A DISCUSSION WITH PETER LOWE

PETER LOWE (PL) IN DISCUSSION WITH ALAN FOWLER (AF) LOOKS BACK TO THE SYSTEMS GROUP IN THE 1970S AND TALKS ABOUT HIS APPROACH TO CONSTRUCTIVE ART AND THAT OF THE GROUP'S MEMBERS

AF | **What were the origins of your first interest in constructive art ?**

PL | I hitch-hiked from London to Paris in 1955 during my second year at art school. I was seventeen and this was my first trip abroad. I slept rough but was allowed into the Museé Rodin free of charge. In the gardens there was an international sculpture exhibition where I saw a construction of Naum Gabo, a wind-up clockwork construction by Jean Tinguely and many abstract and semi-figurative works by Picasso, Hans Arp, Alexander Calder and others.

AF | **Later, I understand you were strongly influenced by Kenneth and Mary Martin. How did this come about ?**

PL | I was at Goldsmiths art school, and to try to emulate there the kind of work I had seen in Paris was out of the question. So instead of studying sculpture I chose painting, because Kenneth Martin taught in that department and I knew him to be one of the best teachers. More importantly, he and his wife Mary had a breadth of vision and produced work which I found exciting. To begin with it was the Martins' understanding and interpretation of Cubism that excited me.

Developments that stemmed from Cubism had the greatest impact on me – the work of Juan Gris, for example, his use of geometry to organise a canvas and how that could relate to collage and moving formats in non-figurative work. The Martins also sparked off my interest in proportional systems and permutations. In 1964, Kenneth Martin appointed me as his teaching assistant at the Barry Summer School in South Wales, and this marked an intense period of experimentation for me.

AF | **Then in 1969 you joined what became known as the Systems Group.**

PL | Yes. My participation in this group came about through a chance meeting with the painter Jeffrey Steele at Barry. He had been teaching at Newport and although he had recently been appointed Head of Fine Art at Portsmouth Polytechnic he retained a link with Barry. His Finnish wife, Arja Nenonen, organised the first Systems exhibition in Helsinki in 1969 and they invited me to take part. So far as the group was concerned, Jeffrey Steele remained a key participant, but Malcolm Hughes, who also exhibited in the Helsinki show, largely took over the running of the group and we met regularly in his Putney studio.

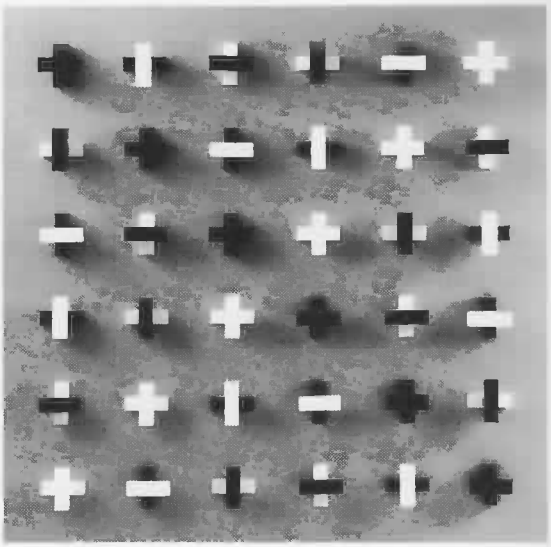

FIGURE 9
PETER LOWE
System of Six Elements on Grey, 1969
Artist's collection

AF | **To what extent did the members of the group share common aims and ideas ?**

PL | I recall each of us having somewhat different aims, though we were all concerned with following an essentially rational approach. My general aim was to keep the group focused on concrete, systematic, constructive art. Other members placed more emphasis on painting (I was producing reliefs) and on broader philosophical, political or educational issues. Unlike Hughes and Spencer, I saw my reliefs more in terms of volume and less in terms of collage. Michael Kidner was making paintings related to sculptural objects. Jeffrey Steele and Richard Allen also made paintings, into which Jeffrey introduced complex curves whereas my work had returned to monochrome orthogonal relationships. But the group's broad concerns were all with the orderly or systematic arrangement of parts or elements.

AF | **The sub-title of the Helsinki Systems exhibition was 'An Exhibition of Syntactic Art from Britain'. What was the significance of the terms 'syntactic' and 'systems' ?**

PL | Jeffrey Steele proposed the word 'syntactic' for the sub-title. I remember arguing that the word 'systems' was preferable since it was in common usage and sounded less pretentious. We could have used the French term ' art concret' or the German 'konkrete kunst'. We decided not to because 'concrete' has the connotation in England of a mix of sand and cement. Syntactic tendencies can be found in the iconoclastic art and architecture of Islam and in some Native American artefacts and the arts of Africa. In 1924 Van Doesburg attempted to reintroduce syntax into European art, which had for centuries been preoccupied with mimeticism and symbolism. Artists invent systems for their own personal use, but systems intended for the improvement of art in general have also appeared. For example, Jay Hambidge, Le Corbusier and Theodore Cook were concerned with the systematisation of proportion: Schillinger with the systematic integration of all forms of expression based on mathematics. Wilhelm Ostwald published a system for describing and organising colour. French Impressionism and Cubism are systems as much as styles. A motive for creating a personal system is suggested by William Blakes's words: "I must create a system or be a slave to another man's".

AF | **What does syntactic art require of the viewer to ensure its appreciation? Is it important for the viewer to be able to deduce the underlying geometrical or mathematical system or structure?**

PL | Syntactic works are often ambiguous: there is more than one way of seeing them and this adds to their richness. Some people complain that to understand the structure ruins their enjoyment. I would agree that sometimes ignorance is bliss, but understanding sharpens the perception. The viewer is encouraged to look at syntactic art without trying to make sense of it in terms of literary or figurative content, and it is not intended as an intelligence test or a conundrum. But how viewers choose to see things is ultimately a matter for them. Making a work and interpreting it are two different acts. Anyone can present something they have found or made, but not everyone can make sense of it. Information in a syntactic work can be retrieved or presented in other ways - as a notation, for example. As a viewer and a maker I take pleasure in the act of seeing. Most things are interesting to look at and enough things can be looked at free of charge to satisfy the most compulsive voyeur. To go out of one's way to find special objects to look at, or to have the temerity to add to this super-abundance one must presumably have a reason. My relief constructions became simpler because I wanted them to be concise and accessible to me and to other people. Basically, I am driven by curiosity to see what something that does not already exist will look like.

AF | **Your work seems to place importance on systems which have a logical conclusion as well as a starting point. Could you expand on that ?**

PL | The question of when or where to start or stop ordinarily besets creative work because events can repeat ad infinitum. Kenneth Martin once illustrated this by telling my children the story of The Robbers in the Cave. At first it amused but then began to disappoint them because the story was locked into an endless loop and could never reach a conclusion. I was influenced by the Martins' use of permutations because they had a beginning and an end built into them. Later I found other conclusive methods without using permutations and built reliefs of identical units which had a simple ratio such that four elements formed a cube. This allowed me to imply a logical conclusion that most people could appreciate. In doing so they were understanding the implied syntax and participating in the work, not just passively viewing an assemblage of uncoordinated units.

AF | **I notice that in various exhibition catalogues of syntactic and constructive art, some artists have written detailed explanations or analyses of their paintings or reliefs. How important do you think it is for syntactic artists to produce these explanations – as distinct from the view that art objects should speak for themselves, solely through their visual appearance or impact ?**

PL | If I believed it unimportant I would not be trying to answer your questions ! On the other hand, the extent to which a written explanation is deemed a necessary accompaniment to a work is a measure of a failure to communicate visually.

It is easy to produce complexity, with or without being systematic about it - but what is the point? The problem is

to communicate visually, not to intimidate the viewer with science, mathematics or "artspeak".

AF | **The constructive artist John Ernest, who exhibited with the Constructionists and the Systems artists, once said that his work was 10% calculation and 90% intuition. Could you comment on the interaction between rationality and intuition in the construction of a systems-based art object.**

PL | It has been said that intuition is that unfailing instinct that tells us that we are right, whether we are or not. In applying a system, the first decisions are invariably arbitrary. At the start of a chess game, shall we begin by playing King's pawn 4 or Queen's pawn 4 or neither ? From then on, it's a dialogue between chaos and reason.

There are subjective choices, too. The same configuration can be presented differently and systematic processes might create unexpected combinations. Sometimes I prefer one appearance to another, but I draw the line at compromising the outcome of a system by arbitrarily altering parts of it. I want a work to have an intelligible or self-evident reason for being the way it is.

AF | **Mathematics and geometry underlie the work of most, if not all, syntactic artists. To what depth did you study mathematics – compared, say, to Anthony Hill who had advanced mathematical knowledge ?**

PL | I know far less about mathematics than Anthony Hill. Most of my work is based on elementary mathematics and geometry. My teachers, the Martins, sparked off my interest in proportional systems and permutations. Later I became interested in computing and began to study first order logic. The level of mathematics in my work is limited to what can be materialised, whereas mathematical concepts are notoriously abstract. I am not seeking to make visual analogies for mathematical ideas.

AF | **Art doesn't exist in a vacuum. To what extent in the 1970s were the concept and practice of syntactic art affected by the political and cultural context of the times ?**

PL | The political and cultural context was, to put it mildly, an inauspicious time for an art that purported to be rationalist. The Cold War was still a fact of daily life. For the most part we had acquiesced to a generic label of Constructivist, but this was a term identified with Russia - the Cold War enemy. Thus in spite of Stalin's persecution of the Russian Constructivists and Formalists and his imposition of Socialist Realism, we were tacitly considered to be associated with an art form of what was later dubbed "The Evil Empire". In the art world, the CIA was covertly ensuring the supremacy of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism as an element of US Cold War propaganda. Local abstract expressionists proliferated in the UK and abstract expressionism was promoted in art schools. Journalists and directors of our national institutions favoured US art and linked their careers to it. There was also a good deal of tabloid comment with syntactic work being invariably labelled "cold and clinical". The term "system" had acquired negative connotations and it was an act of defiance on our part to use it in relation to our group.

AF | **It is evident that in contrast to the situation in the UK, you and other systems artists have had considerable involvement from the mid 1960s onwards with art groups and other constructive artists in continental Europe. Could you talk about some of these contacts.**

PL | My first contact with Dutch artists was due to an initiative of Colin Jones (my fellow student at Goldsmiths) who wrote to Joost Baljeu, the editor of the constructivist magazine, Structure, suggesting we write a piece about an exhibition of ours at the AIA gallery in 1963. (Structure was distributed by the Tiranti bookshop in London.) Baljeu responded positively and we contributed to the last two issues of the magazine before it closed in 1964. The last number carried articles by Ad Dekkers and Andreas Christen with whom I later made personal contact.

In 1970 Jones, John Law and I showed at De Zonnenhof in Amersfoort, with Baljeu's second wife, Truus Wilmink and some students of Baljeu. I was subsequently invited to take part in a show at Galerie Nouvelles Images in The Hague, organised by Truus Wilmink. These shows led to contact with Ewerdt Hilgemann and his second wife, Antionette de Stighter.

In 1974 I was contacted by Pierre de Pootere and invited to join the IAFKG (International Work Group for Constructive Art). Through this group I met many constructive artists from Germany, Poland, France and elsewhere in Europe. The

Swiss artist, Richard Lohse, Henryk Stasziewski from Poland, and Kenneth Martin all became honorary members. The extraordinary thing about IAFKG was its ability to organise events internationally. Compared to us, the Germans, Italians, Belgians, Dutch and even the poor Poles were optimistic and dynamic. For me, this offset the negativity of the contemporary art scene in London. The official backing the Dutch and German artists received also seemed bounteous compared to what we got in the UK, where the Lucy Milton gallery in London bravely tried to emulate Gallery Swart of Amsterdam, but failed.

One reason for the generosity of the Dutch towards art was that they had two artists' unions able to negotiate with their government. Some of these unionists had been members of the Resistance. Baljeu, for instance, had published a clandestine magazine during the occupation. Also, the Dutch government was not spending so much GDP on defence as the UK. In Germany, reaction to the NAZI persecution of abstract artists might account for the more favourable climate towards post-war constructive art, together with money from the Marshall plan. US funds had backed the famous design school at Ulm, though when its rector joined the students' anti Vietnam War protest, US funds were withdrawn and the school closed.

In Poland, the imposition during the Soviet era of a Socialist Realist aesthetic led to many underground or unofficial galleries backing experimental or anti-state art. Later, Stasziewski co-founded the Focksal Gallery in Warsaw, while the Solidarity movement also backed experimental art..

In contrast in the UK, most art critics were hostile towards the Martins, Hill, Heath and Pasmore - and us. Literature was also influential in forming anti-modernist opinions. Huxley's Brave New World, together with Evelyn Waugh and Orwell, satirised modernity. Punch magazine took a similar conservative stance, Anti-modernism in the UK goes back to Cobbet's Rides and Wordsworth in its dismay about the spoliation of the Industrial revolution.

AF | **What led to the eventual end of the group in the late 1970s ?**

PL My political education was less sophisticated than that of most other members of the group. I found it difficult to contribute to the group's discussions about the political aspect of syntactic art because I was less interested in politics and more interested in the theoretical writings of artists, and the study of language. I recall being particularly frustrated when my colleagues expounded the view that all acts were political acts and that art was therefore a vehicle for ideology. I thought I was engaged in apolitical visual research that had nothing to do with political ideals. (I now concede that they were right in the sense that most things, including art, can be used for political propaganda.) But at the time I was influenced in my political views by an essay written in 1923 by Theo van Doesburg titled "An Answer to the Question: Should the New Art Serve the Proleteriat?". To quote:

> *"A form of art which is directed towards one social class does not exist; it would be of no relevance to life. I ask those who wish to produce proletarian art, "What is proletarian art ? Is it an art produced by proletarians ? Or is it art which serves proletarians and aims to stir up revolutionary instincts ?" An art produced by proletarians does not exist because the proletarian, in creating art, ceases to be a proletarian and becomes an artist instead. The artist is neither proletarian nor bourgeois and his productions belong neither to the proletarian class nor the bourgeoisie. They belong to everybody. Art is an activity of the human mind and is dedicated to the aim of liberating man from the chaos of life, from tragedy."*

I resigned from the Systems group after what turned out to be its last meeting, because of disagreements which centred on these political issues. On closing the door I immediately felt liberated. But it was not my intention to destroy the group and I was surprised when it ended. My affection and respect for members of the group remains, and to this day I am in frequent and friendly contact with the surviving members of the group and have exhibited with them on many occasions over the past four decades.

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