

Mary Martin 1907–1969

The end is always to achieve simplicity

Exhibition tour

16 October – 18 December 2004
Huddersfield Art Gallery, West Yorkshire

08 January – 27 February 2005
Kettle's Yard House and Gallery, Cambridge

12 March – 08 May 2005
Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne

25 June – 11 Sept 2005
Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth

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Technical supervision

Andrew Charlesworth

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**Mary Martin as a
Teacher**

Peter Lowe

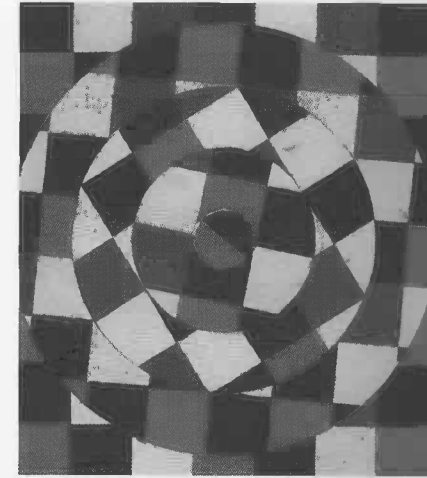
When Mary Martin visited Goldsmiths College School of Art in 1959 to give a course on constructed art, it was still a gentle backwater in New Cross, staffed by amiable eccentrics. It was not yet the fashionable launch-pad for artistic mega-stars that it became some forty years later.

Colin Jones, a fellow student, and I were especially interested in Mary Martin's contribution to Lawrence Alloway's book, *Nine Abstract Artists*. I had seen her environmental construction made in collaboration with the architect John Weeks exhibited in *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.¹ This enclosed a *Screw Mobile* by her husband, Kenneth Martin.

Kenneth Martin had been teaching us life painting and composition, but the official syllabus did not embrace 'abstract art' and the majority of students and staff felt threatened by it. If you did it for the exam, you failed. Kenneth Martin's occasional classes in constructed art were tolerated but he was considered to be extremist due to the mathematical bias of his ideas. Colin Jones recently told me of a student who complained to the principal, Patrick Millard, asking to be excused from Martin's classes because he 'couldn't take it anymore'!

Mary Martin was of average build, in her fifties, neat grey hair in a bun. She had a pleasant, intelligent face and a calm presence. She spoke clearly but with a cool detachment and slightly mocking humour. She referred in her teaching not only to art but also to mathematics, biology and architecture, illustrating her commentaries by drawing directly on a blackboard. We took notes in the mornings and were invited to develop some of the topics in the afternoons.

To break the ice and prepare us for what was to follow, she asked us to try to draw freely without any rules and although we were unaware of the paradox, I feel sure she would have been. I found this exploratory doodling agreeable because I had done something similar during a year away from art school while trying to purge myself of the mannerisms and academic imagery that I had soaked up there. I was especially attentive when she linked this activity to an anecdote about the painter Alan Davie who urged his students to make 'bad' compositions and that their efforts never satisfied him as being bad enough. This, she said, was



Peter Lowe: **Collage** 1959
Procean dyes on paper
Courtesy of the artist

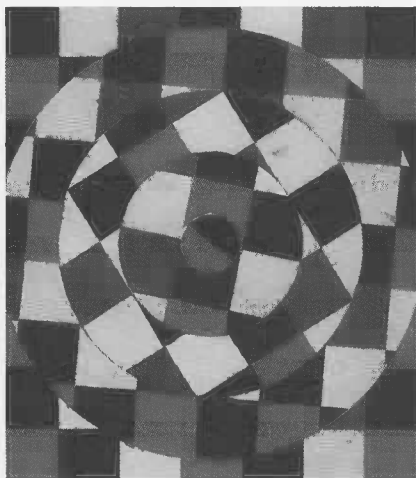
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an example of approaching a problem from its negative side.² It still raises questions of aesthetic judgment and free-will but I cannot recall that we discussed them with her.

She again asked us to draw but this time we were to invent rules and apply them to the drawing. For some this seemed to flout the unquestioned doctrine of creative freedom except that we were now exercising clear choices of our own. She distinguished between the rules and conventions of society and the invented and discovered rules of art and nature. How one interpreted the several different meanings of 'nature' was also important. It wasn't just the countryside of a John Constable landscape. In her view, it included us as part of nature. This struck me as indisputably reasonable. It also seemed to relate to an idea that no matter what structures were put in place, one could not avoid expressing something of one's self. On the other hand worrying about being true to one's own nature was self-defeating and after four years of introspection, I was prepared to look at things differently.

With reference to Klee, she drew the simplest possible grid and onto it she deployed just two colours to represent the simplest possible rhythm. The inevitable consequence was the beginning of a chequer pattern or a stripe.

These ideas didn't inspire everyone however, and Jones and I found ourselves in a small minority who were receptive because Kenneth Martin had prepared us. Generally, students were either dismissive of the simplicity or alarmed by the geometry. I was excited by the very fact that there could even be a simplest grid or rhythm. To fully describe the wealth of information and ideas that she put before us would be a research project in itself.

For example, her course unfolded to bring together a body of interrelated knowledge quite unlike the 'basic design' courses which were beginning to emerge. These too often consisted of isolated and increasingly standardised exercises. In contrast to these, Mary Martin correlated visual entities not only in terms of their morphology, but also in terms of art history. She placed each within a context. The development from point, to line to plane would be related to the theories of

Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. A line taken for a walk à la Klee was related to the idea of a line having a direction. A directed line becoming a loop would enclose a space which she designated positive or negative; depending on whether the line looped in a clockwise or an anti-clockwise direction. These primitive, playful concepts introduced topology and the strange counter intuitive properties of the Möbius strip, Klein bottle and the endless surface structures of Max Bill. The line as a path leading from one point to another brought us to Leonhardt Euler, the legendary puzzle of the bridges of Königsberg and graph theory.

Pathways for the eye to follow have always been part of the enjoyment of experiencing architecture and painting. In Mary Martin's early painting we see evidence of the line as a directed pathway, and in certain early reliefs, planes become pathways. Eventually, permutations of units replace single paths in her work.

It was not so much their choice of interesting examples, but their developmental way of looking and thinking that impressed me about both Martins and their different teaching styles. These were constructions but without being 'Constructivism'. Mary Martin was impressive as an artist and as a teacher. She encouraged a practical and intellectual response to art. Many issues she raised were clear and simple enough yet the implications fueled the imagination for a long while afterwards. One of the strengths of her approach was its experimental nature and her returns to first principles. This gave her work a vitality that informed her teaching and her writing. As I came to know her a little better, her personality seemed to be as reflective and multi-faceted as her reliefs.

Peter Lowe is an artist. He studied under Kenneth & Mary Martin at Goldsmiths School of Art 1954-60 and went on to lecture in Fine Art at Leeds College of Art 1962-64 and Goldsmiths College 1965-2001. He was assistant to Kenneth Martin at Barry Summer School 1963-66.

1 Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 1956.

2 In *Structure* fourth series 2, 1962 she quotes Lao Tzu 'The way to acquire positive is to contain negative.' p.4. Mary Martin, Art and Philosophy.

The Writings of Mary Martin

Hilary Lane

Perspex Group 1963

