

About the Meaning of Construction [Original in English, written in 1966, published in *DATA. Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics. An Anthology*, A. Hill, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 175-179]

The word 'construction,' used in relation to art, evokes the image of an activity that is essentially opposite to the common concept of painting as a means of personal expression. In the slang of Parisian art critics, the term 'abstraction froide' – cold abstraction – was used during the fifties, to accentuate the 'cool' climate of any non-individualist conception of art. The counter-term 'abstraction chaude,' or warm abstraction, was never used and would have sounded ridiculous. This can only be explained if we consider the negative and disapproving meaning of the term 'abstraction froide.' The constructivist movement in art arose in the first period of mechanization, the tendency of constructivism being typical for industrializing countries. Constructivist artists are very much aware of the presence and the influence of machines, and many of them feel solidarity with the workers in industry – they are inclined to want to be workers themselves. There is a romantic side to this worshipping of machines and mechanical craftsmanship. But if we consider the historical fact that artists have always been dependent on the non-working upper classes in society, we can understand that constructivism could only derive from a social revolution that put labor forward as the source of richness and culture. Hence it was the most logical form of art in Russia during the years that followed the revolution of 1917. And in the other countries of Europe where industrialization began to have its impact on daily life, constructivist ideals arose that were always connected with interest in the life of the working classes; sometimes with feelings of solidarity with the proletariat and with ideals of a new socialist society. We may therefore consider the 'arts and crafts' movement in England in the nineteenth century as a forerunner of constructivism, although the 'arts and crafts' movement was distinctly against machinework. We should not forget however that the role machines play in constructivist art is rather superficial.

The works of constructivist artists are handmade, and if

they use products of industry as their material the same thing can be said of the arts and crafts people who used such products as machine-woven threads, plywood and chemical colors. In spite of the machine cult that characterized some earlier constructivists, especially in the Soviet Union, their relationship to mechanization should be seen against the background of social changes that affect the social position of artists as well. The constructivists more than any other artists are aware of the decline of individualism, and they strongly feel the need of an objective style that allows them to get hold of social problems that are connected with the new position of the artist in industrial society. The extreme consequence of the constructivist tendency was the functionalist doctrine that consciously reduced creativity to a function of labor, and thus gave up art itself as the adventurous, the ludic activity it really is. Functionalism has proved to be a very resistant theory that still subsists in architecture, and certainly in town planning, as the dominating conception. I think, however, that the meaning of constructivism in our day is essentially other than that of the constructivist movement in the beginning of this century. The process of mechanization in the higher developed countries has gone so far now that human labor will no longer be the principal force of production. Automation, especially, allows an increase of free time that makes the idealization of labor senseless. The main problem of our time is not the organization of industrial work but the recreation of the unemployed 'worker.' But a worker who is unemployed continuously ceases to be a worker. Not the laborer but the player, not 'homo faber' but 'homo ludens' is the type of man to whom the future belongs.

This entirely new situation incites us to a new interpretation of construction that goes in an opposite direction to the way that once led to functionalism. The ideology of constructivism – parallel to that of socialism – is no longer bound to the idealization of labor, but on the contrary will

lead to the ideal of the liberation of the former laborer from the need of production, the liberation of the laboring masses whose creative forces until our time have been wasted in activities that were simply necessary to keep mankind alive. The task of the artists – at least in the highly developed industrial countries, but sooner or later all over the world – is the preparation of a culture that will activate the total creative force of all humanity.

If we think of the establishment of such a culture, we are no longer speaking of spare time for the laborers, in relation to the creation of a culture, for the simple reason that the distinction between 'laborers' and 'cultured' upper class is an old-fashioned one that will be abolished. Labor can be done by the machines, and the machines can be controlled by cybernetic units. Creation is the specific faculty of man, a capacity that will employ the total energy of everybody. The construction of a new type of culture, that in the real and positive sense will be a mass-culture, is the only purpose of a further development of constructivism. Constructivism has nothing to do with a demonstration of individual fantasy, as is the case with the American 'happening.' It will go beyond the present conception of material construction and beyond the conception of a sociological and psychological construction. The artists of today have abandoned the art of painting – and of sculpture and architecture as well – because they don't believe any longer in the 'expression' of their personality, without an integration of this personality in a more complex system that will enable any individual to reach a higher level of creative power. This higher level will be the collective culture of a future society in which there will no longer be laborers and creators, but in which labor and creation will be synonymous. I have called this future society New Babylon and I have tried to trace its most characteristic features in the maps and the models of urban mass-culture I have made during the past ten years.