

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

It has sometimes been said that when Tatlin completed his *Model for a Monument to the Third International* it was carried through the streets by ox cart. The vaunting ambition of the proposal, the future it espoused and the belief in the transforming power of the social situation which caused it are poignantly contrasted with the lumbering transport of pre-Revolutionary Russia. The collapse of the Communist enterprise there and elsewhere, not before too long one might say, has seemed to be the final curtain call of that future, although Tatlin's star had long since fallen, hope abandoned. There is another story that concerns Tatlin. Some few years before, in 1914, the ex-sailor made his way to Paris and, hanging about in Picasso's studio saw the reliefs he was then making. These odd bits of wood, paper, cloth, metal, material and paint formed the seed which, carried back to Russia, grew first into the Counter Reliefs and, finally, into the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*. It's slightly paradoxical, though that is the way of these things, that the 'non-objective world' should have grown, in part, from Picasso's bits of tat. At the time the appearance of the reliefs must have been profoundly shocking, saturated as they are with their mundanity. It's a long step from those accumulations to Nicholson's 1935 *white relief* which is almost, but not quite, immaterial, as if cut from some ethereal space. Tatlin returned to Russia, assembling his first Counter Reliefs in somewhat the same fashion as Picasso, yet the difference is profound. Crudely, where one might say Picasso played with the space of representation, delighting in tripping between object and image, Tatlin began to see space itself as a material. The first Counter Reliefs seem to splay an object out. Shape, shine, transparency, volume, texture and colour gather across their surfaces like a great question. Then, in the Corner Reliefs, awkwardly strung across or pushing out from the physical place in a room where planes meet, a balance is struck. Space and material substance are covalent (not equivalent since neither replaces the other). Rodin's great insight about sculpture being the art of the 'bump and the hollow' is given a surprising twist. If 'not quite' immaterial is the way to describe Nicholson's relief, it's that 'not quite' which makes the link with Tatlin. The sense of the cut smoothed and sanded hardboard lurks within our perception and is never displaced by the precise, deceptively gentle but insistent modulations forward and backwards over the surface.

'We deny volume as an expression of space' Gabo and Pevsner had written in their Realistic Manifesto of 1920 – in part a blast against Tatlin and Malevitch. One imagines the Hampstead scene slightly later with serious and

modern minded men and women trying to visualise a world of planes in the absence of volume, of space that was defined yet uncontained. The paradigm for this is Gabo's vibrating column in the Tate Gallery, as radical as a Corner Relief. The later Gabos, such as the one in this exhibition, seem to step back a little, to relax a bit. Seeing the *Construction in Space with Rose Marble Carving* the eye seems to swim, rolling gently, dolphinlike around and in and out of the pierced stone, the body stilled, feeling a soft wash of spatial drifting.

Whilst Gabo's work has a certain magisterial authority, Barbara Hepworth's work of the 1930s reaches similar places, but more simply. There is an earlier work than those shown here which always catches me by surprise. Really it's just four marble pebbles on a plate. 'Look' one can almost hear it saying and it's impossible to know whether you look at the pebbles or between them. Of course a certain amount of this is a trick of the light, of the way marble responds to light. Not entirely, by a long way. *Conoid, Sphere and Hollow II* is a small work, a foot in each dimension. The three parts are all of the same white marble and all seem to be more or less equal. The named third part 'Hollow' is a negative though, and it is this negative part which supports, shelters and sustains the two positive volumes, in and out, like breathing. Arp's slithery shapes have always been a bit oddball. Yet in a random universe you'd probably end up with something more like Arp and less like Gabo. We are supposed to believe that, were it truly random then neither is more likely. The 1920s and 1930s saw much playing around with chance and randomness, irrupting Dada evenings, Duchamp's standard stoppages etc are all 'Spaniards in the works' of rationality. There is a certain irony in the title of Jean Arp's work in this exhibition, *Constellation According to the Laws of Chance*, chance and law seeming to sit on opposite fences and the laws of chance being the fool's gold of most gambling systems. Like Arp's 1931 *One Large Two Small*, absence of reason is taken as reason and we are distracted in our search for order. Or at least brought back to the slithery shapes in front of us.

I can imagine Henry Moore talking to Jean Arp, but I can't imagine him in that Hampstead room, visualising. I know no works by Henry Moore that do not come from a direct experience of a body, particularly throughout the 20s and 30s. If one were ever to describe a sculpture by Henry Moore with the words 'like breathing' one would mean 'like feeling ones chest rise and fall'. The string in his *Stringed Relief* does not so much describe a curved plane as draw parts together like sinew. However the absence of anatomy remains quite astonishing in the works which Henry Moore, in Unit One, made when he was closest to the Constructivist dialogue - the *Reclining Figure* like a set of bathroom scales from 1936 for example or the *Head* in green serpentine shown

here. There is an astounding degree of objectification of the body in these works, an absence of interior. Any holes in the head are for looking, eating, hearing, smelling. There is no psychology. Although based on a body, the materiality of this view is not so far from Tatlin.