

## ON ENGLISH SCULPTURE

No determinant contribution to the development of the historical avant-garde bears the label made in England (Vorticism is of little account). But in the 60s came a vision of the world from « swinging London ». Moreover, British developments in architecture have been fundamental; and the capacity to go back to existing culture to explore its analysis more deeply is British too. This is particularly true in the case of the story of contemporary British sculpture.

The Primary Sculpture exhibition organized in 1966 at the Jewish Museum in New York provided some useful indications of a trend in contemporary art which went beyond the « structures » shown and the myth of unity in the arts. The myths of « aerodynamic » modernism cherished by the Futurists and Brancusi's expounders were back after half a century, in a revised and corrected edition, after revolutionary (Soviet) and reformist (Bauhaus) Constructivism had lost its battle, remaining a plain cipher or sense barely capable of beautifying a sculpture of statuary origin. In the 60s the new American (Judd, Kelly, Morris, Smith) and British (Caro) sculpture, together with the still « pictorial » constructions by the Italian Lo Savio, had revived some of the typologies originally created by Constructivism. But they did this by distorting them and removing them from their context, as suggested by the pop imagery. The « outsize » enlargements in paintings by Lichtenstein, Johns and Rosenquist led to the « out of scale » dimensions of Morris and Judd. The shrill colours used by the *popists* were translated into the chromatic — heraldic — exaltation of primary structures, for the subtle « banality » of which the fathers of American geometrical abstraction such as Newman, were responsible.

In the big, noisy fairground of Minimal Art, the Americans took the lion's

share, although British sculptors did also play an important part in establishing this new trend. It is true that its theoretic framework came precisely from the United States, and that the tradition of British art had different roots from those of the American tradition. In both « schools », art welcomed suggestions from architecture, though with different results. The constructivist formalism which constitutes the base of primary structures, led, in the United States, to Kahn's frigid « archeological » recoveries and to the re-reading of Rationalism « *in vitro* » by the Five Architects group, whilst in Great Britain it moved through the fundamental phase of *Brutalism* (with traces in Caro) and flowed out into Stirling's spectacular exercises in a Mannerist-Baroque style.

Whilst the new American sculpture originated from the same aesthetic of objects on which Pop Art was founded, the new, and more discreet British sculpture underwent the fascination of both the Pop Artists and the constructivists Pasmore and Nicholson, who were not averse to lyricism. In the U.S.A., Morris, Judd, Grosvenor and Tony Smith tended to be anonymous and serial, towards interdisciplinary work within an all-embracing system of art based on structural analogies rather than on linguistic sympathies. Their enigmatic and vaguely metaphysical « monuments » contained the « formative » (German-style) virtues of painting, sculpture and architecture in *précis* form. Less peremptory and spectacular, the British sculptors turned less to the Bauhaus and more to the constructive themes of assemblage of sometimes previously existing elements. I am thinking of Caro's assemblages of beams (1960-62), arranged as an organism, which are indeed organic and not technological like the Americans' structures — and this is odd, seeing that the founder of these « metal-welders » was the Ame-

rican David Smith. The sculptures by William Tucker and John Painting are organic, too, even when they look clearly geometrical. The same may be said of Tim Scott, whose recent works are articulated like writing; while William Turnbull carries on his tireless experimentation with a rigorous inner logic that gives him a « touch of class ».

Without wishing to sound over-scholarly, it seems to me that the organic approach (free syntactic articulation of the elements of a structure) taken by British sculptors reveals the specific influence of architecture in Britain. Otherwise there is no explanation to the great difference between them and the American structuralists and to the fact that the former tend towards expansion whilst the latter (apart from the outsider Mark Di Suvero) are closed in blocks. Bruno Zevi, in a famous book in which he compares English Gothic architecture with that of France and Italy, writes: « English Gothic architecture... shows an absolutely modern quality which may be called organic; that of expansion, the possibility of growth, and the articulation of buildings. Whereas Milan Cathedral or Notre-Dame are isolated constructions, the English cathedrals are joined to a series of other buildings; they are extending into them and dominating them... It is the *narrative character* (my italics) of medieval architecture and town planning in which the method of a message continued throughout the centuries, through different people and generations united solely by a profound coherency, of expression, but varied, free and episodic, contrasts with the one-meaning-only pronouncements of classical conceptions... ».

Apart from Zevi's Wright-like mood, it seems to me that his analysis is most apt and enlightening with regard to contemporary British architecture, which in fact fully displays its « narrative » spirit.

Gianni Contessi

# Les Levine

I first met Les Levine when we were both in the third grade in school in Dublin, Ireland. Little did I know at that time that some 32 years later I would be asked to write an article on his work. In school he was an ordinary child of no particular talents that I could discern. Now and again one would spot him around the playground with a camera about two feet from someone's eye. I always thought that was just his way of getting attention from people, that there was really no film in the camera. Les was above all things involved in most of the mischief that surrounded the school. It would take little more than a suggestion by someone to get Les involved in raiding the local apple orchard. At other times he could be seen standing in front of our fearsome headmaster arguing the most minute point until the master would say, « Sit down, professor ».

Imagine my surprise then when I was

about 12 years of age when Les brought me to his home and took me to his room where out of a locked closet he handed me a stack of photographs. Each of them was a picture of an eye shot from about two feet away from the subject. I must admit that I was both shocked and surprised, even more so when his father entered the room and Les grabbed the pictures away from me and hid them under the bedcovers. After his father had left, I asked Les why he'd hid the photographs and he said, « My father wouldn't understand. He would just think I'm wasting my time ». I thought this was a peculiar reaction. I didn't understand the photographs myself. They just made me think that inside that happy-go-lucky body, there was a very strange mind. No one in our age group at that time even knew the word « art », never mind understood it.

During our teenage years we drifted apart. Les went to London to study at

the Central School of Arts and Crafts. I think he enrolled in an industrial design course as his parents felt he might be able to get employment in that field. Now that I think back on it he probably had some vague notion at that time that he would like to be an artist, but was afraid to even suggest that possibility to his parents as he knew it would frighten them to death. While he was in school in England he became even more of an iconoclast than he was in Ireland, refusing to do more than the bare minimum required to be allowed to continue his studies. About three years later I met him in the West End of London and over coffee I asked him how school was going. And he told me, « It's no different than before, but I've managed to get through three years of it without picking up a pencil once. The teachers want me to learn how to draw, but they haven't given me a good reason why I should acquire that skill