Nigel Henderson, Installation of works by Kenneth Martin in Ward 17, Whittington Hospital, London, September–October 1953, showing, *Screw Mobile*, 1953. Collection of the Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/30/9).
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Issue 24

The Expressive Unit of Constructionism: Kenneth Martin at Whittington Hospital

Article by Sam Gathercole

Abstract

In 1953, an exhibition of Kenneth Martin's abstract mobiles was staged in a children's hospital ward in North London. Having languished in the footnotes of the history of British constructionism, the exhibition is read in this article as a significant demonstration of the determination of artists connected with the movement to find a place and function for discrete and modestly sized artwork within post-war social space. A range of evidence is gathered towards piecing together a sense of the exhibition and realising its significance. Photographs made by Nigel Henderson and held in the Tate archive are among the material traces considered. His images are shown to articulate particular modes of spectatorship activated by the exhibition, and to locate the exhibition within post-war discourses of children and childhood. In addition, Kenneth Martin's own writing is drawn upon towards establishing a sense of the constructionist artwork as being something that protects a form of autonomy while being open to an immediate environment and the social forces at play in that environment. This article proposes a new way of understanding British constructionism within an expanded field of post-war British art.

Introduction

In September 1953, Kenneth Martin (1905–1984) installed examples of his recent work in a children's ward in Whittington Hospital, North London (fig. 1). This was the first public, one-person exhibition of Martin's early constructed abstract mobiles. The exhibition ran for one month and the general public had access to it, albeit only within the hospital's normal visiting hours. What the public encountered was a display of works and, more so, an installation of those works in a particular, site-specific context. The mobiles were there, primarily, for the patients; the project was, above all, a gesture made for the dozen children in Ward 17 at Whittington Hospital, who were resident there for several months as they recovered from tubercular meningitis. The display/installation at Whittington Hospital can be understood as a public exhibition, but perhaps better as an experiment in locating constructed abstract art in a fully functioning, non-art environment; what a supportive critic, Lawrence Alloway, referred to as "a real environment".[1]

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Figure 1.
Installation of works by Kenneth Martin in Ward 17, Whittington Hospital, London, September–October 1953, still 28, *Mobiles*,
Digital image courtesy of British Pathé, 1953 (Film ID: 1605.20) (all rights reserved).

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Martin was a constructionist, and what happened in Ward 17 in 1953 can be understood as an early manifestation and a high-point of what is known as British constructionism.[2] Along with other artists such as Anthony Hill, Mary Martin and Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin explored the potential of constructed abstract art to reflect—and indeed produce—a post-war culture and society. Towards realising this potential, the constructionists side-stepped the dominant discourses of post-war British art that ranged between troubled figuration and Romanticist subjectivity. They identified, instead, with discourses associated with the new architecture of post-war Britain: a radically functional architecture of municipal buildings (hospitals, housing, schools, etc.) and social spaces. The Ward 17 exhibition/display/installation/project/experiment articulated key constructionist principles and strategies, but it has been substantially overlooked in the literature on British constructionism.[3] This article seeks to recover and recognise its significance.

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The Whittington Hospital project represents a full expression of what fellow constructionist, Anthony Hill, would come to call the "constructionist idea", and what Martin was already calling "an art of environment".[4] It reveals the character of constructionist work operating between artistic autonomy and architectural integration. It shows something of the ambitious scope and the self-imposed limitations of constructionism. And, it says something about the constructionist determination to find a function for discrete and modestly sized artwork within social space; to intervene upon social systems and to engage the publics these systems produced. The patients in Ward 17 may have been something of a captive audience, but Martin approached the installation of his works believing that they might play a part in generously engaging the children so that they—the children—might become structuring participants in their own recovery and in the social systems of care upon which they found themselves depending.

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This article considers the material traces of the exhibition in the form of contemporaneous accounts assembled in Martin's own scrapbooks and in a series of photographs made by Nigel Henderson that are held in the Tate archive. This material is set in the context of constructionist theory and practice, and in relation to themes apparent in post-war cultural discourses, as well as in broader social discourses including those that centred on the child as a subject of particular concern. What emerges is an understanding of constructionism as a formal experiment inserted into social space, and as a contribution to the shaping of meaning in that space. The constructionist artwork gently articulates an environment, illuminating a set of relationships in which new forms of spectatorship are produced. Henderson's photographs, in particular, will be shown to reveal the character of the works in a distinctive way and say something about the forms of direct—and, indeed, indirect—participation facilitated by the constructionist artwork.

The Expressive Image

Martin's exhibition in Ward 17 attracted attention from a range of interested parties. The local press was there, and the occasion was covered by *Art News and Review*, *Architectural Review*, the *Times Educational Supplement*, and *Nursing Times*.[5] There was even a Pathé film crew in attendance.[6] Each outlet framed the exhibition according to its respective audiences, terms and codes: the local papers, for example, were curious and somewhat bemused by Martin's abstract mobiles.

The visual traces of the exhibition reflect different perspectives and imply different ways of seeing and understanding the project. For example, the austere visual codes of the architectural press—so often hostile to actual human presence and use—were rehearsed in its coverage. The image that accompanies an exhibition notice in *Architectural Review* isolates one of the two *Screw* mobiles installed in Ward 17 (fig. 2). It shows an artwork without context, thereby prioritising the work's internal, sculptural form; it shows an autonomous, empirical artefact. Robert Melville's adjacent short text touches on the mobiles' "most valuable purpose" being in a hospital ward, but the image does not convey anything of the environmental or social engagement of the work.[7]

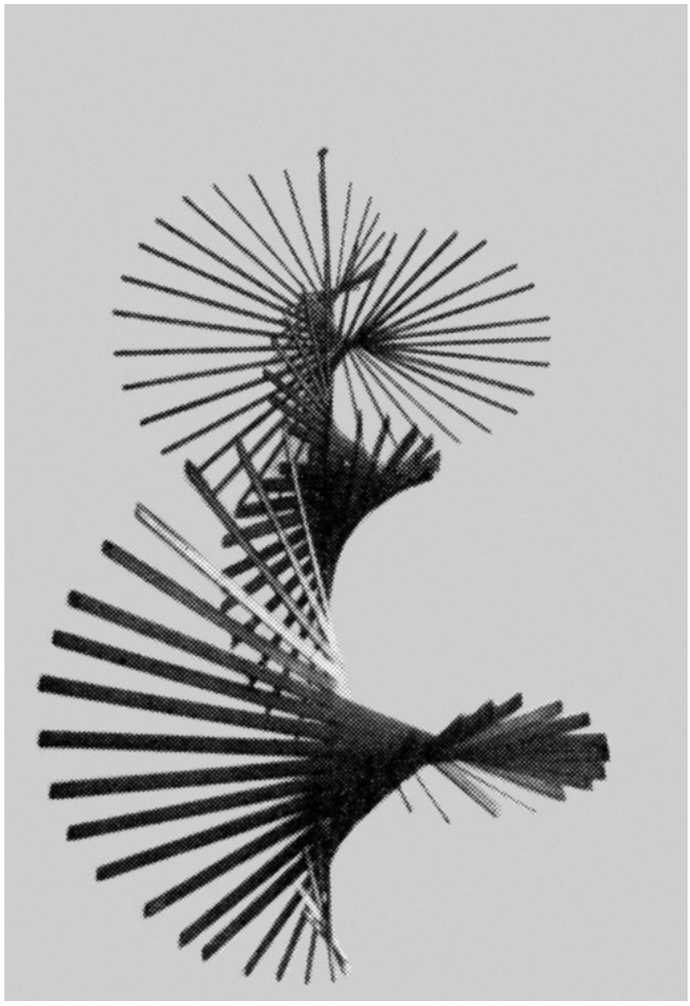

Figure 2.
Kenneth Martin, *Screw Mobile*, 1953. Brass and steel, 81.3 cm tall × 35.5 cm diameter. Illustrated in Architectural Review (December 1953), p.403.
Digital image courtesy of Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).

The image included in an article in *Nursing Times* represents something different. The visual codes of the journals serving the nursing community were distinct from those of the architectural community. In the case of the photograph reproduced in *Nursing Times*, the occasion is represented as standing for something similar to institutional benevolence (fig. 3). It shows Kenneth Martin himself, demonstrating a *Screw* mobile—the same mobile shown in *Architectural Review*—to staff nurse Brenda Hanley and a six-year-old patient called Patricia Norris. There is a different politics—a different set of relationships—being modelled and structured in this representation. Depicting the work in the context of a hospital ward, and showing staff and patients carries a different set of meanings in the operational whole of which the mobile is a part. Naming personnel in the image caption consolidates and develops these meanings.

Figure 3.
Installation of works by Kenneth Martin in Ward 17, Whittington Hospital, London, September–October 1953, showing, *Screw Mobile*, 1953.
Digital image courtesy of Keystone Press/Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

The artist Nigel Henderson also visited Ward 17, and he made a number of photographs on the occasion of Martin's exhibition (fig. 4). Henderson was not a constructionist: his photography and photo-collage work of the 1950s are, instead, commonly set within the terms of another *-ism* of the 1950s—new brutalism—or in relation to his association with the proto-pop of the Independent Group. But, in the early 1950s, a number of circles overlapped in the Venn diagram of emergent art and architecture in post-war Britain. On top of that, Henderson and Martin were friends.

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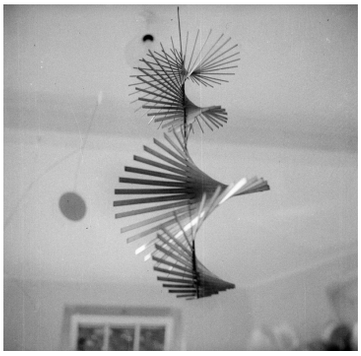
Figure 4.
Nigel Henderson, Installation of works by Kenneth Martin in Ward 17, Whittington Hospital, London, September–October 1953, showing, *Mobile, Black and White*, 1953, aluminium and steel. Collection of the Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/33/4).
Digital image courtesy of Nigel Henderson Estate (all rights reserved).



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The photographs made by Henderson in Ward 17 have their own interests and concerns, distinct from those of the professional journals. Henderson photographed the same *Screw* mobile used to illustrate articles in *Architectural Review* and *Nursing Times* (fig. 5). As with the image reproduced in *Architectural Review*, the mobile is seen from below albeit with some hint of context. His photograph is made from the viewpoint of a hospital bed and shows the work in an actual room. Indeed, it is context that dominates Henderson's photographic record of the Ward 17 exhibition, with the works sometimes being only incidentally registered. When taken as a whole, the body of images made by Henderson have a particular politics in the relationships they represent and structure. It is noteworthy, for instance, that by far the majority of images made by Henderson are of children and the artworks, with adults only occasionally present. There are glimpses of the wider institutional framework in, for example, the form of hospital beds, but the photographs are of the children and, also, of the mobiles, with both being seen close up. Henderson's camera is very much *with* the children who are, in turn, with the mobiles. The children are sometimes shown interacting with the works and sometimes not; sometimes caught in moments of self-absorption or distraction, other times more clearly conscious of the camera being pointed at them and therefore posing or performing for it (figs. 6–9). Throughout, Henderson is intent upon making images of improvised gestures and spontaneous expressions, free of adult presence, mediation, and supervision.

The photographs serve, above all, as a document of the children's agency and autonomy. Besides the single image of the larger of the two *Screw* mobiles installed in Ward 17, Henderson made several images of the smaller work (figs. 10–13). The smaller *Screw* mobile was suspended at the patients' own level, and the close proximity evidently interested Henderson. The patients could look at the larger mobile or have it demonstrated to them by a member of staff (or, as in the case of the photograph in *Nursing Times*, by the artist), but they could more directly engage with the smaller mobile: it was within reach; it was a part of the children's immediate space. And, while these photographs include the smaller *Screw* mobile, it is the young patients that are—literally and figuratively—the point of focus. Indeed, the camera's concentrated attention on the child is even more apparent in photographs of them and another work, *Mobile, Black and White* (1953) (fig. 14). The children are shown being with, rather than necessarily looking at, the mobiles. How the children appear in the space is as, if not more, important than the mobiles themselves. This is not, however, to say that the terms of the images are antithetical to the interests represented in Martin's work. The relationship between work and "viewer", and the terms on which that relationship is negotiated, is fundamentally important in Martin's work.

In the photographs Henderson made in Ward 17, constructionist concerns are extended and combined with themes that Henderson had been developing in an ethnographically coded photographic practice in the streets of Bethnal Green, London. In addition to or in between these languages, the photographs can be understood in the context of post-war discourses of childhood, architecture, and urban planning. The design historian Roy Kozlovsky has attended to these discourses, and noted "the centrality of children to the formation of the welfare state and its model of citizenship".[8] He has also recognised the contribution made by Henderson as to how children were thought of and seen in relation to the urban environment in the early 1950s. Among other aspects of life in London's East End, Henderson photographed children playing unsupervised. The images describe what the cultural historian Ben Highmore calls "spontaneous forms of sociability",[9] and what Kozlovsky reads "as signifying vitality, authenticity and agency".[10] Kozlovsky is interested in the "frequent use in architectural debates of images of children interacting with architectural and urban environments",[11] but is keen to distinguish images that serve design-centred perspectives from those that represent a child-centred concern. In Henderson's photographs, children are not treated as an abstract sign; they are not presented "as a rhetorical construct in relation to an autonomous architectural discourse".[12] Instead, the vibrant and resourceful child is shown as "a concrete subject within a historical context".[13] When (a few months before the Ward 17 exhibition) the architects Alison and Peter Smithson included a selection of Henderson's photographs in a panel articulating their own ideas about urban planning, the images helped to shift "the focus from the architect and the material object to the 'using' subject" (fig. 15).[14] Such a shift is performed through Henderson's photographs of Ward 17, and is paralleled in the intentions of the exhibition itself.

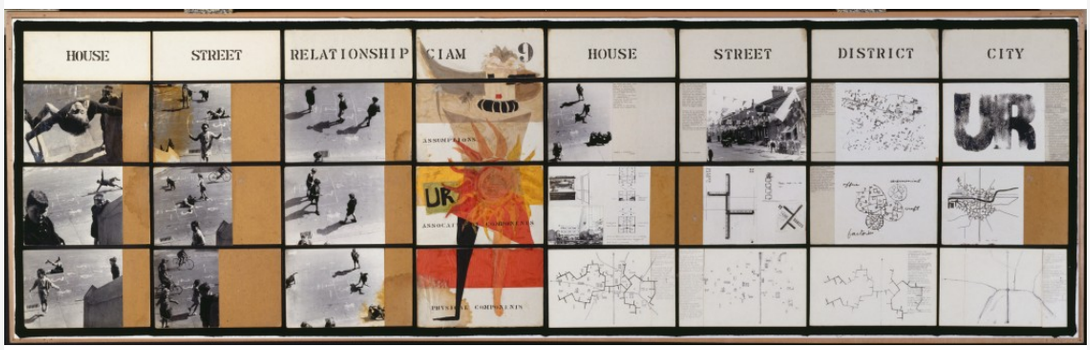


Figure 15.
Alison and Peter Smithson, *Urban Re-Identification Grid*, 1953. Collage, 55.2 cm × 260 cm. Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou (AM1993-1-688).
Digital image courtesy of Smithson Family Collection / Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Georges Meguerditchian (all rights reserved).

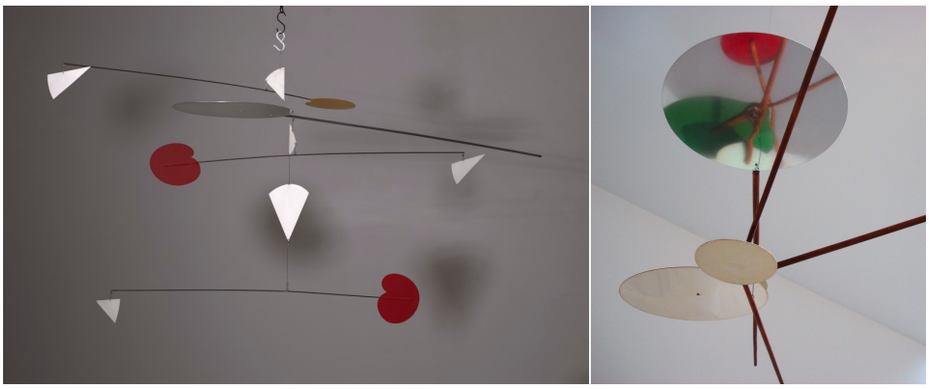
Ward 17

The Ward 17 exhibition was the outcome of a collaboration between Martin and a consultant paediatrician at the hospital, Dr. Simon Yudkin. According to his obituary in the *British Medical Journal*, Yudkin was "an idealistic socialist who believed in taking practical steps to improve society".[15] The collaboration with Martin can be understood on such terms; it represents something of a radical reform of how patients—children in this case—might be stimulated and their recovery aided by a new approach to shaping the hospital environment. The idea was to change the dynamics of the space, as well as the relationships and structures—the politics—within it. Towards this end, the mobiles supplied a means to address the children in new ways; to link them with an environment through a non-prescribed interaction with the artworks. Indeed, for all that Martin might have reiterated the abstract character of his work—saying that that a mobile is "a pure image in time and space"—he also suggested that "the mobile is a toy",[16] thus inviting forms of open participation and use.

What Martin and Yudkin combined to set in motion in Ward 17, was both original and consistent with post-war discourses of children and the urban environment. Kozlovsky has, for example, surveyed a range of post-war strategies and practices that promote "activated subjects [...] incited to appropriate their environments and express their interiority through playful, self-initiated activity".[17] Of course, this has different implications in an institutional context than it would in relation to an adventure playground (or in relation to the street play captured in Henderson's photographs). Alongside such unsupervised freedoms, the post-war environment was also, paradoxically, often one of instrumentalised observation.[18] The Ward 17 project can be understood in such terms, but while a British Pathé film framed it as a "test of the effect of a fascinating and colourful environment on kiddies confined to bed for periods of six months to a year",[19] there is no evidence of a formal surveillance of the patients' behaviours and interactions or of a formal evaluation of the project. It was, instead, an ambitious but strategically low-stakes experiment in redefining the space of recovery (on its own small scale, analogous to the broader terms of post-war reconstruction).

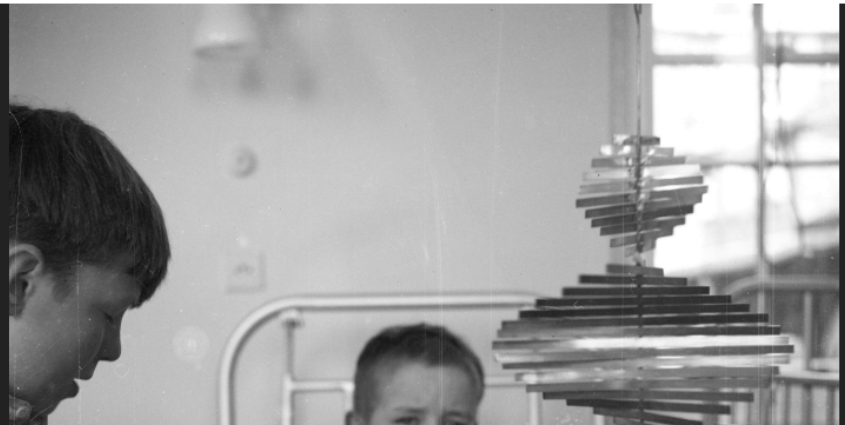
Yudkin was keen to fundamentally rethink the hospital environment towards holistic forms of treatment, and Martin was keen to find a place for art in social systems. And both understood the concept of "environment" in multifarious terms. When Yudkin wrote about children's growth and development, he wrote about "the home" and "the larger community" as social spaces; as being physical environments *and* as being more abstract, conceptual, emotional frameworks.[20] Martin's own thinking was similarly expansive: in 1952, he had written, "Concepts of the space around man, of the nature of man, of the relation of man to society, develop towards a new humanism. With this movement the new artist is associated".[21] Together, Yudkin and Martin shaped a project that reimagined how patients might be engaged through their long-term residence in the ward, and how individuals and a community might be negotiated in such an environment.

Ward 17 was remodelled as a modern environment. The approach taken was consistent with a "post-war-modern" refusal to infantilise the child's realm. The idea was, instead, to construct a modern environment with non-representational elements and, through that, to facilitate a non-prescribed interaction. A new space was prepared for the exhibition to the extent that the ward was redecorated for the occasion. The walls were painted primrose yellow and the woodwork white. Colour was evidently a significant part of the works and the context in which they were installed, even if that colour and its sensuous effect is not available to us in the visual record of the project (which is exclusively greyscale) (figs. 16 and 17). The *Nursing Times* helps us a little, though, reporting a "harmony in colour and movement".[22]



In addition to an innovative and bold use of colour, the conventional adornments of a ward for children were jettisoned: out went pictures of animals and cartoon characters; in came the mobiles. Lawrence Alloway approved of Martin's allusion-free, "concrete" forms, particularly in how they moved beyond figurative identification. Noting an obvious connection between Martin's work and that of Alexander Calder, the American pioneer of mobile sculpture, Alloway distinguished the "lyrical allusiveness by the circus man" (Calder) from Martin's mobiles which

"define space by means of objective forms".[23] Visiting the Ward 17 exhibition, the *Times Educational Supplement* correspondent noted that it was "hoped to show how these mobiles help to create an environment which enlivens and humanises the ward and delights the eye of the patient".[24] Yudkin insisted that Martin's mobiles were "better than dreary decorations";[25] that "they appear to have life".[26] He (Yudkin) was said to be "well pleased" that the patients were not ignoring the mobiles "as they do pictures".[27]



Martin's mobiles encourage a certain form of engagement and produce a particular mode of spectatorship. Some of this is captured in Henderson's photographs in what they show of the works' accommodation of a degree of distraction, if not disregard, on the part of the "viewer" (figs. 18–21). The "function" of the mobiles might have been, in Martin's own words, "purely aesthetic",[28] but a piece by Martin does not demand concentrated attention; it does not insist upon a particular form of interaction. Instead, and by definition, a mobile is experienced in time: Martin suggested that "the new art is meant to be lived with".[29] He wrote that the descending planes of a *Reflector* mobile "may increase our awareness of the ceiling and the space of the room and our own position in the room".[30] So, in regarding such a work or by simply being in the same space, the idea is that the viewer is sensitised to a broader environmental circumstance and, indeed, to their own presence in that space, explicitly so when they see their own face reflected back at them by a mirrored plane in the mobile (fig. 22). The important point here is that the works do not insist on being consciously apprehended. Martin goes on:

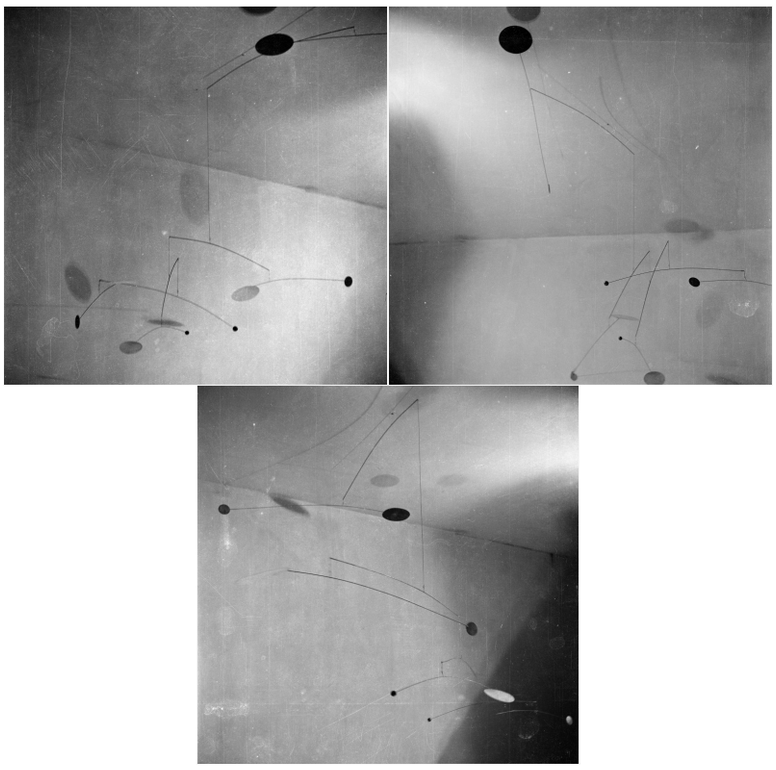
> We lie on our backs and contemplate the ceiling. In the summer, in the open, we lie and watch the leaves of a tree, or the clouds. We see the reflected lights cast upwards on the leaves and passing here and there, changing the colour. The clouds too reflect this light, so that the dark ominous cloud can be seen reflecting the brilliance on the cumulus above it. And so my black disc reflects orange on to the white above it, while this sets blue upon the next white, for my forms are two faced and, like the leaf, are not the same on both sides.[31]

Martin intended his work to be something like the equivalent of natural phenomenon. Such phenomena are rewarding to note, but we don't feel the need to always regard leaves and clouds. And we don't demand that leaves or clouds mean anything in themselves, although it is sometimes tempting to read the shapes and formations in mimetic terms. Newspaper clippings pasted into a scrapbook assembled at the time by Martin report patients succumbing to such a temptation. One clipping tells of an eight-year-old patient called Carol Ann Reeves guiding a journalist called Irene Hanstatter through the installation: "Look, that's a helter-skelter", Reeves enthuses, "that's an apple, that's a see-saw, that's a spider's web".[32] In another clipping, ten-year-old Ian Shepherd tells a journalist called Philip Phillips that the endless motion of the mobiles, and the ever-changing position of elements within them, "are like cowboys chasing Indians". So, while the patients of Ward 17 evidently played a game of pareidolia with Martin's mobiles, the mobiles remain abstract, concrete works that, like leaves and clouds, refer to nothing other than themselves and the space in which they hang.

The concrete expression of the mobiles was sufficient for some observers. The *Nursing Times* correspondent (identified only as "E.E.P."), for one, was prepared to accept Martin's "mobile models" as "pure abstracts".[33] They described works "hanging from the ceiling at intervals and gently swinging and changing pattern in the imperceptible current of air".[34] The correspondent admirably resists any figurative interpretation in their description of the mobiles. Of the earliest of the works on show (figs. 23–25), E.E.P. writes:

> [Martin's] models are delicate affairs of thin and pliant wire which bend of their own weight into graceful arcs from the ends of which depend discs or planes of metal painted in quiet, harmonious colours; as the wires waft gently in the breeze they form and reform into interesting patterns with a graceful, unhurried movement which has a soothing, almost mesmeric effect.[35]

What is being elegantly articulated here is the kinetic effect of the mobiles. Space is revealed in time by the mobiles' sensitivity to otherwise invisible forces.



The non-gallery context for the exhibition allowed Martin's work to reach a non-gallery community on non-gallery terms. Again, the context meant that the works were relieved of the need to be regarded as "art" in any conventional sense and "spectators" were relieved of the expectation of concentrated looking. Ahead of the Whittington Hospital project, Martin was bracing himself for "the dismay of the public", who he thought were not "accustomed to an art of environment".[36] He was not alone in this concern: on the occasion of an exhibition of Piet Mondrian's paintings at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in 1955, the Whitechapel's director, Bryan Robertson, felt the need to acknowledge the suspicious if not hostile reception granted to abstract art in England. He remarked that "the English have never really taken to abstract painting", going on to suggest that "we"—the English—"like our art to be nostalgic and interpretative rather than contemporary and formative".[37] But Robertson went on to say that "the encounter between the public at large and the art of their own time is still quite a new experience, and understanding cannot be hurried". [38] For Martin, the hospital context and the young patients' readiness to accept abstract mobiles allowed the artist to bypass the hostility of a cultural sensibility anticipated by him and recognised by Robertson. In *Nursing Times*, it was "noted with interest that the workmen who installed the exhibits were most appreciative of them, and it was suggested by the artist that both they and the children were ready to accept this essentially modern art expression because they were unprejudiced by the study of conventional techniques".[39]

Whittington Hospital presented a context and an opportunity for abstract art to reveal itself without compromising its character and without intimidating the very audience it was keen to engage. This was a context in which abstract art could demonstrate; what a former surrealist and soon-to-be member of the Independent Group, Toni del Renzio, regarded as "the essentially dynamic nature of abstract art, its power to enter into life and to transform it".[40] In 1951, del Renzio had surveyed the state of post-war art. He despaired at what he took to be an impoverished phase of modern art. He despaired at a polarisation that set arbitrary self-expression and at a "barbarous faith" in expressionism at one end, and the "banal surface" of abstraction's retreat into "pure form" at the other.[41] He was encouraged by work that challenged convention, that embraced complexity, that resisted reductive polarisation, that had purpose beyond "the deadly pettiness of the private art creation".[42] Del Renzio was particularly encouraged by the work of Eduardo Paolozzi and Victor Pasmore, as well as by the work of a range of others, including Kenneth Martin. Martin was still a painter at the time, but del Renzio refers to his paintings as constructions, and he was excited at how the "architectonics of these constructions constantly deny received, normal three-dimensional space ideas and yield planes that hover in changing complexity".[43]

An Art of Environment

The constructionists produced constructed reliefs and constructed mobiles (fig. 26). Reliefs and mobiles were seen by them as operating in an ambivalent and productive space between painting and sculpture. Having started making abstract paintings in the late 1940s, Martin made his first mobile in 1951, "motivated by the need to develop abstract work in three dimensions".[44] Instead of seeing his work in the conventional three-dimensional terms of a sculptural object, though, Martin regarded a mobile as something that "can expand into and pierce space".[45] Rather than being an object *in* a space, the idea was that it was an object *of* that space. In that same year, 1951, Mary Martin also made her first constructed relief. A constructionist relief has, in Mary Martin's words, the appearance of "an object set upon the wall, if it is not a development of the wall itself".[46] The material dimensions of such work (relief and/or mobile) are thus to be understood as indeterminate in that it is always *the work + its environment*: where a relief made by Mary Martin becomes integrally related to—and a part of—the wall on which it is set, a mobile made by Kenneth Martin materialises and defines the space between floor and ceiling. Kenneth Martin described how he "learned how to articulate works that hung from the ceiling and related it to the floor by harmoniously moving horizontal and vertical planes".[47]

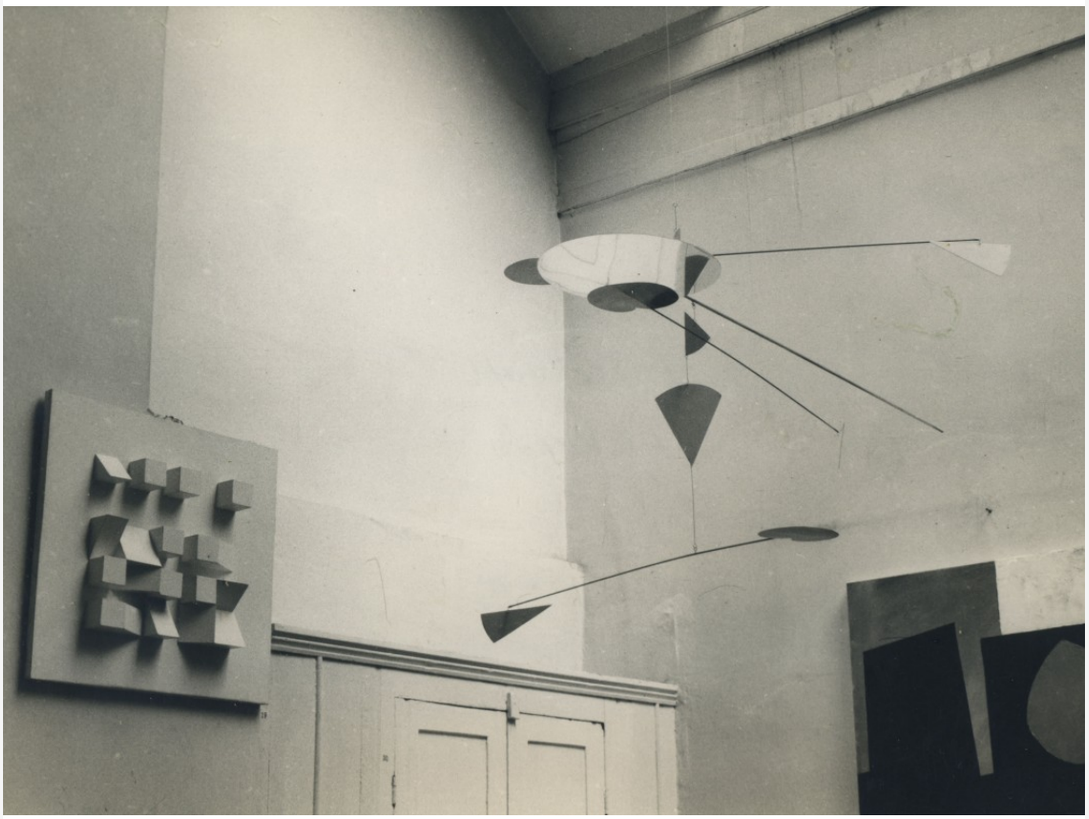


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Figure 26.
View of group exhibition at Adrian Heath's studio on Fitzroy Street, London, May 1953. Including Mary Martin, *White Relief*, 1952 (left) and Kenneth Martin, *Mobile Reflector, Red, Orange and White*, 1953 (right).
Digital image courtesy of Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin. Photo: Peter Hunot (all rights reserved).

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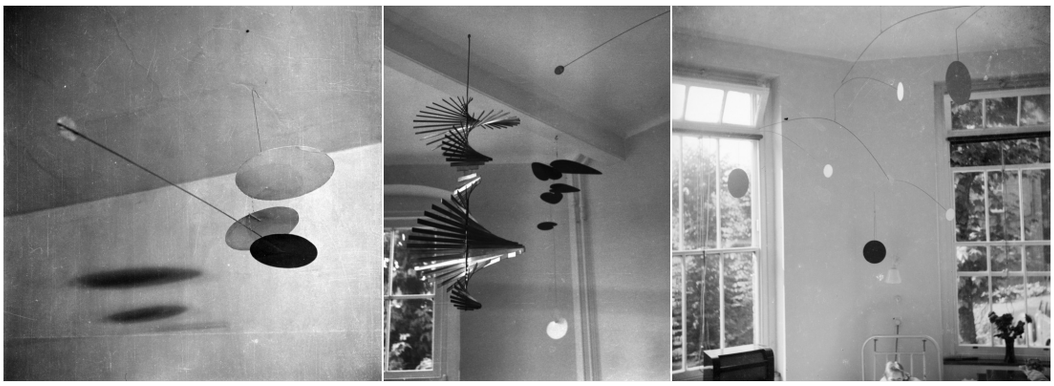
Kenneth Martin showed a range of early mobile types in Ward 17. In the two years leading up to the Whittington Hospital exhibition, Martin had established a number of groups of work.[48] In 1952, for example, he started making *Reflector* mobiles "with horizontal painted and reflective surfaces" combining to form a "space-maker" (fig. 27).[49] In 1953, he made his first *Screw* mobiles utilising "graduated strips of brass rotated around [a] vertical steel rod".[50] Each of Martin's mobile types has a distinct character and each has its own "structural laws".[51] They range from those that appear more organic in form, such as *Vertical Mobile* or *Ascending Figure* (1952), to others that describe a harder geometry, such as *Screw Mobile* (1953). Such works appeared side by side in Ward 17 (fig. 28). Many early works proceeded empirically from a single point to which others were added, all the while maintaining a delicate balance (fig. 29). In these mobiles, Martin worked with the relative weight of materials determining form, and with gravity being regarded as "a direct participant" in the production of work.[52] The *Screw* mobiles marked a shift in that they grew outwards from a vertical core and incorporated a mathematical sequence in the building of form. With the *Screw* mobiles, structure was substantially predetermined through calculation rather than being arrived at through construction. In addition, where the first mobiles were so delicately balanced that the slightest movement in the "chance air" was sufficient to set them in motion, the *Screw* mobiles required an operator (most commonly a manual operator, and, on occasion, a motor) to turn them.[53]



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Towards the end of his life, Martin said that, in the early 1950s, he "was constructing from ignorance towards knowledge".[54] These words recall how he made his work: as Martin put it, "Starting from a simple unit I build with it to see what will happen".[55] It was materials and how they behaved when connected in space that informed the development of the mobiles. Martin's words also recall a steadily expanding knowledge of art history and theory. In the early 1950s, Martin was aware of and interested in the work of Alexander Calder, and he was influenced by the work and theory of Paul Klee, but his art historical knowledge was patchy.[56] He was, for example, substantially unaware of the historical contexts of constructivism, as were many in the West (until at least a decade later), even if his work was unconsciously informed by the historical avant-garde and subsequently historicised within a constructivist framework.[57] External prompts came less from cultural reference points than from an interest in natural structures, and, more particularly, in how science modelled such structures. Indeed, Martin wrote about his work as forming "an alliance with contemporary scientific developments".[58] Grieve has noted how biologist James Watson's and physicist Francis Crick's work on the double helix structure of DNA was published in April 1953, and has speculated on its formal connection to Martin's development of *Screw* mobiles later that year.[59] More concrete evidence survives of the things Martin was looking at in the form of his book requests to the Science Museum Library.[60] These include nineteenth-century works such as the intriguingly titled *How to Draw a Straight Line: A Lecture on Linkages* by A.B. Kempe (1877), and W.K. Clifford's *The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences* (1891), which is identified by Grieve as having been of particular importance for Martin. Consistent with the terms of the scientific disciplines, Martin regarded a constructed mobile as an "organism", and contemporaneous commentary described "The work as an *organism* arrived at through *construction*".[61]

Alongside the development of a work's internal logic, the environmental potential of constructionism was developed and expanded through the 1950s. It was first demonstrated in a series of weekend exhibitions staged in the painter Adrian Heath's studio in Central London in 1952 and 1953. In the years that followed, the exhibitions got bigger and so did the work. This is apparent in a sequence of images that starts with a photograph of the third group exhibition at Heath's studio in May 1953 (see fig. 26). The image shows Mary Martin's *White Relief* (1952) and Kenneth Martin's *Mobile Reflector, Red, Orange and White* (1953). The second image is of Section 9 of the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in 1956 (fig. 30). It shows *Screw Mobile with Cylinder* (1956) by Kenneth Martin, housed within a structure of articulated screens designed by Mary Martin and the architect John Weeks. The third image in the sequence shows work by Kenneth Martin (*Twin Screws*, 1961) again in front of work by Mary Martin (*Construction*, 1961), this time in the Headquarters Building designed by Theo Crosby for the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, held on the South Bank, London, in 1961 (fig. 31). It is tempting to read the development and, more so, the enlarging of work as signalling the maturation of the constructionist idea in relation to architecture; it is tempting to say that the architectural and environmental potential of the work is realised when it achieves a monumental scale apparently implied from the outset. In such a narrative, the early work is prototypical. It might be wholly abstract or concrete, but the early work is, in this sense, read as a speculative model, as a small-scale representation of something bigger to come. And, as the work gets bigger, it appears to move inexorably towards a synthesis with architecture. It is, however, a misunderstanding of the work Martin was making in the early 1950s to regard it as a rehearsal of modern art and architecture's aspiration to an indivisible, total (architectural) work; it would be a misunderstanding of the environmental intent of Martin's early work to think of its environmental engagement as being in any way deferred.

What Martin performed at Whittington Hospital in 1953 was the constructionist idea already worked out. Writing in 1957, Alloway identified "early 20th century delusions of grandeur about monuments in modern materials" as being one of "the problems of constructivism".[62] He went on to say that it "is a virtue of the British constructivists to have accepted the fact that, in this world, their work must function on a domestic scale".[63] As such, an inherent pragmatism and restraint is recognised, registered, and indeed celebrated. For Alloway, "Kenneth Martin's hanging sculptures are highly successful spatial constructions on the scale of a room".[64] And, as Martin himself put it, "It is not necessary always to be formidable".[65]

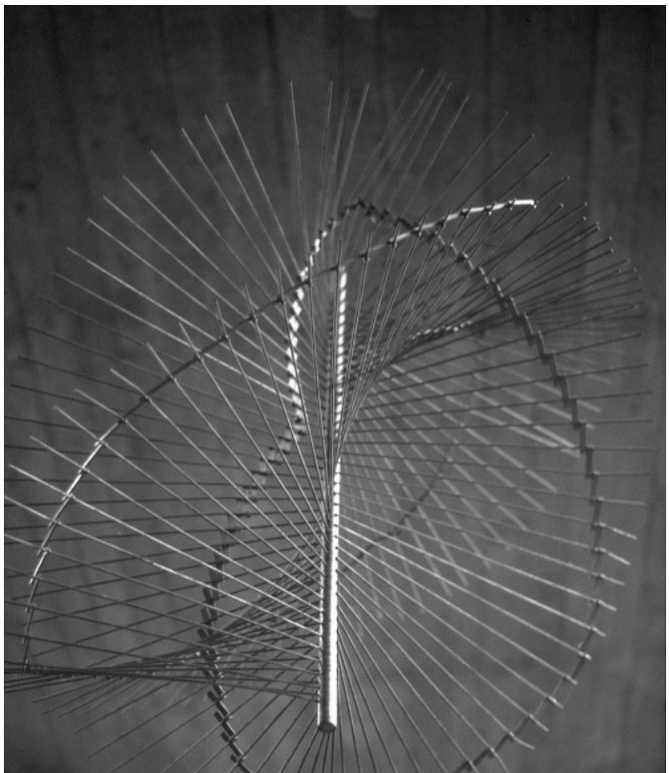
The Expressive Unit

Key to the constructionist idea in relation to architecture and the environment is an understanding of the constructionist artwork as being an "expressive unit".[66] The term, coined by Martin, refers to the artwork as being self-determined and self-contained, *and* as being open to and contingent on an immediate, expanded context. Or, as Martin himself wrote, "While maintaining itself as a discrete entity, as a work of art complete in itself, it can be part of an expressive architecture".[67]

At the production stage, a Martin mobile grows into space, whether that be proceeding from a single point in space to perform an expanding balancing act (as in the first mobiles made by Martin) or advancing proportionately from a core (as in the *Screw* mobiles). Martin wrote of attempting "to achieve a form from the simplest basic principles".[68] The "work is the product of the simplest actions", "not a reduction to a simple form", "it is the building by simple events to an expressive whole".[69] The outcome of the process is a unit that is itself an expressive whole *and* something that relates to, occupies and enhances its environment, thus participating in the expression of a broader whole.

The relationship between the expressive unit of constructionism and the post-war environment is distinct from the "conscious orthodoxy" of a modernist synthesis of art and architecture.[70] Martin interpreted the work of artists and designers associated with, for example, Dutch de stijl as implying a "notion of synthesis, whose pure form is an architecture created jointly by painter, sculptor and architect", and in which "there are no works of art as such".[71] Towards this, de stijl developed its own model of artistic autonomy combined with environmental ambition. The art historian Yve-Alain Bois has distinguished "two operations" within what he calls the "De Stijl idea": "*elementarisation*" and "*integration*".[72] Elementarisation involves "the analysis of each [art and design] practice into discrete components and the reduction of these components to a few irreducible elements"; integration involves "the exhaustive articulation of these elements into a syntactically indivisible, non-hierarchical whole".[73] Martin understood such a synthesis as a "concept of the neutrality of units within the whole".[74] And while the de stijl model informs constructionism, the latter is less totalising: its expressive unit is not neutral and its integration is not dependent on a formally singular environment designed according to the same principles as the artwork. A constructionist "unit" is, instead, immediately part of an environment (such as that found in Ward 17), an environment defined as much by social relations as by aesthetics. The expressive unit is self-contained and contextually contingent.

Where modernist synthesis anticipated the dissolving artwork and the disappearing artist, the expressive unit of constructionism is a discrete environmental intervention. The expressive unit is the unique product of an artist working with, in Martin's words, "the weight and structure of matter and its development in space", which in turn produces "environment and experience".[75] Martin resisted any sense of his work "being absorbed into [...] architecture" even when it might be considered "an inherent part" of a single concept.[76] On the occasions when he worked on commissions for buildings in construction, Martin did not seek an indivisible outcome. In 1967, for example, he realised a work—a motorised *Screw* mobile—as part of the building of the Nuffield Institute of Comparative Medicine in London, designed by the architects Richard Llewelyn-Davies and John Weeks (fig. 32). The work is an expressive unit produced by the artist operating as what Weeks called "an additional specialist" in an expanded architectural context.[77]



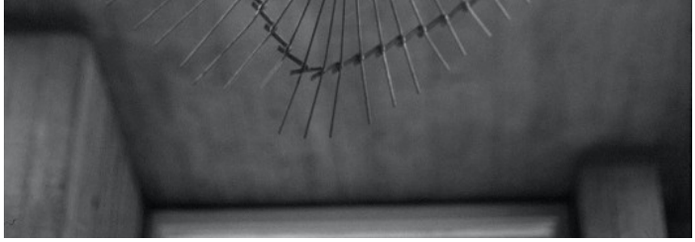


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Figure 32.
Kenneth Martin, *Construction for the Nuffield Foundation*, 1967, installed in the Nuffield Institute of Comparative Medicine, London. Brass, 93 cm tall × 93 cm diameter.
Digital image courtesy of Sam Gathercole (all rights reserved).

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The constructionist artist-specialist was an occasional member of the teams that were an integral part of Llewelyn-Davies and Weeks's approach to design. Weeks was a close friend of Kenneth Martin and Mary Martin, collaborating with them many times in exhibition projects and architectural contexts.[78] There is no evidence that he had any direct involvement with the Whittington Hospital project, but, with Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks was a pioneer of post-war hospital design and was developing approaches to hospital design that no doubt informed the project (and may even have been anticipated by it). In their work for the Nuffield Division for Architectural Studies—part of the Nuffield Foundation that had been established soon after the founding of the National Health Service in 1948—Llewelyn-Davies and Weeks advocated the balancing of "the *means* of building, i.e. structure, materials and technique" with "the *needs*, i.e. functional and physical requirements".[79] In their analysis, mid-century modernism was in danger of focusing on form and forgetting "the early impetus" of the modern movement to "reintegrate architecture with life".[80] Llewelyn-Davies and Weeks defined architecture as the making of buildings that needed, above all, to function for users, and therefore as being the outcome of a necessarily collaborative, multi-disciplinary design process. They sought knowledge "deeper" than that possessed by the architect alone. One team assembled by Llewelyn-Davies and Weeks to think about hospital design "included a doctor, a nurse, a medical historian, an accountant, statistician, and sociologist, as well as architects, and each profession had equal status in the team".[81] All were engaged as specialists and as members of a team. In this sense, it is possible to think of each specialist in constructionist terms as an expressive unit contributing to the development of an expressive whole. Out of this multi-disciplinary process, "new forms of organisation, new attitudes and methods of work emerged simultaneously with new design concepts".[82]

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The project realised in Ward 17 can be usefully thought of as an expression of new concepts and as coming out of a sequence of multi-disciplinary collaborations. The obvious collaboration was between an artist (Martin) and a medical professional (Yudkin). They initiated the project, but its collaborative, multi-authored character does not stop there. As a fully functioning ward, the staff and patients were available to participate in what might be usefully thought of as a durational performance. The patients were an important part of what the project expressed: they were temporary residents in, and producers of, an environment shaped or catalysed by Martin's mobiles (fig. 33). The mobiles joined and helped to articulate the fabric and function of the space (the room itself as well as the furniture and equipment in it) and they joined and helped to articulate (if not produce) the social fabric of the space (the patients and staff). Another collaborative agent is Nigel Henderson. It is Henderson's camera that describes so vividly and so compellingly the relationship between the children and the mobiles, and the integral role played by the children in realising the project. In other words, the photographs do more than document the occasion; they are themselves active in producing an event in which the children are key players. The photographs describe a social and spatial intervention rather than a conventional exhibition of artworks. Henderson's images show the patients as expressive of a living and breathing welfare state, and describe the exhibition of mobiles as an occasion that made visible new social relationships and the possibility of new social relationships.

Figure 33.
Nigel Henderson, Installation of works by Kenneth Martin in Ward 17, Whittington Hospital, London, September–October 1953, showing, *Screw Mobile*, 1953. Collection of the Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/30/9).
Digital image courtesy of Nigel Henderson Estate (all rights reserved).

The rich coincidence of factors apparent in Ward 17 was seldom, if ever, repeated in the short history of constructionism.[83] Martin, for one, would never find a comparable social context in which to so-dynamically insert his mobiles. The expressive unit of constructionism linked things; it worked—in the case of Martin's mobiles—between floor and ceiling; between the unit and the whole; between the individual and community; between autonomy and contingency. This is performed on a necessarily modest—non-formidable—scale. Martin's mobiles produce a set of finely negotiated relationships that start with the artist's de-personalised and de-individualised relationship with a process and its material outcome, before going on to "engage with the laws and the vagaries of the open world".[84] All of this found full expression in Ward 17 of Whittington Hospital.

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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 Lawrence Alloway, "The Development of the Mobile", *Art News and Review* 5, no. 18 (3 October 1953): 2.

2 The term "constructionism" is used in relation to the constructivist practices of a group of artists working in post-war Britain, but the significance of the term and its particularity can be overstated. In his statement in Lawrence Alloway's book *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954, 31–32), Kenneth Martin uses the word "constructionist", but also—apparently with some seemingly indiscriminate interchangeability—the words "concrete" and "constructive". Each term has its own meaning, connotation, and currency, but the point here is that a number of terms were being tried out and used rather inconsistently in the early 1950s. The language is perhaps best seen as itself exploratory rather than as signalling an already resolved identification.

3 The art historian Alastair Grieve mentions the project in his book *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2005), 136. It is also touched on by Celia Davies and Sarah Martin in their "Introduction" to the *Kenneth Martin & Mary Martin: Constructed Works* exhibition catalogue (London: Camden Arts Centre, 2007), 11.

4 Anthony Hill, "The Constructionist Idea and Architecture", *Ark, the Journal of the Royal College of Art*, no. 18 (1956): 24–29, and Kenneth Martin, "An Art of Environment", *Broadsheet* 2 (London, 1952), unpaginated. The title of Hill's article can be understood in relation to a text written by the Russian émigré constructivist Naum Gabo, "The Constructive Idea in Art", in *Circle—International Survey of Constructive Art*, eds. Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), 1–10. Gabo located his ideas in relation to art; Hill located constructionism in relation to architecture.

5 Scrapbooks made by Kenneth Martin (Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin) include cuttings from a number of unidentified local newspapers. Alloway, "The Development of the Mobile", 2. Robert Melville in *Architectural Review* (December 1953), seen as a cutting in the scrapbook. Anon., "Mobiles in Hospital: Therapeutic Value", *Times Educational Supplement* (2 October 1953), seen as a cutting in the scrapbook. E.E.P., "Mobile Abstracts: An Experiment in a Children's Ward", *Nursing Times* (14 November 1953), 1169, seen as a cutting in a scrapbook made by Kenneth Martin and held by the Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin.

6 British Pathé, "Mobiles" (1953), https://www.britishpathe.com/video/mobiles.

7 Melville in *Architectural Review*.

8 Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood: Children, Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Postwar England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 249.

9 Ben Highmore, *The Art of Brutalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 77.

10 Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 232.

11 Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 4.

12 Kozlovksy, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 4.

13 Kozlovksy, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 4.

14 Kozlovksy, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 6.

15 L.B.S., "Obituary Notices", *British Medical Journal* (27 April 1968): 247.

16 Kenneth Martin, "Mobiles", *Architectural Design* XXVIII, no. 101 (October 1958): 413.

17 Kozlovksy, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 7.

18 Kozlovsky (*The Architectures of Childhood*, 249) writes of a "disciplinary gaze" regularly being combined with "the definition of the subject as an autonomous agent".

19 British Pathé, "Mobiles".

20 Simon Yudkin, *All Our Children: A Book for Parents* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1956), 17.

21 Martin, "An Art of Environment".

22 E.E.P., "Mobile Abstracts: An Experiment in a Children's Ward", 1169.

23 Alloway, "The Development of the Mobile", 2.

24 Anon., "Mobiles in Hospital".

25 Simon Yudkin quoted in *Hampstead & Highgate* [*Express*?] (18 September 1953), seen as a cutting in a scrapbook made by Kenneth Martin and held by the Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin.

26 Simon Yudkin quoted in Philip Phillips, "When shadows fall the fairies come to life in the children's ward", unidentified publication, seen as a cutting in a scrapbook made by Kenneth Martin and held by the Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin.

27 Anon., "Mobiles in Hospital".

28 Kenneth Martin, in *This Is Tomorrow* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery), unpaginated.

29 Martin, "An Art of Environment".

30 Kenneth Martin, “On the Development of the Mobile” (unpublished, dated 1955), quoted in Andrew Forge, “On Kenneth Martin’s Writings”, *Kenneth Martin*, Vol. 2 (London: Tate Gallery, 1975), 9.

31 Martin, “On the Development of the Mobile”, quoted in Forge, “On Kenneth Martin’s Writings”, 9.

32 Carol Ann Reeves quoted in Irene Hanstatter, “New Art Kills Their Boredom” (1953), seen as a cutting in a scrapbook made by Kenneth Martin and held by the Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin.

33 “E.E.P.” may well have been Emily Elvira Primrose MacManus, a then recently retired matron who had worked at Guy’s Hospital, London.

34 E.E.P., “Mobile Abstracts”, 1169.

35 E.E.P., “Mobile Abstracts”, 1169.

36 Martin, “An Art of Environment”.

37 Bryan Robertson, *Piet Mondriaan 1872–1944* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1955), 3

38 Robertson, *Piet Mondriaan 1872–1944*, 3.

39 E.E.P., “Mobile Abstracts”, 1169.

40 Toni del Renzio, “First Principles and Last Hopes”, in *Typographica* 4, ed. Herbert Spencer (London: Lund Humphries, 1951), 18.

41 del Renzio, “First Principles and Last Hopes”, 15 and 18.

42 del Renzio, “First Principles and Last Hopes”, 18.

43 del Renzio, “First Principles and Last Hopes”, 19.

44 Lawrence Alloway, *Essays in Movement: Reliefs by Mary Martin, Mobiles by Kenneth Martin* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1960), unpaginated.

45 Martin, “An Art of Environment”.

46 Mary Martin, “Reflections”, in *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and* Aesthetics, ed. Anthony Hill (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 95–96.

47 Kenneth Martin, “The Mobile”, *Structure* 2, no. 2 (1960): 34.

48 Alastair Grieve details the development of Kenneth Martin’s work in *Constructed Abstract Art in England*, 135–50.

49 Alloway, *Essays in Movement*.

50 Alloway, *Essays in Movement*.

51 Kenneth Martin in Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 32.

52 Martin in Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 32.

53 Martin, “The Mobile”, 34.

54 Kenneth Martin, “On Construction”, in *The University of East Anglia Collection*, ed. Veronica Sekules (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1984), viii.

55 Kenneth Martin, “Scale and Change”, *Studio International* 179, no. 918 (January 1970): 16.

56 Kenneth Martin visited an exhibition of Alexander Calder’s work at Lefèvre Gallery, London in 1951. See Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England*, 215–18, for a discussion of the influence of Paul Klee’s work and ideas. On the limits of his historical knowledge, Martin wrote, “I am not a historian, not an onlooker but a participant. I came to abstract construction not through knowledge of or interest in constructivism but like some other artists through pictorial geometric composition, thus moving from copying the appearance of nature to pure invention. It was through association and discussion with a few others and the discovery of a literature that I received stimulation. Important stimuli came from the work itself” (Martin, “On Construction”, viii).

57 See, for example, Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974).

58 Martin, “An Art of Environment”.

59 Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England*, 139.

60 Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England*, 141.

61 Martin, “The Mobile”, 34, and Alloway, *Essays in Movement* (original emphasis).

62 Lawrence Alloway, *Statements: A Review of British Abstract Art in 1956* (London: ICA, 1957), unpaginated.

63 Alloway, *Statements*.

64 Alloway, *Statements*. It is interesting to note here that Kenneth Martin participated in the *Sculpture in the Home* exhibition series (1945–59) supported by the Arts Council and the Council of Industrial Design. The fourth exhibition, staged in 1958, included the large *Screw Mobile* first shown in the Whittington Hospital exhibition.

65 Martin, “Scale and Change”, 16.

66 Kenneth Martin, “Architecture, Machine and Mobile”, *Arts and Architecture* LXXIII (February 1956): 34.

67 Kenneth Martin, “On Architecture and Mobile”, *Architectural Design* XXVI, no. 1 (July 1956): 234.

68 Martin, “On the Development of the Mobile”, extract published in *Kenneth Martin*, Vol. 1 (London: Tate Gallery, 1975), 7.

69 Martin, “On the Development of the Mobile”, *Kenneth Martin*, Vol. 1, 7.

70 Kenneth Martin, “Kinetics” (1963), in *Kenneth Martin*, Vol. 1, 11.

71 Martin, “Architecture, Machine and Mobile”, 34.

72 Yve-Alain Bois, “The De Stijl Idea”, in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 103 (original emphasis).

73 Yve-Alain Bois, “The De Stijl Idea”, 103.

74 Martin, “Architecture, Machine and Mobile”, 34.

75 Martin in Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 32.

76 Martin, *This Is Tomorrow*.

77 John Weeks, “The Role of the Artist in Architecture” (1952). Unpublished text written as a draft of an article for *Broadsheet* 2.

78 Weeks was associated with the constructionist group from its earliest manifestations. In 1951, he contributed a text, “Mondrian and Mies van der Rohe”, to the group’s first *Broadsheet* publication (that featured Kenneth Martin’s text “Abstract Art”). In 1953, Weeks arranged the third of the weekend exhibitions in Adrian Heath’s studio; in 1954, he worked closely with the group on the *Artist versus Machine* exhibition at the Building Centre, London; in 1956, he worked with Kenneth Martin and Mary Martin (as well as Adrian Heath) at the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; in 1970, he designed the Arts Council’s touring exhibition of the Martins’ work. John Weeks’s own work was informed by constructionist ideas and there are particularly strong links with Mary Martin’s work (see Sam Gathercole, “Art and Construction in Britain in the 1950s”, *Art History*, Vol. 29, no. 5 (November 2006): 887–925 [1912–1917 in particular]). In 1957, Mary Martin produced a free-standing articulated wall relief called *Waterfall*, for Llewelyn-Davies and Weeks’s Nuffield House extension at Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast. Mary Martin’s work at Musgrave Park Hospital was a fully integrated, site-specific “expressive unit”. It was conceived in accordance with the architecture’s modular system and fabricated at the same time, and from the same materials, as the building.

79 Richard Llewelyn-Davies, “Deeper Knowledge: Better Design”, *The Architects’ Journal* (23 May 1957): 770 (emphasis in original). This article foregrounds the user in design and argues that mid-century modernism has misguidedly drifted from this towards a stylistic approach. The article opens with the statement: “Many architecturally distinguished buildings are a poor fit with the lives and needs of the people who use them”.

80 Llewelyn-Davies, “Deeper Knowledge: Better Design”, 770.

81 Llewelyn-Davies, “Deeper Knowledge: Better Design”, 772

82 Llewelyn-Davies, “Deeper Knowledge: Better Design”, 772.

83 See, Sam Gathercole, “The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy”, *British Art Studies*, Issue 18 (2020).

84 Andrew Forge, “Notes on the Mobiles of Kenneth Martin”, *Quadrum* 3 (1957): 98.

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