

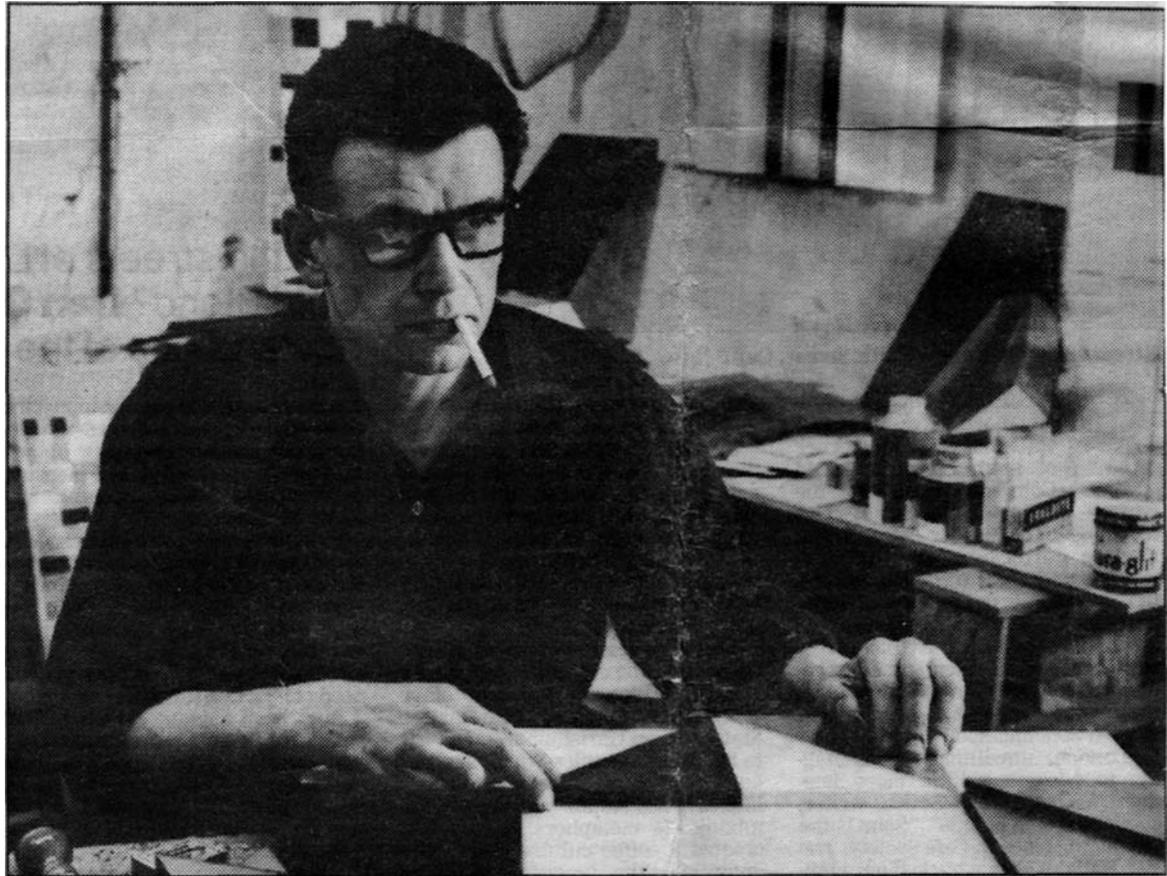
Shape of things to come

John Ernest

JOHN ERNEST, the constructionist artist and teacher who has died aged 72, was a leading exponent of the abstract geometric relief. He was born in Philadelphia and attended two schools of industrial art in the US. Yet many of the building blocks of his later stance were the result of the post-war years he spent in Sweden, France and London where he settled permanently in 1951. He was particularly interested in the work of Picasso, and frequently alluded to the phases of cubism as being "the smoothest sequence of development from figuration to the abstract form".

In 1952, partly as a means of staying in England, he enrolled at St Martin's School of Art, and came into contact with Victor Pasmore. Soon after he produced his first constructed relief. His first exhibition of constructed work was in the Artist vs Machine show in 1954 and from then he worked exclusively in the constructionist idiom, participating in the This Is Tomorrow exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1956, and the International Union of Architects Congress in 1961.

Within this period (1952-61) the "aesthetic" of the British constructionist artists was forming. It had many ingredients, but one fundamental was the desire to approach the problems of visual expression formally, and to use the appropriate new materials to do it. These ideas raised issues about the nature of the "relief" and the handling of space. Although never finding writing easy, Ernest was nevertheless the movement's most lucid and articu-



John Ernest... a craftsman without peer and a poker player in the top league

late apologist through articles in the Dutch magazine *Structure*, as well as his article *Constructivism and Content* (*Studio International*, April 1966). There he wrote:

"The validity of Constructivist content has not come from the fact that it peopled its world with abstract objects, or even ideas, but rather that it is something embodied in an act of understanding. It demands from the spectator that he discover new modes of conceptual activity to construct his experience; that he perform an act in itself creative."

Ernest's reliefs, better known in art circles than to the general public, are nevertheless in major public and private collections around the world. His constructed "mosaic" reliefs, despite their initial reticence, are highly charged and sophisticated works, effortlessly making visible the invisible machin-

ery of mathematics; transforming mere symmetry into dynamic equipoise. He was also a craftsman without peer; no problem of fabrication or process was left alone until it finally surrendered to his ingenuity.

His workshop resembled more a laboratory than the conventional idea of an artist's studio, and his talents included not only the production of major scientific models such as the tobacco mosaic virus for the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, the poliomyelitis virus in the Science Museum, but also his collaboration with the Nobel chemist John Kendrew, to determine the behaviour of a strand of nucleic acid within a sphere of spheres.

Ernest taught for almost 30 years, at the Regent Street Polytechnic, Corsham Court and Chelsea School of Art, as well as being a tutorial visitor to Reading University and the Slade School. As a teacher he

was demanding and to dispute any matter with him was to take one's life in one's hands. However he had an unflinching sense of fairness and never spoke down to students.

Ernest was a serious chess player, and played poker in the top league with opponents such as Telly Savalas and Stirling Moss. He was a friend of James Baldwin and his contacts in science bring forth a cascade of famous names. A "practising" atheist, he was a person of great wit, warmth, generosity and hope.

He is survived by his first wife Elna Adlebert whom he married in 1943, son Paul, daughter Susan, and by his second wife Fenella Crichton and daughter Charlotte.

Terry Pope

John Ernest, born May 6, 1922; died July 21, 1994

JOHN ERNEST (1922-1994)

TERRY POPE

TERRY POPE is a constructionist artist and inventor who teaches and does research at Reading University, England. His works are represented in National Art and National Science Collections.

John Ernest, constructionist artist and teacher, was a leading exponent of the abstract constructed relief. He was born in Philadelphia, May 6, 1922. He left the U.S.A. in 1946 to live first in Sweden, then in France in 1949, and in 1951 moved to London.

Although he attended two schools of industrial design in the U.S.A. many of the fundamental building blocks of his stance in later years were the result of this period in Europe. Particularly interested in the work of Picasso, he produced paintings during this time in France and frequently alluded to the phases of Cubism as being "the smoothest sequence of development from figuration to the abstract form."

In 1952, partly as a means of staying in England, he enrolled as a student at St. Martin's School of Art. It was during this next year that he made contact with Victor Pasmore and soon after produced his first constructed relief. His first exhibition of constructed work was in the "Artist vs Machine" show in 1954 at The Building Centre London, and from this time he worked exclusively in the constructionist idiom. By now he was in touch with Kenneth and Mary Martin, as well as Anthony Hill, and participated in the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1956 and the equally important International Union of Architects' Congress in 1961.

Within this period 1952-61 the aesthetic of the British constructionist artists was forming. It has of course many ingredients, but regardless of whether the work was motivated by mathematical ideas such as group or graph theory, one-sided surfaces, mapping, or matters relating to perception, one thing was fundamental to them all and that was the desire to approach the problems of visual expression formally and to use the appropriate new materials and processes to do it. These ideas raised issues about the nature of the "relief" and the handling of space, both being addressed in the powerful writings of Charles Biederman, with whom all the artists in this group corresponded at different times. But there was also considerable interest in D'Arcy Thompson's book *Growth and Form* with its mathematical analysis of biological systems. The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, cooperated in this debate by issuing "Statements" pamphlets which detail these issues, with contributions from artists of many backgrounds and disciplines.

Although not easily satisfied with his own writing, Ernest was nevertheless the movement's most lucid and articulate apologist through articles in the Dutch magazine *Structure* where his articles "Symmetry" (*Structure* Series 3 No. 1 1960) and "Some Thoughts on Mathematics" (*Structure* Series 3 No. 2 1961) went a long way to bring out into the open the complicated process of invention by which artists translate subjective experiences into a work of art. In "Constructivism and Content" (*Studio International* April 1966) he wrote:

The validity of Constructivist Content has not come from the fact that it peopled its world with abstract objects, or even ideas, but rather that it is some-

thing embodied in an act of understanding. It demands from the spectator that he discover new modes of conceptual activity to construct his experience; that he performs an act in itself creative.

His reliefs, better known in art circles than to the general public, are nevertheless in major public and private collections around the world. His constructed "Mosaic" reliefs using elements in muted colors and atmospheric aluminium operate an interpenetration of planes in a very tight conceptual domain. Despite their initial reticence these are highly charged and sophisticated works, effortlessly making visible the invisible machinery of mathematics; transforming mere symmetry into dynamic equipoise. This accumulating impact is due in no small part to the totally impersonal surface quality, intentionally concealing any hint of his foibles as a craftsman. Nevertheless he described even the most faultless of his works as "only as bad as I can bear them."

His workshop resembled more a laboratory than the conventional idea of an artist's studio and his talents included not only the production of major scientific models such as the tobacco mosaic virus for the 1958 World Fair in Brussels and the poliomyelitis virus in the Science Museum, London, but also his collaboration with the Nobel chemist John Kendrew to determine whether a sphere of molecules imposed any symmetry upon a strand of nucleic acid they contained. Ernest showed they did not.

It is our loss that his works are so few in number and, considering the early hopes and achievements, it is to be regretted that he never received a public commission to work on an environmental scale — a clear opportunity offered by his elegant "Tower" series.

Ernest taught in art schools for almost 30 years, at the Regent Street Poly, Corsham Court (Bath Academy) and Chelsea School of Art, as well as being a tutorial visitor to Reading University and the Slade School. Without doubt, his most sustained and effective teaching took place at Corsham Court where he ran Construction Studio B16 with Malcom Hughes, and later at Chelsea School of Painting where he taught with Anthony Hill. As a teacher he was demanding, but it was always clear that the demand came from the nature of the activity rather than being imposed by him. While to dispute any matter with him was to take one's life into one's hands, he had an unfailing sense of fairness and never spoke down to students. His critical appreciations of their works zigged and zagged through many different disciplines with such thoroughness as to convince the students they had been x-rayed.

Privately he had irresistible charm, a lightning wit, and an irrepressible sense of humour. He was a serious chess player; and a poker player in the top league with opponents such as Telly Savalas, Lucas Heller, and Stirling Moss. He was a friend of James (Jimmy) Baldwin and his contacts in science bring forth a cascade of famous names. A "practising" atheist, he was a person of great warmth and generosity and hope.

John Ernest died in Exeter, Devon, England, July 21, 1994. He is survived by his first wife, Elna Adelbert, whom he married in 1943, son Paul, daughter Susan, and by his second wife Fenella Crichton and their daughter Charlotte. □