

# Peter Lowe

I regard art as a form of communication. For me art is not synonymous with beauty, taste, utility, propaganda or self-expression. I do not accept the hedonist view that it is to do with making pleasing shapes. If I thought that were so, I would turn away from art on the grounds that there are already plenty of shapes around that please me. If art is a form of communication how does it differ from other forms of communication? I think that the answer to this question is that the difference between art and other rule bearing activities (which is what communication is) is that art makes clear that it is a rule bearing activity. (Here I am referring to rules that govern communication not conduct.) Rules of communication are more fundamental than rules of conduct since a rule of conduct needs to be expressed in language.

Having outlined the theoretical position there remains the problem of actual practice. As I make no direct reference in my work to conventional modes of communication like language or gesture, it is essential that the rules are self-evident and deducible from the artifact itself. In order to do this I construct serial works in which any member of a given series (other than the first member) is generated by a simple transformational rule from the previous member in the series. Understanding the meaning of my work is a matter of understanding the rules on which it is based.

Although I make constructions, I do not see myself as a Constructivist. As Kenneth Martin says:

'If I say I construct I am by that only stating here a method of thought and work, and not that I am a Constructivist, Constructionalist, Structuralist or Structurist, which also define adherence to particular schools and philosophies'. (Studio International, January 1970) Construction has a larger and more distinguished history than the movements emanating from Russia sixty years ago even though these movements and their supporters have appropriated the term for their own purposes.

Peter Lowe. March 1979

## One man exhibitions

1974

Gardner Centre, University of Sussex  
Lucy Milton Gallery, London

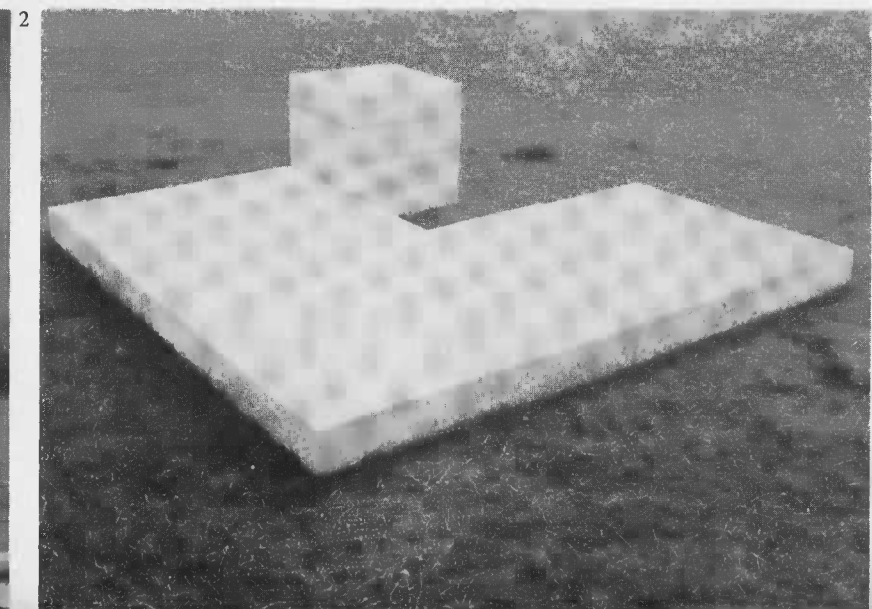
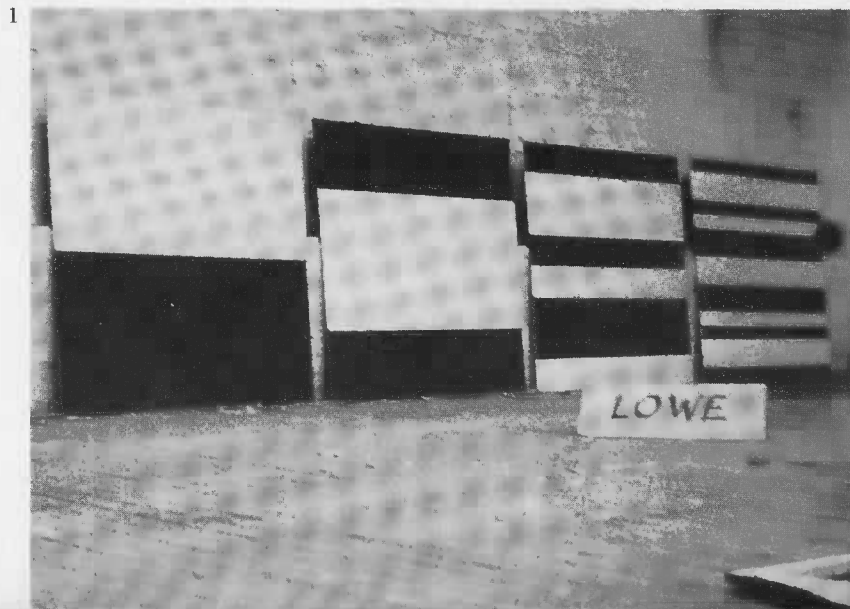
## Recent Group exhibitions

1978

Maximum Minimum, Amos Anderson  
Museum Helsinki

Constructive Contexte, Arts Council,  
Artists Market London  
Galeria Teatru Studio, Palac Kultury,  
Warsaw

S. East Gallery-Dilworth, Steel, Lowe  
Galerie Circulus, Bonn  
Rational Practice, Gardner Centre  
University of Sussex



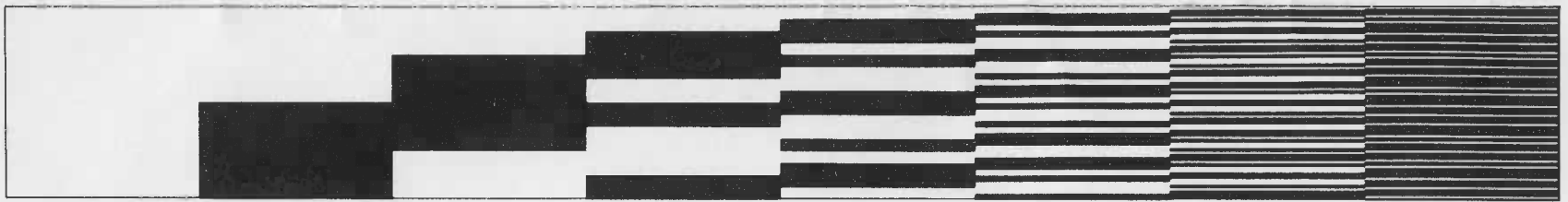
1  
Four part serial painting based on  
transformational rule, 1979.  
Realised with the help of the  
British Council

2  
16 Identical elements, 1979.

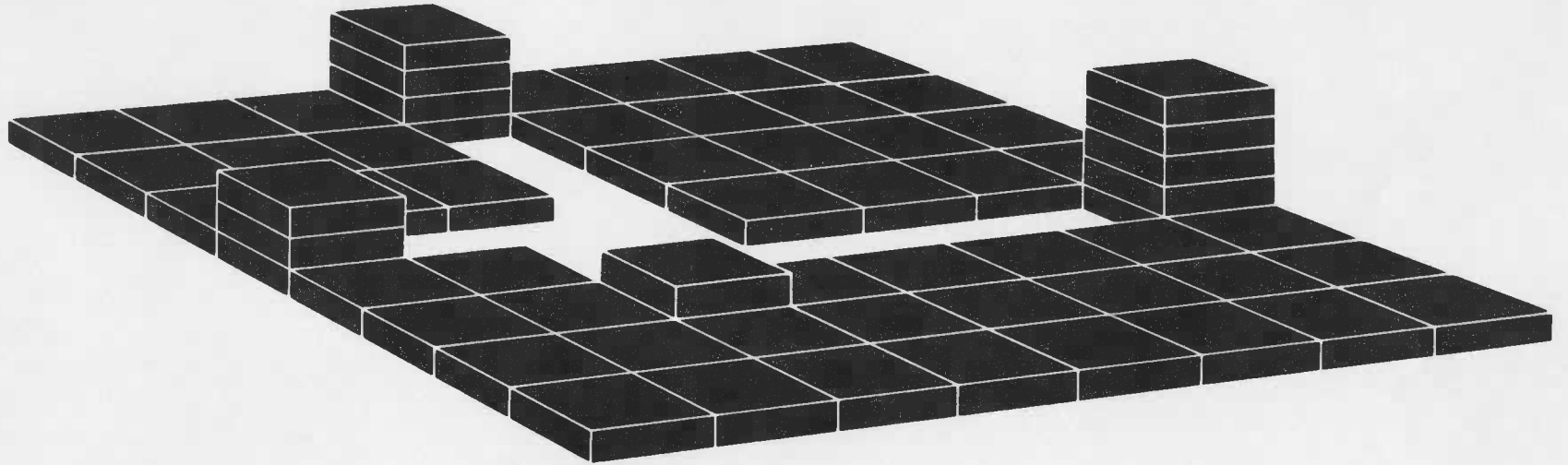
3  
Eight part serial, 1979.

4  
Drawing, 1978.

3



4



Reply to questions received from Loughborough University of Technology relating to Symposium on Cognition & Creativity, April 1993

Where do your ideas come from?

In the context of a symposium on creativity and cognition and as a non-scientist and non-philosopher, I find this apparently simple question difficult to answer. It seems as though there are at least two assumptions being made. I am not so sure that the word 'ideas' quite describes the impulses, feelings and appearances that are involved. It does not necessarily follow that the originator of an idea is the authority on how it arose. I am conscious that when ideas are at issue they are seldom entirely the property of a single individual but are often part of communal knowledge.

In the accompanying drawings I use the sequence 1,2,3,4 because it fits the perimeter of a decagon and moreover even the most casual observer can see it. I have, incidentally, made use of a number property that was known to the Pythagoreans. This however is not intended as an endorsement of plagiarism, or an appeal to tradition, merely an acknowledgement that some components are ultimately unoriginal.

Ideas sometimes come from trying to find solutions to problems. To be able to recognise or formulate a problem that has not already been solved is in itself a major problem for contemporary artists.

Can you track your thinking?

To be able to recover the information contained in my drawings is important to me. Because I devised the rules governing this particular set of drawings, it is impossible for me to see it as a dispassionate onlooker might. The knowledge that there is a pattern ensures that I look at it differently than if I believed it to be no more than a random configuration of triangles. The organisational principle is obvious to some but many people see only a vague suggestion of it. In much the same way I might sense order in a musical composition but with far less awareness than the composer or a trained musician.

How do you explore possibilities?

Like keen eyesight, the ability to look inwards and imagine what could happen or has happened is a tool for human survival as much as it is a plaything for artists. I have no tips for exploring possibilities apart from drawing and constructing models.

What and how do you reject?

I reject examples that I judge to be too simple or too complicated but that does not imply that I consider taste to be the basis for art. My decision to reject or change something is related to scruples and aspirations which include practicality, originality, logicity, completeness, intelligibility and conciseness.

Peter Lowe

February 1993

Whether they are presented as flat designs or three dimensional objects, the components in many of my works are often identical. A building block approach is used and this method predominates not only in the making of the work but also in the thought that orders their components. Repetition, modularity and logic in the appearance of my work is echoed in the structure of computer programs.

In my drawings lines and areas are repeated and combined with others according to certain predetermined rules. Since computers are well suited to tasks involving repetition, modularity and logic, it seems appropriate to use them.

There are few limits to the facilities the computer offers the artist. The simulation of traditional "organic" painterly appearances and photo realist effects has also been available for some time. Why not use them too? This demands a long and detailed argument.

My apparent obsession with simplicity understandably disappoints people who seek artistic fulfilment in more elaborate ways. For this I have been labelled a minimalist and a 'determinist'. At Goldsmiths I feel like an atheist among believers and I have found myself isolated by my incredulity. I am unable to accept for example that the word 'beauty' has any universal meaning other than to signify approval. Moreover I have difficulty disassociating this word from the idea of taste. The phrase 'a sense of beauty' I find obnoxious insofar as it entails privileged sensitivity. This to me smacks of elitism and, when backed by power, of oppression. There are, after all, those who torture to the sound of Beethoven. If on the other hand a 'sense of beauty' is common to everyone, then is this fact worth remarking upon? Claims for specialist insights into the mysteries of beauty are never as impressive as the willingness of otherwise intelligent people to believe in them. The circularity of the argument can roughly be presented as follows:  
Question: "Why is X beautiful?" Answer: "Because people who understand beauty agree that X is beautiful" Question: "Who are the people who agree that X is beautiful?" Answer: They are the people who understand beauty.

This is not to deny that such elusive qualities can have meaning, It has been said that a beautiful woman is the promise of happiness. It could also be said that for some a beautiful object is the promise of money. Dada in its many guises plays with these issues and the "beauty" of such work is less likely to be discovered in its objects than in the recursive elegance with which it parodies them.

Dame Edna's excesses strike similar chords to those that find resonances in my fascination with the work of Jeff Koons.

As my son pointed out, a difference between comedians like Chaplin and Mr Bean is that while Chaplin dealt with material poverty, Mr Bean deals with the poverty of the soul. Koon's work in all its bland opulence reminds me of that spiritual poverty.

The Midas touch whereupon everything the successful artist touches turns eventually to money is a paradoxical legacy of Dada. The new orthodoxy endorsed by recent Turner Prize nominations is the result of following tried and tested recipes for making art. It has long been standard procedure for artists to choose an object, perhaps have it copied and enlarged or minaturised in another material. put into a glass case, on a plinth, in a frame, and or in a gallery. Goldsmiths reputation and house style rests upon this formula..

Appeal to the fallacy that something is art because it cannot be proved that it isnt, is attributable to the apparent mistakes made in evaluating the work of Vincent van Gogh a century ago and is made possible by the difficulty we have in defining art without foreclosing on future creativity.

There are, says Alasdair Gray, three kinds of literary theft (Lanark 1981) Block Plagiarism, Imbedded Plagiarism and Diffuse Plagiarism.

The more financially successful post modernists have expropriated Dada methods and turned them into moneymaking clichés just as adroitly as the traditionalists and mannerists did for impressionism. Post modernism makes a virtue out of plagiarism at the same time that it makes money out of it. The expectation that art should be original has conveniently been done away with. By referring euphemistically to plagiarism as 'parody' one does not change its essentially parasitical nature.

Once it is established that "everyone is an artist" then there are no special attributes associated with this occupation and it is revealed for what it is, a mere pretension. If every object is either a declared art object or potentially an art object awaiting the performative act which confers artistic status upon it then the necessity to make special objects to look at has gone. The infinite variety of objects now presented in galleries and art degree shows is intriguing and this at first sight appeared liberating and exhilarating were not the repetitiousness of the process so predictable a formula.

This brings me to discuss why I work with rules. It is important to me that I should be free to apply rules from choice. No artist slavishly follows aesthetic rules at someone else's behest whether that someone is a gallery owner, museum director art school tutor. There is a difference

between applying rules and blindly following them. One can no more be free of rules (whether invented or discovered) than one can be free of the necessities of nature. With these thoughts in mind I have tried to enumerate the choices of forms that exist within the confines of whatever system I have chosen or devised. To quote from William Blake: 'I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's' . Jerusalem(1865) Working with rules provides me with a heuristic tool and it also makes for communication without resorting to words or iconic imagery .

Not all rules can be stated in simple words like 'You must paint in a free way (sic)' or 'Avoid artistic preconceptions'. (These examples are quoted from real life utterances). The former incidentally curtails the freedom to paint in other ways while the latter paradoxically imposes a preconception. As an art student I did four years hard labour under nonsensical rules like these.

Some of my drawings present an exhaustive set of arrangements within predetermined constraints. In this example, there are eighteen ways in which a binary identity can be deployed around a seven sided figure. The binary identity is presented here as a right angled triangle which faces in either a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. What you see is what you get and what you get is nothing more nor less than the presentation of a mathematical fact. Or is it?

In an artistic context my drawings have as much to do with mathematics as Duchamp's fountain has to do with plumbing. There clearly are other ways in which the mathematical information can be communicated. That I have chosen these particular forms no doubt says something about me and what you say about that will in turn reveal something about you.

Whatever else they may appear to be, they are the (concrete) outcome of the abstract system that structured them. They are not about a constructivist utopia. They are not about particular individuals or their desires or needs. At the same time however, I cannot deny that they can be interpreted as aggressive deployments of form. They call to mind the sharp bastions of walled defences or explosive forms resembling the jagged perforations of bullet holes. They may suggest the stellar structure of a flower or the pushing and pulling of people dancing in a ring. Each frame may seem like a still from a cinematic sequence and has been likened to images of a dancing figure. Their perceptual ambiguities now and then suggest to me unresolved tensions and inner conflicts. In other ways they suggest fractured glass or ice. The fact is that they started out without conscious reference to any of these appearances or flights of fancy. They were therefore not the intentional product of such ideas.

The accompanying series of drawings derives from the first series and each has its corresponding counterform. For example; each form and counter-form combines to give a symmetrical arrangement of squares. This property is the unforeseen consequence of the operations which were applied to them. Between these two extremes are two more series of drawings which are also the counterpart of each other. There are seventy two possible drawings.

The logical structure of the next drawings leads to a finite result in certain cases and not in others. An inconsistency or illogically in the application of the rules would simply be a mistake. Matisse says exactitude is not the truth. But, in reply, it also has to be said that inexactitude isn't the truth either. It is an aesthetic imperative for me that the integrity of the drawing should not be compromised by taste, imprecision or the toleration of error and for some this will no doubt sound ruthless, masochistic and insane. In the domain of logic however this approach would be regarded as rational and its denial the path to madness.

Symmetry and disruptions of symmetry are characteristic of much of my work and reveal an ambivalence about order and chaos. I am attracted to symmetry and also repelled by it.

Juan Gris, writing about his painting, attached importance to his decision to devise geometric schemes upon which he superimposed shapes which suggested objects such as a news paper or a bottle for example. These traces regulateurs have been in use before Gris applied them but the significance with which he determines his position vis a vis Cezaanne is revealing. In certain works by Paul Klee, geometry precedes the iconic or representational aspects. There are obvious analogies to music here, and indeed Klee was a musician. We find a visual transcription of a J S Bach score in the note books of Klee.

I recall Kenneth Martin bringing the newly published German edition of Jurg Spiller's book "The Thinking Eye" into Goldsmiths during the late 1950's. He and his wife Mary Martin were then among a minority who understood the implications of such ideas and who were interested in the relationship of mathematical thought to visual art.

In spite of Max Bill's lucid work and theoretical writings, there has been little acknowledgment or understanding of his ideas. Apart from notable exceptions, one looks in vain for references to Max Bill in recent aesthetic texts which purport to deal with twentieth century art. Art writing seems preoccupied with rhetoric. Adapting literary criticism to visual art can reveal interesting relationships but so too can the use of other means.



An interesting analysis of Mondrian's Neo Plastic paintings was carried out by Anthony Hill who used graph theory to reveal Mondrian's preference for certain kinds of symmetry.

Concrete art is ill served by creative writing . Most art writing is by people with an arts or literary background. When mathematicians or scientists do write about art works they often refer to Escher or the golden section and, more recently, to fractals.

The mathematician F van der Blij has written about the mathematical content of several examples of concrete art without resorting to the usual art /science cliches.

The Martins demonstrated that one might also write down a procedure beforehand and look for forms that fitted the notation. I am greatly indebted to them for opening my mind to such exciting ideas . This possibility was attacked by some as mere painting by numbers but the comparison does illustrate the difference between following rules and applying them and also the incomprehension that the Martins faced from the art world in making such distinctions.

These drawings which I am told resemble bar codes were preceded by such a notation. They were suggested not by bar codes but by language. The colours are analogous to vocabulary and the rules governing their deployment are analogous to grammar. These versions show six possible types but unlike the other drawings they are potentially endless and never resolved. Some are symmetrical others not. The most obvious things are not necessarily the most important. It was not my intention to parody bar codes or histograms but such a reading is not inconceivable.

Looking at things inevitably involves making comparisons with other things. Sometimes relevance seems altogether obscure or missingaltogether.

These drawings represent projects for sculptures which are also based on logic, modularity and repetition. They are like collages except that the thickness of the layers is a measured and conspicuous part of the whole.

Two systems may start differently yet end with the same result form. Comic strip is a form of serial drawing in which incidents are separated by a frame or space. The means is simple yet it can suggest time passing. Although my drawings have no funny people in them, they are related to the comic strip by means of presentation. Because of the means of presentation they are also tenuously related to the Bayeux Tapestry, Trajan's column and much of Hogarth's work. All of these great works present events in chronological order. In these narrative works something



is finally resolved; a battle is won, a marriage ends in disaster etc. My drawings however constitute a logical order. The marks in my serial do not refer to any set of events actual or imagined. Instead the spectator is asked to look at them for what they are. Because concrete art is free of narrative it may draw our attention to structural ideas which are often obscured in figurative art by the power of its images. My drawings are a series within a series, an eight part one within a five part one. The linear square around each drawing both separates events and is part of them. It compresses a scale of intervals which progressively expands. The scale of intervals is based on  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8$ . Because they add up to 36, it fits the following areas exactly:  $1 \times 36$ ,  $2 \times 18$ ,  $3 \times 12$ ,  $4 \times 9$ ,  $6 \times 6$ . In the first drawing the scale is simply placed against an edge of the square. In subsequent drawings it expands and folds against itself till the final drawing where it completely fills the square.

I am grateful to F van der Blij for describing these drawings mathematically. He noted that 36 happens to be both a triangular number and a square number. He was able to calculate what the next possible set of drawings in the series would be and discussed how my drawing relate to diophantine equations.

Unfortunately, I was ignorant of these mathematical facts when I made the drawings so it cannot be claimed that this knowledge entered my work at some subliminal level. Armed with a more sophisticated mathematical knowledge, I would have enjoyed more insight and control over the outcome of my work.

Investigations into the mathematical content of art produces yawns from both mathematicians and artists. Traditionally the appraisal of visual art is dominated by literary criticism and rhetoric. ~~It is rare~~

My ideas come from.....

The above sentence could be completed by randomly substituting any one of a very large number of abstract nouns without falsification. The more abstract the chosen noun, the more likely the statement would be true. The more specific the randomly chosen noun, the less likely will be the truth of the statement.

It is not surprising that most of the categories of abstract relations listed in Roget's Thesaurus seem to describe or coincide with the formal characteristics of much of my work and the work of many other artists. This might at first indicate that some art relates to abstract ideas and language. But then we could describe any art in general terms and still remain truthful.

If I declared that 'language', 'order' or 'existence' was the origin of my work I would expect to be believed even though these statements were merely approximations to the truth. I would expect claims that the idea for them came from 'Lepanto', or 'sputum' to be queried even if these claims were entirely true. This is because the appearance of the work bears no obvious relationship to either of these words.

I would like to claim that my discoveries came about through working from first principles but this cannot be true however much I desire this. Ideas seem to come from sorting through the muddle of experience and for artists this experience also includes an awareness of art.

Ideas sometimes result from seeking solutions to problems. The recognition or formulation of a problem which has not already been solved is in itself a major problem for any developmental art form. One solution available to the post modernist is to ditch the problem of originality altogether.

It is normally impossible to track one's own thought process. The best anyone can do in this respect is to re-examine their previously recorded ideas for any discernible links between them. Sometimes this retrospection does generate new ideas and sometimes it results in art being looked at in terms of previous art. A single drawing or artefact might trigger off a chain of thoughts resulting in yet more drawings just as the solving of one problem creates others.

Within the artworld, reassessment takes place in a much wider arena than art schools, galleries and artists' studios. The artist is

an onlooker and a participant who draws her conclusions from this inconclusive process. The making of art is a way of coming to terms with life's confusion and giving it form. An appreciation of order and chaos is fundamental to the enjoyment of art.

My drawings are partly the outcome of method. Modularity, repetition and logic are included in that method. Rejection or acceptance of ideas is a haphazard process which can be referred to ethical scruples and general principles such as, practicality, originality, logicity, completeness and intelligibility.

## STATEMENT BY THE ARTIST

Peter Lowe

Although I am about to emphasise rational aspects of my working methods, I admit that feeling and subjectivity are part of them. One has feelings about ideas and ideas about feelings and it is curious that some visual relationships appeal more than others. When it comes to 'feeling' I am not thinking of pathos or the 'The Crying Gypsy' painting.

Feeling taps into life's experiences and desires and, like personal taste, is seldom accessible to reason. I can elaborate how and why one shape fits with another but not everyone shares my excitement about this and likewise I might not be able to empathise with their obsessions either. Mathematics and certain kinds of 'abstract art' are similar but fundamentally different activities. They share concerns for pattern for example. There are exceptions but abstract artists are not usually interested in trying to prove theorems but neither artists nor mathematicians are able to entirely dispense with metaphor. The fact that we can designate one thing to stand for another is deeply imbedded in ways of thinking and seeing.

Historically, extreme abstraction posed problems. Purged of symbol and icon semantic meaning disappears. This may have been why some former abstract artists repudiated abstraction and returned to figuration.

In one sense all figurative art is abstract in the same way that mathematical models are always an abstraction of reality. Even figurative painters who transcribe shape and colour from what they see before their eyes are involved with the process of abstracting and simplifying. Taken to

extremes, this process can reduce visual experience to a single line or a dot beyond which is nothingness. At the other extreme of the spectrum of abstraction is the plenitude of objective reality in all its chaotic complexity; the facsimile or the Duchampian 'ready made.' Abstract art is locked between two extremes and is not without boundaries. Contained within these extremes of abstraction are mimetic renderings of reality inviting the viewer to find correspondences with things in the real world. Unavoidably I have unleashed a string of metaphors to describe these thoughts. Is an abstract artist's preoccupation with beginning and end a subliminal metaphor masquerading as hard-headed objective searching for conclusive patterns?

These thoughts and doubts influenced me to experiment with intelligible arrangements and pattern which I hoped would transcend cultural boundaries and paradoxically allow more freedom, not less.