

A Poster by Max Bill or the Love of Geometry

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Translated by John Cullars, Bibliographer for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Illustrations courtesy of Dr. Angela Thomas Schmid, haus bill, Zumikon (Zürich).

Footnotes for this article begin on page 62.

“My images and sculpture are the putting into concrete form of ideas ...without my intervention, these wouldn't be clearly realized. I would like them to be objects for intellectual use whose individual qualities are directly communicated to the observer. I hope such communications will be of a clarifying and organizing nature.”

Max Bill, Easter 1964¹

Among the posthumous papers² of Max Bill (1908–1994), the best known of all the Swiss artists³ of the twentieth century, is an inconspicuous gray, loose-leaf folder in a brown envelope for a 62–page illustrated brochure for the *Sozialer Wohnungs- und Siedlingsbau* [Social Dwelling and Housing Development], published by the Delegierten für Arbeitsbeschaffung [Delegate of the Work Program] and designed by Max Bill in 1944 in Zürich. On these pages, there are 478 sketches for the poster of the *Concrete Art Exhibition*⁴ held from March 18 to April 16, 1944, in the Basle Kunsthalle.⁵ Eight of these pages are of thin typewriter paper, size DIN A4 and partially marked on both sides; another part is similar to large transparent sheets from a roll. Then there is a row of smaller transparent sheets and labels of which the smallest measure only 34 x 102 mm. Others simply display sheet-filling designs. This bundle of sketches is unprecedented in Bill's legacy. There are far fewer sketches and designs preserved for other projects or commissions, often no more than a single plan. In connection to the total legacy, that means that Bill had not done much more with them.

Aside from military service, during which Bill was assigned to camouflage activities, he worked at that time on a book about the Swiss bridge builder Robert Maillart,⁶ and on another book on settlement planning and simple building procedures that appeared in 1945 under the title of *Wiederaufbau* [Reconstruction].⁷ With both books, he desired to be remembered as both an architect and an architectural authority.

The *Concrete Art Exhibition* in Basle showed “ten individual works by foreign artists drawn from Basle collections,⁸ twenty selected graphic art works,⁹ thirty photos of works by foreign artists [because the originals were inaccessible due to the War]¹⁰ and ten work sets by arp, bill, bodmer, kandinsky, klee, leuppi, lohse, mondrian, taeuber-arp, vantongerloo.”¹¹ In Halls 1 and 1a, there were cases with publications of the Allianz-Verlag,¹² which Bill himself

managed. Bill had not merely organized the exhibition, but also was its initiator; with it, he sought to publicize his own artistic position as a concrete artist as well as a curator of exhibitions and a graphic designer. For the poster, he expressly crafted a “concrete” pseudo-Greek set of characters,¹³ which he later reused for individual art works, such as his 1960 exhibition at the Winterthur Museum.

The fascination of the sketches for the *Concrete Art* poster is twofold. On the one hand, they illustrate a fundamentally simple example of the design process; on the other, they display a catalogue of concrete art motifs. Max Bill never published anything on the design process—at least no publications are known. The sketches also were not intended for publication. Bill presumably would be reluctant to agree to their discussion here today, since they reveal something about his methods.¹⁴ He was so interested in promoting goal-oriented thought and business¹⁵ that he actively sought a commission that was close to his preferences. Thus, six months after finishing the design for the *Concrete Art* poster, he bid on a logo for Book Supply Services in Zürich¹⁶ with eight different, interchangeable geometric figures ranging from a pentagram to a tree model with symmetrical root and branch areas, which he already had used in part for other projects. The firm wrote in its rejection letter, “...We’ve come to the conclusion that your printer’s mark is not right for us since it does not in the least communicate anything about what our firm is working on...”¹⁷

Vis-à-vis the effort to submit a “suitable” design to a potential client as a provider of a service, Bill’s work on the *Concrete Art* poster seemed to be stimulated by his desire to find an effective form and thus a positive “trademark” for this artistic discipline. Dr. Georg Schmidt, the former director of the Basle Kunsthalle, was an advocate and sponsor of concrete art as Max Bill represented it when he was entrusted with the exhibition for the organization. “People tend to reproach concrete art for being unconcerned with the problems of the day. It is striking that it has not dramatized these problems. Instead, it devises an activating counter-model.” Georg Schmidt sides with the avant-garde: “Whoever has experienced intellectual impulses has ‘very strong standards’ concerning the reality at hand,” Schmidt said in his opening address for the *Concrete Art* Exhibition (the organization of which Max Bill was entrusted) in 1944 at the Basle Kunsthalle. “Concrete image—spaces as free spaces can be read as socio-culturally Utopian. The concrete art originating in Zürich has moral and political utility value that defines its aesthetic value.”¹⁸

In his search for an effective image for *Concrete Art*, Bill tried to find a form which didn’t directly cite any of the works or positions in the exhibition. That wasn’t easy since Bill, being from the middle generation, was “no inventor, no creator of styles, no transformer but rather a finisher, one who draws the quintessence from a development.”¹⁹ Thus, the sketches present a microcosm of

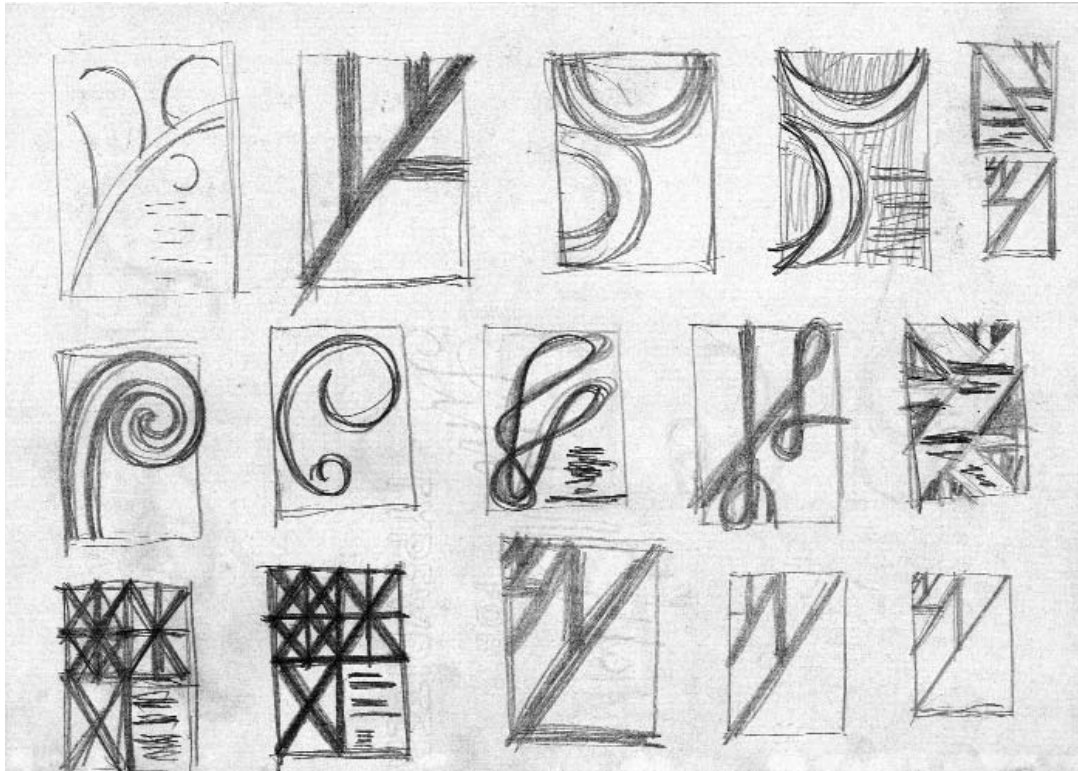


Figure 1
Drawings for the poster *konkrete kunst*
(concrete art), pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.
All illustrations courtesy of Dr. Angela
Thomas.

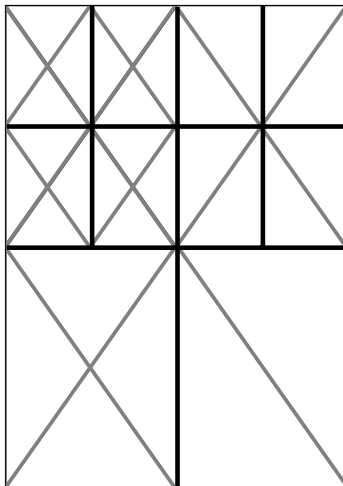


Figure 2
Construction pattern of two sketches in
Figure 1, by the author.

concrete art, with many images by Max Bill and other artists in which the love of geometry and simple spatial relations shine through. An ordered microcosm replaces the confused and impossible-to-overlook chaos of the world.

That can be demonstrated by the following examples. The beginning point for Bill's ideas generally is a drawn rectangle (see figure 1). This framework will be seen and performed as space (or a stage). Nearby are vertical, horizontal, or diagonal divisions. Each of us has made them out of graph-paper at school when bored by the instruction—daydreaming and lost in reveries (see figure 2 diagram). In the commercial art business, rectangles crossed by diagonal lines in the layout always were representatives of images. Today, text and image areas are differentiated in layout programs, as previously, by diagonals. The conflict of the three elementary directions and the fascination of constant processes lead to a series of sketches that are later filled in with round elements. The divisions end when it is no longer possible to represent them in a small framework. That is, simultaneously, the limit for the poster which, because of its necessarily being seen from a distance, can require (or be granted) no greater reduction than that of the little sketch on the table.

There is a positive and negative theme in other sketches (see figure 3)—a scheme that can be observed in the art of all periods. It always has been a theme in architecture, too, as realized in masonry built by former Bauhaus instructor Josef Albers in 1949–50 in a brick

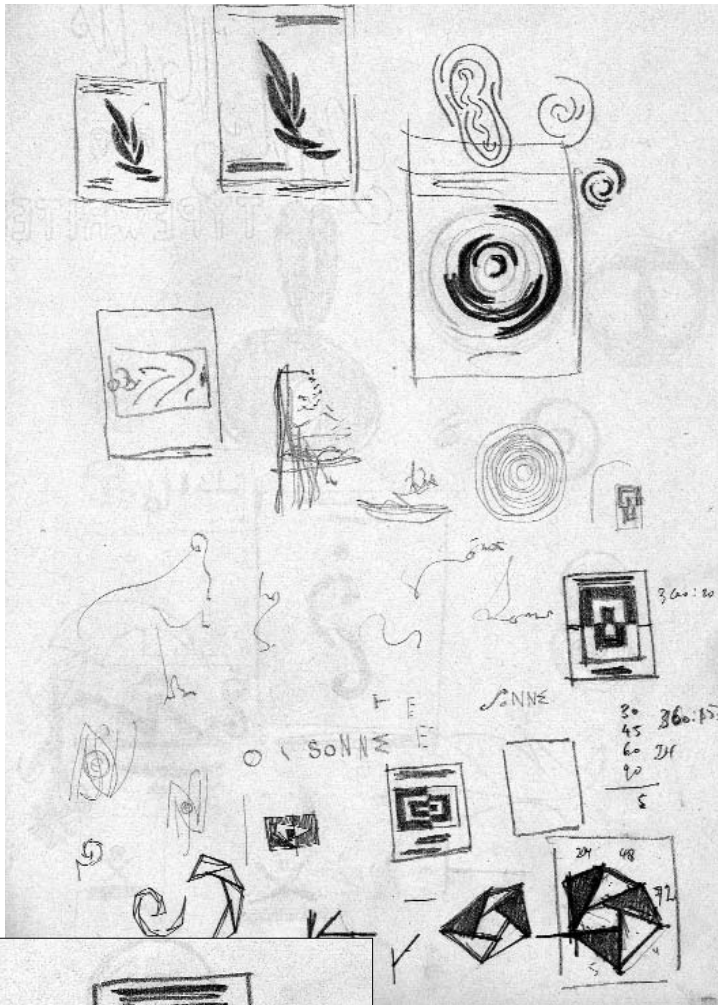


Figure 3 (below)
Detail of figure 4.

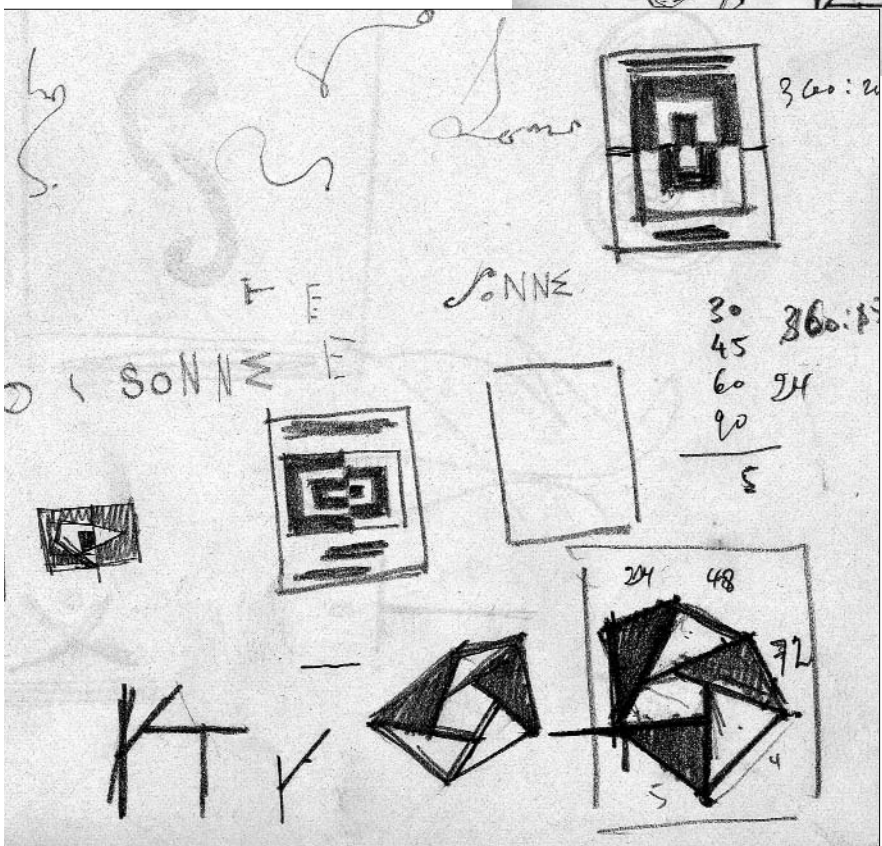


Figure 4 (above)
Drawings for the poster *konkrete kunst*
(concrete art), pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21
cm.

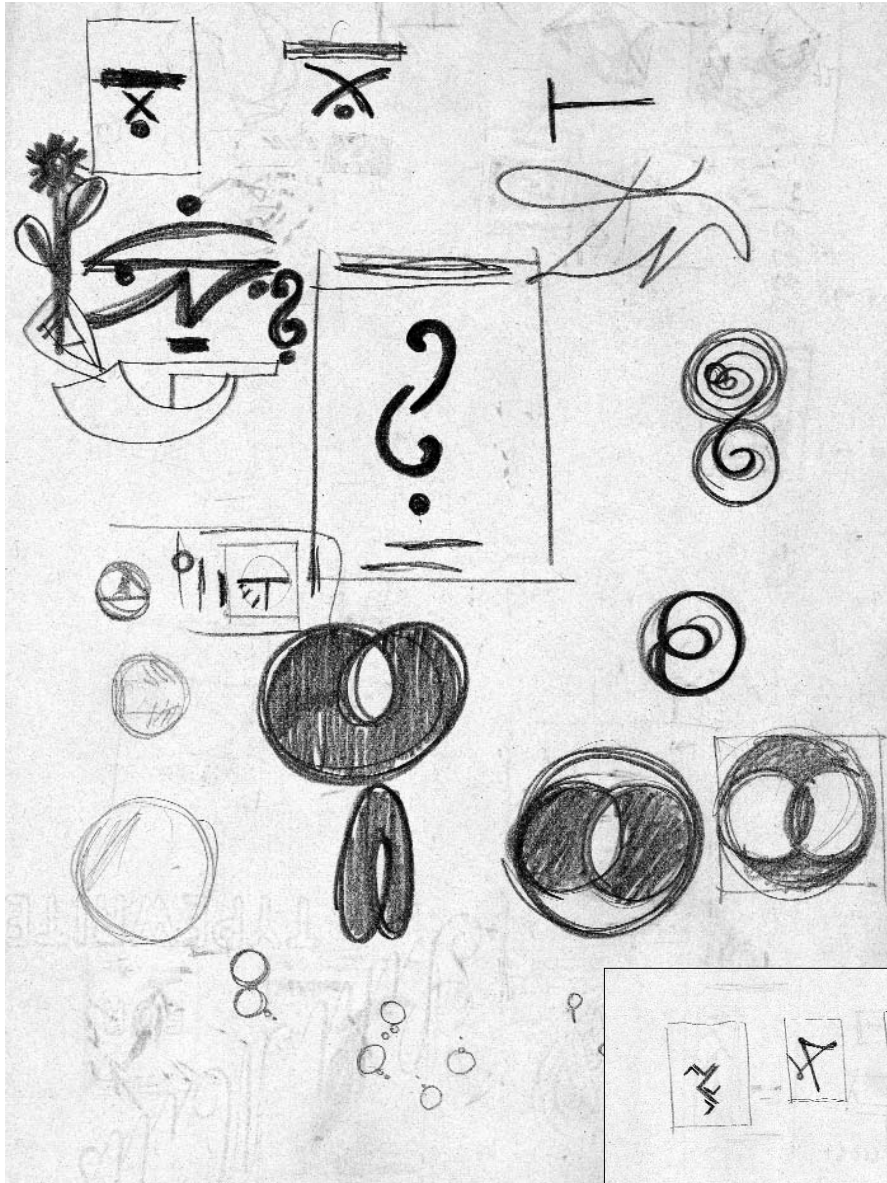


Figure 5 (above)
Drawings for the poster *konkrete kunst*
(concrete art), pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.

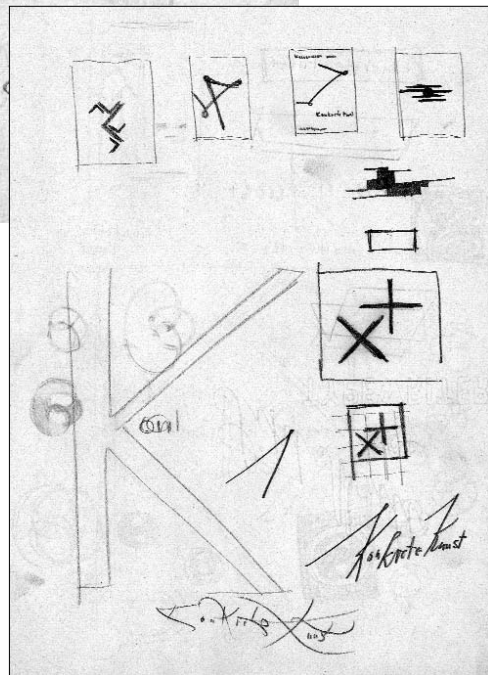
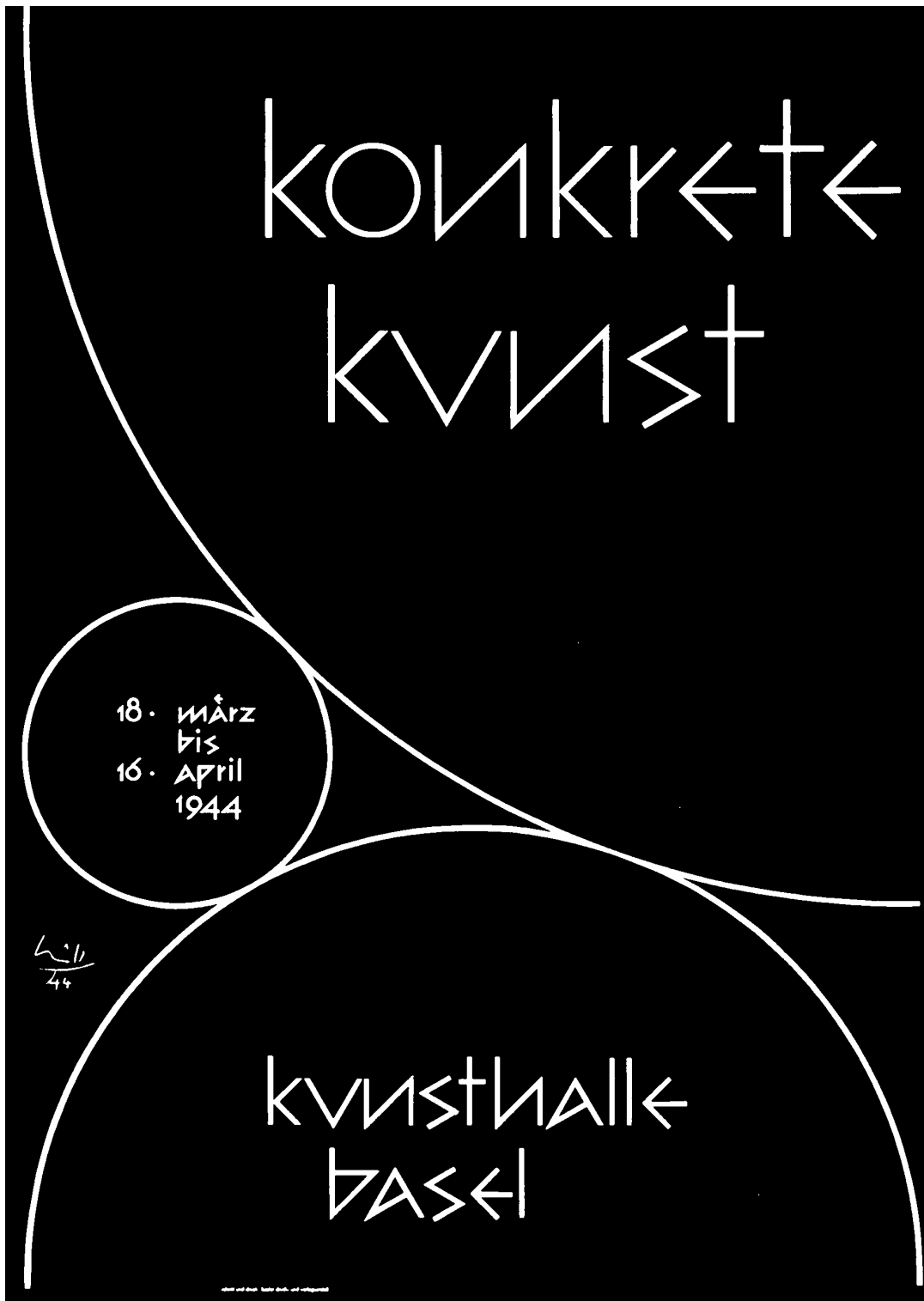


Figure 6 (right)
Calligraphic drawings, detail fo drawings for
the poster *konkrete kunst* (concrete art), pencil
on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.



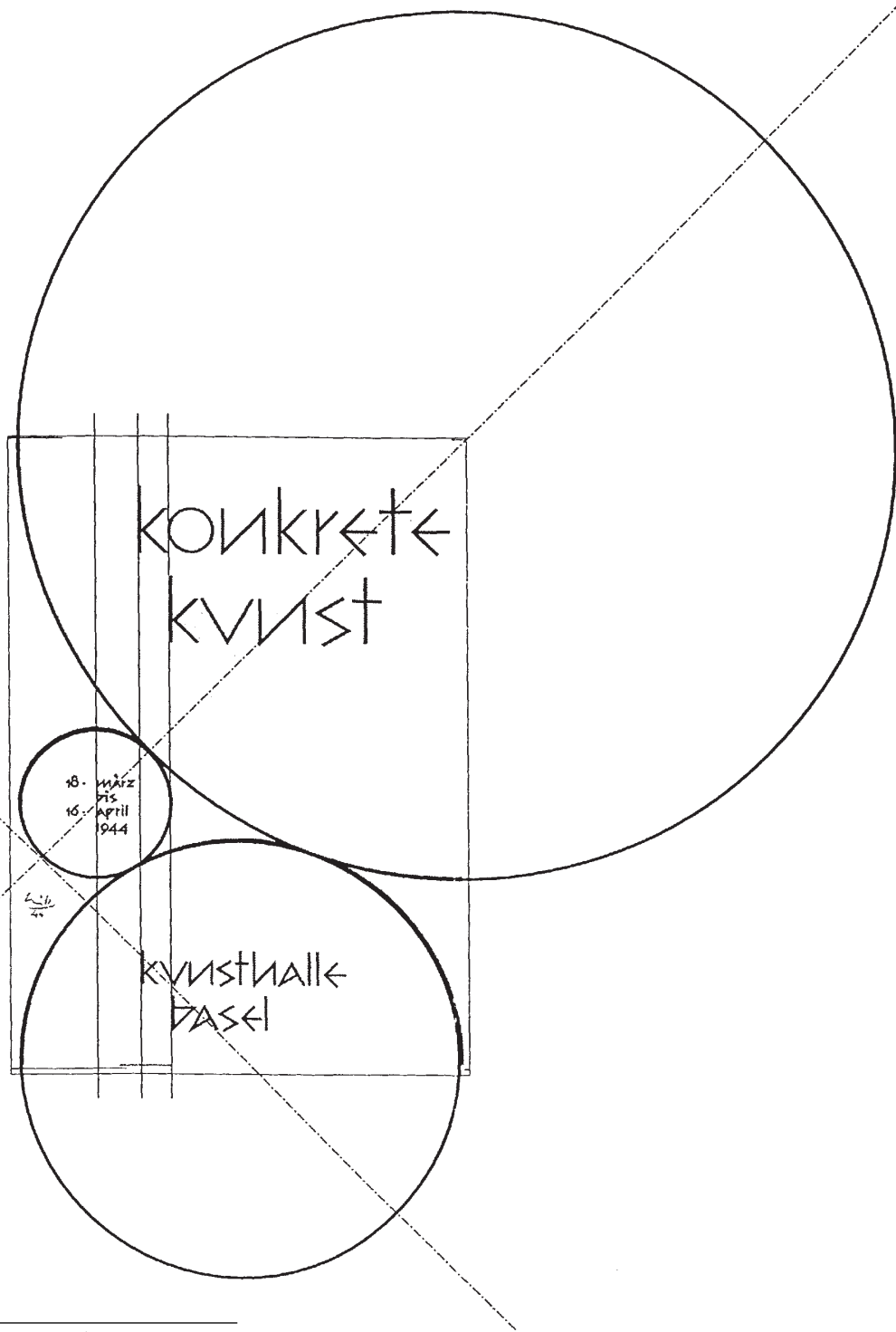


Figure 7 (opposite page)
konkrete kunst, poster, lino cut, letterpress,
black on white paper, 90.5 x 128 cm.

Figure 8 (above)
Construction pattern to the poster (figure 7)
by the author.

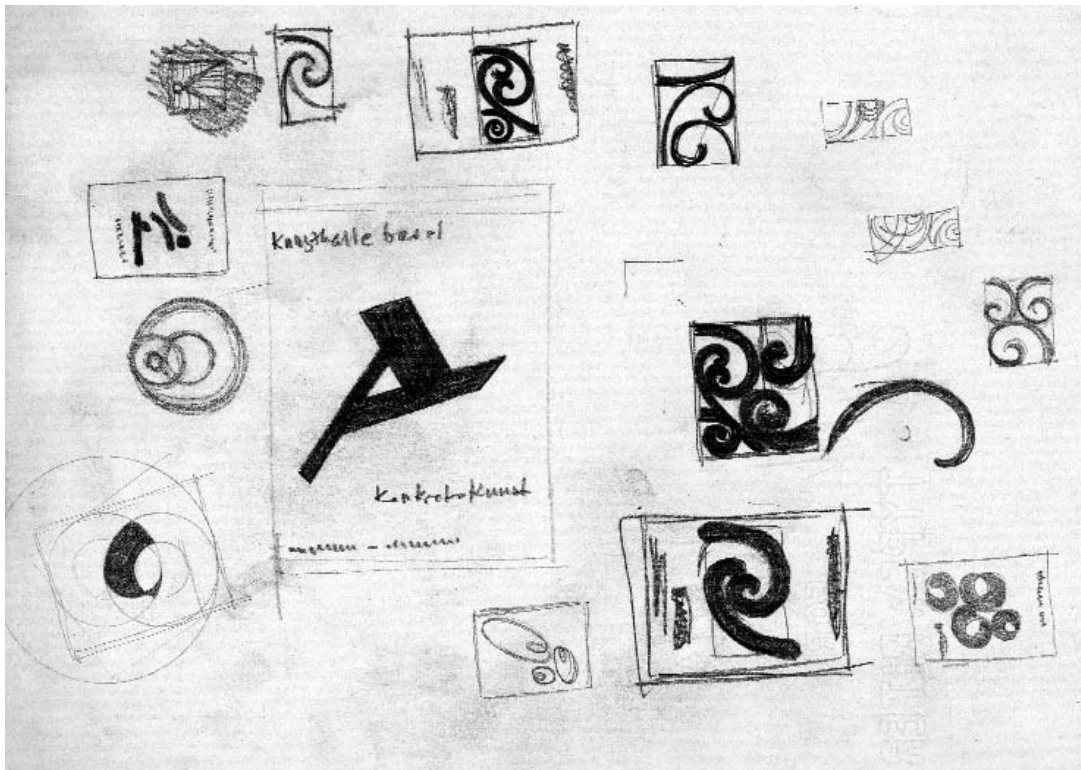
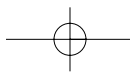


Figure 9
 Drawings for the poster *konkrete kunst*
 (concrete art), pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.

wall in America. Deep shadowy holes, which take the weight from the wall and let it become an image, appear through gaps in the architectural background. On the one hand, this results in the multiplication of the ground mass of the image structure; on the other, the brightness and darkness dissolves the weight of the rectangular wall. Analogously, Bill arranged a series of three small sketches of right-angled U-form figures so that, ideally, a motif no longer appeared on a surface, but rather the entire surface became the image-motif. Thus, it came about that the construction is modular, as is shown by the numbers next to and beneath the sketch (figure 4).

Another, also unrealized, arrangement carries out a small line-drawing without any surrounding framework (see figure 5). It is reminiscent of drawings and images by Paul Klee from the period in which Bill studied with him at the Bauhaus, which means that it is without objective solidification, as in his 1927 *Tiere bei Vollmond* [Animals by the Full Moon]. Four cat-like beings, sketched by what appears to be a single line, form a counterpoint to the circular moon.

As well as geometric ideas, there are direct allusions to the precise initial letters “K” and “k” respectively. Bill attempted to find an effective legible form in a calligraphic example (see figure 6). The long calligraphic swings cause the two words to look more like manuscript illumination than text. In doing this, Bill makes use of the fact that, not only are the two initial letters alike, but that a “k”

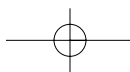
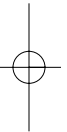
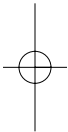


also occurs in the middle of the first word and that the two words appear as triple cycles. The printed *Concrete Art* poster (figure 7, poster) shows a quadrant, a semicircle with a half diameter and a full circle, which respectively touch—or, better yet, which blend into the heavy lines. A naive visitor to the exhibition in Bielefeld²⁰ envisioned in the arcs of the circles machinery that didn't work. If the wheel from which a quadrant is seen turns clockwise, then the semicircle as well as the full circle turn counterclockwise, but not without grinding between the two.

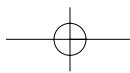
The diameter of the full circle is about one-third the diameter of the semicircle. Thus, the three figures are in the proportion 1:3:6. Blocks of text are found in the circular figures, whose graduated sizes have the same proportions. The game is pursued when one examines the pattern of the lines. The intervals of the boundary lines of the bound words on the left are 2:3 (figure 8, diagram).

Max Bill, perhaps unknowingly, had moved ever closer to the edges of Pythagorean doctrines. We find columns of numbers and proportional models on many of the sketches in his posthumously discovered papers. He attempted to bring the world into completely numerical relations, and was visibly enamored of infinitesimal processes, such as the frequently encountered progressions (figure 9). As an artist, he always allowed himself the freedom of deviating from the rules that he set up at the beginning of a project to complete the anticipated course of action with a gestural form. The mathematical start of his design frequently would be corrected based on what he observed. He made that explicit in one of the key texts of the expression of concrete art:

the mathematical way of thinking in contemporary art isn't mathematics itself; indeed, what one generally understands as exact mathematics is of little use for our purposes. this way of thinking is much more a pattern of rhythms and relations, of laws, which have individual sources in exactly the same way that mathematics, on the other hand, has its origins in the thought of path-breaking mathematicians.²¹



- 1 The manuscript is connected to a design for the title page on the documentation of the Swiss Regional Exhibition *Expo '64* in Lausanne, 1964, for which Max Bill was architect and coworker in Sector 3, *L'art de vivre*, and in the half-sector *Bilden und Gestalten*.
- 2 Max Bill's typographic and commercial art legacy is found in *haus bill*, the artist's former home and studio in Zumikon near Zürich. I examined, arranged, and inventoried it in a sabbatical leave during the summer semester of 1997 and brought it to public attention in an exhibition in *haus bill* in 1997, and in the Bielefeld Kunsthalle in 1998. A special number of the *Typografische Monatsblätter* on Max Bill, which served as the catalogue of the exhibition in Bielefeld, appeared in the series *Pioneers of Typography* in July 1997. The Niggli Verlag in Sulgen prepared a monograph entitled *max bill: typografie, reklame, buchgestaltung*. The sketches that are discussed in this publication are unordered and unnumbered in a gray Schollis Turicum portfolio, with the description "poster studies for *Concrete Art* Basle 1944," with the heading *Concrete Art Poster* (see note 4). The numbering of the sketches used here isn't authentic. With the exception of occasional dates, the leaves aren't marked.
- 3 In the first monograph on Max Bill, his early admirer and later antagonist Tomás Maldonado designated him as "architect, painter, sculptor, graphic artist, designer, publicist, and educator." (Tomás Maldonado, *Max Bill* Buenos Aires, 1955).
- 4 Der Delegierte für Arbeitsbeschaffung, ed., *Sozialer Wohnungs- und Siedlungsbau. Series Frage der Arbeitsbeschaffung 9*. (Zürich: Polygraphischer Verlag, 1944). The sewn innerbook is ripped out.
- 5 Max Bill was a proponent of this art and had set it out programmatically in his 1936 catalogue for the exhibition, *Zeitprobleme der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik*, in the Zürich Kunsthalle: "concrete design is that design which arises from its own media and laws without having to derive from or reject its external natural appearance. optical design rests subsequently on color, form, space, light, movement. although each creative design originates through inspiration, it cannot be completed without clear and precise formulation. works that are coming into being take on concrete form through this formulation; they are realized from their pure mental existence into acts; they become objects, optical and mental commodities."
- 6 Max Bill, *Robert Maillart*, (Erlenbach-Zürich: Verlag für Architektu, 1949).
- 7 Max Bill, *Wiederaufbau: Dokumente über Zerstörungen, Planungen, Konstruktionen*, ed. Abteilung Aussenhandel der Schweizerischen Gewerbeverbandes. (Erlenbach-Zürich: Verlag für Architektur, 1945).
- 8 Willi Baumeister, Viking Eggeling, Jean Hélion, El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevitch, László Moholy-Nagy, Kurt Schwitters, Theo van Doesburg, and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart.
- 9 Hans Arp, Willi Baumeister, Max Bill, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Hans Fischli, Otto Freundlich, Max Hinterreiter, Max Huber, Vassily Kandinsky, Leo Leuppi, El Lissitzky, Verena Löwensberg, Richard Paul Lohse, Alberto Magnelli, Ben Nicholson, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladyslaw Strzeminski, Sophie H. Taeuber-Arp, and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart.
- 10 Josef Albers, Rudolf Bauer, Étienne Béothy, Constantine Brancusi, Alexander Calder, Jean Chauvin, Robert Delaunay, César Doméla [-Nieuwenhuis], H. Eltzbacher, John Ferren, Otto Freundlich, Nahum Gabo, A. E. Gallatin, Jean-Albert Gorin, Barbara Hepworth, Auguste Herbin, Arthur Jackson, François Kupka, Alberto Magnelli, François de Martin, Henry Moore, Georges L. K. Morris, Malow Moss, Ben Nicholson, Hans Reichel, Charles G. Shaw, Vladimir Tatlin, Léon Tutundijan, Luigi Veronesi, and Lajos Vajda.
- 11 Text from the cover of the catalogue *konkrete kunst* (Basle: Kunsthalle Basel, 1944), which also was designed by Max Bill (Broschüre, DIN A 5: 148.5 x 210 mm).
- 12 Max Bill, ed., *5 constructionen + 5 compositionen* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1941); Jean Arp, *poèmes sans prénoms* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1941); Max Bill, *10 original-lithos, "10 origins"* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1941); Max Bill, *x=x* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1942); Max Bill, ed., *les derniers 9 dessins de sophie taeuber-arp* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1943); and Leo Leuppi, *10 compositionen* (Zürich: Allianz-Verlag, 1943).
- 13 The digital font is found in postscript format under the name "architype bill" as one of six avant-garde fonts of *Volumes Architype* (London: The Foundry, ca.1995).



- 14 "as a man, max bill seeks to conceal himself behind a veil of reserve. and yet he is very direct and aggressive in his opinions. he barricades himself in an ever higher mountain of books, magazines, and catalogues. images and objects, which he acquires as an inexhaustible collector of art, he piles up all around him. within his self-created caves, there remains a very small place for him to write and draw, just large enough for a sheet of paper, in the middle of what he calls the "geological levels" of unfinished things. yes, years ago, he abandoned offices because all the space in them was used up, and a new office would soon look just like the old one. there in the old office he searched all over the place for books and documents, which he called mining." Margit Staber-Weinberg, "anstelle einer biografie," in *max bill—leben und sprache* writings 6, 1988, ed. stiftung für konstruktive und konkrete kunst zürich. First published as "quando pitagora dipinge" in *bolaffiarte* 27, Turin, February 1973, p. 58 ff. As a pupil of Max Bill and graduate of the hochschule für gestaltung ulm, Margit Staber-Weinberg, like Max Bill from his Bauhaus days, employed radical lowercase orthography, which had been propagated by, among others, Herbert Bayer at the Bauhaus. He placed as the footer of stationery from the bauhaus dessau: "we write everything lowercase because we can't spare the time to do otherwise." (See Gerd Fleischmann, *bauhaus: drucksachen, typografie, reklame* (Düsseldorf: Marzona, 1984, p. 117).
- 15 "ich habe meinen weg gewählt: der weg der kleinen schritte" in: Der Themakreis im IDZ Berlin, ed., *Design? Umwelt wird in Frage gestellt* (Berlin: Internationales Design Zentrum, 1970), 19.
- 16 Max Bill: 8 logo sketches for book supply services a-g, zürich 1, manuscript signed and dated 8/12/45, as sender imax bill-architect-limmattal st. 253, zürich. Posthumously-discovered papers, haus bill.
- 17 Communication from the Book Supply Services, Zürich, October 9, 1945. Posthumously-discovered papers, haus bill.
- 18 Thomas Jankowski, Angela, "Max Bill und seine Konzeption von Konkreter Kunst: Die Anfänge in Zürich," *Tagesanzeiger* (Saturday, January 9, 1982): 41-42. [Zürich] The last section addresses the criticism that concrete art is an art of forgetfulness and therefore, was, especially questionable in the Germany of the "economic miracle." In no other nation was Max Bill as successful as in Germany, where he was the artistic adviser to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. His monumental Sardinian granite sculpture *Continuity*, set in place on September 7, 1986 in front of the Zentrale der Deutschen Bank in Frankfurt am Main by one of the largest moveable cranes in the world, is a later expression of this consciousness. It simultaneously mirrored the artist's yearning for immortality—and wealth. The original 500-ton block was carved from a cliff and transported to Carrara, where the sculpture was the work of many years, even after being reduced to about 180 tons due to the breaking of the stone. The finished sculpture finally weighed more than 60 tons. It was this very work that provoked the initiative *Ordensleute für den Frieden* [Religious Order for Peace], "enlarged" with liquid manure and rubbish to protest against "a merciless capitalism" in which "the rich get richer and poor ever poorer and more numerous." *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 5, 1998.
- 19 Heinz Ohff, "Das Tragische verschwindet: Zur grossen Max-Bill-Ausstellung in der Akademie [der Künste, Berlin]," *Der Tagesspiegel*, no. 9297 (April 14, 1976): 4.
- 20 *max bill: typografie, reklame, buchgestaltung* Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Studiengalerie, March 29–May 24, 1998. Curator: Gerd Fleischmann, as part of the project "rational, konstruktiv, konkret."
- 21 Max Bill, "Die mathematische Denkweise in der Kunst unserer Zeit" in *Das Werk*, Vol. 3 (1949): 88 (written in 1948), as published in *Pevsner, Vantongerloo, Bill* Catalogue, (Zürich: Kunsthaus, 1949).

