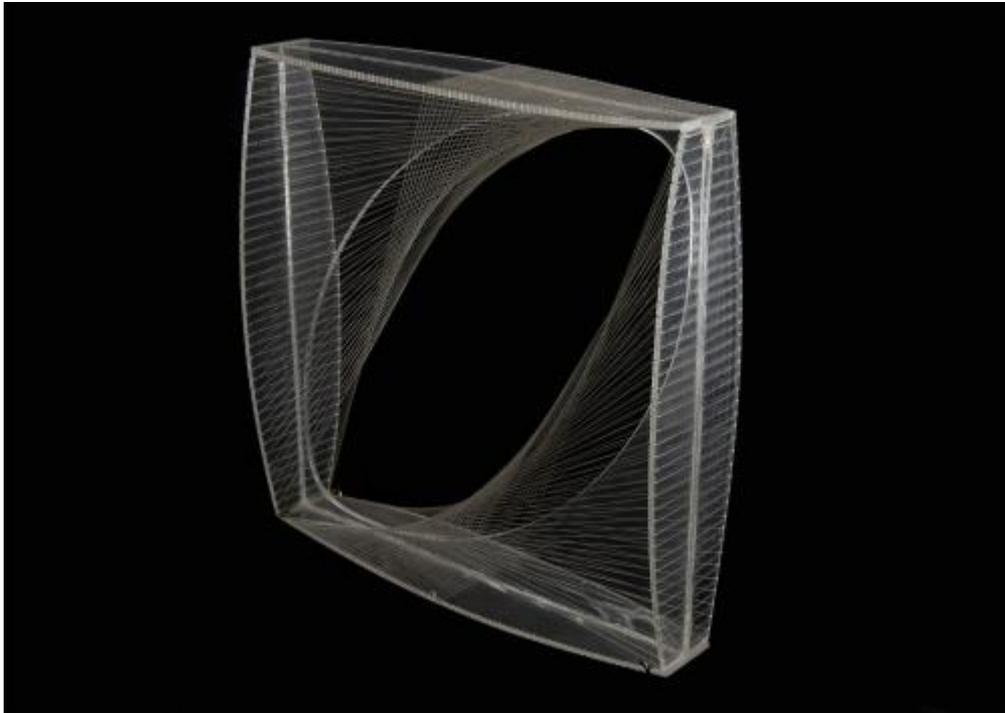


# Beyond Representation: Re-defining Perception in the Twentieth Century



*Linear Construction in Space No. 1*, Naum Gabo (1890-1977), St Ives, 1942/3, Perspex with nylon monofilament, 21 x 21 x 7 cm, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham. The Work of Naum Gabo © Nina & Graham Williams

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Hello, my name is Lucy Gray, and I was the Arts Society Collections Intern at the Barber Institute from September 2021 to January 2022. In this online talk, I will be giving you a brief introduction to the Print Bay Display I curated during my internship, entitled 'Beyond Representation: Re-defining Perception in the Twentieth Century', before expanding upon one of its central themes.

'Beyond Representation' invites viewers to reflect upon the ways in which international artists constructed new perceptions of the world in the twentieth century, paying particular attention to conceptions of physical space. I will be exploring this theme in more detail,

focusing specifically on how artists' increased interest in physical space often coincided with a desire to encourage more active engagement between art and audiences.

So, what exactly does encouraging more active engagement with art mean? Let's take one of the key works in the display as a starting point: a sculpture, called *Linear Construction in Space No. 1*. The sculpture itself is made from a clear Perspex frame, around which delicate nylon threads have been stretched and wound in different directions. The groups of tensioned nylon threads form ethereal, curving planes across the empty space, giving the illusion of weightless and continuous form. The sculpture was made by the Russian-born artist, Naum Gabo. Gabo's pioneering experiments in creating spatial movement in art through the use of new and unconventional materials like plastic, proved highly influential on other twentieth century artists also interested in encouraging more active engagement with art. In this display, the sculpture is located on a plinth in the centre of the room, allowing visitors to walk all the way around it. This is important, as the sculpture looks different depending on the angle from which it is viewed. As you walk around it, you notice that the Perspex frame and nylon threads that make up the sculpture start to form new shapes and patterns, like a continuously changing work of art. Gabo made the sculpture with the viewer's movements and shifting perspective in mind; with no moving parts, it is our active participation alone that brings the structure to life.

Generally, when we look at an artwork, we don't need to engage our bodies. Viewing art is typically, or traditionally, a very contemplative activity, requiring only our eyes to see and our minds to think. Like so many artists in the first half of the twentieth century, Gabo rejected this notion, or what was often perceived as 'passive' viewing. Take a traditional illusionistic painting, for example. In an effort to mirror real life, an artist may use techniques such as one-point perspective, where objects appear to get smaller as they get further away. This illusion relies on the viewer being in one fixed position in front of the painting. Yet, many artists felt that this wasn't

a true reflection of real life, as our perspectives are never fixed — they are constantly shifting. This sparked a plethora of new experiments in form, space, and perspective, many of which can be seen in the display. By involving the viewer in a process of co-creation as they encircle the sculpture, Gabo took these experimental ideas even further.

When we wander around a gallery, the way we move and interact with the space is generally considered less important than the actual art itself. This was not the case for Gabo and other like-minded artists. Not only did Gabo make space the subject of art itself, but he also placed direct emphasis on how our own physicality in real space and time can become implicated in our experience of art. This was a recurrent theme of the art movement, Constructivism, of which Gabo was a leading figure.

Originating in Russia, Constructivism was largely connected to the political and social ambitions of the 1917 revolution, which championed socialist ideals such as collectivism over individualism. Contrary to the elitist perception of art as reserved for an exclusive class of intellectuals, Constructivist artists often sought to connect art to everyday life. By making the visitor's body and movements a key component of the art experience, these artists were moving away from strictly contemplative, individualistic ways of viewing. Instead, they were producing more embodied, holistically engaged encounters by intensifying awareness of visitors' physical and sensory functions. One artist in particular, who was a fierce proponent of creating participatory art experiences, and an affiliate of Gabo, was El Lissitzky.

Although Lissitzky does not feature in this display, his innovations help set the scene for the kind of thinking that was taking place in the newly-formed Soviet Union regarding art and active spectatorship: a post-revolutionary climate of unrivalled experimentation, which would undoubtedly have informed Gabo's own practice. In 1927, Lissitzky designed an exhibition space that he called the 'Abstract Cabinet'. As the viewer moved around the room, the colour of the

walls appeared to shift. This was achieved through the installation of wooden slats, painted black on one side, and white on the other, which produced a kind of animated greyscale, activated by the visitor's movement through the space. Lissitzky, like Gabo, saw visitors not as passive, contemplative individuals, but as active modern creators.

A similar approach was taken by Kurt Schwitters, whose monochrome *Merz V* – a print containing abstract, geometric forms of varying gradients, suspended in space – features in the display. 'Merz' was Schwitters' own invented aesthetic style, which he attached like a brand to all of his artistic creations. Central to the idea of 'Merz' was the merging of art and life. For example, to create his series of 'Merz Mappes', of which *Merz V* is a part, Schwitters used the refuse of modern life to create new art. In this case, he used scraps of discarded material from a commercial printing plant. Schwitters was a close friend of Gabo, and collaborated with Lissitzky on a number of occasions. He would therefore undoubtedly have been familiar with the Constructivist emphasis on the active role of the spectator, and the aim of breaking down the barriers between art and life.

This blending of art and life is something Schwitters took even further in his 'Merzbau' creations (Merzbau meaning 'Merz-building'). As the name suggests, these were effectively walk-in works of art: whole rooms covered and collaged in a proliferation of sculptural forms. Geometric, angular planes and platforms protruded out from walls, staircases and ceilings, until their foundations were virtually unrecognisable. Amongst these abstract three-dimensional shapes were countless nooks and crannies, in which could be found a variety of found objects. Imagine a Modernist stalactite cave, and you wouldn't be far off the Merzbau. Nowadays, we would probably define this studio-cum- exhibition room-cum-living sculpture, as installation art.

Much like viewing Gabo's sculpture, a visitor to Schwitters' Merzbau would have had to walk through the space in order to engage fully

with the art. Except, here, that space *is* the art. The viewer is fully immersed, and experiences themselves within it.

In this talk, I have focused on some of the more radical examples of works that demonstrate the relationship between an increased interest in physical space, and the desire to produce more active and engaging art experiences, during a time where radical social and scientific change opened up new possibilities for representation. However, as my display demonstrates, this relationship manifested in many different ways, most of which were far subtler than Gabo or Schwitters' creations. For example, how might two-dimensional artworks produce more active engagement? Although there is no physical movement involved in viewing Tess Jaray's abstract, elusive shapes included in the display, our eyes are rapidly drawn in multiple different directions as they traverse the works' interconnecting geometric lines, searching for an anchor of familiarity. In light of this, I would like to leave you with a question, perhaps to keep in mind if and when you visit the display: What sort of approach or techniques have the artists on display used in order to make us more active viewers, and how does their interest in space play a part in this?

If you are intrigued by this question, and would like to find out more, the display is open to the public until 22 May 2022, in the Green Gallery Print Bay. You can also find more information on the Barber website. Thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the music that accompanies these talks.

### **Reading List:**

Nancy Perloff, Brian Reed, ed., *Situating El Lissitzky - Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Getty Publications: 2006)

Maille Radford, 'Naum Gabo and the Utopian Potential of Plastics', *Bowdoin Journal of Art, Vol. 3* (Harvard University: 2017)

Gwendolen Webster, 'Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau' (unpublished doctorate dissertation, Open University, Milton Keynes, 2007)

Richard Davey and others, *The Art of Tess Jaray* (Ridinghouse: 2014)

**Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.**