Peter Lowe and Systems:
introductory text by Simon Steele

Systems

Peter Lowe was a member of the Systems group of British abstract artists (1969-76). It was a loose grouping of like-minded artists who knew each other mainly through teaching and exhibiting together.

The group arose from an exhibition at the Amos Anderson museum in Helskinki, Finland in 1969. organised by Jeffrey Steele (whom Lowe had met at Barry Summer School in the mid-1960s) and Steele's and Finnish wife, the artist-weaver Arja Nenonen.

Members organised seminars and courses as well as exhibitions and met regularly for discussions in Putney, London, at the home of Malcolm Hughes.

The group broke up under the pressure of political differences in the mid-1970s but many of its members remained friends and continued to exhibit together informally.

Core members included Lowe, Steele, Malcolm Hughes, Michael Kidner, David Saunders, Jean Spencer and Gillian Wise. Others associated with the group included Peter Sedgeley, Michael Tyzack, John Ernest, Colin Jones, James Moyes, Richard Allen, Geoffrey Smedley, John Law and Norman Dilworth.

Exhibitions
System Systeemi's subtitle referred to the term "syntactic art". This was coined by Jeffrey Steele to convey the idea of art created from fundamental units, in the way that words are deployed in an array following grammatical rules to make up sentences in a language. Lowe was initially not in favour of the term but later accepted it as a co-term with others such as "systems" and "constructed art".

The Finnish show was followed by Matrix, at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol; Systems, at the Whitechapel gallery in London (and tour) in 1972-73; and Systems II at the Polytechnic of Central London in 1973.

Systems at Whitechapel was organised by the Arts Council. Each artist showed one work, supported by drawings and a statement. Lowe wrote: "The selection of procedures and forms can initiate events and appearances which are not prefigured in the imagination. The unknown is present in the known and familiar. Its revelation in one's own work and other people's is an incentive to make further studies."

Members also exhibited at Lucy Milton's gallery in Notting Hill, London, from 1972 to 1975. Many also showed in Constructive Context in 1978, after the group had disbanded.

Systems dissolved
Many members disagreed over proposals for an exhibition organised by Nicholas Serota in 1975. As Steele put it, this was to be "not a straight reaffirmation of constructivism but rather to show the interconnection between constructive art and the broad range of recent developments".

Political differences also came to a head in 1975, during a discussion at the home of Michael Kidner on aligning the group's collective philosophy with Marxism, which frustrated Lowe. He said: "Art is first an intention to communicate about art, not an idea about art, not propaganda … I don't want to have anything to do with that. … I thought I was engaged in apolitical visual research that had nothing to do with Utopian ideals." He left the group and "on closing the door I immediately felt liberated".

Ultimately the group could not agree on a common position and ceased to exist as a collective unit.

Serota's idea for an eclectic exhibition placing systems artists in a wider context was realised in 1980 with Pier + Ocean at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1980. Lowe was the only former Systems artist to participate.

The dissolution of the Systems group

Although *Systems II* was the last of the group's collective exhibitions it was not the last they wished to hold. In October 1975, the leading members of the group met with Nicholas Serota - then near the end of his period as director of the Museum of Modem Art in Oxford and shortly before he took over the direction of the Whitechapel Gallery.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the group's proposal for a major exhibition of constructive and systems art, but Serota was not interested in what he considered would be a show which simply reaffirmed historical Constructivism. He wanted an eclectic exhibition which would place the Systems artists in a much wider contemporary context - an idea eventually realised in the Hayward Gallery's *Pier+Ocean* exhibition in 1980.

The group were invited to sponsor a show of this kind and they held several meetings to consider their response. Differences of view within the group, already a cause of strain, came to a head in these meetings. Writing in 1980, Steele recounted:

> The 'systems' group of artists was dissolved in 1975 as a result of internal conflict over just such a proposal as P+O. The group had been invited to host an international exhibition whose intention was to have been expressly not a straight reaffirmation of constructivism but rather to show the interconnection between constructive art and the broad range of recent developments.

Most of the group considered that the recent developments in art to which Serota had referred were less a continuation of the Constructivist tradition and more a range of deviations from it. The problem, as Steele and others saw it, was that the new developments of minimalism and conceptual art already enjoyed an influence and institutional support far superior to that accorded to Constructivist art.

The disagreement within the group was whether the proposed eclectic exhibition would improve or worsen their position. Some felt an association with newer and more widely promoted forms of art could result in constructive art gaining a more eminent position. Others thought the opposite result was more likely, with constructive art being swamped by more currently fashionable trends.

Similar disagreements caused the failure of several other plans to mount a Constructivist exhibition in the latter part of the 1970s, including the rejection by the Arts Council of a proposal for such a show developed by Steele, Lowe and Dilworth.

Disputes within the group were not limited to disagreements about exhibition

plans. In part there were personality problems, centred around Malcolm Hughes' energetic personality and assertive attempts to gain recognition for systematic art within the art community. Reflecting on this recently, Steele has suggested:

> I suppose that an art-makng method becomes an 'ism' when, in addition to its aesthetic and epistemological intrinsic characteristics, it can be said to exert some political influence on events in the environment, education, ideology etc. In this case SYSTEMS certainly (in my view) had the opposite effect from the one Malcolm Hughes - its primary protagonist envisaged. The tactics employed were bound to alienate more artists - especially young ones (not to mention critics, curators etc - than they were likely to attract.

There was a significant political dimension which caused problems, both within the group itself and between them and the outside world. The mid-1970s were years when the Cold War was still a significant feature of international politics and its anti-Communist impact on the Western world influenced governmental and institutional attitudes. In this context, the Systems group suffered by acquiring an unpopular Communist identity. This derived from two sources. Firstly, the group acknowledged and indeed proclaimed their Constructivist credentials - and Constructivism was associated in many people's minds with Russia and hence, however illogically, with the Soviet Cold War enemy. Secondly, a number of members of the Systems group were overtly Marxist in their personal philosophies. Unfortunately for them, the crucial distinction between a Marxist analysis of society and contemporary Soviet communism was one which establishment figures in the art world seemed generally unable or unwilling to make.

As Peter Lowe remembers:

> For the most part we acquiesced in the generic label 'Constructivist'. Unfortunately, the word Constructivist was identified with Russia, the Communist Cold War adversary. Thus in spite of Joseph Stalin's persecution of of the Constructivists and Formalists and his imposition of Socialist Realism, we were tacitly associated with Russian Constructivism.

The irony was that the Systems group was also attacked by the British left for producing art which was unintelligible to the masses.

This was a period, too, when art education and the public and commercial art world was dominated by American influences. Peter Lowe has described the scene thus:

> The CIA were covertly ensuring the supremacy of Abstract Expressionism and Minimal Art as part of Cold War strategy. ... Local Abstract Expressionists proliferated and taught in schools:They became a strident anti-rationalist, super-productive US orientated majority.

> Journalists and directors of our national institutions favoured US art and linked their careers to it. There was a good deal of tabloid thinking and syntactic art was invariably labelled 'cold and clinical'.

It might be argued, too, that in an economic and social sense, the UK in the early 1970s was experiencing a number of systemic failures, and that in

consequence, an artistic philosophy founded on concepts of order and logic was out of kilter with the nature of the times. The miners' strike of 1972 and its effect on power supplies led to Prime Minister Heath's imposition of the three-day working week. Another strike by miners in 1974 was a key factor in Heath's failure to win the general election that year and the resultant arrival of the short-lived Wilson government which was unable to control inflation, which peaked at 24% in 1975. An economic crisis in 1976 resulted in Britain seeking a humiliating loan from the International Monetary Fund and the imposition of swinging cuts in public expenditure. In Northern Ireland, the 'bloody Sunday' event in Derry in 1972 signalled the beginning of a new IRA bombing campaign there and on the mainland which continued throughout the rest of the decade.

Taking a broad view, events of all these kinds can be seen as indicating a systemic failure of government to create the type of orderly and humane society for which Constructivist art might be taken as a metaphor.

Political strains within the Systems group were brought to a head in the course of group discussions towards the end of 1975. In September of that year, six members of the group (Hughes, Kidner, Lowe, Saunders, Spencer, Steele) together with the musician Michael Parsons, met in Michael Kidner's studio to disccuss whether the group should clarify its collective philosophy and to consider its potential social or political stance. There appears to have been a view that the absence of any kind of manifesto when the group had been formed had resulted in too uncertain an understanding of what the group stood for. The discussion was tape-recorded, and a transcript from which all the following quotes have been drawn survives in the group archive.

The debate was structured around a paper tabled by Jeffrey Steele. This suggested that the experience of the group's members as artists and teachers accorded with a Marxist analysis of the two-class nature of capitalist society, and that the dominance of this system was "incalculably damaging and menacing to present and future societies". The document also proposed that in this situation the group's members perceived three interconnected systems - wealth distribution, systems of ideas and beliefs, and systems of propaganda.From this assumed common understanding, questions arose about the relationship of aesthetics to political ideology, whether the production of art could be separated from its use, and crucially: "can art be beneficial to the whole of society in a capitalist society?"

Steele's paper also suggested that in the field of art, it was in the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie to divert the masses by promoting "nostalgia for past or future heavens" and "psychotic (fascist) fantasies". Systematic constructive art, however, propagated an entirely opposite and rational ideology.

At the risk of over-simplifying a long and inconclusive discussion, three sets of differing views appear to have emerged. Steele's position was very clear in both his paper and in his contributions to the debate. Talking of his own work, he argued that while intrinsically it had

"some value as art", its application was always ideological and that "everything - teaching, exhibiting, selling - has an ideological function" which in the current situation served the dominant bourgeois class. When Malcolm Hughes responded by suggesting that by earning a living by teaching and not by selling, the artist was freed from the influence of the capitalist market system and ideology, Steele replied:

> In order to be employed we have to do one thing, but what we're actually concerned to do is the opposite. We are experienced tricksters. It's an integral system with a dialectical contradiction .... Ideology is all important. So my answer to the question 'can art be beneficial to the whole of society in a capitalist system is, quite clearly, no.

At one point in the discussion, reference was made to statements by Mary Martin. She had taken the traditional Constructivist view that a knowledge of proportion was a contribution an artist could make to social well-being, as evidenced by the spatial relationships of buildings designed by Le Corbusier. Steele's view of this was unequivocal. He considered Mary Martin's approach as anti-Marxist, in the sense that it implied "tinkering with the environment in a cosmetic way" without changing fundamental social relations - "just make better buildings and everyone is happier". For Steele, a proper contribution by artists to the well-being of society could only be achieved fully within a revolutionary change in the nature of society itself - and to this extent, Steele's position was aligned directly with the philosophy of revolutionary Russian Constructivism. Steele's position was supported by David Saunders. When Malcolm Hughes suggested that the two-class concept of society might be wrong and that there might be a third technocratic class which could work creatively within a capitalist society, Saunders rejected this out of hand. "The third class is a myth", he replied, "it serves one or the other".

Hughes had a less rigid view than that of Steele or Saunders. He accepted in part Saunders' rejection of a third class - but only as it related to the distribution of wealth. He argued that it was possible to maintain a detachment from the control or influence of bourgeois values and systems when dealing with the development and dissemination of ideas. He also saw the art object as "a vehicle for the manifestation of ideas", going on to argue:

> It's the nature of ideas through the specific nature of the artefact which is the most creative and the most potent in terms of changing society or communication with society.

But when challenged by Steele as to whether his ideology was or was not Marxist, Hughes replied that it was - though he quickly qualified this by saying that although he considered himself a Marxist he was interested in the dichotomy between the power of ideas and the values of a materialist state. Michael Kidner is not recorded as a major contributor to the debate, but clearly took a position nearer Hughes than Steele. At one point he commented: "It's not black and white: the man who is employed within the system does not necessarily support it". He also criticised Steele's papers for being "very orthodox" and ignoring developments in Western society such as the growth of interest in the idea of worker participation.

Steele and Hughes can be seen as the leading proponents of two positions, which while differing significantly in emphasis, shared the common feature of placing art firmly in an ideological and political context. Peter Lowe's position

was very different.

Towards the end of the discussion he brought into the open his reservations about the whole debate. He said:

> The thing that bothers me - we do this kind of work, and it develops gradually from many origins; and now it seems we've got to graft an ideology onto the group and the work. ... It also seems to me to be a good thing not to go for a readymade set of beliefs. It's very fashionable, and convenient to find an alibi for your work in left-wing ideology, very plausible. Having to call a meeting to discuss our ideology seems to be symptomatic of this kind of anxiety.

Saunders responded by saying it was not a matter of whether the group had a label: the political and ideological dimension was vital because "certain processes in society we are living in right now look like the final collapse of capitalism", and an uninvolved ivory tower art "does seem a little bit meaningless". Lowe's reply was:

We might be just going with the wind: we might be trying to back a winner …

Art is first an intention to communicate about art, not propaganda ... I don't want to have anything to do with that.

Given the range of conflicting views expressed at this meeting it is not surprising that no agreed conclusions were reached. One issue which it highlighted, and which cast doubts about the group's future, was the difference between Hughes' optimistic belief that it was possible for a Systems ideology to make a positive quasi-political or ideational impact within a materialist society, and Steele's pessimism on the same point. But the more immediate effect of debates of this kind was Peter Lowe decision to leave the group - and the first member to do so. He has recently recalled becoming increasingly frustrated with his colleagues' exposition of the view that:

> ... all acts were political acts and that art therefore was a vehicle for ideology . ... I thought I was engaged in apolitical visual research that had nothing whatsoever to do with Utopian ideals. I resigned after what turned out to be the last meeting of the Systems group because of a disagreement which centred on this issue. On closing the door I immediately felt liberated. It was not my intention to destroy the group and I was surprised when it ended. My affection and respect for members of the the group remains.

By early in 1976 the Systems group had ceased to exist as a collective unit, as following Lowe's departure, most other members decided there was no possibility of reaching an agreed ideological position. But this did not imply a complete dispersal of the membership. Friendships had been established which survived major differences of political opinion, and a feature of the years which followed was the frequency with which various of the group's former members exhibited together from time to time. And this close personal contact between some former members endures to the present day.

<u>The Group's place in British art history</u>

If a view was taken of the significance of the Systems group in 20th century British art, based only what has been written in recent and current art literature, the conclusion would probably be that the group was no more than a very minor and unsuccessful attempt to promote the continuation of an out-dated modernist tradition. Books and exhibitions devoted to British art

from the 1970s onwards have largely ignored the group, while art dictionaries (such as the 2000 edition of Grove) include only very brief entries about systems art in general and make no reference to the Systems group or to any of its members.82 A very recent example of this exclusion of the group from both exhibitions and art literature was the 2004 exhibition and accompanying book, *Beyond Geometry,* in Los Angeles.83 The purpose of this very large and eclectic show was stated to be an international survey of what the curators described as simplified form and systematic strategies in art in the period 1940 to 1979. Minimalist and conceptual work was included alongside constructive and systems-based work. Of the 120 artists whose works were shown, 36 were from Western Europe (including Germany, France and the Netherlands), 27 were from South America (particularly Brazil, 10 were from East

Europe (mainly Poland and Hungary) and there were 2 from Japan. The remainder were from the USA European artists included several with whom the Systems Group had contacts and whose work they admired, such as Richard Lohse and Frangois Morellet. But works by only three artists from the UK were shown, none of whom were in the Constructivist or systems mainstream - Bridget Riley, Alan Charlton, and the less well-known artist and Dada-esque poet, Brion Gysin, who showed an 'art as language' piece. None of the Systems group artists were shown - nor, for that matter, any of the Constructionists - and there are no references in the book to either group. It is as though either no aspect of British Constructivist art was considered of sufficient interest to deserve recognition, or alternatively that the curators had no knowledge of the British Constructivist scene. This American view differs from that in Continental Europe, where there has been a continuity of exhibitions involving members of the Systems group throughout the past 30 years.

It is noteworthy that recognition of the group, and of the work of individual members, was and remains at a very low level within the UK. It appears that the view of influential leaders in the British institutional art world has been and still is that systems or syntactic art does not merit a significant place in the canon of 20th century British art history. Is this view justified ? It is a view that has, of course, a wider element relating to the significance of the Constructivist tradition as a whole in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Limiting discussion here to the Systems group, Iwould suggest that a reconsideration of their position is merited, and that a current view would accord the Systems group a much more significant role than has yet been generally acknowledged.

There are several reasons for this suggestion. Through their works these artistshave demonstrated the durability of the essential formal characteristics of Constructivist art - that is, the construction of non-representational art objects by a systematic process of manipulating basic geometric, mathematical or scientific elements in the production of concrete and aesthetically satisfying visual outcomes. They showed that such outcomes did not depend on allying the constructive approach with

the historically utopian concept of a synthesis of the arts in the service of society. What impresses now about their writings and work is the strength of their common commitment to a rational art based on these formal Constructivist principles. The lack of any direct reference in their work to the economic, social, cultural and political turmoil of the times might, of course, be considered its principal weakness and a justification for its marginalisation. I would take a different view and suggest that it constituted a strength. It demonstrated the possibilities inherent in an approach to art which, because it was based on fundamental concepts independent of the shifting fashions and events of the times, could be a lasting basis for the production of works which have an appeal to the eye and the mind regardless of their immediate historical context.

In addition, through group discussion and personal experiment, these artists enlarged the vocabulary of forms, concepts, formulae and systems which the constructive artist can use in evolving the structure of the art object. It was a strength of the group that while all its members adhered to basic formal principles of constructive art, they differed widely in the particular forms which each developed. Some used principally geometric forms, others turned to mathematical elements which themselves varied considerably from artist to artist. There were variations, too, in the parallels different artists drew from semiotic, linguistic and musical sources. All these differences have enriched the 'language' of Constructivism - making discoveries or suggesting new directions which later constructive artists may explore.

By operating as a group, even if only for a few years, the Systems artists can also be seen as helping to secure the continuity of the Constructivist tradition. True, some individual Constructivist activity extended into the 1960s after the dissolution of the Constructionists, as outlined in the early part of this chapter. But in the absence of the stimulation and encouragement intrinsic to the collective activity of a group, there was surely a possibility that systems-oriented artists working in isolation might have become discouraged and eventually abandoned this approach to artistic expression. In reality, contacts and friendships made during the group's life contributed to a number of its members continuing to give each other encouragement to continue their systems-oriented work after the group's dissolution. Further, through their teaching roles, their commitment to this mode of working has been transmitted to those artists of the succeeding generation who are working in the Constructivist tradition today.