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Bill, Max, *sechseckfläche im raum mit vollem kreisumfang*, 1953, Messing, vergoldet, 30,5 x 39,5 x 27,5 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus, KV 919

Documentation level



Name

Bill, Max

Dates of birth and death

* 22.12.1908 Winterthur, † 9.12.1994 Berlin

Municipality of origin (CH)

Moosseedorf (BE)

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Maler, Plastiker und Architekt. Vertreter der konkreten Kunst

Fields of activity

Malerei, Plakat, Plastik, Architektur, Grafik, Umweltgestaltung, Zeichnung, Objektkunst, Design

Lexicon article

Bill grew up as one of two brothers in Winterthur. His father was a stationmaster, his mother the sister of the painter [Ernst Geiger](#). 1924–27, Bill trains as a silversmith at the Zurich School of Art and Design (Kunstgewerbeschule); after being expelled from the school, he studies architecture at the Bauhaus in Dessau until 1929. From 1929, he works as an architect, painter, sculptor, graphic designer and publicist in Zurich. In 1931, he marries the photographer and graphic designer [Binia Mathilde Spoerri](#). 1939–1945, recurring military service. 1942, birth of son [Jakob](#). 1951–56, Principal of the Ulm School of Design, head of the departments of architecture and industrial design. 1961, Member of the

Council of the City of Zurich; 1967–1971, National Councillor in the Swiss Parliament for the *Landesring der Unabhängigen* party. 1991, marries art historian Angela Thomas. 1996, establishes the Max, Binia and Jakob Bill Foundation in Zurich, and in 1997, the Max Bill Georges Vantongerloo Foundation in Zumikon. In 2008, for the centenary of the artist's birth, numerous monographs are published and retrospectives staged, including exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur and the Gewerbemuseum Winterthur, the Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, the Casa Rusca, Locarno, the Bauhaus Archive, Berlin, and the Marta Herford Museum in Herford (Germany).

Painting and sculpture: 1935, *Unendliche Schleife* (*Endless Ribbon*) sculpture, based on the Möbius strip, and the suite of lithographs entitled *15 variations sur un même thème* (published in 1938), an exploration of serial variation. 1946–47, large-scale work, *Kontinuität* (*Continuity*) in Zurich (destroyed by vandals in 1948); first *Bildsäule* (*Ornamented Column*), commissioned by [Hans Fischli](#). 1965–66, *Familie von fünf halben Kugeln* (*Family of Five Hemispheres*), University of Karlsruhe; *Halbe Kugel um zwei Achsen* (*Hemisphere on Two Axes*), Lugano. 1967, *Windsäule* (*Wind Column*) for the Swiss Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Montreal. 1973–1985, *Konstruktion aus vier halbierten Würfeln* (*Construction Consisting of Four Halved Cubes*), King David Park, Jerusalem. 1974–77, *Unendliche Fläche in Form einer Säule* (*Endless Plane in the Form of a Column*) ETH (Federal Institute of Technology) Hönggerberg, Zurich. 1976–77, *Drei Bildsäulen* (*Three Ornamented Columns*), University of Ulm; monumental *Pavillon-Skulptur* (*Pavilion Sculpture*) in Zurich, Bahnhofstrasse. 1979–1982, *Albert Einstein Monument*, Ulm. 1983–86, Granite monolith, *Kontinuität* (*Continuity*), for Deutsche Bank, Frankfurt am Main. 1988, *Endlose Treppe* (*Endless Staircase*), EPFL, Lausanne; 1988–1990, *Pavillon-Skulptur* (*Pavilion Sculpture*), Fondation Cartier, Jouy-en-Josas (France). *Kern aus drei Gruppen von je vier Elementen* (*Core Consisting of Three Groups of Four Elements*) Fondation Saner, Studen (Canton of Berne).

Architecture: 1928, architecture competition for a kindergarten and local centre, Zurich-Wiedikon (with Hans Fischli). 1932–33, construction of a residential and studio building in Zurich-Höngg. 1939, collaboration on the Swiss National Exhibition (urban and spatial planning) in Zurich. 1942, construction of a prefabricated house in Bremgarten (Canton of Aargau); 1950, planning and construction of the Ulm School of Design. 1957, construction of the Cinévox cinema in Neuhausen. 1961, Imbau administration building in Leverkusen; fountain courtyard and fountain at the Congress Hall in Berlin. 1961–64, chief architect for the *Creation and Design* division at the *Expo 64* in Lausanne. 1964–1974, Studio and administrative offices of Radio

Zurich (DRS). 1966–67, Lavina Tobel Bridge near Tamins (together with the engineers Ros, Aschwanden & Speck). 1967–68, construction of his own residential and studio building in Zumikon. 1971, construction of the Galerie Denise René/Hans Mayer in Dusseldorf.

Bill also worked as an industrial designer, typographer and theatre designer: 1932, anti-fascist magazine, *Information*. 1954, multipurpose stool for the Ulm School of Design. 1963, designs for *Oedipus* at the Ulm Theatre. 1965, construction and design of a marquee theatre for *Ubu roi* in Zurich. However, Bill was most influential as a theorist and art publicist, lecturer and teacher: in 1936, he published the text *Konkrete Gestaltung (Concrete Design)* in the exhibition catalogue *Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik (Time Problems in Swiss Painting and Sculpture)*, Kunsthau Zürich). 1941, foundation of the Allianz publishing house in Zurich. In 1944, he organises the international touring exhibition, *Konkrete Kunst (Concrete Art)*, Kunsthalle Basel; establishes the magazine *abstrakt/konkret* published by the Galerie des eaux-vives, Zurich; and lectures in industrial design at the School of Art and Design, Zurich. In 1949, he stages the touring exhibition *Die gute Form* (Switzerland, Germany, Austria). In 1960, Bill organises the exhibition *Konkrete Kunst, 50 Jahre Entwicklung (Concrete Art, 50 Years of Development)*, Helmhaus, Zurich). In 1962, he stages the Georges Vantongerloo exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London. 1967–1974, Professor of Environmental Design at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg. 1980–86, Vantongerloo retrospectives in Europe and the United States.

Bill was a member of numerous associations: 1930, Schweizerischer Werkbund (SWB). 1932–36, international artists' group, Abstraction-Création (Paris). 1937, Allianz, the association of modern Swiss artists. 1938, Congrès International de l'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), Paris. 1949, Union des artistes modernes, Paris. 1952 to 1962, Governor of the SWB. 1956, Deutscher Werkbund. 1959, Bund Schweizer Architekten (BSA). Furthermore, he was a member, or honorary member, of various academies (Berlin, Belgium, Paris, Dusseldorf) and the American Institute of Architects. Prizes and honours also bear witness to the great fame and recognition he enjoyed: 1925, First Prize, Suchard poster competition. 1949, Kandinsky Prize. 1954, gold medal at the *Triennale di Milano*. 1936 and 1951, Grand Prix for the Swiss Pavilion as well as two gold medals at the *Triennale di Milano*; the same year, Grand Prix for sculpture at the *Bienal de São Paulo*. 1953, third place at the international competition (London) for the memorial for *The unknown political prisoner* (text published in 1957). 1968, Art Prize of the City of Zurich (speech, *Das Behagen im Kleinstaat – Contentment in a Small State*). 1979, Arts Prize of the City of Winterthur; Honorary Doctorate, University of Stuttgart; Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. 1982, Kaiserring of the City of Goslar; Knight of the Belgian Order of the Crown. 1985, Commander of the French *Ordre des Arts et Lettres*. 1988, Premio Marconi, Bologna. 1989, Piepenbrock Prize for Sculpture, Osnabrück. 1990, Helmut Kraft Prize for Fine Art, Stuttgart. 1993, French Legion of Honour; Praemium Imperiale, Tokyo. 1994, Honorary Doctorate from the Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich.

«I am of the opinion that it is possible to develop an art form

largely on the basis of a mathematical mode of thought»: within his extensive body of writings, which do not reflect solely on his own work, Bill's credo, first published in 1949 (*Die mathematische Denkweise in der Kunst unserer Zeit (The Mathematical Mode of Thought in the Art of our Time)*) is probably the most concise definition of the meaning of Concrete Art. Strongly influenced by his Bauhaus teachers Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer, Bill found his way to «concretion» in the early 1930s, having observed Theo van Doesburg overcome Mondrian's rigid concept, as well as under the influence of the *Esprit nouveau* and the Paris-based Abstraction-Création group. With his famous text, *Konkrete Gestaltung (Concrete Design)* of 1936, he provided a theoretical basis for artistic practice that was to be of the greatest significance, and not only for post-war Swiss art – particularly that of the «Zurich Concretist School», which included artists such as [Richard Paul Lohse](#), [Camille Graeser](#) and [Verena Loewensberg](#). In his work as a painter and graphic designer, Bill's exploration of the line (division, sequence, grouping), the plane (form, geometry, rhythm), colour (polarity of colour and non-colour, quantity, contrast and complementarity), and composition (symmetry and concentration, sequence and radiance, rotation and mutation) resulted in a wide range of surprisingly undogmatic modes of expression, despite the fact that he restricted himself to working according to fundamental mathematical principles. In his sculptural work, which often crosses the boundaries between both painting and architecture – with favourable results – Bill also concentrated on a few key themes whose simple formal expression, however, is the result of the experimental visualisation of fundamentally structural problems: single-sided surfaces, columns, prisms, spheres, pavilions. The intellectual systematisation of the creative process led not only to a working method that negated the artist's personal signature (for the sculptures, separate materials were processed industrially: smoothly sanded stone and highly polished metal; for the paintings, compositions were defined using a ruler and compass, paint was pre-mixed and applied with a roller), but is also expressed in the sober titles of his works, such as *Rhythmus in vier Quadraten (Rhythm in Four Squares)*, painting, 1943) or *Unendliche Fläche für drei Positionen (Endless Plane for Three Positions)*, sculpture, 1974–75). Bill's membership of numerous associations and academies is evidence of his diverse interests and the broad recognition he enjoyed, just as his important private collection (which besides works by his colleagues and younger Concretists also included those of other artists of the 20th century and objets d'art from other cultures) is the expression of his pluralist concept of art. Apart from his work as a painter and sculptor who enjoyed public success at an early age, as an heir to the Bauhaus's universal, humanist concept of teaching, Bill also saw himself as a holistic designer, and made significant contributions in the realms of architecture, product design and typography. From the 1930s, his own theoretical publications were extraordinarily influential, as were his educational activities as the writer of monographs and the editor of portfolios and artists' writings, as well as an exhibition designer (more than 300 numbers) and the guardian of the Georges Vantongerloo's estate. Numerous lectures and teaching assignments at universities, schools and museums, as well as his political activities, reflect his pedagogical conviction that (concrete) art, as «the pure expression of harmonious measure and principle» (1936), is a model for «an appropriate social order

and an appropriate spiritual order» (1968).

Works: Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv; Berlin-Reinickendorf, *Berlin dankt Frankreich*, 1994; Kunstmuseum Bern; Frankfurt am Main, Deutsche Bank Headquarters, *Kontinuität*, 1983–86; Geneva, Bourq de Four, *Säule mit 3–8-eckigem Querschnitt*, 1980; Jerusalem, King David Park, *Konstruktion aus vier halbierten Würfeln*, 1973–1985; Jouy-en-Josas (France), Fondation Cartier, *Pavillon-Skulptur*, 1988–1990; Karlsruhe, Institute of Mathematics, *Familie von fünf halben Kugeln*, 1965–66; Lausanne, EPF, *Endlose Treppe*, 1988; Ludwigshafen, Wilhelm Hack Museum, *Endlose Treppe: Monument für Ernst Bloch*, 1988–1991; Munich, Klinikum Grosshadern, *Zwei Bildsäulen*, 1983; Studen, Fondation Saner; Stuttgart-Möhringen, Daimler-Benz, *Gruppe von drei Farbsäulen*, 1987–89; Ulm, pedestrian precinct, *Albert Einstein Monument*, 1979–1982; Uster, Town Hall, *Rhythmus im Raum*, 1965; Zurich, Haus Konstruktiv; Kunsthaus Zürich; Zurich, corner of Bahnhofstrasse/Pelikanstrasse, *Pavillon-Skulptur*, 1979–1983; Zumikon, Max Bill residential and studio building; Zurich, ETH Hönggerberg, *Unendliche Fläche in Form einer Säule*, 1974–77.

Juerg Albrecht, 1998, updated 2020

Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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Werner, 1949

Website

<http://www.bill-stiftung.ch>

Archive

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Last modification

17.11.2020

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