

In 1997 four artists from the British Isles, Anthony Hill, Jeffrey Steele, Peter Lowe and John Law, were invited to participate in the 15th International Open Air for the Artists Using a Language of Geometry organised in Okuninka on the Biale Lake by the Chelm Regional Museum. Getulio Alviani, an outstanding Italian advocator of art, which is based on the rational foundations, its great connoisseur and a curator of numerous exhibitions, that promote art descending from the pre-war constructivism, was also there. It was Getulio Alviani who conceived the idea of organising a joint exhibition of these three British artists, his close friends since the sixties. At that time, as an organiser of the Okuninka open-air, I had a chance to have an insight into the work of these artists, representing the same generation, but so different in character. Although they spent only a few days in Okuninka I had enough time to make some remarks on them. I have to admit that my observations were subjective, imprinting in my memory the figures of three outstanding representatives of the British geometrical abstraction. The symposia held in Okuninka provide the artists, using a similar visual language, with a splendid opportunity to become more intimate with one another – both on professional level as well as personal, sometimes they give rise to years' long friendship. Surrounded by the beautiful nature, the forests abundant in mushrooms and the magnificent surface of the Biale Lake artist act naturally, their behaviour is free from formalities, their likes and dislikes get revealed, even their weaknesses get disclosed. In such a context Anthony Hill appeared to be an artist who fits well into the atmosphere of cosy little cafes, Jeffrey Steele felt at home during philosophical discussions – it did not matter what language they were carried in –, whereas Peter Lowe personified of 'a sport' type of an artist, getting up early, perfectly organised, for whom boat trips across the Biale Lake became a favourite pastime. Being so much different from one another in their predilections and dispositions they were still a good bunch of friends, in which an element of mutual respect and many year's long intimacy prevailed over all the differences. For me the way these artists acted was a perfect measure of a phenomenon called friendship.

Eight years earlier – in 1989 – two artists from London, Jean Spencer and Malcolm Hughes, were also taking part in the Okuninka open air. When I look at the catalogue of 'Constructive Context' exhibition of 1978, from the perspective of all these years, I realise that in England all these artists, I have mentioned, are considered to be the classics of the art ruled by the laws of science. Stephen Bann wrote in the introduction to the catalogue: "...One could speak of them as existing within a tradition, with its natural assumption of a formal vocabulary handed down from one generation to another, fits well with the conception of an exhibition like this, in which the wide spectrum of ages rightly suggests that the younger participants have learned a great deal from their elders... What should be stressed in this exhibition is not the priority of the elders, but the very fact that artists of widely varying ages are engaged in connected activities."¹

It is a very meaningful phenomenon that the artists from an art circle of the constructivist provenience emphasise the significance and contribution of their predecessors into the the twentieth century art. They do not cut off from the works of their predecessors, on the contrary, they stress their merits and point to the areas they draw their inspiration from and were influenced by. They do not undermine the importance of the past, they do not question what has been said, but they build bridges to find a common platform to place the ideas of Tattlin, Theo van Doesburg, Albers, Mondrian and many others next to their own propositions. Thus Anthony Hill pays a tribute to Kenneth Martin – his great friend and teacher, while Jeffrey Steele manifests his admiration for the works of Josef Albers, Max Bill, Victor Vasarely, August Herbin, Jesus Raphael de Soto, and first of all for the creative ideas of Richard Paul Lohse.²

Among these three artists Steele's works are the closest to painting. In the sixties he was very active in Op Art movement, which brought him the international recognition. In the exhibition 'The Responsive Eye' organised in 1965 by Modern Art Museum in New York, he showed one of his paintings – 'Baroque Experiment/Fred Maddox' which inspired the world of fashion and advertising at that time. The artist himself perceived these facts in a different way: "...But it was quite evident from the nature of our reception that our moment in the sun/circus ring would be brief. I knew that the most celebrated of my paintings was also the least subtle and was irked by the feeling that the positive issues underlying my work had been muddled and obscured if not actually impaired, at least for some time, by what was happening". Cyril Barrett, the author of the most representative critical work on Op art wrote: "Op art developed later in Britain than on the continent – the earliest Op paintings seem to have been done by Steele in 1960".³ Barrett was referring to 'Orlando'. Steele's active participation in Op-art movement provided the artist with much satisfaction and also with bitter experience, but it had no influence on the fact that along with Bridget Riley he is considered to be the most significant representative of British visualism in the history of the twentieth century art. This experience gave the artist a new stimulus to broaden the scope of his research with respect to a form as well as colour. Steele's painting gave preference to horizontal structures and the simplicity of style over the dynamics of form, the black and white contrasts were replaced by sublime colours. Each series of his works finds its theoretical justification within the system. The language Steele uses often em-

1) Stephen Bann, introduction to the catalogue 'Constructive Context', Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, p.5

2) D.M. Bunyard, Responsive Eyes: The British Contribution to Op-Art, 1958-65, University of Southampton, 1996, p.72

3) Cyril Barret, Op-Art, Studio Vista, London 1970, p.169

loys the terms and concepts typical for mathematical linguistics.

The world of mathematical verifiability is also characteristic for the art of Anthony Hill and Peter Lowe. Lowe builds reliefs with the units which are squares, describing them in the following way: "...Repetition, modularity and logic is the basis for a number of monochrome reliefs dating from 1974 onwards."⁴ These realisations have their drawing versions. Drawing and relief are techniques that often complement each other in his works. In the nineties he made a series of drawings operating with one module, this time it was a triangle. He writes about them: "Some triangular configurations in my drawings remind me of the sharp bastions of walled defences or explosive forms like the jagged perforations of bullet holes. On the other hand they also suggest the stellar structure of flowers or the playful pushing and pulling of people dancing in a ring ... The fact is they started out without conscious reference to appearances or flights of fancy. Triangular form is inherently sharp like a spearhead or knife, but triangles can also function symbolically or perceptually as pointers directing the eye around the picture space. These journeys of the eye can take place with or without the baggage of symbolism."⁵

Philip Hughes discussed Peter Lowe's works in the introduction to a catalogue of the exhibition at the Garden Centre in the University of Sussex in 1974, he wrote: "... Certainly his work is methodical and is preconceived. He invariably knows what kinds of relationships he wishes to explore. But this is his starting point. When the work is finished there are many more relationships that he did not have in mind. This is not accidental, this is also an inevitable consequence of his method of working... If you ask him if he intends his work to have any emotional or symbolic significance he will tell you that he does not. But his attempts to simplify the elements he uses in his work frequently lead to a charge of 'Coldness' or being 'Clinical'. In such cases it is the viewer who insists on overlaying the work with emotional significance."⁶

Anthony Hill belongs to a group of the British artists who had their considerable contribution to the tradition of European constructivism. He deserves a particular recognition as the author of abstract reliefs, which he started constructing in the mid-fifties, that is when he stopped painting. The artist created extremely beautiful series of reliefs, in which he used industrial building materials such as plastic or aluminium. Their apparent crudeness finds its compensation in extraordinary refinement, originality and novelty. His art is a reflection of his mathematical interests, also evident in the series of reliefs entitled 'Parity Studies' (from 1969 onwards), constructed from plastic plates with white laminated surfaces. He engraves flat and very precise geometric patterns on them, as a result we get dull black drawing against the shining white.

Hill's interest in reliefs has its origins in his friendship with several outstanding figures of the British art scene, including Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin, Robert Adams and Adrian Heath, with whom he founded a group called Constructionist Artists in London at the turn of the fifties.

He worked for 'Structure' magazine, edited by Joost Baljeu in 1958-64. In 1960 he wrote in one of his articles: "A constructional relief neither stands like sculptures nor is it suspended like mobiles and other kinds of constructions, it is not a window or a carpet like a painting and neither is it part of the wall. The relief is the real plastic object par excellence, it has the dimensions of everyday objects and yet it is not to be confused with them".⁷

Yona Friedman completed the artist's picture, making such comments on him: "What impressed me, was his inquisitive mind, his keen eye seeing structures behind the facade of things, and his particular talent to discover the aesthetic quality in structures. When, somewhat later, I saw his works, this confirmed the picture I had made about his personality. Anthony Hill is a 'discoverer-artist'. Each work of his is an act of discovery, either of an abstract mathematical structure (which he succeeds to translate into an artwork) or of an aesthetic structure (which he transposes into graph theory)".⁸

These three artists presented at the Lublin exhibition have been well known to the Polish public for years. In 1976 Jeffrey Steele took part in the exhibition "System+Program' at the Studio Gallery in Warsaw. The works of Anthony Hill and Peter Lowe were exhibited at 'Construction in Process' show in Łódź in 1982. Their works are to be found in the international collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź. In February 1999 the works of J. Steele and P. Lowe were presented at the international exhibition 'Concrete Art and Abstraction' in Cracow, later this exhibition was showed in Germany and in May 2000 it will be presented at the Studio Gallery in Warsaw. Thus the Lublin exhibition is a transitional cord, getting these artists together again, about whom Hans Arp said "the concrete artists do not 'abstract' something from the world, but bring something into it".

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4) Peter Lowe, the artist's statement of 1989, in: Portfolio 55 protagonistov konstruirane umetnosti, Cankarjev dom, Ljubljana 1995, p.167

5) Peter Lowe, the artist's statement in: Peter Lowe - serial drawings, Claire Hall Gallery, 1.06- 15.07.1994

6) Philip Hughes, an introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Gardner Centre, University of Sussex, 1974

7) Anthony Hill, A Retrospective Exhibition, Hayward Gallery, London, 20.05 - 10.07. 1983, p.26

8) Op.cit. p.84