted increasing attacks on the artistic avant-garde in music, literature and the visual arts, so that by 1937 his regime was associated with Socialist Realism, a style officially formulated by the Writers' Union in 1934. See Chapters 12 and 13 ('Communism in Retreat' and 'The Great Terror') in Figs, 2014: 245-282.

⁶⁸ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: v-vi.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Gabo expressed particular concern about the sculpture section, in which he noted the presence of works at odds with his understanding of what Constructive art had inherited from early Constructivist art. Late in 1936 he described to Nicholson feeling caught between two different projects:

all our comrades in Paris including Pevsner are accusing me intensively of abandoning the strongholds of the Constructivists by openly associating with artists of doubtful constructive value such as [Alberto] Giacometti and Moore and even with such a sculptor as Brancusi who has been in mind & work & ideology exactly opposite to us & remains so.⁷¹

Of sculptors included in *Circle*, some were more readily embraced within the field of Constructive and Constructivist art than others. Gabo most explicitly opposed those whose reproduced works were bounded forms. Giacometti, Moore and Brancusi were each represented by single forms carved from wood or stone. Hepworth's sculptures also included those formed of a singular shape, yet her artistic interests were more broadly presented and better known to him overall.⁷² *Monumental Stele* (1936, destroyed) (Fig. 23), for example, is a singular form but composed of a spatial arrangement planes. Gabo was represented by four works: a version of *Stone with a Collar* (1933), a 1920 construction design and two plastic constructions made in 1928 and 1929. Gabo's pride in his most recent work *Stone with a Collar*, which extended the spatial axis of a bounded stone, reveals his connection with Hepworth's work at the time.⁷³ In his essay for the journal, furthermore, Gabo specifically upheld a more flexible approach to materials, stating, 'There is no prohibition against a sculptor using any kind of material for the purpose of his plastic theme.'⁷⁴

In conjunction with *Circle*, an *Exhibition of Constructive Art* was held at the London Gallery in July 1937.⁷⁵ The six-person committee included the three *Circle* editors with Hepworth and two other artists included in *Circle*: Eileen Holding and Arthur Jackson. Artists included were: Calder (two mobiles), Winifred Dacre (one painting, three gouaches), Gabo (two constructions),

⁷¹ Gabo, draft letter to Nicholson, [second half of 1936], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 245.

⁷² Four works by Hepworth were included at the beginning of 'Sculpture' section and included a spherical wooden form poised on a raised rectangular base (1935), *Monumental Stele* (1936), a rising arrangement of overlaid shapes (1936) and a two-part sculpture of a larger and smaller darkwood spheres (1936).

⁷³ Hammer and Lodder explain that Gabo was interested in British direct carving before he moved to London. In January 1936, Nicholson reported conversations with Gabo to Read: 'He seems to hold a very high opinion of Barbara's work – he said her sculpture is the most important being made today either abroad or in England. He then went on to say that in England he also admired Moore's work very much'. Nicholson to Read, 24 January [1936], Herbert Read Papers, Victoria, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 225. Gabo had been in contact with carvers in Paris, including Alexander Archipenko and Amedeo Modigliani.

⁷⁴ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: 106.

⁷⁵ *Exhibition of Constructive Art*, London Gallery, 12–31 July 1937.

Héliou (two paintings, three watercolours), Hepworth (four sculptures), Holding (one construction, three drawings), Jackson (three paintings, two drawings), Moholy-Nagy (two rhodoids, one painting), Moore (one sculpture), Nicholson (three paintings, two reliefs), John Piper (two paintings) and John Stephenson (three paintings). With only four international artists among twelve participants and two-thirds of the work made in 1937, the selection defiantly focussed on contemporary English work. Of those made earlier, most were made the previous year except for three: a construction by Gabo (1933), a mobile by Calder (1935) and a rhodoid print by Moholy-Nagy (1935). While the selection was undoubtedly influenced by the relative difficulty of accessing older and international work, the select group of earlier art also reveals the organisers' desire to provide an international frame. Other exhibitions show that a more contemporary focus on Constructivism was in fact well overdue. Another exhibition of Constructive art was held in 1937 in Basel and this presented a historical group of Constructivist and Neoplastic work from the previous decade, with gaps in the display filled by photographs of works by Malevich and Tatlin.⁷⁶ In contrast, visitors to the London exhibition were introduced to the longer history of Constructivism only briefly through a text. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Martin noted, 'The form of art represented here is not a sudden and temporary fashion. Its development has been taking place for a considerable number of years.'⁷⁷ While acknowledging the importance of a growing tradition, no further information about the specific places or individuals was given.

A foreign contributor wrote the main catalogue essay for the London Gallery exhibition to provide an outside perspective on the contemporary movement in England. In an essay titled 'Art as the Key to Reality: What Ails Our Time?', Swiss historian and critic Siegfried Giedion introduced the specific need for Constructive art and thought in England. Since industrialisation, he argued, English culture had failed to cope with the 'social and human consequences' of being a society which had not yet discovered 'the key to the reality [...] in the emotions'.⁷⁸ To stress the relevance and closeness to life of contemporary Constructive art, he explained how works on display offered 'surprising' and 'complete' new comprehensions of the surrounding world.⁷⁹ He continued by suggesting a range of parallels between the forms of art and life, and their interaction:

From a tin can to a steel construction, from the growth of a tree to the remote forms of life manifested under the microscope, from the organic movement of the

⁷⁶ The exhibition included works by Van Doesburg, César Domela, Viking Eggeling, Gabo, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Pevsner, Sophie Taeuber, Vantongerloo and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. Malevich and Tatlin were represented by photographic reproductions. *Abstraction-Création, 1931-1936*, 1978.

⁷⁷ L. Martin, 'Foreword', *Exhibition of Constructive Art*, exh. cat. (London, London Gallery), 12–31 July 1937.

⁷⁸ S. Giedion, 'Art as the Key to Reality: What Ails Our Time', in *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

machines [*sic.*] precision, from the monoliths of the stone age to the complicated winding of a cable; in the perception of all these things our emotions have been enriched by this art which is apparently so far from reality.⁸⁰

Circle and the London Gallery exhibition both suggest that Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson strove to present contemporary work in relation to a Constructive heritage which had developed slowly over time.

Keen to emphasise this linear connection, this small editorial group arguably remained disconnected from other international Constructive threads which were developing in new directions during the mid-1930s and which might have offered further evidence of the Constructive Idea's wide spread. Uruguayan-Catalan artist Joaquín Torres García had co-edited the Paris-based journal *Cercle et Carré* (1929–30) with Michel Seuphor and, after moving to Spain in December 1932, he introduced Spanish audiences to Constructive art through lectures and publications.⁸¹ From Madrid, he even organised a Group of Constructivist Artists and edited a series of guides on the topic of Constructive art. In the third of these *Guiones* ('Guides'), he reflected on the internationalist aspect of Constructivism, as a circle of ideas which moved across cultures at different speeds and took shape in different ways. He wrote, 'Not all peoples advance at the same pace [...] very different phases and cycles of civilization can exist at the same moment.'⁸² Torres García returned to his native Montevideo in 1934 but remained connected to these networks. From 1936 he produced a French and Spanish language edition of *Cercle et Carré*, which appeared as *Circulo y Cuadrado: Revista de la Asociación de Arte Constructivo - 2a. época* ('Circle and Square: Journal of the Association of Constructive Art – the 2nd renaissance'). Nicholson's collection of journals includes a copy of this journal's third issue, published in Montevideo in February 1937, though it is not currently known when it entered his collection.⁸³ If it was known to him during the process of editing *Circle* at this time, Nicholson would surely have taken interest in its contents, which included foundational texts by Mondrian and Van Doesburg, alongside essays by contributors lesser-known among English audiences.⁸⁴ Yet, given the lack of evidence to suggest that Nicholson was pursuing means of reaching out to new branches of Constructive art springing up outside of already dominant centres and the possibility that he was aware of this introduction of Constructive art to South America, the absence of references to the project in correspondence and reports surrounding

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Cercle et Carré* (Paris), nos. 1–3. See for example, Torres García, 'Un grup d'Art Constructiu a Madrid,' *Revista Art* (Barcelona), 1933.

⁸² Torres García, *Guiones* (Madrid) no. 3, 30 July 1933.

⁸³ 'Twenty-five various related publications', Ben Nicholson Papers, TGA 8717.6.9.24.

⁸⁴ Articles included 'Vers un art universel' ['Towards a Universal Art'] by Torres García, 'Sobre Pintura' ['On Painting'] by Van Doesburg and 'Nationalism and Folklore' by Edgar Varese, and American-based French composer.

Circle suggests that he was relatively disinterested in further probing this alternative contemporary development.

While surprising, this is not altogether inexplicable. Although it contained a number of texts and illustrations of works by their network of friends from abstract circles across Europe, *Cercle et Carré*, which Torres García had edited with Seuphor, had brought together works and texts associated with a range of abstract movements based on the principles of Suprematism, Neoplasticism and Constructivism. Lacking critical focus and the direct involvement of more established artists (Mondrian was presented as father-figure but was not directly involved), it was perceived by many to lack focus.⁸⁵ This critical opinion was undoubtedly familiar to the editors of *Circle*; Gabo had earlier refused to participate in the journal's activities. Given the strong association between Torres García's Latin American project and the earlier efforts of *Cercle et Carré* it is likely that *Circle* editors would have continued to view it with a critical eye as an unsanctioned blend of different abstract movements.

As discussed, 'Circle' was selected as the journal's title to emphasise a contemporary crystallisation of the Constructive idea over a wide geographical and cultural terrain. Circles hold a unique place within models of cosmopolitan thought, enabling theorists to consider the relationship between the self, immediate environment or community, and other wider structures of belonging. Martha Nussbaum offers guidance on the visual analogy. Cosmopolitan theorists, she writes,

suggest that we think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one encircles the self, the next takes in the immediate family, then follows the extended family, then, in order, neighbours or local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender, or sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, humanity as a whole.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Bann, for instance, describes the group as, in effect, 'little more than a union of like-minded artists'. Bann, 1974: 177. The first exhibition poster lists the artists included: 'Arp – Baumeister – Cahn – Bjarnason – Buchheister – Clausen – Colson – Cueto – Charchoune – Grabowska – Daura – Exter – Fillia – Foltyn – Gorin – Hoste – Huszar – Idelson – Lafnet – Kandinsky – Le Corbusier – Léger – Luethy – Olson – Mondrian – Ozenfant – Moszcynski – Prampolini – Pevsner – Stella – Welti – Russolo – Szmuszkowicz – Sartoris – Torrès-Garcia – Schwitters – Stazewski – Vordemberge – Vantongerloo – Van Rees – Wolska – Werman.' *Ière Exposition Internationale du Groupe Cercle et Carré*, 18 April – 1 May 1930, Galerie 23, 23 rue la Boétie, Paris. Seuphor's editorial in first magazine 'In Defense of an Architecture' (1930) owes much to Mondrian's theoretical writings which upheld the metaphysical potential of abstraction. *Cercle et Carré*, no. 1, 15 March 1930. Torres García met Van Doesburg, Mondrian and Vantongerloo in Paris around 1928–9. When *Cercle et Carré* disbanded, many of its members became associated with a smaller group under Van Doesburg's direction, *Art Concret*.

⁸⁶ Martha Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism' in Brown and Held, 2013; 158.

Nussbaum's description of the cosmopolitan model of concentric circles is similar to the *Circle* editors' understanding of the shape's symbolism while calling to mind an important difference. At the central core of the circle (or concentric circles) Nussbaum describes is the 'self'. While a number of texts in *Circle* upheld the value of freedom in political and artistic terms, the journal's pages contained few references to the individuality of a 'self' through experiences or personalities, upholding instead characteristics and experiences common to broad cultural transformations or humanity considered as a whole. As shown, discussions reveal that the journal's editors saw the shape in terms of its concentricity and flexibility to be 'small or large', or in their case not of a prescribed size.⁸⁷ *Circle* correspondence and reports, however, show no evidence that editors questioned what lay at the centre or concentric core of their chosen shape. Although its associations must have differed according to each participant, my conclusion stems from Gabo's influence, his description of the 'crystallisation' of Constructive culture, as well as the generative, nucleus-centred character of his contemporary work. At the centre of Gabo's circle, I would suggest, lay neither a specific place nor moment but rather the generative, conceptual and ultimately intangible Constructive idea, around which a nebular cluster of cultural forms would continue to grow.⁸⁸

Nussbaum continues her reflections by suggesting the practical implications of the circular model for cosmopolitan thought. Quoting Stoic philosopher Hierocles (who had used the analogy in the second century), she writes,

Our task as citizens of the world will be to "draw the circles somehow toward the center" [...] making all human beings more like our fellow city-dwellers, and so on. We need not give up our special affections and identification [...] think of them as superficial, and we may think of our identity as constituted partly by them. [...] But we should also work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality, and give the circle that defines our humanity special attention and respect.⁸⁹

Cosmopolitanism is explained, therefore, as a process of drawing connections between the outer circles and the central self. Nussbaum stresses that this does not diminish differences by losing originality, identity or belonging; on the contrary, the process recognises individualities and seeks to learn through them. Practically this generates a personal and political outwardness and an attitude of universal responsibility, care and conversation. As the texts and conversations

⁸⁷ Martin to Nicholson, n.d. [1936], GMA 96.1.2.4.

⁸⁸ Hammer and Lodder describe Gabo's concept of the 'Constructive idea' in relation to his 'idealistic and emphatically non-Marxist view 'of the superiority of the creative *mind* as the producer of a Constructive work. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 241.

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, *op. cit.* in Brown and Held, 2013: 158.

surrounding *Circle* have shown, the ‘Constructive idea’ was described as a transnational force that was in the process of shaping cultures and forms around the world. A physical forum for the reproduction of images and text from a variety of media and participants, furthermore, *Circle* was produced to be circulated among a wide audience and to encourage through this network a sense of transcultural conversation, awareness and support. Its opening editorial plainly stated its aim to generate an outward-reaching system connecting dispersed participants and encompassing their work within an inclusive but theoretically focussed body of work, even if aesthetic, ideological or temporal contradictions arose. As both a practical project and scrapbook of ideas, it connected an extensive network of displaced creators and intellectuals and encouraged collaboration and dialogue. As such, it provided a relatively rare sense of cultural value at a time when the project’s editors and many of their collaborators were in crucial need of optimism and support.

It remains to be questioned how much *Circle* maintained a positive attitude to difference and to the specific origins and identities of its included participants and their work. As seen through the example of Torres García, *Circle* failed to account for the full cosmopolitan variety of work which was continuing to extend the Constructive past. Ideas contained in its pages, however, suggested the power of transcending local and personal circumstances for a common benefit. In his report on ‘International Collaboration’ at the Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne (C.I.A.M.), reported in its pages, Giedion explained the forum’s decisively anti-individualist aim ‘to eliminate personal work’, explaining his view that discussions were only likely to be truly collaborative when participants were asked to solve problems ‘which the individual cannot solve by himself.’⁹⁰ Unlike C.I.A.M., *Circle* did not stipulate the complete subordination of individuals, nationalities or stylistic groups to a manifesto statement. Although incorporating a range of styles, works were not subsumed within a diagrammatic chart of influence or visual hierarchy, which seems to have been suggested but never appeared. Positioned in proximity to other images and texts, artworks were instead arranged with the character of their forms in mind, without distracting descriptions, artists’ profiles or even a strong determining narrative, but rather given space to stand for themselves.⁹¹

Like the associations of the circle’s shape, the forms and materials of Gabo’s work during his time in London visually correlate with *Circle*’s cosmopolitanism. As noted, *Stone with a Collar* (Fig. 20), which was included in the journal, is a concentric arrangement formed of a central nucleus of natural organically-shaped limestone, encircled by a plastic collar and thin brass tail. Modern, man-formed materials extend the central core or mass into its surrounding space and

⁹⁰ Gabo, Martin and Nicholson (eds), 1937: 274.

⁹¹ Hammer and Lodder describe how *Circle*’s layout and design made claims ‘for the impersonal, objective bases of the new art’ in a way that was in keeping with Constructivist theory of the 1920s, in which art was considered closely aligned with science and technology. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 239.

Gabo's configuration suggests an orbit or force-field and a spreading outwards of the Constructive impulse or 'idea' through formal and material expansion.

Resulting from his access to new plastics in London, Gabo extended earlier formal investigations by using different materials to express the values of spatial integration and expansion. Gabo's contact with the Plastics Division of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), the main plastics manufacturer in Britain during the mid-1930s, was particularly influential in this respect. Learning about the development of Perspex, a shatter-resistant, transparent plastic first brought to market in 1933, Gabo ordered some sheets during the summer of 1937.⁹² *Construction in Space: Arch* (1937) (Fig. 24) is one of the results. Clear and beautifully poised, an arched base supports an arrangement composed of two circles – one the peripheral rim of the other. An arm-like line connects the two and extends the flat disc in front of and slightly above the outer rim so that the circles appear to be 'folded' and extended through space.⁹³

Such formal complexity, colourless transparency and textural unity would not have been possible without the structural tenacity of Plexiglass. Twenty years later Roland Barthes's descriptions of plastic as 'ubiquity made visible' are especially pertinent.⁹⁴ The qualities of plastic, as a man-made formation of previously 'formless' matter into an infinite variety of possible structures, led to their contemporary introduction into various spaces of daily life. Gabo similarly exploited its properties to make clear the material's constructive potential, especially its ability to create an infinite variety of forms out of formless matter, which could be put to structural use within the social spaces of daily life. Its suitability for Gabo's purposes, furthermore, ensured its aptness for modern sites and needs. As an acrylic glass, its flexibility, lightness, shatter resistance and transparency made it especially useful as a material for improving modes of transport and from around 1935 it was being used for car windscreens and aircraft parts.⁹⁵ Gabo's complex construction of integrated elements in *Arch* similarly stretched

⁹² Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 251.

⁹³ My reading of this work draws from Hammer and Lodder's description. Ibid.: 254.

⁹⁴ For Barthes this characteristic 'plasticity' also has a negative effect. Because it is 'sublimated as movement' he writes, plastic 'hardly exists as a substance. Its reality is a negative one: neither hard nor deep.' As an effect of its nature, therefore, plastic has become 'wholly swallowed up' by the fact of being originally shaped for a particular form and use. By the 1950s, therefore, Barthes had noted the central paradox of the plastic 'myth': its value as a fabricated material capable of pure plastic form was paired with a sense of negative purity or a lack of meaning or substance beyond its constructed use. Barthes, 1957, 1972: 97–98. The relationship between form and formlessness is more longstanding. Derrida and Ferraris begin *A Taste for the Secret* with a quotation by the ancient philosopher Plotinus (c.204–270 AD) which reads, 'Form is a trace of the formless; it is the formless that produces form, not form the formless; and matter is needed for the producing; matter, in the nature of things, is furthest away, since of itself it has not even the lowest degree of form.' Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI, 7, 33, trans. S. MacKenna, in Derrida and Ferraris, 2001: 3.

⁹⁵ Hammer and Lodder note that Perspex was being used as a replacement for safety glass in car windscreens from 1935, and was later used in aircraft. Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 251. From St Ives Gabo contributed to transport design projects associated with the Design Research Unit, founded by Marcus Brumwell but directed by Read. When, in March 1943, Read approached Gabo regarding a car design, Gabo responded: 'this is exactly the kind of job I am interested in doing and feel competent to

the plastic's form to reveal its inherent potential as a structurally connective, expressive and socially relevant material.

ii. CONSTRUCTIVISM ACROSS EUROPE

In the process of the diversion of Constructive art to London and then to St Ives, its artistic and ideological impulses provided artists in those places with a relevant and active tradition. The meanings and political resonances of this movement shifted depending on each artist's exposure to sources and interests in previous work. For many artists using Constructive precedents and terminology, their understanding of the movement was developed through knowledge or first-hand experience of artworks, contact with artists and access to reproduced texts and images. Exposure to this tradition was dependent, furthermore, upon knowledge not only of its beginnings in Russia but also of successive stages of its development across Europe.

Due to their proximity to its protagonists, the development of Constructive art in Germany during the interwar period was relatively well known to Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson. Hepworth's and Nicholson's networks in Paris and London during the 1930s particularly reveal a trans-European conglomeration of individuals, of whom a high proportion hailed from Germany and its neighbouring German-speaking nations, Austria and Switzerland. During the mid-1930s, Hepworth and Nicholson built on their knowledge of work in these countries while living close to a number of exiles and émigrés, especially those associated with the Bauhaus School who were by then living in London.

Hepworth and Nicholson made contact with a number of German-speaking artists during their participation in Paris-based groups, including Abstraction-Création between 1933 and 1934. During this period other members included Arp (from Alsace) and Germans Carl Buchheister, Otto Freundlich and Schwitters. Swiss artists constituted a large number and included Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Max Bill, Fritz Glarner, Kurt Seligman and Alfred Willimann.⁹⁶ Hepworth and Nicholson were especially close to Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Hepworth later remembered visiting Arp's Meudon studio with Nicholson in 1932, taking with her photographs of her sculptures, including images of 'the alabaster Pierced Form (1931)' and 'Profile (1932)'.⁹⁷

undertake. It would be still better if it were an airplane'. Gabo, draft letter to Read, 20 March 1943, Naum, Gabo Papers, Yale, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 292. In September that year, Gabo went to the ICI works at Welwyn Garden City to discuss whether new plastics such as Perspex could be used for the side windows. He wrote to ICI: 'I am greatly in favour of utilising your plastics, particularly 'Perspex', as much as possible in the future car'. Gabo, draft letter to Mr Walls, 7 September [1943], Yale, quoted in *Ibid.*: 293.

⁹⁶ *Abstraction-Création, 1931–1936*, exh. cat. (Münster and Paris, 1978).

⁹⁷ It is possible that Hepworth was referring to the alabaster *Pierced Form* (dated on record as 1932, destroyed during the war, BH 35). *Profile* could refer to the alabaster *Two Heads* (1932, BH 38).

Although Arp was not there, she recalled being shown around the studio by Taeuber-Arp and being particularly struck by how Arp ‘had fused landscape with the human form.’⁹⁸ While recalling the experience in light of subsequent developments in her work, Hepworth emphasised especially how, coming to Arp’s work without ‘any first-hand knowledge of the Dadaist movement’, she had been free to receive his work on a personal level and been inspired to find her own ‘identification, as a human being and a sculptor,’ with the landscape.⁹⁹

The two artist couples kept in contact following this encounter. In Paris again during December 1933, Nicholson described to Hepworth a recent conversation. He wrote, ‘He [Arp] thought your photos quite lovely & he says you are a bit of a miracle with all that work so young’. He added, ‘Taeuber had a nice ptg – with straight line & circles – so small as to be spots. [...] you must come over next time & meet Arp, & some of your work must come over.’¹⁰⁰ Excited by this critical exchange, it is at this moment that works by Hepworth and Arp, as well as by Nicholson and Taeuber-Arp most closely relate.¹⁰¹ It was in this context of friendly exchange that Hepworth developed a profound view on the importance of international groups for fostering wider European awareness. In her own personal statement for the second issue of the journal *Abstraction-Creation*, she described her feeling that in this ‘fated era’ of history, the concern was ‘not a matter of Greece, or of Germany, or of France, or indeed of anywhere else,’ suggesting instead a shared transnational or European concern.¹⁰²

Actively networking in Paris during these years, Nicholson regularly attended *Abstraction-Création* events. In the winter of 1933 he wrote to Hepworth, ‘We all went to the Vernisage of *Abstr-Créat [sic.]* very nice white little gallery.’¹⁰³ The following April he wrote again reporting ‘a v. bad show indeed on at A-C at the moment,’ suggesting that the group’s exhibitions formed opportunities for internal feedback and debate.¹⁰⁴ Nicholson’s exposure to such exhibitions which were not in line with his tastes led to his and Hepworth’s departure from the group. Timings suggest this was also connected to a wider disbanding of the group in the summer of

‘Statements by Hepworth in six autobiographical sections in *Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings*, with an introduction by Herbert Read, London 1952’, in Bowness, S. (ed.), 2015: 61.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*: 62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 62.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholson to Hepworth [22 December 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.60.

¹⁰¹ Compare, for instance, the examples of each artist’s work in *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif*, no. 2, 1933.

¹⁰² Hepworth, ‘Translation of an untitled text in *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif*, no. 2, 1933,’ trans. A. Grater, reprinted in Bowness, S. (ed.), 2015: 18–9, 18. *Abstraction-Création* had nearly 400 subscribers, half in Paris, 43 elsewhere in France, 68 in Switzerland and 11 in the UK. Valerie Holman, ‘Barbara Hepworth in Print: Acquiring an International Reputation,’ in Curtis and Stephens (eds), 2015: 26–35, note 39. See also Fabre, 1978.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Nicholson to Hepworth 1 April 1934, TGA 20132.1.144.61. Given the date of his letter, it is very likely that Nicholson was referring to an exhibition which opened only a couple of nights before (30 March – 12 April 1934) at *Abstraction-Création*’s new headquarters at 44, Avenue de Wagram, which showed works by Conne, Frenlich, Gleizes, Gorin, Jelinek, Okamoto, Reth, Schoop and Van Doesburg. Inglis, 2007.

1934, when Jean Héliion, Arp and Taeuber-Arp resigned, splitting with '[Auguste] Herbin's faction'.¹⁰⁵

Nicholson, Arp and Taeuber-Arp were united by this split and their desire for a more exclusive, high-quality grouping. No longer directly involved in Abstraction-Création's exhibitions and publications, Nicholson continued to meet Arp and Taeuber-Arp in Paris. In January 1935 he wrote to Hepworth that the three artists had discussed a potential new 'abstract publication, only very select' and he included a list of suggested artists, which included each of the two couples, [Hans] Erni, [César] Domela, Kandinsky, Calder, and Giacometti '(if he would accept)'.¹⁰⁶ Nicholson had clearly positioned himself and Hepworth within a prospective project gathered around the abstract biomorphic tastes of Héliion and Arp in Paris which, as his list suggests, had also been strengthened by Kandinsky's arrival from the Bauhaus the previous year. Although the project was unrealised, Nicholson's list provides a possible artistic path that he and Hepworth might have pursued had they been encouraged to move to Paris.

From late in 1933 Hepworth and Nicholson were increasingly in touch with artists, architects and designers whom they had met in Paris and who were increasingly moving further west. In the winter of 1933-34, following the closure of the Bauhaus in Berlin, Hepworth was visited in London by a German artist who had been, she wrote to Nicholson, 'banished from Germany' and was now living in London.¹⁰⁷ Her visitor was a friend of Willi Baumeister, whom she may have known through Read.¹⁰⁸ In the spring of 1934 Hepworth expressed delight to Nicholson that Gropius was in London and explained that he had 'a most interesting show on.'¹⁰⁹ It is likely that she visited Gropius's exhibition at the Royal Institute of British Architects (R.I.B.A.) which opened in May 1934 and included 170 drawings and photographs of his work.¹¹⁰ Living not far from Hampstead's Lawn Road Flats (a project managed by Molly and Jack Pritchard with architect Wells Coates), it is probable that Hepworth and Nicholson would have been particularly interested in Gropius and the Bauhaus, which, as key exponents of contemporary directions in social living, had been highly influential to the project. In July 1934 Pritchard offered Gropius a studio flat in the building and he arrived with his wife Ise that October. Gropius, Hepworth and Nicholson remained aware of each other's activities in Hampstead.

¹⁰⁵ Arp and Taeuber-Arp resigned that June. See Héliion to Nicholson, 18 June 1934, TGA 8717.1.2.1564. Quoted in Holman, *op. cit.* in Curtis and Stephens (eds), 2015: 30.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholson to Hepworth, [13 Jan 1935], TGA 20132.1.144.67.

¹⁰⁷ Hepworth to Nicholson, [Christmas 1933], TGA 8717.1.1.160.

¹⁰⁸ Hepworth does not appear to have been a great supporter of Baumeister's work. At Christmas 1933 she wrote to Nicholson about a book of Baumeister's drawings owned by Read. She wrote, 'they are so bad and I said I thought so.' Hepworth to Nicholson, [Christmas 1933], TGA 8717.1.1.159.

¹⁰⁹ Hepworth to Nicholson [1934], TGA 8717.1.1.187.

¹¹⁰ 'Opening of the Gropius Exhibition', *R.I.B.A. Journal*, no. 41, 19 May 1934. Crinson and Lubbock, 1994: 96. Gropius had made a previous visit to England in June and July 1933 at the invitation of Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, owners of Dartington Hall in Devon. They had invited Gropius to visit Devon to advise on work at their estate.

Writing to Nicholson in Paris early in 1935, Hepworth noted that Gropius had ‘sent round’ Dr Alexander Dorner.¹¹¹ As Director of the State Museum in Hanover, Dorner had formed a vast collection of Constructive art; Gropius’s recommendation to visit and Hepworth’s report that Dorner had been ‘specially impressed’ by her work suggest that both men recognised the Constructive impulses in the multiform geometric works that Hepworth was particularly developing at the time.¹¹²

From around 1933 Hungarian artist and designer Moholy-Nagy was a key contact for Hepworth and Nicholson. Moholy-Nagy had taught with Gropius at the Bauhaus in Weimar from 1923 to 1928 and had recently relocated from Germany to Amsterdam, following restrictions imposed by the National Socialists.¹¹³ In June 1934 he wrote to Nicholson from Amsterdam requesting friendly advice on the possibility of bringing an exhibition of his work to the city, meaning it is likely that they had already met.¹¹⁴ It is probable that their paths had crossed in Paris the previous year, when both were in close contact with Héliou and the group surrounding Abstraction-Création.¹¹⁵ They may also have met during Moholy-Nagy’s three preliminary visits to London before his longer-term relocation in mid-May 1935.

Despite uncertainty regarding their first meeting, Hepworth and Nicholson were aware of Moholy-Nagy’s work by 1933. Coinciding with his first visit to London in November that year, *The Listener* published a translation of Moholy-Nagy’s essay ‘How Photography Revolutionises Vision’.¹¹⁶ In this, Moholy-Nagy described photography as a means of capturing new images of the world and as a tool for humanity to perceive ‘its surroundings, and its very existence, with new eyes.’¹¹⁷ While Nicholson was in Paris for Christmas the following month, Hepworth wrote to him of her fascination with new photographic techniques. She wrote, ‘I am desperately keen on all this new work – it is all quite lovely & the photograms reveal the most beautiful new world of light & form. It is so exciting.’¹¹⁸ Hepworth had made her own photograms by the end of 1933 which were similar to Moholy-Nagy’s double-profiled self-photograms of the mid-1920s.¹¹⁹ Around 1932-33 Hepworth and Nicholson posed for a photograph in their studio.¹²⁰ Taken by an unknown photographer from a high corner of the room, its composition was

¹¹¹ Hepworth to Nicholson, [postmarked 21 December 1935], TGA 8717.1.1.215.

¹¹² For example, *Three Forms* (1935) and *Discs in Echelon* (1935).

¹¹³ In Amsterdam, Moholy-Nagy found work with the firm *International Textiles*. Senter, 1981: 659.

¹¹⁴ He asked, ‘was meinen Sie dazu? Wann ist in London season für ausstellungen? [sic.]’ Postcard from Moholy-Nagy to Nicholson, 7 June 1934, TGA 8717.1.2.2974.

¹¹⁵ Senter, ‘Moholy-Nagy: The Transitional Years’, in Borchardt-Hume (ed.), 2006: 85–91, 86.

¹¹⁶ Moholy-Nagy, 1933: 690.

¹¹⁷ Senter, 1981: 659. The article was accompanied by two reproductions of photographs.

¹¹⁸ Hepworth to Nicholson, [Christmas 1933], TGA 8717.1.1.161.

¹¹⁹ See Bowness, S., 2013. Nicholson seems to have taught Hepworth to make photograms. In a letter from Paris written just before Christmas 1933, Nicholson wrote, ‘I don’t expect you will know how to do photograms & I will have to show you.’ Nicholson to Hepworth, [postmarked 20 December 1933]. TGA 20132.1.144.59.

¹²⁰ Photograph of Nicholson and Hepworth in the Mall studio [c.1932–3], TGA 8717.5.8.8.

probably inspired by what was, by then, known to be Moholy-Nagy's approach, highlighting spatial relations and structures by providing an alternative, birds-eye perspective. By 1930 Hepworth owned her own new Zeiss Ikon camera and was experimenting with how it could capture the working and living environment she shared with Nicholson. Furthermore, photography and Moholy-Nagy's work seems to have been an interest that she and Nicholson shared. A first-edition copy of Moholy-Nagy's edition of Franz Roh's *Fototek* series, published in Berlin in 1930, was owned by Nicholson and contains an inscription showing that it was a gift from Hepworth.¹²¹ The publication, which was designed by Tschichold, contained an introductory essay by Roh (which appeared in German, English and French) presenting 'the constructivist Moholy' as most strongly associated with the photogram.¹²²

The publication for which Moholy-Nagy was best known at the time was his Bauhaus chronicle *Von Material zu Architektur*, which was published in an English language edition as *The New Vision* in 1932. In June 1934 Moholy-Nagy discussed the book's distribution with Nicholson, stating where it could be bought in New York and explaining that he would also, following Nicholson's advice, contact Zwemmer's bookshop on Charing Cross Road regarding its availability.¹²³ By the time Moholy-Nagy arrived in London the following spring, Nicholson appears to have been familiar with the book. Describing to Martin that the Hungarian artist's presence should offer 'a very valuable contribution' to London, he asked whether Martin knew the 'very interesting book he published 2 or 3 years ago'; a letter which followed shortly after clarified, 'That book of Moholy Nagy's [*sic.*] is the "New Vision"'.¹²⁴

Moholy-Nagy was aware of his developing identity in London. Later reminiscing to Gropius about his first trip, he recounted that those he met had known him only as photographer.¹²⁵ In an important essay, 'Maholy-Nagy's English Photography' (1981), Terence Senter notes that Read tried to convince the Mayor Gallery to hold an exhibition of Moholy-Nagy's work in January 1934, basing his suggestions entirely on his reputation as a photographer.¹²⁶ Using this to his advantage even before moving to the city, Maholy-Nagy gained access to facilities in London, where he could experiment with new photographic techniques. Senter notes that Moholy-Nagy created some of his most experimental work in London during his second short stay in August

¹²¹ Moholy-Nagy, 1930. This is held with Nicholson's collection of publications at the Tate Archive. TGA 8717.6.9.47. Moholy-Nagy's contribution to the series was the first of only two books realised (of a planned eight) in Roh's *Fototek* series.

¹²² Moholy-Nagy, 1930: 8.

¹²³ [As written] 'danke auch für die mitteilung wegen meiner bucher: the new vision. dieses ist von dem verlag harcourt brace & co, inc New York 383 madison ave übernommen worden. dort kann man es bestellen. ich schreibe ... auch an zwemmer (bookseller).' Moholy-Nagy to Nicholson, [postmarked 13 June 1934], TGA 8717.1.2.2975.

¹²⁴ Nicholson to Martin, 31 May [postmarked 1935] and 4 July [1935], GMA 70.3.1.3 and 70.3.1.9.

¹²⁵ Moholy-Nagy to Gropius, 16 December 1935, quoted in Senter, 1981: 659.

¹²⁶ Moholy-Nagy to Read, 24 January 1934, Herbert Read Papers, Victoria. Ibid.: 660.

1934.¹²⁷ Working alongside Lucia Moholy at Kodak, he experimented particularly with an imbibition process for colour reproduction. A relatively complex and unpredictable process, this involved separating the three primary colour components of a transparency into three prints, which were then superimposed and recombined using warm water.¹²⁸ It is likely that Hepworth and Nicholson would have found out about such work through Read, an important mutual friend and one of Moholy-Nagy's firmest supporters in London.¹²⁹

By 1935 increasing numbers of artists and architects associated with the Bauhaus had immigrated to London. There, British artists such as Nicholson and Hepworth benefited from hitherto unimaginable access to works and ideas surrounding art, design and education in Germany.¹³⁰ Breuer, Gropius and Moholy-Nagy were all permanent residents of North London between 1935 and 1937, and each became increasingly active in London's circles of art, architecture and design. Moholy-Nagy spent three months at Wells Coates's Lawn Road Flats from May 1935, before moving to Golder's Green, where he stayed until leaving for America in June 1937. From London he continued to build a successful career as a commercial artist, working (often with Breuer or György Kepes) on high-profile design commissions, including book jackets, film special effects and posters for Imperial Airways and London Transport.¹³¹ Hepworth wrote to Nicholson in January 1936 that she had attended a 'specially nice' party at Moholy-Nagy's, where she had seen Serge Chermayeff, a Russian-born architect who was then developing his house Bentley Wood.¹³² That year Nicholson and Moholy-Nagy were two of few London-based artists who placed signatures on Hungarian philosopher Charles Sirato's theoretical essay, 'Manifeste Dimensioniste'. Published in the Paris-based *Revue N + I* in 1936, Sirato used Einstein's theories to explain contemporary painting's tendency to 'leave the plane and occupy space' and sculpture to 'abandon closed, immobile, and dead space'.¹³³ The

¹²⁷ Senter, 1981: 660.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*: 659.

¹²⁹ In *Art and Industry* (1934), Read described *The New Vision* as 'the greatest experiment in aesthetic education yet undertaken.' Read, 1934: 128. Read sponsored Moholy-Nagy's arrival in London the following year. Ian Grosvenor and Martin Lawn, 2005: 91.

¹³⁰ On the dispersal of Bauhaus masters and students, see Saltenik and Schuldenfrei, (eds), 2009.

¹³¹ Film commissions included *Lobsters* (1935) and *New Architecture and the London Zoo* (1936). He designed special effects for Alexander Korda's film, *Things to Come*, although these were not used in the final version. Gallery commissions included invitations and posters for exhibitions at the London Gallery. Photographs for book projects included *The Street Markets of London* by Mary Benedetta (1936) and *An Oxford University Chest* by John Betjeman (1938). Bergfelder and Cargnelli (eds), 2008.

¹³² Bentley Wood, designed in 1936, was completed in 1938. Photographs from 1938 show a painting by Nicholson hung prominently above the living room fireplace. Chermayeff's support of Nicholson began a decade earlier when in 1928 he included a flower painting by him in the exhibition rooms for furniture manufacturers Waring and Gillow. Moholy-Nagy photographed Chermayeff's De La Warr Pavilion (1935) for the July 1936 issue of *Architectural Review*.

¹³³ Charles Sirato, 'Manifeste Dimensioniste', *Revue N + I* (Paris), 1936, quoted in Henderson, [1983] 2013: 494–496. Henderson notes that the manifesto was also published as a special insert in *Plastique*, no. 2, Summer 1937. The manifesto's principles read: 'Animated by a new conception of the world, the arts in a collective fermentation (Interpenetration of the Arts) have begun to stir. And each of them has evolved with a new dimension. Each of them has found a form of expression inherent in the next higher

‘mosaic’ of statements and signatures also demonstrates network Nicholson and Moholy-Nagy shared, which included also Arp and Taeuber-Arp.¹³⁴ At the end of 1936 Moholy-Nagy had his first solo exhibition at the newly-founded London Gallery.¹³⁵

Nicholson’s awareness of the importance of the Bauhaus particularly grew during this time and he recognised its potential to generate commercial and public audiences for modern art and architecture in England. In May 1936 he was keen to assist his friend Helen Sutherland in the development of an architectural project founded on Bauhaus principles. He wrote to Martin about the potential commission of a new vicarage in Northumberland, explaining, ‘I sent her sometime [*sic.*] ago the Bauhaus book & she has the idea that if the new vicarage is to be built it should be [...] a modern, well lit, & completely labour-saving small house, which could even be run by a vicar & his wife without a servant.’¹³⁶ At this time Nicholson was especially keen to connect with architects who passed through London and to learn about developments in the field. His correspondence with Martin reveals the benefits of this both as networking for potential collaborative projects and as creative inspiration for his own work. Writing to Martin in August 1937 (just following *Circle*’s publication), he asked, ‘If you hear of any foreign architects or writers being in London will you let us know so that we can get in touch with them? – We find that they are often in London only for a week & if we are out [...] we don’t see them.’¹³⁷ Clearly experiencing a burst of enthusiasm for modern architecture, he continued by reporting to have finished a carving started upon his return from visiting Martin in Hull, where he recalled talking about Le Corbusier’s Swiss pavilion in Paris (1930-31).¹³⁸

Finding architecture a topic of increasing interest in relation to his own work in relief, Nicholson continued to enjoy the continued presence of new modernist designs in London. Between the summers of 1938 and 1939, however, his correspondence belies a growing sense

dimension, objectifying the weighty spiritual consequences of this fundamental change. Thus, the constructivist tendency compels;

- I. Literature to depart from the line and move in the plane [...]
- II. Painting to leave the plane and occupy space: Painting in space, Constructivism, Spatial Constructions, Multimedia Compositions.
- III. Sculpture to abandon closed, immobile, and dead space, that is to say, the three-dimensional space of Euclid, in order to conquer for artistic expression the four-dimensional space of Minkovsky.’

¹³⁴ Signatures and statements were by: Nicholson, Calder, Vincent Huidobro, Kakabadke, Kobro, Miro, Moholy-Nagy, Antonio Pedro, Arp, P.A. Birot, Camille Bryen, Robert Delaunay, César Domela, Marcel Duchamp, Kandinsky, Fred Kann, Kotchar, Nina Negri, Mario Nissim, Fr. Picabia., Prampolini, Prinner, Rathsmann, Ch. Sirato, Sonia Delaunay and Taeuber-Arp.

¹³⁵ *László Moholy-Nagy*, London Gallery, December 1936–January 1937. This was one of the first exhibitions of the London Gallery, founded in October 1936 by directors Lady Noel E Norton and Mrs Marguerita Strettell, under the management of Belgian E.L.T. Mesens. Other exhibitions included Herbert Bayer, Gabo, Leger, Oskar Schlemmer. Moholy-Nagy served on the advisory council with Bayer, Gropius and Read. The gallery was sold to Roland Penrose in the spring of 1938. See Halliday, 1991.

¹³⁶ Nicholson to Martin, 2 May [1936], GMA A70.3.2.3.

¹³⁷ Nicholson to Martin, 27 August [1937] GMA A70.3.3.4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

that financial security was more difficult to sustain and that, due to the departure of several protagonists, Hampstead's network of modernists' was losing out to opportunities further afield. Although he was especially pleased to have dined at the penthouse of the new Highpoint 2 building in Highgate in August 1938, he described his host, architect Bertold Lubetkin, as 'one of the few creative people I know'.¹³⁹ Financial strain increased over the following year so that in May 1939 Nicholson reported to Martin the strong financial effect of the impending political crisis. He wrote that there was 'absolutely no one interested in buying ptgs & sculpture – how can they be with the world in its present state?'¹⁴⁰ He continued by explaining how the crisis had not only put a stop to 'sales & promising jobs' but also to the patronage and financial support of a number of friends. To illustrate changes to their income, he contrasted Hepworth's sculptural sales between April 1937 and April 1938 ('about £250 to £300 worth') to those of the past year (£15 worth'). He concluded by drawing together the Constructive value of Hepworth's potential with the recognisably urgent social needs. Aware of his place within an expanded network, he wrote,

I feel that there must be people outside our immediate circle of 'constructive' art who are interested in the survival & encouragement of artists & that they, too, could consider Barbara's achievement & promise [...]. Meanwhile maybe we don't deserve to do what we like best quite freely & in marvellous condition which ¾ of the world is suffering but there seems some urge to go on doing the work that isn't a selfish one.¹⁴¹

Nicholson description shows the range of factors which formed the integral context for important decisions made by Hepworth and Nicholson in the period leading up to the war, especially concerning the necessity of prioritising family life, commercial opportunities and networking over normative creative practices.

iii. NEW GROUND: DISPERSAL AND ASSEMBLAGE FROM 1937

In early September 1937 Nicholson received a postcard of the new Bourne Bridge (completed 1935) over the Cape Cod Canal in Massachusetts which had been signed in different hands by Breuer, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Dorner and Herbert Bayer (Fig. 25).¹⁴² The photograph, which is printed in lurid colour, announced its signatories' joint arrival in the United States and

¹³⁹ Nicholson to Martin, 19 August [1938], GMA A70.3.4.3.

¹⁴⁰ Nicholson to Martin, 30 May [1939], GMA A70.3.6.7

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Postcard from Breuer, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Dorner and Bayer, [postmarked 1 September 1937], TGA 8717.1.2.268. It is possible that Breuer had stayed with Nicholson and Hepworth at Parkhill Road before leaving for Harvard.

signified their optimism for the potential of modern design, industry and transport projects to bridge a vast and promising American terrain. On 4 September 1939 Nicholson sent a similar card to Leslie and Sadie Martin to inform them of his family's safe arrival in Cornwall. A sepia view of the 'Island' peninsula at St Ives from the empty lawn at the Tregenna Castle Hotel (Fig. 26), it shows a typical tourists' view. Nicholson's note, furthermore, did not carry the same message of optimism as the Bauhaus group's announcement. On the back he provided Martin with Stokes' address for continued contact and asked with concern, 'We are very anxious to have news of you – drop us a p.c please - & with your address?'¹⁴³ Hepworth and Nicholson had arrived in a very different location to their previous neighbours in North London. By then, however, Hepworth, Martin and Nicholson had all begun a project which, continuing *Circle's* aspirations, could similarly reach out to a widening network of participants via the post.

Although they were not printed until the very end of 1939, the *Circle* postcard series were a response to the original conception of the journal as an ongoing serial project. In August 1937 when the first issue had just been published, editors were already discussing not only the second issue, but also a parallel series of accompanying artist monographs.¹⁴⁴ Towards the end of that month Nicholson sent to Martin one of *Circle's* first sales reports from Faber.¹⁴⁵ Having been told it was selling at 'quite a good pace', he suggested that they could 'get started with the circle monographs' by creating a list which could soon be presented to the same publishers. As in *Circle*, his suggestions, devised with Gabo, were balanced between three categories:

architects: [Alvar] Aalto, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, [André] Lurçat

painters: Malevich, Mondrian, Nicholson

sculptors: Pevsner, Gabo, Hepworth¹⁴⁶

Recognising the monographs as an intermediary step, Nicholson also passed on Hepworth's suggestion of a 'Honzik article for no. 2' but added, 'It is a bit early to commit ourselves for no.2?'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Nicholson to Martin, [postmarked 4 September 1939], GMA A70.3.6.8.

¹⁴⁴ Nicholson wrote to Martin on 27 August from the Mall Studios, 'Yes do let's get started with the circle monographs – perhaps we could get out a complete scheme which you could take over with de la Mare on your next visit to London.' Nicholson to Martin, 27 August [1937], GMA A70.3.3.4.

¹⁴⁵ Nicholson enclosed a letter from Richard de la Mare (Faber and Faber) regarding sales. According to a letter from Nicholson to Martin, sent in June 1937, the press date for *Circle's* release was 12 July 1937. Nicholson to Martin, 29 June [1937], GMA A70.3.3.3.

¹⁴⁶ He wrote, 'I had a talk with Gabo about it just now & the tentative list we made out was [...]. He continued, 'Gabo says that Lubetkin should certainly be done but not at the beginning as he is still in a sense a pupil of Corbusier & Lurcat. He is v. keen on Lurcat - & he says Mies van der Rohe is a real pioneer.' Nicholson to Martin, 27 August [1937], GMA A70.3.3.4. André Lurçat was a French architect.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. Karel Honzík (1900–66) was a French-born Czech artist, architect, writer, and educator. His 'Note on Biotechnics' appeared in the first issue of *Circle* and compared organic structures in the natural world with their use in architecture and design.

By the following spring Nicholson had written ‘for a push off’ a list of artists ‘for the postcards’, which proved to be very close to the final list.¹⁴⁸ Correspondence reveals that, like the monographs, they were considered an important step between the first and second numbers of *Circle*. Reproduction blocks from ‘Circle 1’ could, Nicholson suggested, be used for works to be reproduced in black and white, and new colour blocks could be chosen with their future use for ‘Circle 2’ in mind.¹⁴⁹ As a strategy to extend *Circle*’s project, the postcards were devised as tangible products which would be continuous with the main journal but also more accessible in price and format. As such, they would continue *Circle*’s momentum and, through a medium suited to circulation and exchange, generate new audiences. Relaying printing quotations from several suppliers, Nicholson was focused on achieving a price which could allow them to ‘touch a fairly wide public’.¹⁵⁰

Later in 1938 Nicholson reported to Martin that *Circle* publishers Faber would take 50% of the income from postcard sales.¹⁵¹ The rest of his letter suggests the difficulties of producing marketable postcards in London and the series’ growing audience in America, which mirrored important life decisions. In an undated letter, he wrote, ‘There seems a chance Barbara may be offered a job in U.S.A. (not Bauhaus) & since the trips [triplets] education would cost £6 a year there instead of £400, it looks as if it might solve our financial problem.’¹⁵² Ending this announcement with ‘But . . .’ he was clearly uncertain and awaited further news. Responding to Martin’s reply that November, he described in a different tone feeling ‘rather relieved’ that such plans for relocation were for the moment ‘dormant’. He continued to justify his initial ‘USA idea’, however, in relation to financial difficulties. He explained, ‘I think the real point is that we must find somewhere a steady job bringing in a steady income (2 day a week teaching) as the strain of trying to keep going on sculp. & ptg is too much.’¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Nicholson arranged his suggestions into four groups. First he listed sculptors Gabo, Pevsner, Hepworth and Giacometti. Of painters, whose works were to be reproduced ‘in colour’, he suggested Mondrian, Nicholson, Héliou and Jackson. Other two-dimensional works, for which colour was considered less important, were those by Malevich and Duchamp. Finally, he listed three possibilities, ‘Moholy?’, ‘Erni?’ and ‘Stephenson?’ Nicholson to Martin, 14 April [1938], GMA A70.3.3.1. [NB This item is dated in the Gallery of Modern Art catalogue as 1937 but must have been sent in 1938, as it contains a reference to *Verve* magazine, Spring (March – June) 1938. Nicholson explained that he had just seen the issue and suggested that Martin would find it very interesting. To close his letter Nicholson also wrote that he was looking forward to seeing ‘your furniture show’. In an essay on Martin’s wife, Sadie Speight, Jill Seddon notes that just before the publication of Martin and Speight’s *The Flat Book* (1939), ‘probably in 1938’, they jointly designed an exhibition of the ‘Good Form’ range of modular furniture for the manufacturer W. Rowntree & Sons. Seddon, 2007: 153.]

¹⁴⁹ Nicholson to Martin, 14 April [1938], GMA A70.3.3.1.

¹⁵⁰ Having approached the Curwen Press, Nicholson reported to Martin, ‘I don’t know if a Circle series of this sort would interesting to do? [...] In any case I must obviously learn all about this lithographic process’. Nicholson to Martin, 2 May [1938], GMA A70.3.3.2 [NB also listed as 1937]

¹⁵¹ Nicholson to Martin, n.d. [1938] GMA A70.3.5.1.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Hoping to gain some income by teaching, Nicholson recognised the vast difference in opportunities arising in England and America. His initial announcement and subsequent justification, furthermore, reveal the conflict between his own curiosity and needs, and a surrounding sense of competition between England and the States within which his decisions were made. This was no doubt inspired by continued contact with his previous neighbours in London. As the Bourne Bridge postcard showed, from the autumn of 1937 Nicholson was included in postal circulars through which recent arrivals shared news from the States and promoted their developing communities. From America, Moholy-Nagy in particular continued to generate dialogue with Constructive artists in England. In November 1937 he wrote to Nicholson – now in English – from his ‘New Bauhaus’, the American School of Design in Chicago. He wrote of recent successes, describing their ‘very promising start’ with an ‘impressive opening day’ which had generated ‘a lot of response from all over the country.’¹⁵⁴ Moholy-Nagy also remained keenly aware of recent publications and events in London. He remarked that he had ‘liked “Circle” enormously’ and had heard through his wife Sybil of the impressive ‘new materials and techniques’ on display at Hepworth’s show at the Alex Reid and Lefevre Gallery that October.¹⁵⁵

Nicholson’s correspondence with Martin reveals that he both respected the ‘New Bauhaus’ and was sceptical of it. In May 1938 he explained that Hélión was in Paris for an exhibition but would soon return to the ‘N__ B_____’, implying its controversy as a term. Nicholson concluded that he would be sorry to see Hélión leave but was glad that he would have ‘some settled income’.¹⁵⁶ In the same letter he described his respect for Edward ‘Bobby’ Carter (RIBA Librarian and editor of its Journal between 1930 and 1946) who was considering a scheme through which teachers of architecture could spend short periods learning with Gropius and Breuer ‘to broaden their outlook’.¹⁵⁷ This coincided with a growing awareness, through *Circle*, of the marketability of their own work and activities in the United States, especially in contrast to a declining French audience. Asking Martin to find out the international sales for *Circle*, especially in the U.S.A., Switzerland and France, he pointed to the latter and wrote, ‘I am convinced these have been v. low indeed.’¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Moholy-Nagy to Nicholson, on letter-headed paper of the ‘New Bauhaus’, 29 November 1937, TGA 8717.1.2.2978.

¹⁵⁵ He wrote, ‘I was glad to hear that Barbara sold well on her show. Sybil was very much impressed by her work and she told me a lot about the new materials and techniques Barbara had employed’. *Sculpture by Barbara Hepworth*, London, Alex. Reid & Lefevre, October 1937. He was possibly referring to Hepworth’s use of different woods and increased geometry of forms which partly characterised her work of the past year. The two families, both with young children, appear to have been familiar enough with each other for Moholy-Nagy to sign off, ‘Sybil and the children send their love to her and to the triplets.’ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Nicholson to Martin, 2 May [1938], GMA A70.3.3.2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Although by 1938 Nicholson had been contemplating his own transatlantic relocation, he remained committed to the continued promise of work surrounding *Circle*. He described his awareness of the loss that his and Hepworth's move could cause 'to the "movement" here', but concluded, 'it is an international affair & one should be able to link up the English & USA activities.'¹⁵⁹ He also described (although hesitantly) the possible creation of a Bauhaus School in England. Read had, he explained, telephoned the previous night to suggest 'a scheme for making a "Bauhaus" here' but had 'asked us not to count on it too much'.¹⁶⁰ Due to personal circumstances, however, Nicholson was also focussed on local opportunities. Having tried 'every known means for making some money,' he still faced difficulty in finding even a short-term commission or wage. Referring to a possible Underground poster, he wrote to Martin despondently, 'that, too, will I think come off a little late.'¹⁶¹ In this climate of slow-moving commercial commissions, financial strain and lack of motivation (due to rarity of sales and exhibitions) towards his own creative work that Nicholson, with Gabo and Martin, continued to extend their work on *Circle*. To close his long, drained letter to Martin on a more positive note, Nicholson noted that they would be doing 'Circle business' on Monday.¹⁶² Increasingly unable to finalise plans, however, the postcard series waited another year to come to fruition. Thus, like a number of other seeds of potential Constructive forms and ideas, the postcards project travelled, with its spear-heading editor Nicholson, to St Ives. Within months of his arrival, he had made progress. In November 1939 he asked his London printers to send the series proofs to Martin for comments who could then post them back to him. With Brumwell and Gabo, he had also developed 'a small circular about the pcs' and had acquired 150 copies for each editor to send out, for which he had collated over 100 American addresses. They were released the following month.¹⁶³

While the light format of postcards suited the editors' desire to disperse the *Circle* brand among a wide communication network, the importance of physical centres for creative development and exchange was not lost among the proliferation of publishing projects and circular post. In a letter to Gabo in December 1939, Read stressed the importance of physical proximity for generating closer contact and a more meaningful community. With his mind probably on the loss of the Guggenheim Jeune gallery that summer and a lack of such a centre in the capital city, his words equally referred to the small community in St Ives: 'I do not really believe that anything real can emerge in a vacuum. I think we need more than an idea. We need a physical centre, and human contacts, and a community of spirit.' He continued by describing the outlook in London, 'for the moment it is just a black-out – the Great Black-out, like the Great Plague.'

¹⁵⁹ Nicholson to Martin, 5 November [1938], GMA A70.3.5.2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Nicholson to Martin, 5 November [1938], GMA A70.3.5.2.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 270. See also Calvocoressi, 1978.

With some hope for the future and the possibility of life continuing in a restricted mode, he advised, 'We have just got to wait until the lights come on again; meanwhile crawl about very carefully.'¹⁶⁴ St Ives provided a physical centre for a nucleus of artists through which the Constructive spirit presented in *Circle* could, at least for a while longer, continue to crystallise.

In the town, editors at the heart of *Circle*'s expansive network became neighbours with more local residents. In the summer of 1939 preceding Hepworth and Nicholson's arrival by a few months, Lanyon returned to St Ives from London, where he had briefly studied at the Euston Road School.¹⁶⁵ Returning from his studies at a politically climactic moment, he considered volunteering for the Spanish Civil War but instead followed Stokes' recommendation to study under his new neighbour Nicholson, which he did from November 1939.¹⁶⁶ Later Lanyon remembered the nervousness which surrounded this decision. On his way to a meeting for volunteers in the town, he recalled, 'I didn't go actually, I had a sort of nervous breakdown, which was probably an escape.'¹⁶⁷ Remembering how he felt he was starting afresh with the possibilities of abstraction, he continued, 'I remember quite vividly that I was left with nothing but the plain white surface of boards.'¹⁶⁸ Over the following months Lanyon started making three-dimensional constructions.

One of the first works Lanyon made was *Box Construction No. 1* (1939–40) (Fig. 27), a boxed picture frame which holds a space over five centimetres in depth. Coloured gelatine square filters lie on the front glass pane. Green and orange overlap to form another square where they merge and a tilted yellow sheet is carefully placed off-centre above. Colours merge so that the shapes have no fixed order of depth but fluctuate according to the perceptual route. Uniting these elements, a single black line hangs suspended on the glass, offering a vertical counterpoint to the horizontal cardboard rectangle, which is boxed in its own white frame. In the top third of the composition, two distinct shapes frame the central arrangement: on the right, a white cylinder which is painted blue inside; on the left, a small red diamond. *Box Construction* is one of only a small number of known extant works made by Lanyon during his first experiments in construction before he joined the RAF in March 1940. Frequently seen in parallel to *White Track* (1940), it has been described as a 'static exercise in demarcating space' in contrast to the symbolic traces of movement in the later work.¹⁶⁹ Presenting a composition of two-dimensional

¹⁶⁴ Read to Gabo, 2 December 1939, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

¹⁶⁵ Stephens notes that Lanyon enrolled at the Euston Road School in London in May 1939, on the advice of Stokes. There he was taught by William Coldstream and Victor Pasmore. Stephens, 2000: 31.

¹⁶⁶ In February 1940, Nicholson wrote to Ramsden, 'He [Lanyon] was at the Euston Road School – of all places --- & last Nov. started having some lessons with me – right from the start he seemed to have a complete grasp of the whole contemporary idea & he has already developed his own pt [*sic.*] of view & has an astonishingly inventive capacity.' Nicholson to Ramsden, 22 February [1940], TGA 9310.1.2.8.

¹⁶⁷ Lanyon, Notes for Arts Council lecture, 1963, quoted in A. Lanyon, 1993.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Garlake, 1998: 18.

elements, *Box Construction* arguably has a more painterly than sculptural emphasis. Its strong frontal design is formed of elements positioned in parallel to the glass. While undoubtedly visual in effect, the translucency of its front panel permits light to enter, creating changing abstract patterns of light and shade.

The visual effect of the work is especially apparent in a black and white photograph (Fig. 28) in which shadows de-stabilise the geometrical composition to create an image of thin, vibrating shapes. The effect, although in positive form, is reminiscent of a photogram, a technique Lanyon would later use experimentally.¹⁷⁰ Lanyon was very aware of photographic processes as he was making the work. He later recalled how he had worked at the time from his father's old photographic studio.¹⁷¹ He described adapting the room over the years to create a whole constructive environment:

It had more or less been empty and I had fiddled around in it for some time. And this was where I worked, and in fact it was then transformed completely, into screens of white paint and bright colours here, right, left and centre, really turning the thing into a whole sort of space organisation.¹⁷²

A photograph of the studio (Fig. 29) taken between late 1939 and early 1940 shows a curated space. *Box Construction* stands on a plinth pushed against a wall and three wall-based reliefs hang on a cloth-covered screen. It suggests the quick impact of Gabo's descriptions of spatial integration. The role of the studio for both private experimentation and public display would not have been an uncommon topic in St Ives. Hepworth and Nicholson are likely to have recounted their experiences of artists' studios in Paris, including those of Brancusi and Mondrian.¹⁷³ Lanyon's description of his own white screens and colours particularly suggests he may have been familiar with the latter's studio environment through descriptions or photographs.

Taking his lead initially from Nicholson, Lanyon was interested not only in principles of Russian Constructivism but also in developments in Germany and Amsterdam, especially those associated with the Bauhaus School. Lanyon was certainly aware of the importance of the

¹⁷⁰ In 1943, Lanyon described his experiments in photogram in a letter sent from his RAF camp in Italy to Nicholson in St Ives.

¹⁷¹ Ben came to my studio, which my father had built for himself as a photographic studio. He handed it over to me just before he died, in 1936.' Lanyon, Arts Council lecture notes, 1963, quoted in A. Lanyon, 1993.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Nicholson visited Mondrian's studio in 1935 and wrote ecstatically to Hepworth, 'There is such a lovely feeling in his studio'. Perhaps affected by a variety of exhibition and studio spaces he had seen over the previous years in Paris, Nicholson explained his own desire for a white studio to Hepworth early in 1935. He wrote, 'I am longing to see the studio white. My new work asks for white all the time.' Nicholson to Hepworth, [13 Jan 1935], TGA 20132.1.144.67.

Bauhaus during his service in the RAF from the spring of 1940.¹⁷⁴ He expressed his awareness of this history most comprehensively in 1943, while positioned in the Middle East. Writing to his sister Mary, he described the School's place within a wider German and European history. His elaborate narrative, furthermore, presents Gropius's work as a mythically 'modern' intervention or escape from a declining culture of bourgeois sensibility facing financial deprivation. He began his history with a description of space reminiscent of Lissitzky's and Gabo's earlier statements, of picture frames hung precariously on walls:

Pictures balanced on the walls of the respectables, hung suspended waiting death on the cross walls of Victorian memory rooms. The movement of Youth, going somewhere, singing in the pine forests of their beauty and the Herenfolk of the master race in Germany. Long before I knew it, men had left the sphere of the respectable representation in pictures, in Germany there was no sentiment, because Germany was suffering. There was cynical sentiment. Cynicism so horrible that pictures I have seen have made me love Marc Chagall for his courage to put down the blatant sexual sense which haunted the German oppressed, to be their escape from the villages of a tortured nation. The Blakes of Germany painted their pictures with the lyricism of hopelessness. In Weimar an architect, Doktor Gropius started the Bauhaus. To learn there was to show the materials of the modern age, to get to know them, steel and plastics, plywood and glass, by feeling them and holding them, working with them and experimenting, to find the hundred ways they could be made to show their intrinsic life.¹⁷⁵

Lanyon continued by immediately stressing the correlation between this story of youth, cynicism and aesthetic education with his own training from Nicholson, with whom he had discovered a new axis of space. Poignantly reflecting on his own path, he wrote to Mary:

Can you see the logic of my own development? The picture frame became a frame with depth and dimensions, stood forward of the board onto which it was nailed, permanently. Ben suggested this. Told me to get two pieces of wood nailed top and bottom of a board and then told me to do something about it. I remember now

¹⁷⁴ Stephens notes that Lanyon enlisted in February 1940, was called up on 8 March, from which point he was stationed in Uxbridge, Morecambe and Chester. He was prevented by migraines from becoming a pilot and so served as an engineer mechanic. In February 1942 he was stationed in North Africa and Palestine. By June 1942 he 'had been in Jerusalem for a while and remained in the Middle East' before journeying to Southern Italy in late 1943 or early 1944, from where he could travel around. Stephens, 2000: 39 and 41.

¹⁷⁵ Lanyon to Mary Schofield [1943], Lanyon family archive.

realising the space I had then to deal with, to explain. Not now the two dimensions of length and breadth, but the third dimension of depth.¹⁷⁶

Although Lanyon's connection between the School's historical importance and his own work, evident in this single letter, seems to have been a retrospective analysis, it is probable that Lanyon had learned about the Bauhaus before leaving to fulfil his wartime role. During the war, however, his particular tasks and experiences of aircraft machinery made him especially receptive to what he knew of the School's approach to materials, space and the relationship between art and life. Furthermore, he seems to have shared this interest with Nicholson. Two years earlier, in June 1941 he wrote to Nicholson and Hepworth after discovering a range of books owned by a local member of the Women's Land Army. He wrote, 'Imagine my surprise when she tells me how another Land Girl and a Conscientious Objector, who works nearby, have bought Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision"! The weekend was spent coming to life again talking of old times'.¹⁷⁷

Although first published in 1932 and apparently known by Nicholson soon after, a revised and enlarged edition of *The New Vision* was published by *Circle's* publishers, Faber & Faber, in 1939. Both Nicholson's and Lanyon's familiarity with the book suggests that a version was owned by Nicholson or Hepworth in St Ives and would have been accessible to Lanyon as a student of theirs.¹⁷⁸ In an opening statement of the text, Moholy-Nagy had declared the value of first-hand familiarity with works of art as a means of understanding a shared 'heritage of human experience'. He wrote,

We can never make a work of art our own by approaching it at second hand. Descriptions and analyses are at best an intellectual preparation, but they supply the courage for the effort to enter into possession of the work through a more personal approach. [...] our efforts at present, especially in the field of education, must be directed to the ultimate aim of entering again into possession of the heritage of human experience.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Lanyon to Nicholson and Hepworth, 27 June 1941, Lanyon family archive.

¹⁷⁸ Although Gabo was not included in Moholy-Nagy's brief list of key Constructive artists (Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Rodchenko, Tatlin), a number of Gabo's constructions were reproduced and discussed in *The New Vision*. Gabo's *Kinetic Sculpture* was accorded particularly prominence in a section devoted to the history of movement in sculpture. Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 127. Ramsden, who was in regular contact with Nicholson at the time, noted 'The New Vision' in her list of books read under May 1940, which suggests contemporary interest surrounding the new English edition. 'List of books read by Ramsden,' TGA 9310.2.13.1.

¹⁷⁹ Moholy, Nagy, 1932: 8.

Lanyon's note to Nicholson about his discovery of books was quickly followed by a description of the materials he used as an aircraft engineer. Apparently spurred on by his memories of the text and his own education, he portrayed his aesthetic and tactile pleasure of interacting with parts of metal machinery, described as magnificent 'polished' mechanical specimens worthy of comparison with sculpture:

Two of us have the job of dismantling airscrews and modifying them as required. It is a grand job. IF you have ever seen an airscrew blade, you will understand this. Bright polished steel, anti corrosive treated white matt steel, black painted blades standing like a Brancusi with yellow tips, pistons, cylinders¹⁸⁰

Describing his practical role with an artist's eye, Lanyon appears to have valued his proximity to his working materials and to have appreciated the aesthetic appeal of machine parts, as well as the constructive act of dismantling and reassembling them. In *The New Vision* Moholy-Nagy had stressed the Bauhaus principle of first-hand experience with materials as a guide for art and life, which Lanyon two years later echoed in his description of Gropius's insistence on 'feeling', 'holding' and 'working with' modern materials.¹⁸¹

Foundational to the Bauhaus' emphasis on the role of personal experience within education was the notion that technological progress aiming at social use should be conceived 'from the ground up' – from the coordinates and requirements of human activity and scale.¹⁸² From his RAF base near Chester at the end of 1941, Lanyon had written to Mary describing how his physical contact with mechanical equipment had led him to contemplate the relation between man and machines. Focussing on their social use and creative value, he described in evocative physical terms how his role as conductor of machines had led him to understand his own human limitations, acting through his hands. He wrote,

I am miserably human. My hands itch to get to the machines sometimes, but it is not a desire to work for so much time, for so much pay, that makes them itch, it is a belief I feel I have in me, that I am doing right and that there is something more in machines than just "machines" if you know what I mean.¹⁸³

It is no coincidence that Lanyon's experience of machinery and reminiscences of the Bauhaus in Germany coincided with his enjoyment of being removed from his own upper middle-class upbringing. In letters home he described positively his sense of being lost within a troop of

¹⁸⁰ Lanyon to Nicholson and Hepworth, 27 June 1941, Lanyon family archive.

¹⁸¹ Lanyon to Mary Schofield [1943], Lanyon family archive.

¹⁸² Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 12.

¹⁸³ Lanyon, letter to Mary Schofield [end of 1941], Lanyon family archive.

labouring soldiers and engineers engaged in mechanical construction for the state. Intuitively he sensed they were ‘doing right’ through their work and he felt closer to a collective working group. As shown, this experience led him to consider Germany’s path away from ‘respectable representation’ and ‘sentiment’ since the decline of the German aristocracy and Empire. Art after social revolution, he sensed, could better suit the needs and feelings of civilians on a more real level, and be more aligned with the aim of possessing the ‘*heritage* of human experience’.¹⁸⁴

Lanyon’s experiences of wartime labour also strengthened his belief in the potential of creative education and its relevance to all levels of society. Towards the end of his service he described his social outlook: ‘The working class, middle class and upper classes have no basic difference except for education. Money is an entirely wrong judge of the individual.’¹⁸⁵ Having seen mechanics and soldiers interact creatively, physically and sensitively with technology, he shared Moholy-Nagy’s perspective that sense-based education levelled social differences and showed that everyone could be creative. In *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy declared: ‘Everyone is equipped by nature to receive and assimilate sensory experiences. Everyone is sensitive to tones and colours, has sure touch and space reactions, etc. [...] any healthy man can also become a musician, painter, sculptor, architect.’¹⁸⁶

Towards the end of the war, when the Allied Forces were advancing through Europe, Lanyon wrote to Hepworth and Nicholson on the value not only of arts education but also of a firmer integration of creativity and everyday working life. In September 1944 he described the necessity of physical interaction: ‘Art alone can supply the organic force needed in human relations. It can explain and teach and belong and it can be part of the new life and not shut away in mortuaries and museums.’¹⁸⁷ He would, he stated, put a plan in place for using art to this end when he could.¹⁸⁸ In March 1945, after reading a copy of Read’s *Education through Art* (1943), Lanyon was considering the ‘possibility of an Art centre here in the Air Force.’¹⁸⁹ His plan became reality soon after VE Day when he was made supervisor of art classes for the armed forces on his base outside Naples, which formed part of the newly established Educational and Vocational Training (EVT) Scheme for men and women released from War Service. David Goodman, who worked alongside Lanyon in this role, recalled that Lanyon had

¹⁸⁴ Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 8.

¹⁸⁵ Lanyon to Mary Schofield, 23 July 1944, Lanyon family archive.

¹⁸⁶ Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 15.

¹⁸⁷ Lanyon to Hepworth and Nicholson, 22 September 1944, Lanyon family archive.

¹⁸⁸ He wrote, ‘I have so many ideas – I want to meet others who have and who will do something and I have got to be out of this first. This has been good training for what I may have to face when it is all over – there are others like me – must we, with still some ideals and a faint hope, go wandering in the Waste land again and bring our children into a bastard world?’ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Lanyon to Mary Schofield, 3 March 1945, Lanyon family archive.

‘gleefully introduced Bauhaus drawing techniques’ into classes.¹⁹⁰ Working from physical centres of a school and camp, Lanyon and Moholy-Nagy were both led to similar projects. In 1943, from his School of Design in Chicago, Moholy-Nagy offered disabled students courses aimed towards rehabilitation which, based on his preliminary courses at the Bauhaus, used sense awareness as a form of education and physical therapy.¹⁹¹

For Moholy-Nagy and other Bauhaus teachers, photography played an important role in enhancing perceptual sensitivity. In *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy wrote,

It seems paradoxical, but proves true in practice, that along with the direct tactile experiences, the use of photography, i.e. an optical approach, assists in tactile training. Documentary exact photographs of material (tactile) values, the magnification of their forms of appearance, scarcely noticed before, inspire almost every observer – not only the handworker – to experiment with the tactile function.¹⁹²

Considering haptic and visual perception as interlinked, tactile tables, drums and constructions were used to teach painting and photography was made central to the process of translating material feeling into surface effects. Moholy-Nagy described paintings in similar terms to ‘constructions’: as material layers, each with different visual properties and dependent upon light refractions. He explained the complex interaction between materials and light: ‘On polished surfaces, metal, synthetic materials, etc. the artist sprays very thin, iridescent, flowing layers of paint, to which the reflecting layer underneath gives an ethereal, fluctuating appearance.’¹⁹³ The light-refracting properties of different materials could therefore provide important contrasts within compositions. Even in seemingly smooth paintings such as *K VII* (1922) (Fig. 30), Moholy-Nagy set certain shapes apart according to their levels of reflectivity and hardness.

Extending his analysis in *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy described the use of reflections and refractions in painting as their fundamental means of interacting with their surrounding space and light. He particularly explained the movement of surrounding conditions entering and enlivening the painting’s materials. He wrote, ‘The reflections and refractions bring the surroundings into the picture surface, attaining the surface flexibility striven for ever since the

¹⁹⁰ David Goodman to Chris Stephens, March 1999. See also Stephens, 2000: 42.

¹⁹¹ Margolin, 1997: 241.

¹⁹² Ibid.: 26. See also Moholy-Nagy, ‘Photography in a Flash,’ *Industrial Arts* (London), vol. 1, no. 4, Winter 1936: 294-303.

¹⁹³ Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 76.

first days of impressionism.’¹⁹⁴ With Moholy-Nagy’s description in mind, it is easier to see Lanyon’s *Box Construction* as similarly concerned with the processes of visual perception. Light is refracted through the lines, colours and planes of the work, activating the haptic-visual potential of each material and surface. This interest in visual experience can be traced throughout Lanyon’s career in, for instance, the textural variety of his painting surfaces or his constructions with glass and other materials.

In his letter connecting the Bauhaus’ history to his education in constructing space, Lanyon drew upon a third aspect of his approach. He wrote, ‘Science comes to the rescue with the suggestion that time and space “are different facets of a unified underlying world of space-time”.’¹⁹⁵ The integration of space and time, now proven scientifically as a fundamental fact, Lanyon reasoned, had always been the role of the artist.¹⁹⁶ Searching for a means of responding to this in his work, Lanyon immediately turned to his experience of the landscape and explained his most recent work as the result of an embodied experience within spatial and temporal axes: ‘the precipitate of my interaction with environment [...] the very manifestations of space and time.’¹⁹⁷ Lanyon may again have been guided in this by ideas contained in *The New Vision*. In the final section of this book, Moholy-Nagy also debated the implications of Relativity which, as Sirato’s manifesto showed, was an interest he shared with Nicholson in 1936. Moholy-Nagy wrote, ‘the boundaries become fluid, space is conceived as flowing; a countless succession of relationships.’¹⁹⁸ As Lanyon began to paint his experiences of space with consciousness of the duration of time, he felt he had achieved a synthesis of the space-time continuum. Crucially, he developed this perspective through his own experience of journeying between places. Just before returning home in 1945 Lanyon described the process of travel with profound awareness of the passing of time. His words evoke the connection which would develop in his work between the presentness of both experience and painting. He wrote,

Between leaving a place and getting to the other place is the exciting part because there are hopes of the future and memories of the past [...]. I feel I am in this suspension, actually experiencing that space in between, because here I am not relating in any way by the past nor have any connection with the future – apparently. I am related only in the basic things which are on the surface here¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. Moholy-Nagy wrote, ‘In the continuation of this work we must doubtless come to creation by moving refracted light (color); we must “paint” colors with flowing, oscillating, prismatic light, instead of with pigments.’ Ibid.: 78.

¹⁹⁵ Lanyon to Mary Schofield [Spring 1943], Lanyon family archive.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Moholy-Nagy, 1932: 115–116.

¹⁹⁹ Lanyon to Mary Schofield [early 1945], Lanyon family archive.

In wartime and postwar St Ives Gabo provided the closest access to Constructive approaches to art and through his example a number of younger artists realised the value of intimacy with materials in the studio environment. As early as 1921 Gabo's fellow Russian Varvara Stepanova had defined construction as an 'active' process. She wrote,

Composition is the contemplative approach of the artist in his work. Technique and industry have confronted art with the problem of construction as an active process, and not a contemplative reflection. The "sanctity" of a work as a single entity is destroyed. The museum which was a treasury of this entity is now transformed into an archive.²⁰⁰

In St Ives Gabo and Lanyon both used their studios to experiment with material possibilities and their spaces became archives of this process. Consequently, their work developed positively within the confines of available space, as each remained committed to mastering their own working environment, materials and tools. Although Lanyon studied with Nicholson from September 1939 until his departure in March 1940, it is unclear when he first met Gabo. Stephens has suggested that they may have met during a period of leave, before Lanyon was given a long-term post in the Mediterranean in February 1942.²⁰¹ Lanyon's box constructions, made from the end of 1939, however, suggest an engagement with Gabo's example of spatial construction and plastic materials, and this line of enquiry came to characterise Lanyon's early wartime work.²⁰² Similarly, a letter written from Lanyon while in service to Gabo around 1940 suggests that the two may have met before the war. He wrote to Miriam and Naum, 'It seems a very long time since I saw you. I wish many times that the days before the war were here again.'²⁰³

Through different experiences of exile and war, Gabo's and Lanyon's movements and adaptations to new environments affected each artist's understanding of the importance of creation on a hand-scale. Lodder's words on the survivability of Gabo's constructions apply equally to Lanyon's wartime experiments: 'The advantage of Gabo's method of constructing sculpture from distinct pieces of material was that they could be collapsed, stored flat and so easily transported.'²⁰⁴ Lanyon later remembered the importance of reassembling to his understanding of Constructivism. He recalled Gabo showing him a construction which, emerging from a box in pieces, was then reconstructed by Gabo within a week. This 'extraordinary experience', he recalled, made him aware 'that any sort of art which seemed to

²⁰⁰ Varvara Stepanova, quoted in Grey, 1971: 250–251 and Buchloh, 1984: 90–91.

²⁰¹ Stephens, 2000: 37.

²⁰² Stephens writes, 'The use of unorthodox materials, specifically plastics, in the box constructions must be the first sign of Lanyon's engagement with Gabo's work.' Ibid.

²⁰³ Lanyon to Naum and Miriam Gabo, [c.1940], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²⁰⁴ Lodder, 2010: n.p.

be something which you could never repeat, a sort of unique event, that this man could actually make it again.’²⁰⁵

Early in the war Lanyon created a construction from a set of piston rings (Fig. 31). Normally used to seal gas within a piston cylinder in an aircraft’s engine, he connected them via a web of string. To the arrangement he added a Perspex oval and some circular sheets of metal and glass.²⁰⁶ As Stephens has described, Lanyon’s use of aircraft engine parts was ‘both expedient and symbolic of a regenerative aspect’.²⁰⁷ Lanyon clearly recognised the constructive potential of disused parts, which he sometimes collected from the debris of crash sites.²⁰⁸ His formal experimentation, however, hailed from definite examples of spatial construction, including Gabo’s *Spiral Theme* (1941) (Fig. 18), of which he kept an image with him during his service, and potentially from experimental and educational constructions made by Bauhaus students and reproduced in *The New Vision*.²⁰⁹ In a section outlining the history of ‘Volume (sculpture), Moholy-Nagy connected key examples of Russian Constructivism, including Rodchenko’s *Hanging Construction* (1920) and his own *Nickel Sculpture* (1921) to works by Joost Schmidt, a junior sculpture master at the Bauhaus in Dessau. The book contained three reproductions of Schmidt’s sculptures from 1928, all of which used rings and webbed string to express spatial volumes between its connected points (Fig. 32). Lanyon’s wartime experiments with disused parts affected his whole outlook on the role of spatial exploration. Referring to his piston rings or a similar work in 1943, he wrote to Gabo, ‘I found my ring of metal, which has been the nucleus of most of my work. Curves derived from it, involutes, paraboloids and other curves together with the colours of that country have formed them.’²¹⁰

In the spring of 1943 Lanyon was stationed in the Middle East following posts in Alexandria, Palestine and Lybia over the previous two years. He wrote to Gabo in June 1943 that he now considered Tel Aviv an important influence on his development, citing that there he had seen works by ‘Marc, Marc Chagall, the Italian Futurists, Bauhaus design, Lissitzky, Feininger and many others who have been in the revolution.’²¹¹ If Lanyon visited the Tel Aviv Museum (founded in 1932) as his letter suggests, it is possible that he had seen Chagall’s illustrations (1923-27) for Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842), which formed a large exhibition from June 1943. Other displays that year featured William Gear, stationed with the British Army in

²⁰⁵ Lanyon, Notes for Arts Council lecture, 1963, quoted in A. Lanyon, 1993.

²⁰⁶ Stephens, 2000: 40.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Lanyon wrote to Gabo in June 1943: ‘Your “Construction in Space Spiral Theme” I have with me...’ Lanyon to Naum and Miriam Gabo, 11 June 1943, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Lanyon, letter to Naum and Miriam Gabo, 11 June 1943, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

Jerusalem, and Dada and Constructive artist Marcel Janco, who was then living in Palestine.²¹² Although Lanyon's movements and incomplete records make it difficult to trace what he saw, these displays reflect the wider activity and outlook of the Tel Aviv Museum close to the time of Lanyon's visit, as attentive to the traditions of Expressionism and Constructivism which connected Europe and the Middle East.²¹³

Lanyon's description of his artistic interests in Tel Aviv highlight that aero-transport and speed were interests he shared with the Futurists and with Lissitzky, who each drew from the aeroplane's potential to travel freely in space. In his 1922 text 'PROUN: Not World Visions, But – World Reality,' Lissitzky compared his ambition to explore space with the surface-centred approach of Cubism. He wrote, 'Cubism moves along tracks laid on the ground, the construction of suprematism follows the straight lines and curves of the aeroplane, it leads the way in the new space, we are building in it.'²¹⁴ His description continues,

We saw that the surface of the Proun ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture which stood at right angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space.²¹⁵

Although Lanyon may not have been familiar with Lissitzky's statements, it is likely that his growing interest in the experiences of flight was encouraged by the precedent of Lissitzky's vertiginous formal perspectives. Lanyon's use of flight as an aesthetic approach and philosophical theme became increasingly focussed on the experiences of vertigo, danger and sublime speed. In this respect, he grew even closer to Lissitzky's vision for his *Prouns* as forms not to be seen but to be inhabited by physically exploring space, associated through his descriptions with the challenges and risks of aerial movement.

Although working far apart, Lanyon's wartime experiments in spatial exploration come closest to those of another artist who became equally associated with Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson in St Ives. Between 1936 and 1945 John Wells, a General Practitioner on the Isles of Scilly, made frequent visits to St Ives. During his visits, Wells developed strong relations with Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson, who each helped him with opportunities and artistic advice. Although

²¹² *Exhibition: Lieutenant W. Gear, Erreel, Hildesheimer, Weston, Janco*, Tel Aviv Museum, July 1943. I am grateful to Dafnit Moskovich at the Art Library of the Tel-Aviv for providing information about contemporary exhibitions.

²¹³ It is unclear which works Lanyon saw by those artists he mentioned and information on the Museum's Tel Aviv Museum's collection and temporary exhibitions from this time is incomplete.

²¹⁴ Lissitzky, 'PROUN: Not World Visions, But – World Reality' [1920], *De Stijl* 5, no.6 (June 1922), in Lissitzky-Küppers, [1967] 1980: 348.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 347.

Lanyon and Wells did not meet until 1946, during the war they worked from similar Constructive precedents and had comparable expectations of how this legacy might stimulate their own future work. Following Lanyon's return, they became artistic allies in St Ives, united especially by shared admiration for Gabo. Writing to Gabo in America around 1947, Lanyon wrote, 'We miss you very much, that is Johnny Wells and myself.'²¹⁶

Wells' wartime *Construction* (1940–41) (Fig. 33) is made of aluminium, steel, wood, copper wire and rubber parts, connected and mounted on a rectangular stone base. The combination of small material elements exhibits the resourcefulness typical of artists, including Gabo and Lanyon, who made assemblages from scraps of household materials or vehicle machinery. In close contact with Nicholson and Hepworth, Wells' wartime constructions reflect the wider hardships of war and attitude of 'getting by'. In February 1940 Hepworth poignantly described her daily life as a constant struggle to save and reuse:

One feels most sad about the time that is wasted; wasted over the difficulties of just living, getting food, saving scraps, collecting bits of old firewood, going the blackout & so on; a million things which I 'spose really help to win the war but which seem very tedious & unproductive.²¹⁷

Made only of small material parts available to him at the time, Wells' *Construction* is a study and demarcation of space through interrelating and balanced lines. Despite the difficulties underlining its form and material variegation, its shape is reminiscent of earlier statements emphasising construction as a form of outward expression and connection. In *Cercle et Carré* (1930), Seuphor wrote, 'To construct is to evaluate relations, to calculate equivalences, to coordinate positive forces with neutralizing realities [...] to organize all the data in such a way that unity, perfect stability is obtained.'²¹⁸

Wells' correspondence with Nicholson was crucial to his understanding of the potential of Constructive art. Between Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the two artists not only discussed materials they had found and used, but even shared them via the post. In April 1942 Wells thanked Nicholson for sending 'the potential constructive element' and added, 'I'm sure it will find its appointed place sooner or later.'²¹⁹ Despite the laborious task of salvaging materials noted by Hepworth, Wells' and Nicholson's interests in discovering new materials clearly led to an important, if playful, communal exchange. The small scale on which they worked therefore

²¹⁶ Lanyon to Naum and Miriam Gabo, 10 March [c.1947], Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²¹⁷ Hepworth to G.L.K. Morris, 18 February 1940, G.L.K. Morris Papers, Archives of American Art.

²¹⁸ Michael Seuphor, 'In Defense of an Architecture', *Cercle et Carré* (Paris), no. 1, March 15 1930, trans. Bann, in Bann, 1974: 186.

²¹⁹ Wells to Nicholson, 20 April 1942, TGA 8717.1.2.5317.

also takes on added resonance, facilitating not only the movement of works through different locations but also the process of passing elements between artists in order to reveal their flexible constructive potential. As a GP, Wells was in a particularly good position to gather scraps of materials used during his everyday life. A list of materials he was using for a new construction in 1944 demonstrates his material range. He described his new project to Nicholson as ‘a construction which includes paint and lines on a board – carved chalk or plaster-perspex string and surgical sutures!’²²⁰

As many of his best known Constructive precedents had done, Wells assembled a range of contiguous parts to create delicately balanced configurations. Like Rodchenko’s hanging constructions (Fig. 34), the diagonal spring of *Construction* is finely balanced so that it slightly vibrates with air currents. Rodchenko’s series is subtitled ‘Surfaces Reflecting Light’ and Wells’ work also inhabits a space which it enlivens by casting shadows around its central form. Buchloh’s statement on the potent spatial integration and technical mechanics of Rodchenko’s work also stands for Wells’ *Construction*: ‘We should not take the reference to *Surfaces Reflecting Light* as anything less than an indication of the potential involvement of these artists with materials and objects in actual space and the social processes that occur within it.’²²¹ Although having no explicit function, the materials and scale of Wells’ work suggest the components of his life and labour, joined by his creative approach to materials in his immediate environment.

The central spring-like form of *Construction* held special significance within the artistic community surrounding Gabo, who enjoyed the spiral’s social connotations. In a 1940 radio debate with Lanyon’s former Euston Road teacher, William Coldstream, Gabo likened human culture to ‘a gigantic spring which must be wound up.’²²² For Gabo the three-dimensional spring was symbolic not only of the interconnectivity of human culture, as a spiral or series of concentric rings, but as a tensile structure with the potential to contract in moments of tension, which would be followed by a moment of release and then reach a stillness and equilibrium in its more expanded form. He connected this, furthermore, to the circumstances of 1940 in fairly explicit terms. Describing how ‘the slightest touch of an ignorant fool’ could ‘release the tension of centuries in a second,’ he included a more positive image of how the Constructive idea would help to return society to ‘a better and more harmonious life’.²²³

²²⁰ Wells to Nicholson, 14 August 1944, TGA 8717.1.2.5328. Very few of Wells’ works of this kind and from this period survive.

²²¹ Buchloh, 1984: 89.

²²² ‘The Artist in the Witness Box: Centre Party v. Left Wing: Discussion between Eric Newton, William Coldstream and Naum Gabo’, *The Listener*, vol. 23, no. 576, 25 January 1940, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 200: 271.

²²³ *Ibid.*

Like Lanyon, Wells was also inspired to create spiralling forms by aerial movements perceived from the ground during the war and by the creative possibilities suggested by aircraft machinery. In January 1942 he described watching aircraft move through the sky with fascination: ‘Yesterday 4 common Hurricanes flew over & played about for ½ hour [...]. To watch them all describing different curves in different directions at different speeds is very exciting.’²²⁴ For Wells this experience was connected to his understanding of freedom within space, which he transferred to his artistic work. That March he wrote that he had ‘tried some very free collage to loosen up a bit’ and had even encouraged local-based pilots to express their movements by making their own Constructive forms. He reported, ‘Have got one of the pilots to try a constr. on the theme of a power dive to earth & back out on the turn. Exciting idea I think.’²²⁵ As for Lanyon, Moholy-Nagy’s *The New Vision*, was clearly an important reference point for the social application of constructive art, through education and physical experience. Later, in March 1942, Wells wrote that in a moment of relative unproductivity, he had ‘tried a “hand sculpture” on the lines of Moholy-Nagy in *The New Vision* – out of a lump of teak.’²²⁶

iv. TOWARDS RECONSTRUCTION

In St Ives both Hepworth and Nicholson at times put their creative work on hold to facilitate the local war effort. Not simply enforced, these were conscious moral decisions based on ideas of social responsibility and present needs. Unfit for active service due to respiratory illness, Nicholson described how his part-time role in Hepworth’s and Stokes’ market garden helped to ‘justify [his] wartime existence’.²²⁷ Similarly, Nicholson’s wartime landscape paintings, discussed in the next chapter, were begun out of recognition that they could provide financial support where it was much needed. As seen in Chapter One, Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson each had a sense that, while they could continue some work during the war, their Constructive ideas would be more fully realised in a postwar reconstruction society. Future plans were discussed in both intimate and international conversations. Constructive colleagues in America, especially those concerned with town planning and social housing, were keen to generate discourse from afar and Martin and Nicholson were both key conduits of information in this respect. In October 1940 Nicholson received a circular report from Chermayeff to old friends

²²⁴ Wells to Nicholson, 31 January 1942, TGA 8717.1.2.5311.

²²⁵ Wells to Nicholson, 9 March 1942, TGA 8717.1.2.5315.

²²⁶ Wells to Nicholson, 30 March 1942, TGA 8717.1.2.5316. Earlier, in the summer of 1941, Wells, seemingly in response to a suggestion by Nicholson and possibly inspired by Gabo’s contemporary photographs, also started experimenting with different types of lens and film to make short-focus photographs. He was proud enough of the results to send them back to Nicholson and they seemed to generate new collage ideas. He wrote, ‘When I got your card I dung out my 1915 camera & wrangled it to take a smaller film. I have a great brainwave & altered the lens to make it much shorter focus & these are the result. I’m rather proud of them as they were quite experimental.’ Wells to Nicholson, 14 June 1941, TGA 8717.1.2.5304. A few months later, in October, he sent Nicholson the result of another photographic experiment, taken with a piece of X-ray filter. Wells to Nicholson, 7 October 1941, TGA 8717.1.2.5308.

²²⁷ Nicholson to Martin, n.d. [1939–40], GMA A70.3.6.12.

and colleagues offering advice on Europe's needs and presenting the critical voice of American reconstructive thought. He described the postwar project of reconstruction as a communal, international concern which depended on 'our ability to prepare for this work now by integrating the Social, Technical and Art problems, into one organic whole'.²²⁸ For Chermayeff, like many others, the constructive emphasis on integrating 'Art' with 'Social' and 'Technical' factors would be a key to success and his native Russia formed a precedent for cross-disciplinary collaboration as a model for post-revolutionary provision.

Socialist aspects of Constructivism continued to resonate politically within the context of scepticism in Britain towards American capitalism and its influence on reconstructive thought. Read, in particular, highlighted the conflicts America posed as a capitalist economy and a centre for social reconstructive thought. His range of contacts and care for political debate, furthermore, ensured that relations between art and politics was a prevalent topic of conversation for him and his friends in St Ives. In September 1941 he described his position definitively to Gabo, declaring Communism as 'the greatest revolution ever carried through by human beings', before concluding simply, 'My only fear is of America.'²²⁹

Hepworth too looked towards the history of Constructivism as an example of the artist's key role in post-revolutionary society. From St Ives she maintained lengthy discussions with Read in which they debated the relationship between society, art and industry. Despite Read's interest in design, he did not encourage artists to work on utilitarian projects. Writing to Hepworth in April 1941, he advocated a freedom of art from discussions of utility, while stressing that the public required education to realise the value of artistic contributions. He wrote,

I don't really disagree with you. [...] the only point I want to make is that people must recognise the necessity for apparently useless activities. That there is a connection between poetry, philosophy & abstract painting on the one hand & utilitarian activities on the other hand is obvious enough to you & me; but it is not so obvious to the man in stoke-hole of a ship or down a coal-mine. The connection needs a lot of demonstrating in simple language [...]²³⁰

²²⁸ Chermayeff, to Nicholson, October 1940, TGA 8717.1.2.692, quoted in Powers, 2001: 149.

²²⁹ Read to Gabo, 4 September 1941, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale. Gabo and Read continued to discuss American politics throughout the 1940s. In 1946, before Gabo's departure for the States, Read described his impressions of a recent trip in political terms. He wrote, 'I did not like New York. It is the most inhuman city I have ever seen. [...] But I do not despise America in general.' He continued, 'they do not believe in equality, but in "equality of opportunity. [...] That is their naiveté again. I doubt if they have the faintest glimmering of the real meaning of words like cooperation, mutual aid...' Read to Gabo, 28 March 1946, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²³⁰ Read to Hepworth, 28 April 1941, TGA 20132.1.167.8.

Seeing the question from the opposite end, he advocated putting social needs first, suggesting that creativity and the understanding of art could only spring from a healthier society. He explained, 'I begin to believe that the thing to aim at is not a place for the artist & [craftsman] as such: but sufficient leisure for everybody to be an artist.'²³¹

Hepworth and Read were similar in their approach to social concerns. Hepworth grew up in an environment receptive to social changes and needs, which undoubtedly affected her particular sensitivity to the Constructive ideas she would later discover. Her social attitude is best reflected in correspondence with her mentor in this respect: her father. Herbert Raikes Hepworth (1880-1958) was an engineer and surveyor for the West Riding of Yorkshire and a firm anti-capitalist. Eager to discuss contemporary events and needs, he maintained a lively correspondence with his daughter throughout the war. On 25 April 1940 he wrote to Cornwall declaring his view: 'I tell people that a radical change in social order is a certainty & that the abolition of private ownership of capital is imminent.'²³² He continued, 'I have told mother that I cannot see a happy issue out of our afflictions until private capital is abolished & we all work for the state – man, woman, or child.'²³³ Herbert's views were clearly transferred to some degree to his daughter. A few months later Nicholson explained to his brother-in-law John Summerson, following a discussion of the triplets' potential evacuation to the States, 'Barbara is v. keen on us all identifying ourselves with Gt B...n [Great Britain] & talks about her triple (!) duty to her children, her husband & the State!'²³⁴

In his wartime correspondence to St Ives, Herbert especially promoted the value of contemplation and patience while waiting for the changed circumstances of postwar society, explaining that it was only in this moment that a closer relationship between art and society could take effect. In November 1940 he provided consolation and recommended staying focussed for now on the present situations. He wrote, 'We simply have to pull through for there is such a lot to do when this war is over.'²³⁵ Practically minded, Herbert prioritised the basic need to survive: 'People who believe in the necessities of revising the social order must go on living or there will not be a revision.'²³⁶ He was therefore against provocative action at a time of need and collaboration and stressed that even abstract political thought was of significantly less use than direct social work. He concluded simply, 'there is not time now for politics.'²³⁷

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² H.R. Hepworth to Hepworth, 25 April 1940, TGA 20132.1.90.4.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Nicholson to Martin, 26 July [1940], TGA 20048.1.10.

²³⁵ H.R. Hepworth to Hepworth, 25 November 1940, TGA 20132.1.90.5. Hepworth and her father also discussed specific issues within national politics, including their discontent with Labour Party's increasingly capitalist approach. For example, on May 1943, Herbert wrote, 'I am disappointed with the Labour Party who seem to be as capitalistic as the capitalists – one with labour as capital & the other with cash.' H.R. Hepworth to Hepworth, 22 May 1943, TGA 20132.1.90.10.

²³⁶ H.R. Hepworth to Hepworth, 25 November 1940, TGA 20132.1.90.5.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Hepworth was surely responding to her father's ideas when she similarly suggested waiting for the correct moment to release a second number of *Circle*. In a letter to Martin written around this time, she suggested that it would be better to collect material for a time when Constructive art could truly make an impact on reconstruction planning.²³⁸ She therefore took a wider view of the journal's longer-term relevance than her collaborators who were, at this moment, considering *Circle* as a means of maintaining wartime creativity and contact between artists who had been dispersed by the war.²³⁹ This led to interesting discussions between Hepworth and the journal's editors. In August 1941 Nicholson wrote to Martin, 'Barbara was very interesting the other evening about prewar – war – postwar. [...] "Circle no.2" will probably not happen but something post-war instead??'²⁴⁰ Recognising the changed circumstances of a postwar contribution, he also suggested a divergence from the first issue's idea and format, proposing 'Another title & entirely different conception?''²⁴¹

By 1942 conversations focussed on another factor of the journal's current and future plans: homeland opposition to Constructive abstract art. Read took a wide political view, blaming anti-socialist political leaders for manipulating the public by making them 'conscious of art' as a segregated activity.²⁴² Such public hostility was reflected in responses to wartime displays of abstract work. *New Movements in Art: Contemporary Work in England* was shown in the spring of 1942 at the London Museum and organised by Ramsden and Eates. Although it included recent work ranging from Constructive to Neo-Romantic figurative trends, Nicholson's and Hepworth's friendships with the organisers and subsequent roles as consultants were reflected in the catalogue's *Circle*-like abstract design and strong red type.²⁴³ In the run-up to the exhibition, a letter debate by Gabo and Read anticipated the focus of reviews. In March 1942 just days before the exhibition opened, Gabo asked Read how to achieve greater contact between abstract art and life: 'How can we achieve a closer relation to life for which we are all

²³⁸ Hepworth to Martin, undated [1940–42], GMA A70.2.22.

²³⁹ It was suggested that a chronicle could be published quarterly and by private means in St Ives, beginning with a small run of 100 copies. Correspondence between Gabo, Hepworth, Martin, Nicholson and Read described the need to construct links, for example, between those in the navy, airforce and army, and to bring together younger artists in particular. Read wrote to Hepworth in May 1940: 'I don't know how the present situation will have affected your plans for a chronicle. In principle of course I approve, and perhaps the worst things get, the more reason for carrying on. But it is going to very difficult to get the contributions together. Difficult to get in touch with the people called up: difficult for others to concentrate.' Read to Hepworth, 24 May 1940, TGA 20132.1.167.4.

²⁴⁰ Nicholson to Martin, 2 August [1941] GMA A70.3.8.3. Nicholson also mentioned that Hepworth had been doing 'some fair dwgs for sculpture with Colour' which were 'opening up all kinds of possibilities'.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² 'The people are unconscious in their collectivity. [...] It is the politicians who corrupt them & turn them against art by making them conscious of art.' Read to Gabo, 24 April 1942, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²⁴³ *New Movements in Art: Contemporary Work in England*, London Museum, 18 March to 9 May 1942. In February 1942 Nicholson reported to Summerson that Margot Eates was in conversation with authorities at the London Museum about an exhibition of modern art that would include 'independent', 'surrealist' and 'constructivist' sections. He noted that he and Hepworth had been consulting on the selection. Nicholson to Summerson, 18 February [1942], TGA 20048.1.20.

longing without losing the intrinsic independent properties of our art?' He continued, 'Your solution seems to me to have the danger of leading straight into [the] social realism of K.C. [Kenneth Clark] which is for me the worst kind of social hypocrisy.'²⁴⁴

Although they intended to demonstrate the simultaneous contemporaneity of each trend, Eates' and Ramsden's selection in fact provoked a wider critical chasm between the perceived social relevance of figurative and elusiveness of abstract work. Reviews of *New Movements in Art* particularly focussed on Neo-Romantic figurative and landscape paintings, which were upheld for their strong relevance to the national war effort. Five days after Gabo's letter to Read a photograph of Gabo's *Spiral Theme* (1941) was reproduced in *The Listener* to illustrate a review by Eric Newton, who described the exhibition as a kind of 'funeral' while showering isolated praise on Gabo's work.²⁴⁵ The following month Read and Gabo's discussion was made public via an article by Read published in *Horizon*. Provocatively titled 'Vulgarity and Impotence: Speculations on the Present State of the Arts', Read responded with some support of widespread claims that abstract art had diverged from social concerns. He praised *Spiral Theme* as a 'miracle of precision and harmony' and highlighted the strength of the Constructive movement while contrasting it with the dynamic, anarchist force of Surrealist art.²⁴⁶ His questioning tone was such that Hepworth expressed doubts as to his sympathies. Read's honest reply offered limited reassurance:

I have not lost one particle of faith in what you and Ben and Gabo are doing. But – and it is a "but" which you admit yourself, and which I am by no means using for the first time – the gulf does exist between your art and the people at large, and the only question is how can it be bridged.²⁴⁷

Read's following advice showed that he considered some necessary changes as outside of the artist's creative control. The 'link' required between art and 'the people', he wrote, could only be repaired with 'profound social changes'.²⁴⁸ He concluded in a more accusatory tone by contrasting the two exhibitions discussed in his review: *New Movements in Art* and an exhibition by members of the forces on show at the National Portrait Gallery.²⁴⁹ While he criticised the latter's lack of 'aesthetic criticism', he judged it reflective of 'the vulgarity of the

²⁴⁴ Gabo to Read, 14 March 1942. Herbert Read Papers, Victoria, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 282.

²⁴⁵ Newton described Gabo's 'organic' structures 'a surprisingly potent stimulus to my sense of space' and evocative of music through its flowing and intersecting surfaces. Eric Newton, 'Contemporary Art at the London Museum', *Listener* (London), vol. 27, no. 688, 19 March 1942: 376.

²⁴⁶ Correspondence shows that James Thrall Soby at the Museum of Modern Art in New York first became interested in purchasing Gabo's *Spiral Theme* on reading Read's description of it in *Horizon*.

²⁴⁷ Read to Hepworth, 4 April 1942, TGA 20132.1.167.9.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *London District Command Forces*, National Portrait Gallery, from March 1942.

age’ and therefore embodying the contemporary spirit lacking in the other exhibition. The London Museum exhibition did not, he explained, have ‘that kind of vitality’ because, in dealing only with the Constructive impulse, it had moved ‘away from contemporary “life”’.²⁵⁰ Undeafened in her reply by the scepticism of her friend and professional ally, Hepworth remained undeterred in her belief in the value of Constructive art which, she wrote, ‘must contain the seed of social critique’.²⁵¹ Accepting both Read and her father’s evaluations of the primary need for social rather than artistic change, she asked, ‘It is now the time for action – the artists are ready – society not yet – What do you suggest we should do?’²⁵²

It is in this context that, from the summer of 1942, the editors and contributors of *Circle* became more focussed on how they could help to develop public understanding of Constructive art. Conversations thus turned to a perceived need to provide an educational guide to its ideas, history and current form. Ramsden was an important protagonist for these conversations and the first to suggest dealing with the lack of public understanding.²⁵³ As the value of historical and contemporary histories were discussed, debates were fuelled by increasing divergence between Gabo’s and Nicholson’s understanding of the Constructive movement. For Nicholson Constructive art was a trans-historical description which could include work which pre-dated Russian Constructivism; for Gabo, Nicholson’s broader use of the ‘Constructive’ term weighed up to an appropriation negligent of historical specificity and of the social and political aspects of that past.²⁵⁴ Gabo, however, maintained a more open attitude to contemporary work. In May 1944 he highlighted to Read the danger of distilling the present movement into a select group and announced his desire for contemporary openness: ‘I never have nor will I sponsor or participate in a movement which would facilitate the formation of a stagnant school or group or party under this name.’²⁵⁵ Connected to this was his perception, which developed over the following years, that Hepworth’s work had come too close to his original concepts. This coincided with an increasing divergence in Gabo’s own work from the theoretical underpinnings of Russian Constructivism. Writing to Read in January 1946, months before he left St Ives, he acknowledged the need for fresh approaches, evidently aware of vast changes to his life, circumstances, position and time. He wrote, ‘The task I am now preoccupied with is so much remove from my theories [...] when I now get exalted letters from Antoine about

²⁵⁰ Read to Hepworth, 4 April 1942, TGA 20132.1.167.9.

²⁵¹ Hepworth to Read, 8 April [1942], Herbert Read Papers, Victoria, quoted in Hammer and Lodder, 2000: 282.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ See correspondence between Ramsden, Eates and Gabo, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²⁵⁴ Around 1942, Nicholson wrote to Gabo, ‘I think there is a serious danger in these movement labels [...] In your case in the Russian movement, & your own part in it, is an accepted fact but the Constructive movement did not originate with the Russian movement but many centuries before...’ Nicholson to Gabo, n.d. [c.1942]. Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²⁵⁵ Gabo to Read, 22 May 1944, Herbert Read Papers, Victoria.

Constructive Realisms and all the rest of it, it sounds to me as an ache from far away, far behind.²⁵⁶

Recent events at local and worldwide levels undoubtedly affected Gabo's ideas on the relative importance of the Constructivist past and continued divergence into new kinds of work. As discussed in Chapter One, his denial of restrictive approaches to the contemporary movement coincided with independence from his previous collaborators in St Ives, which reached a new scale with his departure in August 1946. On a broader ideological level, as he heard more news of the traumatic events surrounding the War and Holocaust, it is possible that he recognised the need to move beyond *Circle's* cosmopolitan project and the current unease with which Constructivism's geographical roots sat alongside the needs of contemporary life. By 1945 the Soviet Union was exerting ever-tighter control through its Five Year austerity plan that sought to recuperate finances and to prepare the ground for the impending ideological battle of the Cold War. Buchloh presents this shift as if inspiring a conscious artistic response which reoriented Constructivism away from Soviet ideology and 'towards European and American concepts of artistic autonomy and modernism.'²⁵⁷ Resting his account on Gabo's representation in the States, he focuses on a 1948 article by Chermayeff (who became Director of Chicago's Institute of Design after Moholy-Nagy), who introduced Gabo to Americans as an abstract artist who had finally attained the freedom required to diverge from the Soviet state.²⁵⁸ Chermayeff's reference to Gabo's cultural roots surely proposes quite another critical tendency: that despite its use in oppositional terms, Gabo and his work continued to symbolise less his freedom from the Eastern bloc but rather, through its continued, muted presence, his slow and more meaningful process of movement towards the West.

In the States Gabo's work was positioned with some success as the product of a past Soviet culture moving West. For artists remaining in Britain, the temporal and social resonances of Constructivism were questioned and this intersected with other postwar factors (including Gabo's departure) so that many artists in St Ives diverted from its path to work in more individual ways. It is arguable that, as knowledge of the horrors of war and the Holocaust spread, artists became more aware of the need to generate new ways to consider the past and to express current needs. Space and time were no longer able to be 'reborn', as the 'Realistic Manifesto' had announced, and artists took note of the social and cultural ruptures and displacement caused by unfathomable recent events and the impossibility of contemporary expressions of equilibrium, order and balance. In the immediate postwar years in Britain, Constructivism, defined by its abstractness, was again subsumed into debates on the social usefulness of abstract art. Although accustomed to public contention, artists themselves led

²⁵⁶ Gabo to Read, 15 January 1946, Naum Gabo Papers, Yale.

²⁵⁷ Buchloh, 1990: 90.

²⁵⁸ Serge Chermayeff, 'Naum Gabo', *Magazine of Art*, 41, February 1948: 56–59.

some of the debate. In 1949, the same year as Adorno's statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', Lanyon noted that postwar abstract art could easily become 'a vanity', without meaningful connection to life.²⁵⁹ Lanyon, in particular, had already turned from abstract subject-matter towards the more recognisably human realm of landscape as a human site. Although he continued to draw from earlier investigations in Constructive space, he negotiated new interests by fusing space exploration with the landscape as a site which would encompass, in Moholy-Nagy's terms, 'the heritage of human experience'.

Despite its central importance, many accounts have failed to take proper account of the role of historical change in driving discussions concerning the timeliness of Constructive legacies to contemporary life and work. In *After Constructivism* (2014) Brandon Taylor describes the history of Constructivism in St Ives as if a change devoid of historical impulses but driven instead by the agency of landscape. Art made in St Ives, Taylor writes, tended 'to retreat from geometry or functionalism alone in favour of a meditative and personal response to nature.'²⁶⁰ Although Constructive forms and ideas had provided the backbone for wartime thinking about postwar reconstruction, when 'the postwar' idea became reality it proved impossible for these artists to feel capable of returning to a culture and network characteristic of an earlier moment without significant appropriation or critical debate. Constructive ideas, therefore, while continuing to form the foundations of much art in St Ives, appeared on different and much negotiated terms. As more in-depth analysis of the driving forces of this change show, this development was not simply a process of de-politicisation or 'retreat' but was often connected to the active, vigorous questioning of how a legacy associated with previous times and other places might be made more relevant to contemporary postwar life.

²⁵⁹ Lanyon to Frost [1949]. Lanyon family archive. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society,' [1949] *Prisms*, 1955; trans. S. and S. Weber 1967: 34.

²⁶⁰ Taylor, 2014: 112.

3 NICHOLSON'S CUBISM: TABLEAU, TEXT AND TABLE TOPS

In 1960 Lanyon assembled pieces of glass, ceramic, painted plaster and wood upon a cork base to make *Blue Glass Airscape* (Fig. 35). It belongs to a body of work made from 1959 onwards in which Lanyon responded to his experience of gliding. A relatively low-lying construction on a square horizontal surface, it recalls a birds-eye view of a landscape with a rocky coast of painted plaster and a periphery of light blue sea. As an 'airscape', however, it does not describe a single perspective view but rather a combination of viewpoints, movements and sensations experienced while moving through this terrain. The central assemblage of opaque planes creates a structure which both holds the space it surrounds and reaches outwards from its support. In many ways *Blue Glass Airscape* is also a painterly composition. Crossing parts and unifying the terrain, Lanyon exaggerated the substance of paint at his central diagonal join, for instance, where blue glass meets cork base, with a heavy black line. Yet its most painterly aspect is its grounding on a two-dimensional board support, upon which other elements have been placed. As a type of construction, it is characterised by its hold upon this horizontal base. As such it lies between the categories of Lanyon's constructions described by Stephens as 'free-standing sculptures' and those 'more like collaged paintings'.¹

As a painterly-spatial construction, *Blue Glass Airscape* shows Lanyon's dual interests in Constructive space and the flatness and literalness of Cubist collage. As such, it demonstrates the proximity and interaction of the Constructive and Cubist movements in St Ives, especially for students of Gabo and Nicholson. Of artists working in the town from 1939, Nicholson came into closest contact with Cubist approaches and ideas, and his engagement with the movement characterises much of his long career. It is arguable, however, that Nicholson's physical proximity to the Constructive movement during the 1930s and the pre-eminence given to Gabo as a conduit for this style has distracted attention from Nicholson's relationship with Cubism. This chapter argues that this relationship, on the contrary, had a more foundational and sustained impact on Nicholson's approach. Moreover, largely generated by his example, Cubist legacies were developed in St Ives through the next generation of artists. This example of Lanyon's work introduces the topic, therefore, as a sign of how Constructivism and Cubism converged in these artists' works despite earlier claims by Gabo that the latter offered only the 'flimsiest foundation'.

Barr's diagram for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1936 (Fig. 8), depicts Nicholson's connections to Cubism and Constructivism. A line connects 'Cubism' (described as 'Paris, 1906–08') to seven later

¹ Stephens, 2000: 165–166. To this list might be added Lanyon's boxed wall constructions such as *Turn Around* (1963–64).

movements which include ‘Suprematism’ (‘Moscow, 1913’), ‘Constructivism’ (‘Moscow, 1914’), and ‘De Stijl and Neoplasticism’ (‘Leyden, Berlin and Paris, 1916’). Each of these connects to one of two contemporary trends: ‘Geometrical Abstract Art’ and ‘Non-Geometrical Abstract Art’.² Although Nicholson’s name is not included on the chart, he is noted in the exhibition catalogue as a key representative of the latter strand.³ Barr’s diagram and catalogue therefore present Nicholson as the inheritor of forms and ideas which had already passed from Cubism to more recent trends to which he was more closely connected. Nicholson’s contemporary work clearly complied with Barr’s perspective, which was guided by an interest in formal inheritance. Barr’s reading of Nicholson’s ‘Geometrical Abstract’ style was, furthermore, based on the artist’s most recent abstract reliefs, which were included in the exhibition catalogue.⁴ The accompanying text shows how Nicholson’s ‘carved and chastely painted reliefs’ were valued by Barr according to Neoplastic principles of aesthetic purity and spiritual restraint. This positioning of Nicholson’s work in Neoplasticist terms, however, obscured the artist’s direct engagement with past and present Cubist work.

When Nicholson saw Barr’s exhibition catalogue and chart in 1936, he responded directly to the curator’s divisions and presentation of time. A letter to his *Circle* co-editor Martin written in May 1936 shows that he was particularly concerned with Barr’s contemporary valuations. He disapproved foremost of his categorisation of current work under ‘Geometrical’ and ‘Non-Geometrical’. Unsurprisingly, he particularly disagreed with Barr’s analysis that the ‘Geometrical’ trend was in decline, which he had rationalised according to the movement of artists (namely, Hélión and Domela) from a ‘geometrical’ to a more ‘non-geometrical’ approach.⁵ Nicholson quoted the following passage, taken from the catalogue, to Martin:

At the risk of generalising about the very recent past, it seems fairly clear that the geometric tradition in abstract art, just illustrated by Nicholson’s relief, is in the decline. Mondrian, the ascetic and steadfast champion of the rectangle, has been deserted by his brilliant pupils Hélión and Domela, who have introduced in their recent work various impurities such as varied textures, irregular curved lines and graded tones.⁶

² Lowry also noted that in two of Barr’s draft diagrams, the prefix ‘contemporary’ was positioned above ‘geometric’ and ‘non-geometric’ art. See G. Lowry, *op. cit.*, in L. Dickermann (ed.), 2012–13: 359–363, 361.

³ Barr, 1936: 200.

⁴ Nicholson’s *October 2 1934 (white relief – triplets)* was reproduced in the catalogue, alongside a contemporary abstract composition by Hélión. Barr, 1936: 201. The catalogue also lists a 1935 painted relief. See Barr, 1936: 218, cat. nos 188 and 188A.

⁵ Nicholson to Martin, 21 May [1936], GMA A70.3.2.4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Sensing that Barr's value judgement was based on reconcilable inaccuracies within his visual map, Nicholson provided Martin with an alternative diagram (Fig. 36).⁷ Barr's contemporary movements, now placed at the head of the chart, were each subdivided into two further categories: 'G-A' [Geometric Abstract] sprouted into 'simple geometric' and 'complex geometric' and 'N-G-A' [Non-Geometric Abstract] was split into 'organic' and 'surrealist'. Sensing the insufficiency of 'geometric' to describe vastly different approaches to abstract shapes, Nicholson used 'simple geometric' to describe abstract styles characterised by a purer use of geometric form. 'Complex geometric', on the other hand, was used to refer to those using a greater variety of non-representational, arranged in more intricate configurations. Suggesting examples of each type, he listed under 'simple geometric' the approaches of Neoplasticism and Constructivism, as well as his own and Hepworth's work. For 'complex geometric' he listed individual artists, Kandinsky, Hélión, Hans Erni and John Piper, and those more broadly associated with the journal *Axis* (1935–7), edited by Myfanwy Piper. Under 'Non-Geometric', Nicholson listed 'organic non-geometric' artists as Arp, Miró and Moore and gave no specific examples of the 'surrealist' type.⁸ Nicholson's suggested sub-divisions show his close attention to formal analysis and the depth of his interest in Barr's arrangement. Furthermore, there is recognisable logic in Nicholson's types; his sub-divisions, for example, parted those working with pre-existent geometrical shapes, however varied and complex, and those using biomorphic forms suggestive of organic growth.

Nicholson's response to Barr's diagram reveals an important difference in his approach in relation to time. In his description of the 'simple geometric' style, the tendencies of 'Neoplastic' (Mondrian), 'Constructivist' (Pevsner and Gabo) and '?' (Nicholson and Hepworth) were combined to describe a roughly contemporary formal trend. Although yet to be determined and named, labelled therefore as '?', he presented his own work as independent from specific 'Neoplastic' and 'Constructivist' styles while linked to them via a common approach to form. Although Cubism was not explicitly included in Nicholson's excerpt, its centrality to Barr's diagram suggests that Nicholson understood each of his 'Simple Geometric' movements as equally responsive to this key precedent, even if at slightly different times.

Nicholson's relationship with Cubism was formed through a series of encounters which affected his awareness of the movement's potential to generate future work. These encounters included conversations with other artists and critics, as well as access to materials, including works of art and reproductions in magazines. Nicholson's admiration for the Cubist masters has resurfaced in most studies of his life and work yet regarding his development of a Cubist or post-Cubist

⁷ Nicholson to Martin, 21 May [1936], GMA A70.3.2.4.

⁸ Lowry also notes that, based on an earlier sketch of his diagram, Barr's category of 'Non-geometrical abstract art' was, at one time, labelled 'biomorphic'. G. Lowry, *op. cit.* in Dickerman, (ed.), 2012–13: 359–363, 361.

style much remains to be explored. Such a reading helps to explore continuations and developments in Nicholson's practice between the interwar and postwar periods. Moreover, while rooted in biographical circumstance, Nicholson's relationship with Cubism moves beyond questions of personal taste and influence to provide a view of Nicholson's position within a growing field of international art criticism. His correspondences reveal that through the 1940s, as in 1936, Nicholson remained connected to discussions which, still centred on Cubism, considered the future for abstract art.

Like Constructivism, Cubism's role as an established – even if contested – history and basis for continued development prompted important questions concerning the necessity of artistic originality in the work it inspired. Reviewing the tenth annual exhibition of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) in 1946, Greenberg warned that the strength of Cubist influence could lead to the creation of 'nothing more than a series of pastiches' which lacked serious interrogation.⁹ Similarly, the anxiety of influence was felt in John Summerson's 1948 monograph of Nicholson's work in which the author stressed that, despite debts to the School of Paris, there was no "quotation" in his work to suggest 'compromised independence'.¹⁰ Debates about dependency seem to have been of a more central concern for critics than for the artist himself. Conversely, Nicholson's own writings reveal that he sought to demonstrate his reverence for Cubism and to stress the direct impact of specific encounters on his own development. In this way, Nicholson's relationship with Cubism reveals how his work and identity was formed alongside and in response to structures which underlie how histories of modern art were debated and told. Although important differences remain between Nicholson's work and the Cubist examples from which he learnt, the ease with which he used and appropriated its lessons, I argue, led to some of his best work and defined its presence in an international critical field.

My analysis of Nicholson's relationship with the Cubist movement starts with reference to a recent exhibition review which uses the quality of 'literalness' to consider the relative qualities of work by Cubist masters and their followers in Britain. Taking this as a relatively common quality attached to the movement by contemporary historians of Cubism, I use Nicholson's acceptance or refusal or values surrounding literalness and objecthood to suggest the range of ways the movement has been received, theorised and understood. My subsequent discussion of Nicholson's relationship with the movement is broadly chronological. This narrative begins with his early encounters with abstraction and the influence of *papier-collé*, which is followed by a study of analogous representational spaces in his paintings and the increasing prominence of lines and text in the early 1930s. Next I explore how Nicholson continued to approach his

⁹ Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists, Jacques Lipchitz, and Jackson Pollock,' *The Nation*, 13 April 1946, in O'Brien (ed.), 1986: 72–75.

¹⁰ Summerson, 1948: 8.

more ‘Neoplastic’ compositions in a ‘Cubist’ mode. In the final section I show how Cubism remained at the heart of Nicholson’s artistic interests and correspondences as he negotiated the Second World War and developed an international profile in the later 1940s.

i. LITERALNESS AND OBJECTHOOD

In a review of the exhibition *Picasso & Modern British Art* (Tate Britain, 2012) for the *London Review of Books*, T.J. Clark includes a criticism of Nicholson’s work. The fault he describes concerns a failure to put into practice ‘modernism’s truth-condition’, which is quickly defined as the ‘literalness’ and ‘overtness’ of the art object as ‘thing’.¹¹ Clark’s criticism rests on a contrast between the Cubists’ imposition upon a viewer’s space and what he describes as the ‘aesthetic distance’ of Nicholson’s paintings and reliefs. He positions the ‘modernist idea’ of Cubism as the *literalness* of the ‘whole shape and substance’ of a work, an inseparable bond between its aspects (including internal organisation, space, surface, and texture) and the material facts of the support and paint.¹² Relating this to Nicholson, he explains, ‘I do not think that Nicholson ever quite saw this, or saw how to put it into practice.’¹³ Clark’s review suggests taking a closer look at the rapport, through Cubism, between Nicholson’s work and the critical value of ‘literalness’. While not wholly denying Clark’s statement, I use his standpoint to interrogate the changing characteristics of Nicholson’s work and to locate his interaction with Cubism within critical narratives of mid-twentieth-century modern art.

An important difference between Nicholson’s outlook and Clark’s terms needs to be recognised. Nicholson, as stressed in previous literature, consistently emphasised the identity of his paintings and reliefs as art ‘objects’ by scraping their surfaces or incising into the layers of pigment, ground, canvas or board.¹⁴ As will be shown, he was led in this approach by Cubist examples and other interrelated sources from within his network of contacts.¹⁵ However,

¹¹ T.J. Clark, ‘False Moderacy’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 34, no. 6, 22 March 2012.

¹² Clark’s described the ‘modernist idea’ that truth depended ‘on deep obedience, or receptivity, to the whole shape and substance of the coloured thing.’ He wrote, ‘The hold of a picture on the world, as well as its internal organisation (the kind of depth it offered, the degree of surface incident, its notion of orderliness or free improvisation), were inseparable from the size and format of the canvas used, or the particular liquidity of the mixed paint.’ He explained, ‘The literalness of the container is modernism’s truth-condition’ and ‘the truth of a pictorial proposal *has* to derive from the proposal’s overtness, its factuality. This is modernism’s core belief.’ *Ibid.* [my italics]

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See C. Stephens, ‘Ben Nicholson: Modernism, Craft and the English Vernacular’, in Corbett and Russell (eds), 2002: 228–245.

¹⁵ It is important to note the widespread interest in naïve and vernacular forms of expression surrounding Nicholson’s interest in weathered textures and the aesthetic of the handmade, especially during the second half of the 1920s. The Seven and Five Society (which Nicholson joined in 1924) played a key role in generating these trends and from 1928, Alfred Wallis, provided a ‘naïve’ precedent, demonstrating to Nicholson the value of painting on rougher surfaces or objects for generating immediate impact. Nicholson’s tendency to highlight the physical components and object-hood of painting arguably also

Nicholson's statements and writings, especially those from the 1930s, consistently deny that, by emphasising his working materials, his works would be tangible in presence, *i.e.* experienced or understood by their physical presence and capacity to be touched. Even when later reflecting on earlier work, Nicholson described his attitude to the painting's substance in terms highly indebted to Christian Science. He wrote, 'I think for a p'tg to be alive one must feel that one cannot touch it. It is thought not paint.'¹⁶ While this appears contradictory to Nicholson's frequent emphasis on the materiality of his surfaces, such statements draw out important discrepancies between terms such as 'literal' and 'tangible'. For Nicholson it was important to stress the material overtness of his 'object-like' works of art, which is not dissimilar from Clark's concept on 'literalness'. Yet the specifically corporal tangibility that might be associated with 'objecthood', pertaining to a relationship between an artwork's object identity and the viewer's body, contrasts with other aesthetic, philosophical and religious ideals held by Nicholson. Although his use of terms did vary according to specific resonances within his life, it is arguable that he never reconciled – or even sought to reconcile – his own emphasis on works as objects with what he saw as their primarily immaterial (whether spiritual, visual or conceptual) meanings and effects.

Examples of Cubist art inspired Nicholson early in his career to approach his practice, I propose, in a more 'literal' manner. Yet I also stress a view of Nicholson's understanding of Cubism which differs from Clark's reading of the movement: not as a form of production straining towards a singular quality of literal and material overtness, but rather as a collection of approaches characterised by the multiplicity of identities and modes of address of the work of art. By no means receiving it as a set style, an approach to materials or a group of formal characteristics, Nicholson was, I argue, highly aware of internal tensions and conflicting approaches which characterised Cubist work during the 1920s and 1930s. With this in mind, it is less surprising that Nicholson never entirely submitted, as Clark's criticism suggests he should, to a singular notion of Cubist literalness, but rather maintained a more open view. As will be revealed through his work, Nicholson understood Cubism, I propose, as a movement consisting of several approaches which, although varied in style, could each be put to use to reveal both the literal *and* pictorial identities of the art object through internal tensions and contrasts.

Clark's emphasis on 'literalness' can be placed within a lineage of formalist readings of Cubism which provide terms and ideas for an analysis of Nicholson's work. In 'Collage' (1959), Greenberg, returning to a topic he had approached in 1948, described *papier-collé* as the major turning point in Cubism's path towards the physical protrusion of bas-relief, described a

drew from his interest in Post-Impressionist painting and its surrounding discourse, which tended to emphasise the material components of surface and paint over subject matter.

¹⁶ Nicholson, letter to Stokes, 28 August 1962, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 86.

climactic point in the confrontation between literal artwork and viewing space.¹⁷ As this suggests, Greenberg's narrative proposed the Cubists' drive towards 'reality' through the physical three-dimensionality and objecthood of their work. His descriptions of different stages of this narrative, however, describe a complex struggle between flatness and its opposite: illusion. In accordance with this, he introduced the importance of *papier-collé* by recognising, through the example of *trompe l'oeil*, the complex nature of the Cubists' approaches to materials which could simultaneously create and deny the illusion of space. Explaining how 'A piece of imitation-woodgrain wallpaper is not more "real" under any definition, or closer to nature, than a painted simulation of it,' he described how it could suggest illusion 'without making it really present'.¹⁸ The result, he explained, was that the suggested possibility of illusion was denied and the image was held to a flat surface.¹⁹ For Greenberg, Cubism's incorporation of imitation printing further 'spelled out' the literal flatness of painting. As letters or texts were differentiated from a background field, they suggested spatial depth.²⁰ Extending this analysis, Greenberg described how early experiments in *papier-collé* implied a spatial difference between figure (the applied surface) and ground (the field or space 'beneath'). Most important to his account was that, as the surfaces of *papier-collé* became increasingly dominated by pasted elements, their 'literal flatness' spread over the surface and dominated it. Leaving no possibility of spatial depth, they were left, he explained, only with the space 'in front of, upon, the surface.'²¹

While the dominant trend in Greenberg's narrative supports (and provides some context for) Clark's terms and expectations, Greenberg's more acute and varied perceptions of the stages leading towards *bas-relief* show that reductive accounts of Cubist 'literalness' obscure its range of perceptual and physical effects. In 1987 Christopher Green described how formalist Cubist narratives offered by Greenberg and others in the 1960s had, despite the subtlety of their arguments, been condensed to a single proposition that the Cubist artwork had become 'isolated in its own aesthetic field as an internally consistent material fact'.²² Leading to a Modernist view based on the notion of progress towards an art that was, he explained, specifically 'materially pictorial, honest (anti-illusionistic) and literal,' Green described how the 'Modernist line' had become defined according to a particular reading of pre-war Cubism in which works were positioned at the intersection of values of literal materiality and an avant-garde commitment 'to the new at the expense of the old.'²³

¹⁷ Greenberg, 'Collage' (1959) in Greenberg, 1961; 1989: 70–83. See also Greenberg, 'Collage in the Museum of Modern Art', *The Nation*, 27 November 1948, reprinted in O'Brian (ed.), vol. 2, 1986: 259–263.

¹⁸ Greenberg, 1961, 1989: 70.

¹⁹ Greenberg, 196, 1989: 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 72.

²² Green, 1987: 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

Although both responded to Cubism in similar ways, the differences in aim, position and experience between Nicholson and Greenberg are important. As an artist, Nicholson was responding through his own work to the Cubist examples he encountered largely before this critical emphasis was directly in play. At the time of Nicholson's first engagement during the 1920s, Cubism was appearing in a strikingly diverse range of modes and forms. It is significant, therefore, that Nicholson's views are seen in relation to Cubism as it appeared after 1914, when its examples and critical discourse were characterised, to use Green's terms, by 'plurality and volatility – openness to change'.²⁴ Particularly as the First World War neared its end and the work of Cubist masters developed, Cubism was explicitly scrutinised for symptoms hinting that it was in the process of decline or substantial alteration. For those acknowledging these recent developments as 'Cubist', furthermore, its most unifying trait seems to have been its stylistic flexibility. André Salmon wrote in 1917, for example, that Cubism could not be in decline because its value 'was precisely the capacity for renewal, for further development which it brought to art.'²⁵ Writing an article on Braque two years later, Salmon again described a contemporary 'Cubist school' that, while connected to earlier examples, now existed 'in multiple and varied form'.²⁶

Gallerist brothers Paul and Léonce Rosenberg played significant roles in presenting the continuing Cubist line to a critical, public audience, and both too directly influenced Nicholson's view of the movement as he engaged with it during the 1920s. One of the most memorable experiences of Nicholson's artistic career came during a visit to Paul Rosenberg's gallery in Paris in 1921, which will be discussed in more depth. In January that year his brother Léonce organised Picasso's first one-man exhibition in London, which, held at the Leicester Galleries, formed a wide-ranging survey of his work to date.²⁷ In 1924, the same year that Nicholson made his first Cubist-inspired work, Léonce began to publish his journal, the *Bulletin de "l'Effort Moderne"* (1924–27), which complemented the programme and outlook of his gallery in Paris. Nicholson owned at least four numbers of this journal, including its first issue.²⁸ Each of these presentations showed Cubism through the eyes of the Rosenberg brothers, who were both sharp promoters of Cubism in its continuing post-1919 form. Their efforts, furthermore, did not go unnoticed. Despite predictions immediately following the War of

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 2.

²⁵ André Salmon, 'Cubisme et camouflage', *L'Europe Nouvelle*, no. 39, 5 October 1918, quoted in Green, 1987: 9.

²⁶ André Salmon, 'Georges Braque', *L'Europe Nouvelle*, 29 March 1919: 625, quoted in Green, 1987: 45.

²⁷ *Exhibition of Works by Pablo Picasso*, Leicester Galleries, London, 1921. Seventy-two works were exhibited, including examples from Picasso's 'Blue', 'Rose', 'Cubist' and 'Neo-Classical' periods. See Beechey and Stephens (eds), 2012: 104.

²⁸ Nicholson's surviving collection of journals includes the *Bulletin de "l'Effort Moderne"* nos. 1 (January 1924), 28 (October 1926), 29 (November 1926) and 31 (January 1927). 'Twenty-five various related publications', Ben Nicholson Papers, TGA 8717.6.9.24.

Cubism's decline, the hype and critical interest surrounding their exhibitions was such that, as Green suggests, it was 'virtually impossible to claim the death of Cubism in 1919.'²⁹

To process and describe the movement's stylistic changes, however, new terms and perspectives were required by contemporary critics, curators and dealers. By 1919 both Picasso and Braque had showed important signs of change at Léonce Rosenberg's Galerie de L'Effort Moderne. In March that year Braque showed paintings with looser compositions and figurative subjects which characterised much of his newer work.³⁰ A combination of Cubist still lifes and Neoclassical drawings by Picasso were on show in the same space that June.³¹ In May 1921 Picasso, who was by then working predominantly with Paul Rosenberg's gallery, showed works with such heavily rounded figures that they incited comparison with a nearby Ingres exhibition. Still a prominent figure in debate, Salmon, while reviewing the Ingres display, connected it with Cubism's longer historical path and this, he argued, included Ingres' visual de-composition and reconstruction of plastic form.³²

Because Nicholson's engagement with Cubist work in Paris coincided with these events, his contact with the movement at the time was grounded in a cultural field which supposed Cubism had already stepped beyond a climax into a later phase. This, I argue, made Nicholson at once alert to the climate of critical questioning surrounding Cubism's decline and receptive to the strong continuations he witnessed in the work of, among others, Picasso and Braque. Crucially, relatively unrestricted by the critical prioritisation of Cubism's drive to literalness in the pre-war moment, Nicholson's understanding of the movement was more in line with other readings which have presented Cubism in a more revealing light.

Christine Poggi's 'Frames of Reference: "Table" and "Tableau" in Picasso's Collages and Constructions' (*Art Journal*, Winter 1988) provides such a perspective on the breadth and complexity of Picasso's and Braque's contribution over the decades of Nicholson's interest. Her approach thus forms a critical outline for Nicholson's interpretation of these histories as imbued in his own work. Beginning with an image of Picasso's early collage, *Still Life with Chair-Caning* (1912), Poggi describes how narratives of Cubism's path to 'objecthood' have presupposed that Picasso's best work presented the viewer with 'more complete' information about the real world.³³ Although also focussed on his *papier-collé* and collage works, Poggi

²⁹ Green, 1987: 46.

³⁰ Examples of work from this period include the Tate's *Bather* or still life *Glass and Plate of Apples* (both 1925). *Georges Braque*, Galerie de l'Effort Moderne, Paris, 5–31 March 1919.

³¹ *Pablo Picasso*, Galerie de l'Effort Moderne, Paris, 5–25 June 1919.

³² André Salmon, 'L'Exposition Ingres', *L'Europe Nouvelle*, 21 May 1921: 666, quoted in Green, 1987: 59. See also the chapter 'Picasso/Pastiche' in Krauss, 1998: 89–210.

³³ Poggi, 1988: 312. Poggi writes, 'Typically, those who assert the objecthood of Cubist works also assert that Cubist formal innovations were intended to give the viewer more complete information about the essential nature of things in the everyday world.' Poggi cites the example of John Golding's discussion of

subsequently provides a broader view of Picasso's Cubism which upholds how his works 'undermine *both* classical and modernist models for understanding the ontological status of works of art.'³⁴ Collage, she describes, provides a particularly important 'focal point' for analyses of Cubist realism because the individual elements of collage have been identified 'both as "real" [...] and as signs for a reality not physically present'. Thus Picasso's collages are works which, through the reality/nonreality of these elements, '*dramatize* the Cubist challenge to prevailing standards of pictorial unity.'³⁵ As I will propose through a reading of his works, Nicholson's use of *papier-collé* led him to develop a comparable use to elements within both abstract and figurative scenes.

To illustrate Picasso's interest in creating pictorial tension, Poggi points to the frames he chose for his collages and to how he 'called attention to the issue of pictorial unity through the *motif* of the frame, rendering problematic its place, form of appearance, and ultimately, its meaning.'³⁶ Her analysis particularly reveals how Picasso playfully instituted 'an ambiguous play with frames and framing motifs,' most notably by referring in single works to the '*table* (the plane of actuality) and *tableau* (the plane of illusion)'.³⁷ Her examples show how Picasso used the pictorial structures of a table (as a flat, literal surface) and *tableau* (as a representative scene) to give his images the multiple and opposing identities of literal object and transparent 'window onto the world'. Poggi emphasises throughout that it was through the coexistence rather than opposition of these modes that Picasso created pictorial tension.³⁸ His use of framing devices, she concludes, more often disrupted a painting's internal unity by allowing for multiple readings and consequently for blurring the 'distinction between the worlds of reality and fiction.'³⁹ Poggi's description of the flat table surface (as a 'plane of actuality'), I suggest, corresponds with Clark's view of Cubist literalness. Yet she situates this in relation to an opposite, the vertical *tableau*, which is a 'plane of illusion'. Crucially, it is the interaction between both modes that activates the viewing experience. As will be suggested through examples which span his career, Nicholson also persistently used the internal pictorial structures of table and *tableau* to create perspectival ambiguity and tension between surfaces which read variously as planes of 'actuality' and of 'illusion'. His works might therefore be read as 'Cubist' precisely through their hold to the non-literal, illusory function of the *tableau*.

Although contradictory in approach, the work of Michael Fried offers a further critical backdrop for Poggi's reading and for Nicholson's work as a post-Cubist modernist practice. In a text

Picasso's early Cubist works of 1909 and emphasis on the continuity of this intent in the movement's following stages. See Golding, 1968.

³⁴ Poggi, 1988: 311.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 312. My italics.

³⁶ Poggi, 1988: 312. My italics.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 311.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 312–313.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 313.

exploring distinctions between the work of American postwar Modernist and Minimalist painters in the 1960s, Fried proposes the dual identity of painting as an optical field and literal support as a conflict necessary for artists to overcome. In ‘Shape and Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons’ (1966), Fried describes Stella’s work as offering a resolution to this conflict by making the painting’s literal limits continuous with its internal organisation, ‘suffusing’ literalness throughout the painting.⁴⁰ In ‘Art and Objecthood’ (1967), Fried further inspects the relationship between pictorial conventions and objecthood, and concludes that Modernist paintings ‘demanded’ to be read primarily as syntactical and ‘pictorial’ (not necessarily illusory but decidedly *non-literal*) shapes. Thus they had ‘suspended’ their own objecthood.⁴¹ For Fried, therefore, the problem of literal objecthood and pictorial representation can be resolved by active strategies of disabling but require foremost an acknowledgement of the painting’s functions and limits. Fried uses this analysis to oppose the approach of Modernist painters with the Minimalists (referred to as ‘literalists’) who he describes as consciously dependent upon the medium’s literal characteristics. The effect of the ‘literalists’ approach is, he describes, a negation of painting’s representational and purely visual means by creating ‘a new genre of theatre’ centred on the beholder’s phenomenological and durational experience of the work.⁴² His segregation of visual and physical aspects of painting through Modernist and Minimalist styles therefore presents works in terms of a primary identity *either* as painting or object. While Poggi presents a more nuanced view of Cubist approaches to surface and space to be followed in the first instance, Fried’s categorisations suggest how Nicholson’s post-Cubist work connects to critical debates about visual representation and physical objecthood which developed in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

ii. EARLY ENCOUNTERS: ABSTRACTION AND PAPIER-COLLÉ

Nicholson’s early experiences of Cubism highlight the initial divergence between his perceptions and later accounts of the movement’s progression to literalness. Nicholson’s first encounter with a work by Picasso has been much recounted in literature since its inclusion in Summerson’s 1948 monograph.⁴³ Referring to a short visit to Paris at the end of November 1921, Nicholson recalled,

I remember suddenly coming on a cubist Picasso at the end of a small upstairs room at Paul Rosenberg’s gallery (Paris). It must have been a 1915 painting – it was what then seemed to me completely abstract. And in the centre there was an

⁴⁰ M. Fried, ‘Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons’, originally subtitled ‘Frank Stella’s New Paintings’, *Artforum* 5, November 1966: 18–27. Reprinted in Fried, 1998: 77–99,

⁴¹ M. Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, *Artforum* 5, June 1967: 12–23, reprinted in Fried, 1998: 148–172.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 153.

⁴³ Summerson, 1948: 7.

absolutely miraculous green – very deep, very potent and absolutely real. In fact, none of the actual events in one’s life have been more real than that and it still remains a standard by which I judge any reality in my own work [...] ⁴⁴

In a letter written to her brother during the same trip, Winifred explained that they had seen two abstract paintings by Picasso, one of which was a large one containing a mandolin, at a Parisian dealer’s shop.⁴⁵

While Winifred had separately recalled the subject matter of some of the works seen, Ben described his experience of a work by recalling only the particular potency of a colour in a work that, he later remembered, had ‘seemed’ at the time ‘completely abstract’. He described this colour as more ‘real’ than the ‘actual events in one’s life’ and remembered its vitality and character independently of descriptive or illustrative function. This colour’s strong effect is less surprising given Nicholson’s previous experience of Cubist art which consisted primarily of black and white reproductions in books and magazines, discussed in more length later in this chapter. Nicholson’s interest in the ‘reality’ of colour was also in keeping with his attentiveness, especially from 1924, to the philosophical models of Christian Science in which ‘reality’ was used to describe spiritual truths rather than tangible entities.⁴⁶ During this time Nicholson filled notebooks with quotations taken from the religion’s founding text, Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875). These quotations reveal a consistent focus on Eddy’s upholding of the value of the ‘divine Mind’ over ‘mindless matter’. One excerpt copied out by Nicholson reads: ‘The divine Mind, not matter, creates all identities, & they are forms of Mind. The ideas of spirit apparent only as Mind, never as mindless matter nor the so-called material senses.’⁴⁷ Nicholson’s handwritten notes demonstrate the role of Christian Science in promoting the devaluation of physical and material values at the time when he was first engaging with Cubist work.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Nicholson to Summerson, 3 January [1944], TGA 20048.1.38.1, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 95.

⁴⁵ After expressing her disappointment at the Salon d’Automne, she wrote, ‘The Picassos were 2 abstractions. One a large one of a mandolin (you can’t have an abstraction without a mandolin) on a table, the other a little gem, green of young dog Mercury black and pure white. Vital as quicksilver.’ W. Nicholson to Wilfred Roberts, 2 December 1921, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 17. Lewison notes that this was ‘probably the same painting by Picasso’ that Nicholson remembered for its vivid green. Subsequent correspondence with Summerson does not reveal the specific work seen by Nicholson at Rosenberg’s gallery, which appears prominently only in correspondence from the 1940s. It seems that Summerson requested more information. In a letter written to him in 1944, Nicholson included a newspaper cutting photograph of Picasso in his studio, taken in 1915, and noted, ‘The enclosed of Picasso shows behind him the kind of ptg of his that originally made such a deep impression on me only it was a much smaller ptg.’ Nicholson to Summerson, n.d. [1944], TGA 20048.1.50.1.

⁴⁶ Winifred had been introduced to Christian Science around 1924. Kent, 2015: 474.

⁴⁷ Notebooks belonging to Nicholson, TGA 8717.3.2.3.

⁴⁸ See Kent, 2015.

From 1924 Nicholson experimented with methods which were undoubtedly affected by his experiences of Cubist works in both original and reproduced form. Writing later in 1956, Nicholson recalled that the composition of *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)* (Fig. 37) had been generated ‘from stuck on papers’.⁴⁹ Aware by the mid-1920s of the Cubists’ incorporation of new materials and material effects in their work (*trompe l’oeil*, *papier-collé* and collage), it is most likely that Nicholson was inspired by the Cubist masters to explore the potential of *papier-collé*. Unlike many of the works he saw, however, this method was for Nicholson an experimental technique used to stimulate ideas and generate compositions. While the process remained recognisable in different ways, Nicholson’s ‘stuck on papers’ did not at this stage become a physical part of Nicholson’s complete work of art.

In the place of paper fixed to the surface, Nicholson recreated the look of pasted sheets using pencil and paint. His exact technique remains unknown but it is possible that he applied his pasted sheets to his painting’s support and removed them only after he had remembered, sketched or traced their arrangement. While his description of ‘stuck on papers’ suggests the material convergence of paper and support at least in part, it is also possible that he attached papers to another surface which he kept nearby as a model. Given Nicholson’s propensity to develop paintings by flexibly responding to how forms and colours looked when in paint, it is most likely that, having an initial compositional outline and colours in mind, he allowed the work to develop with some independence from its stimulus. Particularly attentive to colour values, it is especially likely that he responded to changes required to retain the visual character of coloured sheets as they were translated into paint. Elements are strongly differentiated by colour, size, edges, placement and compositional role. A small straight-edged red rectangle protrudes as a decisive mark, while a larger light blue rectangle with irregular ‘torn’ edges supports other smaller elements. Recreating such colour relationships without their original material, Nicholson provided a concentrated study of colours as vital agents which could be ‘absolutely real’ and ‘potent’ enough to recreate a pictorial structure generated through more three-dimensional means. In this case, Picasso’s specific treatment of colour was undoubtedly an important influence. As Poggi writes, when Picasso returned to using bright colour around the spring of 1912, ‘it functioned almost as a collage element in its challenge to the stylistic and material unity of the work’ and therefore treated colour ‘as a borrowed or appropriated element’.⁵⁰

Nicholson’s use of paint and pencil further suggests a playful approach to how literalness could be translated and negotiated in representational terms. In sections of *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)* where segments overlap, colours combine to suggest they have been built

⁴⁹ B. Nicholson to W. Nicholson, 27 January 1956, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 24.

⁵⁰ Poggi, 1992: 13.

from the base up, repeating the overlaying process of *papier-collé*. Yet the suggested transparency of the upper layer also reveals the thinness of paint. In other areas where rectangles merge, darker tones surround the edges of lighter-toned segments on top to suggest a more evenly applied surface. Nicholson also used his combined materials of paint and pencil to reinforce the identity of *first abstract painting* as an image which, like *trompe l'oeil*, suggests another material while declaring its illusory role. Although they would have been easy to remove, Nicholson chose to keep pencil lines visible under some thin layers of paint and at points he kept the edges of paint slightly apart from these markings. Resulting discrepancies function as subtle but intentional reminders of Nicholson's drawn compositional process (which was probably acted on a horizontal table surface) and of his deviation from this model in his creation of a *tableau* scene. They may also reveal Nicholson's awareness of similarly playful clues left over by Picasso in his *papier-collés*, for example in the literal, self-declaring pin left within *Musical Score and Guitar* (1912) (Fig. 38) or in the evidently illusory nails Braque painted into *Violin and Pitcher* (1909-10).

A contemporary reviewer of Nicholson's works from this time recognised his abstract works as painted versions of *papier-collé*. Reviewing a Seven and Five exhibition in December 1924, *Observer* critic P.G. Konody described a picture by Nicholson referred to only as 'November' (whereabouts now unknown) as composed 'mainly of superimposed squares of flat tints' comparable to 'a sample sheet of paripan wall paints'.⁵¹ Konody connected Nicholson's approach, however, not to Cubist *papier-collé* but to a mode of formal experimentation associated with another history: these abstract patches of colours, he regretted, showed he had wasted time on 'Dadaistic futilities'.⁵² Although Nicholson seems to have known relatively little of Dadaism this early in his career, it is possible that he was aware of connections between Dadaism and his own pasted-paper method.⁵³ Konody's review might propose that Nicholson's relationship with Cubism has obscured other influences on the generation of his abstract style. It is indeed possible that Nicholson's use of 'stuck on papers' was not affected by a specifically cubist understanding of *papier-collé* but rather by an awareness of a wider use of collage techniques. Nevertheless, information about Nicholson's interests, knowledge and own work

⁵¹ P.G. Konody, 'Art and Artists. The "Seven and Five",' *Observer*, 7 December 1924, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 25.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ As shown in Chapter Two, *Circle* (1937) included a work by Duchamp. By 1940 Nicholson's awareness of Dadaism was such that he described it to Ramsden, 'I believe [Tristan] Tzara originated it along with [Max] Ernst, Arp & Schwitters?' Nicholson to Ramsden, 22 February [1940], TGA 9310.1.2.8. Much later, Nicholson denied that he had been inspired by Arp's relief techniques. He wrote to Harrison in 1966, 'The reliefs of Arp had no influence because in fact although I liked their freedom & humour & poetry their method of approach ran contrary to my ideas of working my "idea" into the material – this for me is vital. Arp's reliefs were drawn by him & then cut out by someone else & usually all at the same level. It's a reason why I prefer working in relief to working on canvas [...]' Nicholson to Harrison, 30 November 1966, TGA 839.2.19.2.

during the mid-1920s suggests Cubism was the primary resource.⁵⁴ The rest of his career shows, furthermore, that Cubism was widely influential to Nicholson's practice and that he constantly favoured accounts which recognised this connection.

During the mid-1920s Nicholson had much wider access to Cubist work than his later description of a single encounter suggests. By 1924 Nicholson owned copies of books on Braque and Picasso.⁵⁵ He also owned several copies (including the first issue) of *Cahiers d'Art*, a periodical produced from 1926 in Paris by Christian Zervos, a cataloguer of Picasso's work, and he probably had access to other issues through friends.⁵⁶ Although it appears that Nicholson was keen to emphasise the impact of a particular 1915 work, this was exaggerated in Summerson's monograph. Excluded from his quotation was an extra sentence which provides a more complete view. In his original letter to Summerson describing his encounter with the 'miraculous green' of 1915, Nicholson wrote, 'It was this ptg in among all the other exciting ptgs I saw in Paris 1921-22-23 that were such an inspiration'.⁵⁷

Nicholson's preliminary use of a *papier-collé* technique, which was inspired by the range of work he had seen, undoubtedly had a profound effect on the appearance of his earliest abstract works. Probably made by moving pieces of paper on a flat surface until a desired composition had been achieved, the design of *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)* relates in part to Leo Steinberg's concept of the 'flatbed' picture plane as it is outlined in his essay 'Other Criteria' (1972).⁵⁸ Locating his analysis in the formalist critical tradition, Steinberg introduces the term 'flatness' as insufficient for denoting the variety of 'different flatnesses' visible in painting, especially since 1950.⁵⁹ He uses the term 'flatbed' plane specifically to describe 'a pictorial surface' which has specific 'angulation with respect to the human posture' in that it offers a horizontal, bed-like surface for it rather than a vertical, standing window view. This relationship with the human posture is moreover the 'precondition' of the flatbed picture plane's 'changed

⁵⁴ Lewison records that surviving photos of other works from the time show a conscious application of Cubist methods and styles. See his chapter 'The Still-Life Theme', in Lewison, 1993: 24–30, which includes photographs of *c.1923–4 (Fren Ch Ca)* and *c.1923–4 (abstract painting)*, both presumed destroyed.

⁵⁵ Nicholson owned a copy of Waldemar George's *Picasso* (1924), which included over thirty reproductions. Nicholson inscribed the book 'BN 1924', suggesting that he bought the book that year. A letter from Nicholson to Wilfred Roberts on New Year's Day (probably 1923) mentions a book on Braque, bought in Milan. It is likely that this was Maurice Raynal's *Georges Braque*, which was published in Rome in 1921 and contained thirty-two reproductions ranging from an early Post-Impressionist landscape of 1906 to still lifes made in 1920.

⁵⁶ Nicholson's surviving collection of journals, now held at the Tate, includes twenty-four numbers of *Cahiers d'Art* (1926–39), as well as four numbers of the *Bulletin de "l'Effort Moderne"* (1924–27). 'Twenty five various art related publications, 1919–1970', *op. cit.*, TGA 8717.6.8.23–47.

⁵⁷ Nicholson to Summerson, 3 January [1944], TGA 20048.1.38.2.

⁵⁸ Steinberg's 1972 essay 'Other Criteria' is based on a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1968. Steinberg 1972; 2007. Although unlikely, it is also possible that paper leaves were fixed immediately upon a vertically-oriented surface or pinned in the manner of *papier-épingles*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 82.

content.⁶⁰ Although Steinberg likens the mode of its approach to horizontal surfaces such as the table-top, floor, chart or bed, he stresses that, although interlinked at times (but not always) with the making of the work, it is not the ‘actual physical placement of the image’ that made a difference but rather the image’s ‘psychic address [...] its special mode of imaginative confrontation.’⁶¹ The flatbed’s connection with these horizontal surfaces is, he explains, a consequence of how it tends to be treated and/or designed as a surface ‘on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed’.⁶² Crucially, because the surface is visualised and approached in such terms, it no longer serves as ‘the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.’⁶³

As primary examples of the ‘flatbed’ approach, Steinberg cites works from the 1950s and ‘60s, including those by Dubuffet and Rauschenberg.⁶⁴ While noting the precedence of Cubism’s literal surfaces, he treats Picasso’s collages as precursors of a ‘flatbed’ process which maintain also the impression of a visual field – of ‘something that was once actually seen’.⁶⁵ When viewed with Steinberg’s approach in mind, it is clear that *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)* functions in part as a record of a ‘flatbed’ process (the movement and sticking of paper parts), as well as of the movability of parts in the process of fixing of them in pencil and paint. Yet as for Picasso, it also retains the character of a visual arrangement of objects experienced in real space. In other works, components in Nicholson’s work also appear to refer to objects which are not the flat surface of the painting. Thus the work also reveals its own referential identity by refusing to be entirely literal.

Another work made at the time shows Nicholson using the coloured elements of *papier-collé* to suggest both a horizontal ‘flatbed’ surface and a vertical, visual scene. As suggested by its title, *1924 (painting – trout)* (Fig. 39) is also a still life composition. Parts of the work which resemble torn paper are more evenly spaced and uniform in size and tone, and thus appear even more as a collection of objects upon a surface. While the brown background in *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)* almost completely surrounds these parts to create a horizon-less base, the rectangles of *1924 (painting – trout)* stand on an internal surface which seems to exist in a wider three-dimensional space. The resulting identity of parts can be explored through the striped rectangle. Bridging the end of this internal surface and the space behind, it could be a vertical object, curtain or screen viewed from the front rather than horizontally overlaid. This area describes the pattern of a jug which belonged to the artist’s father, painter William

⁶⁰ Ibid.: 82.

⁶¹ Ibid.: 84.

⁶² Steinberg, 1972, 2007: 84.

⁶³ Ibid.: 84.

⁶⁴ Steinberg illustrated this point with parallel reproductions of Dubuffet’s *Olympia* (1950) and Morris Louis’ *While Series II* (1960). Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.: 82.

Nicholson, and which had been used by both father and son as a still life object.⁶⁶ It had appeared in the younger artist's work as early as 1914, in a scene that showed his interest in creating formal parallels between still life objects and geometric, two-dimensional design. *1914 (the striped jug)* (Fig. 40) shows the jug in front of a draped curtain which repeats the vessel's combination of rounded surface and geometric rhythm of stripes – a blue material with a gold band and trim which hangs in multiple folds. A decade later Nicholson used the same pattern to describe an abstract form which seems to describe both a three-dimensional object and a two-dimensional surface with its own independent reality.

iii. FRAMES OF REFERENCE: LINE AND TEXT IN THE THIRTIES

In the early 1930s Nicholson returned with renewed enthusiasm to Cubist approaches to space and form. This was stimulated by several factors, including personal circumstances (especially, meeting Hepworth in 1931) and a series of fresh encounters with the Cubist masters' most recent work. The still life theme and compositional modes stimulated by the *papier-collé* process, furthermore, it seems, continued to provide means of responding to these encounters in his own work. Especially from 1932 onwards, Nicholson used the internal structure provided by a table-top surface as a grounding for elements which are ambiguous in perspective. Like Cubist precedents of the previous decade, furthermore, he made use of the contrast between the literal 'plane of actuality' suggested by the shape of a table-top and a new range of motifs which were often placed upon these internal spaces to draw attention to them as fields of representation.

1932 (profile – Venetian red) (1932) (Fig. 41) is composed of differently-sized rectangular shapes, some of which are overlaid in a formation reminiscent of Nicholson's earlier use of *papier-collé*. While some of these visually protrude or recede, Nicholson negated the effect of surface relief in subtle ways. The painterly lower edges of two bright red table legs, for example, hold them to an identity of surface paint. Similarly, the density of the central white surface is moderated by its scraped texture, which exposes darker tones underneath. As in *first abstract painting*, graphic features connect surfaces and identify the painting as a flat representational terrain. The handle of a small striped jug overlaps onto the central white, paper-like surface which, in turn, becomes the support for the profile of a face, shaded on one side like the beginnings of a *trompe l'oeil* relief.

Nicholson's use of internal representational fields in this work is, I suggest, an enquiry into compositional methods visible in works by Picasso from the early 1920s with which Nicholson must have been familiar. Given their striking similarity, it is possible that he drew from

⁶⁶ Charles Harrison, 'Notes on Ben Nicholson's Development and Commentary on Selected Works' in *Ben Nicholson*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery), 1969: 12.

Picasso's *Studies* (1920) (Fig. 42) or similar works when designing *1932 (profile – Venetian red)*. Both are structured around internal representational fields and are centred on an image of a head in profile. In different ways, both paintings also conflate images of the figure and the still life theme by creating different internal representational fields. Picasso's work is a patchwork of studies, seemingly a sketchbook or studio wall.⁶⁷ Some designs appear marked directly onto the field or page, while others appear as in frames on a gallery, home or surface in the studio. This form of 'pastiche' imitates the stylistic changes in Picasso's own work, which range from classicised bulky figures to more abstract still lifes. Through this conflation of images, Krauss notes, Picasso declared his own 'fraudulence' as a 'counterfeiter' of signs.⁶⁸ The separate images are also drawn together to form a composite image. A dominant profile occupies the centre of the canvas and two separate images of hands read as if belonging to the same subject.

Nicholson created a similar domestic or studio arrangement grounded on the structure of a table top tilted towards the picture plane. Upon this internal surface lie a flat rectangular field (a drawing of a figure's profile) and other objects seen from the front or side. As in Picasso's work, these items relate to Nicholson's own career, including his own drawings of Hepworth and still life objects. Jugs and mugs, in particular, were significant items which recurred throughout Nicholson's oeuvre and were clearly present in his own domestic and studio environments. Like Picasso's central uncanny combination of a profile and hands, Nicholson's profile, jug and mug are also held in a strong spatial and sequential relationship. Each in profile and roughly proportional to the forms they describe, the linear handles are angled towards the face and mirror, and they offer a repetition of its curves thereby suggesting a continuous design or even perhaps a narrative by association.

While the stylistic diversity and surface compartmentalisation of Picasso's collection of motifs create a continuous wall or page and could be read either as a 'flatbed' surface or *tableau* scene, Nicholson's configuration of objects and images, although arranged on an internal 'flatbed' surface, appear as a distinct *tableau* scene held in space. As in *1924 (painting – trout)*, Nicholson departed further from the outward-building relief aspect made possible by the 'flatbed' mode of address initially encouraged by his use of *papier-collé*. These arrangements continued to derive from and to reflect back upon the form and function of the painting's whole 'shape' and 'substance'. In *1932 (profile – Venetian red)*, for instance, the profile image is centred and repeats the painting's shape, thus creating a metaphor for the wider work. The

⁶⁷ See Cowling and Mundy (eds), 1990, cat. 137: 212.

⁶⁸ I have drawn from Krauss's description of Picasso's form of 'pastiche', especially noticeable in works made around 1920. Krauss describes Picasso's exhibition at Léonce Rosenberg's gallery in 1919 as an announcement of his 'return via the imitation' to a range of 'classical' artists which he 'conducted under the banner of pastiche'. This, she notes, describes how Picasso marked his own 'fraudulence' in these works. She writes, 'Here is Picasso as counterfeiter, his act a blatant betrayal of the modernist project.' Krauss, 1998: 12.

work's support, furthermore, is a combination of canvas on board, with an extra section of board at its base, and this arrangement is mirrored in the central white surface which has an additional band at its base. A number of Nicholson's other works from 1932 include drawings of himself and Hepworth in profile, and these are often contained within rectangular and circular grounds made to resemble particular objects or representative fields. In *1932 (prince and princess)*, Hepworth's profile appears in the field of a playing card, while Nicholson's profile floats over a corner of the larger table-top. Similarly, in *1932 (Crowned Head – the Queen)*, Hepworth's profile appears on a white surface which, with a crown placed above, resembles the pasted-paper element of a stamp.

The reflexive relationship between Nicholson's central motif and the entire shape of *profile – Venetian red* particularly highlights the importance of the table's edge, which Nicholson consistently featured as an axis between the horizontal surface (tilted to become 'flatbed-like' in its mode of address) and the frontal view of its legs and surrounding space (as a visual scene responsive to the human's vertical posture and lines of sight). Nicholson's reference to the table edge in several of his works signals his awareness of its wider importance to the still life genre, to which he felt personally attached. The table edge had played a particularly prominent role, for instance, in works by artists whom Nicholson greatly admired, including, among others, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Paul Cézanne, his father William, first wife Winifred and 7&5 contemporaries such as Christopher Wood.⁶⁹ The drawn motif in *profile – Venetian red*, however, marks it as an overlaid rectangle (potentially even a relief surface applied to the support) and as an integrated part of the painting's representational design. As such, it prefigures an important direction for Nicholson. Depending less on overlapping surfaces which could repeat the characteristics of the support and build outwards from it, Nicholson turned to the linearity of drawing to evoke a different kind of 'literalness', in which the painting field was explicitly referenced as a space capable of multiple modes of address.

By the 1930s Nicholson was guided not only by Cubist paintings but also by spatial settings which resonated with his playful approach to representation. Encounters with the Cubist masters' studios, both first-hand and through photographs, provided Nicholson with particularly potent visual impressions of these artists' spatial environments and of their most recent work. An avid gatherer of images, Nicholson at times removed specific reproductions from his magazines to attach them to his own studio wall or to form a collection of images in a scrapbook.⁷⁰ Because of the physical nature of Nicholson's selection and use, his choices remain

⁶⁹ The Seven and Five Society had been formed in 1919 and held their first exhibition in 1920 and expressed that it did not aim to promote a new 'ism'. Nicholson joined the group in 1924 and exhibited with them at the Paterson Gallery that December. Nicholson invited Wood to join the Society in 1926. Nicholson became Chairman of the Society later that year, holding the position for one year.

⁷⁰ Although it is unclear when they were made, Nicholson made some scrapbooks from images he collected, including those cut out from magazines.

traceable through the cut-out holes left in his surviving collection.⁷¹ In 1932 *Cahiers d'Art* included an article by its editor Christian Zervos titled 'Georges Braque et le développement du cubisme'.⁷² Nicholson not only owned this issue but removed at least six parts from the pages surrounding Zervos's article, including specific images and whole leaves of large or multiple illustrations. At least three whole pages of images and an individual picture were removed, which was an unusually high amount reflective of Nicholson's interest.

Each of the leaves removed by Nicholson include images of Braque's paintings from the beginning of the 1930s in which he used more expansive, fluid lines and organic forms to describe figurative subjects. One page includes three linear drawings. The largest is a study for *La Baigneuse* (1931), a reclining female nude sparsely rendered by a single line rolling over her breasts, stomach and knees. On the other side of this page is a photograph of a corner of Braque's studio taken in January 1931 (by the previous *Documents* photographer, Eli Lotar), which shows a group of his contemporary figurative and still life paintings set vertically beyond the artist's table of materials, including his brushes and paint.⁷³ The largest artwork on display within this photographed scene is another version of the study on the previous page, *La Baigneuse*. In this, the figure's reclining features form a more explicit visual parallel to the internal table-top surface, an analogy strengthened by surrounding pictures showing bowls of round fruit which mimic the figure's forms. The following two removed pages confirm the analogy between the figure and table-top still life: one page shows two table-top still life paintings by Braque; the other presents a photo of *La Baigneuse* in the studio alongside another version (Fig. 43) in which a still life appears on a table or tray which is delivered to the figure and merges with its forms. Nicholson's interest in the combination of these images suggests that he was responsive to Braque's interconnected use of the reclining figure and table-top both as internal horizontal surfaces which, when brought into proximity with the picture plane, could not only provide compositional structure and rhythm but also suggest a painting's identity as a material object and field for the creation of an internal visual scene.

Given the apparent depth of Nicholson's interest and the concurrent direction of his work, these images surely helped him to realise the drawn line's potential not only to conflate the syntactical signs of figure and still life but also to use the continuous plane offered by a linear drawing to unify these different modes. While Nicholson had always maintained a drawing practice, from the early 1930s he increasingly used lines to structure scenes and to create open readings of the spatial relations between parts. Thus, the horizontal 'flatbed' process of drawing was similarly

⁷¹ 'Twenty five various art related publications, 1919–1970', *op. cit.*, TGA 8717.6.8.23–47.

⁷² Christian Zervos, 'Georges Braque et le développement du cubisme', text by Guillaume Apollinaire, *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. 7, nos.1-2, 1932: 13–28.

⁷³ *Documents* was edited by Georges Bataille as an alternative to the 'mainstream' Surrealism of André Breton, and was published in Paris between 1929 and 1930.

faced with its opposite, namely the construction of spatial depth. It was again the table top that held particular importance as an internal terrain upon which objects and representative fields could merge. In *1932 (painting)* (Fig. 44), a horizontal line and two vertical columns suggest a table edge and legs as a field upon which an arrangement of objects might be placed. Like Braque's *La Baigneuse* series, Nicholson's wandering lines also describe the rolling curves of a reclining figure: a torso, pair of knees and a spiralling contour of a breast, eye or curl of hair. The prominent texture of the scraped gesso ground and incised lines further emphasise the painting's rectangular support as a fleshy, figurative ground to be delineated and inscribed. Nicholson created therefore an ambiguous arrangement of seemingly discreet but connected signs suggestive of both a table-top still life and a reclining figure, and both are presented as sprawling, reclining body-surfaces tilted to the picture plane.

As his treatment of *Cahiers d'Art* shows, Nicholson was particularly interested in Braque's recent work. By 1931 Braque had similarly incised lines into a built-up textural ground and this especially characterised his project to illustrate Hesiod's classical text *Theogony*, a commission from Ambroise Vollard. More importantly, Nicholson was interested in a parallel series of works made for Paul Rosenberg's apartment for which Braque, using a process reminiscent of Greek and Etruscan engravings, had incised into black-painted plaster to reveal white lines underneath.⁷⁴ Although the illustrations to *Theogony* were not published until 1955 due to Vollard's death in 1939, Nicholson saw the plasters during a visit to Braque's Paris studio in 1933. He reported their impact to Hepworth following the encounter: 'I have just seen some lovely Braques [...] he is illustrating some Greek thing & he had done some decorations on plaster, black with a scratched white curly endless design – very beautiful.'⁷⁵ Methodologically, Nicholson's first-hand experience of Braque's plasters must have resonated with his earlier use of materials, processes and compositions based on elements which overlapped to build outwards from the support. His letter to Hepworth continues by describing how he was immediately inspired to work sand into his paintings.⁷⁶ Sophie Bowness records that a photograph taken in 1933 shows a photograph of one of Braque's plasters designs of the sea nymph *Sao* (Fig. 45) on the wall of Nicholson's studio.⁷⁷ Bowness suggests 1933 as a 'more probable' date for

⁷⁴ Nicholson's *1932 (painting)* is similarly relates to this history by his use of clay-like terracotta tones.

⁷⁵ Nicholson to Hepworth, 'Fri night' [6 January 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.33, quoted in Bowness, S., 1992: 47.

⁷⁶ Nicholson's letter continues, 'the new medium is magnificent [...] I got Cissie [the children's nurse] to go down to the river & bring me in some sand & popped it in - & while I was scraping parts of the ptg the sand had set so hard it makes sparks like a toy gun & eventually breaks the blade.' Nicholson to Hepworth, 'Fri night' [6 January 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.33

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 47–48. Bowness identifies other reproductions of Braque's works visible in these studio photographs from 1933. These include Braque's *La Barque* (1929), *Falaise et Bateaux* (1930) and *La Nappe Rouge* (1931). Bowness's description of Braque's connection through these works of the landscape of Dieppe and the female form could also explain why Nicholson's *1932 (painting)* has been seen by some as a scene combining the female form and a mountainous landscape. See, for instance, Lewison, 1993: 211 (cat. 26).

painting.⁷⁸ Given the facts of Nicholson's encounter in January 1933, I agree that it must have been completed after this time. The appearance of a *Theogony* work and two others from Braque's slightly earlier 'La Baigneuse' series in Read's *Art Now* (1933) also reveal the impact and presence of Braque's contemporary work among Nicholson's network in London that year.⁷⁹

Nicholson's removal of a page from *Cahiers d'Art* showing a photograph of Braque's studio suggests his understanding of the role of the studio as a space which, as Picasso's *Studies* (1920) shows, Cubist masters had found especially potent as a field in which objects and internal representations could merge. Following *1932 (painting)* and *1932 (profile – Venetian red)*, Nicholson continued to use line as an analogical or metaphorical device capable of uniting different aspects of such scenes. *1933 (coin and musical instruments)* (Fig. 46) particularly combines *profile*'s structure of overlapping object and representational fields and the more fluid, linear drawing style of *painting*. As in *profile*, Nicholson presented a frontal view of table legs and an aerial view of its top, upon which he positioned a coin, guitar and reclining figure. The coin, which would normally rest flat on the surface, is shown 'in profile', parallel to the picture plane, which suggests the table is shown from above. Similarly, the guitar is described as if seen from above or tilted towards the viewer by the figure underneath. A near-continuous line flows through each element to reach the edges of the support. Again this suggests that signs can potentially be read together; the coin's profile becomes the figure's head.⁸⁰

As in each other work discussed, Nicholson suggested analogous relations between the whole work and its parts. Through his expanded range of motifs and focus on Braque's recent work, he developed new strategies for creating internal 'frames of reference' capable of drawing out painting's multiple means of address. Nicholson did not exhibit a facility comparable to Picasso for inventing signs that could, as Green has described, 'shift meaning with minimal changes – from figure to object, for instance.'⁸¹ Yet his linear combinations of pictorial elements, generated through encounters with Braque, did lead him to develop 'a new kind of pictorial

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 51, fn. 24. Hepworth also made small profile-like incisions upon semi-figurative carvings around 1932–33. See *Sculpture with Profiles* (1932) and *Two Forms* (1933).

⁷⁹ Illustrations in this publication are captioned 'Greek Subject' (1933), 'Composition' (1931) and 'Beach Scene' (1931). 'Composition' (1931) especially resembles Nicholson's *1932 (painting)* in its linear description of a reclining woman, with breasts, stomach and knees suggestive of hills in a landscape. Read, 1933.

⁸⁰ Nicholson's use of a coin in this work is comparable to *1932 (head and mug in a Greek landscape)* (University of Hull Art Collection). In this work an engraved profile of Hepworth lies within a circular field which could also be a plate lying on the table. Nicholson's terracotta tones and inclusion of a temple with fluted columns, inscribed into the black ground, also, like the example of Braque, reference the artistic traditions of Ancient Greece, including classical architecture and black-figure vase painting, in which details had to be scratched into painted surfaces.

⁸¹ C. Green, 'Ben Nicholson and Picasso' and subsequent catalogue entries, in Beechey and Stephens (eds), 2012: 96. Arguably, the signs which fluctuate most successfully in Nicholson's 1930s works are the nude female figure and the table-top still life. Alongside *1932 (painting)*, see *1933 (composition in black and white)* and *May 1933 (painted box)*. Lewison, 1993: 215 (cats. 41 and 45).

space' in which written signs created complex and ambiguous spatial structures.⁸² It is perhaps more truthful, therefore, to describe the function of Nicholson's written signs as intent upon a more spatial-syntactical effect. Driven by closer proximity to Braque in 1932 and 1933, Nicholson continued to explore how written signs could create a tension between real and represented space.

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Despite earlier attempts, Braque and Nicholson probably did not meet until January 1933.⁸³ From the autumn of 1932 Nicholson regularly visited Winifred and their children in Paris and would often travel via Dieppe, close to Braque's studio at Varengeville. In August 1932 Nicholson spent four nights in the town and, although he did not visit Braque, he experienced the town as a site replete with Cubist associations and was inspired to paint.⁸⁴ He reported back to Winifred, 'I have painted 3 days without stopping & got onto something at the end of it – something a lot further on than yet for me.'⁸⁵ Works made on his return reveal an enthusiastic engagement with both past and current Cubist methods to depict his experiences of the place. Stimulated by a particular scene, he continued by describing to Winifred a new painting idea: 'It feels as if seen through a shop window with the lettering in red on the glass with lights reflected.'⁸⁶

Although probably painted on his return, the scene Nicholson described inspired *1932 (Au Chat Botté)* (Fig. 47). In his 1941 'Notes on Abstract Art', published in *Horizon*, Nicholson recalled a view of a shop window on Dieppe's Grand Rue in which planes, surfaces and objects merged.⁸⁷ In the catalogue for *Picasso and Modern British Art* (2012), Green recalls the coincidental timing of this specific perceptual experience and Nicholson's interest in Cubist space, explaining that *Au Chat Botté* was stimulated not by a work of art but by the 'actual experience of cubist space/surface oscillations generated by reflection.' Describing the painting's importance, he notes that Nicholson took 'artistic control' of space and surface in *Au Chat Botté*, thus placing the work firmly within 'his dialogue with Braque and especially Picasso.'⁸⁸ It is worth specifying that the Cubist dialogue evident in *Au Chat Botté* was at this moment most particularly with Picasso's early 1920s scenes and the dialogues surrounding them in the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ According to Sophie Bowness, Ede suggested the two artists meet in 1930. It is also possible that Braque saw images of Nicholson's work before they met. Bowness, S., 1992: 44–52.

⁸⁴ Nicholson probably visited Dieppe between 5 and 8 or 9 August 1932. Bowness has noted that Nicholson had spent some family holidays in Dieppe but had not returned to France in over two years. Ibid.

⁸⁵ B. Nicholson to W. Nicholson, 'Saturday' [1932], quoted in Lewison, 1993: 210.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', *Horizon*, vol. 4, no. 22, October 1941.

⁸⁸ *Picasso & Modern British Art*, 2012: 97.

journals to which he had access. In 1924 Maurice Raynal described Picasso's *Three Musicians* (1921) in particularly potent terms. In the first issue of Rosenberg's *Bulletin de "L'Effort Moderne"*, which Nicholson owned, Raynal wrote of Picasso's work as 'rather like magnificent shop windows of cubist inventions and discoveries'.⁸⁹ It is probable that Nicholson particularly recognised the poetic cultural context of Cubist work in which artists and poets worked in close quarters and, furthermore, that he saw that text and words in Cubist work could expand its poetic associations. Nicholson's cut-outs from *Cahiers d'Art* again reveal his access and preferences. In his copy of a number of the journal published in 1931, Nicholson removed an image of a 1915 *papier-collé* by Henri Laurens which included a text inscription in type similar to that used by Nicholson in 'Au Chat Botté' and incorporated in a comparable way.⁹⁰ Laurens' work, which contains the words 'POEMES EN PROSE' on a book-like shape, is likely to have been made in conjunction with his illustrations for Pierre Reverdy's first book of poetry published in 1915.⁹¹

As in previous works, still life elements in *Au Chat Botté* are grounded on a table-top surface, which is viewed from a raised frontal position.⁹² A border of space surrounds the table top at each edge and a drawn curtain on one side suggests it exists inside a room. This sense of spatial depth is, however, countered by a strong alternative reading proposed by the dominantly-placed central lettering. Poggi's analysis of Braque's stencilled lettering and tassels in *Le Portugais* (1911) provides a helpful parallel; they are 'iconic signs' which provide 'a contrast' to the 'abstract fragmented style of analytic Cubism' through their literalness.⁹³ Most obviously, Nicholson's red letters declare the flat surface on which they are written and through which other elements are seen. The literal spelling out of the shop's name 'Au Chat Botté' thereby induces a perceptual system through which aspects of the image are transformed into two-dimensional descriptions of themselves. Signs are then revealed to be potentially 'other' to what they had initially seemed: as impressions, reflections or distortions upon a window surface.

Nicholson's experience of amalgamated planes in the town of Dieppe built on his longer interest in spatial relations in still life and studio, in which he frequently created pictorial tension between surface and space. As others have noted, *Au Chat Botté* continued tracts visible in *1930 (Christmas night)* (Fig. 48). In this slightly earlier work, Nicholson combined three spatial

⁸⁹ Maurice Raynal, 'Quelques intentions du cubisme', *Bulletin de L'Effort Moderne*, no. 1, January 1924. 'Twenty-five various related publications', Ben Nicholson Papers, *op. cit.*, TGA 8717.6.9.24. Nicholson also owned a separate pamphlet containing Raynal's full essay, which appeared in three subsequent numbers. TGA 8717.6.8.42.

⁹⁰ *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1931. 'Twenty-five various related publications', *op. cit.*, TGA 8717.6.9.25.

⁹¹ Pierre Reverdy's *Poèmes en Prose* ('Prose Poems') was illustrated by Laurens and Juan Gris, and published in 1915.

⁹² Sophie Bowness notes that, although 'Au Chat Botté' was a shoe shop, Nicholson inhabited his scene with familiar objects from his earlier still lifes. Bowness, S., 1992: 45.

⁹³ Poggi, 1992: 34.

zones (a room, a window view and an area reflected in a mirror). While each spatial field in the earlier work is distinctly framed, the spatial planes of *Au Chat Botté* merge into a single window surface.⁹⁴ Nicholson also combined textual and graphic elements in the earlier work. The deepest section of *Christmas night*, a moonlit exterior scene, contains the incised white outlines of a church and deer. Thicker lines within the mirror reflection describe a banister and picture of flowers hanging on the opposite wall. A few personal items on the dressing table closest to the viewer's space are shown only as linear outlines: a striped bowl, two brown-haired brushes, a similar white brush or pot and a comb. Their linear, 'drawn' nature is emphasised by the inclusion of Nicholson's initials 'BN' on each brush, which marks them as his belongings and creates a system which uses text as a semantic sign of meaning and expression.

While frequently noted as a form of homage to Picasso and Braque, the dominance of textual elements and drawn designs in Nicholson's Dieppe works has been examined surprisingly little in relation to his wider *œuvre*. That Nicholson produced and controlled the perspectival oscillations of *Au Chat Botté* through text, however, suggests the increasing importance of lettering upon the picture surface to his methods of constructing space. Letters had previously been used to supplement visual signs and symbols, as shown in *Christmas night*, but by 1932 language played a more central role around which he composed a spatial scene. Moreover, Nicholson's choice of words in *Au Chat Botté* has a poetic resonance suggestive of the potential for words to contribute meaning. Discussing his memory of Dieppe in his 1941 'Notes on Abstract Art', Nicholson described words as abstract formations which could trigger associated meanings, thoughts, memories and translations, which could add to the spatial oscillation of objects, surfaces and reflections. He recalled,

The name of the shop was "Au Chat Botté", and this set going a train of thought connected with the fairy tales of my childhood and, being in French, and my French being a little mysterious, the words themselves had also an abstract quality – but what was important was that this name was printed in very lovely red lettering on the glass window – giving one plane – and in this window were reflections of what was behind me as I looked in – giving a second plane – while through the window objects on a table were performing a kind of ballet and forming the "eye" or life-point of the painting – giving a third plane. These three planes and all their subsidiary planes were interchangeable so that you could not tell which was real and which unreal, what was reflected and what unreflected, and

⁹⁴ Lewison, 1993: 210.

this created, as I see now, some kind of space or an imaginative world in which one could live.⁹⁵

In this statement Nicholson suggests how a scene combining text and image could reflect the overlap between physical environs, spatial components, memories and associations, thereby not only recreating an experience but also creating an imaginative world-space. In *Au Chat Botté* this effect is enhanced by the integration of text and image in a way which uses the associative value of words to extend the narrative or associations of objects on show. The red lettering again points to the relationship between the painting's form and meaning. Flat to the surface, it appears as both a formal abstract design and as a signifying phrase to be read and interpreted. It extends the ambiguity and associative potential of the scene, and the words are especially potent given the cultural associations of the shop's name and the painting's title (which translates to 'Puss in Boots'). The text's inscription in French and lack of explicit connection to the scene, furthermore, enhance its sense of evocative uncertainty. Nicholson later discussed his titling practises and described how he liked using words in 'sub-titles (in brackets & small type)' as evocative 'luggage tags' rather than definite formal descriptions.⁹⁶

Over the course of the six months following his return to London, Nicholson continued to draw from experiences and materials accumulated during his trip to Dieppe. Of particular note is his decision to incorporate printed text taken from newspapers collected in the town, thereby reintroducing both material and linguistic excerpts from his journey. Fresh contact with Braque in the early part of 1933 probably inspired him to revisit these traces in new work.⁹⁷ *Jan 27 1933* (Fig. 49) is one of a few painted collages in which Nicholson pasted sections of newspaper taken from Dieppe the previous summer.⁹⁸ Like the varied support and surface of *profile – Venetian red*, made the previous year, collaged paper creates a composition of materials which have their own surfaces available for textual or pictorial representation. Newspapers are flat scripts which are held, viewed and placed in a variety of close proximity with the human form, and the processes by which they are printed and read make them exponents of the horizontal 'flatbed' plane Steinberg outlines.⁹⁹ In *Jan 27 (1933)* Nicholson's particular selection and treatment of segments which have been cut, positioned and painted over create a tension between the literal 'actuality' of these components and the pictorial identity of the whole work.

⁹⁵ Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', *Horizon* (London) vol. 4, no. 22, October 1941, quoted in Bowness, S., 1992: 44–5.

⁹⁶ Nicholson to Harrison, 7 June 1968, TGA 839.2.19.34.

⁹⁷ Bowness writes that Nicholson and Braque seem to have corresponded from around December 1932, before meeting for the first time the following month. Nicholson probably visited Braque in Varengeville twice, in April and September 1933, and the two artists met during Braque's visits to London in October 1933 and July 1934. Bowness, S., 1992: 50, fn.9.

⁹⁸ Bowness has identified the newspapers included by Nicholson in this work as Dieppe's *Le Quotidien* (6 August 1932) and *Le Journal* (5 and 8 August 1932).

⁹⁹ Steinberg began his discussion of the 'flatbed picture plane' by referencing its origin in the horizontal printing press. Steinberg, 1972.

Specifically, Nicholson integrated the printed lines of text with his own painted, drawn and incised marks, which negates their material independence as well as their potential to stand free from the surface in relief.

Nicholson's transformations of sections of print into still life objects in his pictures show how elements were consistently flattened to become shapes and signs. A circular section of print, cut and re-shaped, for instance, is used to create a plate with two fish. A piece of newsprint interacts with the edge of a white doily so that together they seem to create the shape of a mug. Although given a predominantly formal role, the parts of text selected by Nicholson also playfully extend the scene and the sense of pictorial tension. As Bowness notes, a section with the word 'RABAIS' ('reduction') forms one of the fishes on his plate and is itself partially covered by a shaded line.¹⁰⁰ 'Quotidien', the newspaper's title, is also partially visible on the mug. Given their relevance to Nicholson's art, it is clear that he sought to use textual fragments as poetic devices suggestive of time and place. Perhaps sensing the temporal connection generated by his use of materials and words picked up in another time and place, Nicholson titled the work according to the specific day when it was made.

iv. NEOPLASTIC TABLES

Changes to Nicholson's range of contacts from around 1933 instigated fresh interest in how abstract means of colour, line and geometric shape could be used to build upon his ways of generating pictorial tension. As *Circle* testifies, the plastic aims and purist ideologies he saw in examples of Constructivist, Neoplastic and Suprematist art from across Russia and Europe made him aware of the value of abstraction as an international and spiritual language. While his parallel pursuit of still life and landscape themes during these years has been noted, the connections between his primarily geometric abstract compositions and earlier compositional strategies should be more fully explored.

During the mid-1930s Nicholson continued to make landscapes and still life scenes which he exhibited and sold. There is a particular discrepancy between Nicholson's individual creative output and his ambition to be part of outward-facing groups to which he normally contributed only abstract works. This difference is demonstrated by the catalogue of Nicholson's *Exhibition of Still Life Paintings* at the Lefevre Gallery in March 1937. This exhibition was mounted in the same year as the publication of *Circle* and Gabo was asked to provide the catalogue introduction. Although almost half of the works listed had been made or completed just the previous year, Gabo emphasised a temporal shift between Nicholson's work in still life and his

¹⁰⁰ Bowness, S. 1992: 51, note 17. Bowness notes that the word advertised a clothes sale in the 5 August issue of *Le Quotidien*.

current abstract work. His introduction began simply, ‘Ben Nicholson is showing his earlier work.’¹⁰¹ Norbert Lynton recognises in a later monograph that, although Nicholson insisted in 1935 that the 7&5 Society should exhibit only abstract work, the artist himself continued to paint figuratively and at times reworked earlier still life scenes.¹⁰² Lynton’s subsequent analysis, however, creates a critical divide between works from this period which ‘still referred to the visible world’ and those which were immediately ‘taken for abstract and certainly made no references of that kind.’¹⁰³ Of the latter kind, he notes the inspirational role of Mondrian’s paintings which were unframed and had backing boards so that they would stand proud of the wall. ‘There was no mistaking them for windows opening on to another world,’ Lynton writes, ‘they are constructions in paint on canvas, in effect canvases turned into reliefs.’¹⁰⁴

Although recognising the importance of objecthood to both artists, Lynton makes no reference to Nicholson’s longer engagement with procedures by which his works might evoke a literal ‘plane of actuality’, such as through *papier-collé* or the table-top motif. Yet Nicholson’s geometric reliefs and abstract compositions are as intimately tied to the Cubist heritage of still life as his more figurative scenes. Furthermore, Nicholson’s prior experience of Cubism, especially of the *papier-collé* and Cubist still lifes, played a key mediating role in how he received and responded also to Mondrian’s work. As shown through his responses to Barr’s diagram, Nicholson identified with Neoplasticism as a style which had evolved from Cubist approaches to visual representation. From the end of 1933, in particular, he used examples of Neoplasticism, Cubism and the still life genre to create works which create perspectival oscillation between the ‘plane of actuality’ of the painting’s surface and its evocation of a deeper *tableau* scene.

Inspired by naïve styles of representation, Nicholson consistently pushed boundaries between representational, geometric and ideographic forms in his work of the later 1920s. By the turn of the next decade he was especially sensitive to how abstract iconographies could reveal formal, colouristic and spatial relations within representational arrangements. He plotted still life forms upon table-top spaces in ways which especially show the inherent symmetry and formal purity of domestic arrangements. In *1930 (still life with jug and mugs)* (Fig. 50), for example, object shapes stand in grid-like partitions of a square table surface. As in his earlier *1914 (the striped jug)*, the decorative rim of a plate highlights the proximity between real, useful objects and the geometric rhythms and forms created by the painter’s marks. Nicholson was not alone in this interest and was aware of the playful convergence of abstract form and domestic objects

¹⁰¹ Gabo, Introduction to *Ben Nicholson: Catalogue Exhibition of Still Life Paintings*, exh. cat. (London, Alex Reid & Lefevre, March 1937).

¹⁰² Lynton, 1993: 86–88. The example Lynton gives is Nicholson’s *1933–5 (still life with bottle and mugs)*.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*: 67.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*: 67.

throughout the history of still life painting and noticeable in a range of contemporary Cubist and non-Cubist works.¹⁰⁵

A different trend in Nicholson's later 1920s still lifes provides valuable background to his subsequent use of a more Neoplastic style. Still working with recognisable still life objects, Nicholson developed brought forms into closer proximity so that they overlapped and merged into collage-like units of composite rhythms. These groupings arguably created a joined-up 'writing' in which individual elements, as in his later *1933 (coin and musical instruments)*, appear as signs or words within a larger, composite outline. *1925 (still life with jugs, mugs, cup and goblet)* (Fig. 51), for example, contains five different object elements grouped to form a map of overlapping signs which float above the table-edge on another ground. Surrounded by a brown shadow of the bare wooden board, they present a rhythmic compilation of outlines and forms. The undulating outline this creates surely anticipates Nicholson's *1932 (painting)*, which, eight years later, grouped even more shorthand signs through a continuous line.

In his seminal book *English Art and Modernism, 1900-1939* (1981), Harrison introduces Nicholson's mid-1930s white reliefs as a 'single and consistent body of work' which can be seen as 'the major contribution by an English artist to the European Modern Movement in the first half of the twentieth century.'¹⁰⁶ In a 2002 essay, Stephens reinstalls the importance of contexts closer to home, including the resurgent interest in vernacular materials and craft traditions. Referring to the 'highly textured, pitted and scarred' surfaces of the white reliefs, Nicholson's conscious inflection of surface texture is described as embodying 'a set of cultural references in which an English tradition may be indexed.'¹⁰⁷ In a recent article, Lucy Kent demonstrates the strong connection between the forms of Nicholson's white reliefs and the symbolism of Christian Science and argues that they embody a 'distinct semiotic code' based on the Christian Science dichotomy of Mind (symbolised by the circle) and matter (the square).¹⁰⁸ Kent acknowledges, however, that even when stressing the immaterial 'Idea' of his reliefs, Nicholson himself recognised the basis of forms in material worldly objects.¹⁰⁹ The range of these discussions reflects the polarity with which Nicholson's reliefs and still life works were discussed and received at the time: as two distinct genres within his *œuvre*. For Nicholson's critical friends and allies, denying or ignoring the still prevalent still life theme enabled the

¹⁰⁵ Notable precedents include Cézanne, Braque and Picasso, and Nicholson's more immediate contemporary Wood, who had taken a similar approach in works such as *Still Life on a Table* (1925).

¹⁰⁶ Harrison, 1981; 1994: 264.

¹⁰⁷ Stephens, 2002: 229–230.

¹⁰⁸ Kent, 2015: 478.

¹⁰⁹ See Nicholson's letter to Peggy Brook, quoted in an unpublished draft Brook sent to Nicholson for approval in 1963: 'Abstract art is really dealing with ideas, even though it may use some physical object such as a goblet for a starting point [...]' P. Brook to Nicholson, 21 July 1963, TGA 8717.1.2.277, quoted in Kent, 2015: 479.

abstract spirituality of the white reliefs to be upheld.¹¹⁰ Discussions of the material stimuli for Nicholson's white reliefs, however, do not necessarily contest the artist's aim to create immaterial 'Ideas' with emotional and spiritual effect. Yet, it is important to recognise the difference between Nicholson's ideological aspirations and the processes by which the white reliefs were conceived or made, which are also evident in their forms. The range of arguments outlined above highlight the variety of discourses applicable to these works, and their place at the intersection of different critical views.¹¹¹

Archival sources surrounding Nicholson's earliest ventures into relief suggest that he was guided by experiments in still life and *papier-collé* methods, in which the picture surface was a horizontally conceived and used surface on which elements were arranged. It is widely accepted that Nicholson completed his first relief in Paris towards the end of 1933.¹¹² On 8 December that year Hepworth wrote to Nicholson about his 'new work idea (carving out)', which, without seeing the work, she described as a natural progression within his career.¹¹³ Replying to Hepworth on 12 December, Nicholson described that the previous day he had carved a board 'all day long' to produce what 'looks like a primitive game' upon which, at different stages of its development, he had 'rolled a marble about' with his children.¹¹⁴ During the development of *December 1933 (first completed relief)*, therefore, we know that it was experienced and handled as a horizontal board over which a three-dimensional ball had been rolled. It is clear from Nicholson's letter, furthermore, that this affected his reading of the work's forms as being similar to a 'flatbed' board game. Nicholson's following letter contains a drawing he describes as 'a thing I made'. This appears to be a long rectangular board with three carved circles which Nicholson describes as 'cut out different depths & with the circles set in at different slopes'. This object was positioned on the mantelpiece, he explained, so that it held a marble in the central hollow and coins on either side.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ An exhibition of Nicholson's carved reliefs and paintings was held at the Alex Reid & Lefevre Gallery from 27 September 1935. This exhibition included nineteen carved reliefs and twelve paintings, all of which were made between 1934 and 1935.

¹¹¹ Although they were in many ways continuous with Nicholson's approach to the still life, contemporary readings by Nicholson's friends and allies consistently segregated the genres of abstract spirituality of his white reliefs and the domestic materiality of still life scenes. For an example of contemporary reviews signalling the immaterial and spirituality of Nicholson's white reliefs, see Read's review of Nicholson's 1935 exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery. Read, 'Ben Nicholson and the future of abstract painting', *The Listener*, 9 October 1935: 604–5.

¹¹² In the 1960s, Nicholson recalled to Harrison that his first experience of a relief carving process occurred by accident, when a section of plaster between two incised lines came away from the support. Nicholson to Harrison, 30 Nov 1966, TGA 839.2.19.2.

¹¹³ Hepworth to Nicholson, 8 December 1933, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 216, cat. 49. She wrote, 'I am very interested in your new work idea (carving out) naturally – I've been longing for it to happen for ages.'

¹¹⁴ Lewison, 1993: 216, cat. 49. Nicholson wrote, 'I did a very amusing thing yesterday. I carved it all day long it is about 2ice the size of this sheet of notepaper & loops like a section of some primitive game. Jake and Kate came in at various stages & we rolled a marble about on it. I am enjoying working as never before.' Nicholson to Hepworth, [12 December 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.57.

¹¹⁵ Nicholson to Hepworth, '12:30 morning Friday' [15 December 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.58.

Writing recently on Mondrian's studio practice, Hans Janssen argues that it is easy to overstate the difference between horizontal and vertical methods of production and display.¹¹⁶ Like Mondrian, Nicholson's reliefs may have been created, experienced or used in a horizontal format and then released to be sold and exhibited hung on walls. As demonstrated by his use of *papier-collé*, however, the critical binary of horizontal and vertical practices (constructed and developed most notably by Steinberg, with Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss) can develop our understanding of the relationship between Nicholson's process and his works' modes of address.¹¹⁷ For Janssen, as for Steinberg, the most potent contrast between these modes concerns duration. Works conceptualised, designed or made to be displayed horizontally, as maps or plans, he explains, suggest a *process* (with transference and movement) over time, whereas those made or presented vertically are taken as symbols of a visual scene which is a frozen moment in time.¹¹⁸ As Nicholson's first forays into abstraction suggest, the horizontality derived from a *papier-collé* process is imbued in works such as *first abstract painting* through a quality of movability and duration. Furthermore, I would add that Nicholson's process, as an arrangement of forms upon a flat plane rather than a frozen view, is recognisable in a number of his carved reliefs. This is perhaps elucidated best in *Circle*, where, although Nicholson's white reliefs were carefully reproduced to emphasise their identities as carved reliefs, in their mode of address they compare more easily to drawn architectural plans than to other artworks (including Mondrian's) in the 'Painting' section.

While Steinberg recognised Cubist collage as a precursor to the 'flatbed' approach, he differentiated its scale and resultant 'thingness' from the more expansive surfaces of later works.¹¹⁹ Arguably, the same applies to Nicholson's Neoplastic works and reliefs, which, although broadly 'flatbed' in their mode of address, similarly exude a sense of containment and 'thingness' less in keeping with Steinberg's concept of the 'flatbed' terrain. This further suggests the importance of scale to Nicholson's process and the resulting work's effect. Carving lines and circles into his boards, his flexible rotation of (or movement around) boards undoubtedly affected Nicholson's relief forms as well as how he positioned them as surfaces with flexible orientations. His earliest small reliefs, from *first completed relief*, are characteristic in this respect. In December 1933 Nicholson made a wooden box with a carved relief lid which, as a Christmas gift to Hepworth, was designed both to lie flat and to be moved upright, as well as positioned around the house, touched, turned and used.¹²⁰ Although it has rarely been emphasised in narratives of his work, movability and interaction were important aspects of

¹¹⁶ Hans Janssen, 'Working at a Table', in Manacorda and White (eds), 2014: 113–124.

¹¹⁷ Bois and Krauss, 1997; Steinberg, 1972.

¹¹⁸ Janssen, *op. cit.* in Manacorda and White (eds), 2014: 115.

¹¹⁹ Steinberg, 1972.

¹²⁰ *Christmas 1933 (relief box)*. See Lewison, 1993: 217, cat. 51.

Nicholson's early reliefs and the ways they have been used surely help to show how the artist employed scale and composition to affect how viewers would visually receive his works.

Nicholson's early reliefs also create pictorial tensions discussed in relation to the two abstract paintings of 1924. Their structural hierarchies also show that, despite their flexibility to be rotated and moved during the creative stage, Nicholson came to have a dominant orientation in mind. Noting that Nicholson sketched *1933 (6 circles)* on its side in a letter while it was being made, Lewison suggests it may have been started as a horizontal panel and shifted in orientation later in the process.¹²¹ Nicholson's playful approach to the orientation of paper, especially in letter writing, forms an interesting parallel. In his correspondence Nicholson frequently turned the paper several times to write around its perimeter, seeming to do so not just to use available space but because he enjoyed encouraging his readers to turn the paper surface in their hands.¹²²

Nicholson's limited sculptural output emphasises that he was more comfortable creating forms with structural hierarchies equivalent to the human frame. In May 1935, a year before the proposal of a Bauhaus-style vicarage for Helen Sutherland, Nicholson was commissioned by the Church of St Philip and St James at Rock in Northumberland to create a wooden offertory box.¹²³ Although relatively little is known about the commission, it is likely that Sutherland initiated the commission knowing suitable precedents in Nicholson's work.¹²⁴ The result (Fig. 52) is a relatively shallow rectangular wooden box placed on a slightly narrower column which lifts to a reachable height. Both the box's top and the column's front include relief aspects. The box's lid, through which coins drop, is a simple geometric design similar to other reliefs. On the column below, leg-like flutes offer elongation and recall the primitive design of a Doric order triglyph. A circle is placed above these legs to create a sequence which corresponds loosely with the human vertical posture and design. Bringing together the column and box, furthermore, recreates, although in three-dimensional space, the tensions of Nicholson's table-top scenes from the previous decade. A lower plane of frontally-viewed visual equivalents meets a perpendicular table-height horizontal surface which is geometric and flatbed in design, as well as seen (and used) from above.

¹²¹ Given other reliefs made by Nicholson at this time, it is likely that he preferred the stasis provided by the work's heavier base in vertical orientation. Lewison, 1993: 217, cat. 50. Nicholson to Hepworth, [postmarked 20 December 1933], TGA 20132.1.144.59.

¹²² One of many examples is a letter written to Summerson in April 1940 in which he wrote anti-clockwise around the page, which needed to be turned almost 360 degrees to be read. Nicholson to Summerson, 28 April [1940] TGA 20048.1.5.

¹²³ The Church of St Philip and St James at Rock, near Alnwick.

¹²⁴ Nicholson had made a small number of painted and relief boxes from 1933. See, for instance, *May 1933 (painted box)* (Private Collection), *1933 (painted box)* (Kettle's Yard, Cambridge) and *Christmas 1933 (relief box)*, given to Hepworth for Christmas (Private Collection). All reproduced in Lewison, 1993: cat. nos 45, 46 and 51.

Nicholson particularly liked to work with harder materials which could be manipulated in shape to create an object-like work. He later stressed that *1935 (white relief)* (Fig. 53) was carved from a mahogany board table top he had bought in Camden Town.¹²⁵ He explained to Harrison that the material flexibility of shaped board rather than canvas encouraged him to conceive his work differently. While a canvas is normally stretched into conventional shape, he wrote, ‘a board can be carved into any form – it can become an object’. To clarify that the ‘object’ created remained different from normal objects of use, he added ‘– not an everyday object but an object (“idea”)¹²⁶. He continued by opposing his concept of the more spiritual ‘object idea’ to a base surface shape and he recalled that Winifred had taught him that ‘ideas’ could not ‘be nailed down like carpets’.¹²⁷

The range of terms Steinberg uses to describe ‘flatbed’ surfaces helps to clarify the relation between Nicholson’s still life components and his table-top field. For Steinberg, ‘flatbed’ surfaces did not necessarily become a base for outwards relief. Comparing the field to ‘tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards,’ he instead described the ‘flatbed’ as ‘any receptor surface’ on which information could be ‘received, printed, impressed [...]’.¹²⁸ Therefore, while Steinberg’s text focused on examples which incorporated three-dimensional collaged objects, especially those by Rauschenberg, his concept centred on the horizontal ‘flatbed’ plane’s capacity to receive other elements which could equally move over that surface, leaving a graphic trace or imprint upon it.

Although Nicholson emphasised the ‘object’ quality of his reliefs through his choice of materials and application of texture and handmade edges, he frequently rejected suggestions that they physically appealed to viewers as tangible items. At the time, wider compositional structures especially encase his compositions within a wider space, tempering their literalness as ‘planes of actuality’. As in earlier works such as *painting – trout* and *profile – Venetian red*, Nicholson’s reliefs also make use of a basic structural element comparable to the rectangular table top surface, which is surrounded by a border of negative space. Differentiated from the picture plane, these rectangular structures in works such as *1935 (white relief)* are, despite their literal protrusion, grounded within an internal space. Nicholson’s combination of rectangular overlays (whether formed from a single board or several) and circular incisions also ensure that relief shapes are tempered to the base support. Although such ‘holding back’ could easily be described as the antithesis of Cubist bas-relief, Nicholson’s self-consciously binary approach in

¹²⁵ Nicholson to Harrison, 11 February 1967, TGA 839. 2.19.3.

¹²⁶ Nicholson to Harrison, 30 November 1966, TGA 839.2.19.2.

¹²⁷ Nicholson to Harrison, 30 November 1966, TGA 839.2.19.2.

¹²⁸ Steinberg, 1972.

this regard is comparable to Picasso's enactment of a playful relation between projecting forces and recesses.¹²⁹

Even those sculptural works by Nicholson employ similar means of holding relief elements to a continuous plane by processes of reduction. The free-standing structure *1936 (white relief sculpture – version I)* (Fig. 54) has been described as more wall-like than sculptural in character.¹³⁰ Like Nicholson's other reliefs, this work is mounted on a wooded board base which encases it in a spatial frame. Its horizontal and vertical axes also extend Nicholson's approach to the table-top structure. Its frontal façade contains a circular hollow in the upper left which suggests it might hold another element such as a marble or coin. Yet, just as the reliefs were produced to hang on walls, the surface stands upright upon a base of horizontal planes. The L-shaped ledge at the lower-left corner of this view is, therefore, comparable to the table edge in *profile – Venetian red*; it exists at the intersection between a horizontal 'flatbed' surface and a vertical *tableau* view.

Nicholson's framing practices show that he considered the spatial borders of his works important extensions of their internal structures and effects. To display his works at home and in exhibitions, he often used thick wooden frames which are continuous with his reliefs' forms and create wider fields surrounding the internal surfaces, thus weakening the sense of a literal plane. A photograph of Winifred's home in Paris taken around 1934 shows Nicholson's *first completed relief* resting against a wall in its own box frame (Fig. 55).¹³¹ Photographs of Nicolette Gray's *Abstract and Concrete* exhibition (1936) held at London's Lefevre Gallery and Oxford (Figs. 56-57) similarly show white reliefs cased in box frames; hanging from the picture rail, they are presented in a very different way to Mondrian's canvases nearby.¹³² While Nicholson's wooden reliefs were made less literal by his framing practices, Mondrian's unframed canvases mounted on backing boards produced the opposite effect. Nicholson, who had always been highly particular about how his work were framed, started using picture-framer Arthur Colley in

¹²⁹ In her description of Picasso's *Guitar* (autumn 1912–14), Poggi especially notes how Picasso's use of formal elements as empty signifiers (which would be granted meaning by their contexts) made 'the oppositional or relational value' of his formal elements, namely the projecting cylinder and the recessive sound hole – especially apparent. Poggi, 1992: 49.

¹³⁰ Lewison, 1993: 221, cat. 68.

¹³¹ Jake Nicholson at Quai d'Auteuil, Paris, c.1934, TGA Photograph Collection, reprinted in Lewison, 1993: 242.

¹³² Arthur Jackson Hepworth, photograph of *Abstract and Concrete* exhibition, Lefevre Gallery, London, 1936, TGA Photograph Collection. Reprinted in Lewison, 1993: 243. The paintings by Mondrian included in the photograph of the Lefevre exhibition are *Composition B (No. II) with Red* (1935, then owned by Helen Sutherland), an earlier version of *Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1935, purchased in 1936 by Nicolette Gray), and *Composition A (No. 1) with Red* (1935; altered in 1942 to become *Composition with Blue, Red and Yellow*). *Abstract and Concrete* opened in Oxford, then toured to Liverpool, Newcastle, London and Cambridge. Nicholson attended the opening in Oxford Lewison, 1993: 243. Images of the exhibition in Oxford also show Nicholson's works hung above rectangular-panelled walls which further continued the works' quality of negative space held in shallow relief.

the mid-1930s after Colley opened a business in Hampstead.¹³³ Evidence shows that Nicholson preferred frames in natural wood with little graining in order to limit visual distraction from his works. He also specified that frames were not to be joined by a customary diagonal mitring technique; instead he requested that they were perpendicularly abutted to be more in keeping with the work's rectangular forms. Nicholson also had preferences concerning the relationship between the four joins and requested that each edge extend over its left-hand perpendicular piece. At this time Nicholson also developed a firm preference for a particular kind of joint: a variant of a multiple 'biscuit' joint.¹³⁴ When examined closely, the corners of many of Nicholson's frames reveal carved rectangular teeth which, most often repeated in series of three, create an interlocking structure in keeping with the interaction of horizontal and vertical elements in the main body of the work.¹³⁵

Some texts and displays have explored how contact between Mondrian and Nicholson from the mid-1930s generated shared forms and interests.¹³⁶ Lynton stressed the impact of the object-like quality of Mondrian's paintings which, through his unusual framing methods, 'turned into reliefs'.¹³⁷ Nicholson first visited Mondrian's studio in the Rue de Départ in Paris in April 1934 and after a second visit the following year, he and Hepworth painted their Mall studio in Hampstead white. Inspired by access to Mondrian's work, colour was reintroduced to Nicholson's work at this time as a medium for structuring space. His perception of Mondrian's Neoplasticism as a movement with Cubist principles, furthermore, meant that he received it as a continuation of Cubist approaches to space. Nicholson later reflected that, when visiting Mondrian's Paris studio, he had been particularly struck by the 'silences' within his arrangement, thereby stressing his awareness of spaces between elements in the spatial environment.¹³⁸ Thus, as he came to understand Neoplasticism not only as a formal language of colour and line but also as an approach to space, Nicholson developed a stylistically flexible approach, often incorporating abstract shapes within scenes which combined surface planes and

¹³³ According to his successor, Michael Carleton, Colley started his picture framing business from Haverstock Hill in 1935/6 and 'it was not long before he was being asked to make frames, which have always been of the highest quality of workmanship, for many artists, including Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson.' See the British artists' suppliers (1650–1950) directory at the National Portrait Gallery. Some limited correspondence between Nicholson and Colley from the early 1940s suggests that Nicholson might have continued to use Colley's services from St Ives, although Colley's business seems to have struggled under wartime conditions. On 20 March [c.1940] Colley wrote to Nicholson, 'I regret I am unable to supply any of the materials you require my stick having been reduced to practically nil some months ago. I suggest that you write to the makers individually it may bring you some success.' Colley to Nicholson, 20 March [c.1940], TGA 8717.1.2.722. I am grateful to Graham Taylor (National Galleries of Scotland) for sharing this information and for explaining these framing techniques to me.

¹³⁴ Colley's successor Michael Carleton recalled that Nicholson 'always insisted on plain wooden frames with special joinery work on the corners'. National Portrait Gallery, Directory of British Artists' Suppliers, 1650–1950.

¹³⁵ See, for instance, the corners of the painted white frame of *1935 (white relief)* at the National Galleries of Scotland.

¹³⁶ See Bowness, S., 1990 and Green and Wright, 2012.

¹³⁷ Lynton, 1993, 2010: 67.

¹³⁸ Nicholson to Harrison, 30 Nov 1966, TGA 839.2.19.2.

spatial depth. *1936 (still life - composition)* (Fig. 58), for example, hints at the potency of abstract colour within a recognisable still life scene. *1937 (painting)* (Fig. 59) integrates the two approaches more equally, as coloured rectangular blocks structure a table-top composition which is Cubist in its multiple modes of address.

Although Nicholson highlighted the spiritual and immaterial ambitions of his white reliefs, the proliferation of a discourse of ‘coldness’ or ‘emptiness’ of their abstraction surrounding their reception led him to emphasise the strong connection between his reliefs and their grounding in the domestic sphere. Nicholson did not see this as a denial of their spiritual effects but rather as an insistence upon the grounding of abstract realities in everyday life. In May 1940 he wrote to Read acknowledging the basis of his abstract work in real shapes and situations, referencing Picasso: ‘I agree very much with Picasso when he says that there is no such thing as abstract art. One always begins with something.’¹³⁹ Over time Nicholson became more adamant that the creative grounding of his ‘object ideas’ in material objects so that, by the 1950s, he was frequently comparing relief shapes to objects placed upon breakfast table: circles as cups, rectangles as bread-boards or newspapers lying flat on the horizontal surface.¹⁴⁰

Between the end of the 1930s and beginning of the 1950s Nicholson was led by the needs of various monograph projects to consider the foundational importance of his personal biography on his work and artistic aims. Although many of these descriptions were made retrospectively from his new home in St Ives, they demonstrate the extent to which Nicholson considered his Neoplastic paintings and reliefs as continuous with his earlier investigations in still life as well as his wider biography. Furthermore, they suggest how Nicholson came to consider how his upbringing had made him particularly inclined not only to the still life as a subject but also to the ‘flatbed’ terrain of the table as a materially ‘worked’ surface. Nicholson’s account to Summerson of his encounter with Picasso’s ‘miraculous green’ in 1944 was closely followed, in the same letter, by a description of his family history. While noting his admiration for his father’s still life and landscape paintings, he described with greater enthusiasm his memories of his mother’s diligent, physical labour at home. After listing his father’s preference for the decorative surfaces and vertical planes of ‘panelled walls’ and ‘Dighton prints’ decorating the family drawing room, he portrayed his mother as a character more at home in the practical and busy spaces of the studio, nursery and kitchen.¹⁴¹ He evocatively described how his mother worked in these spaces with an instinctive and ‘direct approach’ to tasks which centred on a table top. He continued by emphasising the parallels between his mother’s practical, horizontal, physical and instinctive labour to his work. He wrote, ‘Scrubbing the top of a really well used

¹³⁹ Nicholson to Read, 17 May [1940], TGA 8717.1.3.35.

¹⁴⁰ Lynton, 1993; 2010: 98. Lynton’s source for this information was the artist Adrian Heath whose unbidden recollection recalled Nicholson’s own descriptions of his works to him or in his presence.

¹⁴¹ Nicholson to Summerson, 3 January [1944], TGA 20048.1.38.2.

kitchen table is very close to the way I work at my ptgs.’ He made the comparison more explicit: ‘a well worked on & well scrubbed k.t. [kitchen table] is not unlike a Klee ptg or one of my textured still lifes?’.¹⁴² This correspondence between Nicholson’s upbringing and his artistic approach seems to have been an important revelation for Nicholson and he consistently returned to the same description in letters to friends and those writing about his work. In September that year he repeated the description to Read, who produced a monograph in 1948. Correspondence with Read also reveals that, for Nicholson, descriptions of his upbringing formed an antidote to suggestions of abstract coldness, emptiness or severity in his reliefs. Writing to Read, Nicholson argued his abstract works were in fact ‘the logical outcome’ of his home environment and parents’ roles.¹⁴³

Nicholson’s memory of his childhood environment corresponds with how it is represented visually in a portrait of his family by his father’s friend. *A Bloomsbury Family* (1907) (Fig. 60) by William Orpen depicts the Nicholsons at home. William is most dominant family member seated around the central dining table, refined in profile and seated in front. Ben, also in profile, sits at the table’s opposite end with forearms on its surface cradling a small teacup. Nancy and Tony sit behind while the youngest Kit gestures from a front corner. Their mother Mabel occupies a more enigmatic place. Far behind the main scene, she has either just entered or is about to leave. The room environment is as Nicholson described, filled with the rectangular frames of prints, panels and decorative furnishings which display the refinement of the sitter’s artistic taste. On the back wall is another sign of the main sitter’s interests; an internal mirror surface reflects a window and the artist’s silhouette to create a wider spatial scene comparable to *Christmas night* and *Au Chat Botté*.

Nicholson also recounted his description of his childhood home to Ramsden in a discussion which shows more reasons why, at the end of the war, he was considering the need for ‘modern’ responses to refined and decorative interior spaces. He again described his mother scrubbing a table ‘from side to side & around & into the corners & backwards & forwards,’ before mentioning an article on Alfred Wallis he had written for *Horizon* magazine in January 1943 which claimed the importance of the object quality of Wallis’s work.¹⁴⁴ Nicholson’s letter to Ramsden, probably written the following month, connected his personal biography and childhood environment to Wallis’s role in reawakening an aim towards naïvety and honest materiality over intellectualism and bourgeois decoration. Referring to a question Ramsden

¹⁴² Nicholson to Summerson, 3 January [1944], TGA 20048.1.38.2.

¹⁴³ Nicholson to Read, 25 September [1944], TGA 8717.1.3.51.

¹⁴⁴ Nicholson to Ramsden, 26 February [c.1943], TGA 9310.1.2.50. In his *Horizon* article Nicholson compared Wallis’s work to ‘how Klee brought the warp and woof of a canvas to life’, writing, ‘in the same way Wallis did this for an old piece of cardboard’. He also described his first sight through Wallis’s door: ‘through it [we] saw some paintings of ships and houses on odd pieces of paper and cardboard nailed up all over the wall, with particularly large nails through the smallest ones.’ Nicholson, ‘Alfred Wallis’, *Horizon*, vol. 7, no. 37, January 1943: 50–54, 50.

posed concerning Wallis's 'freedom' from a sophisticated artistic education, Nicholson explained with traces of Moholy-Nagy's theories and Lanyon's contemporary interests, 'I expect an education in which hands & brain develop together is the secret.'¹⁴⁵

Nicholson's correspondences with Summerson, Read and Ramsden reveal that intersecting critical narratives encouraged him in 1944 to locate his reliefs within his own biography and the domestic spaces of his family home. These conversations lay out the path that Nicholson's career had taken by the end of the war as an artist on the brink of maturity, starting to gain substantial critical and historical recognition for his work over the previous decades. Nicholson's decisive and consistent emphasis on the relationship between his abstract works and the spaces of everyday life also reveal contemporary scepticism, as noted in Chapter Two, towards interwar abstraction as a formal language disconnected from everyday experience. Perhaps most importantly, they suggest the context in which Nicholson's autobiography was developed and written down as one which in 1944 valued a certain kind of rustic 'Englishness' and domesticity which had formed in opposition to presumptions surrounding abstraction.

v. OPENING THE VIEW: ST IVES AND TRANSATLANTIC EXCHANGE

The period between Nicholson's neoplastic reliefs and his later reflection of them in relation to his childhood home coincided with his relocation to St Ives. This was a period when, as Stephens notes, Nicholson was like countless others forced to withdraw from international circles in which he had become used to playing a part.¹⁴⁶ Nicholson's wartime experience in St Ives, outlined in Chapters One and Two, was characterised by a continued interest in earlier Cubist modes of representation. His relative freedom from previously dominant European art centres, furthermore, encouraged him to develop his own personal style. Such effects did not go unnoticed by Nicholson. Writing to Read in May 1940, he acknowledged that physical separation from artistic centres could inspire traditions to develop in new ways. He used the example of Mondrian and Cubism to explain that he now found it 'more interesting & more reasonable' that Mondrian had 'purposely avoided seeing Picasso's work [...] because he knew it was such a force that it would influence him'.¹⁴⁷ Nicholson's own direction was instigated by the imposed circumstances of war. Yet, as with earlier travels and encounters, his use of pictorial structured indebted to Cubism enabled experiences of his new environment to enter his work. While he was relatively isolated from actual Cubist works during the war years, in St Ives

¹⁴⁵ Nicholson to Ramsden, 26 February [c.1943], TGA 9310.1.2.50. Nicholson and Ramsden's discussion of this topic was probably encouraged by the presence of Read's *Education Through Art* (1943). In this Read declared that 'art should be the basis of education'. The new book was well received by Hepworth, Nicholson and their contacts.

¹⁴⁶ See Stephens, 'Ben Nicholson in Wartime', in Stephens (ed.), 2009: 57–63.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholson to Read, 17 May [1940], TGA 8717.1.3.35.

Nicholson continued to have conversations about the importance of the Cubist heritage. These conversations show, furthermore, that he was placed at the intersection of those critical narratives which continue to affect how Cubism is presented and understood today.

After he moved to St Ives in the autumn of 1939, Nicholson started to use drawing to explore his position within the surrounding landscape. A number of scenes combined his immediate environs in an interior room with a view out to the area beyond. Freshly stimulated by the landscape, he also spent more time working outdoors. While he was still living at Little Park Owles with Stokes, in December 1939 he described to Read a feeling justified ‘in spending some time in working out here’ due to the relative commercial success of works he was making. He wrote, ‘it is of course a grand excuse to choose a fine day & take sandwiches & drawing book off into the country’.¹⁴⁸ He also described the landscape as if an open but composed visual scene, writing, ‘The country is incredibly long – do you know it here? It is very fierce & primitive & huge chunks of stone everywhere & the Atlantic & Carbis Bay below & the English Channel in the distance – the sea is terrific.’¹⁴⁹ Responding to his site and to wider changes to wartime commercial art markets by drawing, he again used line descriptively and constructively to combine objects and spatial planes. Within these views, the window setting itself is used as a pictorial device which combines a flat field with the impression of space beyond. Nicholson’s scenes also seem to declare the role of drawing in their creation. Objects and landscape elements are connected via an overt system of outlines which reveals the work’s making as a process of collating signs upon a flat surface.

In December 1939 Nicholson, Hepworth and their family moved to Dunluce in Carbis Bay. From here Nicholson benefited from a distant view of the sea and horizon beyond. *1940 (St Ives, version 2)* (Fig. 61) was made after this move and shows a window playfully opened outwards leading the eye into the landscape beyond. It is likely that Nicholson already associated the open window motif with views of St Ives. Visiting the town in 1928 and probably again in May and July 1932, Nicholson depicted its bays in a number of views in which an open window pane provides a diagonal line out into the space beyond (see Fig. 62).¹⁵⁰ Nicholson’s later scene, however, extends the descriptive linear style suggested only in parts of the earlier works. The unifying graphic outlines in *1940 (St Ives, version 2)* connect the two mugs in the foreground to houses in the distance. The window structure creates a *tableau* scene behind the

¹⁴⁸ Nicholson to Read, 5 Dec [1939], TGA 8717.1.3.31.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Some of Nicholson’s paintings of St Ives from this time have been dated 1930 or 1931. See *1930 (Porthmeor window – looking out to sea)*, c.1930 (*Cornish port*) and *1931 (St Ives Bay, sea with boats)*, all reproduced in Stephens (ed.), 2009; 38–39. According to Lewison’s detailed chronology and my own survey of materials, it is not certain that Nicholson visited St Ives during 1930 or 1931. Winifred moved to Par in mid-Cornwall early in 1932. Nicholson visited that May and made a trip to St Ives. In July he visited Par again to look after the children while Winifred travelled to Paris. He returned to Cornwall again in September following his visit to Dieppe. Lewison, 1993.

picture plane, which connects with an even earlier moment in his career. From the early 1920s onwards both Ben and Winifred frequently painted figurative still life scenes set on window sills. In these, both artists depicted objects from oblique perspectives which allowed for interior and exterior spaces to be shown.¹⁵¹ Photographs taken at this time particularly reveal the couple's strong interest in the window as a structure offering both a literal field and a 'transparent' view into a space beyond (see Fig. 63).¹⁵²

The consistency of Ben and Winifred's interest in the window and still life theme during the 1920s, a period when they were introduced to contemporary work through broader travel and access to publications, suggests they would have been familiar with Cubist masters' use of the motif, which was prevalent from 1919 onwards. By the mid-1920s, at least, Nicholson would have been aware of Cubist precedents for his open window scenes. Two images from Picasso's Saint-Raphaël open window series, an aquarelle and oil both titled *Fenêtre ouverte*, were included among the thirty two reproductions in Waldemar George's 1924 book *Picasso*, which was owned by Nicholson from that year. By the time of his visit to St Ives, in the summer of 1932, similar works had received attention in contemporary sources. In June that year an aquarelle from the series (1919) (Fig. 64) was included in a copy of *Cahiers d'Art* which Nicholson owned – an issue preceding Picasso's first retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit from 16 June to 30 July 1932. In the journal an image of the work appeared alongside an essay that Nicholson would have been sure to see, by his good friend Jim Ede.¹⁵³ A letter from Helen Sutherland to Ede dated 27 June 1932 suggests that, after reading his article, she and Winifred had decided to go to Paris to see the Picasso exhibition, which suggests the article's importance among Nicholson's circle of contacts.¹⁵⁴ As he used the motif while visiting St Ives in 1932 and then when staying in the town from 1939, it is further possible that Nicholson approached his open window scenes as a form of personal response to Picasso's precedent. Given the expanded literature on Picasso by the 1930s, it is likely that he knew Picasso's window works were a series made by the artist during a summer vacation to Saint-Raphaël with his wife. The decorative handle persistently depicted in both Nicholson's 1932 and 1940 scenes of St Ives further supports this suggestion they were responsive to Picasso's series, in which the decorative ironwork of his room's balcony railing is also given particular prominence.

¹⁵¹ See, for instance, Winifred's *Primulas* (1921–23) and *Window-Sill, Lugano* (1923).

¹⁵² Ben and Winifred's photograph album (collection Jake Nicholson). Page 17, for instance, places both artists' still life window scenes alongside photographs taken of windows. See '35 b+w photographs and negatives of a photograph album belonging to Ben Nicholson featuring photographs of works by Nicholson and Winifred Nicholson as well as shots of people and places (Collection Jake Nicholson).' TGA Photograph Collection.

¹⁵³ Ede, 'Picasso', *Cahiers d'Art*, nos. 3–5, June 1932.

¹⁵⁴ Helen Sutherland to Jim Ede, 27 June 1932, Kettle's Yard.

Given this connection, it is less surprising that Harrison notes that Nicholson's paintings from the late 1920s show an increasingly independent and decorative use of line, often dwelling on 'the curve of a handle or the filigree of a lettered sign.'¹⁵⁵ While a return to some of his earlier scenes, Nicholson's wartime window scenes often exhibit these tendencies. Harrison also aptly describes how Nicholson's inclination towards a decorative use of line is successfully held in check when lines are instead used to construct spatial planes.¹⁵⁶ He explains, 'the more the functions of drawing are assimilated into the procedures of construction, the less whimsical, on the whole, the paintings tend to be.'¹⁵⁷ In *1940 (St Ives, version 2)*, a descriptive line connects objects in the foreground to a landscape view, with darker landscape forms in the middle-distance. Nicholson's linear mode of constructing space mirrors methods and materials used by his closest contemporaries in St Ives, namely Gabo and Hepworth's use of taut string to describe relations across space. Especially for Hepworth, string expressed her spatial position within the surrounding environment.¹⁵⁸ In *Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red)* (1940) (Fig. 65), for example, one edge of a bowl-like cavernous space is connected to the inside of the other by an array of stringed lines which she described as expressing a 'pull' she felt towards the landscape's shapes.¹⁵⁹ Nicholson's use of line at this time, however, stems most from his encounters with Braque's still life, reclining figure and landscape compositions of the early 1930s, such as his *La Baigneuse* works. In paintings from this series, objects and planes merge on a plane of near-continuous linear design which leads the viewer's eye around different symbols and spatial zones.

As they merge with landscape views, Nicholson's still lifes become microcosmic arrangements which represent his position in the wider world. Not just spatially constructive, they function as records of emotional attachments, his feelings of isolation or the prospects of exploration, travel and contact. Nicholson's ability to combine different spatial planes through pictorial motifs, learnt through the examples of Cubist still lifes, imbued his scenes from the 1940s with particularity and homeliness. One further motif typifies Nicholson's use of objects and domestic spaces to express the intersection of private circumstances and the shared historical events through which he lived. Around VE day, in May 1945, he included in a still life scene a cup or mug decorated with a Union Jack. Not just an abstract sign, the flag appears on a cup which

¹⁵⁵ Harrison, 1981: 182. Harrison writes, 'there is a persistent tendency in Nicholson's works of c.1925–32 for line to function descriptively with a degree of independence from painted and textured areas.' 'insistent decorative element, the curve of a handle or the filigree of a lettered sign, signifies a certain taste, as it might be in antique mugs or picturesque shop fronts, within which the difficult enterprise of picture-making has been contained and reduced to the status of a game or an elegant performance.'

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.: 183.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.: 183.

¹⁵⁸ Around 1940 Hepworth described her use of string to Martin. Announcing that she was sending Martin some gouaches and gouaches with strings, she explained, 'the strings of course are half way between the ptgs & sculpture'. Hepworth to Martin, n.d. [c.1940], GMA A70.2.19.

¹⁵⁹ See my essay, 'Figure and Landscape: Barbara Hepworth's Phenomenology of Perception', *Tate Papers*, no. 20, Autumn 2013.

Nicholson is known to have owned and which commemorates (through both the British and Danish flags) the British coronation of 1902.¹⁶⁰ As several authors have suggested, the presence of this object in multiple images from 1945 implies that Nicholson used the object and sign in the spirit of national optimism surrounding the end of the war.¹⁶¹ It was probably included as a later addition to the work, which is known as *1943–45 (St Ives, Cornwall)* (Fig. 66), where it sits within a small collection of still life forms before a window view of St Ives bay. Its presence and the viewer's knowledge of events surrounding the date mean that the liveliness of the coast assumes wider significance, becoming emblematic of renewed opportunities for travel, trade and Empire following the war's end. When it was first made, it is likely that *1943–5* was read with this historical context in mind. Nicholson's first postwar exhibition, which took place at the Lefevre Gallery in October 1945, included only paintings and reliefs made since 1939 and thus formed a specifically wartime group. Alongside *1943–45* and thirty-five other works made in the exhibition's year, one of the last works listed in the catalogue is 'V E day, 1945'.¹⁶² Given the level of control Nicholson usually demanded over the presentation of his works in displays and texts, it is highly likely that these were titles he had chosen as representative of his work at the time.

Unusually explicit in its symbolism, it is probable that Nicholson recognised that the Union Jack could act, like the shop's name in *Au Chat Botté*, as a destabilising, playful sign of the representational, graphic nature of the wider work. Its inclusion, furthermore, continues the explicitly symbolic but often fragmented and ambiguous signs used by Picasso and Braque throughout their careers, whether through *papier-collé* or painted symbols. Nicholson may even have been aware of instances where Picasso provocatively painted French flags, for example in his 1914 still life composition, *Playing Cards, Glass, Bottle of Rum: "Vive la France"* (Fig. 67). This was also reproduced in the 1932 issue of *Cahiers d'Art* (1932), which Nicholson owned and which contained Ede's essay.¹⁶³ Like Picasso's example, Nicholson depicted the flag at an angle as if hanging from a flag pole. He also extended flat edges over the cup's borders, making it more autonomous from the curved surface we know it originally decorated.

While during the war Nicholson responded to his circumstances in a personal way, he remained connected to Cubism as a historical style and path for future development. Not completely isolated, in St Ives Nicholson was well placed to contribute to ongoing debates surrounding the movement's future. His most important contact in this respect was the American painter and

¹⁶⁰ Information from Sophie Bowness. Following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, the Coronation of Edward VII and Alexandra of Denmark took place in August 1902.

¹⁶¹ The same mug is visible, for instance, in *1945 (still life with 3 mugs)*, illustrated in Stephens (ed.), 2009: 96 and in *1945 (fishing floats)*, *1945 (Little Trevarrack)* and *1945 (St Ives)*, all illustrated in Read, 1948: cats 120, 151 and 160. See, for instance, Lewison, 1993.

¹⁶² *Ben Nicholson: Paintings & reliefs 1939–1945*, exh. cat. London, Lefevre Gallery, October 1945.

¹⁶³ *Cahiers d'Art*, nos. 3–5, June 1932.

writer George L.K. Morris (1905–75), with whom he shared a lively transatlantic correspondence. After attending Yale University, in the spring of 1929 Morris spent some time in Paris, where he took classes from Léger and Amédée Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne. In 1935 he curated an exhibition of Léger’s work for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he served on the advisory committee.¹⁶⁴ Between 1937 and 1939 he worked with Domela and Taeuber-Arp on the transatlantic journal *Plastique*, which was published between Meudon and New York.¹⁶⁵ In an article outlining this journal’s approach in 1937, Morris emphasised the long history of abstraction in a way reminiscent of Nicholson’s approach: ‘There is nothing new about the quality that we have come to call abstract.’¹⁶⁶ From 1937 to 1943 Morris was also an editor and financier of the New York-based cultural and political journal *Partisan Review*, which was providing a more explicitly anti-Stalinist and Trotskyist stance in its upholding of core cosmopolitan values.¹⁶⁷ In late 1937 the journal published an essay by Morris on *Circle*, which reveals his interest in contemporary work in England.¹⁶⁸

As all of these publications show, Morris and Nicholson were both important conduits between Paris and their home countries, and they shared a network of professional contacts centred in Paris.¹⁶⁹ At the time of their first contact around 1937, both were working on publications aiming to promote the continued relevance and strength of abstract art movements as they were seen to be entering new ground.¹⁷⁰ In his 1937 introduction to *Plastique*, titled ‘On the Abstract Tradition’, Morris described a cyclical search for work developing the Cubist-Constructive principles associated with the recently disbanded Abstraction-Création group.¹⁷¹ This approach had been put into practice the previous year when Morris co-founded, with Carl Holty and Harry Holtzman, the American Abstract Artists (AAA). Two years later the Association issued their first *Artists Yearbook* (1938) which, as a collection of artists’ statements and illustrations, shows the strength of *Circle*’s impact.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁴ *Fernand Léger*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 – 24 October 1935. Paul Rosenberg and A.E. Gallatin were among the most important lenders and Léger gave a guest lecture.

¹⁶⁵ Morris met Arp, Taeuber-Arp and Domela through Gallatin in 1934. The first issue of *Plastique* was devoted to the historical origins of Constructivism and included articles on Suprematism and Malevich. *Plastique* ceased when Arp and Taeuber-Arp were forced to leave Paris in 1940, although Lorenz notes that internal differences may have emerged due to Arp’s Surrealist sympathies. Lorenz, 1982: 70–71.

¹⁶⁶ Morris, ‘On the Abstract Tradition,’ *Plastique* no. 1, Spring 1937; reprinted ed. New York, 1969. The original article was published in French but it was also published in English the following year.

¹⁶⁷ See Cooney, 1986: 225.

¹⁶⁸ Morris, ‘Modernism in England’ *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, December 1937: 70.

¹⁶⁹ In Paris, Morris and Nicholson’s major contacts both included Arp, Domela, Héliou and Mondrian.

¹⁷⁰ Morris later recalled how *Plastique* came about following a suggestion by Arp to provide a force against Breton’s Surrealism. He recalled, ‘of course we all thought that Dali and Max Ernst and everything were taking art off in completely the wrong direction and that some force out to be against it. So Arp suggested a magazine.’ Transcript of oral history interview with G.L.K. Morris, 11 December 1968, Archives of American Art.

¹⁷¹ Morris, ‘On the Abstract Tradition,’ *Plastique*, no. 1, Spring 1937: 13–14.

¹⁷² This publication included Morris’s essay ‘The Quest for an Abstract Tradition’. See *AAA Yearbook*, 1938. Morris’s essay was also published (in French) in *Plastique* that Spring. See Morris, ‘À la recherche d’une Tradition de l’Art Abstrait,’ *Plastique*, no. 3, Spring 1938.

Although they shared occasional letters from 1937, Morris and Nicholson appear to have first met in London in 1939. This meeting sparked more regular correspondence lasting beyond Nicholson's departure from St Ives in 1958.¹⁷³ Nicholson was a prolific networker, yet his correspondence with Morris during the 1940s is unusual for its regularity and depth of discussion with a fellow artist.¹⁷⁴ Morris later recalled their correspondence as exceptional at the time, noting that the two artists exchanged letters 'every few weeks'.¹⁷⁵ In November 1939 Morris sent Nicholson, now living in St Ives, a copy of *Partisan Review* from New York, explaining that, although he had proposed an article on British abstract art, this had been dismissed by peers on the grounds that 'a purely aesthetic' article on British work would seem 'a trifle flat in our first war-issue'.¹⁷⁶ A couple of months later, Morris sent Nicholson another copy of the journal, which included his article 'Picasso: 4000 Years of his Art'.¹⁷⁷ In this text Morris critically appraised Picasso's stylistic path for surviving 'the test' of a long retrospective show.¹⁷⁸ Sensing the circular and self-referential nature of Picasso's sequence of stylistic developments, Morris particularly praised Picasso's new approach, visible in *Guernica* (1937), which had, he described, 'gone back to the grisaille of Cubism' to provide 'realism to its highest pitch'.¹⁷⁹

While in the late 1930s and early 1940s Nicholson moved flexibly between the genres of landscape and abstract relief, throughout his career he consistently focused on the relations between shapes, objects and structures in space. More uniform in his use of non-figurative shapes, Morris's works of the late 1930s fluctuated between different approaches to Cubism, as well as non-geometric or 'biomorphic' abstraction. His *Untitled* (1938) (Fig. 68), for example, contains rounded organic forms and lines in a style derived from Arp and Miró.¹⁸⁰ The fragmented and overlaid structure of *New England Church* (1935–42) (Fig. 69), on the other hand, provides a landscape view through a process of formal deconstruction and sequential reassembling which is associated with Cubism.

¹⁷³ Morris recalled, 'I met him [Nicholson] in Paris – in London I mean in 1939. We corresponded for about fifteen years or so.' Transcript of oral history interview with G.L.K. Morris, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁴ The Tate Archive holds eighty-three letters from Morris to Nicholson dated between 7 December 1937 and 22 June 1960, TGA 8717.1.2.3033–3105.

¹⁷⁵ When asked by an interviewer whether he had corresponded with Cubists in Paris, Morris replied, 'Not the famous ones, no. I have a couple of rather perfunctory letters from Braque and Léger. The only one I corresponded with for many years when I gave the letters along with the others was Ben Nicholson. We used to write to each other every few weeks.' Transcript of oral history interview with G.L.K. Morris, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ Morris to Nicholson, 28 November, 1939, TGA 8717.1.2.3034. Instead, a different article by Morris appeared: 'Art Chronicle: Recent Tendencies in Europe,' *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 5, Fall 1939: 31–33.

¹⁷⁷ Morris, 'Picasso: 4000 Years of His Art', *Partisan Review*, vol. 7 no. 1, January–February 1940: 50–53.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 50.

¹⁷⁹ Morris, 'Picasso: 4000 Years of His Art', *Partisan Review*, vol. 7 no. 1, January–February 1940: 53.

¹⁸⁰ Other works of this kind include *Carnival* (1937) and *Abstract Composition* (1937).

In the first half of the 1940s both Morris and Nicholson explored ways to further these traditions by creating a deeper space behind the picture plane. Nicholson was urged on in this respect by views of the landscape surrounding St Ives and by his experiences of relief carving, which encouraged him to reach increasingly beyond foregrounded objects and planes. Having returned to painting following a period of making reliefs, Nicholson wrote to Read early in 1943, 'I always want to cut through at some point.'¹⁸¹ Morris was also interested at this moment in creating optical views into deep space, which he understood was also a departure from historical Cubism. When interviewed later, he explicitly described this difference with a sense of progressive freedom: 'I do just the opposite of Cubism because Cubism is very flat coming out very slightly towards the center. [...] What I do instead of coming out from the center I go in and try to get the feeling of deep space'.¹⁸² Like Nicholson, Morris's new approaches to the picture's space were reflected in his use of materials, even using glass in some relief constructions to generate optical depth through surface forms.¹⁸³ Describing his relationship with Cubism, Morris explained his use of space as analogous to a landscape view. His work, he wrote, was 'more closely connected with the landscape sensation' through his creation of 'an enclosed area that I go into'.¹⁸⁴ Although working between the poles of abstract reliefs and landscape paintings, the synchronicity of Nicholson's interests at the time is perhaps best shown by his open-window schemes, including *1940 (St Ives, version 2)*, in which he generated a sense of deeper space.

Nicholson's and Hepworth's friendships with Morris, which grew during the first few months of the war, provided a vital opportunity for continued contact and development. In February 1940 Hepworth wrote to Morris, 'It is possibly difficult for you to visualise how good it is to have a letter from a friend in U.S.A. A sort of link with the outside world that saves me from having too much of a marooned feeling!'¹⁸⁵ The timing of this transatlantic contact coincided not only with these British artists' relative geographical isolation but also with the hostility to abstract art growing within British institutions. A letter from Nicholson to Ramsden written in October 1940 demonstrates the links between national antagonism and the importance of international comradeship and support. Nicholson reported to Ramsden that Read was to send him an article on abstraction which had recently appeared in *Partisan Review* and which 'he says is important'.¹⁸⁶ In the same letter Nicholson mentions Read's own response to Geoffrey Grigson's article, 'The Death of Abstract Art', which had been published in the *Listener*

¹⁸¹ Nicholson to Read, 22 January [1943], TGA 8717.1.3.43.

¹⁸² Transcript of oral history interview with G.L.K. Morris, *op. cit.*: 53.

¹⁸³ Morris also later made actual window designs and relationship with optical art. See Lorenz, 1982: 104–108.

¹⁸⁴ Transcript of oral history interview with G.L.K. Morris, *op. cit.*: 54.

¹⁸⁵ Hepworth to Morris, 18 February 1940, G.L.K. Morris Papers, Archives of American Art.

¹⁸⁶ Nicholson to Ramsden, 2 October [1940], TGA 9310.1.2.11.

magazine the previous month with the effect of presenting the last decade of abstract work as socially irrelevant, academic work which had existed in a 'glass church'.¹⁸⁷ It is likely that the article Read was to send on to Nicholson was a text by Morris belatedly responding to Barr's 1936 exhibition and especially to his neglect of contemporary American abstract work. This was published in the Spring 1940 issue of *Partisan Review* and was the only major article he published that year.¹⁸⁸

In 1940 Morris and Nicholson's interests had also particularly converged in a shared appreciation of Mondrian, who had arrived in New York that October. Like Nicholson, Morris had previously met Mondrian, visited his studio in Paris and owned one of his paintings, *Composition with Blue* (1935).¹⁸⁹ As Morris became better acquainted with Mondrian in New York (as Nicholson had earlier), he took an interest in using Mondrian's presence to encourage and promote new abstract work. Subsequent relations between the two were by no means seamless. Early in their correspondence, Nicholson advised Morris that Mondrian could produce an article for *Partisan Review*. Mondrian provided this essay but withdrew his submission after receiving Morris's suggested edits.¹⁹⁰ Remaining on friendly terms, by the end of 1941 Mondrian had accepted an invitation to join the AAA and he had exhibited a new work, *New York* (1940–41), at the society's annual exhibition.¹⁹¹ Despite the variety evident in Nicholson's work during the early 1940s, his work was best known as indebted to Mondrian. One of Morris's closest allies and collaborators in New York A.E. Gallatin shared both artists' enthusiasm for a tradition merging the Cubist and Constructive trends. Furthermore, he had

¹⁸⁷ Grigson's article began by describing Wyndham Lewis's recent claims for a 'return to nature' as a 'death certificate' for abstract art. Noting that 'war is emphatic' and 'may not innovate', he also described, perhaps with Nicholson in mind, that an artist who a few years ago 'painted abstract shapes', now paints 'a chapel or a hill'. G. Grigson, 'The Death of Abstract Art', *Listener* 24, 12 September 1940: 373–4, 373.

¹⁸⁸ Morris, 'The Museum of Modern Art: (as surveyed from the Avant-Garde)', *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 3 May–June 1940: 200–203. Nicholson was intrigued by the article Morris, having not received it from Read by November 1940, he asked Morris to send him a copy directly. Nicholson to Morris, 18 November [1940], George Morris Papers, Archives of American Art. See also 'Appendix: List of Writings by George L.K. Morris' in Lorenz, 1981: 169–172. Morris's criticism of Barr's selection provoked a published letter in response. See 'Letters', *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1940) which includes correspondence between Morris and a Trustee at the Museum). In 1936 Morris participated in a group show organised by Gallatin which has been described as a "counter-exhibition" to Barr's exhibition. *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* ran at the Paul Reinhardt Galleries in New York at the time of *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Presenting the living continuation of the Cubist tradition in America, it was generated for both home and foreign audiences; it travelled to the Galerie Pierre in Paris, then to the Mayor Gallery in London between June and July 1936 where Nicholson might have come into contact with the work of Morris, Charles Biederman, Calder, John Ferren and Charles Shaw (see Lorenz, 1981: 42). Morris's 1936 essay 'On America and a Living Art' for the catalogue of Gallatin's Museum of Living Art can also be read as a response to Barr's selection.

¹⁸⁹ Morris visited Mondrian's Paris studio in the mid-1930s, purchasing *Composition with Blue* (1935), which he owned until 1947. Through his role on its advisory committee, he also purchased *Composition White, Black and Red* (1936) from Mondrian for the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

¹⁹⁰ Jackson, 1997.

¹⁹¹ Mondrian and Léger were asked to join the AAA on 30 November 1940. Mondrian formally accepted the invitation the following January 1941 and the welcoming party was held later that month. The AAA's Riverside exhibition was display in February 1941. See Ward Jackson, 'Mondrian and the American Abstract Artists', *American Abstract Artists Journal: Reflections on Mondrian*, no. 2, December 1997.

formed an art collection which reflected these interests. This collection became the Museum of Living Art at New York University in 1940, when it already included Nicholson's 1936 (*painting*) (Fig. 70).¹⁹² Typical of Nicholson's output from the time when he was most indebted to the lessons of Neoplastic painting, this work built upon the appearance of Nicholson's painted reliefs in Barr's 1936 catalogue in that it again showed him as an artist working in the European geometric abstract tradition.¹⁹³

Nicholson and Morris's correspondence between the autumn of 1941 and spring of 1942 reveals that both artists particularly valued transatlantic exchange at this time. In September 1941 Nicholson was on a mission to send works to the United States for safe-keeping and potential display. By post he sent Morris a small work, probably his 1941 (*painted relief*), and Morris responded with gratitude and a statement of nationalised solidarity.¹⁹⁴ He wrote, 'It is a beautiful one, and it does us good to know that England is able to produce things of such quality at the moment.'¹⁹⁵ He explained that, in return, he was sending Nicholson the next number of *Partisan Review* which included an article explaining 'how I construct pictures'.¹⁹⁶ Morris also requested more images of recent work by Nicholson and his 'compatriots' and responded positively to an ideas posed by Nicholson to highlight the shared interests and mutual support of English and American artists during the war through a published montage of 'lots of little photos'.¹⁹⁷ He explained, however, that his editors were 'a little over-fed on abstract pictures for the present', which suggests why such an article did not appear.

At the beginning of 1942 Morris found another way to represent Nicholson's contact with the American group. After admiring a letter Nicholson had written, Morris published excerpts from it in the correspondence column of an issue of *Partisan Review*, where it appears as a response to Morris's article, received by Nicholson the previous autumn.¹⁹⁸ Nicholson's letter begins by

¹⁹² Gallatin, an old family friend, had visited Paris with Morris in 1929. Morris became curator of New York's Museum of Living Art, formed from Gallatin's collection. See Morris, 'The Gallery of Living Art, New York University', *Axis*, November 1935: 9–10. In a letter to Nicholson written in December 1939, Mondrian repeated Gallatin's description of works in his collection, including two paintings by Mondrian, one by Nicholson, and a work in crayon by Picasso. Mondrian to Nicholson, [6 December 1939], TGA 8717.1.2.3012. Sophie Bowness has noted that this work is 1936 (*painting*), now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bowness, 1990. Nicholson's 1936 (*painting*) is reproduced in black and white in Gallatin's collection catalogue, which was published in 1940. *Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York, 1940), cat. 98.

¹⁹³ *Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York, 1936).

¹⁹⁴ Read's 1948 catalogue of paintings, reliefs and drawings lists two works from the collection of Morris: 1936 (*drawing*) (cat.108) and 1941 (*painted relief*) (cat. 129), making it likely that he sent the latter, which existed in multiple editions, in September.

¹⁹⁵ Morris to Nicholson, 10 September [1941], TGA 8717.1.2.3038.

¹⁹⁶ Morris, 'On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,' *Partisan Review* vol. 8, no. 5, September–October 1941: 403–17.

¹⁹⁷ Morris to Nicholson, 10 September [1941], TGA 8717.1.2.3038.

¹⁹⁸ In January 1942, Morris wrote, 'I enjoyed your long letter very much – in fact, I thought a couple of selections were so interesting that I am taking the liberty of printing them in the *Partisan Review*

comparing Morris's article with his own 'Notes on Abstract Art', which were published in *Horizon* around the same time. Nicholson's response, however, was an honest recognition of differences in approach. He wrote, 'I wondered how much our two articles might overlap – but not much, it seemed.'¹⁹⁹ That year Morris facilitated the purchase of a set of photograph albums of work by Nicholson and Hepworth by New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the inclusion of two of Nicholson's white reliefs in an American-British exhibition at the Museum of Living Art.²⁰⁰ While working towards a second number of *Circle*, he was also, through Morris, being presented to American audiences as an exponent of a broader Neoplastic tradition.

During the early 1940s both Nicholson and Morris were working with younger artists around them and must have been conscious of their position between the historical paths of abstract art and its development in contemporary work. Morris in particular took his responsibility to guide the movement's survival and progression very seriously. As a relatively widely-read critic, furthermore, he was in an ideal position to present Nicholson at the forefront of the English contribution. In a single-page article for *Partisan Review* in 1943, on 'English Abstract Painting', Nicholson is clearly placed at the centre of a circle of artists in England whose works, Morris notes, had created 'a sort of national language'.²⁰¹ Perhaps drawing from Nicholson's statement of differences the previous year, Morris explained such differences as a consequence of war, when opportunities for contact were in short supply or had 'ceased entirely', and as a result of artists' wartime locations 'mostly in isolated country-villages'. Learning from his contact with Hepworth and Nicholson, Morris also stressed material difficulties, especially for 'handicapped' sculptors who were forced to concentrate 'on drawings and projects'. In this climate, he described how the movement in England had grown to be 'much more homogeneous than our own'. Particular aesthetic traits he noted were the use of a 'circular compositional scheme' and 'the contrast of hair-lines with bold solid masses'.²⁰² The former trait particularly reflected the centrality of Constructive forms by Gabo, Wells and Hepworth to Morris's reading. Works reproduced by these (alongside others by Nicholson, Alastair Morton, Moore and Lanyon) were constructions, reliefs and drawings composed around a central nucleus. Morris concluded by comparing English and American trends and noted that a more 'sharply constructivist' impulse characterised the English group. He explained how American work

correspondence column.' Morris to Nicholson, 17 January [1942], TGA 8717.1.2.3050. 'A letter from Ben Nicholson,' *Partisan Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, January–February 1942: 93.

¹⁹⁹ He continued by discussing with more enthusiasm the various possibilities of 'abstract' and 'representational' forms in painting to provide 'profound' expression. *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Lewison, 1993: 244.

²⁰¹ Morris, 'Art Chronicle: English Abstract Painting', *Partisan Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, May–June 1943: 224–6.

²⁰² Morris, 'Art Chronicle: English Abstract Painting', *Partisan Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, May–June: 224. Nicholson had clearly assisted Morris with his research by providing information and reproductions. In May 1943, Morris wrote, 'I want to thank you so much for all the trouble you have taken for my article, which is about to appear, and a copy of which I will send each of you. The following works are reproduced – by Gabo, Nicholson, Hepworth, Morton, Wells, Moore, and Lanyon.' Nicholson to Morris, 10 May [1943], TGA 8717.1.2.3043.

seemed ‘unmistakably romantic in comparison’. To close, he modestly upheld the English contribution and potential to sow seeds for a ‘post-war renaissance’ in which art would relate strongly ‘to the new forms of our modern surroundings.’²⁰³

While Morris’s presentation of variously English and American national abstract traditions recognised an increased freedom the critical languages of interwar Cubism, his own reputation within a wider field of writers in the United States shows how contemporary abstract work in both England and America remained tightly bound to discussions of Cubism as a continuing mainstream modern movement. Greenberg emerged in circles surrounding *Partisan Review* in 1939 when, aged twenty-nine, his ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ was published in the journal.²⁰⁴ The following summer the journal also published Greenberg’s ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’ and he joined Morris on the editorial board that year.²⁰⁵ Through Morris, Nicholson was kept up-to-date on new and relevant critical texts such as these. Around 1941 Morris explained to Nicholson that he had sent ‘a couple of Partisan Reviews the other day, one with the Greenberg article you wanted’.²⁰⁶ However, by 1942, when Nicholson and Morris’s conversations were arguably at their most advantageous to Nicholson, the two critics were on diverging paths. In March 1942 Greenberg became art critic for weekly magazine *The Nation* and Morris resigned from *Partisan Review* the following year.

While the two critics had agreed on the superiority of an abstract Cubist tradition at the beginning of the decade, debates which followed reflected how their approaches to Cubism as both a historical and contemporary movement differed. In April 1946 Greenberg strongly questioned the American Abstract Artists’ overreliance upon ‘Cubist’ motifs in his review of that year’s exhibition, now published in *The Nation*.²⁰⁷ Nicholson, included as a guest contributor to this exhibition, was however selected by Greenberg in his review as one of four artists whose work had ‘particularly impressed’ him as viable expansions of the Cubist movement.²⁰⁸ Connecting each of his selected artists to a modernist precedent, Greenberg noted the Arpian work of Nell Blaine and the Klee-like work of Fannie Hillsmith and Maurice Golubov. The ‘cubism’ of these more successful works, therefore, was analysed according to the movement’s contemporary directions. Viewing his work in terms of Neoplasticism, which he described as ‘late-Cubism’, Greenberg explained that Nicholson’s work ‘seems to go toward

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, Fall 1939: 34–49.

²⁰⁵ Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’, *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 4, July–August 1940: 296–210, 296.

²⁰⁶ Morris to Nicholson, 12 February [c.1941], TGA 8717.1.2.3039.

²⁰⁷ *American Abstract Artists 10th Annual Exhibition*, American-British Art Center, New York, 25 March – 13 April. Greenberg, ‘Review of Exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists, Jacques Lipchitz, and Jackson Pollock’, *Nation*, 13 April 1946, reproduced in O’Brian (ed.), 1986: 72–75.

²⁰⁸ Greenberg began his review by characterising the group as aiming ‘to continue and develop the premises inherent in cubism’. Ibid.: 72.

Mondrian – but only seems.²⁰⁹ Recognising this stylistic association through Nicholson's formal language of 'precise circles and strict and not so strict rectangles', he described Nicholson's use of geometric abstraction not as an attempt to create a pure or rational form but as an expression of 'a maximum of "poetry"'. He explained, 'That Nicholson's work should be taken for cold and formal is the result only of many people's failure to look at it without preconceptions.' While Greenberg perceived the formal proximity of Nicholson's work to the Neoplastic strand, he described how, when distanced from the rhetoric of purification which characterised interwar geometric abstraction, Nicholson's individual use of geometry was revealed as a visual, post-Cubist form of poetry.

Greenberg's evocation of poetry as a positive antidote to purification and rationalism, suggests that he valued Nicholson's forms not as an absolute formal language stripped of particularities or associations, but as a set of forms which created a non-objective, emotional and sensory expression. For Nicholson too, poetry was a term he associated with the power of art to provide a personal and intuitive statement rather than an iconic representation or set of intellectual principles. When Nicholson analysed poetry as an art form, he particularly noted how, because it was built upon a system of signs, linguistic terms and references, it was impossible for it to be totally abstract. Rather it was inherently descriptive and evocative. In June 1941 Nicholson described to Read, a poet, the place of abstraction in different media, explaining that he considered art, music, poetry and science as 'parallel' and 'equal' developments which had 'exact differences'. He wrote, 'where poetry can never be entirely abstract, where art can be almost purely naturalistic & can be purely abstract, & where music can only with great difficulty be at all naturalistic.'²¹⁰ Returning to art, Nicholson concluded that it was due to its relative flexibility to be 'almost purely naturalistic' or 'purely abstract' that abstraction was less widely accepted. At the time when his own work was fluctuating between landscapes and abstract reliefs, therefore, Nicholson was interrogating the representational and abstract means of painting, which he considered alongside other media, including poetry.

Although it is not certain which texts he knew, Nicholson's 1941 analysis of each medium suggest that he had read earlier texts by Greenberg on the same topic. Greenberg, also a poetry critic, included a comprehensive discussion of media in 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940). In this essay, Greenberg evaluated each medium's inherent characteristics, also specifically connecting them to their representational or abstract capabilities. He upheld music for its 'absolute nature' and pronounced poetry as the principal 'psychological' medium which was not an intellectual effect but rather an appeal to readers' consciousness.²¹¹ For Greenberg, poetry communicated foremost not a prescribed set of meanings but rather a 'relation' between words,

²⁰⁹ Ibid.: 73.

²¹⁰ Nicholson to Read, 10 June [1941], TGA 8717.1.3.41.

²¹¹ Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' [1940], *op. cit.*: 304–306.

which were complex ‘personalities composed of sound, history and possibilities of meaning’.²¹² Similarly, in his ‘Notes on Abstract Art’ of 1941, Nicholson described not the meaning of the words included in *Au Chat Botté* but his experiences of them as ‘abstract’ designs and stimuli of a ‘train of thought.’²¹³ This strong concurrence of interests makes it likely that Nicholson received ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’ from Morris in February 1941 and had it in mind when preparing his *Horizon* article published that October. This relationship was then arguably reciprocated in 1946, when Greenberg responded to Nicholson’s ‘poetic’ mode of abstract painting.

Although stylistically dissimilar to the more explicitly textual *Au Chat Botté*, Greenberg’s discussions of Nicholson’s ‘poetic’ post-Cubism helps to reveal important continuations between Nicholson use of text and his later treatment of still life objects. In particular, Greenberg’s earlier description of poetry as a relational system between words ‘personalities composed of sound, history and possibilities of meaning’ can help to unpick Nicholson’s treatment of objects, and especially in his later 1940s and early 1950s still life scenes. As shown, in the second half of the 1920s, Nicholson had gathered objects together in naïvely composed arrangements to create composite outlines suggestive of the abstract language of their forms. Principally through his encounters with Braque’s work in 1932, he used line to connect signs and to compose his scenes. Through his relocation to St Ives and supported by his conversations with Morris in the early 1940s, linear structures increasingly configured objects and more distant views into scenes with greater spatial depth.

From around 1946, Nicholson’s works encompass systems of shapes and signs which increasingly dissolved the object into a network of repeating, reversed and often serialised forms.²¹⁴ In their more de-individuated form, by the second half of the 1940s Nicholson’s treatment of still life objects is comparable to a different and particular mode of Cubism in its post-1919 form: the *objet types* of the 1920s Purist paintings of Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier). Surprisingly absent in previous literature on Nicholson, Purist works formed a strong presence in 1920s Parisian galleries and journals, including Rosenberg’s *Bulletin de “l’Effort Moderne”* and Ozenfant and Jeanneret’s *L’Esprit Nouveau*, both of which

²¹² Ibid.: 306. Nicholson’s ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ of the previous year had also briefly introduced his ideas about poetry as a necessarily representative medium. He wrote: ‘poetry must deal with words, and words must communicate.’ Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ [1939], *op. cit.*

²¹³ Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, *Horizon*, vol. 4, no. 22, October 1941, quoted in Bowness, S., 1992: 44–5.

²¹⁴ Although not a central feature of this argument, I have drawn from distinct readings by Krauss and Poggi of Saussurian linguistics, which is explored by both, although in different ways, as a device which can highlight forms and ideas central to the Cubists’ use of shapes and signs. Both compare this to Saussure’s description of language as a ‘synchronic, relational system’ in which concepts are not defined by their positive content but through their positioning within the context of other signs. Krauss, for instance, quotes Saussure’s description of words as ‘relative, oppositive, and negative’ to describe the Cubist project in terms of how ‘meaning itself becomes a function of the system rather than of the world.’ Krauss, 1998: 18. See also Poggi, 1992 and Saussure, 1966: 119.

Nicholson is known to have owned. Ozenfant's *Vases* (1925) (Fig. 71) was, for instance, reproduced in black and white the November 1926 issue of the *Bulletin de "l'Effort Moderne"*, which Nicholson owned.²¹⁵ Nicholson also kept a full set of the Purist journal *L'Esprit Nouveau: revue internationale illustrée de l'activité contemporaine*, in which Ozenfant and Jeanneret outlined their approach. For example, the term 'objet type' was used in a text 'Le Purisme', published in the fourth number in January 1921.²¹⁶ In 1925 Nicholson also contributed two works to an exhibition in Paris (*L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*), which included works by both Picasso and Ozenfant, and he probably visited Paris at the time of the exhibition.²¹⁷

Although opposed to the literal effect of actual collaged elements, the Purists used recognisable, graphic and standardised still life objects to create an overlapping sequence of forms, set up like *papier-collé* to interact through their forms, outlines and positioning. Because of this, Ozenfant's analytical 'types' were widely received as a strong line of Cubist enquiry. Ozenfant and Jeanneret themselves aligned their approach with Cubism through their journal, while suggesting that Purism could spread the movement into new ground – a position Ozenfant explicitly stated in his 1925 article 'On the Cubist and Post-Cubist Schools'.²¹⁸ As Green states, the Purists' absorption of the Cubist value of plasticity made it a 'strong case' for the earlier movement's survival beyond the 1920–25 period.²¹⁹ From the mid-1920s Nicholson similarly extended the Cubists' emphasis on relational systems through the plastic qualities of still life objects and he must have been interested in the Purists' approach. Ozenfant and Jeanneret, furthermore, were noted by those in Nicholson's close social network during the 1930s as key exponents of the new Cubist style which, as Nicholson wrote in 1930 to Roché, constituted the work of Braque and younger artists. Read created a telling summary of the movement in his 1933 book *Art Now*, in which he began a list of contemporary 'Cubists' with 'Braque, [André] Lhote, Ozenfant, Jeanneret [...]'. Despite being credited with its invention, he explained to readers that Picasso now only 'intermittently practiced the style.'²²⁰ Nicholson does not seem to have explicitly recognised a particular connection between his own work and that of the Purists', and important differences in approach undoubtedly exist – for instance, in Nicholson's preference for combining multiple perspectives and differentiated surface textures. Regardless

²¹⁵ *Bulletin de "l'Effort Moderne"*, no. 29, November 1926, TGA 8717.6.8.24.

²¹⁶ Other similar terms were used in following issues: 'l'objet standart' appeared in the essays 'L'Angle droit' (*L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 18, November 1923) and 'Idées personnelles' (*L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 27, November 1924). Green, 1987: 306, note 85.

²¹⁷ *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*, Chambre Syndicale de la Curiosité et des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Lewison notes that Nicholson was invited to contribute to *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* in 1925 by Polish artist Victor Poznanski.

²¹⁸ Ozenfant, 'Sur les écoles cubistes et post-cubistes', *Journal de psychologie normale*, January – March 1924: 290–302. Green, 1987: 89.

²¹⁹ Green, 1987: 91.

²²⁰ Under the heading of 'Cubism', Read wrote, 'This is a fairly limited school, but a very consistent, very persistent one. In France it consists of artists like Braque, Lhote, Ozenfant, Jeanneret, Delaunay, Marcoussis, Metzinger, Gleizes and Léger [...]. Picasso is sometimes credited with the invention of the style; but he and other painters who have intermittently practiced the style [...] in the main belong to other school.' Read, 1933: 108.

of some stylistic differences, the Purists' approach to the still life object, its role within painting and in viewers' experiences of it offers a vital context to this important stage in Nicholson's development.

Krauss offers a helpful starting point for this analysis by connecting the pictorial system of *objet types* in Ozenfant's mid-1920s works with Picasso's *papier-collés* and 'pastiche's'.²²¹ In *The Picasso Papers* (1998), Krauss describes Ozenfant's use of objects as 'token signs' which are comparable to the superimposed, non-representational elements of *papier-collé*, which she terms 'semiotic equivalents'.²²² Noting a desired banality in Ozenfant's depiction of *objet types*, she explains that, while they do not completely disregard objects' identities, they stand in for the objects' plastic properties and design. To describe this effect, she refers to them as the 'token signs' of items which circulate independently from their actual referents in the natural world.²²³ For Krauss this is comparable to the 'dismantling of conventions of representation' put into effect by *papier-collé*. In both systems, she suggests, objects become flattened signifiers which circulate upon a field and are valued according to their plastic qualities and relative positioning.

Before turning to specific examples, it is worth exploring the intersection between this formal narrative and Greenberg's wider discussions on post-Cubist painting. In the years following his review of the visual poetry of Nicholson's works, other texts by Greenberg highlight that the artist and critic shared common ground concerning the relevance and effects of Cubism. In 1947 Greenberg described a trend, perceived among contemporary post-Cubist painters, to exploit the physical limitations of the medium by repeating its shape and proportion through internal pictorial structures. Reviewing an exhibition of works by Jean Dubuffet for *The Nation* that February, he noted how Dubuffet's internal structures explicitly recalled the rectangular shape of the picture space. He explained, 'Like so much of modern art, it is a kind of geometry impelled by the need, conscious or unconscious, to remind ourselves of, and repeat, and

²²¹ Krauss writes, 'By the mid-1920s someone like Ozenfant will make exactly the same synthesis between mechanical drawing and classical "purity" – a purported classicism that will have as its generative subject an array of bottles and wineglasses and pitchers wrought by mass production. Ozenfant will rationalize his decision to take these implements as the nexus of his classicism by calling them "*objet types*" [...].' Krauss, 1998: 153.

²²² Krauss describes how *papier-collé* produced 'rumpled fragments' which were 'transformed into a series of semiotic equivalents' so that they became 'flattened sets of signifiers for the various pictorial signifieds, such as *depth, light, texture, shape*.' She also adds that colour could not be added to this list, since it cannot be given a substitute. Noting how it could be true of texture, she cites Picasso's and Braque's experimentations with 'a wide variety of surfaces like gesso and sawdust-impregnated paint to signify the distinctly different surfaces of wood and glass'. She explains how colour functions differently in their works as it 'remains local'. Thus, 'the colored surface of a given object' was always 'the unmediated color of the thinglike plane itself' as it was received by the viewer's sight. Krauss, 1998: 170–171.

²²³ On the 'empty' or 'token' sign, Krauss writes, 'At its most pernicious level, the fraudulent is thus a corollary of the "empty sign," the outgrowth of what structural linguistics would call a "token" language, signs circulating without a "convertible" base in the world of nature.' Krauss, 1998:10–11. See also Green, 1987: 91.

acknowledge the physical limitations of the medium.²²⁴ This was a structure that, since his early still lifes and experiments with *papier-collé*, Nicholson had explicitly acknowledged as a foundational structuring tool.

A work made in the month following Greenberg's 1947 review confirms that this opposition remained central to the effects of Nicholson's works. *14 March 1947 (still life – spotted curtain)* (Fig. 72) is a typical work from this period and shows Nicholson using still life objects to make a painted abstract configuration.²²⁵ The forms and outlines of different objects at times merge so that the selective perception is required to comprehend more fully a particular object's shape. Although continuing a much longer tendency for Nicholson's still life forms to become particular *objet types*, the 'objects' appear here as performances of their forms, a series of bold, decorative outlines which describe the ridges of the carafe and glass forms. The resulting pattern calls attention to the fact that the painting is a two-dimensional linear design made by the artist performing a process of representation. As for earlier works, however, other techniques provide the forms with substance and the scene a sense of depth. Strong, plastic colour, for instance, gives individual segments particular weight or personality. Nicholson's scheme of colour and pencil lines occupies only the internal table-top field which is differentiated from a ground beneath to become a *tableau* space within the compositional field. As a horizontal surface tilted flat to the picture plane and shown with two narrow legs below, this space also mimics the upright posture of the painting's support, thereby enacting its upright flatness with a charismatic performativity similar to the heightened ridges used to describe the objects on display.

This development in Nicholson's work coincided with significant developments in how Greenberg perceived the contemporary manifestations of Cubism. These changes in the field of art criticism, furthermore, have played a significant role in determining Nicholson's position within historical accounts of the movement's evolution from Cubism to 'post-Cubist' trends. Greenberg's 1946 review of the AAA exhibition was combined with his reviews of two monographic exhibitions also on display in New York: Jacques Lipchitz's sculptures at the Buchholz Gallery and Jackson Pollock's paintings at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery.²²⁶ Witnessing both of these artists' 'bombast', Greenberg described Pollock's 'bad taste' as a sign of things to come and he praised the younger artist's brashness (his 'genuinely violent and extravagant art') as a challenge to his audience which would, he predicted, 'become

²²⁴ Greenberg, 'Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock', *The Nation*, 1 February 1947. Reprinted in O'Brian (ed.), 1986: 123.

²²⁵ *14 March 1947 (still life – spotted curtain)* was one of the most recent works shown in Nicholson's exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery in May 1947, where it appeared alongside a group of 32 drawings. It was then included in an exhibition of Nicholson's 'Recent Paintings 1947–48' at the same gallery the following year, which included, among others, *11 November 1947 (Mousehole)*.

²²⁶ *Jacques Lipchitz*, Buchholz Gallery, New York, March–April 1946; *Jackson Pollock*, Art of this Century, New York, 1946.

a new standard of beauty'.²²⁷ Nicholson's 'poetry' and Cubist taste, therefore, soon faded into the background of a declaration of new and more forceful standards which were clearly already taking effect.²²⁸

Two years later Greenberg consolidated his view in his article 'The Decline of Cubism' (*Partisan Review*, March 1948), in which he proposed a direct causal link between the war and the postwar decline of the European avant-garde, which he characterised in terms of a Cubist lineage ('still the only vital style of our time') and the weakening of social conditions conducive to avant-garde art. For Greenberg, the process 'of history going backwards' and Cubism's demise was already underway by the 1920s; by 1939 it had entered what he assumed to be its 'final stage'.²²⁹ Framing his critical narrative around the end of the First World War, the 'decline' of cubist masters' post-1919 work was at the heart of Greenberg's value judgements.²³⁰ His explanation centred on the idea that, during its earlier pre-war stage, these artists had been formed by the 'progressive', optimistic and self-confident age of the industrial, capitalist culture in which they lived. Re-emerging in the interwar period, Cubism lacked the supportive 'social premises' required for it to continue to progress. Reversing into 'retreat' since then, he explained how the original Cubist project had, in its current postwar situation, become impossible in Europe, which had become 'filled with nostalgia and too profoundly frightened' by the war 'to dare hope' for a better future.²³¹

Greenberg's reliance on a narrative of post-1919 Cubism as a movement no longer pursuing its original form was, as shown, part of a wider debate which had existed since 1920s Paris. Nicholson had engaged with the situation eighteen years earlier when, in 1930, he described to French writer Henri-Pierre Roché that recent Cubist work had moved beyond his understanding of the movement's focus on the materials and processes of painting. Hopeful of a return to these standards, he wrote,

I learnt a lot by our visit to Paris – I think the Parisian work has gone (not Braque of course) outside painting (psychological, mechanical etc.) & that in daring, which I agree is essential, they have gone to a human power which is no power at all. But

²²⁷Ibid.: 74.

²²⁸In his article Greenberg used the term 'post-cubist' to describe the work of Arp, whose work he noted as an important precedent for the younger artists on display. Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists, Jacques Lipchitz, and Jackson Pollock', *The Nation*, 13 April 1946, reproduced in O'Brian (ed.), 1986: 72.

²²⁹Greenberg, 'The Decline of Cubism', *Partisan Review*, March 1948, reproduced in O'Brian (ed.), 1986: 211–215, 214.

²³⁰Greenberg cited the critic's responsibility to consider 'why the cubist generation and its immediate successors have, contrary to artists' precedent, fallen off in middle and old age.' Ibid., 212.

²³¹Ibid.: 215.

perhaps when Picasso has left his psychological by-pass he will come back to a new power & bring Parisian painting with him.²³²

Except for the isolated work of Braque, for Nicholson the kind of work associated with pre-war Cubism no longer existed in 1930. As the diagram he made six years later showed, he considered Constructivism, Neoplasticism and ‘?’ as directly inspired but historically disconnected movements to be named of their own accord. Within Greenberg’s longer narrative, the critical value of previous (specifically pre-1919) Cubist work was also upheld to suggest the possibility of its return. In the context of his argument, Cubism represented a broader value of avant-gardism which, generated within a more optimistic culture, depended upon similar historical circumstances and social conditions. Noting how some of these ‘premises’ had already taken root in the United States, he ended ‘The Decline of Cubism’ with the possibility that the movement as he saw it could enjoy ‘a new efflorescence in this country’.²³³

Actively taking on Greenberg’s appropriation of the movement, Morris’s work endured a less fortunate fate. From 1948 he engaged in oppositional debate with his previous colleague, with his allegiance to an outmoded form of Cubism inspiring further criticism from Greenberg and other critics.²³⁴ Nicholson, on the other hand, whose reading of Cubism was neither directly aligned nor at odds with that of the critic, continued to receive minor praise from New York. In the spring of 1949 Nicholson had his first one-man show in the city, at the Durlacher Gallery, which was formed of a substantial group of twenty-eight works ranging from the early 1930s to recent paintings. Greenberg reviewed the exhibition for *The Nation* with enthusiasm for Nicholson’s ‘consistency of success’.²³⁵

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²³² Nicholson, letter to H.P. Roché, 20 June 1930, Carlton Lake Collection Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, quoted in Lewison, 1993: 38.

²³³ *Ibid.*: 215.

²³⁴ The June 1948 issue of *Partisan Review* published both sides of the story. Morris’s article began, ‘Why is it that America, despite considerable creative vigor and an unusual curiosity about painting, has never produced a reputable art critic?’ He questioned Greenberg’s notion of the Cubism’s decline: ‘It would have been rewarding if Greenberg had indicated in what ways the works of [Picasso, Braque, Arp] [...] have declined since the thirties.’ He also argued with Greenberg’s description of the importance of collage for producing relief, explaining his view that ‘Even in the flattest cubist paintings, the image [...] is ‘behind the frame’.’ In the same issue Greenberg replied to Morris. ‘Let me be brief, Picasso: insensitive and disruptive color, arbitrary space-handling, literary distortions [...], forced emotion, bombast ... Braque: a growing aimlessness [...], repetitiousness and flaccidity of design, virtuosic color, lack of real matter.’ He then admitted that he had failed to specify, in his previous text, between descriptions of ‘classical cubism as a specific style’ and ‘cubism as a tradition’. He closed his response suggestively, ‘Nevertheless, I believe that in the eyes of the future their differences will seem much less pronounced even than they do now.’ Greenberg, ‘Reply to George L.K. Morris’, *Partisan Review*, June 1948. Reprinted in O’Brian (ed.), 1986: 242–5.

²³⁵ *Ben Nicholson*, Durlacher Bros., New York, 29 March–23 April 1949. The selection included *1933 (coin and musical instruments)* to more recent work such as *13–17 December (Trendrine 2)* and *21 March 1948 (still life – crystal)*. Greenberg, ‘Review of Exhibitions of Ben Nicholson and Larry Rivers’, *The Nation*, 16 April 1949, reprinted in O’Brian (ed.), 1986: 299–301, 299.

In 2012 Clark stated that Nicholson's art exhibits an 'aesthetic distance' which is at odds with the modernist value of literalness, described as a bond between the physical facts of the medium and its internal imaging. As we have seen, Clark's key modernist 'truth condition' rarely provides by itself a suitable way of looking at Nicholson's work. Yet, examples show that a kind of literalness is explicitly produced in how Nicholson exploited key structuring motifs. The table-top surface and the window frame, in particular, repeat and mimic the physical, material and orientational characteristics of the support, as well as its literal identity as an object in the world. As in the early experimental reliefs, internal fields sometimes explicitly declare the work's role as an interactive 'thing' to be moved and held. More often, the symbolic structures of the table or window assert the verticality of the wall on which it would be placed, made more clear by the persistent tilt of the table-top's horizontal field.

Clark's values also highlight that Nicholson's works most explicitly present the literalness of painting as a transformative site. This is traceable within each example discussed, for example in: the visibility of pencil lines in *1924 (first abstract painting – Chelsea)*; the wandering lines in *1932 (painting)*; the frames of his painted reliefs; the linear window handle in *1940 (St Ives, version 2)*; and the mirroring of the vertical support through the tilted table-top in *14 March 1947 (still life – spotted curtain)*. This range reveals that, for Nicholson, representations are consistently described with honesty regarding their own materials and processes. Nicholson's works can be seen to express the Cubist project, therefore, through his use of table-top and *tableau* motifs, which call attention not just to the works' literal physicality but primarily to their identities as constructed worlds in which signs circulate. As Nicholson saw in Cubist examples, 'reality' itself could be expressed in a work's 'pictorial' honesty', in which it exposes itself as an interlocutor in a dialogue between object, representation and viewer. In the autumn of 1944, two years before Greenberg's review and just months after his description of Picasso's 'miraculous green', Nicholson described his understanding of Picasso's work in these terms. Following a discussion of painting's necessarily 'tense visual structure', he wrote with characteristic playfulness: 'To deny the reality in say a Picasso abstract-cubist ptg or in a good Mondrian is enough to make any cock crow thrice & bust. To find also a reality in representation is a good idea & is in fact what Picasso has done?'²³⁶

²³⁶ Nicholson to Summerson, 5 September ['Sept 5 probably'] [1944], TGA 20048.1.68.

CONCLUSION: 1949–64

The network of artists in St Ives did not, as in 1939, suddenly change in 1949. The developments discussed in this chapter were, on the contrary, part of a gradual process that, as Hepworth's changing relationship with Gabo has shown, was already underway in the final years of the war. 1949, however, marks a year in which several factors converged and a climax was reached. At the close of the Second World War a few years earlier, artists, this time returning from wartime service or labour, moved or returned to St Ives. Many did so explicitly with the ambition of staying – on a temporary basis at least – to establish or to resume an artistic practice. In June 1945 Bryan Wynter, who had spent the previous five years working as a Conscientious Objector in Oxford, arrived in St Ives with the intention of staying for a summer before returning to the Slade School of Art. He found a home in the West Penwith moors above St Ives and stayed for most of the next thirty years.¹ A number of men recently demobilised from duty abroad followed the next spring: Lanyon returned in March, Terry Frost arrived in May and William Scott stayed for that summer.² As for ten years earlier, the stories of each new resident would demonstrate how West Cornwall satisfied each artist's specific practical, psychological and artistic needs at a time of great importance to their professional and personal lives. The range and character of these movements, however, reflects the changed context of renewed opportunities for travel and relocation in postwar Britain. Once they had arrived, many artists stayed mobile and worked fluidly between St Ives and other art centres elsewhere.

In this context of more flexible modes of communication, transport and living, the community of artists attached to St Ives grew over the following years and each artist, in their own way, developed international audiences and correspondences. As Hepworth's, Nicholson's, Heron's or Lanyon's lists of contacts, exhibitions and visitors through the period would show, St Ives between 1949 and 1964 was a decidedly international network. Important conversations were continued or maintained, connecting those working in St Ives to the forefront of debate surrounding the present and future circumstances of modern art. Rothko stayed with Lanyon when he visited St Ives for a long weekend in August 1958; Greenberg stayed with Heron when he visited for six days the following July, during his first trip to England since they first met in London in August 1954.³ Heron's situation and subsequent importance for the network of artists in St Ives demonstrates how those who were able to move freely between St Ives and London during the late 1940s and early 1950s, in particular, benefitted from the capital's commercial

¹ See Stephens, 1999 and Bird, 2010.

² On Lanyon, see Causey, 1971 and Stephens, 2000. On Frost, see Lewis, 1994 and Stephens, 2000. On Scott, see Whitfield, 2013. A more comprehensive guide to those arriving in St Ives during these years can be found in *St Ives 1939–64*, exh. cat., 1985.

³ See *Mark Rothko in Cornwall*, exh. cat. (St Ives, Tate Gallery, 1996) and *St Ives 1939–64*, exh. cat., 1985.

and cultural power to present opportunities for collaboration, income and critical exchange. Heron lived predominantly in Holland Park in West London until 1956. Between 1945 and 1954 he worked as a critic and reviewer for *The New English Weekly*, *The New Statesman and Nation* and *Art News & Review*; from 1953 to 1956 he also taught at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Camden.⁴ Although regularly visiting Cornwall, especially over the summer months, the range of Heron's professional roles meant that he was thoroughly engaged with exhibitions, events and current developments in London and further afield. In 1952, for instance, he was the London reviewer of Nicholson's latest Lefevre exhibition, which he described negatively as a remove from the 'reality' of Cubist still lifes of Picasso and Braque.⁵ When Greenberg visited London in 1954, Heron was there to meet him so that, upon his return, Greenberg suggested him as a London arts correspondent for New York *Arts* magazine, a position he held between 1954 and 1959. As both an artist and writer, and positioned as he was between St Ives, London and the critical scene in New York, Heron was central to the orchestration of a number of these artists' critical and commercial presences in the States, and he wrote articles introducing Frost, Hepworth, Hilton and Wynter, among others, to American audiences.⁶ As the critical importance of each artist grew, furthermore, Heron increasingly presented St Ives as an artistic centre worthy of international attention and appraisal. Due to be reporting on London for the New York *Arts* in November 1956, he felt the need to explain, 'in England there are two centers so far as contemporary painting is concerned: London and St Ives, Cornwall.'⁷

Numerous artistic correspondences emerged in this climate of inter-cultural contact. From 1949 Heron frequently visited French artist Pierre Soulages on most his trips to Paris and engaged, in both his criticism and own work, with the non-figurative 'reality' of his spatial constructions of colour.⁸ In 1953 Hilton (not yet living in St Ives) entered into dialogue with Dutch artist Constant, who, through conversations and a first-hand introduction to Mondrian's work in Amsterdam, had a vital impact on Hilton's development of a more geometric style and later involvement with the group of British 'Constructionists'.⁹ In the mid-1950s Frost and Heron, in particular, developed interests in the work of Californian painter Sam Francis, then living in Paris. Both seem to have visited the artist in 1956 and recognised, although not without some hesitation, that his differently coloured markings upon spacious canvases aligned with their own

⁴ Gooding (ed.), 1998.

⁵ Heron, Review of *Ben Nicholson: Exhibition of Paintings*, Lefevre Gallery, London, May 1952. *The New Statesman and Nation*, 17 May 1952. Reprinted in Gooding (ed.), 1998: 63–65.

⁶ 'Barbara Hepworth – Carver', *Arts Digest* (New York), 1 May 1955; 'Alan Davie and Terry Frost', *Arts* (New York), April 1956; 'Introducing Roger Hilton', *Arts* (New York), May 1957; 'Influences and Affinities: Americans at the ICA/ Tobey, Wynter and César', *Arts* (New York), January 1953. All reprinted in Gooding (ed.), 1998.

⁷ Heron, 'London' *Arts* (New York), vol. 31, no. 2, November 1956.

⁸ See Wilson, 2000: 104 and 167, and Heron, 'The Power of Paris', *New Statesman and Nation*, 19 July 1952: 68.

⁹ See Lewis, 1998, Lewis, 2003, Grieve, 2005 and Stephens, 2006.

more painterly and atmospheric application of paint.¹⁰ As these examples can only suggest, many international conversations revolved around artists' knowledge of and desire to extend modernist traditions, including both Constructivism and Cubism.

Yet the postwar narrative offers a different kind of story to wartime St Ives. The overall picture it presents is of a network of nuclear groupings, discrete international conversations and leading figures who continued to generate international commissions, coverage, exhibitions and sales. Even for the idealist Hepworth, circumstances at the end of the war had planted the seeds of an increasing solitariness in artistic approach and professional pursuit. By 1949 relations with Nicholson, at the heart of her collaborative ideals from the 1930s, had broken down and she moved to her own walled house, studio and garden at Trewyn.¹¹ The forming and fracturing surrounding the workings of the 'Penwith Society for the Arts in Cornwall' in February 1949 further illustrate the difficulty of grouping the different personalities and practices of West Cornwall into a society with collectively understood rules, leaders and aspirations. With non-resident Read as President, a ruling was passed in November that year, introducing three categories of work: A for 'Representational', B for 'Abstract' and C for 'Craftsmen'; by the following spring, several members, including Lanyon, had resigned.¹²

Before concluding, I turn to two events from 1964 which help to unravel some of the changes which had taken place.

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In June 1964 Hepworth travelled from St Ives to the unveiling ceremony of *Single Form* at the headquarters of the United Nations, New York, where she was to give a short address (Fig. 73). At the height of her career, a mature artist gaining ever-growing recognition and reward, Hepworth found aspects of her increasingly public role challenging. Asked to present her work and life through texts, statements and public appearances, it was often hard to find the right words. For the rare privilege of unveiling this commission, Hepworth agreed to speak.¹³ Her first words, 'It is very difficult for me to speak, because I can only communicate through my sculpture,' signalled the primary role of her work.¹⁴ Hepworth was also frustrated by tasks which took her away from her studio for long periods of time. During the 1960s she frequently

¹⁰ See my essay, 'Common Ground: St Ives and Post-war Communities of Exchange' in *Modern Art and St Ives*, exh. cat. 2014: 100–101.

¹¹ Hepworth bought Trewyn Studio and Garden in August 1949.

¹² Lanyon resigned in May 1950. 'Chronology' in *St Ives 1939–94*, exh. cat., *op. cit.*: 106–107.

¹³ Hepworth initially requested that her statement was read by someone else, but on 27 May 1964 she wrote to Dr Bunche, 'I would like to meet your request to read my few lines & trust that somebody could help & instruct me?' Hepworth to Dr Ralph Bunche, 27 May 1964. TGA 20132.2.1.3.176.

¹⁴ Hepworth, 'Address at the Unveiling of "Single Form" in New York', 11 June 1964, reproduced in Hepworth, 1993: 96.

rejected opportunities to travel, conducting arrangements instead via telephone and letter from St Ives, where she could continue to work.¹⁵ Yet this protectiveness over her time and privacy was balanced by a profound desire to connect with audiences across the world through her work.

International exhibitions presented the most exciting opportunities to meet with large cross-cultural audiences. Returning home from the Venice Biennale in 1950, her first experience of a postwar international fair, Hepworth thanked the British Council: 'I came away feeling very satisfied – indeed more than satisfied for I felt a real appreciation of my work from many people'.¹⁶ Over the next two decades, opportunities continued to expand so that selections of her work toured five continents. In 1959 twenty sculptures and fifteen drawings were sent to the V Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo (Fig. 74), which, starting in 1951, signalled the city's ambition to become a centre of international contemporary art. Hepworth represented Britain alongside Francis Bacon and printmaker Stanley Hayter, and she was awarded the prestigious Grand Prize. Czech writer J.P. Hodin provided the catalogue text and introduced Hepworth's work as a continuation of the 'Greek classic ideal' in contemporary form.¹⁷ His description of 'propounding twisting, open forms' particularly resonated with the recent works on display, which included the large guarea carvings *Oval Sculpture (Delos)* and *Curved Form (Delphi)* of 1955, and open bronzes *Figure (Oread)* and *Cantate Domino* of 1958.¹⁸

Following the Bienal, most of her works were sent on a tour organised by the British Council, from São Paulo to Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Valparaiso, and Caracas.¹⁹ In the catalogue text for this South American tour, Hepworth's biography was described as a journey from a local upbringing (born in Wakefield, awarded a travel scholarship) to national recognition, international eminence and global popularity (represented in public collections across America, Australia and Europe). For Hepworth, São Paulo and South America presented the opportunity to reach new audiences at a time when global exposure was high in her mind. In the summer of 1959 Hepworth had been dissatisfied by her representation at Documenta, an

¹⁵ For example, Hepworth refused to visit the UN site until well into *Single Form*'s development despite frequent calls for her presence. She made a two-day trip to New York in October 1962. S. Bowness (ed.), 2011: 81.

¹⁶ Hepworth to Lilian Somerville, 21 June 1950, TGA 867.3.1.

¹⁷ J.P. Hodin, Introduction to *Barbara Hepworth*, exh. cat. (British Council tour: São Paulo, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Caracas, 1959–60): n.p., parallel English, Portuguese and Spanish text.

¹⁸ The catalogue of Hepworth's exhibition at São Paulo lists twenty sculptures and fifteen drawings. This includes only two sculptures from the 1930s and six from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Similarly, only two of the drawings included pre-date 1955. Ibid.

¹⁹ Comisión Nacional de Bellas Artes, Montevideo (Uruguay), 21 April–15 May 1960; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires (Argentina), 21 May–mid-June 1960; Instituto de Arte Moderno, Santiago (Chile), September 1960; Universidad de Santiago Art Gallery, Santiago (Chile), 12 September–2 October 1960; Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas (Venezuela), November 1960.

international exhibition of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany, to which her Gimpel Fils had sent only three small works.²⁰

For her South American venues, including the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Museum of Fine Arts) in Buenos Aires, Hepworth's touring exhibition fitted within existing projects to connect art circles from across Europe and South America. In December 1955 Jorge Romero Brest was appointed supervisor of that Museum, which was due to reopen following the coup d'état against President Juan Perón a few months before.²¹ Founding editor of arts review *Ver y estimar* ('Observe and Judge') from 1948 to 1955, Romero Brest had already built a reputation for locating national art within an international field.²² His essay 'Argentine Art as Universal Art', published in the first issue, described the power of international art centres and upheld Paris as the primary artistic 'melting pot'.²³ As one of the few publications devoted to modern art in Argentina at the time, it established Romero Brest as a leading importer of European tastes and histories.²⁴ His work also brought him to the attention of European artists and critics, and he came into contact with Hepworth and Nicholson.²⁵ He visited St Ives early in 1953 and sent at least one copy of *Ver y estimar* to both artists.²⁶

As director of the Museum from 1956, Romero Brest arranged the permanent collection so that modern works from Europe and Argentina intertwined, supplemented by a changing programme of temporary exhibitions.²⁷ Practically neither Romero Brest nor Hepworth seems to have been directly involved in the arrangements for Hepworth's display which, organised by the British

²⁰ *Imprint* (bronze, 1956, height 32 cm), *Figure (Oread)* (bronze, 1958, height 51 cm) and *Head (Chios)* (alabaster, 1958, height 24 cm). Hepworth complained to Gimpel Fils that she had not been consulted regarding the selection. Hepworth to Charles Gimpel, 16 July 1959, TGA 965.2.2.55.45.

²¹ Giunta, 2001; 2007.

²² *Ver y estimar* was published in forty-four issues between 1948 and 1955. Enrique Oteiza describes how Romero Brest 'opened up people's minds to modern European art [...]. There was hardly any literature available on these subjects then.' Giménez (ed.), 2006: 94.

²³ J. Romero Brest, 'El arte argentino y el arte universal,' *Ver y Estimar* vol. 1, no. 1, April 1948.

²⁴ Romero Brest also wrote a book on contemporary European painting, *La pintura europea contemporánea (1900–1950)*, published in 1952.

²⁵ In 1953, Romero Brest was on the jury panel of the 'Unknown Political Prisoner' competition, which was organised by the ICA in London and included an exhibition at the Tate Gallery. Hepworth won a prize for her entry. Hepworth, Nicholson and Romero Brest also shared a number of contacts, including Max Bill, Léon Degand, David Lewis and Read.

²⁶ In March 1953, Hepworth reported to Romero Brest that she had translated one of his articles from Spanish with a friend's help and that she had been 'tremendously stimulated' by his text. On 8 March 1953, Hepworth wrote to Romero Brest, 'Mrs Bernal has translated all the parts of your article in "Ver y Estimar" which I did not understand & we worked in detail on the important philosophic sections'. In her note, which was sent from St Ives, she also described having been 'greatly excited' by discussions during 'your two visits here' and she wrote, 'I enjoyed every moment of the time you spent in my studio.' Hepworth to Romero Brest, 8 March 1953, correspondence of Jorge Romero Brest, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, C23-S4-473. Nicholson's correspondence with Romero Brest at this time also suggests they discussed Nicholson's painting in his studio. Nicholson to Romero Brest, 16 July [no year], correspondence of Jorge Romero Brest, *op. cit.*, C23-S1-319. I am grateful to Dr Catherine Spencer (University of St Andrews) for locating this correspondence among the papers of Romero Brest in Buenos Aires and for discussions surrounding his activities in Argentina and Britain.

²⁷ Giménez (ed.), 2006: 201.

Council, opened in Buenos Aires in May 1960. Yet Hepworth's contact with Romero Brest and exposure in South America typify the increasingly anti-centralist outlook from the late 1950s when, in the midst of the Cold War, decolonisation and Latin American revolutions, artists' minds and institutional programs were opened towards new geographical areas of research and interest.²⁸ Hepworth and Romero Brest's opinions on the value of art for promoting universal awareness were perfectly aligned and they kept in touch.²⁹

After starting to cast editioned works in bronze in 1956, it was easier for Hepworth to meet simultaneous demands for local, national and international exhibitions and sales. As her work reached wider audiences, it also met with varying expectations. Despite offering a successful introduction to her work across South America, Hepworth's São Paulo exhibition was received with disappointment by an Italian critic who compared the selection with earlier international fairs.³⁰ Similarly, a string of high-profile commissions for civic sites in the 1960s prompted critics to consider Hepworth as an artist working in a decidedly public sphere.

In 1974 Hepworth's *Single Form* was reviewed by Lawrence Alloway for American magazine *The Nation*.³¹ The past ten years had, Alloway explained, granted 'enough time' for reflective evaluation on the sculpture's public role.³² Noting that it was originally conceived as an intimate, personal work, Alloway proposed that *Single Form* had failed to achieve the level of meaning required by the commission. For him, the location was partly to blame. On an island usually circled by cars, the work did not encourage physical sociability but was, instead, too contained or introvert; it could, he suggested, have been 'closer to the flow of people or more grandiose' (Fig. 75). In the absence of a closer connection, he noted how the sculpture had taken on a more symbolic role. Valuing the work's abstraction as unsuitable for presenting a topic in a language 'readable' to the far-reaching audience it was meant to address, he concluded that *Single Form* signified primarily the artist: 'it is a Barbara Hepworth and that is that.'³³

Alloway's critique of the work serves as a reminder of the risks Hepworth faced when working for major institutions on an international stage, especially concerning whether settings could provide intimate encounters with her work. As the enduring impact of Trewyn shows,

²⁸ Margaret Garlake claims that the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes had seen so many international exhibitions since 1958 that they were 'no longer extraordinary events'. Garlake, 'The São Paulo Bienal: A Year-by-Year Summary' in Brett (ed.), 1991: 72. See also Donaldson, 1984.

²⁹ Romero Brest visited Hepworth in St Ives again on 26 August 1962, Hepworth's visitors' book, TGA 20132.3.16.1.

³⁰ Gillo Dorfles, 'La quinta biennale de San Paolo', *Domus*, no. 362, January 1960 : 43–48.

³¹ *The Nation*, vol. 219, no. 8, 21 September 1974: 254.

³² The issue also includes a review of the U.N.'s politics, which proclaimed widespread scepticism of the organisation's political agenda and processes. Donald Fraser, 'Human Rights at the UN', *The Nation*, 21 September 1974, *op. cit.*: 230–2.

³³ During 1974, Alloway contributed an 'Arts' article every fortnight, through which he presented a clear preference for forms of 'social' art, including murals, publications and select exhibitions. Alloway, 1974: 254.

Hepworth's sculptures thrive when displayed in varied, natural environments where they can gradually reveal their forms. This can be anywhere in the world but requires the prioritisation of personal interaction and some seclusion. In such settings, as in Hepworth's life, there is space for the individual both to connect with others and to have time apart. In 1965 Hepworth wrote a tribute to Hodin, whose words had accompanied her sculptures around the world. Returning to memories of Greece, which had stimulated her large guarea works, she described her joy of intense individual pursuit and solitude.

Perhaps I did not write in my notebook about Delphi because it meant so much to me. On a fair and glorious morning I managed to escape some 400 people and ascend the hill alone and in silence. / I also managed to descend alone. All very antisocial; but fantastically important to my work.³⁴

By 1964 Hepworth was a thoroughly international figure who maintained vast appeal and audiences around the world. Although shaped by earlier international collaborations and aspirations, she was no longer part of an artistic movement or collective group. In the UN sculpture at least, her singular 'internationalism', Alloway suggested, had taken over a project that should have had a different focus and effect.

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A different project demonstrates the breadth of change within St Ives's artistic community by 1964. That February Hodin posted a questionnaire to artists he associated with the town. In a covering letter to each artist, he explained his intention 'to collect material for a major article for "The Studio" magazine'.³⁵ He posed the questions:

1. When did you come to Cornwall?
2. How long did you stay, or are you living there now?
3. What attracted you in Cornwall?
 - a) the landscape
 - b) the artists' milieu
 - c) other reasons
4. Is your work influenced by the Cornish landscape?
In what measure?
5. What are the characteristics of this landscape in your opinion?
6. Is Cornwall particularly attractive to the artist?

³⁴ Hepworth's tribute to Hodin was based on notes she made for her Greek Sketchbook of 1954, with an additional beginning and end. Hepworth, 'Greek Diary' in Kern (ed.), 1965: 24.

³⁵ This material is part of the archive of Hodin's papers at the Tate Gallery. All subsequent unreferenced material is from this collection. Josef Paul Hodin Papers, TGA 20062 (uncatalogued).

7. Would you consider the notion of a Cornish School of Art, or even a Cornish style acceptable?
8. Make a short statement of your own aims in art.
9. Give the dates of the various stages of your development, and the influence of trends or personalities upon each of these stages.
10. What is the main source of your inspiration?
 - a) nature
 - b) works of art

This article, as Hodin imagined it, did not subsequently appear. However, held with Hodin's papers at the Tate Archive are responses from eleven artists: Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Paul Feiler, Hepworth, Hilton, Lanyon, Bernard Leach, Roger Leigh, Alexander Mackenzie, Denis Mitchell, Karl Weschke and Wynter. Not all of the artists Hodin contacted had a permanent address in Cornwall, yet all of those who responded were still based, at least on a temporary basis, in the area.³⁶ It is probable, therefore, that Hodin only sent his questionnaire to those who were still as attached to the place, artistically and personally, as they ever had been. Consequently, no trace remains of responses by Gabo or Nicholson, who had left St Ives respectively in 1946 and 1958, or of any attempt by Hodin to include them in his enquiry.

Through their responses, artists were invited to provide their own explanations of agencies on their careers and they were guided towards recognising the local place, landscape and artists' community. For artists involved, furthermore, the questionnaire was an opportunity not only to reflect on their own histories but to portray themselves in certain ways. In an earlier article titled 'Cornish Renaissance' (1950), Hodin explained his approach to culture as a series of overlapping areas:

Culture is everywhere, or it is nowhere: the whole people has it, or nobody has it. [...] If culture is to flourish in the metropolis, it must flourish in every village. It will be slightly different in every region, as also in every social level; because it is something which grows. The whole culture of a nation will be a harmonious organic pattern of a number of parts.³⁷

Specifically on Cornish culture, Hodin explained, 'What is happening in Cornwall attracts our interest not only from the local point of view but as an expression of British and, one might even say, of a universal culture.'³⁸ Continually referring to the county 'Cornwall', his questions

³⁶ For example, Hilton's response came from his home address in north-west London.

³⁷ Hodin, 1950: 113.

³⁸ Hodin, 1950: 113.

encouraged participants to reflect upon their connections with the regional aspects of its landscape and culture.³⁹

The majority of artists responded disapprovingly to the assumptions implicit in Hodin's choice of questions. At least half of the responses returned to Hodin arrived with covering letters expressing dislike of the questionnaire. Many found the concept of explaining their work in relation to Hodin's pre-given ideas particularly offensive. Wells wrote to Hodin at the end of February 1964 saying, 'I must confess I find such questions almost impossible to answer and in fact, I can't help it, exceedingly irritating!'⁴⁰ His following letter explained that he was providing 'the uninspired best I can do with your questions' which had, he added 'irritated everyone I have spoken to'.⁴¹ Hilton responded requesting to be left out of Hodin's project, explaining that he had spent more time in Paris and London compared 'to the odd couple of summers & 4 months one winter in Cornwall'. Because of this, he noted, it would be 'rather unbalanced' to consider him alongside those who had 'lived there for years on end.'⁴² Although Hilton moved permanently to Cornwall the following year, his reluctance to be considered alongside those more firmly based in the town was entirely justified. His response, furthermore, points to the fact that during the 1950s, 'Cornwall' (specifically St Ives and its surrounding area, West Penwith) was a location that many artists visited with varying degrees of permanence. A number of artists, including Hilton, kept studios in West Cornwall on a seasonal basis and their practices developed around the rhythm of change and seasonal variations. This was more in keeping with trends established by nineteenth-century artists' colonies, or with artists' temporary or seasonal trips to Paris earlier in the twentieth century, than with the wartime community in St Ives.

Responses to Hodin's questions also show considerable confusion over the meaning and relevance of the term 'Cornish'. Hepworth, who acknowledged the importance of the local landscape to her work throughout, took Hodin's question to mean a conscious and shared ideology or style. Her contradictory response, 'No [...] influences must [...] never be super-imposed,' revealed the same insistence on individual creative freedom that she had expressed when growing apart from Gabo in the mid-1940s. She added a note to apologise for short replies, being 'frantically occupied' finishing the UN work.⁴³ Barns-Graham similarly read Hodin's question of 'Cornish School of Art' or 'style' in terms of social interaction and influence. While she admitted that the 'powerful light in Cornwall' may have affected the pitch

³⁹ In 'Cornish Renaissance', Hodin specifically evoked the county's regional identity, describing Cornwall as 'the living ground from which one of the oldest European cultures has grown, the monuments of which still speak to us in their silent but forceful language of the Celtic ancestors' fight with the elements and with the saints.' Hodin, 1950: 113.

⁴⁰ Wells to Hodin, 26 February 1964, TGA 20062.

⁴¹ Wells to Hodin, 3 March 1964, TGA 20062.

⁴² Hilton to Hodin, n.d. [1964], TGA 20062.

⁴³ Hepworth to Hodin, n.d. [1964], TGA 20062.

of colour used, she added that any similarity this caused was ultimately superficial. She continued by expressing a past aesthetic style centred on Nicholson's role as leader. She wrote, 'There really is no school now, but in the days of Ben Nicholson he was a considerable influence.'⁴⁴

Only one artist who responded did not dislike the idea of their work being seen to represent Cornwall or a 'Cornish' style. Lanyon was the only artist who read Hodin's question in terms of native belonging and who actively accepted the existence of a 'Cornish style'. Throughout, the force of Lanyon's answers comes from his impetus to stand apart through his Cornish heritage. Born in Cornwall, he sarcastically responded to the first question concerning his arrival with his birthdate followed by, 'in the morning I think.' To the second question, 'How long did you stay, or are you living there now?' he expressed his difference from the dominant 'foreign' group: 'I am NOT a foreigner.' To close his letter, finally, he added his 'suggestions for a better questionnaire,' which included, 'When were you born in Cornwall', 'IF not when do you propose to leave?' and 'Is your work influencing the Cornish landscape?'⁴⁵ Through these questions, Lanyon highlighted his own creative identity as intimately and inherently connected to the local place, as well as the presumptions embedded in Hodin's questions, which saw Cornwall as a destination for artists to enter, leave, imagine and produce in their own ways. In an earlier letter to Hodin, sent around 1961, Lanyon questioned the meaning of Hodin's terminology for this reason. He wrote, 'What is this about a "Cornish Renaissance"? The Renaissance is "IN CORNWALL". Only two Cornishmen have been reborn – Johnny [Wells] and me.' In his questionnaire response, he elaborated by contrasting his own native rights with those who had 'invented' an image of St Ives through their appropriation of the landscape into pre-developed abstract styles. The 'Cornish style', he wrote, was '*not* the one invented by intellectuals wanting a little bit of reality. EG Hepworth.' By 1964 the modernist community fostered by Gabo, Hepworth and Nicholson had clearly fractured both ideologically and physically to such an extent that Lanyon had not only turned against his previous teachers but was also disassociating himself from the legacies of abstract modern styles. Yet, as *Blue Glass Airscape* (1960) has shown, this was easier to maintain in words than in his work, which, while committed to the subjects of local place and landscape, continued to evolve from the Constructive and Cubist past.

Karl Weschke's responses form a poignant contrast. Weschke, who openly described the landscape from an incomer's perspective, depicted it as an emotional rather than aesthetic terrain. He wrote, 'It is a big landscape without being extrovert. It also is a secret landscape and

⁴⁴ Barns-Graham to Hodin, 10 March 1964, TGA 20062.

⁴⁵ Lanyon to Hodin, n.d. [1964], TGA 20062.

needs your participation to become splendid.’⁴⁶ Weschke’s emphasis on personal engagement stemmed from his faith in the totality of the artist’s psychology and personality. Noting that it would be impossible to name the multifarious agencies (‘every strong personality or every contact with anyone or every highly charged incident of living’), he refused to describe his narrative in terms of the ‘stream of art’. As a result, his response differed vastly from art-autobiographical accounts provided by those more used to writing statements for journals or monographs. He wrote, ‘Art is made by people whom we call artists and not the other way round.’

In place of artistic lineage, Weschke foregrounded the wholeness of his personal identity and individual psychology as the substance on which countless outside impressions were made. Answering the question, ‘What attracted you in Cornwall?’ he responded to two categories:

- a) *the landscape ...* The landscape primarily.
- b) *the artists’ milieu ...*
- c) *other reasons...* The need to find an identity with the landscape, which might have been caused by my refugee complex. Roots we all have or seem to have, but how often do we find it possible to root them in an environment of our own choosing.

Ignoring the role of an artistic community or shared concern, he stressed the importance of the landscape as a ground in which he had established his own ‘roots’. Uprooted from other communities and places, he simply described his psychological sense of statelessness in a manner reminiscent of Gabo.⁴⁷ Weschke’s wide-ranging experiences of being ‘up-rooted’ and subsequent sense of the ‘entire world as a foreign land’ provoked his original representations of the landscape of West Cornwall which, although responsive to the lineages of Expressionism and postwar figuration, were markedly different from the dominant Constructivist, Cubist and Franco-centric lineages otherwise present in the town.⁴⁸ Weschke’s ‘ex-centric’ relationship to the bonds of communities and moving artistic ‘streams’ in fact make his responses to Hodin’s

⁴⁶ Weschke to Hodin, n.d. [1964], TGA 20062.

⁴⁷ Weschke later explained his difficult relationship with his mother provided him with little sense of familial belonging. He was left in a state-run home for children at the age of two and collected by his mother years later. Following an involvement with the Hitler Youth, he volunteered as a paratrooper in the German army during the Second World War. Near its end, he was captured by Canadians and suffering from shell shock and a nervous breakdown, he was hospitalised then placed in various British prisoner of war camps. Following spells in London, Spain and Sweden, he arrived in Cornwall in 1955. See Lewison, 1998.

⁴⁸ Edward Said returns to this phrase, taken from the twelfth-century scholar Hugh of Saint Vincent, several times to distinguish the lived experiences of refugees to postcolonial perspectives on exile, which, by foregrounding multiple perspectives, proposes an outlook in which seeing “the entire world as a foreign land” makes possible originality of vision. See Said, 1994, 2001 and Mercer, 2005: 90.

questions especially resonant of the time and place.⁴⁹ Consciously ‘un-belonging’ or dissociating himself from artistic attachments, collaborative communities and historical lineages, he stressed that Cornwall was a landscape to be moved through and used to satisfy his own personal and important needs.

Given the lack of unity of aim or identity in St Ives between 1949 and 1964, it is less surprising that Hodin, searching for signs of a shared culture, turned to the place as these artists’ common ground. Yet, just as some were happy to respond to his questions and others were not, it became apparent that the conflicting characters and individuals he approached not only denied the possibility of a common interest in the place but also questioned his critical efforts in return.

St Ives’s shifting network in the postwar period was a constellation of newcomers, visitors, and long-term residents who were no longer unified, as the small wartime collective had been, by a common drive or fight. Although a consequence of historical change, the temporal scales are more complex than a separation into interwar, wartime and postwar periods can depict. As its opening statement suggests, *Circle*’s shared concern centred on the closure of the Bauhaus School by Nazi authorities in 1933 and the subsequent awareness, in Hampstead in particular, of the need to face the Nazis’ declarations of degeneracy in art, culture and religion with an international project uniting modern artists, architects, designers and thinkers from across Central and Western Europe. As an artistic project, furthermore, a range of modern approaches were conflated under one tendency, described as the ‘Constructive’ spirit, which, for the three co-editors at least, had another opposition: Surrealism. *Circle*, therefore, was at least partly defined by what it was not. In its scope and narrative, it was arguably as much (if not more) *anti-Fascist* and *anti-Surrealist* as cohesively ‘Constructive’ in determination and effect.

From the tightly-knit community of Gabo, Hepworth, Nicholson and a small cluster of younger prodigies, the shared project of Constructivism continued. At home it was spurred on by queries concerning the potential usefulness and contemporary relevance of abstract art to a culture at war. Present in reviews, including one by the artists’ close friend Read, this led *Circle* contributors and surrounding contacts to consider the need to further public education on Constructivism and abstract art in preparation for a future moment when Constructive ideals could better come to light. Similarly, *Circle*’s editors were incited by competition with their previous neighbours, now in America, with whom they engaged in an unspoken but instrumental competition surrounding the much more explicit claims arriving from America of its status as heir to European Constructive trends. Although ‘Circle 2’ did not appear, it was in

⁴⁹ Mercer describes the potential of the term ‘ex-centric’. He writes: ‘Where exiled identities are formed in an ex-centric relationship to the bonds of citizenship ordinarily conferred by the nation-state, deciding to act as a world citizen or cosmopolitan has the potential to de-naturalise the symbolic authority of patria or nationality.’ Mercer, 2005: 90.

the spirit of continuation signified by this project and its manifestation in the postcard series that the 'Constructive idea' remained a potent force in St Ives. In this respect, its utopian, optimistic force was sustained, despite the pessimistic circumstances of continuing war, especially from 1942, by a process of looking towards a future postwar era. As with examples of historical Constructivism in the 1920s, such projected focus required some distance from immediate social and familial needs.

With their proximity to Gabo and socialist ideals, the Constructivist aesthetic and associated political ideologies of post-Revolutionary Russia continued to be utilised by artists in St Ives throughout the war. Conversations reveal that, for these artists and their immediate circle of leftist friends, most notably, Ramsden and Read, the effect of events such as the Moscow Trials of 1936–7 and the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 was much more complex, gradual and tied to subsequent wartime events than has been assumed. The statement of Serge Guilbaut that, as a consequence of such events, 'On the eve of World War II America was already being seen as the sole champion of democracy', does not represent the ideals present in the Constructive network surrounding St Ives.⁵⁰ Rather, rooted firm to interwar beliefs, this process only gradually seeped in. Although part of a longer change of events, it was only in 1946 that Hepworth asserted her independence and artistic freedom from Constructivism as something which appeared to her, in the form of Gabo, as increasingly dogmatic and totalitarian in character. In turn, Lanyon read Hepworth's and Nicholson's roles in the shaping of the Penwith Society, especially from 1949, as an internationalist agenda akin to colonisation. Central to this was his perception – over-simplified, but not completely unfounded – that their allegiance to geometric abstraction, in the local context at least, was a superficial 'vanity' which ignored and negated more varied expressions of contemporary human experience and characteristics of the local place.

Nicholson's development of Cubist approaches to painting was, from the start, a more personal pursuit. Tied to the specific circumstances of his biography at an earlier time, the narrative is less bound to the collaborative artistic aspirations noticeable in the moment of 'Constructive art' in mid-1930s Hampstead. The depth of his understanding of Cubism and the timeliness of his artistic response meant, on the other hand, that his work was well placed to become an example of 'late-' or 'post-Cubism' within international critical debate. As I have argued, rather than hindered by a contrast between his own experiences of Cubism and the critical centrality of 'literalness', as a quick reading of Clark's review might suggest, Nicholson, for a short period at least, gained from the similarity of his and Greenberg's perceptive readings of the movement as an open-ended and self-reflexive approach to painting's materials, internal structures and modes of address.

⁵⁰ Guilbaut, 1983: 39.

While 1949 marks a new chapter for St Ives, Constructivism and Cubism continued to develop and disperse both within the town and elsewhere. A more suitable conclusion therefore concerns the locations in which these movements carried on. America played relatively little role in shaping the ideas and forms at the heart of Constructive and Cubist work in St Ives between 1939 and 1949. As a centre of artistic creation, artists remained highly sceptical of America's cultural integrity. Yet, as the form of each narrative and the nature of countless conversations have consistently shown, discussions surrounding the future of the Constructive and Cubist movements looked towards America as a growing centre of critical focus and ground from which new developments could potentially spring. This process was already underway by 1937, when it was recognised that *Circle*, an 'International Survey' which included only one American-born visual artist (Alexander Calder), would achieve its highest impact among an American audience. The intellectual weight of *Partisan Review* and Nicholson's recognition of Morris's value as a critical ally in this respect, demonstrates the same point: that America, and especially New York, was becoming an important export destination. Like St Ives, America's potential seemed to lay in its qualities as an open, habitable, safe and tolerable ground for the thousands of intellectuals (scientists, artists, musicians, philosophers, writers and political theorists – the majority of which were Jewish) who were fleeing persecution and censorship. In his book *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought 1930–1945* (1975), H. Stuart Hughes describes this movement as 'the most important cultural event – or series of events – of the second quarter of the twentieth century', which produced not only a 'shift in intellectual weight' but one which 'made the former pattern of deference toward the Old World no longer necessary or appropriate.'⁵¹ St Ives played its role as a location in which artists, due to their relative safety and connectivity could resist present forces and persist in both artistic and social work within Britain and Europe. In these circumstances, modern art movements provided artists in St Ives with the temporal indexes through which they could approach, discuss and understand the importance of their wartime work as innovations and positive actions which continued paths from common ground and moved towards a better future.

⁵¹ Hughes, 1975: 1–4, quoted in Cooney, 1986: 259.

APPENDIX: ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

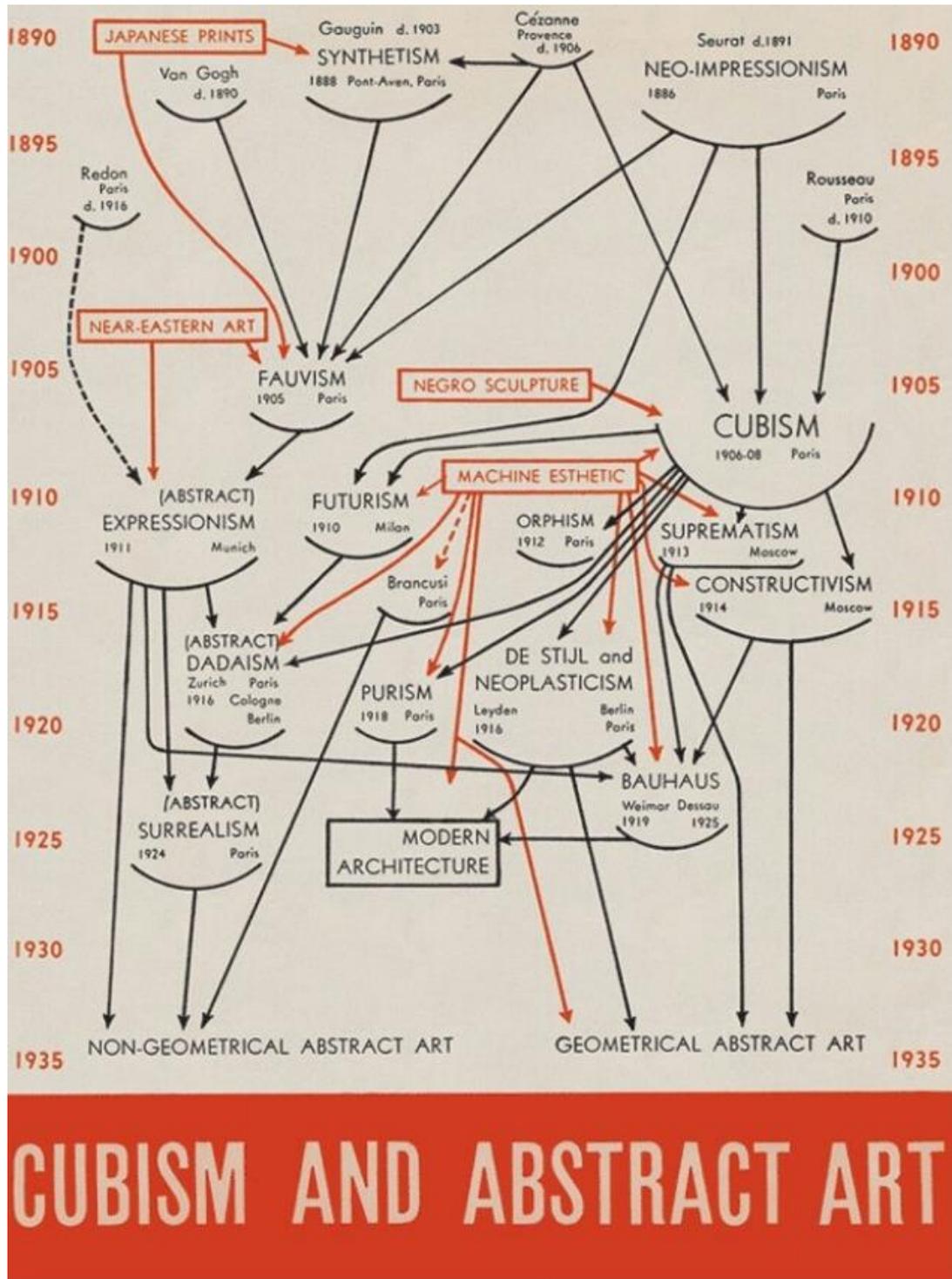


Fig. 10

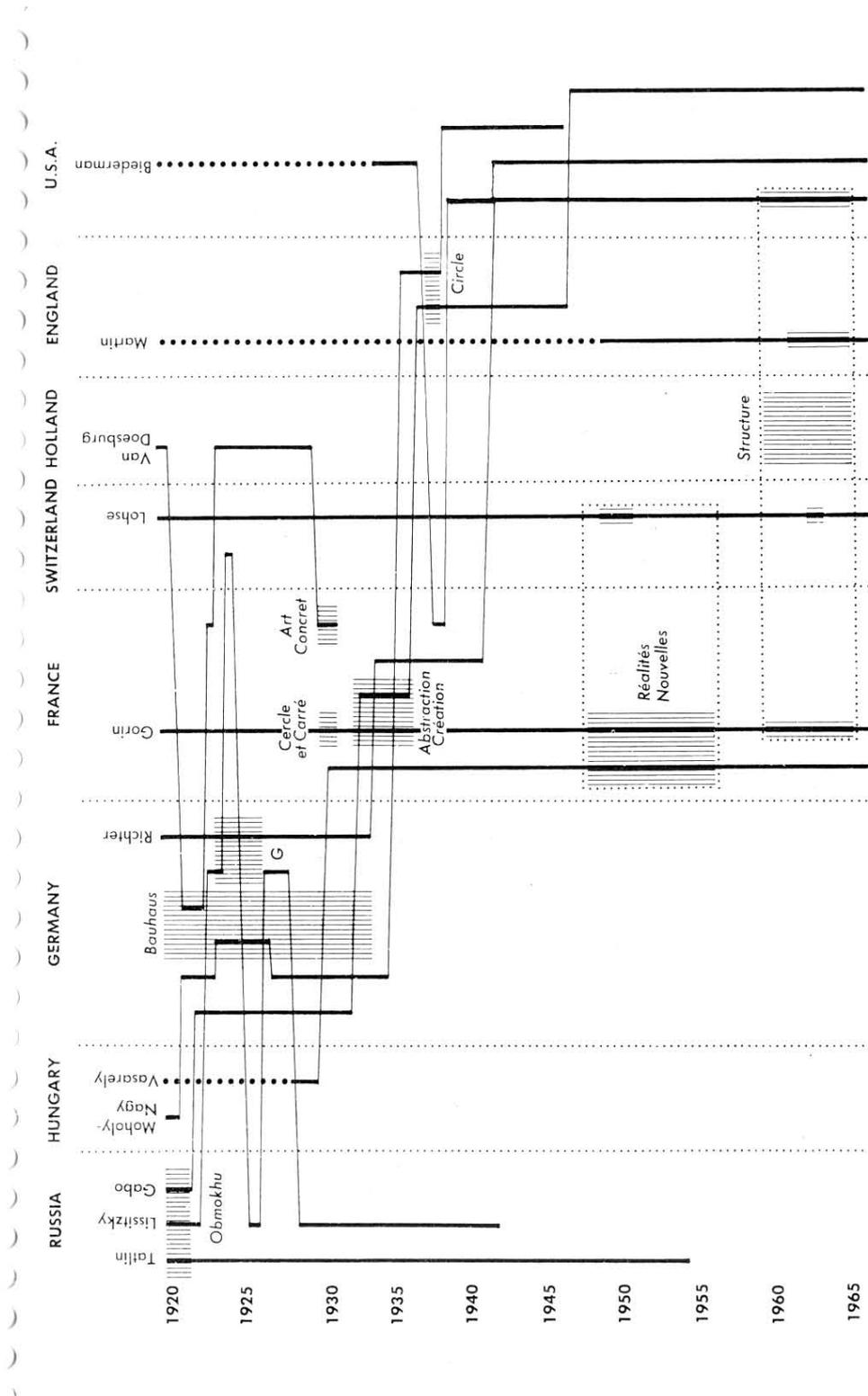


Fig. 12

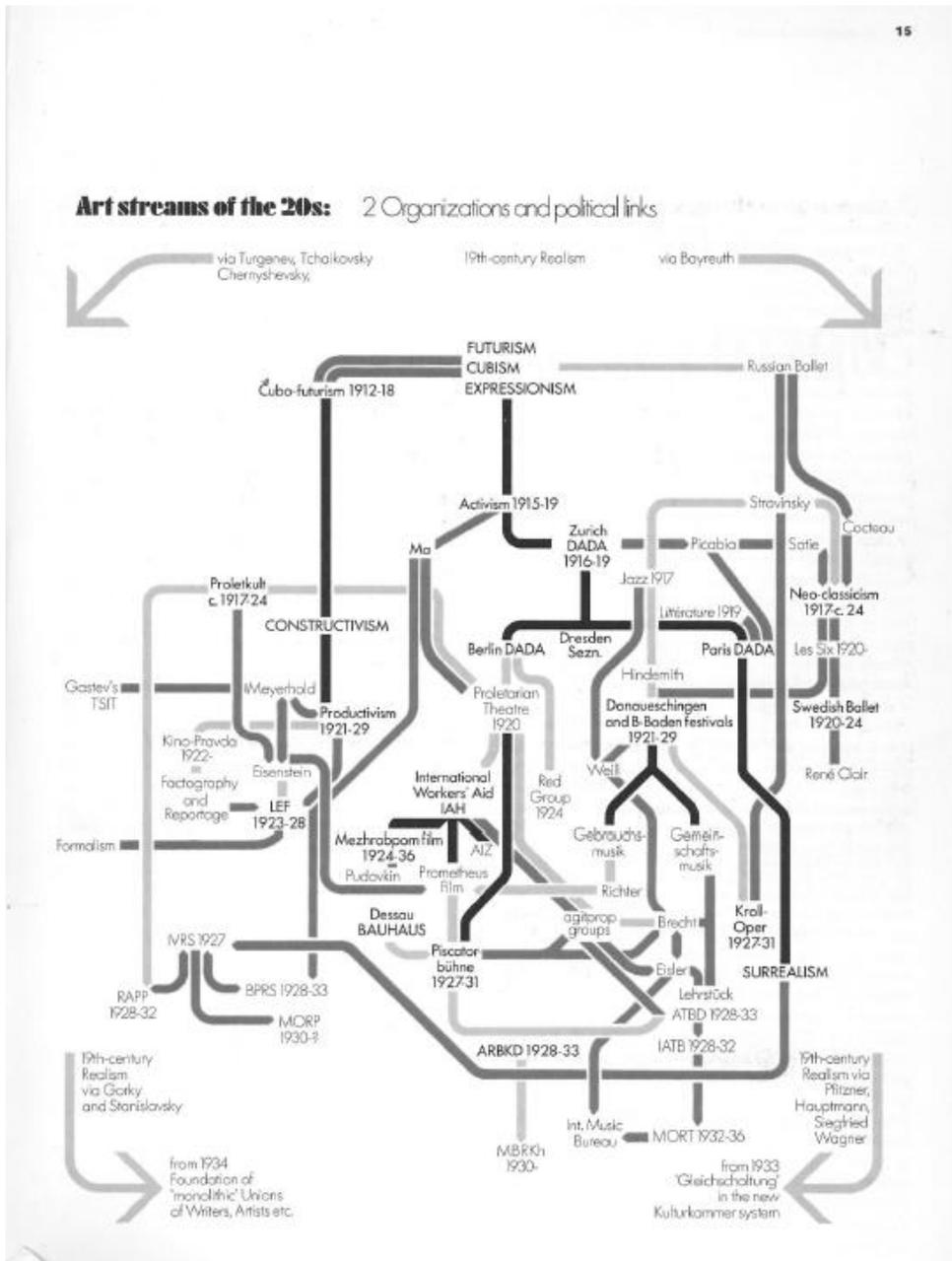


Fig. 13

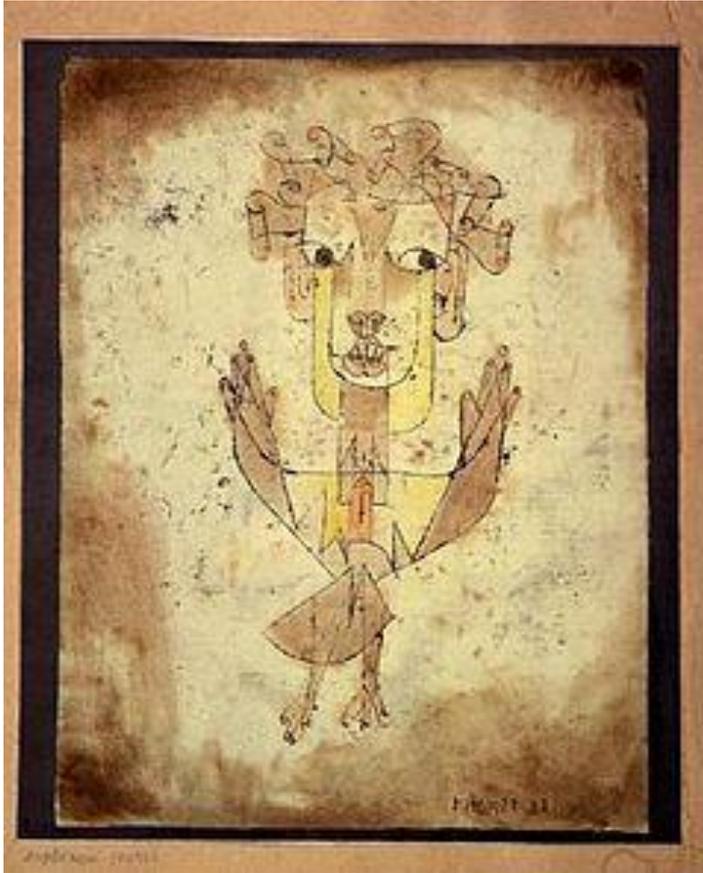


Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

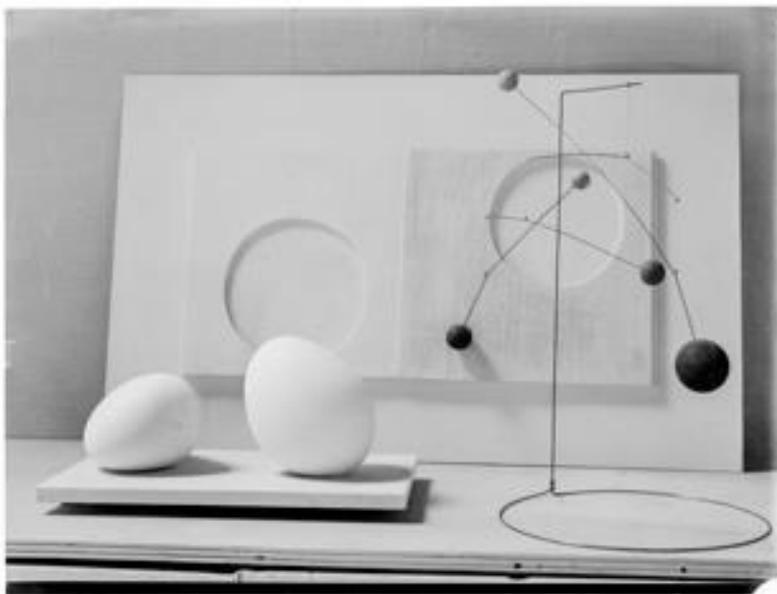


Fig. 17

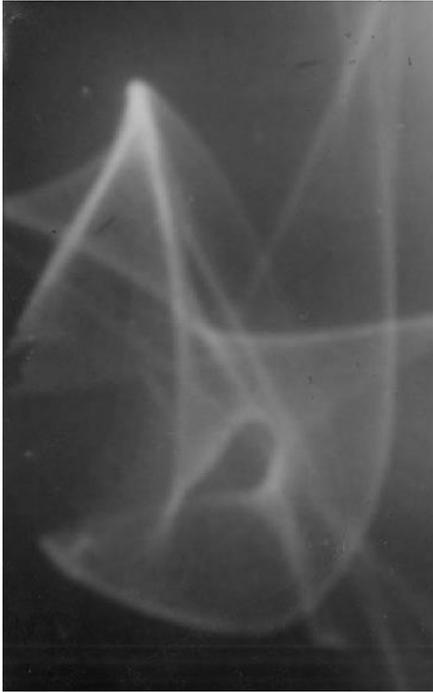


Fig. 18



Fig. 19

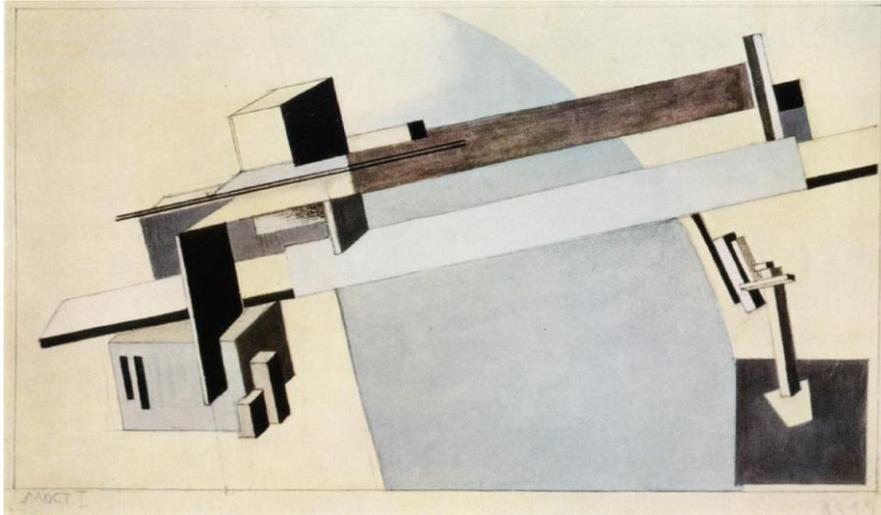


Fig. 20



Fig. 21

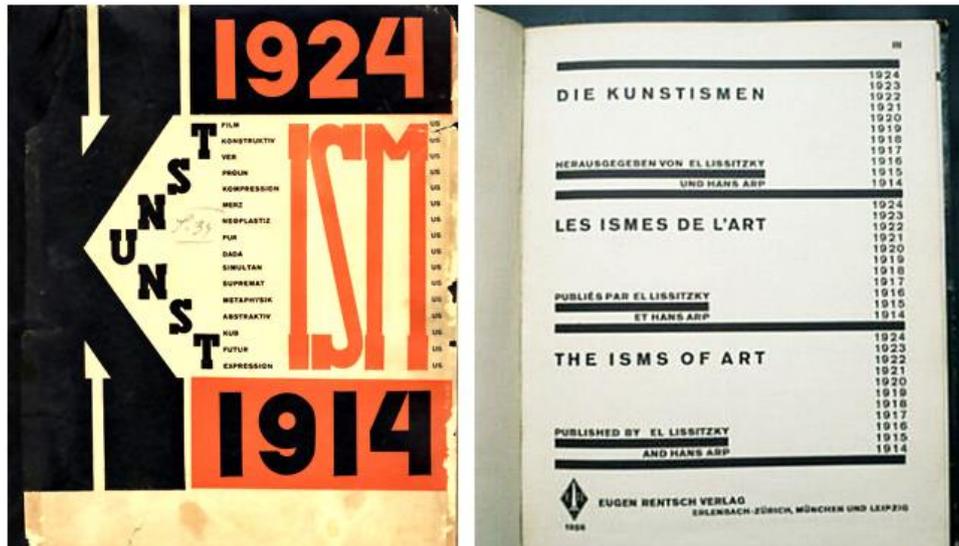


Fig. 22

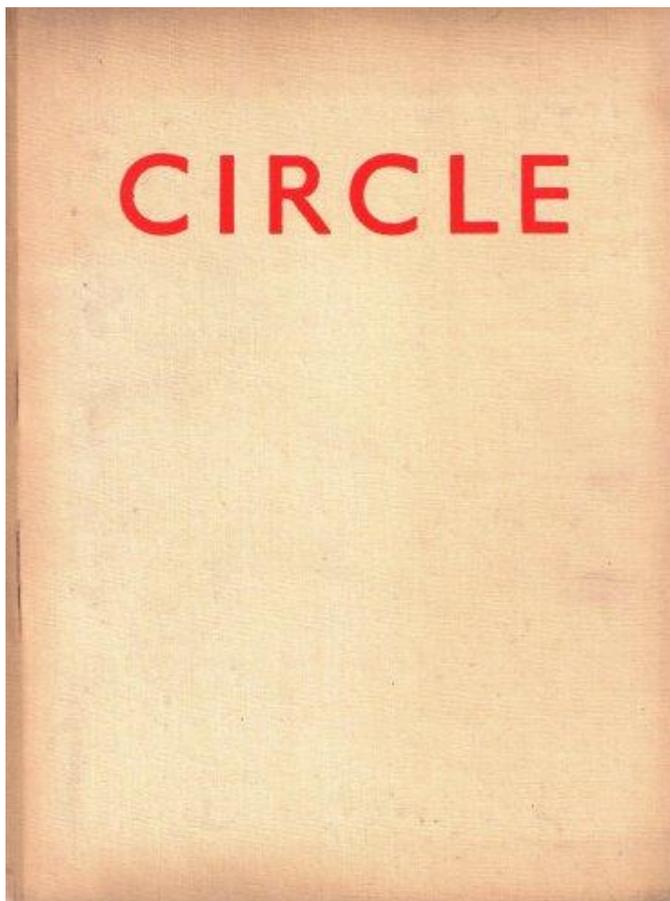


Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28

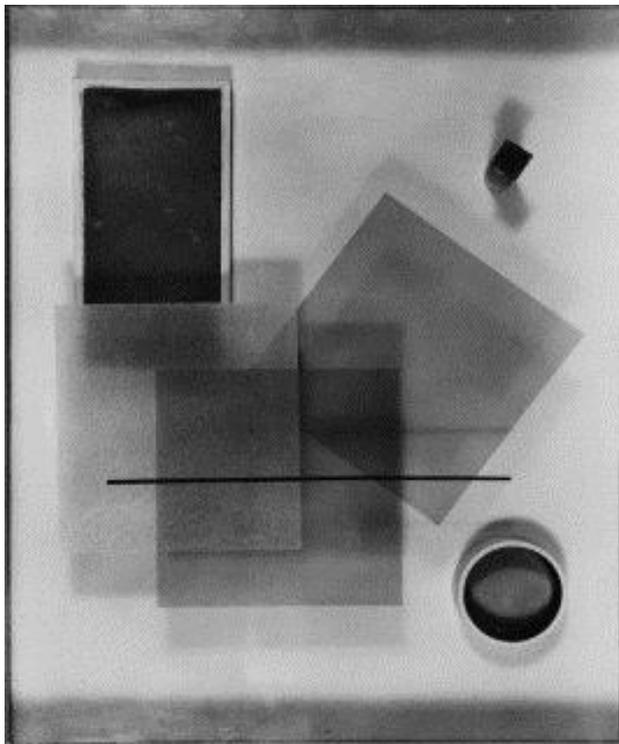


Fig. 29



Fig. 30

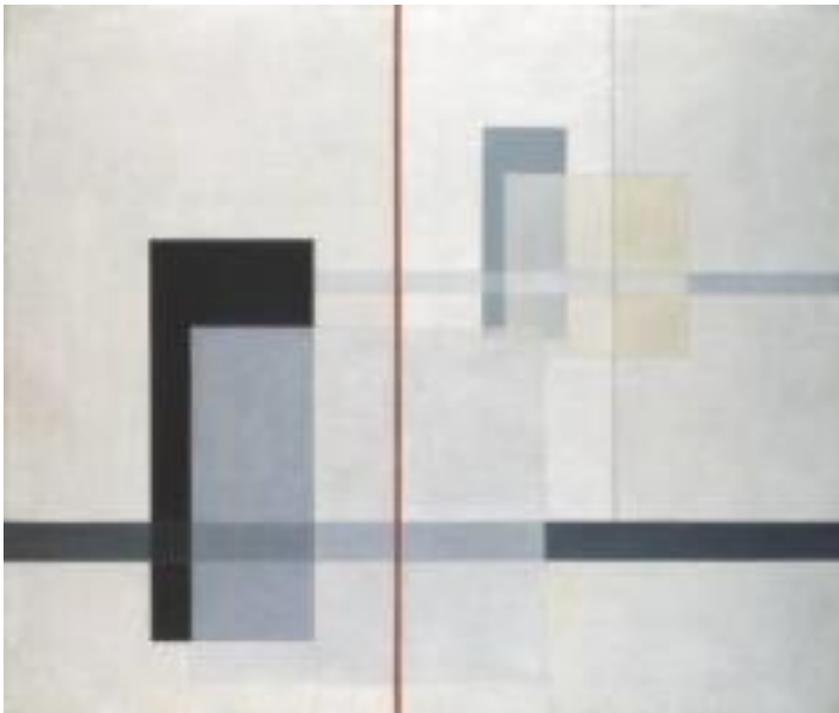


Fig. 31

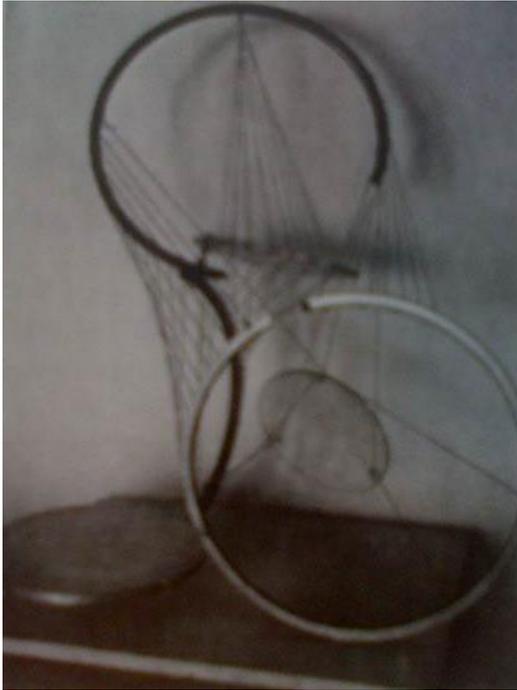


Fig. 32

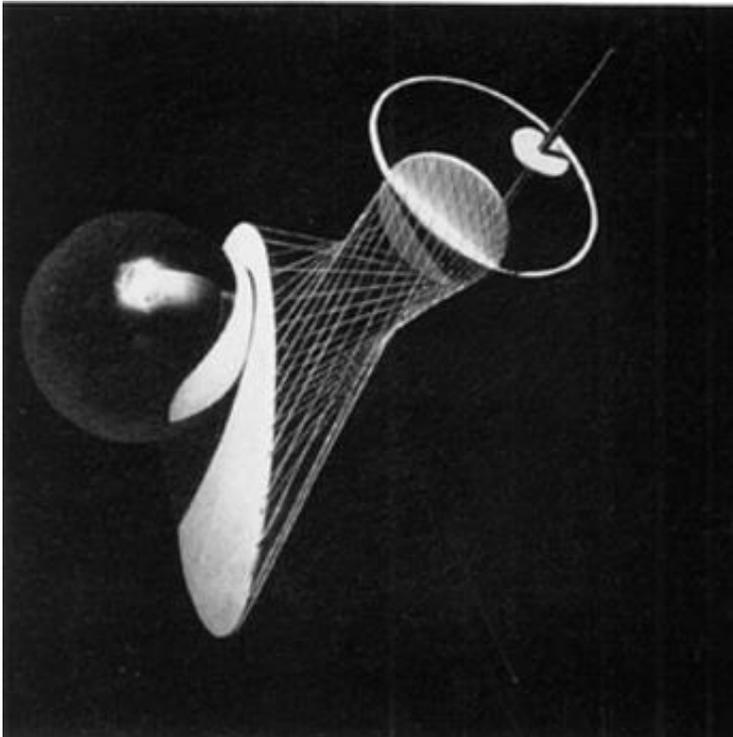


Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36

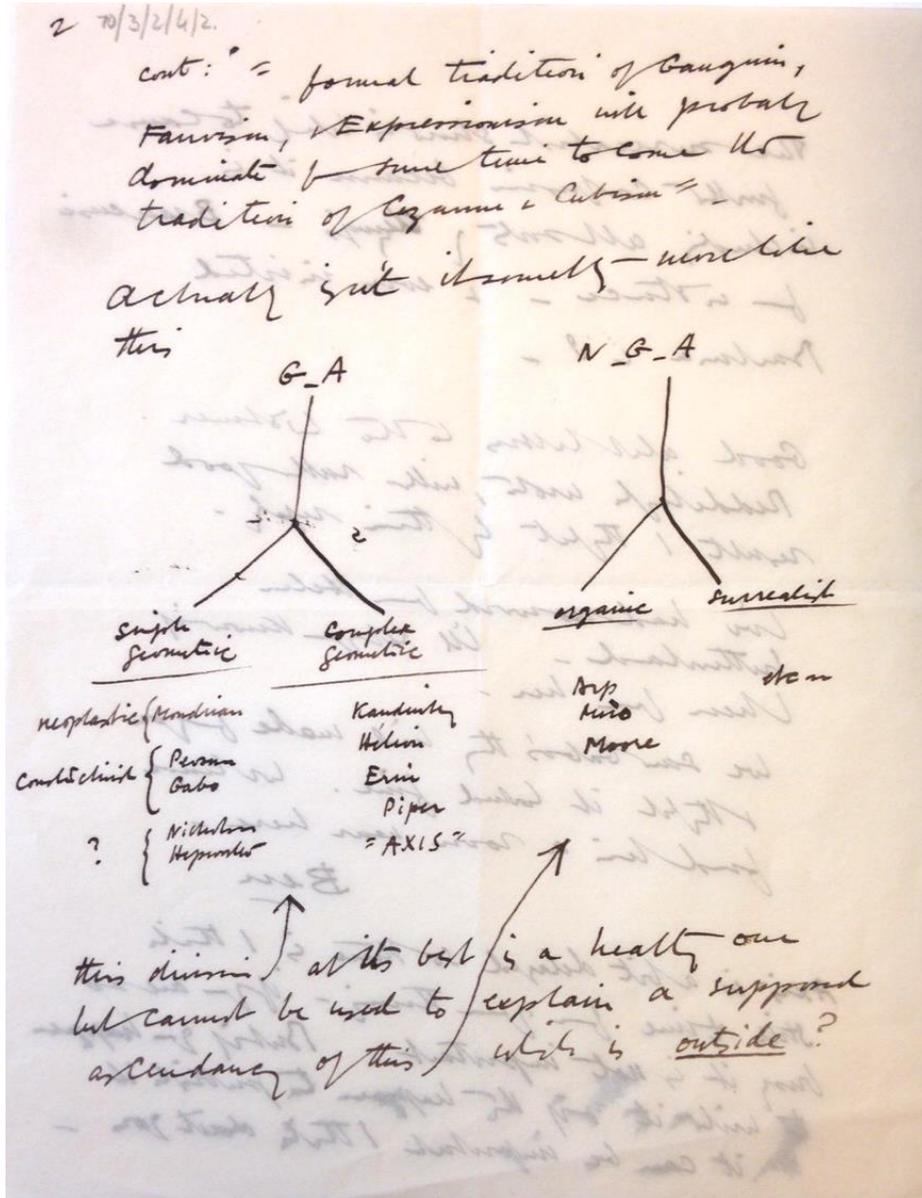


Fig. 37



Fig. 38

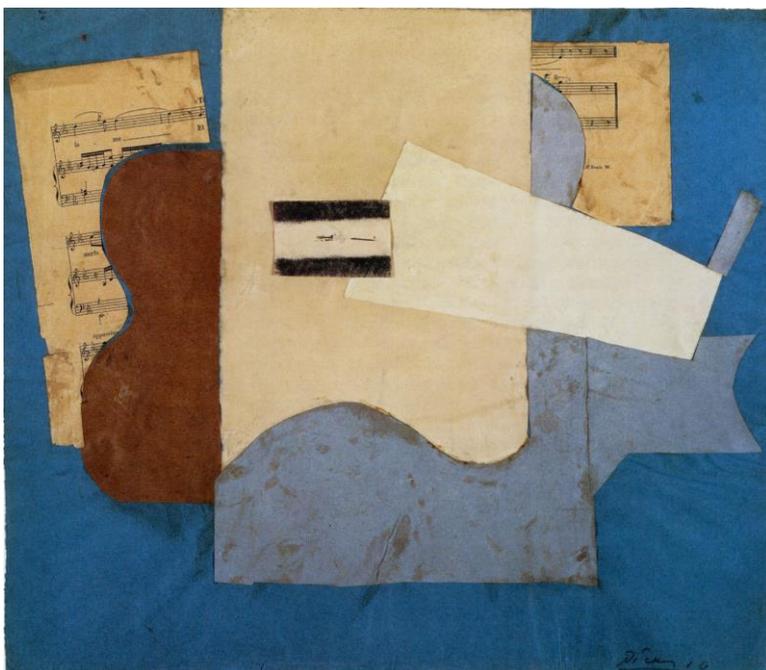


Fig. 39



Fig. 40.



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43

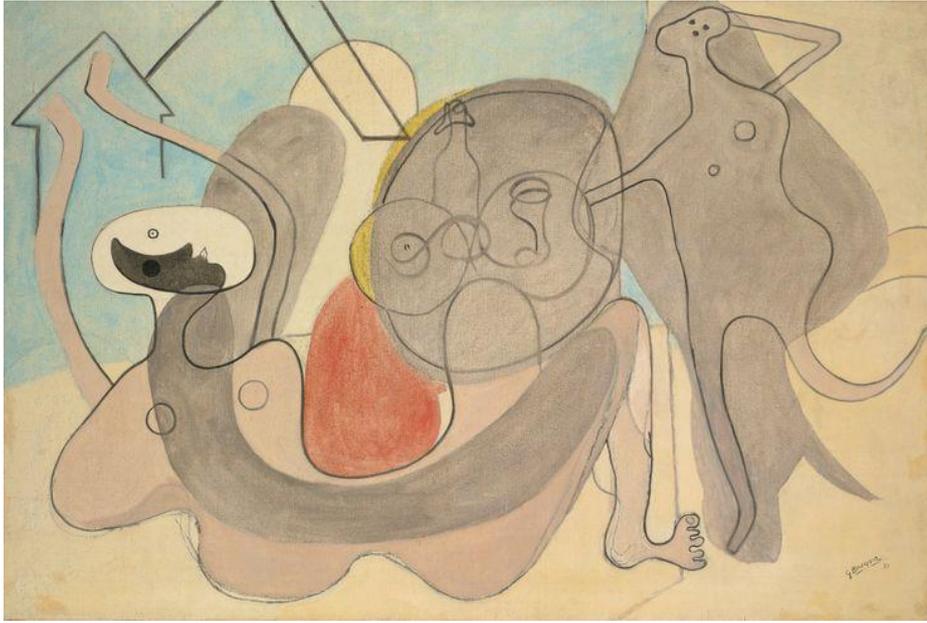


Fig. 44

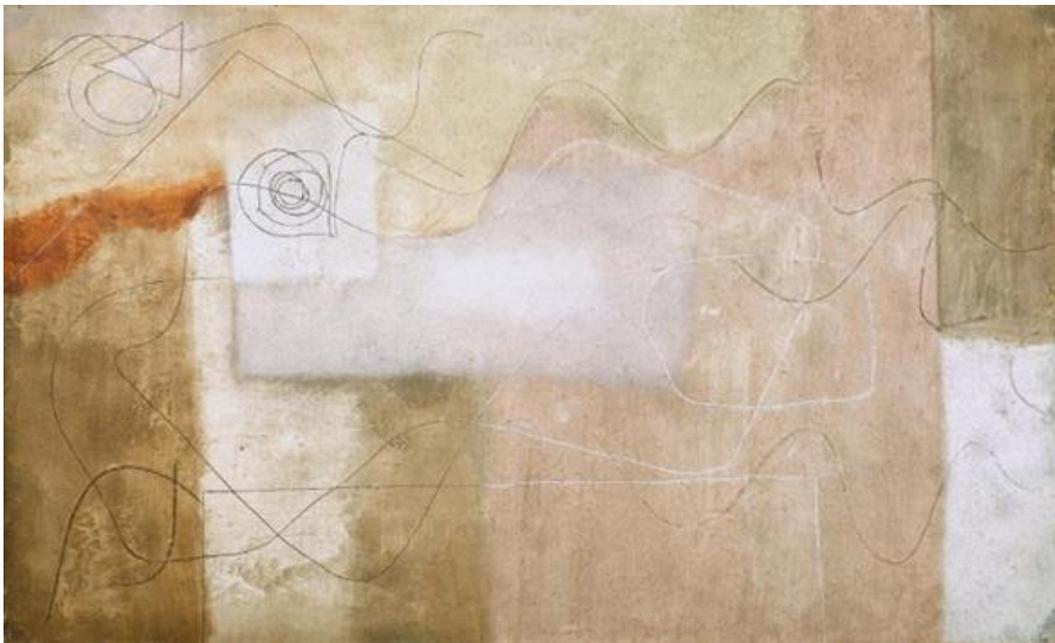


Fig. 45



Fig. 46

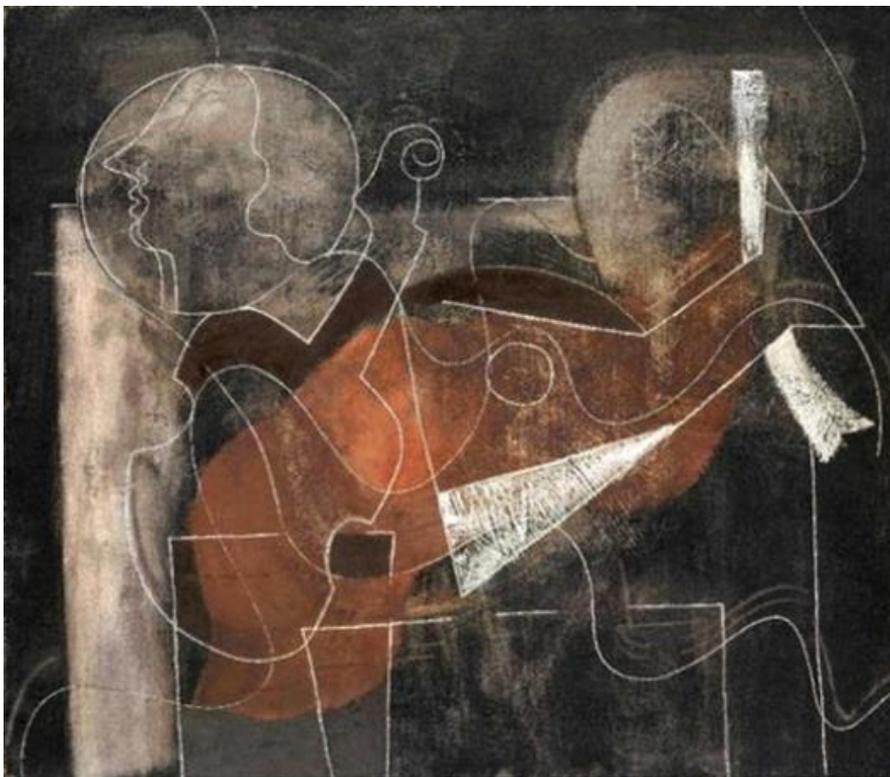


Fig. 47



Fig. 48



Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Fig. 52



Fig. 53

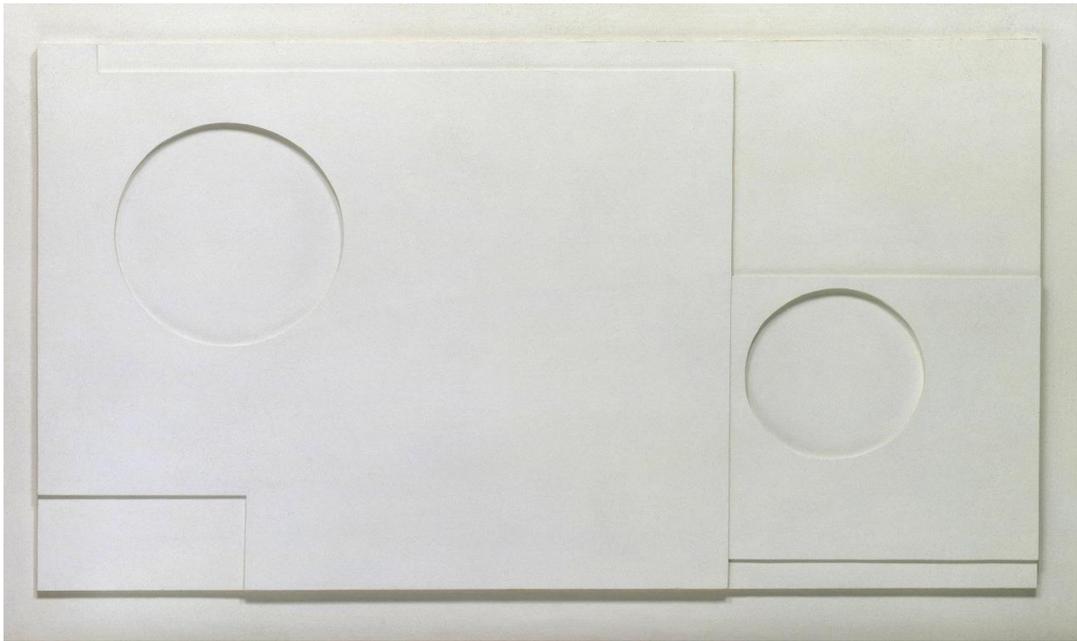


Fig. 54

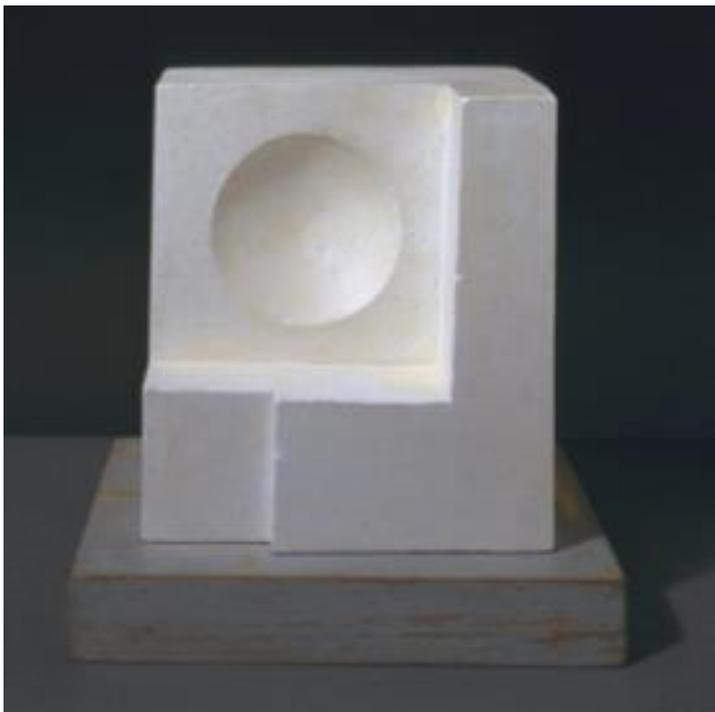


Fig. 55



Fig. 56



Fig. 57

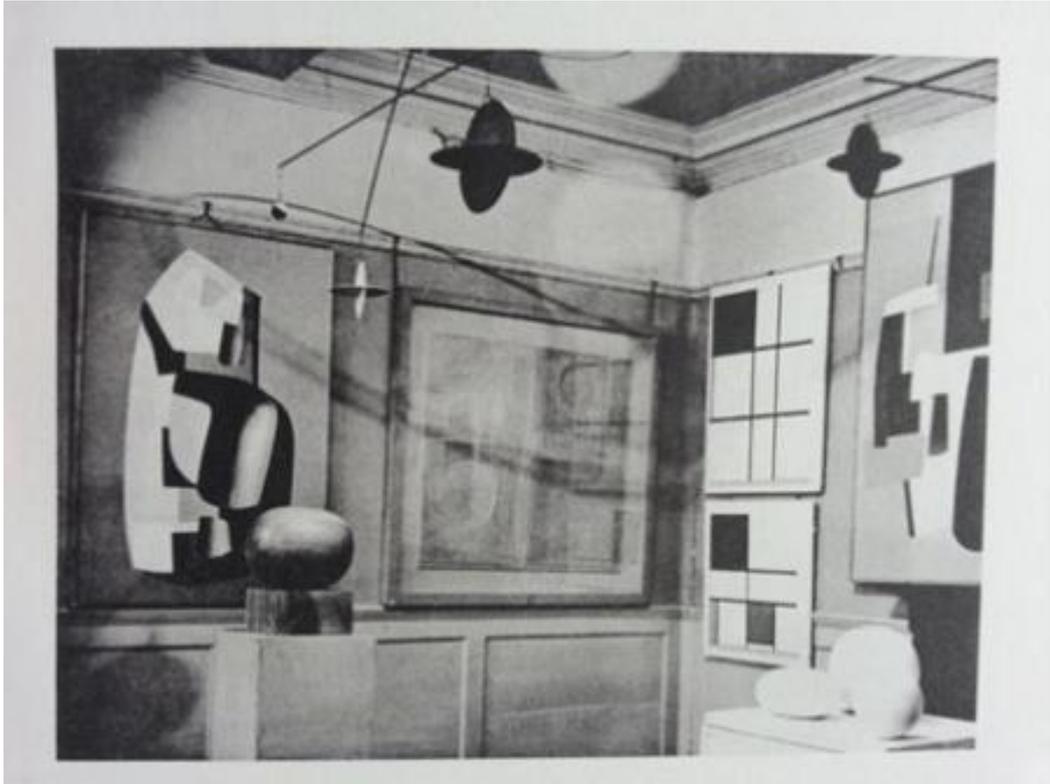


Fig. 58



Fig. 59



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62

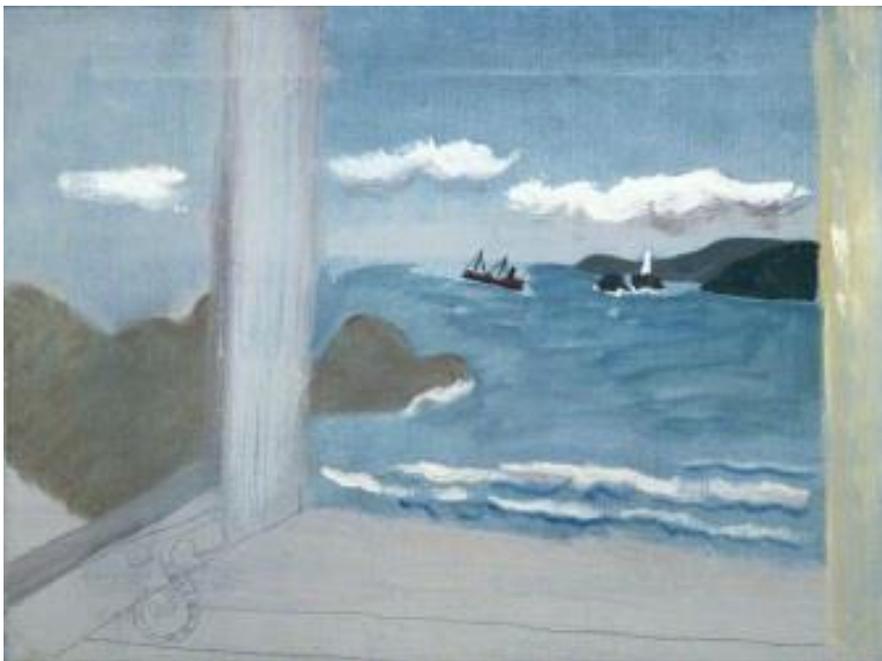


Fig. 63



Fig. 64



Fig. 65

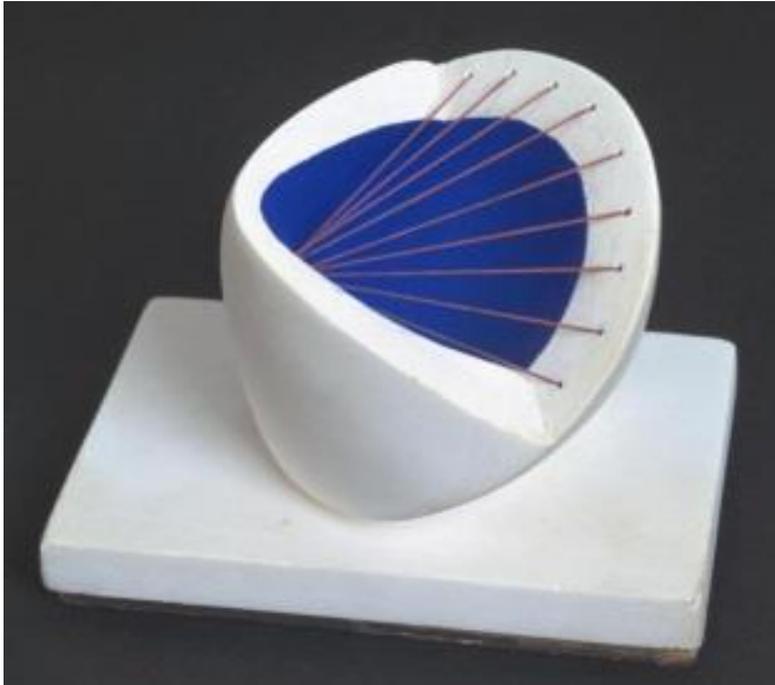


Fig. 66



Fig. 67



Fig. 68



Fig. 69



Fig. 70

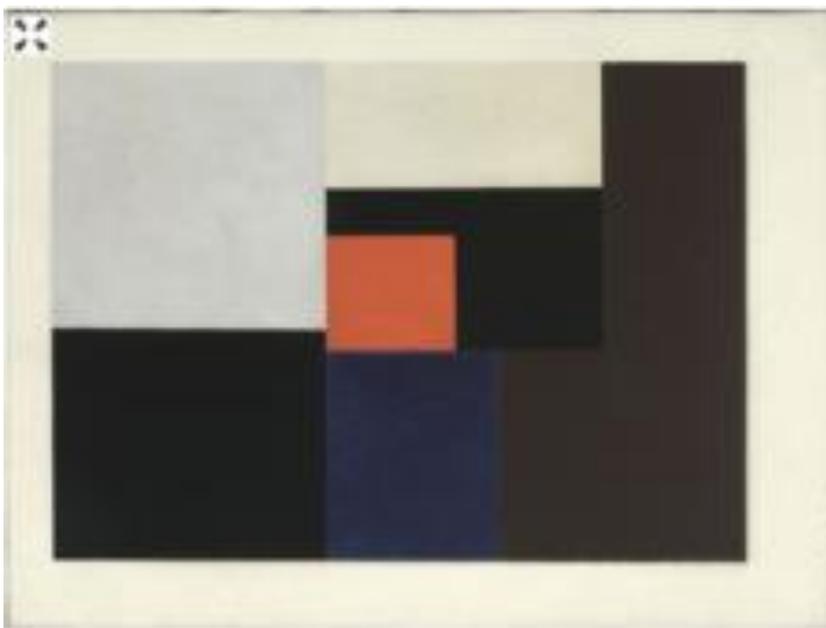


Fig. 71

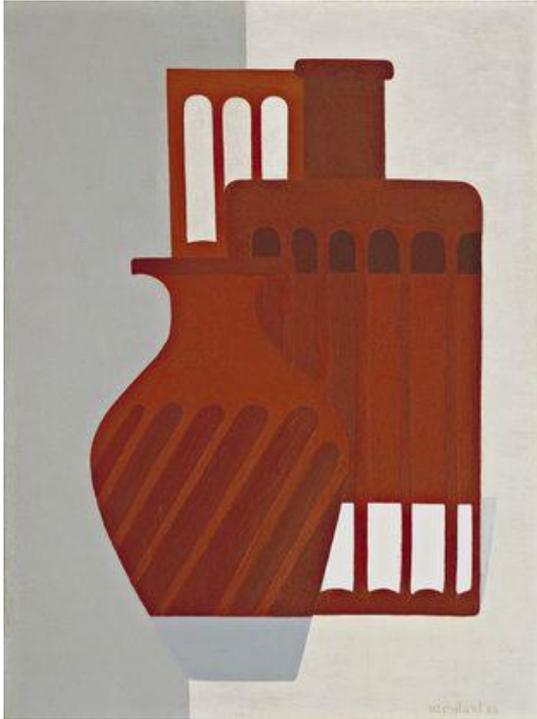


Fig. 72



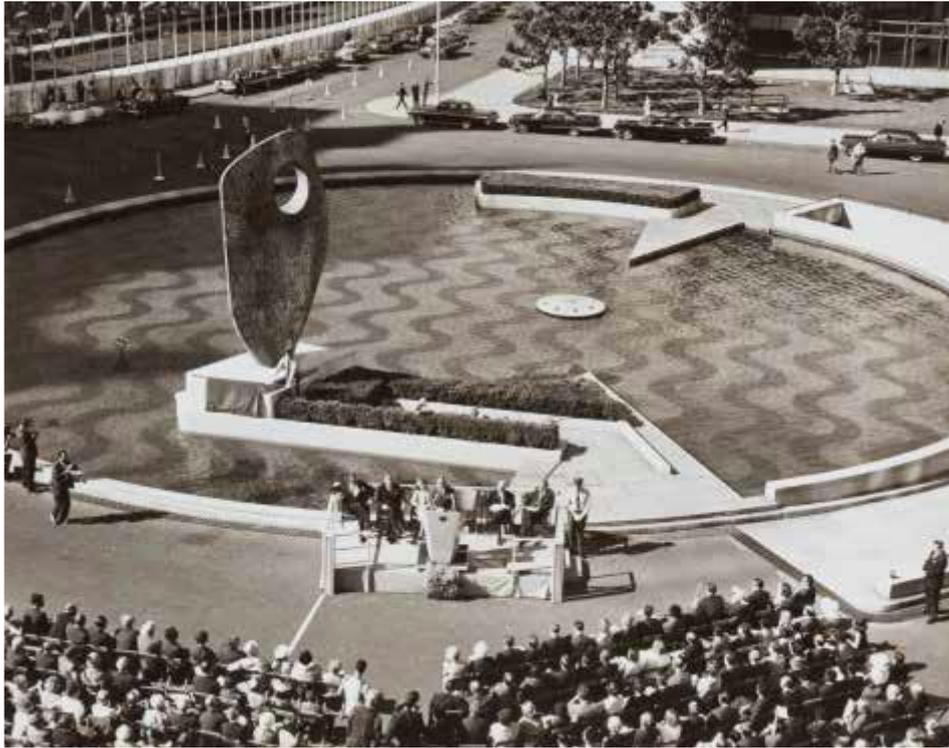
Fig. 73



Fig. 74



Fig. 75



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