

Kenneth Martin

Construction

1972

NewArtCentre.



Kenneth Martin, *Construction*, at New Art Centre,
Roche Court, East Winterslow, Salisbury, January 2022

Kenneth Martin's *Construction* 1972

Dr Susan Tebby

In the early years of the twentieth century art in the public realm had been mainly figurative. After the second world war, however, there was a growing appetite for abstract sculpture, sculpture that had additional meaning or reference to something outside of itself, that was more related to the site in which it was to be located and the materials from which it was made, instead of a work that depicted someone or something, and was generally a sculpture from the studio moved into an external location or simply the enlargement of a studio work or maquette.

In these post-war years, The Arts Council of Great Britain had a significant role to play in the new arena of public art, not least through its



Construction on the Press Day for the work's installation:
Jeremy Rees stands to the right
Unknown photographer © The Estate of Kenneth Martin

sponsorship of the Festival of Britain in 1951, where abstract sculpture came to the fore. This was followed by exhibitions such as *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956, which presented a number of groups of 'new-wave' artists and architects, showing what was possible with an entirely different approach to working in a public environment.¹ Their collaborative, abstract, geometric work demonstrated how such approaches could become site-specific, respond to external stimuli and interact accordingly. Other exhibitions followed, perhaps one of the most influential being Bryan Robertson's *New Generation, Sculpture* in 1965, also at the Whitechapel. Sculpture now had an entirely different focus and outlook, with its new materials and purpose and above all, audiences.



William Turnbull next to *Angle*, 1972 his commission for the City Sculpture Project, installed outside Bluecoat Chambers, Liverpool, BRO-43371-Dept-Exh-3-1-10-012, © Estate of William Turnbull



Alternate view of *Construction*, looking towards an older part of the city, 1972. Photograph by Susan Tebby © The Estate of Kenneth Martin / Susan Tebby

City Sculpture Project: The Beginning, 1971

On 15th April 1971 the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation – working in conjunction with the Arts Council – issued a Press Release to announce a new public art programme in Britain. 24 artists, from an initial list of 240, were to be invited to submit proposals for artworks in eight major cities. A panel was convened – comprising Jeremy Rees, organiser of the enterprise; Phillip King the well-known sculptor; and Stewart Mason, Director of Leicestershire Education Committee and notable contributor to the Whitechapel Art Gallery programme of events – to select sixteen artists from the submissions in relation to their chosen cities: Birmingham, Cambridge, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle, Plymouth, Sheffield and Southampton.²

The emphasis was on a new approach to siting artworks by younger artists outside London (where there were already many public sculptures). One of the surprising facts about the selection is that Kenneth Martin

was almost a generation older than the other ‘senior’ sculptors chosen, such as Bernard Schottlander, William Turnbull and William Tucker and nearly two generations older than the rest, who were born around 1940 and who were far less known.

Yet Martin – unlike, perhaps, Moore or Hepworth - was very much part of the contemporary art milieu at that moment in time. He and his wife Mary (who had sadly died in October 1969) were showing their work in the Arts Council UK Tour between May 1970 and May 1971, which Jeremy Rees would have seen in Bristol City Art Gallery in April and which was almost certainly seen by Stewart Mason and Phillip King at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in May. And 1970 was also the year of the Hayward Gallery’s *Kinetics: An International Survey of Kinetic Art*, in which Martin had shown his *Linkage* – a work almost 10 metres across, hanging from the ceiling. Size and location clearly did not daunt Martin.

From the outset, Martin wanted Sheffield as his city – the city of his birth. And he decided to work with steel, as steel was synonymous with Sheffield, and Martin believed that to be important for the *City Sculpture Project*. In the months that followed he sought advice, organising visits to Sheffield principally to select a site that suited his likely proposal, approaching several recommended steel manufacturers in Sheffield. He began drawing possibilities, working on a number of similar themes in which he was currently interested because they offered potential and adaptation once the definite site had been chosen, developing several maquettes of differing sizes.³ He sent for photographs and site plans of locations in Sheffield, but, having visited the square in the city centre – one of the sites offered – he felt that that was already well endowed with its present occupants and life, and that it would be presumptuous to add a sculpture.⁴

After a second visit to Sheffield, Martin eventually chose a site - Arundel Gate, Sheffield - where there were a number of approaches: walkways, elevated by-pass, underpass, road and pathway. Close to the new Polytechnic was a small green with a tree in front of a large white wall, while on the far side were older, traditional shops and houses gradually sloping away from the green. Seats offered time to sit and observe. There was a quietness as well as a busyness about the site, offering a time to contemplate as well as to observe a sculpture while on the move, on foot or by vehicle.

On 24th January 1972 Martin received approval to proceed and Thomas Ward Ltd., Sheffield steel fabricators, began manufacturing *Construction*. Meanwhile, Rees was requesting details and submissions for the exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, that was to run concurrently with the installation of the sculptures. The exhibition was intended to travel round to each city with a broadsheet and full

catalogue of information which each sculptor now had to contribute a written statement about their submission.⁵ There are a number of sheets of paper in the Martin Estate with possible statements, part-statements, phrases and so on, written as their forms of expression and significant matters gradually came to him. The final statement offers insight into Martin's processes of thought and his concern for the 'man/woman (or child – the words are supremely simple and clear for all) in the street' that he/she should understand his aims:

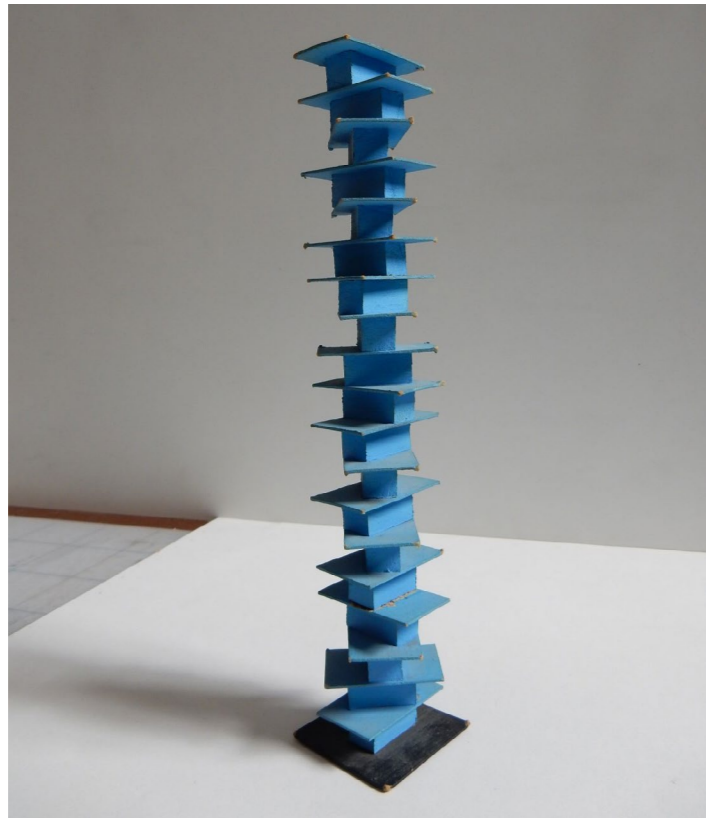
“What is the function of a city sculpture? To appeal to the multitude and/or to the individual. To express the multitude and/or the individual. In this project the artist was able to go in his own direction within the limits that there was no public demand for his work, no event or person which it was required to celebrate and that there were limited resources. The artist could work from the tentative towards the concrete, from the confused towards something definite, to discover his own results which would include the participation of a site and people.

It was first necessary to find a sympathetic site. After exploration I found this place, by Arundel Gate and the Polytechnic, whose attributes I gradually came to realise. While it is within the city centre it is less crowded and less formal than the more obvious sites, also there is character to the movement around it. Traffic goes along the elevated motorway beside it. Pedestrians come from the subway under the motorway or walk beside it. People sit on the seats by the wall of the Polytechnic. A road and paths go down the hill to the south. For this place I have designed a work of art, a vertical progressive rhythm composed of a series of identical distances and a chosen variety of directions.

While it was being erected I was asked by an onlooker what it was. I said painted welded steel and then prompted by his look of dissatisfaction began to explain the work to him, to tell him that it was a permutation of an order of rotations.



Susan Tebby photographing *Construction* installed at Arundel Gate, Sheffield in 1972, Arnolfini Archive at Bristol Record Office
© [BRO 43371-Dept-Exh-3-1-13-012]



Kenneth Martin, *Sheffield V 1971* [maquette], painted wood and cardboard, 26.7 x 5.1 x 5.1 cm Photograph by Susan Tebby / Collection: Leeds City Art Gallery / image courtesy of the Estate of Kenneth Martin

He could see the identical nature of the two elements used throughout. I tried to explain how the proportions of the plate were derived from those of the box which was a double cube. The alignment of the box with the plate above it was always the same and these formed the unit. Each unit was positioned on the one beneath in one of three directions diagonal and crosswise and it was these that had been permutated.

I went on to say that as an invention it existed in its own right. It was a column of rhythm and thus had a correspondence with our own character and rhythm and that we might appreciate its effect on our senses and gain pleasure. It had been designed for the site, high enough to be seen from the road, its vertical progression set against the various levels and movements around it. Its blue painted facets took on the variety of the light and changed with it like everything around. It became a centre for the place and gave it a change of character.”

Kenneth Martin

Statement for the accompanying *Studio International Special Issue*, published 1972

Onward Journey

All the sculptures for the City Sculpture Project were intended to remain at their sites for six months, with hopes that each would be acquired by the local authority or city for which they had been designed. In this way more people would come to see and experience what was possible in terms of sculpture in the open air and realise how the presence of such sculptures could enrich a place.⁶ In turn this would promote more opportunities for further work, enhancing spaces, giving them focus and significance that they otherwise might not have. Some of the sculptures were not appreciated – indeed some had to be removed. But Martin’s *Construction* – and that of Bernard Schottlander also in Sheffield (and made in steel) - was well regarded. Indeed, the Polytechnic intended to purchase Martin’s *Construction* (papers in the Martin Estate). At the last minute though, the transaction did not take place. Fortunately, however, discussions were progressing with the Commonwealth Institute, close to Holland Park in London, and the Arts Council, and *Construction* was installed at the front of their new building the following year, 1973. *Construction* suited the modern architecture and was of the right scale in a prominent location.

In 1977 the Commonwealth Institute loaned *Construction* to Battersea Park for the Queen’s Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary British Sculpture, from June to September. This was the first time that *Construction* had been exhibited within a landscaped setting, looking very much as if it had been designed for such a location. The reflection of the movement of trees and vegetation around the blue column flickered on the surfaces of the gloss painted steel making it seem alive whilst at the same time preserving a stillness. Again, the scale was perfect: the six-metre column held its own with appropriate trees. The Silver Jubilee catalogue photograph of *Construction* in Sheffield against the elevated motorway, classical buildings and subways was in complete

contrast to the park setting of Battersea, yet both sites were in accord with the sculpture, and the sculpture within man-made or natural settings. *Construction* was at one in either location. At the same time, in order to broaden the presence of sculpture to a wider public, a contemporaneous exhibition, *In Microcosm*, was held at the Redfern Gallery, Cork Street, from June to July of 1977. A new maquette of *Construction* was made specially for the occasion, the first maquette having travelled around offices and steel works was by now in need of restoration. Additionally, the first maquette had been painted a different blue (gouache) from the Crown China Blue (gloss polyurethane) which finally coated *Construction*. The second maquette now matched its master for colour.

The sculpture itself was taken back to the Commonwealth Institute where it remained for a number of years until building developments at that site necessitated its removal. The sculpture spent most of the 1980s in the landscaped gardens of Sutton Manor, at Sutton Scotney in Hampshire. In 1988, the sculpture park closed and *Construction*, along with many of the sculptures, was moved to Southampton where it was carefully packed and protected in a warehouse in the Shamrock Quay area. A six-metre-tall sculpture is not an easy object to place immediately in public, however great the desire to do so.

Life Continues

In the final years of the twentieth century, curiosity regarding the works from Sutton Manor was aroused. Southampton Public Arts was a thriving and important organisation at this time, dedicated to placing artworks around the city for the benefit of all. Following negotiations with its then owner/collector and other bodies, Martin's *Construction* was loaned to the City and placed on Millbank Street, an area near the docks, with water in the vicinity – a completely new kind of environment. This was an industrial area, built up, busy in a way that had more affinity with

Construction in Battersea Park, 1977
for the Silver Jubilee Exhibition of
Contemporary British Sculpture
Photograph © Susan Tebby / image
courtesy Susan Tebby Archives



Sheffield city centre: a thoroughfare. One might say that public access at that time had never been made so accessible for this work. The sculpture was included in Southampton's first Public Art publication in 2001, along with 46 other contemporary artworks, with others about to be located. Southampton was clearly the city where public art was thriving and appreciated. In 2004, developments in Millbank Street necessitated the return of *Construction* to the warehouse.

Sculpture in waiting but not for long

We have almost come to expect that a saviour or situation would be waiting in the wings to relocate *Construction* to its rightful place in an outdoor setting. And so it was that in 2007, *Construction* was installed once again in a landscape – this time at Roche Court. The sculpture did not stay at Roche for long, however, as it was acquired by an important private collector in California. *Construction* looked as much 'at home' and settled in the dry, rocky landscape as it had anywhere else. Or perhaps one should say 'everywhere' else. This sculpture has the remarkable capacity and quality to look as though it had meant to be wherever it was, whether landscape, cityscape, industrial or urban; a busy place or quiet.

Homecoming

Meanwhile, in 2015, the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds re-ignited interest in the sculpture and events of the *City Sculpture Project 1972*. Dr Jon Wood co-ordinated a considerable research programme, searching for lost sculptures and documents and any reminders (and remainders) of what had occurred at that time, who was involved and how it had happened. And perhaps most importantly: *What is its legacy?* The result was/is publication *No.76: City Sculpture Projects 1972*, published by the HMI, 2016, with an accompanying exhibition at the HMI in Leeds, of



Kenneth Martin, *Construction*, c.2010
Photograph by Giovanni Ricci-Novara

maquettes, drawings, ephemera and other items from that national event. There was also a recording on *Front Row*, BBC radio 4, December 2016, of interviews with some artists who were there in 1972, four symposia and other related events in 2017. At the same time from December 2015, interest was shown in a different way by English Heritage (now Historic England), who mounted a provocative exhibition at Somerset House in London in 2016, asking “*Where have our Sculptures Gone?*” referring to the sculptures of the City Project (amongst others). Kenneth Martin’s *Construction* was specifically mentioned as ‘missing’, whose loss was apparently much lamented by Sheffield inhabitants. Perhaps if their researchers and compilers had visited Leeds, they might have found some answers.

The arrival back in the UK of Kenneth Martin’s *Construction*, made for the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation *City Sculpture Project* in 1972, is heralded with much excitement and pleasure. To see this tall, distinguished, elegant work installed in the landscaped setting of Roche Court is to be able to reinvestigate and re-appraise its characteristics and surprising intricacies that so delighted previous viewers and connoisseurs during its prior public exhibitions. Sited in a peaceful English landscape among other notable sculptures and artworks, *Construction* continues to inspire, delight and uplift new generations of visitors.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Kenneth and Mary Martin together with John Weeks, the architect, were one of 12 groups of artists, designers, architects and others who collaborated on specific environmental projects. *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, August 9 – September 9, 1956.
- 2 14 artists were chosen at the beginning of the project. Estate of Kenneth Martin Archives.
- 3 At least two sheets of sketches known; three scale drawings and projections with engineer’s requirements known; one finished large drawing, Estate Collection. Four initial maquettes; one final maquette, 1971, in Leeds City Art Gallery Collection; one subsequent maquette for *In Microcosm*, Redfern Gallery, 1977, in the Estate Collection.
- 4 For example see: Review in *The Times*, September 1972, *More than a monument in the piazza*, Guy Brett, art critic.
- 5 *City Sculpture Project 1972* Broadsheet was a six-fold, double sided 80cm long collection of artists’ photographs of their submission, curriculum vitae, and a history of art in public, both historical and contemporary. *The Special Issue of Studio International in Collaboration with the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation City Sculpture Project, 1972*, effectively a second catalogue, contained artists’ statements, colour and black and white photographs of installations. Issue: July-August 1972.
- 6 See papers in the Kenneth Martin Estate which contain details of the proposed re-siting of *Construction*.

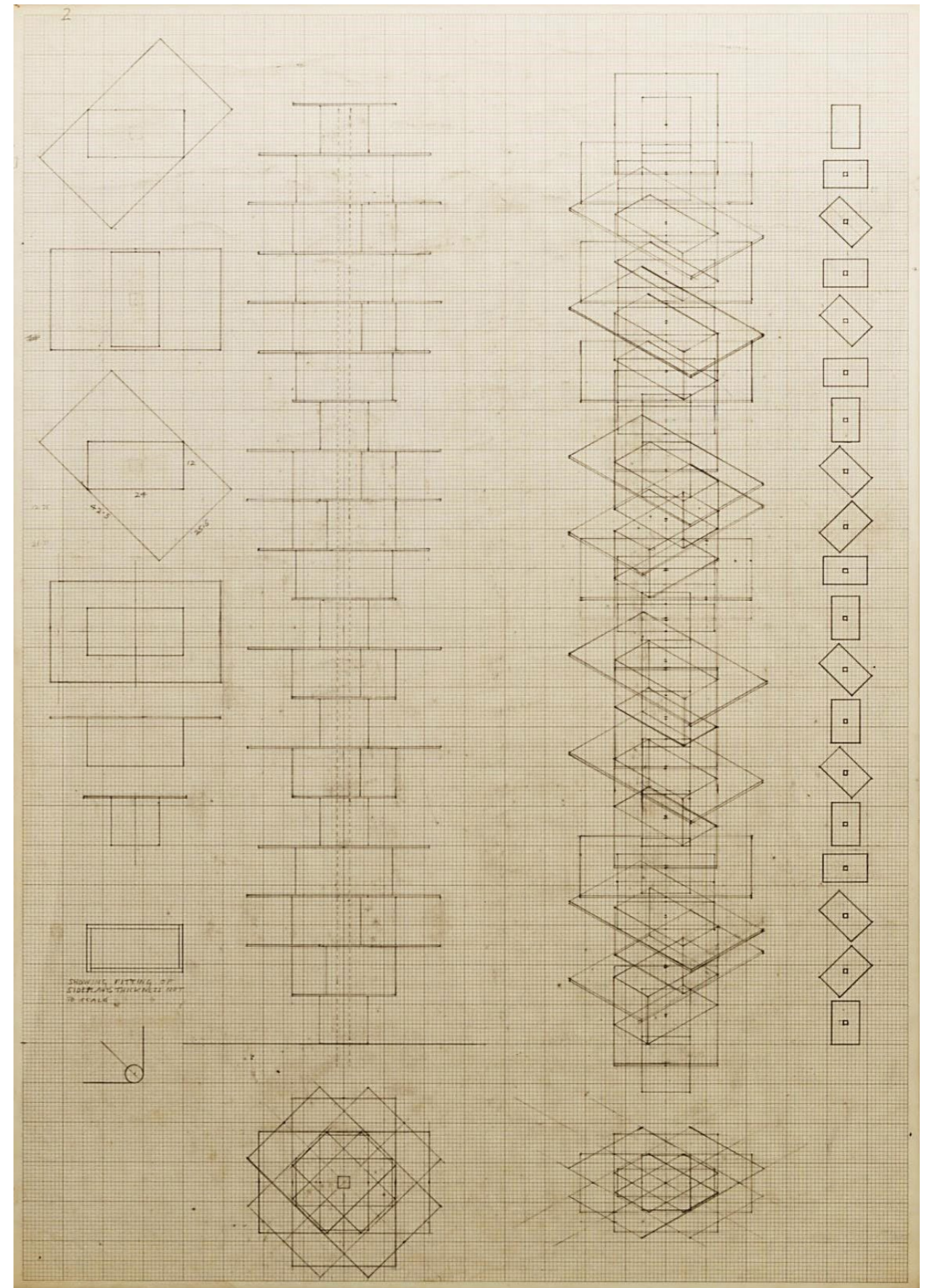
Mathematical Process

The manner in which the units (box and plate) were ordered is according to the numerical sequences of what is known as a pendulum permutation. Two sheets of graph paper in the Martin Estate show the variations Martin drew, with a pendulum permutation (PP) of 4 on the first sheet, and one of PP3 on the second sheet. There are several crossings out and re-numberings as possibilities are explored in relation to box and plate stacked up one above the other from the ground. The height of the column is determined by the permutation being carried out six times, with the first number in each row being the deciding position of box and plate.

Whilst these rules are clear, referencing them to the clusters of numbers on the two sheets is not so easy. The numerical references begin at the base and are clearly from PP3:

1 2 3, 2 3 1, the next set are written: 3 1 2, 3 2 1, and the third set: 2 1 3, 1 2 3.
A nineteenth box and plate of number 1 repeated closes the sequences.

Dr Susan Tebby



Completed drawing for *Construction* © Photograph by Susan Tebby /
The Estate of Kenneth Martin / image courtesy of Paul Martin

Kenneth Martin 1905 - 1984

Construction 1972

Painted iron and steel

5.9 m high

Provenance:

- 1972 Commissioned by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation for the City Sculpture Project, Sheffield
1973 Commonwealth Institute, London
1983 Waddington Galleries, London
1984 Private collection, UK
2007 New Art Centre, Salisbury, UK
Private collection, California, USA, acquired from the above by present owner
2022 New Art Centre, Salisbury, UK

Exhibitions:

- 1972 Arundel Gate, Sheffield, *City Sculpture Project*,
March – November
1973 Commonwealth Institute, London, permanent exhibition
1977 Battersea Park, London, *A Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary British Sculpture*, 2nd June – 4th September 1977,
Exhibit 31 [illustrated in catalogue]
1984 Sutton Manor Arts Centre, Hampshire, UK, *Sutton Manor: Permanent Exhibition XXth Century Sculpture* [illustrated in catalogue]
1998 Millbank Street, Southampton, UK, 1998 - 2004
2016 Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK, *City Sculpture Projects 1972*, 24th November – 19th February 2017 [Maquette and drawing]

Literature:

- Kenneth Martin*, exhibition catalogue, The Tate Gallery, London 1975, 14th May – 29th June 1975, p.120-1, fig.119 [illustrated]
Kenneth Martin, exhibition catalogue, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA 1979, p.14 [illustrated]
Walter J. Strachan et. al, *Sutton Manor: Permanent Exhibition XXth Century Sculpture*, Fondation Herbage/ Sutton Manor Arts Centre 1984, p.21,31,94-5 [illustrated]
Walter J. Strachan, *Open Air Sculpture in Britain: A Comprehensive Guide*, A. Zwemmer Ltd/ The Tate Gallery, London 1984, p.79-80, fig.145 [illustrated]
Jon Wood, Lisa Le Feuvre (ed.), *City Sculpture Projects 1972: Essays on Sculpture*, Henry Moore Institute 2016, p.26-9,41, fig.17-8 [illustrated]

Biography

Kenneth Martin 1905 - 1984

Kenneth Martin was an English painter and sculptor, a notable leading figure in the revival of Constructivism. Born in Sheffield, he studied at the Sheffield School of Art through the 1920s, and then at the Royal College of Art from 1929 until 1932. Martin's career is characterised by an incessant experimentation with the concepts of order, permutation and chance, elements that are all apparent in the abstract arrangement of the nineteen blocks and plates that *Construction* is built from. During his lifetime, Martin had key solo exhibitions at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven in 1979, and a significant retrospective at the Tate Gallery, 1975.

Kenneth Martin was one of the key artists at the forefront of Constructivist art in Britain. This movement, that emerged during the early 1950s in a post-war climate of both celebration and rebuilding, explored the potential for non-representational abstraction and was predominantly disseminated by artists emigrating from Russia to Britain in the 1920s and 30s. The most important concept of this movement was that of simplicity: in material, method, and construction. Martin's ambitions,

that stretched from drawings, paintings, and domestic sized *Screw Mobiles*, were therefore fully realised in the large-scale installation of *Construction*. Martin's oeuvre takes precedence in the exhibition *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist Art in Britain since 1951*, currently on view at the Sainsbury Centre of Visual Arts, Norwich. Charting Martin's influence amongst his contemporaries in regards to the development of Constructivism in Britain, this exhibition explores the participatory, optical and scientific developments of one of Britain's sprawling abstract movements.

As *Construction* exemplifies, Martin is noted for his large-scale commissions, primarily across Britain: including *Screw Mobile*, Victoria Plaza London and *Fountain* made for the International Symposium in Gorinchem, Holland. Martin's work is held in institutional collections internationally, including Tate, the British Museum, Arts Council of Great Britain, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Kröller-Müller Museum, The Netherlands, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. He was awarded an OBE in 1971, and an Honorary Doctorate from the Royal College of Art in 1976.

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Dr Susan Tebby was Kenneth Martin's studio assistant from 1966-1984 and has since assisted The Estate of Kenneth Martin and public institutions on both research into the artist's work and questions of conservation.

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