

The making of modern art through commercial art galleries in 1930s London

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The Making of Modern Art through Commercial Art Galleries in 1930s London: The London Gallery (1936 to 1950)

Abstract: This article explores the London Gallery as a disseminator of modern art. So far, the London Gallery has been considered as a gallery for surrealism only, as its longest-serving director, E.L.T. Mesens, promoted Surrealism all his life (1903–1971). By considering particularly its early exhibition history and activities in the 1930s, this article will show first that the London Gallery supported any avant-garde art contemporary to its showing, and second that commercial art galleries were the driving force behind the dissemination of modern art in London, using a number of marketing strategies that also included a claim to education.

Keywords:

The London Gallery, E.L.T. Mesens, surrealism, commercial art galleries, modern exhibition cultures

Introduction

This article explores the role of the London Gallery in disseminating modern art at a time when the national institutions, notably the Tate Gallery, remained conservative in taste.¹ Unlike the US, where the promotion of the European avant-garde through commercial galleries and museums forms a complex landscape,² the UK publicised the latest art from the continent through commercial art galleries, as this article will show by concentrating on the London Gallery. As one of the most important commercial galleries in 1930s London, it used a number of marketing strategies, but was less successful financially in the end than it was in distributing contemporary art through exhibitions and other activities. So far, the London Gallery has been considered as a gallery exhibiting Surrealism and selling Surrealist art only.³ This may well be due to the fact that the gallery was run by Edouard Léon Théodore Mesens (1903–1971), known as a fervent advocate for Surrealism, for two years before and five years after the

Second World War. Such a view, however, neglects the two years before Mesens took over, as well as the entire exhibition history of the gallery, which had a number of floors. To widen the perception of the gallery, this article re-examines the London Gallery in light of its curatorial programme and its role particularly as a London-based gallery in disseminating art in the 1930s. It will therefore also contribute to a contextualisation of the dissemination of Surrealism.⁴

The archival material consulted for this article enable the exploration of, what Lívía Páldi has termed, the ‘paracuratorial’, which includes the activities around the exhibitions, nowadays defined by museum studies as Marketing and Public Engagement.⁵ In our case, these materials include exhibition pamphlets, photographs of the installations, invitation cards to openings, typescripts of speeches given in the gallery, and the publications of the gallery including the most prominent one, *The London Bulletin*.⁶ Such an approach conceives of exhibitions as multi-layered events and of galleries as social spaces. Based on Foucault, who believes very strongly in a close relationship between power and knowledge and institutions that exercise those powers, arguably exhibitions not only organize and construct knowledge of art for the public, they also exert power over the forming of art movements and narratives of art history. Therefore the questions addressed in this article are twofold: First, what kind of art was promoted by the London Gallery? Although the gallery has only been seen as a supporter of Surrealism so far, it will be shown that its programme was much wider, including the entire European avant-garde, particularly during the gallery’s prolific early years. This question leads to the second, namely what strategies were used by art galleries such as the London Gallery, particularly regarding commercialism and education, arguably two main areas in which many commercial art galleries were active at the time? And who were the intended recipients of such strategies? Was it simply a

gallery based in London with an international artist-dealer network, or intended for a local public too? In other words, what is the relevance of the gallery being located in London?

This article will begin by looking at the organization and venue of the London Gallery, followed by an investigation into its curatorial narratives and the intended gallery visitors, before answering the broader questions of the role of commercial art galleries and their strategies as London-based enterprises. This article will therefore be a contribution to the growing scholarship that revises standard understandings of modern art by taking into account its exhibition histories.

The organization and venue of the London Gallery

Opening in 1936 with an exhibition dedicated to Edward Munch, which ran from October 21 to November 14, the London Gallery used the back cover of the autumn 1936 issue of *Axis* to advertise itself as a gallery dedicated to ‘the works of painters, sculptors and designers whose art is specifically modern in inspiration and technique’.⁷ This focus, the gallery claimed, would be different from that of other ‘enterprises’.⁸ The advertisement also listed an ‘Advisory Council’ for the gallery, which would give guidance on the selection of works, but have no involvement in organization and administration. This board was international: apart from ‘England’ (mentioned as such) and the continent, advisors also represented ‘America’, Australia and Japan, among other countries.⁹ Just as with galleries such as the Mayor Gallery, a structure exploiting an international advisory board was not unusual.

For most of its existence, the gallery was run by Mesens, whose first exhibition, a small retrospective on Magritte, opened on 30 March 1938. He took over from Lady Peter Norton (1891–1972), who in late 1937 had left London to join her diplomat husband Sir Clifford Norton (1891–1990), then posted at the British embassy in

Warsaw;¹⁰ and Mrs Cunningham Stettel, who was Norton's cousin.¹¹ As noted by Keith Holz, Norton had opened the gallery in 1936 with the help of Roland Penrose.¹²

Mesens, a Belgian citizen, is known as an early collector of Magritte and the curator of the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London in 1936.¹³ On his arrival in Britain he was put up by the surrealist Roland Penrose at his home at 21 Downshire Hill, Hampstead.¹⁴ Penrose, together with V.W. Watson and Anton Zwemmer, were the directors of the London Gallery. The conditions under which they employed Mesens are outlined in an unpublished contract signed on February 27, 1938, according to which he earned six pounds per week plus commission.¹⁵ The gallery also had a secretary, Sybil, who would later become Mesens' wife, but was then still married to John Stephenson, an abstract artist who became a member of the Ben Nicholson circle.¹⁶

From its opening until the start of the war, the London Gallery was located at 28 Cork Street, where it had two floors used as exhibition space. The gallery's close neighbours were Guggenheim Jeune (next door at 30 Cork Street) and the Mayor Gallery at 19 Cork Street. The last exhibition in that first location showed 51 works by Picasso; scheduled to run from May 15 to June 3, 1939, owing to its success it was extended to June 20. Upon its official re-opening after the war on December 10, 1946, the London Gallery operated from 23 Brook Street until its closure in 1950. The latter venue was a Georgian House, in which the ground floor had been converted into a shop before the war; it faced onto the street with two windows and a glass door between them.¹⁷ This ground floor became the bookshop, with low shelves along two walls and space for drawings and small pictures to hang above them. Melly describes it as follows:

Two steps led down into a much larger gallery at the back. This was a previous extension on the house, and had a cellar for storage beneath it. A door in the bookshop opened onto a side-passage (which also had its own front door), and at

the end of it was a rather rickety staircase, with a dangerous little lavatory built out over the yard. Above were four other floors, the first two of which were to become an office, additional exhibition space and a picture restoration studio. The top floors, cut off by a front door were to form Edouard and Sybil's living quarters: a low but pretty sitting-room facing Brook Street, a bedroom at the back and, above, a tiny dining-room, kitchen and bathroom.¹⁸

According to Peter Watson, *The Times* called the three galleries (Guggenheim Jeune, the Mayor Gallery and the London Gallery) the 'three little bethels devoted to "fancy religions" in art'.¹⁹ Indeed, all three were commercial galleries promoting avant-garde art. While Guggenheim Jeune was established by Peggy Guggenheim, in January 1938, the Mayor Gallery had already opened its doors in 1925.²⁰ In the 1930s, these galleries also undertook activities that bring to light a close relationship between them. All three published their exhibition pamphlets regularly in the *London Bulletin*, edited by Mesens, while in 1949 the London Gallery organized a show together with the Mayor Gallery.

Both the first and the second venues of the London Gallery were situated in Mayfair, an area in the West End of London that had originally been home to members of the British upper class; after the First World War, it had found new residents in the form of foreign embassies, but remained essentially a residential area for the upper end of society. Mayfair was also at the heart of contemporary art, home to a number of commercial art galleries such as the aforementioned Guggenheim Jeune and the Mayor Gallery in the same street, as well as the Redfern Galleries (which moved to 22 Cork Street in 1936) and the Leicester Galleries. The Zwemmer Gallery was on Litchfield Street, about 0.7 miles from Cork Street to the east, close to Covent Garden, one of the oldest parts of London and known for its fruit-and-vegetable market. Furthermore, the London Gallery was at the periphery of Oxford Street (its second location even closer than the first), which by the 1930s had been transformed from a residential area into one

dedicated almost entirely to retail. The location of commercial art galleries in its neighbourhood suggests that art was considered a commodity, more like products to be bought and sold than works representing national heritage; indeed, the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery, the two major art institutions at the time, were much further away.

The view of art as product is underpinned by one of the gallery's aims:

The commonest defect of the modern room, on whose decoration and furnishing the owner has usually spent much taste and care, is the absence of pictures, or – worse – the presence of pictures which do not harmonise with the room and the life of those who live in it. It is surprising how much vitality can emanate from a good picture in the modern genre and what an influence this can have on everyday life. Moreover, one can buy such pictures at a moderate price.²¹

While perceiving art as an element of good living, the gallery's other major aim was educational:

The London Gallery offers an opportunity for such study [‘the appreciation of contemporary art, i.e., art which owes its impulse to the times in which we live’], not only through the exhibitions it will arrange, but by the literature (books, reviews, and magazines concerned with art, from all countries) which it brings within the reach of its visitors. Magazines can be studied in comfort in the gallery itself. Books will be on sale. Both books and magazines can be borrowed by those joining the Gallery's lending library.²²

This second goal aimed at bringing through the door an audience that did not necessarily consider itself wealthy. The gallery's emphasis was on moderate pricing, art as design for a modern home and the belief that art can be better understood through education. It thought of attracting an educated elite, fitting somewhat with the neighbouring embassies. However, to what extent were the aims of the gallery realised or only proclaimed in order to attract buyers? What did the gallery exhibit and who actually saw these exhibitions?

Curatorial narratives and commercial aspects of the London Gallery

In scholarship, the London Gallery is known for exhibiting surrealist art, a view which will be widened by analysing its exhibition history, in particular that of the gallery's early years, on the basis of its exhibition pamphlets and further archival material. The earliest pamphlets were in colour, of A5 size, and comprised between four and thirty-seven pages. This layout continued until Naum Gabo's *Constructions* in January 1938, which was the last exhibition to have a separate catalogue until after the war, when exhibitions tended to be irregular. From April 1938 the exhibition pamphlets were published on coloured paper in the newly established journal titled *London Bulletin*, along with the essays, poems and illustrations that filled the rest of the periodical. The pamphlets printed before the *London Bulletin* yield a list of approximately 50 exhibits – of which the title and sometimes the year and technique, and the names of lenders are mentioned – and demonstrate that the gallery also showed abstract and concrete/constructive artworks.

The first exhibition dedicated to constructive art was held in July 1937 under the curatorship of Norton and Cunningham Stettel (Figure 1). It was organized to coincide with the publication of *Circle* – subtitled 'International Survey of Constructive Art' and edited by Naum Gabo, Leslie Martin and Ben Nicholson – a book that had been planned during the previous summer.²³ It has been suggested that *Circle* was the third in a series of journals: *Unit One*, edited by Herbert Read and published in 1934 as a book on the modern movement in English architecture, painting and sculpture,²⁴ was followed by *Axis*, with eight instalments appearing between January 1935 and early winter 1937.²⁵ Subtitled 'A quarterly review of contemporary "abstract" painting & sculpture', *Axis* had a particular emphasis on abstract art.

The so-called *Exhibition of Constructive Art* was shown for two-and-a-half weeks, from July 12 to 31, 1937, an unusually short duration compared to the commonly month-long shows. According to the exhibition pamphlet, it staged works by artists who had contributed to *Circle*: Alexander Calder; Dacre (the pseudonym for Winifred Nicholson, also used in *Circle*); Naum Gabo; Jean Hélion; Barbara Hepworth; Arthur Jackson; László Moholy-Nagy, whose work had been shown in a solo exhibition in the same gallery six months previously from December 31, 1936 to January 27, 1937; Henry Moore; Ben Nicholson; John Piper and John Stephenson (Figure 2). In addition to these, the exhibition pamphlet lists works by one artist who does not appear in *Circle*, demonstrating, to a certain extent, the exhibition's independence from the book publication. This was the editor of *Axis*, John Piper, who would have a solo show at the London Gallery in May 1938.

Further 'constructive' art was shown in *Constructions*, a solo exhibition of Naum Gabo's sculptures held from January 5 to 29, 1938 (Figure 3). For this exhibition, there survive not only an invitation card to the private viewing (Figure 4), but also two principally different versions of an unpublished speech by Naum Gabo, prepared for the day of the opening of the exhibition. In the long version of the speech, the artist distinguishes clearly between abstract and concrete before explaining constructive art.

Abstract art is

an idea about things. When we say: 'A man' this is an abstraction, we mean nobody in particular. When we say 'John Smith' that is no longer an abstraction it is a specific person. When we say 'a line', 'a square', 'a circle' we are making an abstraction which signifies an idea; but when an artist paints a square or a circle or any other figure, whatever its shape, he is doing the same thing which we did when we specified 'John Smith'. He is painting a certain square which has concrete measures, concrete limited and distinguished form ['form' written in with pencil] and which can be recognized from any other squares which are painted in its

vicinity. A painter who is painting what are wrongly called 'abstract forms' does in reality paint concrete things. His painting is far away from being an abstraction and moreover it is a concrete thing having all the qualities of any other of the concrete things in our life which we would never dream of calling 'abstractions'. One general rule could be re-stated here; namely, that anything which can be apprehended or perceived by any of our five senses is concrete.²⁶

Gabo believes that there is no abstract art, as 'abstract' is simply an idea and what one would call 'abstract art' is actually 'concrete art', because it has become form. Gabo further clarifies what he conceives as constructive art in the longer version of the speech:

Now we go over to the 'constructive' idea. I hope that all of you have already had the opportunity of seeing some of this kind of pictures and plastics consisting of unusual forms and lines which do not remind you of anything associated with the forms of the external world. And certainly many of you have asked the question 'what does it mean?' I hope you do not belong to the sort of people who in looking at such works of art just say to themselves 'Because I don't understand it it [sic] must be nonsense or the artist must be crazy.'²⁷

He then describes the history of constructivist art from Malevich onwards, distinguishing himself from Tatlin as follows:

The other part of this generation, and the part to which I belong, have chosen another way, namely, the way which we know today as constructive art. Our main idea is first of all the ardent defence of the eternal spiritual function of a work of art. We saw clearly that the utilitarian function of a work of art remains even when it is not a poster or a layout for a book or typographical arrangement. The utilitarian purpose of a painting or a sculpture lies in its esthetical [sic] reason. If a poster can influence the mind of society thru [sic] the forms and shapes and colors on it, then it can also influence with its shapes and its types ['types' added in pencil] when it is not a poster [...]. The psychic life of a human being is more important than the actual needs of some advertising slogan political or otherwise [...]. It is not the chair which forms the mind, it is the mind which forms the chair. Art had and should keep the function of forming the human mind.²⁸

For Gabo, constructive art is not only an idea, but contains ‘eternal’ spiritual elements that influence society and form the human mind. For him, these are ‘in painting, lines, shapes and colors, and in sculpture, material, volume, space and time’.²⁹ Gabo also includes spheres, because he ‘felt that the visual character of space is not angular: that to transfer the perception of space into sculptural terms it has to be spheric’.³⁰ In contrast to Tatlin, Gabo emphasizes the idea rather than the utilitarian use of art; but unlike concrete art that is simply non-representational, constructive art has the power to change society.

In addition to these two exhibitions, which showed what is commonly referred to as abstract and constructive art, though not particularly announced as such in the introductions in the pamphlets or in the essays printed in the *London Bulletin*, in May 1938 the gallery staged a solo show of work by John Piper, who had participated in the *Exhibition of Constructive Art* as mentioned above. Although held under the curatorship of Mesens, as it was only the second exhibition after his take-over as director one can assume that the Piper exhibition had already been lined up, possibly without Mesens’ involvement in the decision.

Further exhibitions before Mesens’ directorship demonstrate an interest in both abstract and surrealist art. This goes for the *Exhibition of the Theme of Musical Instruments* shown in March 1937, which included two works by Ben Nicholson; in an essay on the artist published in the *London Bulletin* in 1939, Herbert Read was to describe Nicholson’s work as abstract (Figure 5).³¹ *Surrealist Objects & Poems*, which opened on November 30, 1937, exhibited surrealist artworks including René Magritte’s *Eternal Evidence* (1930, today Menil Collection, Houston) (Figure 6).

In addition to abstract and surrealist art, the gallery displayed a great interest in what was then termed continental art. The exhibition of Léger’s work staged in

November 1937 indicates the gallery's interest in Cubist art, while an exhibition of Munch's work in 1936, the artist's first solo exhibition in London, was introduced by Herbert Read in the exhibition pamphlet as having 'developed in isolation from the Paris school'. For Read the artist stood 'at the beginning of the modern German school'. The exhibition following that of Munch's works, shown from December 31, 1936 to January 27, 1937, was dedicated to the Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy, with an emphasis on his materiality: the exhibition catalogue separates the works into 'Transparencies', 'Aluminium Pictures', 'Galalith Pictures', 'Enamel Picture' and 'Cork Picture'. This was the artist's second solo exhibition in the UK, following a show at the Royal Photographic Society in London in April of the same year; the next one was not until 1961, when his work was exhibited at the New London Gallery in London from May to June, with a catalogue for which Edwin Maxwell Fry wrote the foreword.³²

Herbert Bayer, another Bauhaus artist, had a solo exhibition in April 1937. It was accompanied by an exhibition pamphlet that featured the so-called 'Bayer-type', a typography developed by Bayer (Figure 7). Two months later, the gallery staged an exhibition by Oskar Schlemmer, another Bauhaus teacher (Figure 8).

The gallery also showed works advertised under a national label. *Pictures by Young Belgian Artists* was shown between the Bauhaus artists' exhibitions in January 1937. *Cartoons by Low* in May 1937 indicates that the range of media as well as art movements to which the London Gallery was dedicated before Mesens took over its directorship was broader than previously assumed by secondary literature.

The first exhibition to be shown at the London Gallery following Mesens' appointment as director was the 'mini' retrospective of Magritte in April 1938. This was followed by Joan Miró's surrealist works in May 1938 and those by Paul Delvaux in June 1938. *Giorgio de Chirico* and *Humphrey Jennings* were shown concurrently in

the following October and November, Max Ernst in December 1938, Man Ray in January 1939 and a second Miró exhibition in May 1939.³³ These artists have all been associated with surrealism. In other words, with the exception of July 1938, when there was an exhibition dedicated to the impact of machines, surrealism was permanently on display, from Mesens' take-over until the last exhibition before the outbreak of war.

From May 1938 there was always more than one exhibition running at a time. These included works from other art directions, such as John Piper's abstract paintings in May 1938, as mentioned above, and Louis Marcoussis' cubist works. These solo exhibitions were shown alongside subject-oriented shows, such as *Living Art in London* in January 1939, and those works permanently on view, by artists as announced in the pamphlet to the 1937 Schlemmer show: Herbert Bayer, Barbara Hepworth, Jawlensky, David Low, Magritte, Moholy-Nagy, Henry Moore, Edvard Munch, Ben Nicholson, John Piper and Oskar Schlemmer, most of whom had had an exhibition at the gallery in 1936 or 1937. These artists represent a wide spectrum of styles. In other words, while there was an exhibition focus on surrealism under Mesens' directorship, even then visitors to the gallery could see a wide variety of contemporary avant-garde approaches to art displayed on the staircase and second floor.

In terms of statistics, only approximately one-third of the shows organized at the London Gallery before the closure in summer 1939 were described as being associated with surrealism. With one exception (*Surrealist Objects & Poems*, opening on November 30, 1937), all of these shows were curated by Mesens, a clear indication that it was Mesens who started the gallery's trend towards surrealism. In the years 1936 and 1937, when the gallery was run by Norton and Cunningham Stettel, the shows had a tendency towards art related to Germany: four of twelve shows were dedicated to Munch, described as standing at the beginning of the German school, and the Bauhaus

artists Moholy-Nagy, Bayer and Schlemmer, who all had a tendency towards abstraction. Two were constructive art, while the rest, that is the other six exhibitions, represented styles ranging from Cubism to abstract, and themes from musical instruments to the impact of machines, while encompassing sculpture, painting and cartoons. Hence one can conclude that continental, abstract and constructive artworks were the gallery's preferred styles before Mesens (i.e. in 1936 and 1937).

This focus may have a number of reasons. On the one hand, the London Gallery might have wanted to keep pace with neighbouring galleries, particularly with the Mayor Gallery, which had a very similar profile from its beginning in 1933, displaying, as Stephenson has called it, 'a self-conscious 'cosmopolitanism.'³⁴ Furthermore, during these years, the Bauhaus artists Gropius and Moholy-Nagy – who both left the UK in 1937 – were still in Britain, as was Gabo, who had arrived in 1935/1936: suggesting that the presence of these artists influenced the outlook of the gallery. Indeed, their living and working in London meant that the gallery saved on transport costs, as it showed the artists' current work under the label of continental art. However, one can assume that such a focus also represents a political agenda, as these artists had been forced to leave Germany after the Nazi's rise to power in 1933. The fact that the London Gallery provided the opportunity for such artists to exhibit, at a time when they were considered immigrants in London and their works shamed as 'degenerate' in Nazi Germany, indicates a curatorial programme that was consciously political, with an anti-National Socialist stance.³⁵ This argument finds support in the fact that the gallery founders intended to stage a counter exhibition to the Degenerate Art Exhibition held in Munich in 1937.³⁶ Moreover, Mesens was himself from Belgium and therefore sympathised with them as foreigner. He accepted publications for the *London Bulletin* that dismissed National Socialism and Fascism.³⁷ While the gallery's intention before the war might

still be interpreted as cautious, an article published on the opening page of the final issue of the *London Bulletin*, dated June 1940, left no doubt about the journal's anti-National Socialist agenda:

NO dream is worse than the reality in which we live. No reality is as good as our dreams. The enemies of desire and hope have risen in violence. They have grown among us, murdering, oppressing and destroying. Now sick with their poison we are threatened with extinction. FIGHT HITLER AND HIS IDEOLOGY WHEREVER IT APPEARS WE MUST. His defeat is the indispensable prelude to the total liberation of mankind. Science and vision will persist beyond the squalor of war and unveil a new world.³⁸

In addition to the information on the curatorial programme, the exhibition pamphlets also allow an insight into the gallery's attitude towards art and money. Evolving from department stores as a distinct enterprise in London in the 1850s and 1860s, commercial art galleries had become well established by the 1930s.³⁹ However, what did commercial mean in the view of a gallery at that time?

To begin with, only a few exhibition pamphlets provided prices for the listed art work, such as for example that for the Frederick Edward McWilliam in March 1939. If prices were indicated, they were given in guineas. Although the guinea coin had ceased to circulate in 1816, when it was replaced by the pound, the prices for art as well as other items with a 'class' connotation – including horses, furniture and luxury goods – continued to be given in guineas. Rent, on the other hand, was counted in pounds; the gallery's monthly rent was £100 pounds, payable to the Goupil Gallery (approximately 95 guineas and five shillings).⁴⁰ Prices for the works in the McWilliam exhibition – varying between twelve and 120 guineas for a sculpture, and three to six guineas for a drawing – were in the range paid by the Tate for an artist's first works, and similar to prices charged by the Lefèvre Gallery.⁴¹

However, in view of the monthly rent, and taking into account salaries, publication and running costs, the gallery would have needed to sell quite a few of the cheaper works to break even. An undated list of 87 art works in the archive mentions sale prices between one pound (for two pen drawings by Banting) and 350 pounds (being achieved for both Juan Gris' *Still Life painting* from 1918 and for Chirico's painting *La Mort d'un esprit*, 1916). As the three works by McWilliam on the list are priced at 2, 10 and 50 pounds, this seems to provide a good indication for the ins-and-outs of the gallery.⁴² Without dates for the sales, however, it is difficult to assess the commercial viability of the gallery at that time. Nevertheless, the numerous number of such lists in Mesens' papers, in addition to the frequent discussion of prices in Mesens' correspondence, suggest that pricing and sales played a substantial role for the London Gallery.⁴³

Exhibition pamphlets did not always include prices. However, this omission was not a sign of disinterest in sales. Instead, it was an indication that prices were to be negotiated, as was common practice across galleries. The London Gallery was no exception; the pamphlet accompanying a Joan Miró exhibition in 1938 indicates in a note that 'most of the exhibits are for sale' and that prices are available upon inquiry. Furthermore, the numerous letters written by artists and galleries to the London Gallery illustrate the relevance of prices and their negotiation. Artists also indicated which works could not be sold: for example, Munch, who had an exhibition in 1936 at the London Gallery, provided prices for 4 oils of between 3,000 and 10,000 Norwegian Kroner (150 to 500 pounds), while two works were directed not to be sold.⁴⁴ Financial negotiations included not only the prices of art works and marginal profits, but also who paid for transport costs (including packing, customs and insurance).⁴⁵

Not only were some art works in shows not for merchandise, entire exhibitions were sometimes advertised as no sales shows, such as that of Max Ernst in 1936, advertised on the back page of the McWilliam exhibition pamphlet. Works on display but not for sale illustrate that the London Gallery used a marketing strategy by which it associated itself with key works of art and collectors of high quality that might eventually leverage sales.⁴⁶ Moreover, such exhibitions may have also been meant to be educational in introducing ‘modern’ art to the public, an aim formulated at the foundation of the gallery.

The intended gallery visitors and the accessibility of the London Gallery

Yet who was this ‘public’? Who actually went into the gallery to see the exhibitions? As the correspondence of the gallery shows, artists and dealers did not necessarily visit the gallery to agree on loans or sales, let alone view a particular exhibition. It is evident that, in many cases, they sent photographs of art works and wrote, telegraphed or phoned to drop by while they were in the country. The London Gallery’s bookshop and publishing activities further question to what extent the gallery was site-specific with actual daily visitors in mind, or a *pro forma* art gallery that dealt in art by correspondence and with art through publications.

Indeed, for an evaluation of the role of temporary exhibitions and the display of art works in the dissemination of art by commercial art galleries such as the London Gallery, an analysis of the gallery visitor is necessary. The latter also brings to fore to what extent the gallery was site specific. In other words, did it matter that the gallery was located in London? In the absence of any visitor numbers recorded by the gallery, the retracing of the spectatorship beyond the artist-dealer network will be undertaken by an exploration of the accessibility of gallery and a characterisation of the intended

visitors to the gallery.

To begin with, the curatorial narrative suggests that the intended gallery visitors had to have an interest in avant-garde art and, from 1938, a focus on surrealism. The consultation of the exhibition pamphlets required a reading knowledge not only of English, but also of French: while most of the prefaces that appeared in the pamphlets to introduce the exhibits were in English, those presented in French were not translated. Introductions in German, which were much rarer, were translated into English, suggesting that the intended gallery visitors had to have knowledge of English and of French, but not German, even in cases when the exhibition displayed the works of an artist from Germany.⁴⁷

While such sources help characterise the audience of the gallery, exhibition pamphlets could also be consulted without necessarily visiting the gallery. So what about the gallery's opening times as an indication of a gallery that operated with visitors in mind? As specified on private viewing cards and in advertisements, the London Gallery was open from ten until six o'clock every weekday, with the addition of 'Saturday also' in brackets (presumably the gallery was closed on Sundays). These opening hours resembled those of department stores, such as, for example, that of the chain retailer Woolworth – which was so successful in the 1930s that in 1936 it was able to open a second store in London's Oxford Street, and whose opening times in the 1930s were from nine o'clock until half past five from Mondays to Saturdays.⁴⁸ While department stores were instrumental in the foundation of commercial art galleries in the nineteenth century, opening hours resembling those of these sales centres suggest that the London Gallery was intended for visitors to drop-in. They are, however, not necessarily proof that visitors actually came to the gallery.

In comparison with the *London Bulletin*, which sold for a small charge, the gallery visitors did not need any money to see the exhibitions or to browse in the bookshop, as both activities were free of charge. If they wanted to consult the exhibition pamphlets, they needed to buy the *London Bulletin*, which was available at the London Gallery, but also obtainable from the same places as other high street journals of the time. As advertised in March 1939, single issues could be purchased in Britain at WH Smith bookshops all over the country and in the USA at the Gotham Book Mart in Manhattan. The price for the journal, which could also be bought on subscription, varied between one shilling and sixpence initially, and three shillings later on, as it grew even in its first year from sixteen pages, equally split between text and illustrations, to twenty-eight pages, including twelve illustrations, from which point it stayed more or less the same length. Only the final issue, a triple number, cost five shillings. From March 1939, the periodical's price was also given in the currencies of the countries in which it was available: for that issue, one had to pay twenty-five US cents, nine French francs, half an Italian florin, seven and a half Belgian francs or one and a half Swiss francs. These prices are comparable to those of other art magazines of the time; for example, *Axis*, published between 1935 and 1937, with usually thirty to thirty-two pages, including twenty-one to twenty-five black-and-white illustrations of a half to a full page and one to two coloured plates, was available at a price of two shillings and sixpence. *Abstraction-Création*, published in France, was fifteen francs for a slightly longer version (forty-eight to fifty-two pages with illustrations).

The details of publication and pricing of the *London Bulletin* demonstrate that the gallery was, indeed, interested in addressing an audience larger than that of local visitors. Its list of 'international' prices shows that it targeted potential readers in the western hemisphere, specifically the USA, and France, Italy, Switzerland and Belgium.

Its publication formed an excellent market strategy to attract interest to the London Gallery and other galleries whose exhibition advertisements it carried. Indeed, it seems that the *Bulletin* was intended to attract a wide readership: so wide that it even questions the relevance of the exhibitions for the dissemination of art. The regular inclusion of exhibition pamphlets and essays about artists shown at the same time in exhibitions in nearby galleries – such as Guggenheim Jeune, the Mayor Gallery and also, though less frequently than the other two, the Alex Reid & Lefèvre (commonly known as the Lefèvre Gallery) – nevertheless seems to have been aimed at an actual visitor, interested in avant-garde art, who would go from one to the next of these galleries, which never showed the same artists at the same time. It is such co-ordination that seems to be provide the best proof that the galleries intended to attract actual visitors to see the exhibitions at Cork Street.

The closure of the London Gallery – after the summer exhibition of *Picasso in English Collections* in 1939, until its re-opening with a group show on December 10, 1946 followed by *The Cubist Spirit in Its Time* on March 18, 1947 (Figure 9) – and the suspension of the *London Bulletin* in June 1940, indicate that the gallery visitors may also have been involved in the war effort, and were unlikely to have time or interest in the gallery or gallery visits in general during wartime. Mesens himself, as a Belgian citizen, had to apply to the British government for permission to remain in the UK, receiving authorization in 1940.⁴⁹ After the war, the intended gallery visitors may have been very similar to those of the pre-war years, although now the *London Bulletin* was no longer published, being replaced by a small newspaper that appeared only occasionally. Named *London Gallery News*, it contained poems, advertisement of the London Gallery publications and exhibition pamphlets.⁵⁰ According to Melly, the diminishing publication activities contributed to a decrease in the number of visitors,

who became 'sparse [...]. Few bothered to pay the small amount to buy a catalogue', published for the last month in which the gallery was open.⁵¹ According to the figures provided as part of Mesens' stock-taking, there were more publications than paintings sold between mid-1949 and early 1950.⁵² This means that visitor numbers and publications contributed to the gallery's decline, but the real issue was the shrinking dealer activities that led inevitably to the closure of the gallery in 1950.

Getting back to the question at the beginning of this section, as to what the London Gallery was really about, the commitment to publications but even more so the gallery's curatorial programme synchronised with its neighbouring galleries in terms of content, opening events and length of the exhibitions, demonstrate that the London Gallery was not just a *pro-forma* space for art sale that was conducted by correspondence, neither was it only a site producing and circulating publications on art, but its exhibitions were also curated with (local) visitors to the gallery in mind. One can therefore conclude that the curatorial practices played a substantial role in the marketing strategy, and so did the publications; publications were not only aimed at creating interest, but the London Gallery also relied on their sale in addition to the income through art dealership.

The role of commercial art galleries in London in disseminating modern art

The exhibition history as documented through the pamphlets and other material demonstrates that the London Gallery was not dedicated to surrealism only, as has been claimed in scholarship so far, but rather to avant-garde art, particularly during its early years, when the gallery was run by Norton and Cunningham Stettel and abstract, constructive and Bauhaus artists were living in London. However, the *London Bulletin*, including its essays and poems, did have a clear bias toward surrealism. This demonstrates that the journal, first published eighteen months after the gallery's

opening, as well as Mesens' directorship from April 1938, have dominated scholarship's assessment of the gallery. Though closely related to the gallery through the publication of exhibition catalogues, the outlook of the *London Bulletin* is not the same as the curatorial narrative. This finding demonstrates the relevance of studying the entire exhibition history of a gallery, and its paracuratorial events and publications, in order to assess its approach to art.

The final exhibition of the London Gallery ran from May 25 to June 30, 1950, and was dedicated to works by Yves Tanguy, the Scandinavian painters Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen and Elsa Thoresen and the English artist Samuel Hecht. It also showed sculptures by the German émigré Werner Michael von Alvensleben, the German-born Heinz Henghes and the Scottish William Turnbull (Figure 10). According to Melly, the gallery closed in July or August 1950; the closure was possibly announced as a holiday, as before the war the gallery had a summer break in August and September every year, and in 1939 also did not re-open after the summer. The closure in 1950 was due to the low visitor numbers and sales figures of exhibition pamphlets.⁵³ It is therefore not surprising that this commercial gallery, apparently without other financial support, had to close when it was no longer financially viable. The gallery-owned works were sold off by auction on an 'everything-must-go' basis: amongst others, Mesens bought most, Penrose very little, Zwemmer a few things.⁵⁴

Other commercial art galleries also faced difficulties: for example, according to MacGillp, Guggenheim Jeune suffered a loss of six hundred pounds a year.⁵⁵ Indeed, when left without the support of wealthy donors, commercial art galleries depended on financial success. In this they differ from national galleries, such as the Tate Gallery at the time, which could count upon governmental support.⁵⁶ Yet, it were commercial galleries like the London Gallery that introduced avant-garde art to the public in

London. According to MacGillp, this was due not only to the Tate's staff and trustees, who 'limited the intellectual reach of the institution', but also to the state, 'which further restricted the mobility of the institution by limiting the Tate's Funding. The gallery did not have the resources to offer patronage to artists, and, moreover, expected to be offered discounted prices for works.'⁵⁷ Temporary exhibitions addressed at a local public were fundamental for the London Gallery's dissemination of the avant-garde. Being a commercial gallery, these exhibitions were also central to the marketing strategy to deal in art and so were the publications that were able to reach a wider audience than only that based in London. While the exhibitions and publications may have educated on art, an intention proclaimed at the gallery's foundation, their main function, however, seems to have been to support the gallery financially, directly through the sale of art works and publications and indirectly through widening the audience to attract buyers. Similar strategies were pursued by other galleries, such as the Zwemmer Art Gallery, whose owner was one of the directors of the London Gallery, and which became financially successful as a spin-off from the owner's bookshop.⁵⁸ As young, avant-garde art was difficult to sell in London, commercial art galleries in London did not only concentrate on contemporary art: more established galleries, such as Tooth's and the Lefèvre, also dealt in nineteenth and early twentieth-century French art in order to generate a steady income.

Overall, the 1930s saw the peak of London's power and position within the growing avant-garde world; geopolitical events such as the oppression of artists in continental Europe, and the expansive British Empire, converged with an increasing public interest in modern art, turning the British capital into the movement's creative and commercial heart. Despite the Great Depression, the city saw the opening of a number of commercial art galleries, including the London Gallery. While most of these

closed for the duration of the war, the Arcade Gallery, Leger Gallery and Leicester Galleries remained open, and the Modern Art Gallery was actually opened in 1941 by Jack Bilbo (1907–1967), a refugee from Nazi Germany, who kept it running until 1948.⁵⁹

Promoting art that was steeped in continentalism, produced by white and predominantly male artists and intended for gallery visitors who presumably had a very similar background to the artists on show, the London Gallery contributed to shaping the British capital's understanding of avant-garde art. In what ways it also shaped the understanding of art beyond London, letting commercial art galleries emerge as actors in a network defined by interest rather than by national boundaries, requires a study of its own.⁶⁰

By focusing on the site-specific aspects of the London Gallery, it appears that it was the vision and activities of that gallery, together with those of other commercial art galleries, that must be credited with the creation of modern collections in the UK.⁶¹ In this way, the London Gallery left an enduring footprint in the British national collections of modern art.

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Mesens' papers, The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles (The material in the Mesens papers is organised by boxes and folders. When cited in this article, the first figure refers to the box, the second to the folder (i.e. 5/6 means Box 5, Folder 6)

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N.N., 'Introduction', *The London Gallery 28 Cork Street*, London W1, c. 1930s, pamphlet, 4 pages, unpublished (Peter Norton papers, TGA 9113/5/3, Tate Collection, London)

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Appendix: Exhibitions at the London Gallery

The figure in brackets behind the exhibition title indicates the number of works shown in the exhibition. If no figure is provided, the number of exhibits is unknown.

Year	Month	Title of exhibition (the order of exhibition titles and their spelling correspond with that provided on the source); if known, the number of works exhibited are given in brackets	Description of the exhibitions according to the pamphlets or private viewing cards; sources, if difficult to locate
1936	21/10 – 14/11	<i>Edward Munch</i>	'at the beginning of the modern German school'
	03 – 24/12	<i>Peasant Art and</i>	

		<i>Children's Paintings</i>	
1936/7	31/12 – 27/01	<i>L. Moholy Nagy</i>	Bauhaus
1937	28/01 – 27/02	<i>Pictures by Young Belgian Artists</i>	
	06/03 – ? ⁶²	<i>Exhibition of the Theme of Musical Instruments (67) (Figure 5)</i>	
	08/04 – 01/05	<i>Herbert Bayer (Figure 7)</i>	Bauhaus (exhibition pamphlet with an introduction by A. Dorner)
	06/05 – 05/06	<i>Exhibition of Cartoons by Low</i>	
	in June	<i>Exhibition Oskar Schlemmer. Professor of Bauhaus/Dessau (Figure 8)</i>	Bauhaus
	12 – 31/07	<i>Constructive Art (Figures 1 and 2)</i>	Constructive
	Aug. – Sept.		Summer break – no

			exhibitions
	14/10 – 13//11	<i>Léger</i>	Cubist
	30/11 – ?	<i>Surrealist Objects & Poems</i> (Figure 6)	Surrealism
1938	05 – 29/01	<i>Catalogue of Constructions by Naum Gabo</i> (Figure 3)	Constructive
	Feb. – March		No records for Feb. and March (possibly no exhibitions because of change in directorship Mesens signed his contract on 27 Feb.)
	in April (opening on 30/3)	<i>Magritte</i> (46)	Surrealism First exhibition curated by Mesens and the pamphlet published in the <i>London Bulletin</i> . From now exhibition pamphlets appear in the <i>London Bulletin</i> (the date corresponds with the issue that only gave the month, but not

			the exact date of the exhibition length (this was also not mentioned on the page that listed the works shown in the exhibitions); for the exhibition, see also Mesens' papers, 12/8)
	in May	<p><i>Joan Miró</i> (21)</p> <p><i>John Piper</i> (31)</p> <p><i>Pablo Picasso</i></p> <p><i>Pictures</i> (14) (second floor)</p> <p><i>Eileen Agar</i> (2), <i>Victor Brauner</i> (1), <i>Oscar Dominguez</i> (1), <i>Jean Helion</i> (1), <i>Wolfgang Paalen</i> (1) (staircase)</p>	<p>Surrealism</p> <p>Editor of <i>Axis</i>, abstract</p> <p>Surreal works</p>
	in June (03/06 – 02/07)	<p><i>Paul Delvaux on the first floor</i> (17) and</p> <p><i>Mixed Exhibition</i> (staircase and</p>	Surrealist paintings

		second floor)	
	in July	<i>The Impact of Machines</i> (88)	
	Aug. – Sept.		Summer break
	in Oct. and Nov.	<i>Giorgio de Chirico</i> (18) (first floor) <i>Humphrey Jennings</i> (26) (second floor)	Surrealism Co-editor of the <i>London Bulletin</i> , organiser of the Surrealist exhibition in Britain
1938	Dec.	<i>Max Ernst</i> (51)	Surrealism
1939	Jan. – Feb.	<i>Living Art in London</i> (49) <i>Man Ray</i> (35)	ranging from ‘independent’ to Surrealist, Constructivist and Expressionist Surrealism
	in March	?	?
		<i>F. E. MacWilliam</i> (51)	‘abstract’; elements of Constructivism and Surrealism

		<i>Paul Klee</i> (12) (second floor)	Bauhaus/Surrealism
	April	<i>Louis Marcoussis</i> (20) <i>Joan Miró</i> (19)	‘Cubist’ Surrealism
	15/05 – 03/06, closing postponed until 20/06	<i>Picasso in English</i> <i>Collections</i> (51)	A double number of the <i>London Bulletin</i> dedicated to Picasso
			Gallery closed; the <i>London Bulletin</i> was suspended after the June 1939 issue (= no. 17); re-issued in June 1940 with nos. 18/19/20 published at once (with sole agent A Zwemmer), ceasing after these
1945	18/10 – 03/11	<i>30 Works by</i> <i>‘Scottie’ Wilson</i>	was staged at the Arcade Gallery, London, but ‘presented in conjunction with the London Gallery’(see Mesens’ papers, 24/1)

1946	April/May		Mesens received two letters addressed to the London Gallery (23 Brook Street) by Jacqueline Kennish who resigned on 29 April as manager (it is unclear in what way this refers to the work in the gallery; as she was employed for her editorial skills, it might not be for organising exhibitions); see (Mesens' papers, 5/8)
1946	05 – 30/11	<i>Wilfredo Lam</i> (20) (bookshop of the London Gallery)	Advertised as the first exhibition in London of the Cuban painter Lam (see Mesens' papers, 24/1)
1946/47	12/1946 – 01/1947	<i>Scottie Wilson</i>	Held at the Barcelona Restaurant, 17 Beak Street, London 'by arrangement with the London Gallery' (no exact dates are given)
1946/47	10/12/1946 – 11/1/1947	<i>Group Show. Opening Exhibition</i>	Advertised in <i>The London Gallery News</i> , Dec. 1946, 8 pp

		<i>of the Ground-Floor Gallery (49)</i>	(Mesens' papers, 12/12) Official re-opening after the war (on 23 Brook Street); see Geurts-Krauss, <i>L'alchimiste Méconnu du Surréalisme</i> , 115
1947	18/03 – 03/05	<i>The Cubist Spirit in Its Time (Figure 9)</i>	39 pages, compiled by Edouard Léon Théodore Mesens and Robert Melville
	03 – 30/09	<i>The Temptation of St Antony</i>	Held in collaboration with the American Federation of Arts; works included those by Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, Eugene Berman, Leonora Carrington, Paul Delvaux, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Louis Guglielmi, Horace Pippin, Abraham Rattner, Stanley Spencer and Dorothea Tanning; No exhibition pamphlet found, only a private viewing card (see Mesens' papers, 24/2);

1948	18/02 – 20/03	<i>3 Types of Automatism. Works by Ernst Martin, Paul Paun and Scottie Wilson</i> (34 by Martin, 18 by Paun and 46 by Wilson)	4 pages, with an introduction by André Breton (see Mesens' papers, 24/2)
	23/06 – 24/07	<i>John Banting</i> (in the bookshop), <i>Edith Rimmington</i> (Room A), <i>Peter Rose Pulham</i> (Room B)	No exhibition pamphlet found, only an invitation card for a private viewing (Mesens' papers, 24/2)
1949	?	<i>Works from 1947 to 1949 by John Craxton: First One-man Exhibition in London, Paintings by Vivien Roth</i>	Organised 'in association' with the Mayor Gallery; The only record of this exhibition (without an image) is found on http://books.google.de/
	25/01 – 19/02	<i>First One-Man Exhibition Phyllis Bray. Paintings</i> (Room C)	(see Mesens' papers, 24/2)

		<i>Paintings and Drawings by André Masson</i> (Room D)	
	01 – 26/03	<i>Serious Nudes by Picasso, de la Fresnaye, Miro, Max Ernst, Magritte, Delvaux and others</i> (bookshop) <i>Gordon Bird paintings (first exhibition in London)</i> (Room A)	(see Mesens' papers, 24/2)
	05 – 30/04	Rogi-Andre Magda Szuknovich	French portrait photographer André Rogi (pseudonym for Rosza Klein, married to André Kertész) No information found

		<p><i>The Early Chirico</i></p> <p>(works painted between 1911-1917)</p> <p>(in three rooms numbered A, C and D)</p>	<p>Surrealism</p> <p>Private viewing card (see Mesens' papers, 24/2); for a record, see also https://www.abebooks.co.uk</p>
	10 May	<p>Recent works</p> <p>(drawings, paintings, objects)</p> <p>by <i>Roland Penrose</i></p>	<p>Private viewing card (see Mesens' papers, 24/2)</p>
	10/5 – 04/06	<p><i>Twenty Original Drawings by Pablo Picasso</i></p> <p>(Room D)</p> <p><i>The Early Chirico</i> exhibition (extended until 4 June)</p> <p>(Room C)</p>	<p>(see Mesens' papers, 24/2)</p>
	12/10 – 05/11	<p><i>Allan Milner First One-Man Exhibition</i></p> <p>(bookshop)</p>	<p>(see Mesens' papers, 24/2)</p>

		<p><i>Estéban Francés</i></p> <p><i>First Exhibition in</i></p> <p><i>London</i></p> <p>(Room A)</p> <p><i>New Works by</i></p> <p><i>Austin Cooper</i></p> <p>(Room C)</p> <p><i>Stephen Gilbert</i></p> <p><i>First Exhibition in</i></p> <p><i>London</i></p> <p>(Room D)</p>	
1950	?	<p><i>An Exhibition of</i></p> <p><i>Work by Max Ernst</i></p> <p><i>and Sculpture by</i></p> <p><i>Sean Crampton,</i></p> <p><i>First One-man Show</i></p> <p><i>and Sonja Sekula,</i></p> <p><i>First Exhibition in</i></p> <p><i>London</i></p>	<p>1 page;</p> <p>The only record of this exhibition (without an image) is found on http://books.google.de</p>
	02 – 28/02	<p><i>Joan Miró (14)</i></p> <p>(Room A)</p> <p><i>Desmond Morris</i></p> <p>(17) (bookshop)</p>	<p>Surrealism</p> <p>Surrealism</p>

		<p><i>Cyril Hamersma</i> (16) (Room C)</p>	<p>Invented kerbscapes (Constructivism) (see Prunella Clough papers, TGA 200511/7/8/6, Tate Collection, London)</p>
	19/04 – 13/05	<p><i>Kurt Schwitters,</i> <i>Rolanda Polonsky</i> <i>and Stella Snead</i></p>	Dada
	25/05 – 30/06	<p><i>Paintings and</i> <i>Drawings by Yves</i> <i>Tanguy</i> (15) (Room A)</p> <p><i>Work by Two</i> <i>Scandinavian</i> <i>Painters, Vilhelm</i> <i>Bjerke Petersen</i> (8) <i>and Elsa Thoresen</i> (5) (bookshop)</p> <p><i>Recent Work by the</i> <i>English Artist</i> <i>Samuel Hecht</i> (15)</p>	<p>2 pp (see Mesens' papers, 24/2)</p>

		(Room C) <i>In the three galleries: Sculpture by Alvensleben, Henghes and William Turnbull</i>	
	in July or Aug.		Gallery was closed; Gallery-owned works were sold off by auction on an 'everything-must-go' basis; see Melly, <i>Don't Tell Sybil</i> , 126; for discussions on the sale of the gallery, see Penrose to Mesens, 19 July 1950 (see Mesens' papers, 6/8)

Figure Captions

Only those photographs and exhibition brochures have been reproduced which are difficult to locate or which are discussed in the text. Most of the pamphlets can be consulted at the National Art Library, London (under London Gallery catalogues). They are also part of Mesens' papers, The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles.

- 1 Cover, *Constructive Art*, 12-31 July 1937, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London
- 2 List of Works, *Constructive Art*, 12-31 July 1937, page 2, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London

- 3 Cover, *Catalogue of Constructions by Naum Gabo*, 5-29 Jan. 1938, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London
- 4 Private Viewing Card for *An Exhibition of Constructions in Space by Naum Gabo* at the London Gallery, January 1938, unpublished, Gabo papers, TGA 9313/7/1/10, Tate Collection, London
- 5 Cover, *Exhibition of the Theme of Musical Instruments*, 6 March 1937-?, exhibition pamphlet, Ithell Colquhoun papers, TGA 929/10/3/3, Tate Collection, London
- 6 Cover, *Surrealist Objects*, 30 Nov. 1937-?, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London
- 7 Cover, *Herbert Bayer*, 8 April-1 May 1937, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London
- 8 Cover, *Oskar Schlemmer*, 17 June-10 July 1937, exhibition pamphlet, NAL, London
- 9 Cover, *The Cubist Spirit in Its Time*, 18 March-3 May 1947, exhibition catalogue, British Library, London
- 10 Cover, *Yves Tanguy, Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Elsa Thoresen and Samuel Hecht (and sculpture by Alvensleben, Henghes and William Turnbull)*, 25 May – 30 June 1950, exhibition pamphlet, 2 pp, Mesens' papers, The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles (24/2)

¹ This article is based on a paper presented in the session 'London's Commercial Art Market: Art on sale and display from 1920 to now', convened by Dr Jennifer Powell, AAH conference, University of Reading, April 11 to 13, 2013. A fellowship at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt, Germany gave me the time and financial support to expand the paper into this article. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions that greatly strengthened the arguments in this article.

² For example, the first Surrealist show in the US was held at an art museum, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford (Connecticut) followed shortly after by an exhibition at the

commercial Julien Levi Gallery in New York. The insight into Surrealism as a movement that was not promoted by one gallery dominant enough to take a monopolistic position was the starting-point for a project titled ‘Surrealism by Galleries, Collectors and Mediators’ (2015-2017; see <https://dfk-paris.org/en/research-project/surrealism-and-money-dealers-collectors-and-gallerists-971.html>). Through a number of colloquia (one of which was dedicated to Surrealism in the US), the project aimed to show that Surrealism was spread by a large number of galleries, collectors and mediators (<http://www.labex-arts-h2h.fr/en/surrealism-by-galleries-collectors.html>). For this information, I am grateful to the anonymous peer-reviewer of this article.

³ See Caputo, *Collezionismo e mercato*. The London Gallery is mentioned in Geurts-Krauss, *E.L.T. Mesens* and Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil*. There is also a short review of surrealist books by Del Renzio, titled ‘Who is ELT Mesens?’, 48–9, an unpublished PhD on Mesens by Diane Naylor, ‘ELT Mesens. His Contribution to the Dada and Surrealist Movements in Belgium and England as Artist, Poet and Dealer’ and material in Penrose, *Scrap Book 1900–1981*.

⁴ In this way, this article contributes to the current re-examination of Surrealism as a global phenomenon undertaken in the UK, spearheaded by the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, in collaboration with the AHRC (<https://courtauld.ac.uk/study/phd-research/global-surrealism-tracing-international-networks>), a project which will also contribute to an exhibition on Surrealism organized by Tate Modern and planned to travel to the Art Institute of Chicago in the autumn 2020.

⁵ Most of the material concerning the London Gallery is held in Mesens’ papers, The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles. Some other material is held there in the papers of Douglas Cooper and in the Peter Norton papers, Tate Collection, London.

⁶ The *London Bulletin* was edited by E.L.T. Mesens (from the first issue), by the artist Gordon Onslow-Ford (1912–2003) and artist and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings (1907–1950) from issue no. 3 (June 1938), and by Roland Penrose from issue 8/9 published in January 1939 (being replaced as assistant editor by George Reavey from issue no 11, published in

March 1939). It was printed by the Bradley Press (49 Broadwick Street, London) and appeared monthly from 1938 to June 1940 (20 issues altogether), but was suspended with the issue for June 1939 (no. 15) and then re-issued by the Surrealist Group in England at the beginning of 1940, ceasing with the issue for June 1940. A reprint of all issues with a newly prepared index was published by the Arno Press, New York in 1969. Manuscripts of the contributions to *London Bulletin* sent by Mesens are kept in Mesens' papers (Boxes 14 and 15).

⁷ N.N., 'Advertisement', n.p.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The full list is as follows (names, titles and places are given as they appear in the original):

America (Marian Willard); Australia (A.J. Ralton); Austria (Herbert Bayer); Belgium (E.L.T. Mesens); England (Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Ashley Havinden); France (Hans Arp); Germany (Prof. Walter Gropius, London; Prof. Dorner, Hannover); Holland (Ir. Albert Boeken); Hungary (Prof. L. Moholy-Nagy, London; Marcel Breuer, London); Italy (N. Poli, Milan), Japan (no name mentioned, but the country is listed, suggesting that the intention was to find someone to represent Japan); Spain (Perez de Ayala, Madrid, and Sevt, Barcelona); Switzerland (Hans Girsberger, C. Giedion-Welcker).

¹⁰ Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil*, 44.

¹¹ This was mentioned by Gill Hedley in her paper on Arthur Jeffress, presented in the session 'London's Commercial Art Market: Art on sale and display from 1920 to now', convened by Dr Jennifer Powell, AAH conference, University of Reading, April 11 to 13, 2013. According to Gill Hedley, whose father-in-law was Peter Norton's first cousin, Norton was born Noel Evelyn Hughes and married Clifford Norton. She called herself Peter after Peter Pan, remembered from childhood.

¹² See Holz, "'... not my most beautiful but my best paintings ...'", 88.

¹³ Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil*, 11.

¹⁴ See Geurts-Krauss, *E.L.T. Mesens*, 87.

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- ¹⁵ The commission was specified as either 5% of the difference between the acquisition and sale price, 5% of the commission paid to the society, or 10% on the works that belonged to him and to Penrose. See for the original: ‘ses appointements s’élèvent à six livres par semaine plus les commissions, soit 5 % sur la différence entre le prix de revient et le prix de vente, 5% sur les commissions payées à la société et 10% sur les œuvres lui appartenant ainsi qu’à Penrose.’ Unpublished contract of 27 Feb. 1938, cited by Geurts-Krauss, *L’alchimiste Méconnu du Surréalisme*, 92.
- ¹⁶ Melly, *Don’t Tell Sybil*, 47.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* 50.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* For an illustration of one of the gallery floors, see Geurts-Krauss, *L’alchimiste Méconnu du Surréalisme*, 114.
- ¹⁹ Watson, *From Manet to Manhattan*, 276 (without providing more details on the source).
- ²⁰ See MacGillp, ‘Matthew Smith, The Tate Gallery, and the London art market’, 212.
- ²¹ N.N., ‘Introduction’, n.p. (1930s).
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ See Dewey, “‘Construction through a Plane” by Naum Gabo’, 755; Gardiner, *A Scatter of Memories*, 185; and N.N., ‘Minutes of Editorial Board Meetings’.
- ²⁴ The introduction to the book also explained the name *Unit One*: ‘The title then combines the idea of unity – Unit – with that of individuality – One.’ See N.N., ‘Introduction’, n.p. (1934).
- ²⁵ See Lewison, ‘Foreword’, 5.
- ²⁶ Gabo, ‘Speech’, 4.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 6.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* 9.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ See Read, ‘The Development of Ben Nicholson’, 9-10.

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- ³² See Moholy-Nagy Foundation <http://moholy-nagy.org/exhibitions-archive/>. The New London Gallery founded after the war is unrelated to the London Gallery.
- ³³ Where an artist's name is italicized, this indicates that their works were shown under their name, while works by those artists whose names are without italicization were shown under other titles.
- ³⁴ Stephenson, 'Strategies of Display and Modes of Consumption in London Art Galleries in the Inter-War years,' 116.
- ³⁵ For a list of artist refugees from Nazi Germany in Britain, see Vinzent, *Identity and Image*, Appendix.
- ³⁶ See Holz, "'... not my most beautiful but my best paintings ...'", 88. Although Lady Norton abandoned the exhibition idea in late December 1937, when she left London to accompany her husband, she nevertheless played a decisive role in the mounting of the exhibition *Twentieth Century German Art* held at the New Burlington Galleries in London from July 8 to August 27, 1938, which is considered a protest against the 1937 exhibition organized by the Nazis.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Penrose, 'From Egypt', 15, which introduces the manifesto of the Egyptian group *Art et Liberté* entitled 'Long Live Degenerate Art', published on the following pages. This print demonstrates the journal's support of the group's opinion, also shared by 36 intellectuals who had signed the manifesto.
- ³⁸ See *London Bulletin*, June 1940. Though published without an author's name, it is most likely that it was written by Mesens as the editor of the issue. The capital letters correspond with the original.
- ³⁹ See Fletcher, *Shopping for Art*, 47–64.
- ⁴⁰ One guinea was 21 shillings and amounted to £1.05.
- ⁴¹ The Tate paid for works by Smith: £17 in 1924, £100 in 1927 and £250 in the 1930s. This means that, in guineas, Smith's first painting bought by the Tate was 16 Gns and 4 shillings. For prices paid by the Tate, see Alexandra MacGilp, 'Matthew Smith, The Tate Gallery, and the London Art Market', 212.

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- ⁴² See List of Art Works with Prices, typescript, 3 pages, unpublished (Mesens' papers, 12/11). There are no buyers' names.
- ⁴³ See Mesens' papers, 12/11.
- ⁴⁴ See Edvard Munch to the London Gallery, Oslo, 7 Nov. 1936 (Mesens' papers, 4/3). For dealers, see Robert Giron, several letters to Mesens, Brussels, in June 1937 (Mesens' papers, 4/6). For after the war, see Mesens' papers, 5/11. For the exchange rate, see the Historical Currency Converter, <http://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>.
- ⁴⁵ See, for example, the correspondence between Mesens and Pierre Matisse in 1939, unpublished (Mesens' papers, 4/12).
- ⁴⁶ For this argument, I am grateful to one of the anonymous peer-reviewers of this essay.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, Dorner, 'Herbert Bayer', 7–11 (the name of the translator is not given).
- ⁴⁸ See the Woolworth Museum at <http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/1930s-openinggambit.htm> and <http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/1930s-daylife.htm>.
- ⁴⁹ See N.N., 'Authorisation', unpublished (Mesens' papers, 13/10).
- ⁵⁰ See, for example, *The London Gallery News*, Dec. 1946, 8 pp (Mesens' papers, 12/12).
- ⁵¹ Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil*, 126.
- ⁵² See Mesens' papers, 6/8.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ See *ibid.* 128.
- ⁵⁵ See MacGilp, 'Matthew Smith, The Tate Gallery, and the London Art Market', 212.
- ⁵⁶ See Spalding, *The Tate*, 9.
- ⁵⁷ See MacGilp, 'Matthew Smith, The Tate Gallery, and the London Art Market', 212.
- ⁵⁸ Nigel Vaux Halliday, *More Than a Bookshop*, 96 provides the following figures as profit for its gallery: 1934 – c. £1,400; 1935 – £2,946; 1936 – £3,566; 1937 – £1,053 and 1938 – £1,536.
- ⁵⁹ See Vinzent, 'Muteness as Utterance of a Forced Reality', 301-37.
- ⁶⁰ The fact that the art gallery was commercial offers the possibility to study not only the personal network of the gallery directors, particularly that of Mesens, but also that with

buyers as well as with artists. A mapping of these three networks would bring to the fore the gallery's social network that would help assess in what ways the gallery's curatorial narratives were shaped by personal interests of the gallery directors. To undertake this in the thoroughness that this topic deserves, such an analysis would go beyond the constraints of this article.

⁶¹ See MacGilp, 'Matthew Smith, The Tate Gallery, and the London Art Market', 212; and at more length, MacGilp, Alexandra, 'The London Art World and the Formation of a National Collection of Modern British and Foreign Works at Tate 1926–1946'.

⁶² The question mark here and in the following indicates that the date is not given on any material related to the exhibition.