

ROBERT OWEN

KINETIC RELIEF #9 [PROJECTION 3] 1970

A central thread in Robert Owen's work is the exploration of sensory immersion through the experience of light and colour, the meeting of art, science and technology in Russian Constructivism being an influence here. The first book Owen bought as an art student was a monograph about the pioneer of constructive sculpture Naum Gabo, which introduced him to the idea of synthesised creative and scientific modes of practice. Later, while living in London, Owen encountered at first hand the expansion of Constructivism beyond its Russian origins. From 1966 he worked as an assistant to Anthony Hill, a member of the British Constructionist Group, which also included Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin and Mary Martin. While retaining an interest in the principle of construction over composition, the Constructionists used abstraction to explore structural forces in nature, Hill's work developing notational systems to describe complex polyhedra and organic molecules.

Russian Constructivism sought to model a socialist future through the alliance of experimental art and practical designs. Its main artistic legacy for Owen, however, was the move beyond representation through the actuality of real forms and industrial materials. His 1970 work *Kinetic Relief #9 (Projection 3)* examines the experience of light through a grid of twenty-five large and small cubes of diffraction grating, framed and connected with aluminium tubing. Diffraction grating is a mirror-backed acetate developed for use in interferometry and spectroscopy. In separating light into different wavelengths, it allows scientists to examine varied phenomena from the structure of atoms to the chemical composition of stars. Owen gained access to cast-off blocks of grating, attracted by the colourful, optical effects afforded by the material. This series of works, including *Kinetic Relief #9*, was produced in London, but drew on Owen's memory of the expansive, light-filled rural landscapes of his childhood, their grid form echoing the mosaic tiles

he knew from living on the Greek island of Hydra between 1963 and 1966. It was also on Hydra that Owen witnessed a spectacular solar eclipse, during which the atmosphere split the sunlight into its component colours. Rejecting paint on canvas as inadequate to the exploration of such experiences, in *Kinetic Relief #9* Owen blends corporeal and perceptual similitude through the use of the diffraction grating.

Constructivism's pivotal alliance of non-objectivity, materiality and constructive sculpture is an artistic progenitor for Owen's *Kinetic Relief* series, including through Russian Constructivism's influence on later art movements, such as Minimalism, examples of which Owen had access to in London. His purpose in the series, however, exceeds Constructivism's aim to strip the properties of the work of art of all transcendent connections. *Kinetic Relief #9* reflects a pre-analytical, phenomenological encounter with the world, having an added metaphysical intent. It explores affective and perceptual states beyond the material, albeit ones grounded in time and place for Owen. The play of evanescent visual effects against the geometric logic of the grid introduces elements of complexity and indeterminacy into the work, suggesting Owen's aim to take the viewer beyond a straightforward, everyday experience.

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