

# A Complex, Pivotal Personality

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## “Cher Camarade”

This was the form of address used in correspondence by the artists of the major international organisation “Abstraction Création, Art Non-Figuratif” (Paris), which counted among its members such pioneers of classical modernism as Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers and Max Bill. It was with an equally politically and artistically respectful salutation, “Dear Comrade” (Caro Compagno), that Max Bill addressed the Belgian artist Dominique Stroobant, his junior by two generations.

The well-read Dominique Stroobant, like Max Bill’s lifelong friend Georges Vantongerloo (and Henry van de Velde?), hails from Antwerp/Anvers. This background paved the way for their interaction. Dominique’s polyglot abilities likewise eased his communication with Bill.

Dominique Stroobant (b. 16 March 1947) first met Mymona (“Mona”) Johnson, a South African woman from Cape Town, in 1969 in Belgium, and the two later married. They have two children: a son, Ish-maël (b. 1972) and a daughter, Mascha (b. 1978).

The exploration and experimentation with the expressive possibilities of linguistic and artistic variation are features of Dominique’s character and personal charisma. While serving in the Belgian army in Westphalia in 1973, he was amazed by the number of illiterate Belgians serving with him—and he helped them gain confidence by teaching them to read.

The first encounter between Dominique Stroobant and Max Bill was made possible in 1981 by the Swiss gallery owner Marc Hostettler, who hosted exhibitions by the two artists at his Galerie Média in Neuchâtel. Hostettler moreover put together a set of documentation at that time which was released in a black box: “le présent ouvrage a été publiée par la Galerie Média pour son cycle de quatre expositions mars 1981-janvier 1982 (...) des 500 exemplaires tirés, Neuchâtel, le 14 mars 1981”.<sup>1</sup> Part of this documentation is a self-portrait Dominique took at 11:31 pm on the 7th of January 1981 in Miseglia, to which he added a number of technical details: “éclairage: lampe de bureau”, “camera: sac en plastique noir” (...) “temps de pose; +/- 10 minutes”.<sup>2</sup>

After this first meeting, Max Bill’s “young friend” formed a group with the stonemasons of the “SGF Scultura” (Torano-Carrara) called “Esagono SNC”, for which Dominique

1. Present work has been published by Media Gallery for its cycle of four exhibitions March 1981-January 1982 (...) of the 500 copies printed, Neuchâtel, le 14 mars 1981.

2. “Lighting: desk lamp”, “camera: black plastic bag” (...) “exposure time; +/-10 minutes”.

outwardly acted as the workshop supervisor. They were commissioned with the execution of Bill's granite sculpture "Continuity," which stands before the headquarters of Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt am Main and, according to Bill, is the largest granite sculpture to be transported "since ancient Egyptian times."

Max Bill considered Dominique Stroobant, who invented several tools specifically for optimal carving of the sculpture, to be "a genius."

Stroobant is someone ethnologists would call a "pivotal personality," someone who moves among different social circles or classes and exercises an influence on them. It is impossible not to notice him when he is in his element. Carrara and its surroundings constitute one of the largest centres of anarchism, and Dominique Stroobant is a member of the F.A.I. (Federazione Anarchica Italia)—just like the comrades in the SGF Scultura were avowed anarchists, who would gently mock the bankers of Deutsche Bank who came to Carrara from Frankfurt to check on the work's progress, pulling out "their spray deodorants" up in the marble mountains...

There is a video documentary called "Non son l'uno per cento—Anarchici a Carrara" (2006, director: Antonio Morabito) about the anarchists of Carrara, who were very anti-clerical, and for good reason given the right-wing tendencies of the Vatican. In this film, Dominique Stroobant appears as one of the self-confident protagonists, emoting expressively in the role of a serious scholar who knows the history of anarchism from the ground up. He lives a modest private life with his family but is wonderfully hospitable and talkative.

There are parallels in the social consciousness of Max Bill's work and that of Dominique Stroobant. For example, in the early 1950s Bill designed a "monument for the unknown political prisoner", which despite its exemplary content and aesthetic qualities was unfortunately never built.

In 1979 Stroobant co-organised an international competition for a "Memorial of the victims of fascism". In 1988 he designed a monument dedicated to the victims of a mine shaft collapse, "Memorial for the victims of Marcinelle inside the site of the coalmine" (bois du cazier), which was financed by an association of ex-coalminers (Italmondial).

Dominique's wife, Mona (Mymona Johnson), with her striking presence, took part-time jobs during the summer months in Switzerland, one of them at a hotel on the Furka Pass run by gallery owner Marc Hostettler and refurbished by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944 in Rotterdam). Not far from this hotel was one of Max Bill's last sculptures, along with works by other international artists (Richard Long, Per Kirkeby, James Lee Byars). Situated in the countryside on the border between the cantons of Uri and Valais, Bill's work is composed of four identical blocks of granite, which can be used as a seating group.

Max Bill and I once met Mona and Dominique at an opening dinner for the Italian artist Piero Dorazio in Milan, and I got along well with Mona.

Dominique Stroobant was also involved in the execution and installation of another of Max Bill's granite sculptures, the 20-tonne "Endless Staircase: Monument to Ernst Bloch" (1988/90), produced by the Biselli company in Italy. It was set up next to the Wilhelm Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen am Rhein in honour of the philosopher Ernst Bloch. This was also the setting for a photo documenting the friendship between Max Bill, Dominique and myself. Bloch had emigrated from Germany during the Nazi era and visited Max Bill in Zurich-Höngg.

Dominique Stroobant's multifaceted personality poses a challenge to anyone intent on understanding and classifying everything. When I see his sketches all lined up on a seemingly endless strip of paper, I ask myself if Dominique is trying to bring order to his inner universe.

One series of drawings is titled "Stones, A Selection" (1972-1984). It was reproduced in a large-format invitation flyer for Dominique Stroobant's exhibition in July 1984 at Galerie Bernard (Grenchen/Switzerland). The flyer was designed by Hans Liechti, who was friends with the Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Dürrenmatt was read by both Max Bill (with great pleasure) and Dominique Stroobant. There could possibly even be some sort of inner relationship between Dürrenmatt's "chaos valley" (*Durcheinandertal*) and Dominique's sketches. The degree of variation in his rather comic-strip-like sketch sequence could almost instil a fear of the irrational in your heart.

In contrast to this fast-paced sketching, his shorter photo sequences are produced much more slowly with a pinhole camera he built himself, using precisely calculated exposure times over long periods. He first sets the time in the pinhole camera and then it continues to shoot autonomously.

I am compelled to rummage through these select, limited series, with their carefully calculated exposures, in search of a specific aesthetic. However, this might be the wrong approach. Perhaps he is not concerned with the aesthetic sought by the judgmental eye trained in classical modernism. After all, anarchists, with their broad view of realities and existences, make an effort not to discard anything, seeing no quality distinction between high culture and everyday culture, and instead accepting a broad variety of things as equal.

The great leftist cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin, who did not survive the Nazi era, saw a "literarisation of the conditions of life" in the photography of his epoch, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, one of Max Bill's masters at the Bauhaus in Dessau, was of the opinion that "the illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of pen and camera alike".

(As told by Franz Roh in: Franz Roh/Jan Tschichold: *Foto-Auge-Oeil et Photo-Photo-Eye*, Tübingen 1929)

The use of the pinhole camera seems to be a specialisation comprehensible only to initiates. Pinhole photo production is inexpensive, raising the question of whether it is connected to the rise of the "Arte Povera" movement.

### The time factor

Dominique Stroobant's more recent pinhole photography (shot using an exposure time of six months) resulted in the depiction of things we would otherwise never naturally be able to see. Produced using minimal technological effort, the images consist of interesting, seemingly artificial forms and proportions whose value lies in the truth of their temporal component. In this sense, Dominique Stroobant's photography turns natural processes (such as sunlight) into works of art, using minimal technology.

### Box

In my private notes from the time I lived with Max Bill in Zumikon, I read this entry about the sculptor Dominique Stroobant: "... the Belgian anarchist Dominique Stroobant, who lives in Italy, came to visit us in Zumikon with his African wife, Mona. Dominique showed us a new granite sculpture—and Max Bill ordered a somewhat larger version of it for himself." (Angela Thomas, Monday, 15 February 1993)

Max Bill died on the 9th of December 1994; Dominique's wife Mona on the 25th of March 1998. Since then, Dominique has been with his new life partner, Holly Manyak, a American sculptor and teacher who travels back and forth between Marseille and Carrara. Since 1998 I have been married to my second husband, Erich Schmid. He is a Swiss author and film director who made a film in honour of what would have been Max Bill's 100th birthday titled "Max Bill—das absolute Augenmass" (2008, subtitled in multiple languages, including Italian), in which the young, bearded Dominique Stroobant is seen in action wearing a hat (which he, as a true anarchist, took off for no one) while working on Bill's sculpture "Continuity."

Dominique Stroobant recently donated a remarkable collection of source materials for the execution of Bill's sculptures ("Continuity", "Monument to Ernst Bloch", etc.), consisting of private notes, documents, calculations, correspondence and drawings he made, to the Haus Bill archive. We owe him our thanks.