

The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy

Author(s):

Sam Gathercole

URL:

<https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/the-lost-cause-of-british-constructionism/>

Citation (Chicago):

Gathercole, Sam. "The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy." In *British Art Studies*. London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2020. <https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/the-lost-cause-of-british-constructionism/>.

Citation (MLA):

Gathercole, Sam. "The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy." *British Art Studies*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2020, <https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/the-lost-cause-of-british-constructionism/>.

© 2019 British Art Studies

The text of this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Unless otherwise indicated, all illustrations are excluded from the CC BY license. To view a copy of this license visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Aubrey Beardsley in the Russian "World of Art"

Author(s):

Sasha Dovzhyk

URL:

<https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/aubrey-bearsley-russian-world-of-art/>

Citation (Chicago):

Dovzhyk, Sasha. "Aubrey Beardsley in the Russian 'World of Art.'" In *British Art Studies*. London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2020. <https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/aubrey-bearsley-russian-world-of-art/>.

Citation (MLA):

Dovzhyk, Sasha. "Aubrey Beardsley in the Russian 'World of Art.'" *British Art Studies*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2020, <https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/aubrey-bearsley-russian-world-of-art/>.

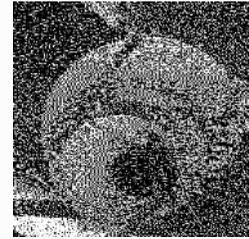
© 2019 British Art Studies

The text of this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Unless otherwise indicated, all illustrations are excluded from the CC BY license. To view a copy of this license visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy

Article by **Sam Gathercole**

WORD COUNT:11,451



Abstract

This article reflects on the demise of British constructionism. Constructionism had emerged in the 1950s, developing a socially engaged art closely aligned with post-war architecture. Its moment was not to last however, and, as discourses changed in the 1960s and 1970s, constructionism was marginalised. This article traces social and economic shifts, but it is the changing cultural discourses—particularly those associated with critical art—that are the primary concern. This article focuses on two case studies: one, the constructionist involvement in the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects in London in 1961; the other, Victor Pasmore’s work in Peterlee New Town (1955–1977). Both cases form the background for celebrated cultural interventions, by Gustav Metzger and Stuart Brisley respectively. Considered on constructionist terms and in relation to the conflicts apparent in relation to emergent critical practices, these two case studies shape an understanding of constructionism’s falling out of favour.

Cast of Main Characters

Stuart Brisley, community (and performance) artist

Anthony Hill, constructionist artist

Kenneth Martin, constructionist artist

Mary Martin, constructionist artist

Gustav Metzger, auto-destructive artist

Victor Pasmore, constructionist artist

with Lawrence Alloway, art critic, as The Player

Prologue: Minor Characters and Dramatic Devices

On 11 April 1967, Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was performed in full for the first time at the Old Vic Theatre, London. In it, Stoppard took two minor characters from William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* and placed them centre stage. Weaving scenes from Shakespeare’s original with imaginings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s continued life outside of it, Stoppard granted attention to the margins: exits from an old drama had become entrances

into a new one. Adding a number of self-conscious nods towards the work of Samuel Beckett, Stoppard shaped an absurdist, intertextual, existentialist, meta-drama.

Taking a prompt from Stoppard's play, what follows tells a parallel or background story to that foregrounded by the recent art history engaging with critical practice. According to that history, Gustav Metzger and Stuart Brisley are the heroes of the tale about to be visited.¹ But, instead of rehearsing the standard account, this is a story about those who have been cast as the minor characters (operating in the background or wings of Metzger and Brisley's actions, but barely registered in the historical record of those actions). Metzger and Brisley are, thus, the Hamlets of the tale; a different group of artists—the constructionists: Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, and Victor Pasmore—are the Rosencrantzs and the Guildensterns, doomed from the outset (as, indeed, they are in Stoppard's play).²

In relation to the action that is about to unfold, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* functions primarily as a playful device: a passage of art history is here treated as theatrical drama played out with minor characters of that history taking centre stage. There is no direct link between Stoppard's play and the lost cause of British constructionism. However, in its own gentle way, the play can be regarded as a marker of Western cultural discourses of the moment; discourses that directly and indirectly applied pressure to the constructionist idea that had been developed in the previous decade. On a literary front, questions were being asked about the role of the author and the originality of the creative act.³ Stoppard's play can be located in relation to these and numerous other critical challenges of the time, many of which addressed and intervened upon cultural canons and hierarchies, as well as the attitudes and values they upheld.⁴ So, the play works here as prompting a particular mode of engagement with the subject, and as being representative of certain attitudes and practices that held currency in the period about to be visited, 1961–1976. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* itself deals with a number of themes that emerge in the two acts that follow: the relationship between art and life; confused agency; a crisis of identity and purpose; recruitment to an ill-defined cause; and betrayal. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to make sense of their ill-defined context in Act One of Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern, "Shouldn't we be doing something—constructive?"⁵ If Gustav Metzger had been a character in the scene, the answer would have been "No! Destruction is the only appropriate course of action."

Exposition: Setting the Constructionist Stage

On 3 July 1961, the pioneer of auto-destructive art Gustav Metzger arrived at the South Bank in London with subversive intent. On 5 January 1976, the performance artist Stuart Brisley arrived in Peterlee, County Durham, planning his own critical intervention. Brisley had been officially invited to Peterlee; Metzger had not been invited to the South Bank (although he had sought permissions from the organisers of the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects that was happening there, before angrily turning up anyway). Their respective actions were framed as something like art—Metzger and Brisley were operating as artists—but both were engaging in what they saw as urgent social/political issues: Metzger's eye was on "capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation";⁶ Brisley's more localised concern was repressive bureaucracy, and what he saw as a flagrant disregard for the local community exercised by post-war New Town development corporations. As such, both maintained the historical avant-gardist intention to merge art and life: to work in direct, critical relation to society; and to influence progressive change through cultural activity.

Metzger and Brisley are here recruited to represent aspects of the new cultural strategies and critical tendencies that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. On some fronts, critical practices took a performative turn and explored new subjectivities; on others, critical practices worked towards dematerialising the artwork and decentering art production. Metzger and Brisley are but two of many agents of change at work in these years. The broad shift in which their work participated is one that relates to contemporaneous and, indeed, current discourses of art: a change in what artists do, and, more significantly perhaps, a change in the meanings it is possible to claim and find in what artists do (and had done historically). In other words, established meanings attached to certain forms of practice were no longer to be assumed: top-down modernist practices were giving way to bottom-up models that, in the cases of Metzger and Brisley at least, were critically positioned in opposition to prevailing cultural, social, and political discourses.

What follows is not, however, a story about Metzger and Brisley: they are not our main protagonists. Rather, this is a story about the vanguard representatives of a fading model, and about the circumstances in which that model was superseded. The main roles are here to be played by a loosely organised alliance of artists (the constructionists) that had, from the early 1950s developed an abstract, formal, rationalist artistic language, and explored its potential in relation to architecture and the wider built environment.⁷ Their work was done in a post-war context that consolidated and institutionalised the collective, equalising energies of wartime in the form of the Welfare State. Constructionism worked in support of the Welfare State—in relation to its emergent infrastructure and associated superstructure. This was constructionism's defining context, but—as the 1960s began—the context was changing. Social and political changes left the artists increasingly in the compromised service of private interests, hierarchical bureaucracy, and corporate capitalism. So, Metzger and Brisley are this story's antagonists. They are the agents named here towards a particular purpose: their now widely celebrated activities on the South Bank and in Peterlee took place against the backdrop of British constructionism. Constructionism, as represented here by the artists Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, and Victor Pasmore, pursued a socially engaged “art of environment” in the 1950s.⁸ Through statements and publications (such as three issues of *Broadsheet* produced irregularly between 1951 and 1957, and the book *Nine Abstract Artists* published in 1954), and in a series of group exhibitions (such as *Artist Versus Machine* at the Building Centre in London in 1954, and *This is Tomorrow* at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1956), the constructionists foregrounded social engagement, and the environmental implication and architectural intent of their work.⁹ Their exhibitions regularly involved architects and models of collaboration. The constructionists took these speculative models of collaboration one step further, producing work in spaces outside those of exhibition, in, for example, new housing schemes, new hospitals, and new schools, colleges, and universities. Through such projects, the constructionists demonstrated in practice, as well as in their theory, a willing participation in the shaping of the public and social spaces of post-war Britain.

Constructionist work is contingent upon its immediate environment. Anthony Hill wrote of any given constructionist work as “an organisation” that “influences its surrounding context”, and “only functions in its context”.¹⁰ It is a restrained, rational art. It was produced in conditions that ensured a degree of independence of artwork from artist in that the work has its own internal necessity. The constructionists worked in productive and creative dialogue with and between given geometrical systems and structural principles, and frequently with raw, industrial materials. The work occupied a position of depersonalised resistance to the bucolic, individualistic romanticism that prevailed in much post-war British art. It stood—figuratively and, where and

when possible, literally—alongside emergent forms of modern architecture in developing what the art critic Lawrence Alloway termed “an aesthetic of the typical”.¹¹ This linked, in turn, with certain discourses of the Welfare State: the assertive but quiet manners of constructionism chimed with those of the New Humanism of the 1950s. New publics were being shaped through new institutional and infrastructural frameworks, and through and by new social spaces. Beyond the 1950s, however, constructionism’s manners were regarded as complicit in a more problematic culture and politics. The society produced by the Welfare State was vital in floating the possibility of a more egalitarian society constituted through new distributions of power and new forms of agency, but the energies it released developed into a range of fault lines in the 1960s.

Constructionism presented itself in line with the potentiality of post-war Britain. According to the Liberal architect of the Welfare State, William Beveridge, the post-war period would represent a “clear field” both ideologically and materially, given the scale of the reconstruction demanded by wartime destruction.¹² The question was: on what terms and in what form would Britain rebuild? For Beveridge, this was a “revolutionary moment” and thus “a time for revolutions, not for patching”.¹³ And, just as the Russian constructivists had recognised a particular cultural challenge in relation to the Russian Revolution, so—in a characteristically quieter fashion and in a less tumultuous moment—the British constructionists forwarded a unified cultural and social vision. More than any other of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, constructivism (and variations such as constructionism) is reliant on conditions available in particular cultural, social, and political contexts. It does not oppose antagonistically in the way that other historical avant-garde manifestations such as Dadaism and Surrealism do. So, without a sympathetic context, constructivism flounders, and is reduced to operating in a space of artistic speculation some uncomfortable distance from its materialist ambitions.

Constructivism—and practices drawing from and associated with it—had a couple of moments in twentieth-century British art and design. In the 1930s, when Britain played host to a number of European émigré modernists, artists gathered around Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson responded to modernist work and ideas. The response was singularly English however: nature prevailed over technology. The British artists were attracted to European modernism, but betrayed a less industrial mindset: theirs was a less technologically driven outlook, inclined instead to draw on natural structures; the British palette was one of secondary and tertiary colours alongside Mondrian’s primaries; in terms of materials, wood was preferred to metal. The British art was less urban, more rural in its implications: it was more a modernism of the cottage than of the tower block. This phase of British constructivism is articulated in, among other things, the 1937 anthology, *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, edited by Naum Gabo and Nicholson along with the architect Leslie Martin (published in London by Faber & Faber). For the art historian Stephen Bann, *Circle* “displayed the unbridgeable gulf between the foreign exiles and the native artists”.¹⁴ In the 1950s, a more committed and convincing home-grown contribution to the constructive tradition emerged through constructionism. Consistent with that tradition, constructionism represented a form of praxis: theory leading to application and testing in practice that, in turn, feeds the further development of theory in an ongoing dialectical relationship. As such, British constructivism has two quite distinct phases that are neatly bookended with *Circle* at one end and the 1968 anthology (again published in London by Faber & Faber), *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics*, edited by Anthony Hill, at the other. For Bann, *DATA* “helped to promote that consciousness of the constructive aesthetic as a plurality of genetically related positions”.¹⁵ It is here contended, however, that British

constructivism was already, by 1968, in retreat if not decline; the moment, and its associated opportunities forged in the 1950s, had passed.

There is a problem locating constructivism in relation to later twentieth-century discourse. Changing and changed circumstances are certainly apparent by the time of the Arts Council's exhibition *Pier+Ocean: Construction in the Art of the Seventies* staged at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1980. It presented the work of a diverse and international range of artists that included some obviously connected with a clearly defined constructivist attitude (Hill and the Martins among them), and others representing dematerialised and performative models of practice. The exhibition was selected by a German artist, Gerhard von Graevnitz, and his catalogue introduction outlines the difficulty of coherently representing historical and contemporaneous constructivism. The challenge pivoted on reconciling the social/political urgency of the historical artists with the aesthetic legacy of their experiments.\

*If Constructivism had [in the exhibition] been treated as a stylistic consensus spanning a number of different periods, then the early Constructivists' universalist impulse to change the world would have been lost from sight. If, on the other hand, in order to point to an uninterrupted evolution, the various periods involved had been presented in an extra-artistic context—that of the aspirations of those same early revolutionaries—then the younger generation would have appeared as the degenerate heirs to a tradition which had lost its force.*¹⁶

So, by 1980, constructivism was largely historical. For von Graevnitz, it had stood “at the beginning of eternity”, but was now standing “at the edge of the past”.¹⁷

Following von Graevnitz's introduction, and functioning as an epigraph for the *Pier+Ocean* exhibition catalogue, is a passage from Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy* (1959).¹⁸ This is a first-person account of collecting “sucking stones” and distributing them in pockets so as to ensure they were circulated and sucked without repetition or omission in the rotation. The passage describes private routines and rituals. In the context of *Pier+Ocean*, the text signals a move away from the public discourses of the post-war period.

Act One: The IUA Experiment

In 1961, the constructionist group participated in the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects (IUA) hosted at London's South Bank on 3–7 July. Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, and Mary Martin (along with a more recent associate of the group, John Ernest) produced work for the set-piece Headquarters Building. Their work for the congress can be regarded as the final significant group act of the constructionists working in relation to architecture and site-specificity. As such, it concluded nine years of collaborations that had started with a series of small, environmental exhibitions in Adrian Heath's studio in Fitzrovia, London in 1952 and 1953 (fig. 1). An interest in shaping an environment through architectural collaboration is apparent in the early manifestations of the group's work, and this was maintained and developed throughout the 1950s. Mary Martin might, in 1961, have written, “The possibility of making a synthesis of art and architecture is becoming more real than it was even five years ago”,¹⁹ but the practical and theoretical positions rehearsed in the constructionist sections of the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery five years earlier did not, it turns out, open the way to a sustained “reality”.

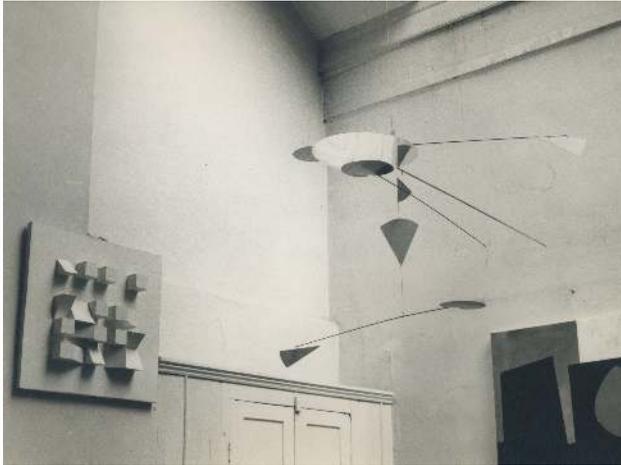


Figure 1

View of the third group exhibition at Adrian Heath's studio on Fitzroy Street, London, May 1953 including, *White Relief*, Mary Martin, 1952 (left) and *Mobile Reflector*, Kenneth Martin, 1952 (right). Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin / Photo: Peter Hunot (all rights reserved).

For his part, Kenneth Martin produced two mobiles for the IUA Congress (figs. 2 and 3). In conjunction with the event, Martin published brief and unfinessed notes about his aim being “to take part in an expressive whole”.²⁰ Each participating artist's work was, Martin remarked, to be “considered as part of [the] function of the building which was to house the special activities of a special group of people for a few days”.²¹ Martin's statement is a short one, but it articulates something of the (compromised) circumstances of the occasion. What might be made of his characterisation of “special” people and activities? His use of words is loaded: this was a temporary and privileged event, a significant purpose of which was to bring the architectural profession together. Another purpose, in this particular edition of the congress, was to showcase the products of private manufacturers. A “total architectural expression” had been achieved “by a group [the constructionists] bound together by a developing aesthetic”, Martin suggested. But, yearning, perhaps, for something more consequential, he went on: “at other times they may be the fruits of expression of a whole society”.²² In such words, we might read Martin's recognition that the progressive, totalising social and cultural possibility of the post-war years had faded, or at least had been indefinitely deferred. The terms and conditions in which he was operating in July 1961 were some considerable distance from earlier projects, such as an installation of Martin's mobiles in a children's ward at Whittington Hospital, London, in October 1953 (figs. 4 and 5). No commercial agendas were served on that occasion; instead, it was a cultural experiment in social context (engaging a different group of special people).



Figure 2

Kenneth Martin, *Twin Screws*, Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium and asbestolux, 76 cm tall and 152 cm radius. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Kenneth Martin, *Twin Screws*, Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium and asbestolux, 76 cm tall and 152 cm radius. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).



Figure 4

Nigel Henderson, *Mobiles by Kenneth Martin*, installed in Ward 17 of the Whittington Hospital, London, October 1953, photograph. Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/30/1). Digital image courtesy of Nigel Henderson Estate. Photo: Tate (all rights reserved).



Figure 5

Nigel Henderson, *Mobiles by Kenneth Martin*, installed in Ward 17 of the Whittington Hospital, London, October 1953, photograph. Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/30/4). Digital image courtesy of Nigel Henderson Estate. Photo: Tate (all rights reserved).

Gustav Metzger was also on and around the South Bank in July 1961. He used the occasion of the IUA Congress to demonstrate his “Auto-Destructive Art”. This was, according to Metzger, a new form of public art that sought a space outside of museums and galleries where “stinking fucking cigar smoking bastards” were dealing art; Metzger sought a space that withheld art from “the possession of stinking people”.²³ Metzger was outside the IUA Congress and Martin (and other constructionists) inside, but apparent oppositions between the two artists’ work and motivation are less straightforward. The form their respective works took was different, but the avant-garde attitudes and the ambitions they held were not so very different. Indeed, Metzger acknowledged the progressive position taken by twentieth-century “artists with a strong leaning to the left”, who had explored “the interaction of art, science and technology” and left “a marked effect on the mechanical and kinetic arts”.²⁴ He valued this as “a critical attitude towards Capitalism [that] hinders the absorption of the artist”.²⁵ However, cultural conditions were changing: new spaces were opening up, others closing, and geometric abstract art was losing its critical credentials. The form of the work, the meanings it was taken to carry, and the spaces it occupied would prove decisive in terms of its critical potential. More explicitly antagonistic, Metzger’s work resisted political neutralisation through corporate recuperation. He would, for example, not have kinetic works commissioned by a shopping centre in Peterborough (New Queensgate Centre, 1982) or an office building in London (Victoria Plaza, 1984), as did Kenneth Martin. The constructionist work was being cast as innocuous at the commissioning stage. The Sixth IUA Congress assembled representatives of the international architectural profession to consider the apparently problematic relationship between architecture and new materials and technologies. It addressed “the problem of the architect in a new technological situation”.²⁶ The “problem” for architecture was a perceived loss of balance, with design being dictated to by economic factors and materials manufacture that emphasised pre-fabrication. As such, a “two-tier profession” had emerged: “one tier concerned with architecture as art, the other with building”.²⁷ The feeling was that, “on the technical side, the architect is losing control to the manufacturer”.²⁸ What is apparently missing from the discussion is reference to a wider social context, and the place of architecture in the service of that context: the architectural profession, it seems, was keen to reassert architecture as an art, and recover the ground it felt it had lost in the 1950s when the most radical work was being done through (socially rather than commercially driven) pre-fabrication. This had been debated in the 1950s, but the momentum in the early and mid-1950s was with social building.²⁹ The task of the congress was to explore ways in which architectural control might be recovered and revitalised in line with the new conditions. To this end, the temporary buildings hosting the congress would seek to facilitate the productive collaboration of architects, artists, and manufacturers in “developing aesthetic methods of handling prefabricated pieces”.³⁰ What became known as “the IUA experiment”³¹ — the commissioning of a temporary site designed by Theo Crosby (himself a veteran of *This is Tomorrow*), and the invitation to a range of artists to make or place work within it — was initiated and supported by three private firms: Cape Building Products Ltd. (that specialised in manufacturing asbestos), Pilkington Bros. Ltd. (glass), and the British Aluminium Company. A letter written in 1960 from P.A. Denison of Cape Building Products to Sir Harry Pilkington of Pilkington Bros. identifies an opportunity to showcase a range of material products to the international architectural profession. He proposed “an exhibit [...] to create an impact of visual stimulation”.³² The artist-initiated *This is Tomorrow* this was not: instead, artists found themselves working at the behest of private sponsors, and therefore promoting their products.

Crosby's site organised a succession of spaces that culminated in the Headquarters Building. It was here that site-specific works by Hill and the Martins were located.³³ The Headquarters Building was the most ambitious realisation of the congress's attempt to demonstrate the potential synthesis of a new art/architecture aesthetic and new materials manufacture. Hill and the Martins produced work that complemented Crosby's architecture. Kenneth Martin made two large mobiles, located in the centre of Crosby's axially planned building and suspended from Frank Newby and Dr Z.S. Makowski's ceiling/roof of aluminium pyramids—a bravura demonstration of what can be done with only a thirty-sixth-thousandth-of-an-inch-thick metal. The ceiling set a visually cacophonous tone for the space—a tone somewhat at odds with the more restrained language of constructionism. Hill (fig. 6) and Mary Martin (fig. 7) produced constructed clerestory friezes, facing each other, and covering the truss between the building's two roof levels (higher in the centre and lower either side), thus effecting a transition from one roof level to another. According to *Architectural Design*, Mary Martin's work was the "more solid construction", and offered one solution to the context.³⁴ Hill offered another: "His was a subtle game of reflections producing an indefinite transition from one space to another."³⁵



Figure 6

Anthony Hill, *Screen*, in the Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium, asbestolux, and glass, 213 × 1463 cm with a maximum projection of 47 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).



Figure 7

Mary Martin, *Construction*, in the Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium and asbestolux, 213 × 1463 cm with a maximum projection of 35 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin. Photo: Henk Snoek (all rights reserved).

Mary Martin, for whom the "constructive work is an integration in itself since it is painting, sculpture and architecture, inseparable", stated that the IUA Congress "held the possibility of a mild synthesis".³⁶ The "mildness" identified here again acknowledges something of the limitations of a situation contrived by the architect (Crosby) for artists to demonstrate what they might contribute to new architecture. The relationship between artist and architect, with the artist having "complete freedom" in the space allocated by the architect,³⁷ was one developed in the theoretical space of a formal exercise. The IUA Congress staged a dialogue between the architectural profession and commercial manufacturers, with artists enlisted to enrich the space of that dialogue. This is some distance from a more complex and layered synthesis coming out of

collaborations involving more parties than artist and architect, and resulting in the production of social space. An example of that is Mary Martin's work at the Nuffield House extension for Musgrave Park Hospital in Belfast in 1957 (fig. 8). There, she collaborated with the architects Richard Llewelyn-Davies and John Weeks (with whom she had worked in *This is Tomorrow* a year earlier) as part of a team made up additionally of medical professionals and others including a medical historian and a sociologist. Out of this, Martin produced a constructed work, *Waterfall*, for the extension's entrance.

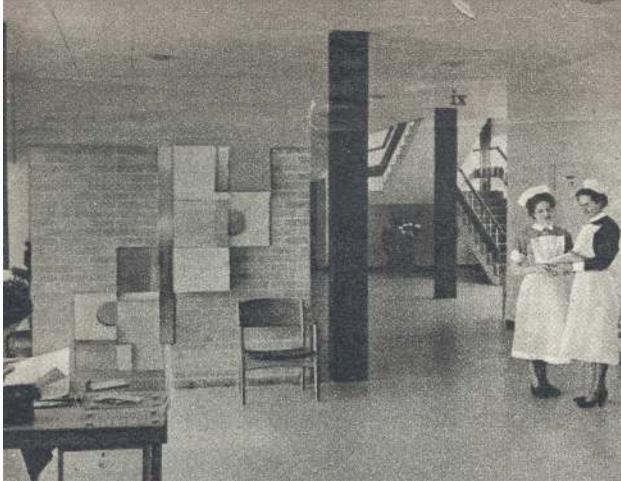


Figure 8

Mary Martin, *Waterfall*, 1957, brick, stainless steel, white painted plaster, 203 × 209 × 34 cm. Nuffield House, Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast. Photograph from *Nursing Mirror*, November 1958. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).

The close relationship between Martin and Weeks had numerous outcomes, both in exhibitions and in architectural actuality.³⁸ One champion of constructionism, the art critic Lawrence Alloway, celebrated the Nuffield House work as a positive alternative to more familiar ways in which art operated in relation to architecture. For Alloway, a “shaggy dog approach” that sets “rough, lumpy, or curly forms as contrasts to the real architectural scene” was being productively rivalled by a “an ‘artistic’ use of modern materials, of using the materials of engineering and architecture, without ‘utilitarian’ requirements”.³⁹ At Nuffield House, the artist had adopted the measurements and proportions of the modular system determined by the architects. She also utilised the same materials used in the building itself. “Thus,” Alloway noted, “proportionally and materially [the work] is linked with the building which contains it, and both of these are clearly visible”. He goes on to say:

*Mary Martin is using some of the architect's materials, but she is using them in a special sense, freely. There is an element of play which is no less strong for staying within limits; these are, on the contrary, the rules of the game. Her sensibility operates playfully, lyrically, within the vocabulary of building materials, but she gives the materials a different function.*⁴⁰

And, drawing wider conclusions from Martin's work, Alloway remarks: “Constructivists of all artists are least content with private and unique works of art. A keen desire to give individualistic art a social function motivates their use of ‘modern materials’.”⁴¹

Alloway also wrote in relation to the “IUA experiment”. In doing so, he indirectly registers some of the shifts occurring as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s. What was shifting, among other things, was the “social function” of the work. For Alloway, the “best works” at the congress (and, in Alloway’s opinion, Mary Martin’s *Construction* was one of these) “gave up none of their autonomy to the public occasion”.⁴² What Alloway was writing about here is an artistic autonomy that seals off the inner logic of the work as well as its material object-hood from external factors. As such, according to Alloway, the “best works” asserted sovereignty over the contingent terms of context, the very contingency that the constructionists had so eagerly embraced and foregrounded in their work in the 1950s. What had been important as an environmental setting of artistic materiality and facture was slipping into a detached statement of materiality and facture. In 1954, Alloway had celebrated the grounding of language of abstract art—what he termed a shift “from eternity to here”—and its relevance to the built environment.⁴³ In 1961, he was arguing that the “considerable speculation” about “the possibilities of synthesis” (a synthesis of art and architecture) had given way to “scepticism about synthesis as an ideal”.⁴⁴

What is being signalled by Alloway, then, is a strategic retreat from public, social space. According to him, Martin’s work in the 1950s operated with a freedom from utility that was not available to the architect, but such art remained an integrally socially engaged and functional element within the environment. By the 1960s, that relationship was slipping, and artistic freedom was being reconfigured in terms of artistic autonomy. Or, without a social context and application, all that was left was the work’s self-determination. Alloway proceeded to effectively detheorise the work of the constructionists.⁴⁵ He wrote: “In constructivist theory, the use of modern materials precipitates the artist into a socially useful relation to 20th-century technology. This is doubtful and fortunately constructions do not need such an ambitious rationale.”⁴⁶

A similar sentiment is apparent in the catalogue for a group exhibition, *The Geometric Environment*, staged at the Artists International Association Gallery, London in 1962. The exhibition featured work by, among others, Kenneth Martin and Mary Martin, including models relating to two of their collaborations with the architect John Weeks.⁴⁷ The catalogue text by Patrick Reyntiens disparagingly references the “remedial manifestos” associated with constructive art, and suggests that supposing that “moral retrenchment and geometric construction in art should go together” is a commonly encountered “fallacy”.⁴⁸ Reyntiens goes on: “English constructive art has always been modest in the sense of being self-sufficient, integral, and concerned with the minimum of allusion to events or ideas outside itself.”⁴⁹ Thus, even among its established supporters, constructionism was being stripped of social potentiality. Anthony Hill had taken a more distant position than others in the constructionist group in relation to architecture and the built environment. He had not, unlike others in the group, worked with architects. Indeed, the team of which Hill was a part for *This is Tomorrow* was the only one in the show not to include an architect.⁵⁰ On the relationship between art and architecture, in 1956, he wrote that “there is less to be said than might be expected”.⁵¹ Alongside such statements, however, Hill declared a theoretical interest “in the issue of synthesis, plastic art and architecture”,⁵² and in thinking through how plastic art might be “able to contribute positively towards the shaping of the spiritual and material outlook of our modern civilisation”.⁵³ For him, a new, rationalist model emerging in post-war architectural discourses was more compelling than the individualistic subjectivities of the dominant tendencies in post-war art. In conjunction with his involvement in the IUA Congress, Hill wrote, “Good architecture is without question a more

vital need for people in general than anything that is coming out of the artist's studio; in consequence it is a more serious topic than 'fine art'."⁵⁴ He went on to say that architecture:

*is now at a stage free to smile at the intense subjectivism of experimental art and replace its own subjective areas by new outlooks that render the problem entirely solvable in terms of new branches of technology, "human" engineering, etc.*⁵⁵

Thus, Hill is contributing to the central themes of the congress: the relationship between architecture and new materials and technologies; and the status of architecture as, itself, an art. His contribution, however, remains one committed to the socially oriented functional architecture of the 1950s; he was not concerned about that architecture's perceived lack of art.

More strongly than Mary Martin's, but less strongly than Kenneth Martin's, Hill's position was one that expressed dissatisfaction with the IUA project. For him, the "experiment" was one free of risk: if it failed, the "real culprit" would be seen to be:

*the architect rash enough to tackle the enterprise this way. Alternatively, if it succeeded in anybody's view it would have to stand as an example of "aesthetic laissez faire" with the full collusion of the architect and the various sponsors who agreed to there being "an experiment" on these lines.*⁵⁶

With such safeguards in place and little at stake, Hill bemoans a lack of purpose. The event becomes, instead, merely "a demonstration of answers to hypothetical problems".⁵⁷ The progressive, social drive of the new architecture of the 1950s, that had been prepared to jettison established models of architecture as an art, was being reviewed at the IUA Congress in 1961. The profession was keen to recover previously established models.

So, what did the sponsors make of the constructionist work? P.A. Denison of Cape Building Products Ltd wrote approvingly of it, but added that he did not "feel that the experience of coming into contact with them led my imagination to immediate ways of extending their type of designing by way of our products." He continues: "Perhaps this is because they only want the material in its ordinary form. I do not think that any of them are particularly interested in thinking of components that can be developed from the material."⁵⁸

The constructionists' use of materials as found and, through that, their advancement of Alloway's "aesthetic of the typical", was clearly not what the manufacturers had in mind for their products.

⁵⁹ This might be extended to reflect the yearning on the sponsors' part (as well as that of the architectural community gathered at the congress) for a more recognisably artistic direction.

Denison reserved warmer words for—and reports an ongoing dialogue with—William Turnbull, who had also produced a scheme of work for the Headquarters Building. If, as Crosby suggested, "The manufacturer is the new patron" now, making "the aesthetic as well as the technical and economic decisions", then tastes such as those expressed by Denison signalled the way forward (without the constructionists).⁶⁰ Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper, Diana Rowntree described the IUA buildings as "a gift from three manufacturing firms".⁶¹ The giving of the gift is, by implication, a power play. Rowntree went on to say: "Acceptance of this gift marks a new attitude on the part of the architectural profession".⁶²

As post-war public service commenced its dissolution into the service of private interests, the contexts in which a socially oriented constructionism might operate evaporated also. A significant amount of what was left of the radical politics of the post-war moment moved into the new spaces of 1960s counter-culture. Pressure groups and protest groups—a politics from below, to which we will return—determined the progressive agenda. Municipal spaces of housing, health, and education remained, but the terms through which those spaces were shaped—and, particularly, how the processes and structures were understood by socially engaged, left-leaning

parties—were changing. Avant-garde cultural groups, for instance, increasingly positioned themselves at a critical distance from the practical, production end of social space. The “actual creative factor” that the constructionists had recognised in “machine techniques and materials”, and “the place of abstract art in the new architecture”, that they had foregrounded in the exhibition *Artist Versus Machine* at the Building Centre in London in 1954 were seemingly less conceivable a decade later.⁶³ Such points had, to an extent, been revived at the IUA in 1961, but the difference between the independently, self-organised display at the Building Centre and the invitation to join a commercially sponsored event at the South Bank is significant: one (the former) is speculative; the other (the latter) is an attempted recruitment to a commercial cause.

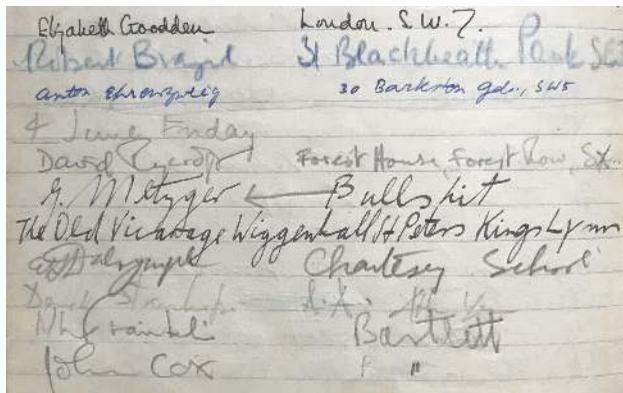


Figure 9

Section of a page in the exhibition visitors' book, *Artist Versus Machine*, Building Centre, London, 1954. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).

On the morning of 3 July 1961, Metzger arrived at the South Bank to demonstrate auto-destructive art (fig. 10), and issue his third manifesto, *Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art* (alongside his previous two manifestos, on a single sheet) (fig.11). The intention was to perform work in two phases: the first was an action in which hydrochloric acid was applied to stretched nylon sheets; and the second was a sequenced falling and breaking of panes of glass. Windy weather prevented the glass element of the demonstration.



Figure 10

Gustav Metzger, *Acid Action Painting*, demonstration on 3 July 1961, South Bank, London, nylon, hydrochloric acid, and metal, 213 × 381 × 183 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Gustav Metzger. Photo: Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (all rights reserved).

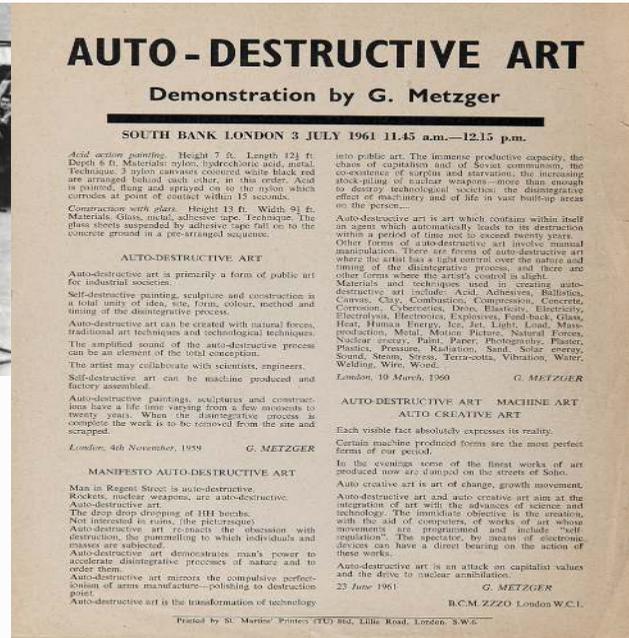


Figure 11

Gustav Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art*, hand-out, July 1961. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Gustav Metzger (all rights reserved).

Metzger's action is known for its anti-war and anti-capitalist positioning. Metzger explicitly stated as much in his manifestos, and his use of nylon is significant on this front. As well as dissolving in a particularly dramatic way when acid is applied, nylon was historically associated with militarism and capitalism. Sven Spieker points out that as a new material developed by the US military in the Second World War (primarily for parachutes) and as the material of "women's stockings and other items of mass-produced clothing", nylon exemplifies "an amalgam of wartime destruction, post-war fetishised consumption and capitalist spectacle".⁶⁴ In addition, Metzger's performance was taking local aim at the IUA Congress. Reflecting on the targets of his aggression, the artist said:

*It was partly me attacking the system of capitalism, but inevitably also the systems of war, the warmongers, and destroying them, in a sense, symbolically. The aggression was also directed against the organisers of the International Union of Architects' Congress, who had originally agreed to hold the demonstration, and a week before had cancelled the event.*⁶⁵

In terms of the antagonistic dialogues engaged by Metzger, connections can be made, not only to what was happening within the IUA Congress, but also to a wider constructionist language, particularly that of the space-frame construction. Before the demonstration itself had started, Metzger's nylon sheets (one white, one black, one red) stretched over a metal frame, would have resembled a rudimentary space-frame construction, not unrelated to John Ernest's *Tower* at the nearby entrance to the congress—itsself something of a space-frame construction that utilised coloured panels held by a scaffolding framework (fig. 12). The "space-frame"—an economical spatial articulation using orthogonally related lines and coloured planes—was, by then, a familiar form of constructionism, developed from constructivist, neo-plasticist, and de Stijl antecedents. The constructionist Stephen Gilbert, for one, had produced space-frame constructions that he went on to develop as architecture, in the form of prototype houses.⁶⁶ Metzger's structure of

stretched monochrome sheets on a standardised frame structure was a space-frame construction in basic form. A dialogue between the constructive and the destructive would have been even more apparent if Metzger's second planned action, *Construction with Glass*, had been possible. Again, a metal frame provided a structure from which large glass sheets (396 x 290 cm) were to be suspended, and from which they would fall "on to the concrete ground in a pre-arranged sequence".⁶⁷ As such, Metzger was appropriating constructionist forms towards an "auto-destructive" event of performative sacrifice.⁶⁸ The form was taken as a sign to be destroyed. Photographic documentation of the action barely registers the work's formal components, instead foregrounding Metzger himself, in safety-protected form, including a full-face gas mask. This is embodied theatre, rather than the de-individualised practice of constructionism.

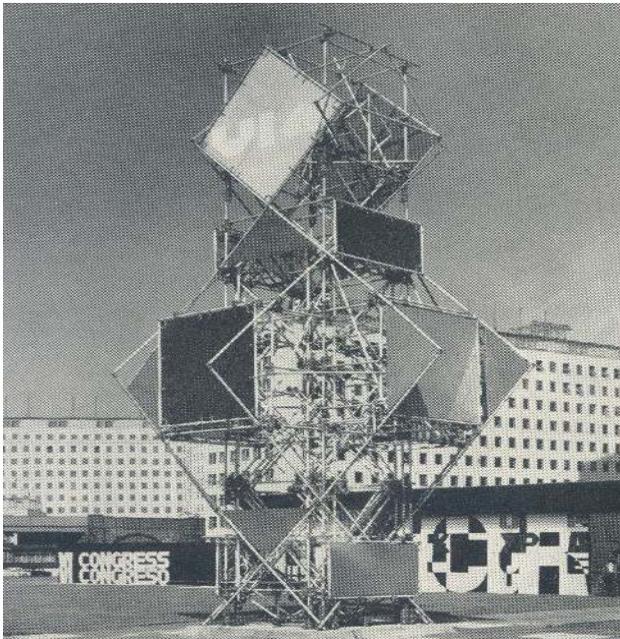


Figure 12

John Ernest, *Tower*, outside the entrance to the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, in *Architectural Design* 31 (November 1961), 485, 1961, steel scaffolding and asbestolux panels, 1280 cm tall. Digital image courtesy of Paul and Susan Ernest (all rights reserved).



Figure 13

Mary Martin, *Tidal Movement*, 1960, installed on the SS *Oriana*, relief sculpture (one of six). Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin. Photo: John Maltby (all rights reserved).

Constructionism is implicated by Metzger's intervention at the IUA Congress. In 1962, Mary Martin was maintaining that "real art" was "against convention, but not against society, so that it is destructive in order to be constructive".⁶⁹ The tense and fragile balance she sought between a society "based on convention" and a constructive art that was, by definition, she claimed, "anti-convention" was less palatable than it had been a decade earlier. Instead, constructionism was coming to represent an uncritical position. In 1960, working through the Design Research Unit, Martin had produced six large reliefs for the stairwells of the first-class section of the P&O liner SS *Oriana* (fig. 13). In 1965, she produced a maquette for an unrealised fountain at Britannic House, the BP Headquarters in the City of London.⁷⁰ These projects mark a shifting balance of relationships. In 1956, Mary Martin had written about the productive potentiality of artists working with architects "with a similar aesthetic approach", while acknowledging that "it is the

patron who makes such collaboration possible”.⁷¹ Only a few years later, the roles were changing. The private patron was emerging as pre-eminent (at the expense of the relationship between artist and architect). The pieces Martin produced for SS *Oriana* and Britannic House are themselves accomplished and the realisation of a consistent and ongoing body of works, but they reflect the interests of a new patron and the spaces the new patron was shaping. Such works, in or intended for spaces of privilege and of the corporation, set constructionism apart from emergent critical practices.

The IUA experiment shows that, in 1961, a range of pressures on constructionism were being exerted. At one end of the range, the pressure might be considered as close, if not internal, to it. Claims of artistic autonomy made by supporters such as Lawrence Alloway were changing the terms on which constructionism was contextualised (some distance from the terms of social engagement). At the other end, the pressure might be considered external: the encroachment of private interests on the public spaces of post-war Britain was fundamentally changing the social circumstance that constructionism had been intent upon articulating.

Interval: Lawrence Alloway, The Player

Let's take this moment of pause in the action to reflect on the role being played by the critic Lawrence Alloway. His part in this unfolding drama is comparable to that of The Player in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: the relationship between the constructionist artists and Alloway is not unlike that between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and The Player. In both sets of relationship, one party acts to commentate on, explain to, and ultimately condemn the other. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern regularly turn to The Player for advice and reassurance to assuage their sense of uncertainty and increasing vulnerability. They treat him as something like a guiding voice. The Player's behaviour is, however, unpredictable and his remarks are regularly arch and opaque. It is unclear whose side he is on, and whose interests he serves beyond his own. Ultimately, The Player appears to be an agent active in orchestrating the eponymous heroes' death; a fate—already written—that is simply to be played out. The constructionists didn't rely upon Alloway to the same extent: they regularly proved themselves more than capable of speaking and writing about their work, and they did so with clarity and purpose. However, it was Alloway who frequently articulated their work, and located it within broad cultural and social contexts. Alloway's support of the constructionists was considerable, but, as is apparent in Act One, that support was increasingly ambiguous.

Lawrence Alloway was a player. Like The Player, Alloway knew (or appeared to know) “which way the wind [was] blowing”,⁷² and was prepared to manoeuvre in accordance with that wind as well as, himself, generating new directions for it to blow in. His voice carried authority and influence, and he remains a figure of considerable interest and attention.⁷³ By the time of the IUA Congress in 1961, Alloway was changing the terms of certain narratives that he himself had shaped: 1961 was the year that he relocated to New York to take up a senior curatorial post at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The language that he used around the IUA can be understood in terms consistent with the American discourses of modernist autonomy to which he was increasingly drawn (alongside emerging languages of pop and minimalism).

Alloway, The Player, was manoeuvring. As was seen in Act One, Alloway's promotion of artistic autonomy in relation to constructionist participation in the IUA Congress left their work stripped of significant purpose. He was, in effect, writing the end of the constructionist idea as socially engaged. On the subject of the Martins' work in 1960, Alloway acknowledged that “criticism of British Constructivism has centred on its theoretical basis”, but insisted that the artists' method

transcended theory.⁷⁴ “In fact,” he went on, “as the observant spectator of Kenneth and Mary Martin’s works knows, the discipline of their making shapes the visual play we witness (quite apart from the theoretical background).”⁷⁵ He would later write about the “platonic optimism” of earlier twentieth-century artists—a belief that “geometric forms could symbolise a realm of ideas”—being superseded by a post-war model that proceeded from an “existential base”.⁷⁶ In this shift from the platonic to the existential, the artistic act and the object produced by it is reinterpreted as immediate and material rather than transcendental. Such work did not transport the viewer to another plane, but actively engaged the viewer in a material and spatial present. In the 1950s, this amounted to a form of social engagement in terms of the works’ articulation of environment, its connection with new forms of functional architecture, and its definition of new forms of spectatorship.

In the 1950s, constructionist positioning was theorised. Although the shift from a platonic model to an existentialist one marked a departure from abstract concepts in favour of concrete facts, this shift was itself the subject of theoretical statements. For Alloway, the significant art of the 1950s (including that produced by the constructionists) was rethinking the role of the artist. The artists that interested Alloway were, in different ways, relinquishing absolute control of their work and handing increasing responsibility for the determination of form to others, such as audiences. Alloway was critical of what he saw as the arbitrary determination of much abstract art and the passivity of the spectator in relation to that art. He described such work as “monovalent”.⁷⁷ With particular reference to the construction kit sculptures being made at the time by the Independent Group artist John McHale, Alloway celebrated the new works’ “multivalency”: “here is an art that literally depends on human action”, he wrote.⁷⁸ The idea of a non-ideal spectator was important in constructionism also, but on different terms. For the constructionist, the others to which elements of formal determination was deferred were more likely to be architects (as demonstrated in Mary Martin’s work at Musgrave Park Hospital in 1957) than audiences (to the extent that McHale had taken it). Constructionist work was directed at a broader public rather than the individual. Alloway appreciated the constructionist terms and considered them in line with the characteristics of the new architecture: “mass-production, flexible planning and movement which make any ideal canon inconceivable”.⁷⁹

Alloway regarded constructionist art as playful expression. He found, in the constructed reliefs made by Hill in the late 1950s, “the ludic principles of art (play without utilitarian goal)”.⁸⁰ According to Alloway, “*Homo Ludens*” was what the 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow* had staged.⁸¹ The term was used in relation to the artists, designers, and architects who participated in the exhibition, and in relation to the audience who visited it. Such terms were expanded in 1957, when Alloway worked with Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore on *an Exhibit*, an immersive installation staged first at the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle and then at the ICA in London (fig. 14). The project can, on several levels, be understood as a game, in the first instance played non-competitively (perhaps) by Hamilton (representing the Independent Group) and Pasmore (representing the constructionists) with Alloway commenting. Alloway described the structure of the exhibition as “one set of possible moves”.⁸² The “rules” allowed for multiple outcomes determined as much by the visitor as by the artists. For Alloway, we are all players: “The meaning of *an Exhibit*,” he wrote, “is dependent on the decisions of visitors, just as, at an earlier stage, it was dependent on the artists who were the players”.⁸³ Act Two will reveal some of the implications of this game for the audience (in the form of residents of a constructionist environment). According to Alloway, *an Exhibit* exposed its audience as either “maze-bright” or

“maze-dim”.⁸⁴ This is typically provocative and divisive on Alloway’s part, and Pasmore was uncomfortable with such language.⁸⁵



Figure 14

Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore, *an Exhibit*, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, 1957 (left to right: Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton, and Terry Hamilton). Digital image courtesy of Stephanie Murray (all rights reserved).

The bell is ringing for Act Two, an act that will not see Alloway make an appearance, but in which Pasmore will emerge as a main character. Much of the drama about to unfold happens with Alloway having departed for the United States. In the 1950s, he championed the work of Pasmore—regarding the artist as a “culture-hero” and as being “heroically motivated”—but had no word for or about him beyond 1961.⁸⁶ Alloway, *The Player*, performs as interval entertainment, and he functions as a device: a pivot in the drama. His *Player* operates on two levels. One sees him manoeuvring (apparently serving multiple agendas and supporting diverse practices, but ultimately manoeuvring in self-service and towards his own career progression). We’ve seen some of the consequences of these manoeuvres in relation to the constructionist participation in the IUA Congress and constructionism more broadly. The second level on which Alloway plays concerns his idea that play itself is integral to art. This theme is important in the ongoing drama he’s now departed. As we prepare to head north to County Durham for Act Two, let’s keep an idea of the constructionist environment as a playground—as “a drama of space that involves the spectator”—in mind.⁸⁷

The lights are dimming.

Act Two: Artist Projects, Peterlee

As the curtain lifts on the second act of our drama, we pick up the action fifteen years after the IUA Congress, and more than 200 miles north of London. It is January 1976 and we are in Peterlee in County Durham (fig. 15). The performance artist Stuart Brisley is the new agent poised in the wings. He is about to demonstrate how far critical art and design practices had moved on from the principles of mid-century modernism. But before Brisley receives his cue, a scene needs setting; an environment needs to be constructed.



Figure 15

Victor Pasmore, *Apollo Pavilion*, Peterlee New Town, 1969, photographed by Stuart Brisley in 1976. Durham County Council, People Past and Present Archive. Digital image courtesy of Durham County Council / Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

Peterlee New Town was founded in 1948 as part of the New Towns Act of 1946. A constructionist artist, Victor Pasmore, was appointed by the Peterlee Development Corporation (PDC) in 1955 to work as Consulting Director of Urban Design. Pasmore worked with two young PDC architects, Peter Daniel and Frank Dixon, to develop the 300-acre South West Area. In all, Pasmore worked on six phases of development. Daniel and Dixon worked with him on the first two. Pasmore remained in the employ of the PDC until 1977. Pasmore's work at Peterlee can be considered as producing something like a constructionist environment. The team's initial instruction from the Corporation was "Do what you like, but don't do what we have done before".⁸⁸ What had gone before at Peterlee lurched from the spectacular but abandoned the "Brasilia of the North" master plan proposed by the Soviet émigré constructivist architect Berthold Lubetkin to the conservative but realised designs of the English architect George Grenfell-Baines. The latter was said, by the editor of *Architectural Review*, to have produced housing of "the dreariest kind".⁸⁹ Pasmore went further, saying that Grenfell-Baines' scheme "seemed to spread like a disease over the whole countryside".⁹⁰

With an open invitation to innovate within tight economic limitations and planning restrictions, Pasmore, Daniel, and Dixon went on the offensive. Towards attempting "a new interpretation of a planned environment", they "decided to attack six of the existing practices common in the New Town layouts":

1. Mechanical planning by rule and by-law.
2. *Purely* drawing-board planning.
3. Failure to insulate the community from roads and motor vehicles.
4. Visual monotony of continuous housing and negative open spaces.
5. Complete subordination to old-fashioned building techniques.
6. The mistaken concept of the picturesque.⁹¹

Having identified the enemy and highlighted its characteristics, the design team established five positive objectives: "First, to re-design the housing in a more modern architectural style; second, to re-define the atomic process; third, to re-constitute the spatial concept; fourth, to control

repetition and, finally, to free the housing from the road system.”⁹² A decisive, modernist intent is apparent here: Pasmore, Daniel, and Dixon were determined to impose a “cubic concept” on the site.⁹³ Individual housing units were flat-roofed cubic forms set in dynamic orthogonal relationship with others. Space was treated as a continuity: there was, for example, no clear distinction between the front and back of the houses. All spatial components were “treated as positive and integral architectural features”.⁹⁴ Garages, fences, and pavements were as much a part of the scheme as the houses (fig. 16).



Figure 16

Victor Pasmore, *Housing in the South West 3 and 4 area, Peterlee New Town*, building commenced in 1964, photograph. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

A “total” environment was unified by adhering to an orthogonal rule that paid no attention to local topography. As the editor of *Architectural Review*, J.M. Richards noted that the houses were not “planned in conventional style along the contours”. Rather, they were “planned across them, against a gentle slope, thereby effectively challenging the landscape in spite of the small bulk of the individual units; and it is on this that their unusual geometry is based.”⁹⁵ The scheme set itself aggressively against nature—or, at least, against a prevailing romanticist idea of nature—and thus, directly against the appeal of the picturesque apparent in a significant amount of contemporaneous art and architecture. For Pasmore’s team, the idea of submitting to the natural beauty of the site in a conventional way was based on a fallacious understanding of nature and the natural. For them, the landscape was itself man-made, having been shaped by industry and agriculture: it was, according to Daniel, “natural only in that it was made up of growing elements”.⁹⁶ Pasmore’s team set out to create a “new landscape” “made of horizontal planes and roads, squares and courtyards, together with the vertical planes of buildings and the voids which they contained”.⁹⁷

The ideas that informed the wider environment were reiterated in artworks that Pasmore produced for the site. In addition to the well-known *Apollo Pavilion* in the Sunny Blunts area of housing, constructed in 1969, Pasmore produced, among other things, a construction for Thames Road in the first area of housing, SW1, commenced in 1958 (figs. 17 and 18). The *Apollo Pavilion* survives, the construction does not. The *Apollo Pavilion* is an imposing concrete

structure adorned with biomorphic abstract elements redolent of the increasingly organic language of Pasmore's paintings of the 1960s; the construction was more consistent with Pasmore's constructionist works of the 1950s (fig. 19). Indeed, it directly connected Pasmore's studio constructions of the early and mid-1950s with the architectural language used in much of the South West Area. The construction in SW1 was a non-monumental, projective, spatial articulation in an environmental context. It utilised the same materials as the domestic architecture and communal spaces in which it was sited; it stood as a formal expression without architectural utility. The idea was that the artwork enhances an environment and sensitises users of the space to its language. In 1957, Pasmore wrote of a "reciprocal" relationship between the new architecture and "pure form in painting and sculpture": "If pure form strengthens architecture, architecture in turn vitalises pure form."⁹⁸ Importantly—and here I would distinguish the Thames Road construction from the *Apollo Pavilion*—constructionist works do not dominate the environment. Instead, they are relational: singular impact is less significant than the environmental whole of which such works are a part.



Figure 17

Victor Pasmore, *Construction in the South West 1 and 2 area, Peterlee New Town*, building commenced in 1958, photograph. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).



Figure 18

Victor Pasmore, *Construction in the South West 1 and 2 area, Peterlee New Town*, building commenced in 1958, photograph. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

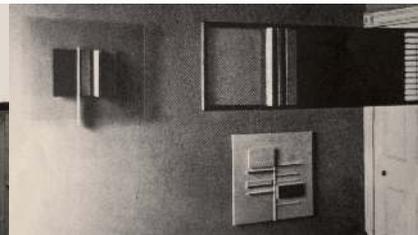


Figure 19

Victor Pasmore, *Constructed Works*, circa 1954. Photograph from *Zodiac: Review Internationale*, Vol. 1, 1957, p. 69. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

Pasmore regarded all elements of his work as producing, or being integrated within, a community of forms. On a small scale, in the work itself, the constructions of the 1950s articulate relationships between formal elements. The South West Area is comparable on an expansive, environmental scale. Pasmore wrote:

*The South West Area was conceived as a series of clearly-defined housing communities related to each other in form and scale so as to make up a total environment which is both rationally practical and emotionally stimulating; in other words, to bring about an integrated urban development.*⁹⁹

When Pasmore writes of "housing communities", what he is writing about is the spatial relationship of architectural elements. The idea of a community of people is barely registered. Indeed, Pasmore's own photographic record of Peterlee is one largely devoid of people. Numerous contact sheets conform to the codes of photography associated with the architectural profession, meaning that human presence is an exception; people are made absent from the documentation (fig. 20). When a lone cyclist is captured, it serves as a reminder that people lived in this environment. Pasmore might write, 'A town is a manifestation of the whole man, not an abstraction of him', but the design is one that describes a new being—a symbolically modern,

abstract being.¹⁰⁰ The idea was for an abstract environment—an abstract stage—for players to operate within. A social game was set up in the New Towns—a game with new rules—but, for all that Pasmore said and wrote about Peterlee, there is at best indirect reference to the people for whom it was being built. Nothing is said about local history and the identity of the people that would constitute the New Town community. In fact, the words and, indeed, the wider scheme were set aggressively against the past (as they were against the local topography). The modernist attitude apparent here is one that takes a clean slate, zero-form starting point: according to this attitude, historical injustice and inequality could only be overcome through the development of a new, unburdened society and culture. Pasmore felt that the post-war context necessitated “a fresh start”: “What seemed to be required was not a new mirror or a new symbol, but a new process of development”.¹⁰¹ As such, the erasure of tradition and historically shaped identity was a strategic imperative. What was mobilised in Peterlee was a comparable model to that developed in the *an Exhibit* project that Pasmore had undertaken with Richard Hamilton (and Lawrence Alloway). The South West Area housing was conceived as an open form to be occupied—as something of a residential playground. Pasmore and the team around him were not setting out to dictate ways of living, but to create an environment that was to be ultimately articulated by the residents. Just as in *an Exhibit*, the game was to be taken up by the audience, or, in this case, the townspeople.



Figure 20

Housing in the South West 3 and 4 area, Peterlee New Town, building commenced in 1964. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

For the performance artist Stuart Brisley, approaching the town in the first few days of 1976, the “fundamental question” was concerned with the “human quality” of the community.¹⁰² For him, historical erasure, far from producing a progressive reality, had instead (unwittingly) reproduced unequal distributions of power and agency.

[Enter Stuart Brisley, from the left]

When Brisley arrived in Peterlee to work as Town Artist, he found it built, but evidently riddled with issues. When he photographed the *Apollo Pavilion* in 1976, it was already in a state of disrepair only seven years after its construction (figs. 21 and 22). What Brisley read through the environment was the failure of the Peterlee Development Corporation to work for, and more importantly with, the newly assembled human community. What he found was a people detached from social fabrics. Brisley’s project notes frequently identify New Town Development Corporations as unelected bodies and stress that New Town residents had no means to challenge them.¹⁰³ Brisley remarks on “the Development Corporation’s paternalism and long-standing elitism—always knowing what was best for people without consulting them”.¹⁰⁴ Brisley was, however, in Peterlee as part of an Artist Placement Group project negotiated with the PDC itself. His appointment coincided with a major overhaul of PDC personnel as well as its reduced authority. Brisley recognised an opportunity in this changing circumstance for the “restoration of a measure of self-government for the people of Peterlee”.¹⁰⁵ Pasmore’s work at Peterlee is not directly mentioned by Brisley (even if Pasmore was still in the employ of the PDC, although ever-more remotely, having relocated to Malta in 1966). However, Pasmore’s failure to directly engage or acknowledge the residents of the South West Area housing can be seen as representative of the wider concerns about the people’s treatment that Brisley does clearly express. (Just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can, in Stoppard’s play, be seen as stooges of the Danish Court, so Pasmore might, in terms set out by Brisley, be seen as a stooge of the PDC).



Figure 21

Victor Pasmore, *Apollo Pavilion*, Peterlee New Town, 1969, photographed by Stuart Brisley in 1976. Durham County Council, People Past and Present Archive. Digital image courtesy of Durham County Council, People Past and Present Archive / Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).



Figure 22

Victor Pasmore, *Apollo Pavilion*, Peterlee New Town, 1969, photographed by Stuart Brisley in 1976. Durham County Council, People Past and Present Archive. Digital image courtesy of Durham County Council, People Past and Present Archive / Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).

The difference between what Brisley did as a Town Artist in Peterlee and what Pasmore had done as Consulting Director of Urban Design is marked. Where Pasmore imposed a modernist culture on the site, Brisley did not. Taking a prompt from the “History from Below” movement that had been developed by an emergent New Left of the 1960s including, for example, the Hackney Writers’ Group to which Brisley acknowledges a debt, Brisley took an “incidental” position towards encouraging and facilitating cultural production by the local residents.¹⁰⁶ His idea was to draw out a culture that had been neglected if not erased in the formation of Peterlee.

Brisley conducted feasibility work in Peterlee in July 1975, and, from that, he proposed a three-part project. The first phase involved the gathering of images, documents, and recorded interviews to form a “people’s history” (fig. 23). By July 1976, Brisley had recruited a small team of unemployed Peterlee residents to conduct the work with him: the first project report identifies Jane Bennison, Karen Carr, Pat Gallagher, and John Porter as the “personnel”, having been “engaged through the Manpower Services Commission job creation team”, alongside Brisley (here identified as “Consultant to the PDC”).¹⁰⁷ Brisley insists that the work was not about conducting a “social survey, nor intended to become primarily an archive of local history”; there was “no ‘end product’ planned”.¹⁰⁸ Instead, the idea was one of constructing a dynamic history of the present (not the past), of influencing “community consciousness”.¹⁰⁹ The first phase was the only one completed. Through it though, 2,000 photographs, 1,000 slides, and 50 taped interviews and transcripts were amassed. Brisley departed Peterlee in August 1977, with the dissolution of the PDC and the passing over of its remit to Easington District Council. The unrealised phases included expanding particular histories and developing the form the project would take towards operating as a platform for debate and action. Such ambitions were thwarted as soon as the District Council took control: the material they inherited as “History Within Living Memory” was quickly renamed (and reconfigured) as the “People Past and Present Archive”. It is now a local history heritage archive hosted by Durham County Council.¹¹⁰

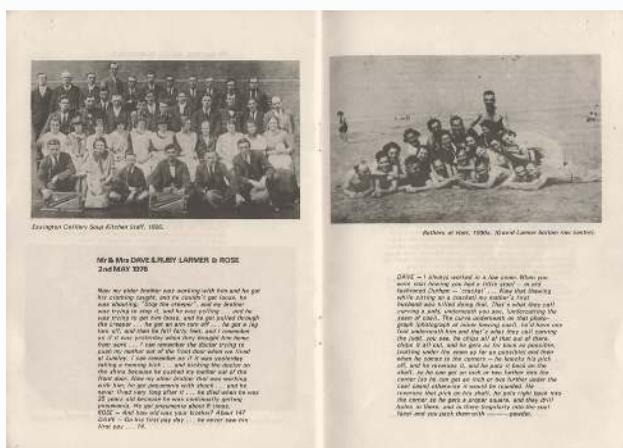


Figure 23

Stuart Brisley, *pages from Artist Project: Peterlee Report, 1976*. Stuart Brisley Collection. Digital image courtesy of Stuart Brisley Collection (all rights reserved).

Despite having been locally disabled as “a social tool”, Brisley’s work in Peterlee is nevertheless still regarded as prototypical for recent and current socially engaged art practices.¹¹¹ In this sense, it can be (and has been) thought of as a “successful failure”.¹¹² It stands as a model that is widely celebrated in the critical discourses of contemporary art. In contrast, Pasmore’s work in Peterlee is commonly considered through the less-critical terms of heritage.¹¹³ It is Brisley’s example that chimes with contemporary practice on the level of method. Claire Bishop discusses Brisley’s Peterlee project at length in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. She identifies resonances between Brisley’s work in Peterlee and contemporary, twenty-first-century art theory and practice, for example, Bishop observes that there has been a shift from socially engaged art producing “works of art” to undertaking “projects”.¹¹⁴ More

historically, she considers Brisley's project as part of a wider reflection on "two attempts to rethink the artist's role in society" in the 1960s and 1970s (both of which retain considerable currency).¹¹⁵ One attempt is represented by strategies employed by the Artist Placement Group (APG), founded in the mid-1960s; the other is the community arts movement that emerged in the 1970s. The APG model is "one in which the artist undertakes a placement with a company or government body"; the community arts model is "one in which the individual artist assumes the role of facilitating creativity among 'everyday' people".¹¹⁶ Although Brisley's work in Peterlee was conducted under the auspices of the APG, his relationship with that organisation was fractious. In line with APG practices, Brisley was placed in relation to the PDC with the intention of impacting on its operations, but he was more interested in using his position to engage the local residential community towards critically articulating its immediate circumstance, its multiple histories, identities, and futures. For Brisley, it was important to disrupt the established distribution of power that APG projects too-regularly, to his mind, reproduced.¹¹⁷ The work Brisley did at Peterlee has, instead, more in common with community arts in its bypassing of official, institutional structures.

Brisley's work is representative of a bottom-up model of critical art practice that superseded a top-down model, represented here by Pasmore. For the constructionists, social engagement came with the production of contingent works that operate in public space and/or in relation to architecture. The belief was that a certain type of art and a certain type of environment might positively influence the wider social system. Increasingly denied the opportunities to work in such contexts—indeed, with the wider absence of such contexts—the constructionist response was to strategically withdraw; to determine works that operate in a parallel, propositional space, as autonomous works of potentiality. For Brisley (and Metzger before him), this approach was inadequate in meeting the immediate social and political challenges, and lacked an essential criticality. For all its claims to be constructive, Metzger regarded the modern project as destructive. His response was to reflect this and, in doing so, reveal and repurpose destruction. Brisley also recognised the destruction inherent in modern practices (in relation, for example, to the destruction of social fabric), but his response was less to appropriate destruction than to produce a social form that resisted cultural erasure. On this productive (if not constructive) level, Brisley's action is not unrelated to Pasmore's. Brisley, however, positively foregrounds class identity and difference. As such, he departs from Pasmore's modern outlook that believed in the universal potential of abstract form.

Epilogue

The lost cause of constructionism can be read through the events that played out at the IUA Congress in 1961 and in Peterlee New Town some years later. Of course, this reading is partial: such scenes will only ever yield glimpses towards understanding a wider, complex whole. Accepting these limitations, a number of conclusions can be drawn. The "IUA experiment" reveals public agendas giving way to private interests. Constructionism (here represented by Hill and the Martins) found its principles and public ambitions stripped of context. In the 1950s, constructionism recognised a potential in the post-war framing of the public, and in the progressive interweaving of the economic, the social, the political, and the cultural. The subsequent separation of these spheres undermined the constructionist idea. Metzger's action shows something of the new directions critical art was moving in; essentially a more urgent and oppositional direction, and with it the development of a new definition of public art. Further to and out of this, Brisley's activities reveal a different understanding of how public interests had

(and hadn't) been represented in the development of Peterlee New Town. As critical art practices abandoned cooperative participation in the conflicted spaces of institutionalised infrastructure (at least in terms of joining in the production of such spaces), constructionism was exposed and implicated.

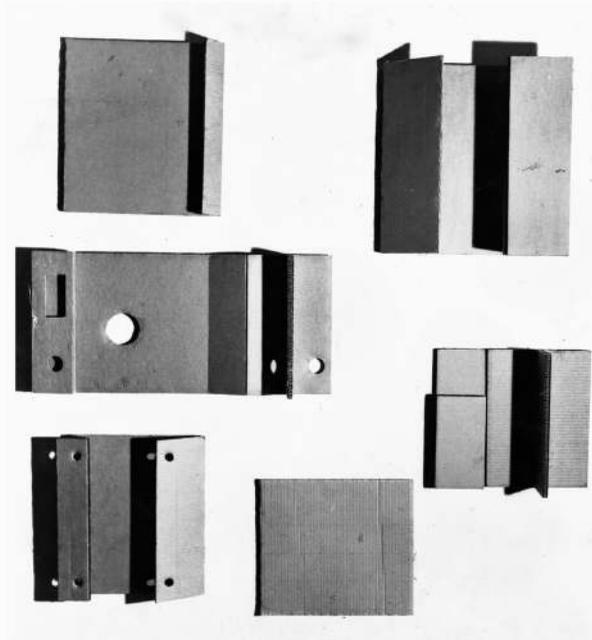


Figure 24

Gustav Metzger, *Cardboards*, exhibition, 14 Monmouth Street, London, November 1959. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Gustav Metzger/ Photo: John Cox (all rights reserved).

Constructionism (and the wider constructive tradition of which it is a part) sought to shape a popular, everyday culture out of specialist laboratory researches utilising industrial and architectural materials in combination with abstract form. This was a top-down model that fell out of favour with the late twentieth-century art that directly or indirectly critiqued modernist principles and practices. From the bottom-up trajectory of, for instance, 1960s pop art through to the more politically urgent positions taken by artists such as Metzger and Brisley, a culture-from-below approach is apparent in a significant amount of socially engaged work produced in the 1960s and 1970s (and beyond). Constructionism had, in the 1950s, shared common ground with the proto-pop of the Independent Group, as evidenced, say, by both groups working in tense alliance towards the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition in 1956, and in Pasmore's work with Hamilton on *an Exhibit* a year later. The top-down trajectory of constructionism temporarily met the bottom-up trajectory of the Independent Group. Both shared an interest in disrupting cultural hierarchies and privileges, but the "bottom-up" approach was in the ascendancy, and the groups subsequently diverged. Avant-gardism was being overtaken by new forms of insubordination. This was the period in which it is said that the historical avant-garde gave way to the neo-avant-garde. The shift is mapped by Peter Bürger in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. According to Bürger, the avant-garde project was one of attacking the institutions of art and, indeed, the very category of art. The historical avant-garde worked towards the "sublation of art" and towards its absorption within the "praxis of life".¹¹⁸ Realising the failure of the avant-gardist unification of

art and life, Bürger argues that related neo-avant-gardist art practice could no longer “pretend that it has direct effect”.¹¹⁹ New balances and settlements were agreed that rendered the avant-garde project not only historical but itself re-institutionalised as art. Instead of working with the historical principle that art could become fused with everyday life, the neo-avant-garde worked on the reverse principle that the everyday could be elevated to the status of art. Metzger’s “Auto-Creative” *Cardboards* of 1959 are an example of this (fig. 24). In these works, Metzger took deconstructed television packaging found on a London street to the gallery having identified and redesignated it as sculpture. However closely related this might be to the historical avant-gardism of, say, the ready-made or even constructivism, Bürger would argue that such work asserts (rather than questions) the category of art. On other fronts, Metzger recognised and actively resisted cultural shifts. In 1974, he was calling for three years without art (something that he alone undertook in 1977).¹²⁰ The incidental role assumed by Brisley in Peterlee in 1976 might be understood as another critical response. The *Peterlee Project* was not to be categorised as art, but rather as a framework within which the culture of the residents might become visible. Pasmore had, in his own way, attempted to stage the residents of Peterlee, but constructionism proved itself less responsive to changing circumstances.

Constructionism maintained an avant-gardist position in terms of dissolving art into the environment, but was stymied by emerging discourses. In 1966, Mary Martin would suggest, “If one takes something straight out of everyday life and places it in a work of art with *no transformation* then life will always beat it”.¹²¹ In this sense, it is the artist’s job to determine form, however much that form might be contingent upon external elements such as geometrical systems or architectural environments. Nevertheless, for ongoing constructionist production, what occurs within the work overtook its expansive relationship with social space. The seeds of that were cultivated by Alloway in the language of autonomy used in relation to the constructionist contributions to the IUA Congress in 1961. Such iterations do not, of course, in themselves mark or produce change. They do, however, function within broader narratives to reproduce and reinforce the authority of those narratives. It is in the accumulation of such details that historical momentum is established.

Art history chooses its heroes. It commonly represents Russian constructivism as heroic, and its demise as the consequence of an aggressive political authoritarianism. Russian constructivism’s failure does not taint its reputation; in fact, its failure guarantees its reputation. The lost cause of British constructionism is framed differently."

About the author

Sam Gathercole is a senior lecturer in Contextual and Theoretical Studies in the Design School at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. He has published widely on post-war British constructivist art. Recent work includes “The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy” (*British Art Studies*, Issue 18, 2020) and “The Geometry of Syntactics, Semantics and Pragmatics: Anthony Hill’s Concrete Paintings” (*Tate Papers*, No.31, 2019).

Footnotes

1. Metzger’s auto-destructive theory and practice has enjoyed significant attention for some time. His famous demonstration of auto-destructive art on the South Bank, London in 1961 was re-performed by Brian Hodgson under Metzger’s supervision as part of the *How to*

Improve the World: 60 Years of British Art exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2006. Metzger was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London in 2009, and, more recently (2015–2016), another staged at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland, and at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, Norway. Brisley's work in Peterlee has, among other things, been historicised by Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), and in an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford in 2014.

2. When constructionism has been the subject of art-historical attention, the histories formed are less concerned with it as a “critical art”, for example, Alastair Grieve's significant monograph, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2005), or are dismissive of constructionism as a part of a history of critical art, for example, Mark Crinson's “The Incidental Collection—Stuart Brisley's Peterlee Project”, *Mute* 1, no. 28 (2004): 132–133.
3. For example, Julia Kristeva (in her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel”) was picking up Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism to refine a theory of intertextuality, Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 35–61; and Roland Barthes (in his 1968 essay “The Death of the Author”) was reviewing the authority of the author and the role of the reader in shaping meaning, in Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 142–148.
4. With greater political urgency, for example, Jean Rhys had played the same game as Stoppard in her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), that retold Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) from an alternative (anti-colonial, feminist) perspective, marginalised in the original.
5. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 31.
6. Gustav Metzger, “Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art” (third manifesto, 1961), in Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), *Gustav Metzger: History History* (Vienna: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 226.
7. The terms used by the British group to describe itself and the work it produced were many. Words like “abstract”, “concrete”, “constructive”, “constructivist”, and “constructionist” were all used at different times and in different contexts. For the sake of consistency, the group are here referred to as the constructionists. This was a word they regularly used to identify themselves, having adopted it from the writings of the American artist Charles Biederman. His monumental book, *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948), was enthusiastically received by British artists. In it, Biederman used the word “constructionist” to signal a distinction from (Russian) constructivism, and identify a stage in artistic development that drew from and moved on from constructivism, incorporating other models such as Mondrian's neo-plasticism and Max Bill's concretism. It has been suggested that the word constructionism ‘emphasises the social dimension of a given construction rather than a subjective, perceptual engagement’; see Elena Crippa, “Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation”, in Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), *Exhibition, Design, Participation: ‘an Exhibit’ 1957 and Related Projects* (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 16. This is appropriate, but could be said to be a retroactive application of the terms of social constructionism developed later, in the 1960s.
8. Kenneth Martin, “An Art of Environment”, *Broadsheet No.2* (London, 1952), unpaginated.
9. Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954).
10. Anthony Hill, “On Constructions, Nature and Structure”, *Structure* 2, no.1 (1959), 8.

11. Lawrence Alloway, "Non-Figurative Art in England", *Arti Visive* 6 (January 1954), unpaginated.
12. Sir William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (London: HMSO, 1942), 6.
13. Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, 6.
14. Stephen Bann, *Systems* (London: Arts Council, 1972), 9.
15. Bann, *Systems*, 9.
16. Gerhard von Graevnitz, "Introduction", *Pier+Ocean: Construction in the Art of the Seventies* exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery, 1980), 5.
17. Von Graevnitz "Introduction", 7.
18. As previously mentioned, Stoppard leaned lightly on the work of Beckett in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Vladimir and Estragon—the central characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954)—inform Stoppard's elaboration of Shakespeare's dramatis personae. The final act of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* opens with the main characters in barrels, a direct reference to Beckett's *Endgame* (1957).
19. Mary Martin, "Art, Architecture and Technology", *Structure* 4, no. 1 (1961), 16.
20. Kenneth Martin, "Kenneth Martin Says", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 503.
21. Martin, "Kenneth Martin Says", 503.
22. Martin, "Kenneth Martin Says", 503.
23. Gustav Metzger, "Manifesto World" (fourth manifesto, 1962), in Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), *Gustav Metzger: History History*. Vienna: Hatje Cantz (2005), 233–234.
24. Gustav Metzger, "A Critical Look at Artist Placement Group", *Studio International* 183, no. 940 (January 1972), 5.
25. Metzger, "A Critical Look at Artist Placement Group", 5.
26. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 483.
27. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 483.
28. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 483.
29. For example, the modernist architect Maxwell Fry suggested that the pioneering schools building work being done in Hertfordshire "carried with it the seeds of wide development", but that this had been at the "expense of architectural rhythm and solidity"; see Maxwell Fry, "Twenty-Five Years of Modern Architecture in England", *Architectural Design* 25, no. 11 (November 1955), 340.
30. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 483.
31. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 482.
32. Letter from P.A. Denison to Sir Harry Pilkington, included in Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 482.
33. The opening statement of the temporary site was 13-metre-high tower by John Ernest, and another recruit to the constructionist cause, Gillian Wise, contributed a relief construction to the Exhibition Building that housed a range of discrete artworks. Here "Situation" artists Bernard Cohen, John Plumb, and Peter Stroud presented works utilising materials supplied by Cape Building Products. There were sculptures by Robert Adams, Theo Crosby, Bryan Kneale, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, and Brian Wall, and wall-based works by Richard Hamilton, and John McHale (as well as Wise). The exhibition building gave way to a central courtyard containing New Sculpture by Anthony Caro, and this, in turn, led to the Headquarters Building. Here, there were mural works by William Turnbull and John Ernest, as well as the work by Hill and the Martins.

34. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 499.
35. Anon., "Experiment in Integration", 499.
36. Mary Martin, "Mary Martin Says", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 503.
37. Martin, "Art, Architecture and Technology", 16.
38. See Sam Gathercole, "Art and Construction in Britain in the 1950s", *Art History* 29, no. 5 (November 2006), 887–925, see 912–917 in particular.
39. Lawrence Alloway, "Real Places", *Architectural Design* 28, no. 6 (June 1958), 249.
40. Alloway, "Real Places", 249.
41. Alloway, "Real Places", 249.
42. Lawrence Alloway, "Criticism", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 508.
43. Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 5.
44. Alloway "Criticism", 507.
45. This is discussed further in Sam Gathercole, "British Constructivist Art", *British Art Studies* 3 (July 2016), (<https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/sgathercole>) [10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/sgathercole]. Accessed 1 January 2020.
46. Alloway, "Criticism", 507.
47. A model of the section that Weeks worked on with the Martins for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition (1956) was shown, as was their submission to a competition for a monument at Auschwitz (1958).
48. Patrick Reyntiens, "Introduction", *The Geometric Environment* exhibition catalogue (London: Artists International Association Gallery, 1962), unpaginated.
49. Reyntiens, "Introduction", *The Geometric Environment*.
50. In Section 6 of *This is Tomorrow*, Hill worked with the artists John Ernest and Denis Williams.
51. Anthony Hill, "The Constructionist Idea and Architecture", *ARK The Journal of the Royal College of Art* 18 (November 1956), 29.
52. Anthony Hill in Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954), 27.
53. Hill, in Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 28.
54. Anthony Hill, "The Questions of Synthesis, Collaboration and Integration Occasioned by the I.U.A. Congress Headquarters Building", *Structure* 4, no. 1 (1961), 18.
55. Hill, "The Questions of Synthesis, Collaboration and Integration", 19.
56. Anthony Hill, "Anthony Hill Says", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 504.
57. Hill, "The Questions of Synthesis, Collaboration and Integration", 22.
58. P.A. Denison, "Conclusions", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 509.
59. Alloway, "Non-Figurative Art in England".
60. Theo Crosby, "Conclusions", *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November 1961), 509.
61. Diana Rowntree, "Buildings for Architects", *The Guardian*, 29 June 1961.
62. Rowntree, "Buildings for Architects".
63. Group statement in Anon., "Abstract Art at the Building Centre", *Architectural Design* 24, no. 4 (April 1954), 122.
64. Sven Spieker, "The Uses of Destruction in Contemporary Art", in Sven Spieker (ed.), *Destruction (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press, 2017), 18.
65. Gustav Metzger, "Gustav Metzger in Conversation with Clive Phillpot", in Julia Peyton-Jones et al. (eds), *Gustav Metzger: Decades: 1959–2009* (Cologne: König, 2009), 25.

66. See Sam Gathercole, "Space/Time + Colour = 2 Houses", in Lynne Green and Robert Hall (eds), *Peter Stead: A Life in Dynamic Equilibrium* (Huddersfield: Huddersfield Art Gallery, 2006), 84–95.
67. Metzger, "Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art", 226.
68. Metzger was drawn to the ready-made object and the discarded by-products of manufacture, as is clear in his *Cardboards* work of 1959 that utilises the cardboard package for a television set. Andrew Wilson connects *Cardboards* with the precedent set by Marcel Duchamp's idea of the ready-made, and also with Russian Constructivism; see Andrew Wilson, "Gustav Metzger's Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art: An Art of Manifesto, 1959–1969", *Third Text* 22, no. 2 (March 2008), 182.
69. Mary Martin, "Pro-Art and Anti-Art", *Structure* 5, no. 1 (1962), 19.
70. For balance, it should be noted that Mary Martin also produced a notable large-scale work, *Wall Construction*, for Robert Matthew and Stirrat Johnson-Marshall's Pathfoot Building at University of Stirling in 1969. She also continued to participate in avant-garde contexts such as exhibiting at David Medalla's Signals London in 1966.
71. Mary Martin, *This is Tomorrow* exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956), unpaginated.
72. Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 49.
73. See, for example, Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (eds), *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2015).
74. Lawrence Alloway, "Looking at the Martins", *Architectural Design* 30, no. 7 (June 1960), 250.
75. Alloway, "Looking at the Martins", 250.
76. Lawrence Alloway, *Max Bill* (Buffalo, NY: Albright Knox Art Gallery, 1974), 11–12.
77. Lawrence Alloway, "The Spectator's Intervention" (1955) (translated from French by Catherine Petit and Paul Buck), in Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), *Exhibition, Design, Participation: "An Exhibit" 1957 and Related Projects* (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 170.
78. Alloway, "The Spectator's Intervention", 172.
79. Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 4.
80. Lawrence Alloway, *Anthony Hill: Recent Constructions*, exhibition catalogue (London: ICA, 1958), unpaginated.
81. In his text for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition catalogue, "Design as a Human Activity", Alloway references Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens*, and discusses the show in relation to play; Lawrence Alloway, "Design as a Human Activity", *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956).
82. Lawrence Alloway, *An Exhibit* (London: ICA, 1957), unpaginated.
83. Alloway, *An Exhibit*, unpaginated.
84. Alloway, *An Exhibit*, unpaginated.
85. Elena Crippa, "Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation", in Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), *Exhibition, Design, Participation: "An Exhibit" 1957 and Related Projects* (London: Afterall Books 2016), 35.
86. Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 3 and 7–8.
87. Lawrence Alloway, "An Exhibit", *Architectural Design* 27, no. 8 (August 1957), 288.
88. A.V. Williams's words recalled and paraphrased by Roy Gazzard in "Housing Experiment at Peterlee", *Architectural Association Journal* 133, no. 3436 (June 1961), 7. Williams was General Manager of Peterlee Development Corporation from its establishment in 1948;

- Gazzard was appointed Chief Architect/Planner for the Peterlee Development Corporation in 1960.
89. J.M. Richards, "New Town and Old Town: Housing at Peterlee New Town, Co. Durham", *Architectural Review* 141, no. 842 (April 1967), 271.
 90. Victor Pasmore in Gazzard, "Housing Experiment at Peterlee", 7.
 91. Peterlee design team, quoted in Anon., "Housing in Peterlee New Town", *Architects' Journal* 133 (23 February 1961), 298.
 92. Victor Pasmore, "Peterlee. The South West Area: Urban Design as a Problem of Multi-Dimensions", originally unpublished text dated 1970. Published in Colin Robson and Sam Gathercole (eds), *An Experiment in Total Environment: Pasmore and Paterson in Peterlee* (Peterlee: APCA, 2014), 16.
 93. Pasmore, "Peterlee. The South West Area", 16.
 94. Pasmore, "Peterlee. The South West Area", 22.
 95. J.M. Richards, "New Town and Old Town", 272.
 96. Peter Daniel in Anon., "Housing Experiment at Peterlee", 11.
 97. Daniel in Anon., "Housing Experiment at Peterlee", 11.
 98. Victor Pasmore, "Connection between Painting, Sculpture and Architecture", *Zodiac: Revue Internationale* 1 (1957), 66.
 99. Pasmore, "Peterlee. The South West Area", 35.
 100. Pasmore, "Peterlee. The South West Area", 19.
 101. Victor Pasmore, "Developing Process", in Anthony Hill (ed.), *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 120.
 102. Stuart Brisley, "Observations on Peterlee by Stuart Brisley, 1976–1977", 1975, (http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Observations_on_Peterlee_by_Stuart_Brisley/page:22) [http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Observations_on_Peterlee_by_Stuart_Brisley/page:22]. Accessed 1 January 2020.
 103. Development Corporations were a fixture of the post-war New Town projects. They were appointed by central government and were responsible for constructing urban infrastructure and attracting industry. In New Towns, the role of the elected Local Authority was limited to overseeing services, such as education and health.
 104. Stuart Brisley, "Peterlee Development Corporation", in "The Peterlee Project in Tate Archive: Representation of Parts of *The Peterlee Project* as it is held in Tate Archive", in Stuart Brisley, Sanja Perovic, and Tim Brennan, *The Peterlee Project 1976–1977* (Aarhus: Museum of Ordure, 2014), unpaginated section.
 105. Brisley, "Peterlee Development Corporation".
 106. Stuart Brisley, "The Peterlee Project 1976–77", in Stuart Brisley, Sanja Perovic, and Tim Brennan, *The Peterlee Project 1976–1977* (Aarhus: Museum of Ordure, 2014), 121.
 107. Stuart Brisley, *Artist Project: Peterlee Report* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Northern Arts, 1976), unpaginated.
 108. Brisley, *Artist Project*.
 109. Brisley, "Observations on Peterlee by Stuart Brisley, 1976–1977".
 110. Durham County Council, "People Past and Present Archive", (<http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/2075/People-Past-and-Present-Archive>) [<http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/2075/People-Past-and-Present-Archive>]. Accessed 1 January 2020.
 111. Brisley, *Artist Project: Peterlee Report*.

112. Sanja Perovic, “Performing History”, in Stuart Brisley, Sanja Perovic, and Tim Brennan, *The Peterlee Project 1976–1977* (Aarhus: Museum of Ordure, 2014), 9.
113. Much of the architectural language of the South West Area was lost with significant reworking of the houses in the 1980s. Façades were dramatically altered and pitched-roofs added. More recently, attentions moved to preserving and restoring the *Apollo Pavilion*. The District Council received Heritage Lottery funding to fully restore the *Apollo Pavilion*, and this was completed in 2009. It achieved a Grade-II listing by Historic England in 2011. On a contemporary art front, there has been engagement, for example, Jane and Louise Wilson have made work in response to Pasmore’s Peterlee in the form of their 2003 piece, *Monument (Apollo Pavilion, Peterlee)*, but it takes its place alongside their other works that engage with decommissioned sites. In other words, it is a subject—or indeed, an object—that comes from a different time and place.
114. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 174.
115. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 163.
116. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 163.
117. Stuart Brisley, “No, It Is Not On”, *Studio International* 183, no. 942 (March 1972), 95–96. It is worth noting here that Gustav Metzger was also launching seething attacks on the APG in 1972. See, for example, Gustav Metzger, “A Critical Look at Artist Placement Group”, 4–5.
118. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated from the German by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58.
119. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.
120. Gustav Metzger, “Years Without Art”, in Christos Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (eds), *Art into Society—Society into Art: Seven German Artists* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1974), 79.
121. Mary Martin, “Art and Life” (1966), originally unpublished, handwritten, and dated notes, Michael Compton et al., *Mary Martin*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), 30.

Bibliography

- Alloway, L. (1954) “Non-Figurative Art in England”. *Arti Visive* 6, unpaginated.
- Alloway, L. (1954) *Nine Abstract Artists, Their Work and Theory: Robert Adams, Terry Frost, Adrian Heath, Anthony Hill, Roger Hilton, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Victor Pasmore [and] William Scott*. London: Tiranti.
- Alloway, L. (1956) “Design as a Human Activity”. *This is Tomorrow*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, unpaginated.
- Alloway, L. (1957) *An Exhibit*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Alloway, L. (1957) “An Exhibit”. *Architectural Design* 27, no. 8 (August), 288.
- Alloway, L. (1958) “Real Places”. *Architectural Design* 28, no. 6: 249–250.
- Alloway, L. (1958) *Anthony Hill: Recent Constructions*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Alloway, L. (1960) “Looking at the Martins”. *Architectural Design* 30, no. 7 (June), 250
- Alloway, L. (1961) “Criticism”. *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11: 507–508.
- Alloway, L. (1974) *Max Bill*. Buffalo, NY: Albright Knox Art Gallery.
- Alloway, L. (2016 [1955]) “The Spectator’s Intervention”. Translated from French by Catherine Petit and Paul Buck. In Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), *Exhibition, Design, Participation: “An Exhibit” 1957 and Related Projects*. London: Afterall Books.
- Anon. (1954) “Abstract Art at the Building Centre”. *Architectural Design* 24, no. 4, 122.

- Anon. (1961) "Housing Experiment at Peterlee". *Architectural Association Journal* 133, no. 3436: 6–24.
- Anon. (1961) "Housing in Peterlee New Town". *Architects' Journal* 133, 23 February: 291–302.
- Anon. (1961) "Experiment in Integration". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11: 482–483.
- Bann, S. (1972) *Systems*. London: Arts Council.
- Barthes, R. (1977 [1968]) "The Death of the Author". In *Image—Music—Text*. London: Fontana, 142–148.
- Biederman, C.J. (1948) *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge*. Red Wing, MN: Biederman.
- Beveridge, W. (1942) *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. London: HMSO.
- Bishop, C. (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Bradnock, L., Martin, C.J., and Peabody, R. (eds) (2015) *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications.
- Breitwieser, S. (ed.) (2005) *Gustav Metzger: History History*. Vienna: Hatje Cantz.
- Brisley, S. (1972) "No, It Is Not On". *Studio International* 183, no. 942 (March): 95–96.
- Brisley, S. (1975) "Observations on Peterlee by Stuart Brisley, 1976–1977", http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Observations_on_Peterlee_by_Stuart_Brisley/page:22. Accessed 1 January 2020.
- Brisley, S. (1976) *Artist Project: Peterlee Report*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Northern Arts.
- Brisley, S., Perovic, S., and Brennan, T. (2014) *The Peterlee Project 1976–1977*. Aarhus: Museum of Ordure.
- Bürger, P. (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated from the German by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Compton, M. et al. (1984) *Mary Martin*, exhibition catalogue. London: Tate Gallery.
- Crinson, M. (2004) "The Incidental Collection—Stuart Brisley's Peterlee Project". *Mute* 1, no. 28: 132–133.
- Crippa, E. (2016) "Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation". In Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), *Exhibition, Design, Participation: "An Exhibit" 1957 and Related Projects*. London: Afterall Books.
- Crippa, E. and Steeds, L. (eds) (2016) *Exhibition, Design, Participation: "An Exhibit" 1957 and Related Projects*. London: Afterall Books.
- Crosby, T. (1961) "Conclusions". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11, 509.
- Denison, P.A. (1961) "Conclusions". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11, 509.
- Durham County Council (n.d.) "People Past and Present Archive", <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/2075/People-Past-and-Present-Archive>. Accessed 1 January 2020.
- Fry, M. (1955) "Twenty-Five Years of Modern Architecture in England". *Architectural Design* 25, no. 11 (November), 340.
- Gathercole, S. (2006) "Art and Construction in Britain in the 1950s". *Art History* 29, no. 5: 887–925.
- Gathercole, S. (2006) "Space/Time + Colour = 2 Houses". In Lynne Green and Robert Hall (eds), *Peter Stead: A Life in Dynamic Equilibrium*. Huddersfield: Huddersfield Art Gallery, 84–95.
- Gathercole, S. (2016) "British Constructivist Art". *British Art Studies* 3, DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/sgathercole. Accessed 1 January 2020.
- Gazzard, R. (1961) "Housing Experiment at Peterlee". *Architectural Association Journal* 133, no. 3436 (June), 7.

- Grieve, A. (2005) *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde*. New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press.
- Hill, A. (1956) "The Constructionist Idea and Architecture". *ARK The Journal of the Royal College of Art* 18: 24–29.
- Hill, A. (1959) "On Constructions, Nature and Structure". *Structure* 2, no. 1: 5–8.
- Hill, A. (1961) "Anthony Hill Says". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11, 504.
- Hill, A. (1961) "The Questions of Synthesis, Collaboration and Integration Occasioned by the I.U.A. Congress Headquarters Building". *Structure* 4, no. 1: 1822.
- Hill, A. (ed.) (1968) *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Joachimides, C. and Rosenthal, N. (eds) (1974) *Art into Society—Society into Art: Seven German Artists*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Kristeva, J. (1986 [1966]) "Word, Dialogue and Novel". In Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 35–61.
- Martin, J.L., Nicholson, B., and Gabo, N. (eds) (1937) *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Martin, K. (1952) "An Art of Environment". *Broadsheet No. 2*. London, unpaginated.
- Martin, K. (1961) "Kenneth Martin Says". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11 (November), 503.
- Martin, M. (1956) *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery.
- Martin, M. (1961) "Art, Architecture and Technology". *Structure* 4, no. 1: 16.
- Martin, M. (1961) "Mary Martin Says". *Architectural Design* 31, no. 11, 503.
- Martin, M. (1962) "Pro-Art and Anti-Art". *Structure* 5, no. 1, 19.
- Metzger, G. (1972) "A Critical Look at Artist Placement Group". *Studio International* 183, no. 940 (January): 4–5.
- Metzger, G. (1974) "Years Without Art". In Christos Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (eds), *Art into Society—Society into Art: Seven German Artists*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Metzger, G. (2005) "Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art" (third manifesto, 1961). In Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), *Gustav Metzger: History History*. Vienna: Hatje Cantz.
- Metzger, G. (2005) "Manifesto World" (fourth manifesto, 1962). In Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), *Gustav Metzger: History History*. Vienna: Hatje Cantz.
- Metzger, G. (2009) "Gustav Metzger in Conversation with Clive Phillpot". In Julia Peyton-Jones et al. (eds), *Gustav Metzger: Decades: 1959–2009*. Cologne: König.
- Pasmore, V. (1957) "Connection between Painting, Sculpture and Architecture". *Zodiac: Revue Internationale* 1: 66–69.
- Pasmore, V. (1968) "Developing Process". In Anthony Hill (ed.), *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Pasmore, V. (2014 [1970]) "Peterlee. The South West Area: Urban Design as a Problem of Multi-Dimensions". In Colin Robson and Sam Gathercole (eds), *An Experiment in Total Environment: Pasmore and Paterson in Peterlee*. Peterlee: APCA.
- Perovic, S. (2014) "Performing History". In Stuart Brisley, Sanja Perovic, and Tim Brennan, *The Peterlee Project 1976–1977*. Aarhus: Museum of Ordure.
- Peyton-Jones, J. et al. (2009) *Gustav Metzger: Decades: 1959–2009*. Cologne: König.
- Reyntiens, P. (1962) *The Geometric Environment*. London: Artists International Association Gallery.
- Richards, J.M. (1967) "New Town and Old Town: Housing at Peterlee New Town, Co. Durham". *Architectural Review* 141, no. 842: 271–276.

- Robson, C. and Gathercole, S. (eds) (2014) *An Experiment in Total Environment: Pasmore and Paterson in Peterlee*. Peterlee: APCA.
- Rowntree, D. (1961) “Buildings for Architects”. *The Guardian*, 29 June.
- Spieker, S. (ed.) (2017) *Destruction (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press.
- Stoppard, T. (1968) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber & Faber.
- von Graevnitz, G. (1980) “Introduction”. *Pier+Ocean: Construction in the Art of the Seventies*. London: Hayward Gallery, 5–7.
- Wilson, A. (2008) “Gustav Metzger’s Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art: An Art of Manifesto, 1959–1969”. *Third Text* 22, no. 2: 177–194.

Imprint

Author	Sam Gathercole
Date	30 November 2020
Category	Article
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Double Blind)
License	Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-18/sgathercole
Cite as	Gathercole, Sam. “The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy.” In <i>British Art Studies</i> . London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2020. https://britishartstudies-18.netlify.app/the-lost-cause-of-british-constructionism/ .