

Synopsis

of the film

max bill – the master’s vision

by Erich Schmid

The life and importance of Max Bill

Max Bill (1908 - 1994) was probably the most important Swiss artist of the twentieth century internationally. He came from the working class town of Winterthur. He was a rebel but he has since taken his place among the immortal Gods of Olympus. His name stands for art that looks towards the future and accepts social responsibility. There is a social political message in his work that is not always immediately recognizable. Max Bill wanted to design our environment. He had an environmental awareness that is extraordinarily close to modern day thinking.

Erich Schmid has worked for six years to produce the big screen film that will make people aware of this. His film aims to highlight tensions between art, aesthetics and politics.

Max Bill was influenced by the times of shortage he experienced. Those times will catch up with us again if our resources run out. We have now reached a turning point where waste and post-modern luxury are being questioned. Max Bill would have been an ideal aesthetic guide. His life’s work has shown that beauty lies in total reduction or simplicity. Anyone who wants to move with the times cannot avoid this way of thinking.

As artist, sculptor and architect, organizer and creative designer Max Bill laid significant milestones. Thanks to his versatility he has sometimes been referred to as “the last Leonardo of the twentieth century”.

The most important Bauhaus student

Bill studied at the Bauhaus in Dessau, which after World War I, achieved the turnaround to the modern age. From an aesthetic point of view Bauhaus was changing the whole western world until it was relocated in Berlin and closed by the National Socialists in 1933. Bill’s Bauhaus masters, teachers and models were Wassili Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Although Max Bill only studied in Dessau for two years, from 1927–28, he finally became the most important student to come out of the Bauhaus.

Exhibiting in Paris at 17

At only seventeen Max Bill received his first recognition when Sophie Taeuber-Arp showed two of his school works at the legendary “Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs” in Paris. Top world designers like Le Corbusier and Melnikow were also represented. Max Bill was greatly impressed by their work. Eight years later, in 1933, Bill was accepted for the artist’s group “abstraction création” in Paris and exhibited along with Piet Mondrian, Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Georges Vantongerloo. Max Bill was twenty-five years old.

Anti-fascism and the Scholl foundation for the HfG-Ulm

Thanks to his very early anti-fascist efforts in the Ignazio field, the Allies considered Max Bill reliable enough to take a key position (both practical and intellectual) in implementing the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Germany after World War II. As architect he built the Academy of Design in Ulm (HfG) in the early 50s, and then became its first rector.

The HfG was financed by the Scholl foundation. Inge Scholl, whose brother Hans and her sister Sophie were murdered in Munich in 1944, was the president. It was an irony of fate that the progressive HfG-Ulm that based its teaching on the Bauhaus principles was closed in 1968 by a former Nazi judge, Hans Filbinger, who was the minister president of Baden-Württemberg at that time. However, The HfG-Ulm continued to have an international influence on modern design in Europe, Japan and America. The career of designer, as we know it today, is largely thanks to Max Bill. He set up the guidelines and theory of modern design and promoted those ideas all over the world.

Praemium Imperiale or “Nobel prize for the Arts”

Bill kept on fighting for better environmental design and a better world. He was a member and president of many national and international panels of judges. He was always on the move. One year before his death, he was the first Swiss to get the so-called “Nobel prize for the Arts”, the Praemium Imperiale in Tokyo. On 9 December 1994, on his last mission as president of the Bauhaus archive, he collapsed and died at Tegel airport in Berlin.

A difficult person or a difficult field?

Max Bill was thought to be a difficult person, not because he really was, but because his ideas were often misunderstood or rejected. As a boy his parents sent him to a reform school for a stupid reason (he had stolen a penny romance from a kiosk). However, the school authorities were tolerant. Max Bill could paint his first pictures there. Then he was accepted for the College of Arts and Crafts in Zurich. After three years he was expelled for coming to class with make-up still on after the carnival. Shortly before that, he was lucky enough to win a generous prize in a poster competition, so he packed his bags before the diploma, and went to Dessau. He began studying at the Bauhaus. Once again he missed the leaving certificate, this time due to an accident on the Bauhaus stage where he collided with a trapeze artist and lost half a tooth.

Creative response to the loss of an eye

Bill was a person who did not give up but at once converted strokes of fate into creative activities. For example the graphic series “seven twins” that he started designing in hospital the day after having an eye removed due to a tumour, in October 1977. On the other hand, the force of his talent gave him the strength to stand firm against heavy opposition as in connection with the Pavilion sculpture in the Zurich Bahnhofstrasse.

Bill’s secret was a perfect eye

Contemporary witnesses say he must have had a unique visual gift as an artist, architect and designer. He had a perfect eye for the dimensions and lighting conditions he worked with. It was comparable to a perfect musical ear. It is a fact that Max Bill justified the concrete art he promoted by comparing it to music. When you look at it, he said, you do not see an object but a composition that is effective thanks to its creative elements. If someone asks what it means, you can cheerfully refer them to music. Nobody asks about the meaning of music. Concrete art creates an atmosphere or changes it – like music.

The unknown Max Bill

It appealed to me as a film maker and author to throw new light on the well established views on Max Bill. I wanted to make my own contribution to the media coverage, publications and exhibitions that can be expected in 2008 for Max Bill's centenary. To be exact, I wanted to break up the often repetitive exhibitions and catalogues about Max Bill by showing him in a way we have not yet seen.

Concept for the big screen

It was my intention, thanks to my close contact to Max Bill's work (see "personal relations to the film project"), to make a film that would become an essential part of every future presentation about him. This could only be a film for the big screen, for the cinema. It would go further than the television and other film documents that already exist. Of course I also depended on that picture and sound material as Max Bill was no longer alive when I started the film project.

Bill and 1968

My first contact with Max Bill's work was in 1968 when there was a big one-man exhibition of his work at the Kunsthaus, Zurich. It was also the year of the students' revolt. I was one of those who made a big mistake. At that time we young people saw ourselves as non-political opposition, whereas Max Bill was an independent member of the Swiss National Council. As Bill never talked openly about his early political activities, for example, as anti-fascist, we did not know his political background and rejected him as a member of the Bourgeois Establishment. It irritated me personally that I liked his work when I saw it in the Kunsthaus. That was somehow a contradiction.

The second contradiction was in the same year when Max Bill gave a public speech thanking the town of Zurich for their art prize. He called it "contentment in a small town". At the same time we young people, who aimed to use the streets as a political platform, were having an unpleasant time being sprayed with hoses and hit with police truncheons each time we were seen with our long hair. We took the title of his speech too literally. It was nothing more than a provocative answer to a speech given by Karl Schmid, professor of literature at the time. The title of his speech was "The troubles of a small nation". He meant Max Frisch when he said that troubles always produced great creative work in Switzerland. Max Frisch did not accept this theory because he said the troubles of a small nation do not explain the reason for great achievements. It merely becomes a psychological argument without taking the concerns seriously. The discussion went deeper than most people realized.

Against nuclear power, consume and the Vietnam War

In fact Max Bill's politics were very much in line with the students' revolt. He was against excessive consume and a society producing unnecessary goods. In 1965 Max Bill, Sartre, Silone, Max Ernst, Simone de Beauvoir, Max Frisch and others signed the first European artists' protest against the Vietnam War that appeared in the New York Times. He apposed nuclear power and was already promoting environmental protection, although at that time most people talked about environmental design (See p.154 in the catalogue "max bill: No beginning, No end" to the retrospective exhibition at the Gehry Museum. Marta Hereford, Publishers Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008: "The political Bill" by Erich Schmid).

First to sign the “Zurich Manifesto”

Max Bill was the first to sign the “Zurich Manifesto”. He was on the side of the protesters in the conflict between the young people and the local authorities responsible for law and order. However, there was still a misunderstanding of Max Bill’s art by members of the 68 movement. You could say he was in no man’s land: the students found him too conform and the Bourgeois found him too politically left.

Bill bashing and subversive brilliance

A number of journalists and people from the culture sector verbally attacked Max Bill. A Swiss Radio reporter asked him in an interview after he had just received the Zurich Art prize, if he really thought that he had a purpose in Switzerland as an artist and politician. Max Bill answered with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. This lack of enthusiasm was then – without mentioning the question – used as proof of Bill’s basic character. It was re-used years later and broadcast several times. A particularly resourceful cameraman once filmed his mouth so that it filled the whole screen and in this way drew attention to Max Bill’s small, otherwise unnoticeable, speech defect. This was caused by a metal plate in the roof of his mouth. By filling the screen with his blown-up mouth the cameraman made Bill look like a “big-mouthed bluffer” and of course showed him in the worst possible light. The same person filmed the architectural structure of Max Bill’s private house and studio when the surroundings were not yet finished. There was no green to be seen, the sky was grey and the camera shots were taken from below towards the concrete perimeter, so that the elegant cubic building looked like a concrete bunker although it blends into the landscape well. If Switzerland had not usually reacted in a faint-hearted way to great culture personalities, you could think that the attitude towards Max Bill was just a moment of anger resulting from the constant cycles of change we experience. Whatever the reasons were, it did not harm Max Bill. As we see it today, the bashings by unknown people seem ridiculous. On the other hand, most of Max Bill’s statements are valuable documents, each in its own right. There is still plenty of bad feeling on the various political fronts of the Swiss upper class. These bad feelings will only disappear when those involved and their followers become history, which will of course be the case. Bill will outlive them with the subversive brilliance of his work.

Birth of the film

Max Bill died in 1994. I did not know him personally. My film project was started in 2002. By chance it was love that led me to it. In 1998 I married Max Bill’s widow who lived in his house and studio in Zumikon, Switzerland. She staged events and exhibitions there that were open to the public. At the time I was working on my cinema film “Meier 19”. Just for the fun of it I roamed around the house with my camera, especially when people from the culture scene were visiting. At some point I realized that the important contemporary witnesses, who had been close to Max Bill, were soon not going to be available to answer questions. So, without any special purpose and with only the house archive in mind, I started to interview some of the people. Then I reached the point when I had to say I knew enough about Max Bill to justify making a film. But I immediately sensed the possible objections to my project. The criticism would be aimed at my civil status and in-house position. I would be accused of acting in my own interests, being too close to the subject and not being critical enough. But I felt pragmatic enough to continue.

Access to private files

The chance to have access to otherwise private files was very tempting. For this reason I started to persuade my wife, who following Max Bill's death had rather preferred to say farewell, to write a book about him. When she began to write and started to do her own research, more and more material came to light including Bill's unknown anti-fascist efforts that began before the Nazis seized power. This was the basis of his political, social and educational thinking. It is also a theme that runs through his biography.

Overcoming contradictions in his life

When the first enquiries came about what was planned for Max Bill's centenary in 2008, I suddenly felt this was a question directed at me as a film maker. I then looked around to see what film material was available on Max Bill. My book, a detective story that I have already completed but not revised, has been shelved for the moment. There was a lot of material about Bill but there is no real biographic film. There is no film that shows the life of this artist in enough detail to explain the dramatic connections that led to his deep-rooted convictions. He lived on the threshold to present day life constantly fighting for a better and fairer world, using aesthetics and design to implement his message. This may seem like wishful thinking now, but when you think of the strong opposition there was towards Bill's Pavilion sculpture in the Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich and you look at it today, you will see a big contrast. You can watch people stop at the Pavilion and open a book, exchange a kiss, eat an apple, write an SMS or meet without having to buy anything. His sculpture has almost become a ritual and a timeless refuge in the middle of one of the most expensive shopping miles in the world.

One man's fate as a moral example

The fact that there was a tough fight between the wealthy Bourgeois at the top and the petit Bourgeois at the bottom has in time been forgotten. Yet this was not the first or the last time Bill polarized. Finding ways to overcome conflicts and contradictions was part of his life. When I discovered this was a theme running right through his biography, I became interested in the human aspect. I was eager to find out just what people can be capable of. This element appealed to me and did away with my last remaining doubts. My previous films had always featured controversial and polarizing people with civil courage who had interested me. Bill was a logical continuation to add to my previous most important subjects: "Trial and Death in Winterthur", "He calls himself Surava" and "Meier 19". In those films I showed single fates reflecting the moral picture of that particular time.

185 hours of film material

After I had collected all the film material I could find about Max Bill from archives in Switzerland and other countries, there was a total of 185 hours of film and sound material, including my own filming. I could also use the integral library of Max Bill: forty photo albums with more pictures, newspaper articles and photos that Angela Thomas had taken and collected during her 20-year partnership with Max Bill.

A growing love of my subject

It was very important to me that as I got increasingly involved in the biography of this artist my love of the subject grew. It was actually the same as with all the people you meet in life: the more you know of their life story, the better your chance is to love them (or keep out of their way). That is how it was

post humus with Max Bill. The more I learned about him, the better I understood what he basically wanted to achieve with his art, architecture, design and teaching.

Bill wanted to change the world

Bill wanted the same as I always wanted, he wanted to change the world and he found his very own means of doing this; by using his enormous aesthetic talent. He used new combinations of colour and shape hoping they would create a particular atmosphere in his pictures. Bill once said, "I find the structures in art that I don't find in life". If you stroll through urban streets looking at the shops and offices, you sometimes have the impression that he was largely successful. You can see many examples of the choice of colour, shape and design that remind you of the concrete art he represented. Whether it is a simple notice board or the usual interior fittings the influence is everywhere. Of course Bill could not take all the credit, but he was certainly one of the most important creative designers of the 20th century. It is also important to me that my film should make it clear to the public that they are being influenced, more strongly than they realize, by Bill's ideals and achievements.

Under observation for decades

The work that Bill and other designers of concrete art did, apart from Dadaism, is probably one of the most valuable contributions to creative art that Switzerland has ever made. But, as I have already mentioned, it seems to be typical of Switzerland rather to pick holes in its own achievements in the art field than to encourage them. Concrete art is no exception, partly because it was considered elite, subversive and politically left. During World War II and the following cold war, the surrealists, abstract and concrete artists were brand-marked as "the Bolsheviks of culture". For fifty years Max Bill was being secretly watched by the Swiss National Security. The first entry in their register dates back to 1936. It was noted that he had hidden a journalist who was being persecuted in Nazi Germany. Max Bill and his wife Binia had often taken in refugees, both Jewish and political. The artist Max Ernst, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart and his Jewish wife Leda, as well as Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp also sheltered refugees. Max Bill was entered in the records for repeating the offence of "not registering persons seeking shelter", as they described it. He was heavily fined. Today the attitude towards the concrete artists of Switzerland, who were all convinced anti-fascists, is still similar to a policy where this small mountain country, which has no raw materials, prefers to let the art resources that it **has** go to waste rather than rescue them.

The attitude of the well-known Kunsthau, Zurich

Whereas the Kunsthau Zurich is interested in integrating the art collection belonging to the arms manufacturer, E. G. Bührle, the present manager expressed his views on concrete art very clearly when he said in an interview that it ended with Piet Mondrian. For the past decade the Kunsthau has turned down every Max Bill exhibition that was offered, including the one for his centenary. Of course any talk of an exhibition of Max Bill's work includes a discussion about his social political ideals. These ideals are weighed up against Bührle and his art collection that was partly financed with money he earned exporting weapons to Nazi Germany. Viewed objectively, favouring the E. G. Bührle collection as apposed to concrete art, is a political manifesto, because neither the Bührle pictures nor concrete art can be considered without their social political history.

This Manifesto reflects the present balance of power in Switzerland where influential people in art and politics apparently have a rather negative view of the philosophical ideas that the Zurich concrete

artists and Max Bill represented. On the other hand concrete art is not pleasing at first sight. The viewer needs to study it carefully and try to analyse it, also politically. It is not popular and it is not going to get a high quota.

Changing the pattern

This fixed pattern, which has been repeated so often and cannot be shaken by anything new, was a challenge to me as a film maker. I willingly took up this challenge because I thought if Bill had a disadvantage rather than an advantage in his home country then, considering his talents, there must be an enormous amount still to be discovered about him. I would have to concentrate on the unknown Bill and surprise the public with new facts and, if possible, change the pattern in the reception of these works.

In order to do this I would have to study his work very carefully, analyse it and perhaps discover and film things others had not yet seen. First I looked at his sculptures. I went close to them, viewed them from further away, looked at them from all sides and considered how I would film them. Then I suddenly realized something I had never found in a description or heard in a discussion of the subject. There was, for example, a complicated irregular figure “rhythm in space”, that seen from one side looked like a slim figure rising to quite a height. At 90 degrees, looking from the side, it was incredibly extended in width and became a strange shape with three holes – a sort of abstract skull. It took me quite a while to realize that this sculpture was absolutely symmetrical on its axis: that means if you went in a half circle of 180 degrees round it, it looked exactly the same as from the axial of the opposite side. If you circled the slim figure (180 degrees) you came to precisely the same slim form. It was the similar with the “skull side”. The axial of the opposite side was always absolutely identical. This symmetry in a seemingly irregular sculpture was a great surprise. There was an element of infinity in it too, a subject that had continually interested Max Bill since 1937 when he created the sculpture “never ending bow”.

Interpreting Einstein’s theory in art

Nowadays art is no longer confined to three dimensional images, which are completed and therefore limited, but also ventures towards infinity as Einstein defined it. The fact that Max Bill interpreted this in his art and sculptures was the beginning of a new epoch that could possibly be compared to the Renaissance, when perspective was first used to create two dimensional pictures.

The beauty of reduction as a political manifesto

Earlier on I already claimed that nearly everything Max Bill created or designed had some kind of political and social connection. So it is a logical question to ask what political connection Bill’s non-figurative, non-abstract concrete art had.

It is the beauty achieved by reduction. It is his absolutely democratic architecture. He aimed to use the beauty of design to create an outside world where people would feel good or even better. This aim was in line with Max Bill’s political thinking on environmental awareness. He said he was not interested in what each individual thought. He had no wish to look into the innermost thoughts of people like, for example, the surrealists. The surrealists, who were inspired by the secret depths of a person, communicated with evil spirits and ventured into the field of psychology. Bill probably did not understand much about psychology. But he unquestionably knew a great deal about three dimensional relations, lighting conditions, shapes and colouring. With his perfect vision he was able to master all these areas in the best possible way.

He had always understood designing and he stayed in that field. In the broadest sense, he felt that you should take full responsibility for everything you created or designed and expected the public to accept. You could not simply make something and present it, although it made no sense and was not compatible with the environment. It is amazing how far sighted and politically accurate his continually repeated statements were at the time. It was a long time before the Club of Rome spoke about the limits of growth. With his art Bill wanted to tidy up the general chaos by designing places and objects that were ideal for their purposes and would serve as models to be used for life in general “from spoon to town”, as he wrote in his well-known publication about “good design”. His architecture was political because every architect has to be politically minded in a way. But Bill’s architecture was absolutely democratic. It was in complete contrast to the architectural monstrosities of the post modern. This architecture aims to make people feel small and discipline them to admire the buildings they are in (instead of thinking things out for themselves). They should literally be impressed and feel the overpowering effect of these pretentious buildings in a similar way to the Byzantium age when architecture was used to maintain the absolute rule the pope had over the people. Today, when you look at the colossal post-modern architecture, you could say this role has been taken over by the international global concerns.

Max Bill and Max Frisch – opposites

There was not much contact between Max Bill and Max Frisch in their lifetime. This was possibly because the political and social aspects of the work of these two great Swiss was so different. To put it simply, Max Bill and other concrete artists were aiming for objectivity in their work. It was also a mathematical way of thinking that tried to force out individualism (Bill modified this aspect later on). Of course the concrete artists left their personal stamp on their work – otherwise we could not look at a Lohse and name the author. But the concrete designers moved within a system based on objectivity. This was also a political requirement. What they created had to be transparent and it had to successfully pass the tests imposed on their work to prove it was socially responsible. That was in a sense a political statement as only transparency provides the right precondition for a true democracy that is worthy of its name. (In the present media world where political propaganda and with it the available finances play an increasingly important part, I venture to say we have the first “real-life” democracy).

Max Frisch would have had a different opinion but his priorities were quite different. In the 50s “Stillness” was a novel that went in exactly the opposite direction and featured rediscovering individualism as its subject. It was a novel searching for personal identities that had been lost or subordinated due to authoritarian rule or the war. The personal “I” had had to be suppressed for a long time, often in the army.

The contrasts between Max Frisch and Max Bill are culturally very complementary to each other even though they did not have much contact. There may also have been other reasons why they kept their distance. We can only speculate as no one can offer proof today, just a few references. It was the time when Max Bill was sheltering a German refugee who was active in connection with the Schauspielhaus theatre in Zurich (Bill was fined for it). Max Frisch was anything but anti-fascist. (He compensated for that later).

Garage doors and a simple porch on the facade

As an architect Max Bill always designed plain and simple housing for poor people as well as for himself. His private house and studio in Zumikon, which he designed himself, has no representative

frontage with classic pillars as you might expect for a famous man. The house front consists of four garage doors with a simple porch so that you reach the house with dry feet. The façade consists of a simple insulating outer casing without any decorations. The “Bill house” in Zumikon is evidence of the theory that beauty lies in reduction, in the dimensions of the building, which direction it faces and the natural play of light and shade in relation to its natural surroundings, but not in a pompous frontage designed to impress. There is no client in the world who would have liked such simplicity in a house he had commissioned. Instead of building a noble façade Max Bill invested in extending the living and working areas inside the house.

The architecture of the HFG Ulm

The Academy of Design in Ulm is also an excellent example of very early democratic thinking in Bill’s architecture. The entrance to the academy with its double doors looks like the entrance to a small apartment house, possibly for three families. You would have to go a long way to find an equally simple, unpretentious entrance to a university or higher school. The first thing you see in Ulm is a delivery and parking area for cars. There is no representative façade. The parking and delivery area is logical not only from a geographic but also from a practical point of view. It is under a terrace and connected to the canteen and kitchen. When you go into the Academy of Design in Ulm, you soon notice the generous proportions of the sequence of rooms that were designed to serve the purpose of this higher school. There is a breathtaking curved bar with a seating arrangement that makes it possible for people to sit in full view or discreetly hidden. Groups could get together there, and it was a place where the various educational interest groups could be formed. It was designed as a social meeting point where the entrance, exit to the terrace, canteen and kitchen converge. Everyone had to pass this point in order to fetch their food or go outside onto the terrace. You always had to pass the bar but you could not do so without meeting someone or having to avoid them. That was an integral part of Max Bill’s political architecture. The outer appearance of the university was not at all in keeping with popular ideas in Germany at the time. It was built post war when there were shortages. Partly for that reason it was a building designed to meet the basic needs of a higher school. The architectural design was even more radical than the Bauhaus Institute in Dessau. Walter Gropius, who built the Bauhaus in Dessau after World War I, was financially in a much better position than Max Bill immediately after World War II in Ulm. The building in Ulm has unfortunately been altered to meet modern university requirements. It had an uninterrupted flow of light that was not only good for the heating bill but also added brightness to the interior. There were practically no enclosed corridors but rather a succession of light rooms with the inner courts, rather like atrium, leading to other rooms and open spaces so that the whole interior was bathed in light.

“Liquidating the old”

You could have said it was an architectural sculpture that still made sense. In the meantime, in spite of being classified as a protected monument, there have been serious changes made to the university that Bill designed. You could regret this (and should) but on the other hand it has been possible (more or less successfully) to adapt the building he designed for the HfG in Ulm to new university requirements. In 1968 the Academy of Design in Ulm was closed by Hans Filbinger, who became minister president of Baden-Württemberg during the Cold War. His comment was, “in order to create something new you need to liquidate the old”.

A political bedroom?

How was I going to show the political thinking behind Bill's architecture, art and design in my film? I wondered how Max Bill had lived privately. How much importance did he place on his private life? What is the most private place a person has? In a way I wanted to peep through the keyhole of his bedroom, to look round and see if he kept things neat and tidy in a place where he felt nobody was watching him. Then I actually found a photo of his bedroom that Angela Thomas had taken at some time. I was curious to see if this photo would show a contrast between Max Bill in his bedroom and Max Bill's public image. Did Bill make a difference between his public and private life? And how did he live and come to terms with those contrasts? Then there were the usual questions to be answered: Where did he come from? Where did he live and what were his thoughts? Where did he get the energy for all his new ideas? When he was misunderstood, where did he get the strength to stand firm? What was his reaction to the situation in his lifetime when the national socialists set out to destroy the world? Did he oppose them? What was his attitude towards those who were persecuted: the refugees who came to the safe haven of Switzerland to save their lives? How did he use his architecture and design in the post-war period and where do you find the political and social aspects in his work?

Shooting the film

My camera man Ueli Nüesch and I made a very thorough search for evidence in the places where Bill lived and worked. Ueli Nüesch always chose ideal shooting locations at the most important places. He and the chief lighting engineer Ernst Brunner and the audio engineer Dieter Meyer also found ideal solutions. I did not want my questions to only be answered in spoken interviews with contemporary witnesses. Above all I wanted pictures to answer the questions. Pictures are made up of light and shade. Therefore the lighting we chose whether it was artificial, daylight or mixed lighting showed in what light (also in a figurative sense) Bill's architecture and his sculptures were seen. Using lighting to help, I wanted to show his three dimensional works in a way they had not so far been seen. I wanted to show the unknown Bill and aimed for a paradigm change towards him. My first approach was cautious and based on the rather obvious fact that an object is only seen in three dimensions thanks to light. The opposite is that in darkness a space is non-existent. A dim misty light shows a figure as a two dimensional silhouette. It is only possible by using different lighting – filming from the side and against the light - that a figure or area appears in three dimensions. This formed the basis of our shootings. Our film team were given the task of finding the optimal light to show Bill's architecture and sculptures as clearly and as three dimensional as possible so that we could progress from there to the fourth dimension: to the infinity of the work. This is what Max Bill would have deserved.

Light plays a leading role in the film

It was only by setting myself the task of going round and round the subject, of looking at his works at different times of the day and in different seasons, that I realized not only the element of infinity already mentioned, but also that Bill must have considered light when choosing the shapes and materials for his designs. Lighting was definitely an important element to him. Bill must have been an architect of lighting. You can tell this by the fact that instead of architectural frills and ornamental house fronts, his buildings are flooded with light. This light is used to accentuate the architecture with all the possibilities that light has to offer - using a play of shadows, reflections and nuances of colour.

Before he built he must have known exactly where and when the sun rose and set in each season. He must have calculated the flattest and the steepest angle daylight was going to enter the building. He also knew how high the rooms needed to be and at what level the windows had to be light the rooms of a building with natural daylight. This in turn would give it an optimal aesthetic three dimensional design. He must have used the possible lighting conditions to plan the building elements of his architecture. He designed the rooms to lead from one to the other allowing an exciting penetration of light. Nature also played an important part. By doing without any form of surface decoration, for example, he let nature into the rooms with all its delightful play of shadows. Nature literally makes even the best ornaments look pale. Imagine the effect of the shadows of trees on fancy wallpaper or the stucco of a neo-classic interior, for example. The shadow would be spoilt. But not if it fell on bare, but well-proportioned walls, floors and ceilings. In this case nature's shadows beat any work of art. Reduction also meant to Bill that there should always be room for nature, knowing that the beauty of nature is greater than any man-made object.

The interior and exterior architecture

As an architect Max Bill played with the relations between the interior and exterior areas, with the relation between architecture and the surrounding countryside. That was particularly the case for his private house and studio in Zumikon – the “Bill house”. The interior and the outer living areas (a covered and an open terrace and an inner court) blend into each other and are so closely connected that you hardly notice if you are inside or outside in the summer months. On the other hand, the outside areas have very definite borders. There is a hard edge, a solid concrete wall that gives the impression of jutting out too far into the surrounding landscape at first glance. The surprising thing is that optically this hard edge does not affect the view of the surrounding green area. On the contrary, the pleasing aspect of the concrete border is that it shows off the surrounding country making it seem bigger.

It is the flooring that makes the connection between inside and outside. Bill chose the same light brown clinker tiles throughout. On both floors of the living area they give an especially warm light that has a positive effect on how you feel. It is thanks to the flooring that the faces of those who live there and their visitors are softened and appear literally in the best light.

Relying on the prerequisites

From the beginning I hoped that art, aesthetics, light, shape and colour would be very important in my film. My wish was fulfilled during the shootings and in the montage – which was where the actual film began. We could rely on this material that then formed the basis of our film. It was great to know (and this is only possible with documentary films) that the film is not actually based on a script but rather the shootings and montage. For the film scenario we had only the evidence from our research and the material we found, as well as pictures from the archives. We relied on shootings, pictures and sound recordings for the rest.

Personal relations to the film project

As director of this film project I was heavily criticised on account of my personal relationship. The panel of judges, who had to decide whether the film was worth sponsoring, were so critical that the whole project was unanimously turned down. The reason: I was married to Max Bill's widow and she plays an important part in the film. Therefore the film director's critical objectivity would be missing. Although in a way the questions were justified, I did not see why this closeness could not be seen as

an advantage. It might have softened the unanimous vote against the film. However, the project was reconsidered and the jury gave their blessing for the following reasons:

1. Angela Thomas was not only Max Bill's wife but also an art historian and
2. Apart from her personal relationship, she always kept a professional distance to the artist.
3. As film director and author I have a relaxed attitude towards the subjectivity of a person giving information but there are clearly defined limits: It is essential that personal opinions are transparent.
4. If it is quite clear who is speaking in the presentation, I can leave the public to judge whether the statement is true or not.
5. When subjectivity is made transparent it is a way of showing the public that I think they are capable of judging for themselves.
6. Angela Thomas's part in the film is transparent because she is shown mainly in the "Bill house" in Zumikon where she and Bill lived. She continually refers to the black books that she compiled during the twenty years she and Bill spent together. Like Angela Thomas these black-covered books have a clear transparent message and show her role openly. They illustrate the experiences she had with Max Bill and he had with her.
7. Everything that Angela Thomas says about Max Bill in the film refers to her position as companion, wife and art historian that lasted until the artist's death.
8. There is a transparent definition of her role in the film and in the photos from the archives: Angela Thomas is constantly seen as Max Bill's wife and companion. This image does not get lost at any point in the film; not at the shooting locations or in the picture documents or in talks with other contemporary witnesses.
9. As she is also an art historian her statements are both subjective and well-considered. This is a lucky combination.
10. For a documentary film there is basically nothing better than genuine subjective personal opinions and statements because these often have a greater impact than an actor's role in a feature film.
11. My close relation to the subject was never a problem or disadvantage. On the contrary – it was an advantage. I would never have had such good access to the necessary material without Angela Thomas. Without my wife (and Max Bill's widow) I would not have been able to make this film. I would have found out hardly anything useable about Max Bill's personal life which was closely connected to the work he did.

Bill's reception at home

I would like to add one last remark: Imagine there was a film project about Picasso. It would probably never have occurred to anyone to complain of lack of distance if Picasso's widow had offered to be in the film. People would have thought it so exciting to find out more about this dynamic artist. Whether she was an art historian or not, all critical questions about being too close would have been dropped. Sadly Picasso's widow killed herself. Bill had happier surroundings. For the Max Bill story it is most fortunate that Bill's widow Angela Thomas, who was forty years younger than him, has an excellent memory and the professional knowledge of an art historian. There is no one else who was close to Max Bill with the same possibilities. It is thanks to her professional knowledge that she is able to avoid becoming uncritical of the subject. The same is true of me as the author.

Erich Schmid