

January 1935

AXIS

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY
"ABSTRACT" PAINTING & SCULPTURE

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AXIS •

january

1935



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No. 2

The SECOND NUMBER of AXIS (to appear in April) will include illustrated articles on SIR MICHAEL SADLER'S COLLECTION at Oxford, and the painting of KANDINSKY and BEN NICHOLSON. Writers will include Wyndham Lewis, Herbert Read, Jean Hélion, and Kandinsky.

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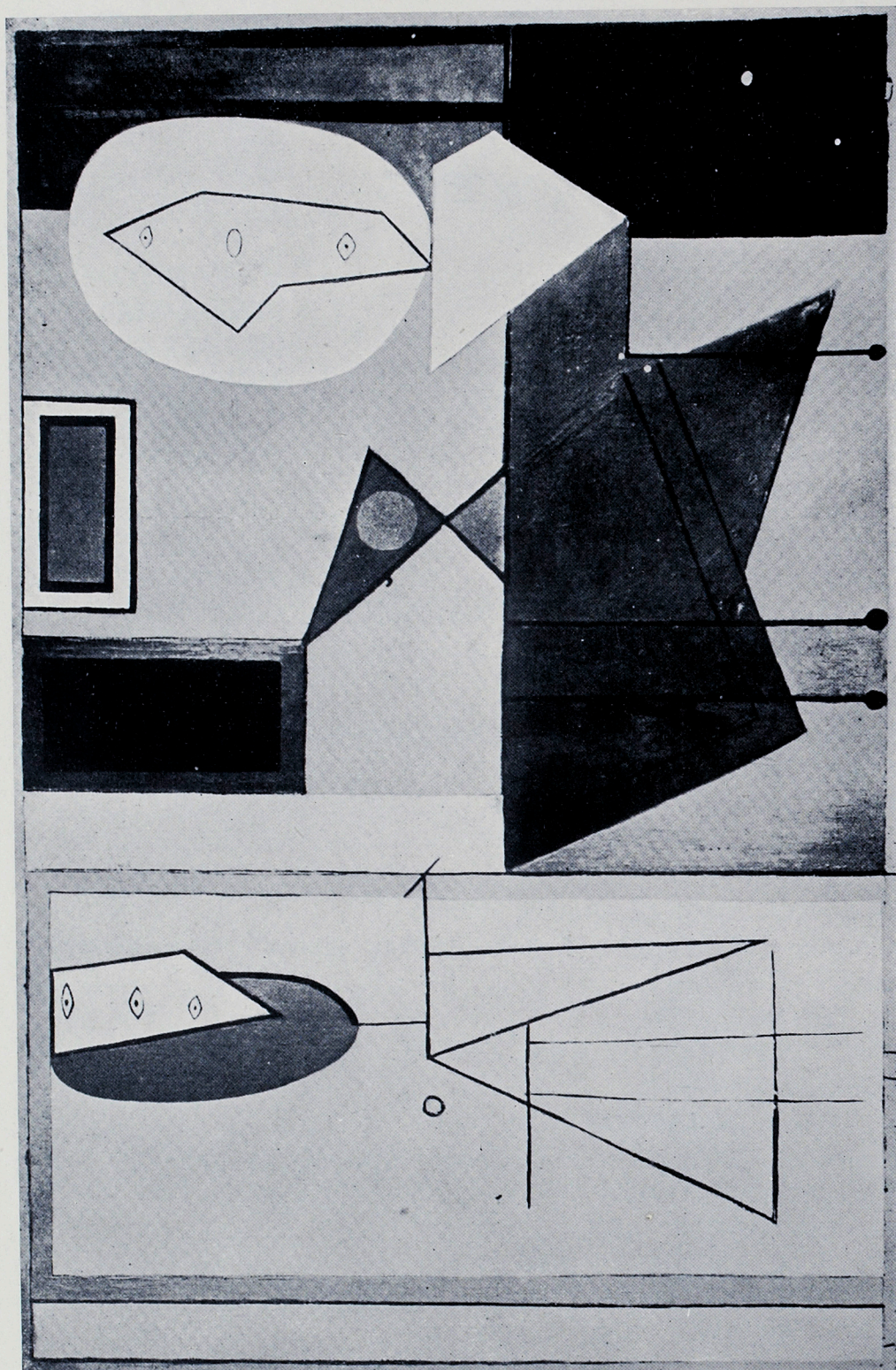
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Pablo Picasso. INTÉRIEUR. 1928

DEAD OR ALIVE

"AXIS : Imaginary line about which a body rotates, or by revolution about which a plane is conceived as generating a solid (sphere, cone, cylinder) . . ." (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

Abstract is an inadequate and misleading term, that is why it is put into inverted commas in the description of this paper. It is used as a general name for the painting and sculpture of to-day that is not naturalistic, nor surrealist, nor purely decorative. It suggests certain limits rather than defines them and is not in itself a criterion.

Abstraction has been confused with many things.

ABSTRAC- TION AND SIMPLIFICA- TION.

Cézanne defined objects by their relation to each other on cross-sections. In cubism the line of relations was expanded for its own sake, and the object receded further and further into the eye of the camera. Not caprice but the demands—for the moment—of the tradition were responsible. The object went because it was of no further use—but with it went also a restraint which had kept painting within the scope of its own tradition ; a great opportunity for painters not primarily interested in painting. They took it, and followed a literary pursuit, surrealism : producing garrulous and inquisitive pictures from a fictional subconscious, which, like bad poetry, say too much and leave no room for self-expansion. With all its apparent scope and new ground for exploration the subconscious mind is a more limited subject for painting than a blank wall.

But the main line of development lay through an exhaustive analysis of shapes which, though apparently extreme simplification, was really an elaborate observance of minute differences. The abstract method has been attacked for being too simple. There would be more sense in attacking it for not being simple enough. A hair's-breadth between two positions of a shape on a background made the difference between one picture and another. This is exaggerated subtlety ; an exaggeration that is an essential part of any stage. Mondrian's work is analysis perfected : not an end, but a *means* in itself : not to be imitated but isolated.

Analysis is the end and the beginning : the lowest point in the graph.

The shapes of things and the shapes between things become a vocabulary, slow to expand but gradually multiplying and growing flexible, till a new complexity of expression is reached. This process can be seen clearly in the work of Héliou. He aims at the complexity of nature without the object. Immense intersections and fine subtleties of forms without bastard memories, but no less expressive of experience.

ABSTRAC- TION AND GENERAL- ISATION.

"To Generalize is to be an Idiot." To paint circles and rectangles instead of heads and bodies because Picasso does is the worst kind of generalisation. But to paint them because of an individual need is justified particularisation. That needs like this are never confined to one person at a time is a matter of sociology and the history of painting.

**ABSTRAC-
TION AND
MACHIN-
ERY.**

Another kind of generalisation is to assume that because an object has not been painted before it can be painted in the same way as other objects, and be something new : that you can discover beauty in a pylon and paint it in the same way that you would have painted an ivy-covered tower fifty years ago, and be doing something new. But new things come under the same laws of change as old ones. If a human figure is abstracted, an automaton ought to be even more so. That the whole tradition of painting is affected by machinery is a commonplace : that it should imitate it is a piece of muddle-headed sentimentality.

**ABSTRAC-
TION AND
PROGRESS**

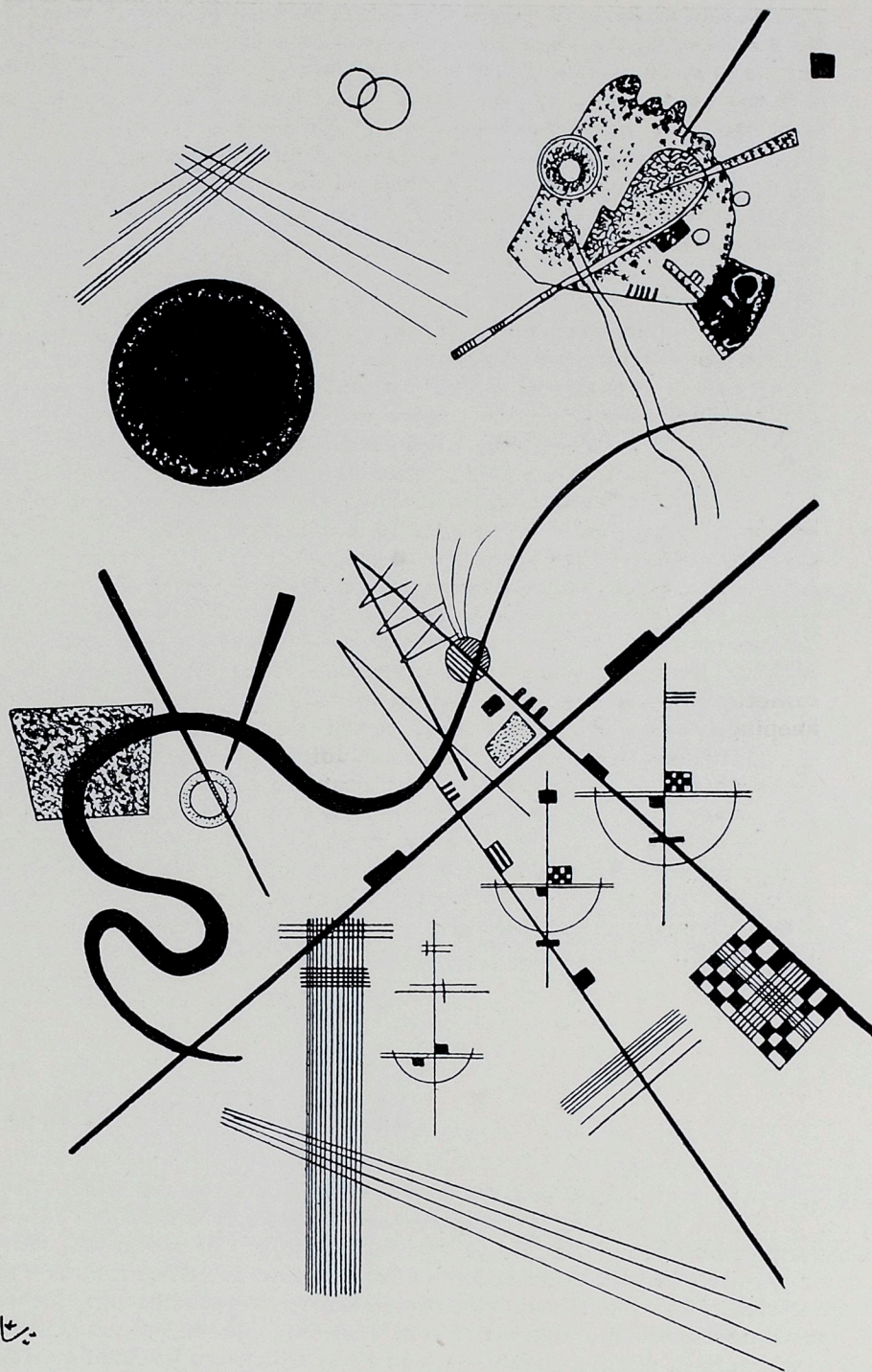
This is an idea which always possesses the simple-minded at the mention of machinery. The most one can say for the progress of painting or sculpture is that there is a continuous progress and decline between parallel lines—not a steady, unwavering journey towards a catastrophic perfection not yet reached or understood by man. The advance on Beauty with machines and banners is as stupid as the retreat to it with a handloom.

There is nothing to be said about painting which is not utter nonsense except "I like this." All dogma leads one to logicalities which would be entirely useless if they were not treated illogically. I should confine myself to reproducing about two pictures instead of nineteen if I wanted to keep on the right side of my statements. This is not an argument for fluctuation but expansion. The building process after analysis is not steady or sharply defined, and so this paper illustrates many variations of abstraction, moving sometimes towards a suggestion of surrealism, in Miró's work for instance, keeping traces of the object in Gonzalez' or Nash's.

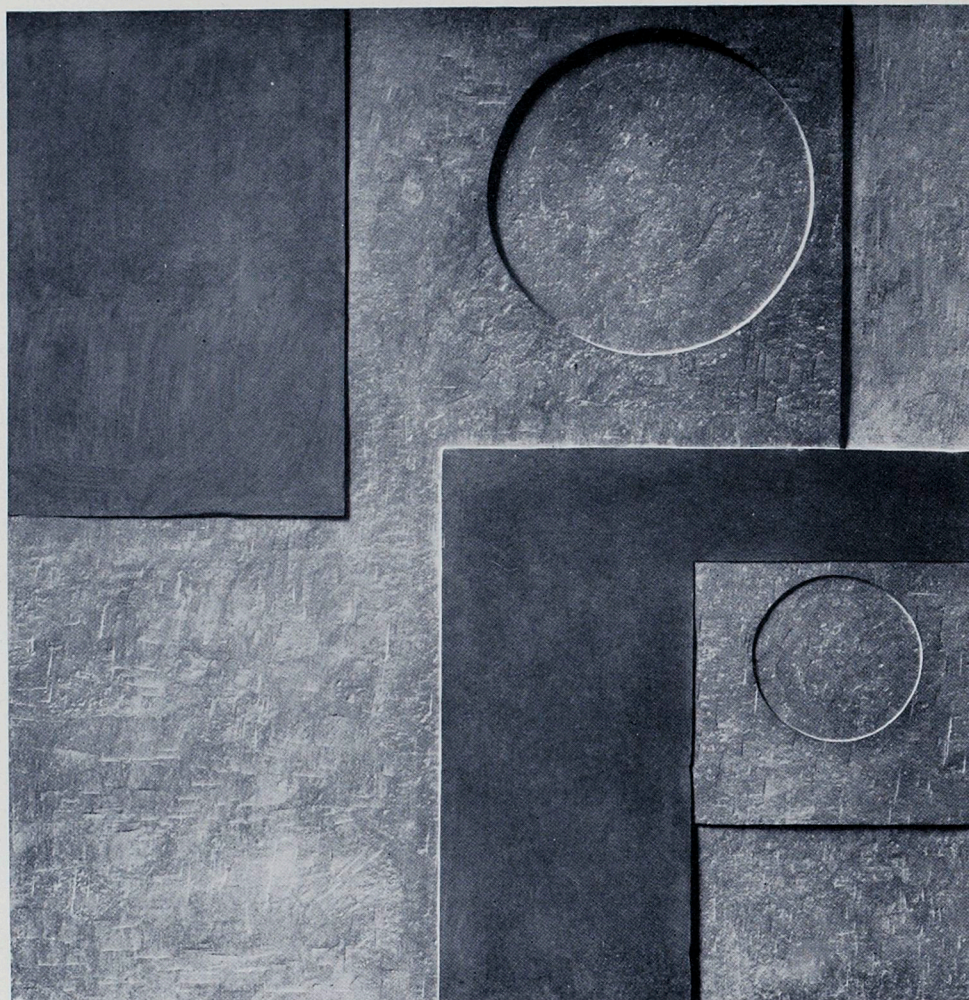
The one insistence is that the tradition should be kept actively alive. To paint objects like Cézanne, like Chardin, like any of the great masters, is to foster the tradition of painting, but deny it expansion and so kill it. Surrealism denies painting altogether. In the technical and emotional exploration of shapes left by the analysed object, there is real growth and life ; slow at times because there is no boundary of shape to guide it ; sometimes immensely rapid because self-imposed restraints can be ignored.

MYFANWY EVANS.

"If the emotional power of the artist can overwhelm the 'how?' and can give free scope to his finer feelings, then art is on the crest of the road by which she will not fail later on to find the 'what' she has lost, the 'what' which will show the way to the spiritual food of the newly awakened spiritual life. This 'what' will no longer be the material, objective 'what' of the former period, but the internal truth of art, the soul without which the body (i.e. the 'how') can never be healthy, whether in an individual or in a whole people. This 'what' is the eternal truth which only art can divine, which only art can express by those means of expression which are hers alone." ("The Art of Spiritual Harmony," by Wassily Kandinsky, Constable, 1914.)



Wassily Kandinsky. DRAWING. 1924. (Pour l'Almanach "Europa," 1925)



Ben Nicholson. CARVED RELIEF. 1934

Our Terminology

In the criticism of modern art we have reached a stage at which the everyday vocabulary of criticism is proving inadequate and therefore confusing. Developments of the last twenty years have given rise to various new types of art which, although they may have their parallels in past epochs, have never existed as self-conscious entities. All this time art criticism has been busy inventing new terms—naturalism, impressionism, pointillism, post-impressionism, expressionism, fauvism, cubism, constructivism, super-realism—all of which have distinct meanings, and all of which are justified by new developments of technique or manner. The group of terms I wish to try and define more precisely in this note all arise out of the cubist movement.

Cubism, when it was first used, about 1908, denoted a certain distortion of natural appearances in the direction of plane surfaces and geometrical outlines. Cézanne, of course,

had made simplifications in this direction, but the decisive moment for the application of the term "cubism" comes when (as with Picasso) the simplifications pass beyond the degree of illuminating the nature or structure of the object represented, and take on aesthetic values of their own. The form of the composition, that is to say, is independent of the forms of nature. But "cubism" has an historical significance, and should, I think, be confined to painting and sculpture which still retains a recognisable relation to natural objects—in which these objects remain as the theme of a geometrical distortion.

Such is the usage of the term now predominating in serious discussions of modern art. The confusion begins with the further developments of the cubist movement. The distance between the painting and the natural object quickly increased between 1909 and 1914, until the natural object had no more than a perfunctory and scarcely distinguishable existence. Then artists began to call their work "abstractions," and the phrase *abstract art* gradually came into use.

We may note, in justification of the use of such a term, that :

(1) The notion of an art divorced from "real" or natural objects was a possibility envisaged by Plato, and discussed by him in terms which signify "absolute" or "abstract" (*Philebus*, 51 B. See *Art Now*, pp. 101-2).

(2) The notion has its parallel in modern poetry under the term "pure" poetry, which is poetry supposed to depend for its appeal, not on its signification or meaning, but on its sound values, the inherent appeal of the material.

In this general sense, the term *abstract art* would seem to be definite enough. But certain sophists have arisen to point out that since all art, except the photographic, departs in some measure from exact representation, therefore all art is *more or less* abstracted or removed from reality, and that therefore we have no right to regard this particular phase of modern art as peculiarly abstract. In fact, in so far as such art is a pure creation of the mind, without reference to external objects, it is not "abstracted" at all from an original object, and therefore cannot be called abstract.

Some artists, accepting this argument, have invented other phrases, such as "non-figurative" and "concrete"; even *Axis*, in its Prospectus, puts the word "abstract" between guilty quotation marks. Non-figurative may sometimes be justified for the sake of clarity, but it has the disadvantage of being merely a negative term. "Concrete" has more to be said for it, since, as Jean Hélion has pointed out, this "abstract" art is really the most concrete of all arts, relying (like pure poetry) on the immediate appeal of the materials (definite dimensions of canvas, oil, etc.).

I feel that to add this term "concrete" to the many already existing terms would only add to the confusion. Nor do I think its use is really justified by the facts. Hélion's observations are perfectly just, but in the same way that all art is *more or less* abstract, so is all art *more or less* concrete, depending for part of its appeal on the immediate qualities of the materials.

The objection to the use of "abstraction" for the type of art we are discussing is, as I have implied, mere sophistry. For practical criticism, the only distinction we need is between a geometrical art which retains some relation with the appearance of natural objects, and a geometrical art which is entirely contained within the relationships of forms, colours, lines and surfaces, without any suggestion of natural objects. For the first type *cubism*, *cubist* are at once the historical and logically sufficient terms; for the second type *abstraction*, *abstract* are logically sufficient, and are and can be used without any confusion of meaning. No naturalistic painter has any necessity to call his method of painting "abstract."

Abstract has a cousinship with the term "absolute," and both terms suggest a surplus of intellectual values which exist in abstract painting, and for this reason alone I feel that the term "abstract" is fully justified.

It may be objected that a type of modern art exists which has no relation with

natural forms or objects, but which is nevertheless not an affair of geometry, of proportions, colour harmonies, etc. It is represented by certain phases of Picasso, by Arp, Miró and Max Ernst. But for this type of art we have the accommodating term super-realism (*surréalisme*—but not the bastard word “surrealism,” which is neither French nor English). I mean no disrespect to Superrealism, but obviously a type of art which claims to break down the barriers between the conscious and the unconscious, which uses both conscious and unconscious symbolism, can be made the foster-mother of many *enfants terribles*.

HERBERT READ.

COMMENT ON ENGLAND

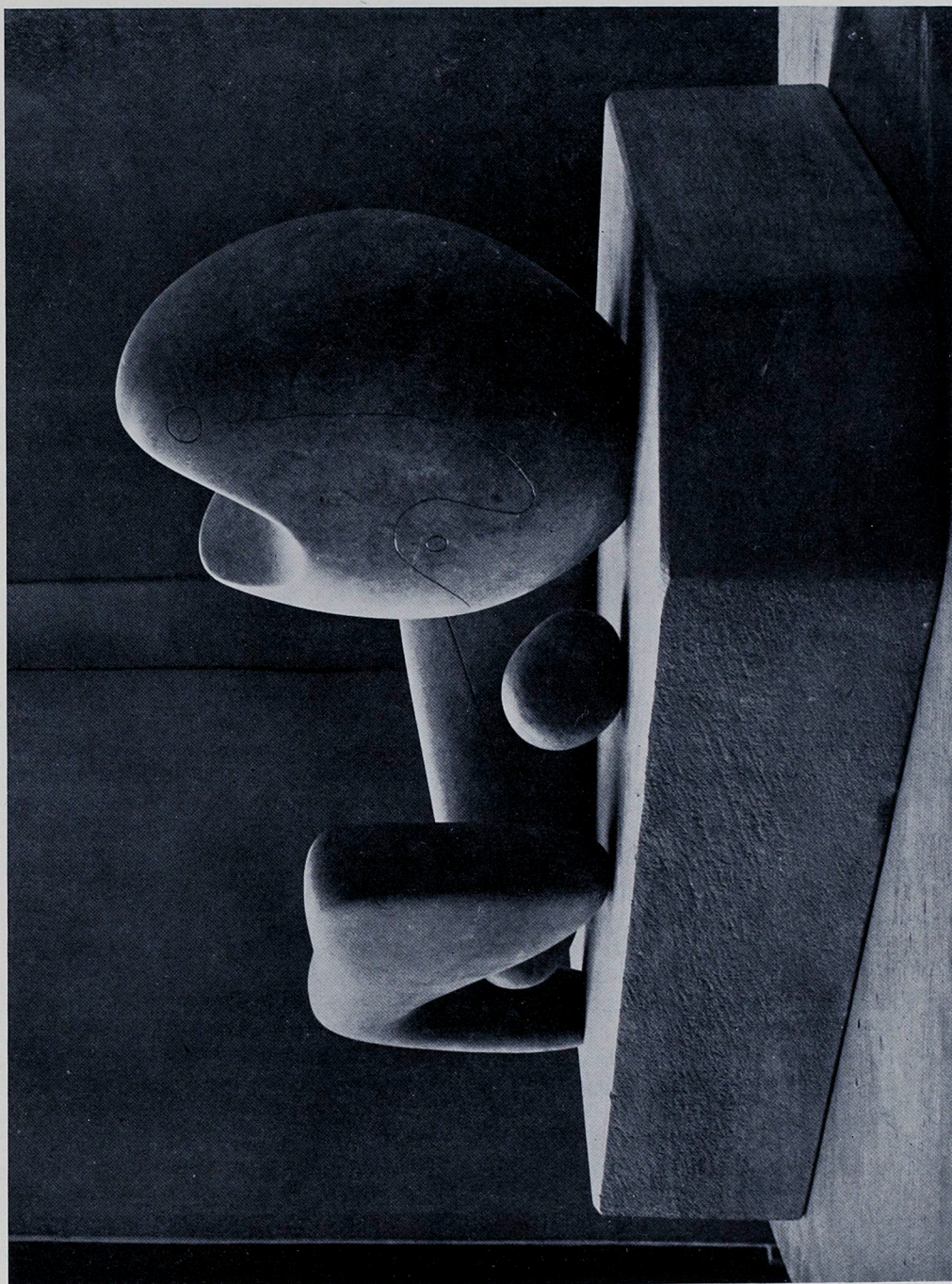
Abstract art, as an idiom or pure method, would be art drawing away to order, instead of advancing to order. It would order by leaving out, by negation, instead of by controlling and altering what exists, and creating it a second time until it becomes what has never existed. It would reduce to as little as one can imagine inside the definition of art the intellectual and the affective elements ; it would reduce them to an intellectual type, to “art itself.” It would make, indeed some artists now tend to make, all pictures consist of the islanded principles of pictorial art, instead of conforming to these principles, which are the facts of order (regularity, rhythm, symmetry and broken symmetry) and the fact of emotion ; of which the former opposed as a comfort against the half-known caves of the mind, is made the more powerful.

Abstract art, then, is not the seed to grow from, but the first floor to build upon. Impressionism, extended, would have meant the supersession of art by life, so Wyndham Lewis declared ; purism, “abstraction-creation,” extended would mean the supersession of art by ideal death. In his “Elements of Folk Psychology” Wilhelm Wundt describes the way in which the Bakairi of Central Brazil make simple geometrical designs on wood, affective through symmetry and rhythm, and how then they read into these designs “through imaginative association, the memory images of objects”—snakes, swarms of bees, etc. In these geometrical patterns so interpreted he finds the beginning of formative art. Abstract art at this time needs (but actually and not only in fancy) to be bodied out in such a way ; to be penetrated and possessed by a more varied affective and intellectual content. Only so can it answer to the ideological and emotional complexity of the needs of human beings with their enlarged knowledge of the widened country of self.

Certain artists have realised this in their practice ; abroad Picasso, Brancusi, Klee, Miró, Hélión ; in England Wyndham Lewis and Henry Moore. Abstractions are of two kinds, geometric, the abstractions which lead to the inevitable death ; and biomorphic. The biomorphic abstractions are the beginning of the next central phase in the progress of art. They exist between Mondrian and Dali, between idea and emotion, between matter and mind, matter and life. “In art we are in a sense playing at being what we designate as matter. We are entering the forms of the mighty phenomena around us, and seeing how near we can get to being a river or a star, without actually becoming that. Or we are placing ourselves somewhere behind the contradictions of matter and mind, where an identity . . . may more primitively exist.” This needs to be remembered now in England, if leading English abstractionists are not to turn their backsides to *Minotaure* and run off to Nowhere through the dry spaces of infinity.

Comments upon the need and the action are suggested by the English paintings and pieces of sculpture reproduced in this number of *Axis*. I see in them a small history of English ideas, English hesitancy, English error and English performance, and I would summarise them in this way :

NASH : Pre-abstract naturalism with bits cut away through the force of the present.
A degree of order imposed upon material disorder. Pictorial ingredients only



Henry Moore. CARVING. 1934

half broken down and half re-created. How much of what quality of vision?
How much Clive Bell just round the corner?

WADSWORTH : Abstraction neither biomorphic nor geometric. Impersonal vehicle carrying not much ; but a respectable simplifying and concentrating of a cold curtailed fancy.

NICHOLSON : Too near to a surface object derived from art, instead of a portion of art. An image of infinity, ordered by saying "no" rather than "yes," which is without body enough to make the image perceptual. Admirable in technical qualities, in taste, in severe self-expurgation, but too much "art itself," floating and disinfected.

JACKSON : An attempt at moving forward to fullness and complexity. Affirmative at least, however much it seems done by way of trial out of Nicholson.

PIPER : Domela somewhat vivified. An attempt at advance in biomorphic abstraction, though irresolute here and there in form.

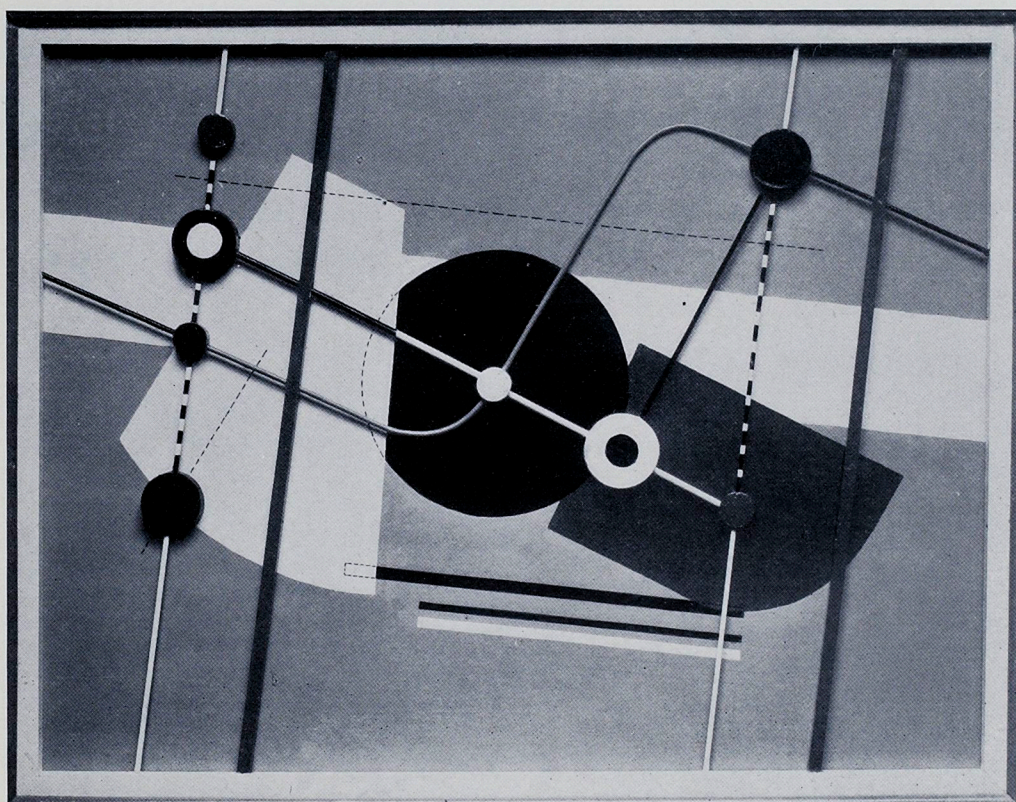
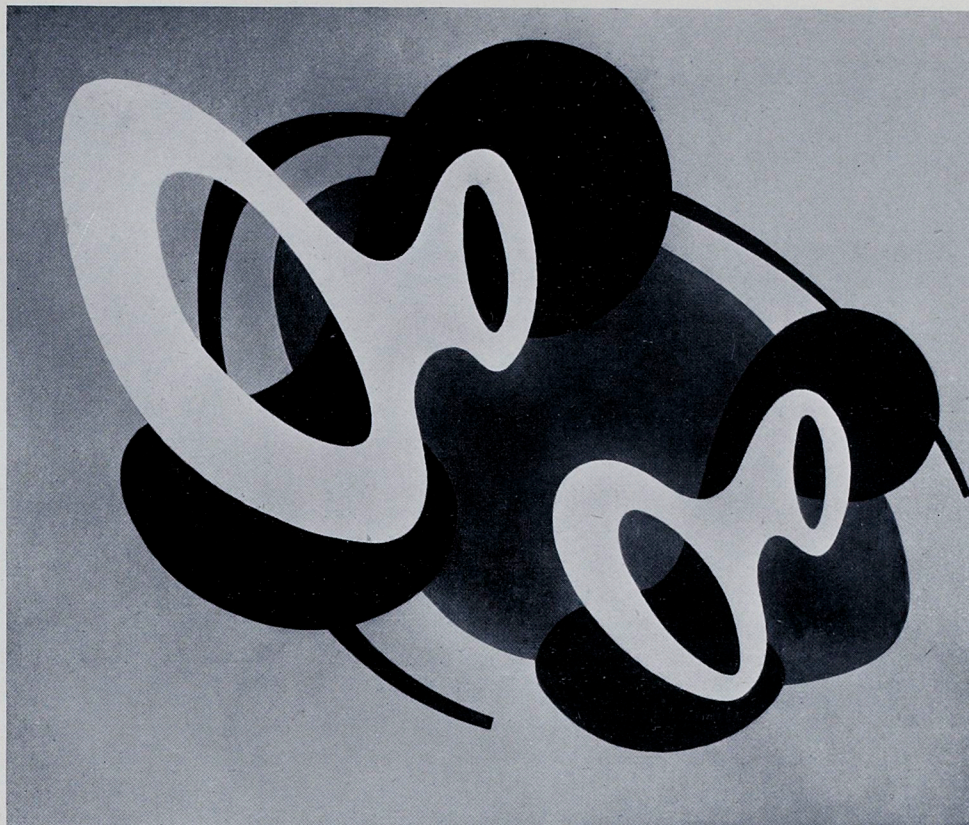
MOORE : Product of the multiform inventive artist, abstraction-surrealism nearly in control ; of a constructor of images between the conscious and the unconscious and between what we perceive and what we project emotionally into the objects of our world ; of the one English sculptor of large, imaginative power, of which he is almost master ; the biomorphist producing viable work, with all the technique he requires.

HEPWORTH : Product of a sculptor more of the single image ; making forms not so enticing by their exact appropriate nature. But she is a viable abstractionist, more constricted and more exclusively (though in quality more slightly) emotional.

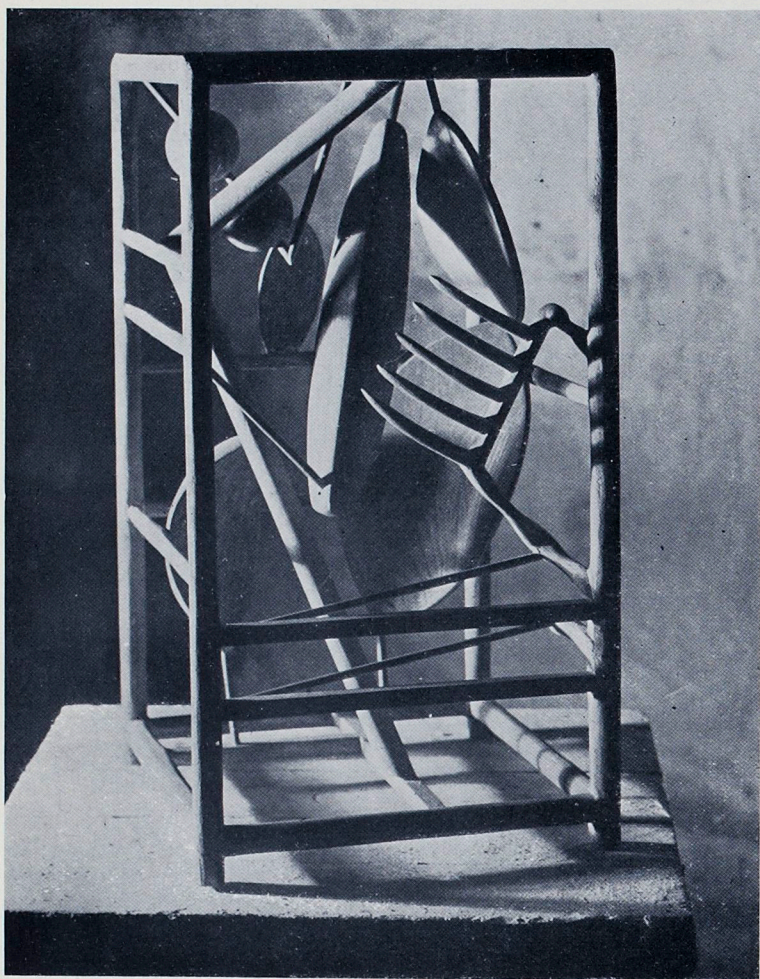
Moore and Wyndham Lewis are the only English artists of maturity in control of enough imaginative power to settle themselves actively between the new preraphaelites of *Minotaure* and the unconscious nihilists of extreme geometric abstraction. They are not those accidents in Valéry's phrase, which are so common in England, artists of intuition without intelligence. From Picasso, from these two, from the over-severe Brancusi, the over-confined Paul Klee, from Miró (whose frivolity is only the slightest ingredient of his work), from Héliou, who sees as sharply as any painter the need for a new biomorphic complexity, the practice of painting and sculpture is gaining a new rotundity of purpose and achievement, mortally opposed to the peevish pinched formalism with which art was stifled for so long in England by Roger Fry, Clive Bell and their minute protégés. "The picture is to be caught by the neck, yes, by the ideas, by the lines, by everything and more. For the idea of element, brought too much forward, must be substituted the idea of plurality. For the idea of machine, must be substituted the idea of being. There is a point where ethics, esthetic, lyrism, reason all meet and become one thing. That point, the picture." Those words are Héliou's ; and these come from Wyndham Lewis, writing fifteen years ago : "The important thing is that the individual should be born a painter. Once he is that, it appears to me that the latitude he may consider his is almost without limit. Such powerful specialised senses as he must have are not likely to be overridden by anything." Here in England the senses of the artist and the interpreter have too long been overridden—overridden by etiolated cliquish amateurism, by the delicate, affected, sly nodding of Bell-flowers, ringing their self-peals over and over again. This Home-bred formalism is now as dead as Mr. Duncan Grant. English artists must replace it by no incapable tyranny of geometric and mechanical idealism, no permanent escape to the divided rectangle and the spokeless wheel.

GEOFFREY GRIGSON.

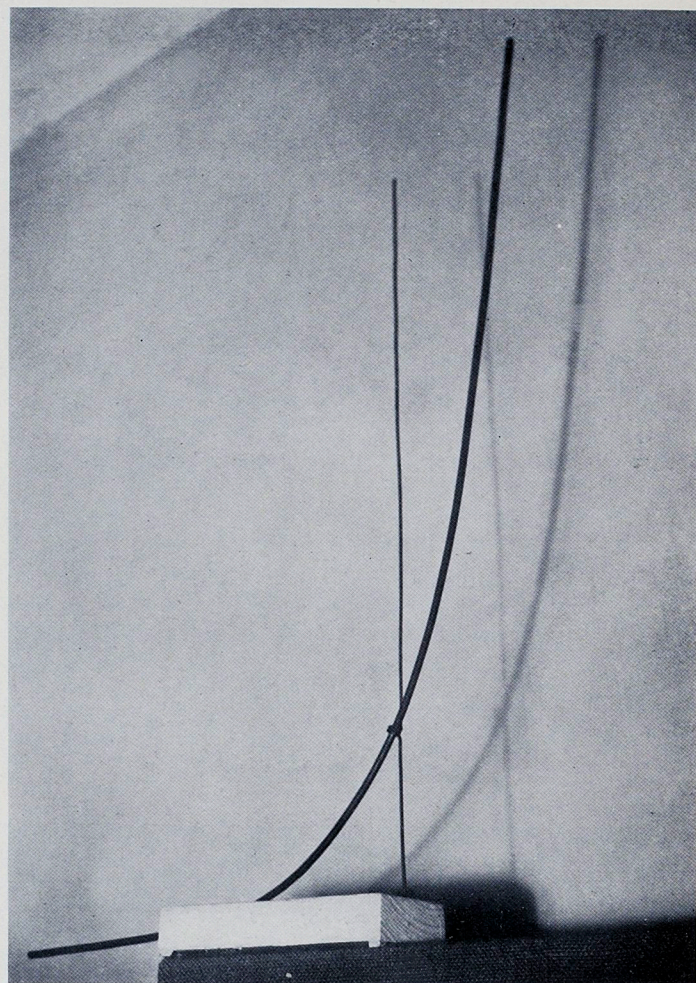
Edward Wadsworth.
COMPOSITION. 1932



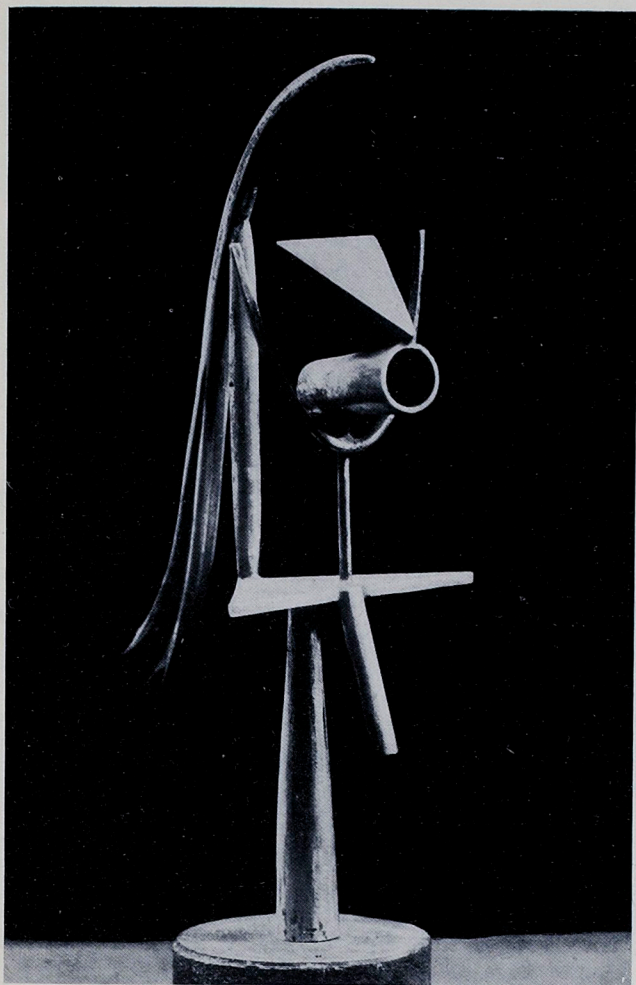
John Piper.
CONSTRUCTION. 1934



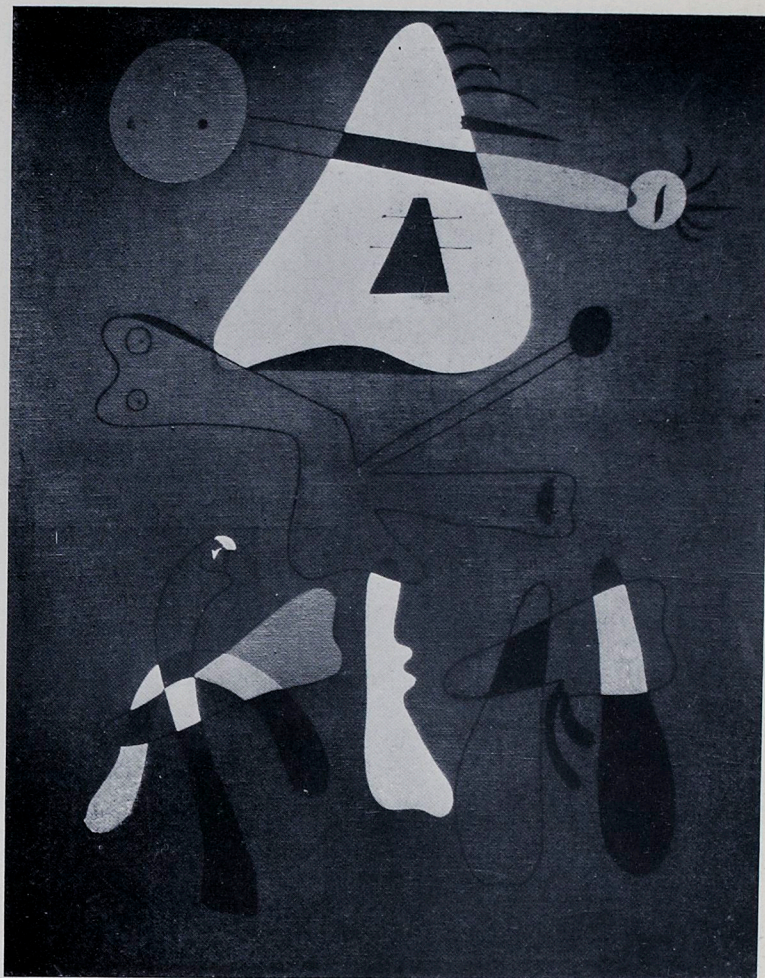
Alberto Giacometti. PALAIS DE QUATRE HEURES



Alexander Calder. SCULPTURE.
(Collection Anatole Jakovski. Photo. Herdeg)



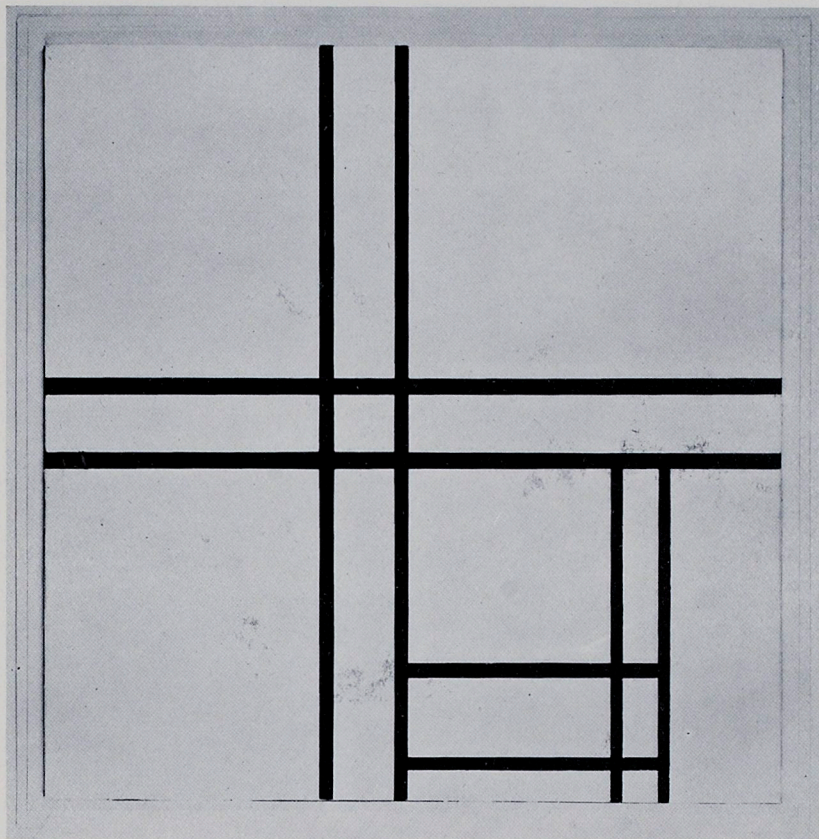
Julio Gonzalez. SCULPTURE



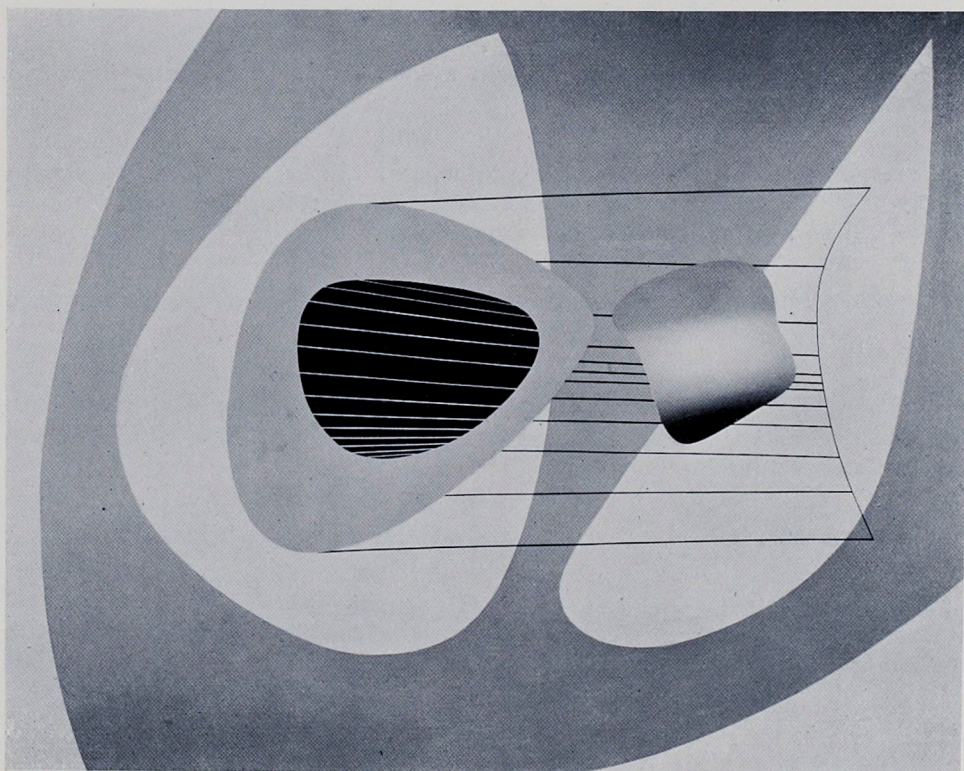
Joan Miró PEINTURE. 1934

Inscriptions under Pictures

- ★ P. Mondrian works at a picture for many months. For years almost. He varies the elasticity of the colours, of one colour very often, and he alters the distances between the black lines to get micrometrical differences. Infinitesimal. But the amazed spectator sees only a square. He does not see that it is the perfect relationship between one colour and emptiness ; between existence and nonentity. The square marking the limits of the outermost zone of art.
- ★ The Russian painter Malevitch, who launched the theory of "Suprematism," long ago painted a picture representing nothing but a square on the unified and neutral background of a canvas. In doing this he quite simply stated that there would be nothing to do in the realm of painting if one were to follow the fatal road opened up by the Impressionists.
- ★ He said this, I insist, because he was not enough of a painter. Mondrian, on the other hand, persuades us, suggests to us each day, that final beauty exists. Beauty when breath stops. The beauty of the summit. The beauty of the iceberg.
- ★ A futurist poet, also a Russian, instead of reciting his poem, stood on the platform and opened his mouth without pronouncing a word. His companion explained to the public that it was the poem of silence.
- ★ To develop, to be able to continue Mondrian's work, one would have to paint pictures of absence.
- ★ Young painters—quite a school—who do innumerable squares plagiarize him grossly. Making his doctrine their own, they forget that one cannot imitate a gesture. A historic action.
- ★ All effective art reduces itself at times to a gesture. To an act of abnegation or redemption. To a spiritual state which marks the end of one culture, pushing forward dialectically in search of another :—that of the future.
- ★ Miró's pictures might be called *Après L'Amour*.
- ★ Yesterday evening I was delighted by the shadows, shining like quicksilver on the Seine, which was extremely calm, like ebony, after midnight. They were gleams from the electric lamps on the bridge, half engulfed by, half plunging into the sleeping surface of the water. They recalled the forms of Brancusi's "Birds." A most noble form, quite faultless and quite silent. A boat goes by. The waves ripple, shaking out this astonishing beauty. The bird shudders and sings. Sometimes one must destroy a work of art so that it can sing.
- ★ Swan-song : the *Giaconda* with a moustache by Marcel Duchamp.
- ★ The absolute beauty of a work of art is the beauty of nature—natural beauty.



P. Mondrian.
COMPOSITION
EN BLANC ET NOIR.
1934



H. Erni.
PEINTURE.
1934

Hans Arp.
CONCRÉTION
HUMAINE



Brancusi's sculptures stood about at random always make marvellous compositions. (Look at his studio.)

- ★ A signature is impossible on Brancusi's sculptures. The customs-house stamp on his "cup" of wood is the act of an iconoclast. A stamp on the cheek of a virgin of the Italian school—that is the same thing.
- ★ If Arp's forms are cranial worlds—earthly skulls—Brancusi's sculptures are spirit solidified.
- ★ The mass—an upward spurt.
- ★ The road : "Colonne Sans Fin."
- ★ The unending embrace, is that not the dream of Miró's and Arp's creation ?
- ★ Letting go, reducing this life such as it is to nothingness—this fine life of daily commonplaces, once removed from reality by events of purely topical interest—the preceding generation has left as a heritage the primary forms of each art, of all

the arts. The task which faces young artists is to reconstruct the world in its integrity, to rediscover the complexity of life from its disparate elements.

- ★ Héliou, very gifted, perhaps the one "genuine" among younger painters, works at the reconstruction of a picture, at the vitalizing of its elements. His images become winged, and fly. His latest big pictures are aerodynamic, like life at the present time.
- ★ Erni, who follows him faithfully and fights the same battle, is still resolving the extreme problems of the resistance of disposition and range.
- ★ The new painting has come into existence thanks to new methods of lighting. Héliou's forms fly taut like flags in the wind on unceasing currents of light.
- ★ Intensity of light-rays.
- ★ Kandinsky is the first abstract painter. The first non-figurative picture dates from 1911. Before, well before, the war he realised that the world must be destroyed one day.
- ★ He was the first to discover the lyrical interaction of colours—that intense and complex life of colours which attach themselves to no reality and are nothing but the precipitates of our burning sensations. Footprints of the artist's inner life as it ceaselessly turns back along the paths of memory.
- ★ Childhood has no limits. That which we call memory is only the horizon. Kandinsky had a feeling for childhood also, the regeneration of our art.
- ★ As for others—they achieve the utmost finesse. Extremely acute feeling for poetic content—or rather for subject-matter that is indulgently refined.
- ★ Giacometti is perhaps the most candid witness of the present social cataclysm : the one who best transcribes the anguish of to-day.
- ★ To shatter, to corrode, to torture, to tear, to blow up, that is to say to create.
- ★ The descriptive sadism of Salvador Dali—man devouring himself—this scorched creature of his engravings becomes in the hands of Giacometti abstract sadism, sublimated and sublime. It is the content which suffers and makes others suffer.
- ★ The "*Palais de Quatre Heures*" is the meeting-place, unequivocal but unforeseen, of prehistory and our own times.
- ★ The old masters painted with the *trompe l'œil* ; the Spaniards of the twentieth century, Picasso, Miró, Gonzalez, employ the *trompe cœur*.

- ★ Art always deludes and sculpture always was and always will be, not a casting of the human body, but a casting of its spiritual condition.
- ★ There were periods of groping when sculptors used the body ; there are those which fill the vacuity, left by the absence of man, with nothingness. At such times one says : night has come.
- ★ Night and day, not the famous *clair obscur*—which are the limits of plastic expression. When Gonzalez encloses space, murdering light, there is never any shadow—it is always night.
- ★ Art at times of transition is nocturnal ; it begins at midnight. In the darkness of the ages. In the unconscious soul. We buy cinema-tickets to-day as they used to go down to the catacombs of the early christians.



Barbara Hepworth. CARVING. 1934
(Collection Margaret Ludwig)

- ★ Gonzalez lets rust eat away the contours of his forged-iron sculptures. Thus pre-historic shells preserve the sand around them, an ambit with a vanished core. How much blood, how many tears—what centuries of moistness do these forged tokens of Gonzalez preserve.
- ★ Miró crucifies his “objects” with rusty nails.
- ★ Almost all these atavisms, these rudimentary feelings, this anguish rooted in the depths of the soul, are foreseen by Kandinsky.
- ★ The old sensibility flowing through U-tubes rises again to the level of day for the last time, to supply the flagrant want of subject-matter in the new forms created by the electro-metallurgic civilization.
- ★ His last picture : the lines luminous, as if lighted from within by neon tubes, intersect a number of archaic forms, subconscious, without a formula.
- ★ So drawing microscopically precise proves to be merely the delusions of the soul.
- ★ The microcosm, the macrocosm serve the same end : the downfall of a soul.
- ★ Calder fixes the rendezvous of the planets.
- ★ Nicholson also has that air of being troubled by the centuries. I often think of him when the electric street-lamps lower their eyelids. It is the hour of that incomparably acute sensibility of his which so bitterly recalls the drawings of children. Like a thief I creep near to a wall surrounding a transient garden, a wall which sleeps peacefully covered with children's drawings. There is no one here. I cut out a square, taking every precaution not to spoil the delicate reliefs, engraved with a rusty nail, not to destroy the light powder of floury colours, and at the bottom I sign : Ben Nicholson. The date. The day and the hour. Thus one collects butterflies. Or plays hide and seek by oneself.
- ★ Night.
- ★ Night, Night, oh what interminable night. Huge. With no orbit. Always night which creates light. Night, that shows us *how men see*. The sun is an everyday light, and everyday life is not art. Man-made light is his *vision*. Seeing by electric light is different from seeing by the light of gas-jets. Seeing by the light of neon tubes different from seeing by candlelight, or Auer burners. Oh, lighted cities ! . . . Headlights continually bring into being different forms of beauty. Styles derived from methods of lighting. For example : voltaic arc-lights :—the period of 1900—modern style—instability—crackling vibrations—thirst—anguish—the flux and reflux of a delirium—dull sleeplessness—apathy—Sarah Bernhardt—latent heat—the osmosis of desire—the uncertainty of the new method of seeing—the terror of unusual things.

Jean Hélion.
PEINTURE.
1934



- ★ Headlights—one is bound to see them. Or keep one's eyes shut. Oh, Hélion. . . .
- ★ Myself ; I like light, for—those who seek it wander through the night.
- ★ For : “I love the art of to-day, because I love light more than anything else, and all men love light more than anything else—they invented fire.” (Guillaume Apollinaire).

ANATOLE JAKOVSKI

Paris, October 1934.

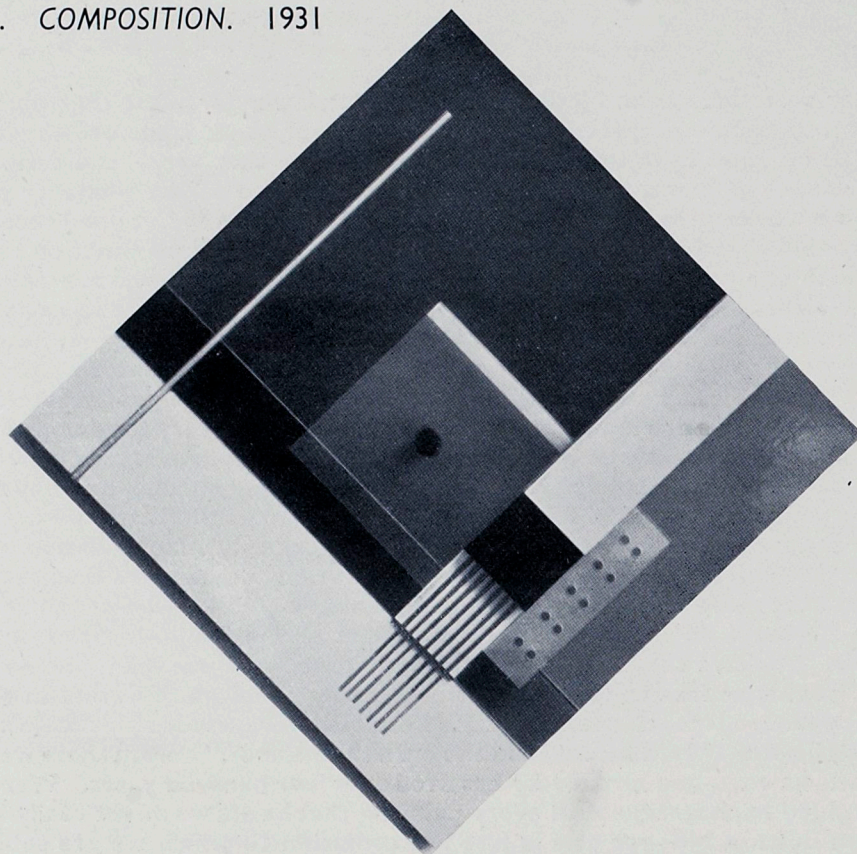
“To enlarge the elements, to multiply them as the cells multiply, think them, lead them to the complexity of particular beings, keeping as long as it would be possible, their character of simplicity. It is probably the task, and the greatest possibility left for the new artist. The question is once more to open what has been shut . . .” (Jean Hélion: Catalogue of the Gallery of Living Art, New York University, 1933.)

MODERN ART

We hear so much about Modern Art, and yet I wonder what that phrase means. Why are so many people prepared to condemn it out of hand, while others will consider nothing else to be good? In both cases I would suggest that very little serious thought had gone into such judgment, for wherever art has flourished and at whatever period, it is likely that some works have been good; not only for their period but good throughout the ages. The trouble lies, I think, in our extraordinary lack of discrimination: we do not easily distinguish one painting from another. In the eyes of those who are enthusiasts for the art of the eighties Augustus John and Ben Nicholson are both moderns—and for this reason bad. I have often thought it very difficult to form even an approximate judgment about the art of our own day. For one thing, the majority of us fail to notice our own development. Automatically we go on repeating that A and B are good, therefore C must be bad since his methods are different. This sort of thing dies very hard and so when new methods are put into force, when old forms are newly clothed, when new conventions are adopted they are abusively labelled "Modern." Modern they may be, but why the abuse? Another thing which makes it hard for us is that though, taken in mass, we are very little selective, the accidents of time are very much so, and curiously enough discriminatingly so. Thus the art of the past when taken as a whole is of a far higher standard than that of to-day. I do not mean that there is not an appalling amount of rubbish, even of the remote past, still to be seen—but I do mean that the judgments of the few art critics or art lovers throughout the past have set their seal on certain works, have put them on one side, so to say, as good, leaving us free to consider them without the effort of having to select them from a mass of heterogeneous quality. Take Botticelli, for instance—his fame could easily rest on two works—the "Primavera" and the "Birth of Venus." From these we judge him great. Two works only, and already he has lived over four hundred years. Were we to see these two jumbled haphazardly with every painting that he did we might easily in our confusion put him down a bit—yet this is just the confusion to which we are subject in our judgment of contemporaries. All the work they do, or almost all, comes before us—an immense output, fifty to a hundred paintings a year. Picture our embarrassment after ten years: a thousand paintings any two of which, or one of which for that matter, may be enough to establish the painter in the first rank of artists. We lack sufficient selective power to discern at once the core of their work; certain things irritate us unnecessarily, other things please us too much, our judgment is muddled by our emotion. Could we project our vision a few hundred years it is quite possible that we should find an artist living to-day who is so overwhelmingly great that he will upset the standards of the past—that the centre of greatness in the visual arts will shift from, say, the fifteenth to the twentieth century. It is easy to admire the old masters; we are accustomed to them and their best works are sorted out. But each work from contemporary artists is new to us, and by experience we know that very few of them can be the basis of fame, though there will undoubtedly be many which for their beauty and fringing of perfection may fill our eye as everyday enjoyments, as everyday inspirations. Again our task of discrimination is added to, for not only must we find the best works of an artist's output but we must decide who are the artists who really count in any period; we must distinguish them from the crowd of their hangers-on who by their crudeness, by their mediocrity, often make the quicker and more popular appeal.

With all these difficulties it is small wonder that modern art is held so little in repute and that even the willing student finds himself out of his depth. It is almost inconceivable how little consideration the average person looking at a picture gives to the understanding of that picture. He thinks that because it is something which he registers through the eyes he can decide about it at once; it is an empty judgment arising from the necessities of our physical life. A man has a cup and saucer before him and he knows

C. Domela. COMPOSITION. 1931



that he sees it ; so he does, but in a functional way : it holds tea, its handle enables him to hold it, he can place it on its saucer, and so on. These things are what he apprehends as a cup and saucer, and thus he may be said to " see " them. But a potter or the manager of a porcelain factory or a poet will " see " so much more, and the vision of the poet may be vitalising. How then should the essence of a picture, a work of art, be seen at a glance, its physical aspects being but the clothing of its real life ? We have a certain little arrogance summed up in the phrase " seeing is believing," and so a picture remains to us the visual representation of what our eye sees. We bring no artistic judgment to bear on it, its story is still considered to be its main interest and not its colour or its composition or that indefinable abstract quality which may have made it a good picture apart from its visual interest. Art should not compete with the physical aspects of life—the statue of a man with the man himself—the painting of a landscape with trees and sky and earth. It can never accomplish this and must find expressions within its own laws, suggestive if it will, of these things but using them to convey the life of the spirit. We must not get fixed ideas as to how this spirit is to be expressed. Our appreciation of art must be fluid. There is no fixed standard in such things ; as we grow, so our appreciation grows, and so our standards are changed. James Joyce or Hindemith must have some effect on our judgment about literature or music. Already the great period of Dutch painting is becoming more a thing of historical interest than of living value, their standards being too remote from ours of to-day, fed as we are by airplanes, cinemas and wireless.

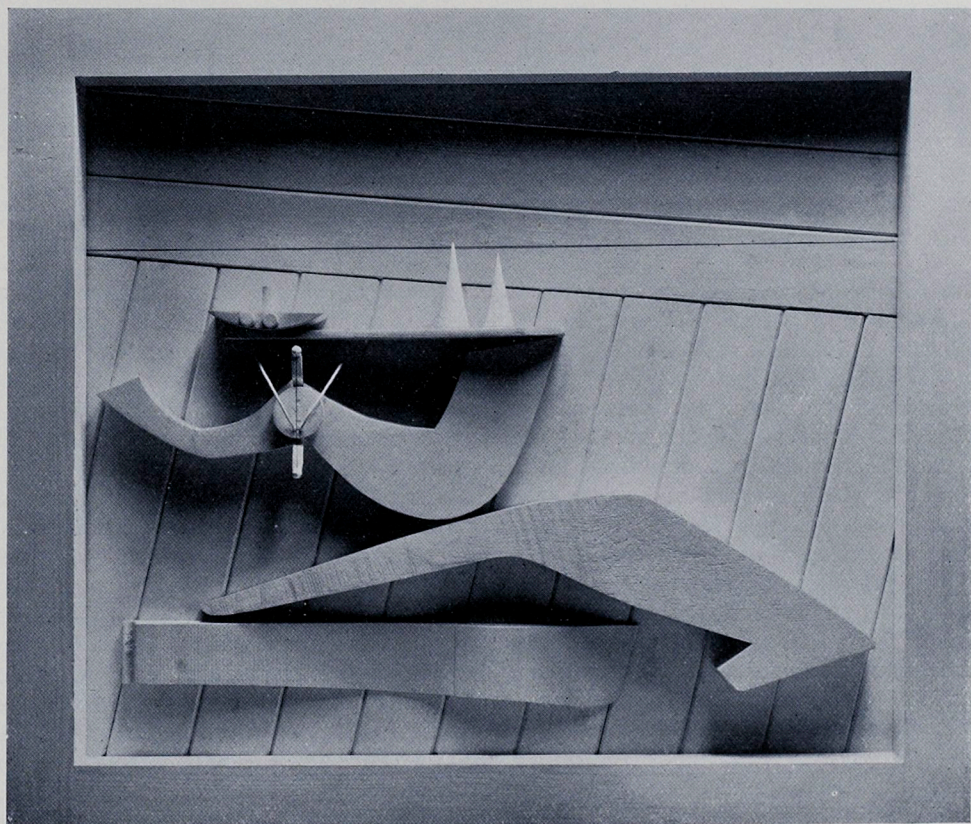
There is need for contrast and clear discrimination. Picasso has shown that a painting using the symbols of geometry can be just as inspiring as one which uses people and human incidents. Recently in this country there has been a movement towards non-figurative

work, often spoken of as Abstract Art. The terms are generally wrong, for mostly the non-figurative is figurative of geometric or other symbols ; and as for the term abstract, it is but to call it art, for we might say that all art is abstract in so far as it is art at all. Be this as it may, the movement arises from a real vitality and a desire to define, to get back to the basic uses of art. It is a kind of discipline which opposes itself to the degenerations of the Royal Academy, and out of it will spring a clearer conception of the nature of art.

There is a saying that if you give a man enough rope he will hang himself, and it is certainly true that in creative work the more liberty we are given the greater discipline do we need to exercise in our endeavour to be creatively selective.

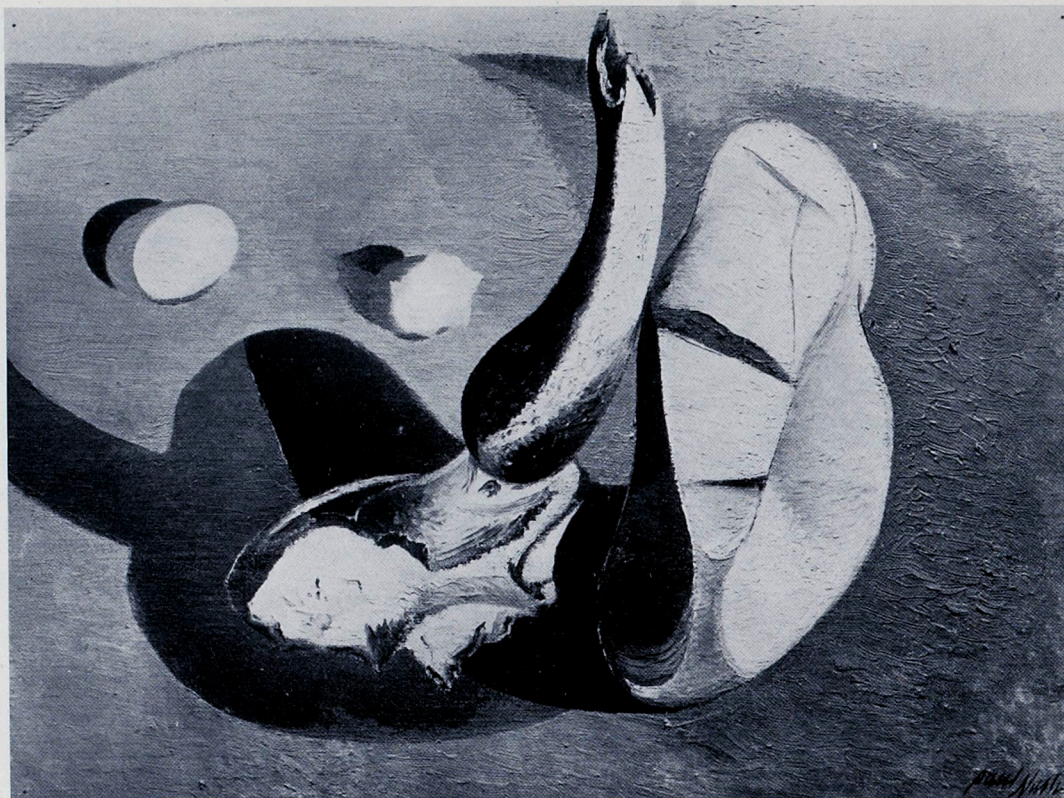
Il faut recueillir pour mieux sauter : and this I feel is happening in England to-day. The Parisian school of the last thirty years did this to shake itself free of the Impressionist school which had begun to lose sight of the true objective of the artist. We are doing it after an overdose of suave technique. In each case it is like opening the windows of a closed house, a purification, and then a redecoration with the experience of the past as decorator. Every work of art is in a way a variation on an original theme, catching at the spirit of the original but standing clearly in its own life ; a new composition indeed, so far from the original that it would seem to be quite unrelated to it, yet tied through the channel of tradition ; endless links through time. It is for us to catch the theme.

H. S. EDE.



Ceri Richards. CONSTRUCTION. 1934

Paul Nash.
PAINTING.
1934



FOR, BUT NOT WITH

The following essay needs a few words of introduction. It originated in a letter to the editor of *Axis*, where I expressed a doubt that a painter not wholly devoted to producing abstract pictures, could be eligible for inclusion in a magazine which, as I thought, expressed so particularly the non-figurative creed. It appeared, however, I was mistaken in my estimate ; our ranges coincided. But there still remained some debatable space ; scarcely no-man's land—a more aerial hiatus, such as an air-pocket, perhaps. In any case a void of some sort, which I have been left to explore.

Before I venture upon any criticism of purely abstract art, I should prefer to state that I am almost entirely in sympathy with its purpose and aesthetic. If I am unable to submit to the exigence of a completely non-representational idiom, it is for what I will call "personal" reasons. It was the personal aspect which the editor of *Axis* seemed to think might interest her readers ; but since I feel that matters of personal bias are often looked at askance, I shall approach my objective obliquely. Fortunately I am old enough to remember when abstract art began to be spoken of as a passing fashion. This was soon after its inception, a few years before the war. In England, since the end of the war, our more vocal art critics have steadily discouraged the belief that there is any future for abstract art. Indeed, it is usually stated as a cold fact, that abstract art is dead. I have seen it printed in respectable journals, and offered as useful information to guide the unwary, that abstract painting has long been abandoned on the continent and that any attempt to do over again in England what had proved no more than a freakish experiment is not only futile, but perverse. Some of us know the story of the august personage who visited a famous art school,

but, before entering, enquired with great seriousness, "Professor T, I trust you have no cubists here"; and upon being assured there were none—"I am glad," he added, "Cubism is Bolshevism." This confused view is shared by a number of prominent people in England to this day: they are convinced that the practice and encouragement of abstract painting and sculpture is somehow subversive of discipline and order. Apart from the slightly amusing irony that an art which so deeply imposes order and discipline on the imagination, should become a sort of formal symbol for a conception of chaos, what are the facts, actually, concerning abstract art?

It has been practised now, in various forms all over the world, for twenty-five years. Its adherents, far from falling off, have gradually increased. In this country, the younger generation of artists regards it as a natural form of expression, and, I am told, that at the public schools, it is the only form of art which has any appeal for boys interested in aesthetics. How are we to account for this state of things, so much at variance with a popular conception?

For myself, I can only say that an explanation given by Herbert Read in his discussion of Mechanic Sensibility, chimes so perfectly with my own understanding, that I can offer nothing better than a quotation of his words. "The obvious ground for the appeal of mechanical form," he says, "is the presence in our daily life of so many machines; of so many objects expressing in their lines and volumes a certain functional perfection, to which we cannot deny the name of beauty. . . . But there is probably a profounder reason for the appearance of a mechanical or geometric sensibility in modern art and that reason is the reason underlying all recurrent phases of geometric art in history."¹ He then gives Worringer's theory expressed in his book, *Form in Gothic*, that the artist's will in primitive man "did not arise from the enjoyment of direct sensuous perception of the object; instead he created precisely in order to subdue the torment of perception, in order to obtain fixed conceptual images in the place of casual perceptual images . . . it was the product of a direct impulse of self-preservation, not the unrestrained luxury product of a humanity delivered from all elemental world fears." Read finds a parallel between the primitive artist's state and that of the modern artist. He asks, "Is our outer world, in its state of political, economic and spiritual chaos, one which man can face with 'universal piety,' sensuous satisfaction, spiritual aplomb? Is it not rather a world from which the sensitive soul, be he painter or poet, will flee to some spiritual refuge, some sense of stability? And is he not likely, in that tendency, to desert the perceptual basis of the empirical art of the immediate preceding epoch, in favour of a fixed conceptual basis?"

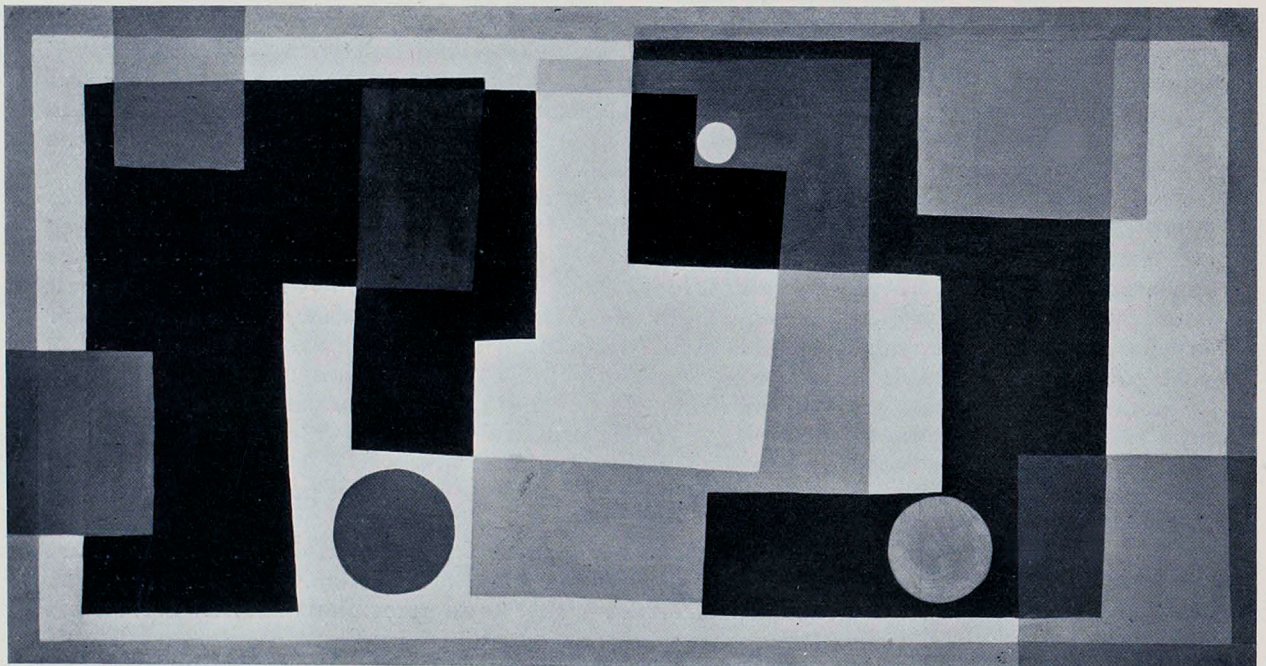
I am wholly in sympathy with such a theory, although it can be made to cover a wider field than that occupied by a pure abstract art. It explains, however, the spiritual need for such an art. But there is another reason why, from a practical standpoint, a purely abstract art may be prevalent in the future. This is put forward in Herbert Read's latest book, *Art and Industry* (Faber & Faber). In the course of his admirably reasoned case for an industrial art, Mr. Read suggests that "virtually a new plastic art, developed out of cubism, is very valuable as a 'pure' art controlling the development of formal art in general which will occupy, in the future, a relationship to industrial design very similar to the relationship pure mathematics bear to the practical sciences." Here, I think, we have an idea immensely stimulating to young minds; and one which, as it is understood and put into practice, will go far towards reconciling the baffled or suspicious public to the meaning of abstract art.

In this short summary I have tried to review the claims which a purely abstract art has upon the sympathies of every intelligent person. I now wish to show, as succinctly, why I as an artist, am unable to practise such an art except as an occasional means of expression. To begin with, I will turn in my tracks to the quotation I made from Herbert Read's

¹ *Art Now* (Faber & Faber)

comments on Worringer's theory of fixed conceptual images. Referring again to geometrical art in general, he admits that it is possible to regard it as an art of despair, "an art merely of escape from the complexity and confusion of modern life." Whether this is just or not, or whether it matters or not, the art of escape is not the prerogative of the practitioners of a purely geometrical art. What we all do more or less, as Jean Hélion says, is a piece of world, an isolated object. I find my piece of world cannot be expressed within the restrictions of a non-figurative idiom; not by reason of its expanse, so much as by reason of its character. I have known this from the afternoon in Paris ten years ago when I listened with awe to Albert Gleizes' eloquent spate of aesthetic and philosophic theory, to the last time I turned the pages of *Abstraction-Creation*, and marvelled at the beauty of their immaculate monotony. Apart from the world of "pure" invention free from association with recognisable objects, I have no doubt, that the infinite variations of nature may be resolved with an equally incalculable number of complete abstractions. Yet I find I still need partially organic features to make my fixed conceptual image. I discern among natural phenomena a thousand forms which might, with advantage, be dissolved in the crucible of abstract transfiguration; but the hard cold stone, the rasping grass, the intricate architecture of trees and waves, or the brittle sculpture of a dead leaf—I cannot translate altogether beyond their own image, without suffering in spirit. My aim in symbolical representation and abstraction, although governed by a purpose with a formal ideal in view, seeks always to give life to a conception within the formal shell. But when I am at liberty to change my mood, and can turn to the geometrical planning of a textile or other form of industrial design, I fancy that I gain something in the release from all representational problems; and it is during these occasional periods, that I find non-figurative painting a pure, unhindered joy.

PAUL NASH



Arthur Jackson. PAINTING. 1934

Exhibition of Abstract Painting at the Experimental Theatre

At the moment of writing, i.e. during the second week of the year 1935, the most impressive picture exhibition to be seen in London is probably the scratch collection assembled at 59, Finchley Road, the headquarters of the Experimental Theatre. The fact that some of the exhibits have been seen before elsewhere does not detract from their interest. Without pausing to scrutinize the doctrinal soil from which they flower, a disinterested Eye proffers the following diary of its journey round this hothouse of abstractions.

The eye wanders first, perhaps, to the white expanse of Miró's "Horse." This turns out to be an unknown breed of dog investigating a rich brown viand and torpedoed in the rear by a familiar Miró fish. Next to this very sensitive drawing is a small inspired Ernst entitled "Human Figure and Insects"—an affair of refrigerated blues accommodating two hostile reds pacifically. The same wall supports two well-known Wadsworths—"Exhalation" and "Humoresque"—both very fine if over-deliberate and hard.

Mr. Paul Nash is poorly represented by a chilly "Summer" and a rather melancholy ruin, unhappy in tone, called "Strange Coast." A characteristic Baumeister—an outsize "Hand" clutching the elements of a Picasso "flat" still-life set in a coarse sandy desert of olive pigment—makes an agreeable decoration. More ingenious are Mr. Piper's alarmingly precise and complex "Constructions," assembled from hunks of cable, rods, drums, ribbed lavatory panes, strips of perforated bluebottle-metal, etc., and painted in sober earth colours. They suggest Underground wiring diagrams, or nightmare relief maps such as a neat and gifted electrician might improvise in sleep.

Mr. Ben Nicholson's three vertical rectangular "Compositions" are of impeccable quality: the first, predominantly grey, disclosing ample feminine rhythms in skating tempo; the second and largest picked out in dense black edged with an icy blond surf and illumined from beneath by a vivid vermilion meniscus; the third a small narrow design in black, white and scarlet signed at the top with a bird-like crest. But it is the trio of attractive abstractions by his young pupil, Mr. Arthur Jackson (Nicholonesques with a personal difference), that provide the surprise of this show. One is a pure painting overlapping rectangles of limpid colour; another is a plywood jigsaw; the third is a congeries of cut painted and mounted boards, framing strips and islands of engaging colour.

The three Klees are notable for their magical tactile beauty; a "Creative Still-Life"—scumbled gold and walnut; "Counterspot," a check of faded sepia and iron grey dominated by a frosty red arrow; and "Cathedrals," a shimmering square boss incised with minute runes rewritten with incredibly fine brushstrokes. Finally there is a magnificent Kandinsky, a miracle of balance. Its vast dun sky harbours a smouldering planet, reflected sectors of which leer on the horizon. There is an apparition of bleak triangles and a steep rocketing of inflexible rods. Across a foreground of sombre, apprehensive gray a solitary black hieratic camel stalks off left: the hieroglyph of a superb vision.

HUGH GORDON PORTEUS

Picasso at the Tate

It is rare to see several Picassos hanging together in London, and the fourteen paintings and drawings which Mr. Hugh Willoughby has lent to the Tate Gallery should not be missed. They are not highly important pictures for Picasso, but each one is representative of a phase; and they are important enough, seen as a group, to allow verification or revision of opinions.

"Think of some highly organised visual entity—a tiger, say: and then, over against

it, a dark red splash of paint upon a whitewashed wall" (Wyndham Lewis: *Men Without Art*, p. 188). The red-splashed wall is represented here by early fragments of a Toulouse-Lautrec character. The other twelve are "tigers." *The Times* art-critic suggests that Picasso has always been a red-splasher at heart, and has never successfully hidden the fact from the clear-sighted. There is a suggestion of warning in his comment: warning that Picasso should not be mistaken for a top-drawer Classical artist. The warning is unnecessary, because a top-drawer Classical artist, even if he is born, cannot live and breathe in days of clearance like those of the last forty years. At any rate, Picasso is the only *mature* artist now living in possession of enough power and control to have created the need for a contemporary classical standard. And it happens that his method has been that of trial and error, of canalization, of the suppression of elements. Direct building was impossible: clearance had to come first. Cézanne had chosen the site. With the extra complexity of life since about 1900 and red-splash promptings like negro sculpture and psycho-analysis, what other approach has been possible than through use and constant control of the red splash? It was the only way to marshal any elements of this complex, constantly implicated existence.

In his task of clearance Picasso has at any rate invented (being unable to find it on the rubbish heap) a respectable contemporary Classical form. "Picasso is a Romantic" is a cheap taunt—if it isn't a compliment. After all, a tiger as a visual entity may quite reasonably be considered as a red splash in perfect control.

The aggressiveness of a Picasso is exaggerated in reproduction. A show like this proves again the mistake of considering a series of reproductions as anything better than an index. (And after a certain point, the better the reproduction the worse the index.) The "Bather" painting, for instance, has the delicate feeling for paint of a Boudin, which a good reproduction subtly falsifies and a bad reproduction turns into a German assertiveness. This painting and the abstraction in the centre of the wall have the controlled potency of Picasso at his best. Three or four of the drawings are up to this standard too. Everywhere in them is to be seen that finding of a line-of-all-lines; that certainty that is so certain that it looks lucky. In the two surrealist "Women on the Seashore" drawings there is little evidence of a committal to surrealism. It is instructive to notice just how little there is. And even in the early Toulouse-Lautrec-like fragments there is plenty to give the lie to those who argue too glibly about Picassoid sentiment, and snort at the Blue Period.

JOHN PIPER.

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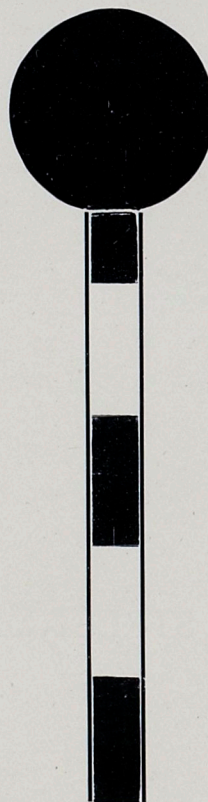
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