

## **'the roundhouse of international spirits'**

Hans Arp,  
Raffael Benazzi  
Julius Bissier  
Ben Nicholson  
Hans Richter  
Mark Tobey  
Italo Valenti  
in the Ticino

**17 January - 15 March 2009**

## **Teachers' Pack**

### Contents

- Introduction to the exhibition and maps
- History of the arts in the Ticino region
- Friendships between the artists
- Image, key questions and biography for each artist
- Themes and shared techniques to consider

# 'the roundhouse of international spirits'

Arp, Benazzi, Bissier, Nicholson, Richter, Tobey, Valenti in the Ticino

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*'The landscape ... is entirely magical and with the kind of visual poetry which I would like to find in my painting.'* Ben Nicholson

The natural beauty of the Ticino, around the famous tourist spots of lakes Maggiore and Lugano had long attracted artists and intellectuals. Writing to a friend in 1962, German painter Julius Bissier described the area of Ascona and Locarno, where he was then living, as 'the roundhouse of international spirits'.

By the early 1960s a remarkable group of artists had settled in the area. Hans Arp and Hans Richter returned, having first visited in the 1910s. Julius Bissier, Italo Valenti, Ben Nicholson and Felicitas Vogler arrived in search of better living conditions and new inspiration. The American painter Mark Tobey, based in Basel and a friend of many of these artists, regularly visited. The Locarnese, as it is known locally, became a thriving intellectual hotspot, with a strong sense of community - so much so that Arp liked to refer to it as 'el kibbutz'.

These artists shared ideas and swapped works and the period produced rich results. The exhibition includes Bissier's delicately balanced watercolours, striking reliefs and collages by Arp and Valenti, painted reliefs by Ben Nicholson, paintings by Tobey and Richter and sculptures by Arp and Raffael Benazzi, here representing the impact of these artists on a younger Swiss generation.

This is the only showing in the UK before travelling to Switzerland.

'the roundhouse of international spirits' is organised by Kettle's Yard in collaboration with Museo comunale d'arte moderna Ascona and Servizi culturali Città di Locarno, and supported by Alfred Harrison and The Henry Moore Foundation.



## History of the arts in the Ticino region

### **Monte Verità (Mount Truth)**

- A co-operative and vegan colony in Ascona founded in 1900. Mix of “naturists, theosophists, utopians, anarchists, and political activists in exile, as well as painters, sculptors and dancers”.
- A place to “go on a journey of self-discovery and explore new ways of living by immersing [oneself] in uncontaminated nature and resplendent landscapes.” (p.7 catalogue)
- Rudolf von Laban based his dance school there in the summers between 1913-19, returning to Zurich for the winter. In Zurich, Laban had links with intellectual groups, particularly the Dadaists, who provided sets and costumes for performances.
- Belief in the combination of artforms, scrambling visual arts with music and dance and poetry.

### **Der Grosse Bär (The Large Bear)**

- The 1920s saw a new generation attracted to the region for different reasons. Instead of coming for the energy and innovation, artists were drawn to the peaceful, tranquil town and isolation as the source of their creativity.
- Der Grosse Bär, founded in 1924, included artists Marianne Werefkin, Ernst Frick, Walter Helbig, Richard Seewald, Otto and Adya van Rees.

### **Eranos Conferences**

- Since 1933, each August “scholars from different disciplines (comparative religion and mythology, Far Eastern studies, psychology, literature, etc), all sharing a spiritual or philosophical outlook”, came together. “Every year intellectuals of international standing, for example Carl Jung and Karol Kerényi, met and discussed the topic of the day”. (p.10 catalogue)

### **Remo Rossi**

- Ticinese sculptor who established a studio for himself and a series of smaller studios for other artists from the late 1950s. Attracted international artists to the region, including Arp, Richter and Valenti.
- Rossi was a keen advocate of the arts and played a key role in establishing the Museum of Modern Art at the Castello Visconteo in Locarno.

## Friendships

- The seven artists in this exhibition did not form a cohesive group. Some of the artists were closer friends than others, some had known each other for decades whereas others had only met more recently, some enjoyed collaborative working whereas others were more solitary in their practice. Some of them lived in the region and others visited regularly. Despite their disparity, there are many shared ideas and beliefs that come through in their work, which reflect these friendships.
- Arp and Richter were both part of the Dada group in Zurich (1916-1922).
  - *Dada was an 'anti-art' movement, a collection of artists, writers, poets and performers who were in part protesting the futility of the First World War. Erratic, chaotic and jumbled, the group's performances challenged ideas of aesthetic beauty and the control of the rational mind. Their avant-garde ideas directly inspired Surrealism in France during the 1920s.*
- Arp and Richter both had studios with Rossi. Nicholson visited frequently, but never had a studio there. Nicholson had met Arp in Paris during the 1930s.
- Nicholson and Valenti became particularly close friends after meeting in 1959 in the Ticino.
- Benazzi was a generation younger than the other artists in the exhibition and was particularly close to Bissier, who acted as a mentor and point of inspiration.
- Tobey lived in Basel and visited the Ticino frequently to see Bissier and Nicholson.
- 1963: the Museum of St Gallen exhibited a group show of Valenti, Bissier, Nicholson, Arp and Tobey.
- The partners of many of these artists were creative individuals in their own right. Valenti's wife, Anne de Montet, was a poet; Nicholson's third wife, Felicitas Vogler, was a photographer; Bissier's wife Lisbeth wove the linen on which he painted; and Arp's wife from 1921-1940 was the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp.

## Hans (Jean) Arp 1886 - 1966



**Oriforme**  
1962  
Aluminium  
24 x 23 x 6 cm

Fondazione Marguerite Arp, Locarno

Arp was drawn to collaborative practice and sharing his ideas with others. He believed in “the social function of art and the need for the artist to act collectively”. (p.12 catalogue)

- What are the benefits of exploring creative ideas together?
- Can you see in the exhibition where one artist may have influenced or inspired another? How has this influence been shown?
- What does *Oriforme* remind you of?
- How has Arp distorted or simplified the forms that inspired him?
- Why do you think Arp chose to work with shiny, smooth aluminium?
- How does the void in the centre relate to the surrounding shape?

### **Biography**

Hans Arp was a sculptor, painter, and poet. Born in Strasbourg (France), in 1904 he left the local École des Arts et Métiers to go to Paris, where he published his poetry for the first time. From 1905 to 1907, Arp studied at the Kunstschule, Weimar, Germany. The following year he returned to Paris, where he attended the Académie Julian. Arp was a founding member of the Dada movement in Zürich (1916). In 1925 his work appeared in the first exhibition of the Surrealist group at the Galerie Pierre in Paris. In 1931, he broke with Surrealism to found Abstraction-Création. Throughout the 1930s and until the end of his life, he continued to write and publish essays and poetry. In 1942, he fled from his home in Meudon to escape the German occupation and lived in Zürich until the war ended. In 1954, Arp won the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the Venice Biennale.

([www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk))

## Raffael Benazzi 1933 -



**Untitled**  
c.1965  
Alabaster  
36 x 35.5 x 33 cm

Collection of the artist

“The friendship with Bissier was very important for the development of Benazzi’s art. One of the ideas they discussed regularly was the powerful symbolic value of elementary forms like the circle, the triangle and the square. These feature regularly in Bissier’s paintings, and Benazzi often used simple shapes in own his work.”  
(exhibition label)

- Benazzi took great inspiration from Bissier. How is this reflected in his work?
- What is the relationship between the form of the sculpture and the material from which the sculpture has been made?
- By calling his sculpture *Untitled*, Benazzi offers us few clues to its meaning. What impact does that have on us as viewers?

### **Biography**

Born in Rapperswil, Switzerland, Benazzi moved to Tuscany in 1953. He visited the Ticino regularly between 1955-1965 to stay with his in-laws. His father-in-law, artist Gordon McCouch, was a painter who had been a member of the Ascona-based group Der Grosse Bär (The Large Bear) in the 1920s. Benazzi had his first solo show in Ascona in 1957, which led to contact with other local artists, including Arp and Richter. From 1959-1964, Benazzi was represented by Charles Lienhard’s gallery in Zurich, which also represented Bissier. It was through Lienhard that Benazzi also met Nicholson. Benazzi explored many of the key 20<sup>th</sup> century innovations in sculpture, including direct carving and ‘truth to materials’ and an interest in spirituality. Bissier took on the role of mentor to Benazzi, introducing him to German philosophy and Oriental spiritualism (Zen and Buddhism). Following Bissier’s death in 1965, Benazzi made a plaster sculpture every two days for a number of months, working through his grief and the ideas they discussed. Bissier’s death marks the end of Benazzi’s visits to the area. (paraphrased from the exhibition catalogue)

## Julius Bissier 1893-1965



**LBI 57 - 12.6.1962 Kr**

1962

Egg tempera on canvas

19 x 26.5 cm

Museo comunale di arte  
moderna, Collezione Comune di  
Ascona

“Bissier enjoyed many aspects of the Ticino, not least the spiritual serenity that he felt permeated the region. Spirituality and symbolism were important themes in his painting [...] For Bissier the urn was a symbol of motherhood. He read with great interest the writings of anthropologist Johan Jakob Bachofen, which discuss at length the idea of matriarchy and its social and symbolic implications.” (exhibition label)

- How has Bissier prepared the background for his composition of smaller shapes? Why didn't he paint these smaller shapes directly onto a white page?
- How does the colour scheme relate to the shapes?
- In your opinion, how much of the composition was consciously planned out and how much was left to chance? What led you to this conclusion?
- How do Bissier's tempera works differ from his ink wash drawings, also exhibited in the show?

### Biography

Julius Bissier was born in Freiburg im Breisgau and studied art history at Freiburg University from 1913-14, briefly attending the Karlsruhe Academy in 1914. His first painted compositions were inspired by the German primitives, then he turned in 1923-8 to Neue Sachlichkeit realism. He shared a friendship from 1919-27 with the orientalist Ernst Grosse, who introduced him to oriental mysticism and the art of the Far East. From 1929-34 he taught at the University of Freiburg and turned to abstract art in 1929-30 partly as a result of meeting Brancusi in Paris 1930. Almost all his early work was destroyed in a fire at Freiburg University in 1934. He worked henceforth on small formats, frequently in India ink. He moved in 1939 to Hagnau on Lake Constance, where he designed carpets and fabrics which were woven by his wife. Between 1947-54, he made colour monotypes, wood engravings and India ink drawings, then began in 1955-6 to make 'miniatures' in oil tempera and watercolour. He moved to Ascona in 1961, where he died four years later.

([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk))

## Ben Nicholson 1894 - 1982



### **Ronco**

1967

Etching on paper

25.4 x 27 cm

Tate, London

- What qualities do Nicholson's etchings and reliefs have in common? How are they different?
- Is *Ronco* a still-life? Why or why not?
- What were the objects that inspired this composition?
- Considering the simplicity of the single drawn line and lack of shading, how has Nicholson created a sense of depth?
- Where has Jim Ede chosen to hang his Nicholson etchings in the Kettle's Yard house?

### **Biography**

Ben Nicholson was the son of the painter William Nicholson. After marrying Winifred Roberts in 1920, he travelled widely and lived with her between Cumberland, London, Paris and Switzerland. Following a period experimenting with a post-Cézanne manner, Nicholson developed a consciously 'primitive' landscape style in 1927, further encouraged by his encounter with the art of Alfred Wallis. Between 1931 and 1939 he lived in London in close proximity to many artists and critics such as Moore, Piper, Martin, Ede and Herbert Read. He met Arp, Brancusi, and later Mondrian, Gabo and Jean Hélion. The influence of these artists led him to develop a highly abstract style in the late 1930s, for which he is most famous. In 1931 he met Barbara Hepworth, who would become his second wife. He returned to St. Ives during the war with Hepworth, Gabo and Stokes and established an international reputation in the 1950s and 60s. After the war he lived at various times in London, Cambridge and Switzerland and married a third time to Felicitas Vogler.

([www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk))

## Hans Richter 1888 – 1976



### **Yellow Echo**

1968

Oil on canvas

40.3 x 65 cm

Museo Cantonale d'Arte,  
Lugano – on loan from a  
private collection

Richter wrote:

“an Echo brings back to you / What you already know / But by hearing it, seeing it, feeling it / Again / It becomes a Not-You / a reflection reflecting upon you / a sounding mirror / a silent witness”. (p.41 catalogue)

- How may chance have played a role in the arrangement of shapes in *Yellow Echo*?
- How has Richter taken inspiration from the natural world?
- Nicholson and Bissier also use transparency and overlapping forms in their work. How does this effect differ in each artist's work?
- What do you feel is more important to Richter – colour or shape/line? Why?
- Richter's work often fused different art forms, combining poetry, film, music and dance. How might you respond to Richter's paintings in a different medium?

### **Biography**

Richter was a painter, graphic artist, avant-gardist, film-experimenter and producer. In 1916 he was wounded and discharged from the army and went to Zürich and joined the Dada movement. Richter believed that the artist's duty was to be actively political, opposing war and supporting the revolution. In 1918, he befriended Viking Eggeling, and the two experimented together with film. Richter was co-founder, in 1919, of the Association of Revolutionary Artists ("Artistes Radicaux") at Zürich. Richter moved from Switzerland to the United States in 1940 and became an American citizen. He taught in the Institute of Film Techniques at the City College of New York. While living in New York, Richter directed 2 feature films, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* and *8x8: A Chess Sonata* in collaboration with Max Ernst, Jean Cocteau, Marcel Duchamp and others. In 1957, he finished a film entitled *Dadascope* with original poems and prose spoken by their creators: Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Kurt Schwitters. After 1958 Richter spent parts of the year in Ascona and Connecticut and returned to painting.

(wikipedia.org)

## Mark Tobey 1890-1976



### Untitled

1965

Tempera on paper

(or cardboard?)

103.4 x 54.1 cm

Private collection, Switzerland

Quotes from the artist:

- “Doing and idea are simultaneous [...] As the brush moves on the surface, the idea reveals itself”. (p.62 catalogue)
- “I know very little about what is generally called ‘abstract painting’, pure abstraction would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable to me”. (p.66 catalogue)
- How even is the surface of Tobey’s rhythmic compositions? Why are some areas denser than others?
- What sort of music might the artist have been listening to when he made his paintings?
- What is more important in art – the idea or the execution of the idea?

### Biography

Mark Tobey was an American painter whose work has affinities with oriental calligraphy. Born in Centerville, Wisconsin, he received little formal training in art apart from a few lessons at the Art Institute of Chicago. He worked for some years in New York as fashion illustrator, interior decorator and portrait draughtsman, experimenting with fantastic drawings for his own satisfaction. His first one-man exhibition of portraits was at the Knoedler Gallery, New York, 1917. He became a lifelong adherent to the Baha'i World Faith in 1918. Over the next twenty years, he travelled extensively, living in Seattle during the 1920s and England during the 1930s, as well as going to Mexico, the Near East and China, where he spent a month in a Zen monastery. He returned to the USA in 1938, settling in Seattle. He made a number of works inspired by Seattle's open-air market, followed by many with all-over abstract brushwork or dynamic white lines. He received growing recognition from 1944, including the City of Venice painting prize at the 1958 Venice Biennale and First Prize for Painting at the 1961 Pittsburgh International. He spent his last years from 1960 in Basel, Switzerland, where he died.

(paraphrased from [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk))

## Italo Valenti 1912 - 1995



**Collage n. 104 / A minuit le soleil**  
1961  
Collage and gouache  
83 x 113.5 cm

Museo comunale di arte moderna,  
Collezione Comune di Ascona

The moon was the symbolic centre of Valenti's work – a friend called him a 'Moon-fetishist'. Waxing and waning, the moon symbolises the 'permanent change' of the passage of time.

- What other natural forms can you find in the exhibition that may have a symbolic function? What do you think they symbolise?
- Why is it important that Valenti tore, rather than cut, paper for his collages? How would the 'energy' of the piece be different if the lines were concise and tidy?
- How does Valenti balance the contrasting elements in his work (black versus white, foreground versus background, depth versus surface)?
- There are several Valenti's in the Kettle's Yard house extension. How has your understanding of Valenti's work been affected by viewing his collages in the context of the exhibition?

### Biography

Valenti left school at 16 to train as a blacksmith, ceramicist and goldsmith at the Brera Academy in Milan. His earliest influence was his grandmother, who cared for him during his early childhood. She was a great storyteller, which fired up his imagination and gave him both dreams and nightmares. Consequently, his early work is influenced most closely by Symbolism and expressionistic French/German art. During the 1930s he experimented with serene classicism (Milanese milieu of Novecento) and socially inspired works. He taught life-drawing at Brera Academy from 1938-42 and travelled to Paris and Brussels, taking inspiration from Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh in their use of strong colour and the dream-like quality of their imagery. From the late 1940s, Valenti moved increasingly towards abstraction and experimented with thick impasto painting. By 1952 he was based in the Ticino and working on his kite series. He met Ben Nicholson in 1958 at the Venice Biennale, and Nicholson in turn introduced Valenti to Jim Ede, the original owner of Kettle's Yard. From 1959, Valenti worked predominantly with collage, which he considered a natural development of his practice. In 1985, he had a stroke and lost the use of his right arm and his speech. However, he regained both during his last decade.

## THEMES & TECHNIQUES

These suggested themes and shared techniques are offered as starting points for further discussion and debate. The bullet points below include relevant quotes and additional information. I have not included information on each artist as in some cases it is self-evident or addressed elsewhere in the teachers' pack.

### Organic forms and the natural world

Arp, Benazzi, Nicholson

- Arp quote: "In Ascona, I drew in pencil and Chinese ink broken branches, roots, grasses, and stones which the lake had thrown up on the shore. Finally I simplified these forms and reduced their essence to moving ovals, symbols of the growth and metamorphosis of bodies." (p.9 catalogue)
- "Benazzi mastered the treatment of wood to achieve a variety of effects, from rough textures to much softer, more tactile surfaces, which also characterises the stone pieces. The form remained essentially organic, often conceived to explore ideas of aperture, receptacle and penetration, and with an inherent tension between solid and void – an interest which the sculptor refers back to Zen philosophy." (p.88 catalogue)
- Nicholson quote: "Living in Switzerland is most stimulating to my work [...] The landscape is superb, especially in winter and when seen from the changing levels of the mountain side – the persistent sunlight, the bare trees seen against a translucent lake, the hard, rounded forms of the snow-topped mountains, and perhaps with a late evening moon rising beyond in a pale, cerulean sky – is entirely magical and with the kind of visual poetry which I would like to find in my painting." (p.77 catalogue)

### Spirituality

Arp, Benazzi, Bissier, Nicholson, Richter, Tobey and Valenti

- Arp quote: "Art has its origins in nature, and it sublimates itself and it spiritualises itself with the sublimation of man" (p.30 catalogue)
- Arp: "[his] naturalism had deeply spiritual roots, and ... his art can be interpreted as the successful attempt to distil organic structures in search of formal purity, to get closer to the essence of nature. (p.33 catalogue)
- Bissier was fascinated by Western medieval mysticism and East Asian culture and philosophy.
- "Tobey's art was also inspired by Oriental thought and art, of which he had in-depth knowledge, but it is above all on spiritual grounds that the affinities with Bissier emerge. Both painters were engaged in incessant soul-searching.

They shared a mystical attitude and a work practice conducted on the edge of consciousness and tapping into the most intimate sources of their being,” (p.18 catalogue)

- Tobey quote: “Always in movement – that is how the Greek philosophers saw the essential being of the soul – so, I have tried to tear out just a few scraps of that beauty which makes up the miracles of the Cosmos and which is in the multi-facetedness of life”. (p.66 catalogue)

## Dichotomies

Arp, Richter, Bissier, Tobey

Harmony through oppositions

- Black and white
  - Yin and yang
  - Solid and void
  - Chaos and order
  - Spirit and body
  - Light and shadow
  - Spontaneity and deliberation
- 
- “Richter saw the tension between ‘the irrational of my inspiration and the rational of the forms and colours which dictate their own life [...] as the subject of practically all my late paintings, collages, reliefs, sculptures, films: to bring organic form – the expression of nature, chaos, the unconscious, the emotional – into a relationship with inorganic form – the human, the planned, the conscious, the intellectual’.” (p.41 catalogue)
  - Following his young son’s death and a destructive studio fire in 1934, Bissier’s work changed dramatically: “he used an ink brush on small sheets of paper to draw existential contradictions, symbolic condensations of binary opposites: outside/inside, exposed/protected, masculine/feminine, resting/moving, urn/womb, birth/death.” (p.45 catalogue)
  - “An exciting and exceptionally productive network of references between polarities – East and West, civilisation and what we call nature – is in any case consistently present in Tobey’s work”. (p.62 catalogue)

# TECHNIQUES

## Reliefs

Nicholson, Arp

- Nicholson's first reliefs date from the mid 1930s and coincide with his relationship with sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Not quite a sculpture, not quite a painting, his abstract compositions were inspired by the natural world and were sensitive to their immediate environment, altering as the changing light affected the fall of shadows.

## Collage

Valenti, Arp

- Arp: "One of the key dichotomies in the work [is] that between chaos and order. The 'laws of chance' played an important role in this. Appropriately, Arp first understood their importance by accident, and subsequently allowed them to drive aspects of his creative process, most famously in the papier déchirés of the early 1930s". (p.30 catalogue)

## Texture

Bissier, Nicholson, Valenti

- Bissier used wood grain in some of his prints to break up the surface and make a pointed reference to the natural world that had also inspired his abstracted forms.
- Nicholson would scour the surface of his work, sometimes with wire wool or a razor, to create a link between his reliefs and the rock, wood, stone and earth of the natural world that inspired them.
- Valenti used frottage (rubblings over an uneven surface) to add texture to his collages.