

Shared viewpoints and cultural appreciation

Max Bill, "...[is a] versatile [artist], as he works with equal fervor as architect, painter, sculptor, typographer and writer. A special clarity in thought and design characterises him, being the absolute opposite to a romantic. He is someone who stands firmly in the centre of life.

Hans Hildebrandt¹

Max Bill attended the Bauhaus in Dessau between 1927 and 1929, where his studies included classes taught by Klee (to whom he spoke in his mother-tongue of Swiss-German), Kandinsky, Albers and Moholy-Nagy. The Bauhaus liberated the young artist and the ideological, as well as the sensual, impressions he gained in his few years there had a lasting effect on him, his work and his teachings.

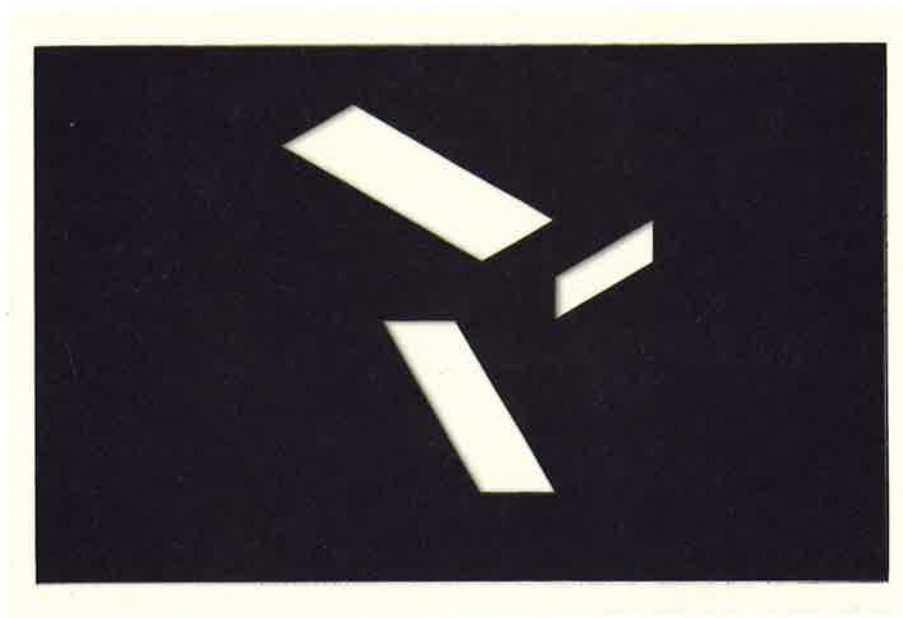
In the early 1930s, Bill was drawn to contemporary cultural life in Paris and he began to form an independent creative and artistic style. In December 1933, having just turned 25, he exhibited with the group *Abstraction-Création*, that included several established and older artists such as Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brancusi and Georges Vantongerloo, who was to become a lifelong friend.² It was from that time that Bill was accepted as an independent artist by his former Bauhaus masters Moholy-Nagy, Kandinsky and Albers. In fact, Moholy-Nagy endeavoured to engage Bill for the New Bauhaus that he founded in Chicago.³ Bill declined the offer but did, in 1955, utilise many of the Bauhaus principles for the curriculum of the newly formed Hochschule für Gestaltung (Academy of Design) in Ulm, Germany where he was both the architect for the buildings and its first director.⁴

Among the group *Abstraction-Création* were several English artists including Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Marlow (Marjorie Jewell) Moss, who was to become a good friend of Max Bill's. Whilst in Paris in the early 30s, Marlow invited him to Château d'Evreux where she was living with her Dutch partner Nettie Nijhoff.⁵ Moss and Bill showed together in the March 1934 *Abstraction-Création* exhibition in Paris, which also included the work of Jean Arp who had asked Bill to join the group.⁶

Shortly after this time, the possibilities of free cultural exchange diminished when Europe was barricaded, due to the growing numbers of the Nazis, and during the Second World War letters were censored. Although Bill was in the privileged position to be in Switzerland at this time, any contact to countries like Great Britain was unthinkable. When the war was over, Marlow Moss wanted to visit Bill immediately to renew their long friendship. At the same time, in February 1947, Bill's Flemish artist-friend Georges Vantongerloo, who lived in Paris at the time, was to visit him in Zurich-Höngg.⁷

One international exchange Bill did have during wartime was with a group of Italian architects, who had been detained in Switzerland after escaping Italy as they were Partisans who were cornered by the Fascists. One of these architects was Ernesto Nathan Rogers, who became editor of *Domus* (Milan) at the end of 1945 and who wrote several articles on Bill.⁸

Max Bill had a lasting relationship with these architects and when his book on Reconstruction was published in 1945, it came as no surprise that he, a Swiss architect, was invited to participate at the *Primo Congresso Nazionale per la Ricostruzione Edilizia*, the first post-war congress on Reconstruction which was held in Milan that same year.



1 **construction in black** 1939
cardboard cut-out of black carbon carton
30.5 x 49 cm

Joint Post-War Exhibitions

In July and August 1948, Galerie Herbert Herrmann in Stuttgart exhibited works by Josef Albers, Jean Arp and Max Bill.⁹ Following this exhibition was a joint Albers-Bill exhibition at Galerie Gerd Rosen in Berlin in 1949. Albers, whose works Bill regarded highly, did not travel from America for the opening in Berlin.¹⁰

Max Bill designed the small catalogue for the exhibition in Stuttgart and it includes a text by him entitled "On the meaning of the terms in modern art", as well as a text by Professor Hans Hildebrandt about the three exhibiting artists: "they manifest ... the similarity of their attitudes towards the problems of artistic design at the same time as they manifest the difference of their personal working processes".¹¹

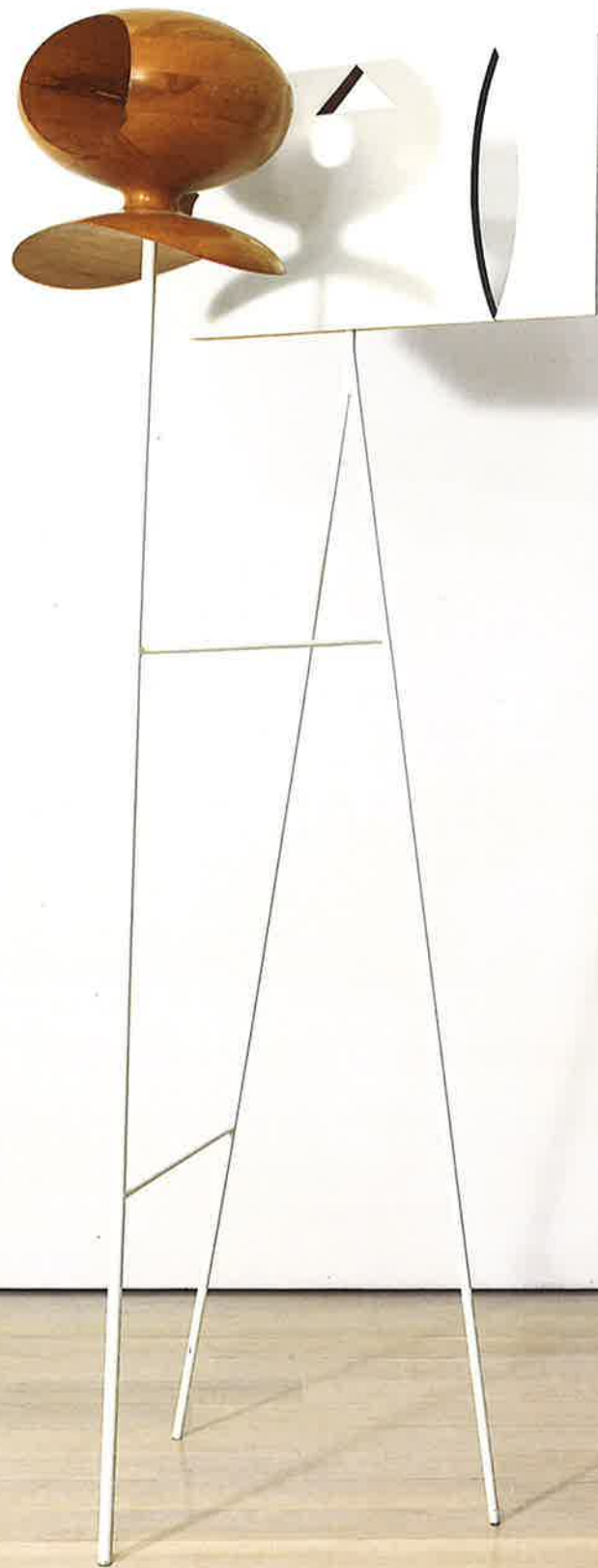
Albers and Bill

As Moholy-Nagy before him, Josef Albers, who had emigrated to the USA with his wife Anni in 1933, asked his former Bauhaus student, Bill, whether he would like to lecture at the "Summer Institute" session at Black Mountain College, with which Albers and his wife Anni were affiliated from 1933 to 1949.

Albers had become a renowned teacher and lecturer in the US and, in addition to Black Mountain, held various academic positions at Cincinnati Art Academy, Pratt Institute, Harvard University and Yale. In 1953, the Alberses went to Peru where Joseph had a position as a visiting lecturer at the Institute of Technology in Lima. There they were able to pursue their interest in Peruvian textiles, the colour designs of which were of special interest to Joseph.

Though in communication since Josef Albers's time at the Bauhaus, Max Bill had not seen Anni and Josef for a quarter of a century. Whilst in Brazil in 1953, Max Bill and his first wife, Binia, travelled to Lima to see the Alberses. The foursome travelled on to Cuzco and to see the ruins of Machu Pichu. During this trip Bill persuaded Albers to come back to Germany as a visiting professor to teach a Foundation Course (Grundkurs) at the Academy of Design in Ulm, which he did in 1954 and again in 1955.^{12 and 13}

The versatile Bill made an effort to promote the work of Josef Albers, his former Bauhaus master, and also that of the German artist Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart who were both forced to emigrate from Nazi-Germany in the 1930s. He curated an exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zurich in 1956 with works by Albers, Vordemberge-Gildewart and Fritz Glarner, who was born in Zurich and lived in America at the time.¹⁴ This exhibition resulted in the "re-discovery" of the work of Josef Albers in Europe. A few years later in America, Anni and Josef Albers, together with Marcel Duchamps, attended the opening of Max Bill's first one-man show in New York at Staempfli Gallery in 1963. After this, Bill regularly visited Albers in his studio in New Haven, and later in Orange, Connecticut whenever he was in America.¹⁵



After the Second World War, Bill also promoted the work of the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, who had gone from France into exile in England. Bill installed a comprehensive exhibition of his work at the Kunsthaus Zurich in May 1955 and also designed the exhibition's catalogue and poster. A few years earlier, in 1949, Bill himself had exhibited there together with two colleagues of an older generation, Antoine Pevsner and Georges Vantongerloo, who both lived in Paris. Max Bill later curated several retrospective exhibitions of Vantongerloo's works.

Max Bill and Annely Juda

Max Bill was always a loyal friend to the people he admired. One of these was Annely Juda, with whom he shared an upright political mindset, a sense of justice and a view of artistic quality.¹⁶ They also had a mutual appreciation and admiration of many of the same artists - Albers, Mondrian, Arp, Vantongerloo and Vordemberge-Gildewart among them - whom Annely showed in her gallery in exhibitions such as the highly regarded series *The Non-Objective World* (in which Bill participated) and also *Line + Movement* (for which Max Bill lent works by Vantongerloo). It was not long after they met that she was showing Bill's work as well.¹⁷

Another gallerist with similar views, Denise René in Paris, told me one day that she used to be "scared of" Max Bill when she was younger, as he was prone to change her hanging of his works. There were no such fears between Annely and Max, as they had a silent understanding regarding their visual acuity and appraisal of quality. Max Bill always willingly loaned Annely Juda works for her important historical exhibitions. The 'grand old lady' kept something natural in her demeanour. She was able to think and carefully deliberate. Wherever one went Annely seemed to magically appear, be it at "Espace Concret" in Mouans-Sartoux in France or at a Matisse exhibition at Museum Berggruen in Berlin, where she was seen sitting on a bench talking intimately with the collector Heinz Berggruen. In her own gallery, she was always found standing upright. She came to visit me twice at Haus Bill in Zumikon after Max Bill's death and also came to the festivities at the posthumous inauguration of a sculpture by Max Bill in front of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (see photograph).

David, who has worked with his mother since 1967, first visited Max Bill with her in 1972. This retrospective exhibition, as well as their 1996 show *Max Bill and Georges Vantongerloo: A Working Friendship*, is testimony to David and Annely's shared understanding of Max Bill as an important and influential artist and teacher.

Dedicated to Annely

Angela Thomas, February 2011
Haus Bill, Zumikon, Switzerland

max bill - the master's vision

A documentary feature film by Erich Schmid

This film moves between the dynamic fields of art, aesthetics and politics and will be shown at the gallery during the exhibition.

Switzerland, 2008. 35mm colour, Dolby SR-D, 93 min. Director: Erich Schmid; Camera: Ueli Nüesch; Sound: Dieter Meyer; Editing: Antoine Boissonnas; Collaboration: Georg Janett, Richard Dindo. Distribution Switzerland: Ariadnefilm GmbH; World Sales: Accent Films Montreux



quarter sphere with two equal triangles, 1994, impala granite, 201 cm long

In 1996, after Max Bill's death on 9 December 1994, the gift of a sculpture by him to the Israel Museum was honoured with festivities in Jerusalem. The Socialist mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, gave a speech at the occasion and Annely Juda was also amongst the guests. The sculpture was installed outside the main entrance, behind it are Angela Thomas, Bill's widow, with Teddy Kollek and Jacqueline Weil.

Footnotes:

1. Hans Hildebrandt in the exhibition catalogue *Albers-Arp-Bill*, Galerie Herbert Herrmann, Stuttgart, 1948. This quote goes on to say:
"It is characteristic for Bill that the most current architectural questions of the time, problems of reconstruction (he summarised possible solutions with the help of international materials in a book of high practical value); city and countryside planning, exhibition buildings, the modern one-family-home etc.; the inclusion of industry in the diverse areas of architectural and artistic production – fascinate him as much as the theory and design of a law abiding, timeless, mathematical art does."
2. For more about the history of *Abstraction-Création* and non-figurative art, see Angela Thomas in *Für eine neue Welt – Georges Vantongerloo und seine Kreise – von Mondrian bis Bill*, Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg. Scheidegger und Spiess, Zurich 2009, pp. 227–242.
3. "As is well known Moholy-Nagy tried to continue the Bauhaus partly in Chicago as the New Bauhaus with the Institute of Design, which was later annexed to the Illinois Institute of Technology. The basis and general belief was never identical with what I would have expected from the continuation of the Bauhaus." (Max Bill, Director's speech, Academy of Design, Ulm 24 October 1955)
4. Under Bill's direction, new approaches to the design process were implemented and it became one of the most progressive educational institutions of design in the decades of the 50s and 60s.
5. In 1939, at the start of the Second World War, Marlow Moss was on vacation in the Netherlands. Her property, a château in Gauciel, France was requisitioned by the French airforce. Marlow Moss stayed in the Netherlands until she was able to flee to England on a cargo ship in May 1940. She settled down in Cornwall and rented a small house in Penzance in 1941. Her château in France was bombed in 1944 and was destroyed, along with the majority of her early work.
6. For more about this period, see Angela Thomas, *Mit subversivem Glanz – Max Bill und seine Zeit* (vol. 1, 1908-1939), Scheidegger und Spiess, Zurich, 2008, p. 449.
7. Max Bill wrote to Georges Vantongerloo: "(...) nous t'attenderons vers le 14 ou 15 Février. En meme temps (...) arrivent aussi Nettie Nijhoff et Marlow Moss (...), ton Bill", letter, Max Bill 18 January 1947 to Georges Vantongerloo, Paris, in Georges Vantongerloo-Archiv c/o Angela Thomas, Haus Bill, Zumikon.
8. The architect Paulo A. Chessa, who like Rogers was detained in Switzerland, would later be responsible for drawing the *Domus* typography. In 1947, Max Bill announced that *Domus* was "one of the best magazines in the world for questions of architecture, interior design and art. The typography is exemplary and the architect Paulo A. Chessa, as co-editor, is responsible for this", see Max Bill, "Aus meiner Korrespondenz mit Italien..." in *Schweizer grafische Mitteilungen*, Verlag Zollikofer & Co, St Gallen, 1947 (no serial number) in plain cardboard cover in the library Max Bill c/o Angela Thomas, Haus Bill, Zumikon.

9. As can be seen on the invitation, the “Albers Arp Bill” exhibition opened on 3 July 1948 with a speech by Professor Hans Hildebrandt, who previously, during the Nazi time, was not allowed to practise his job due to an occupational ban (Berufsverbot) against him.

10. “... de Albers j’ai reçu de très beaux lithographies et bois. Il a bien travaillé”, letter, Max Bill 29 June 1946 to Georges Vantongerloo, Georges Vantongerloo-Archiv c/o Angela Thomas, Haus Bill, Zumikon. In contrast, Josef Albers’ art dealer Nierendorff, who in the USA was also dealing with works by Klee and Kandinsky, visited Max Bill in Zurich-Höngg from New York in July 1946, where he saw the paintings by Vantongerloo, which impressed him. Bill wrote to his friend in Paris in July 1946: “... samedi par exemple le marchand de tableaux Nierendorff de New York, qui avait été à Paris, mais ne t’avait pas vu. C’est le marchand de Klee et Kandinsky, et Albers, et il semble que les tableaux lui ont fait impression. Je lui ai dit qu’il doit absolument aller te voir à Paris, et que Wittenborn va publier tes articles”, letter, Max Bill, 8 July 1946 to Georges Vantongerloo: Georges Vantongerloo-Archiv c/o Angela Thomas, Haus Bill, Zumikon.

11. Hildebrandt., *op.cit.*

12. Correspondence about this venture was at first lost in the turbulences of Max Bill’s activities at the time. Josef and Anni Albers announced their demission from Black Mountain College shortly after. For more details on the activities of Black Mountain College see the publication *Black Mountain College – Experiment in Art*, edited by Vincent Katz, with essays by Martin Brady, Robert Creeley, Vincent Katz and Kevin Power. (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2002).

13. This was Albers’ first time back in Germany since the Second World War. Not only did he teach the Foundation Course (Grundkurs) in Ulm (which he did in November 1953 and January 1954), but taught another course about Colour for the summer semester (May-August 1955). Anni Albers preferred to stay in America.

14. Exhibition catalogue designed by Max Bill: *Josef Albers, Fritz Glarner, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart*, Kunsthaus Zurich, 28 April to 10 June 1956 (introduction by Max Bill).

15. When Josef Albers died on 25 March 1976, a few days after his 88th birthday, Bill wrote an obituary in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 March 1976.

16. Annely’s son David recently told me that Annely was a member of the KPD (the German Communist Party) during the controversial and tough 1930s. Bill himself never joined a political party, but kept an attitude that, today, would be described as “undogmatically left”.

17. These exhibitions, started in 1970, were a showcase of important international artists and included Russian Constructivists (Gabo, Malevich, Lissitzky), artists of the *de Stijl* (van Doesburg, Mondrian and van der Leek) as well as British members of the *Abstraction-Création* movement (Hepworth, Nicholson and Kenneth and Mary Martin). Bill was included in most of the *Non-Objective World* exhibitions from 1971. Annely Juda made a second *Line + Movement* exhibition in 1994 which included work by Bill.



max bill

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five decades

19 may - 30 july 2011

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cover: **untitled** 1970 oil on canvas 282 x 282 cm diagonal