

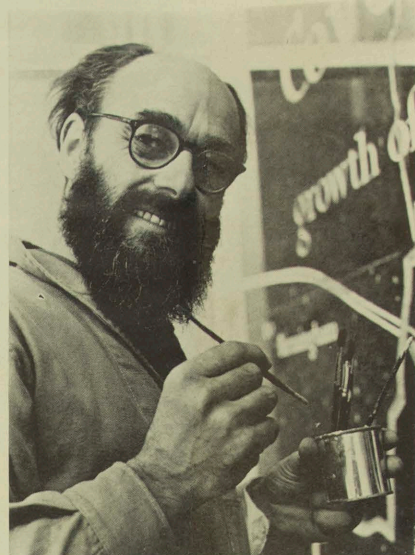
However much the concept of 'avant garde' has changed and its very existence challenged, we are still startled, from time to time at least, out of a complacent acceptance of novelty by the creations sculptors perhaps more than painters. Yet, in spite of the apparent chaos of individual experimenting today, this exhibition, which contains work of some of the pioneers of abstract art as well as its contemporary exponents, demonstrates how even its extreme creations are deeply rooted in the ideas and forms of those pioneers. Among these represented here, Malevitch, Arp, Gabo and Schwitters, all born within twelve years of each other into that marvellously inventive generation which dwarfs our own, pointed the way followed by our contemporaries.

The small sculpture by Arp, the organic growth of natural form flowing into bronze, alone seems strangely out of place among the other exhibits that are so essentially a part of the machine age. Pol Bury's work is the most closely related to it; the slow balls sliding over a plain surface and the cluster of sensitive antennae groping the air are like larvae exuded by some alien form of life. Among the surrounding kinetic and optical art, only the assemblages of Lygia Clark, the *Climbing Grubs* made from branches, metal ribbons and strips of tyres, the detritus of life, have any evocative associations. It is a curious paradox that the art which has developed from dada and Schwitters' *Merzbilder*, using the ready-made industrial product, should possess an emotional content that is quite absent from the constructions which are the artistic reflections of science and technology.

This impersonality was inherent in the work and ideas of Malevitch and in the constructivism of Gabo and Pevsner, whose Realist Manifesto of 1920 first evolved the aesthetics of the age of technology. Malevitch's dynamic little pencil drawing here exhibited might be the draft for an abstract construction, but his famous black square on a white ground of 1913 which he described himself as 'the experience of pure non-objectivity' was equally pregnant with the art of today. It was an act of artistic annihilation, the end and beginning of absolute painting. Takis's tele-magnetic constructions have fulfilled a similar function for sculpture; they are the annihilation of

material sculptural form and the creation of the invisible sculpture of movement. The electrical machine, the electromagnet and the ball swinging over it are an unfortunate necessity and ideally would not exist leaving only the absolute sculpture of pre movement, the pattern of the ball over the electromagnet. The sculpture of three nails on nylon threads held taut in space by the lines of force of a magnet is probably the barest statement of the idea of tension that has ever been made.

Withdrawal from this frontier of art and pure abstraction to the forms deriving from the ideas in the Realist Manifesto is also a return to a world of refined visual beauty, which Takis's *Signals* and early works possess but which seldom appears in the machine accessories of his latest ideas. Constructivism has succeeded more surely than any other modern movement in reflecting the machine age if only for the linear purity of its creations quite apart from its materials, and kinetic and spatial notions. The fluid lines of a recent linear construction by Gabo himself is the counterpart of an air-borne Caravelle or a Jaguar Mk. X in movement. It has been appropriately illustrated on the catalogue is the symbol of *Soundings Two*, for although movement is only implied in its intersecting planes and concentrated, centripetal tension, Gabo's first kinetic sculpture dates back to 1920. The clashing, contrapuntal rhythms of Soto's huge vibrating mural, Cruz-Diezs screen in reds, ochres and vermilion, which turn to deep blues as the observer moves in front of it, Asis' vibrant pink board fixed with sixteen quivering hair-springs that swing into a circular dance motion with their own shadows, are the joyous creations of light, movement and colour. It is difficult to imagine living with a great many of these restless, disturbing optical and kinetic works, especially the electrically driven movement of a Bury or a Takis; but, however quiet and contemplative a painting or sculpture in one's sitting room or bedroom may be, even a cold, silent relief by Canargo, which is a still point in the turning world of *Signals*' gallery, it is a live thing that can never be ignored but elicits some emotional response whenever the eye lights on it, and the time may soon come when Takis's swinging balls will be an acceptable part of our everyday environment.



John Skelton

photograph by Brian Shuel

Born in 1923 in Glasgow of English parents, John Skelton was educated at Norwich Cathedral Choir School and Bablake School, Coventry. He spent one year at Coventry School of Art studying drawing, sculpture and architecture after which he was apprenticed to his uncle, Eric Gill, for a few months. During the War Skelton was five years in India, Burma and Siam as an artillery officer. When the War ended he worked for three years in a mason's yard before setting up his own workshop in Sussex in 1950. His present workshop and home is at Streat in Sussex, behind the Downs near Ditchling. The first major exhibition of his work was in Chichester and a second is now on show at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry. John Skelton is married and has two children.

*You were apprenticed to Gill and, when we last talked about two years ago, you said you saw art as a part of everyday life, an essential element in everybody's experience. You do a lot of very fine letter cutting and recently you completed that huge incised map on Swedish granite for Sainsbury's in Coventry. But, since we met in 1963, you have been doing much more work that has no already existing architectural home - the sculptural equivalent of easel painting. Does this represent a change in attitude? Are you now moving away from your background education as a craftsman? How do you view the relationship between art and craftsmanship?*

Certainly my attitude has changed. But in fact, I started forsaking my early craftsman's training with a feeling of guilt. Like a naughty boy who never had much pocket money being given ten bob and feeling guilty at spending it. Now it's so exciting I can't stop. I am doing practically everything that Gill said don't do. For instance the use of machines - this cannot be a substitute for handwork, but it can give you an entirely different approach, an approach which I have come to feel has a place and which one should accept. One should find out what the machine wants to do and make capital out of it. For example my *Salome* was entirely done by machine. I started off with a fairly traditional conception of this based on a drawing I did some time ago. While I was at work on it I read Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and this, in

Lygia Clark *Climbing Grub* 1965 Metal and branch of tree *Signals*

