

Basic Design



Edited by Elena Crippa and Beth Williamson
With additional contributions by Alexander Massouras and Hester R. Westley

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Cover image: Session of group criticism, Scarborough Summer School, Yorkshire, c.1956

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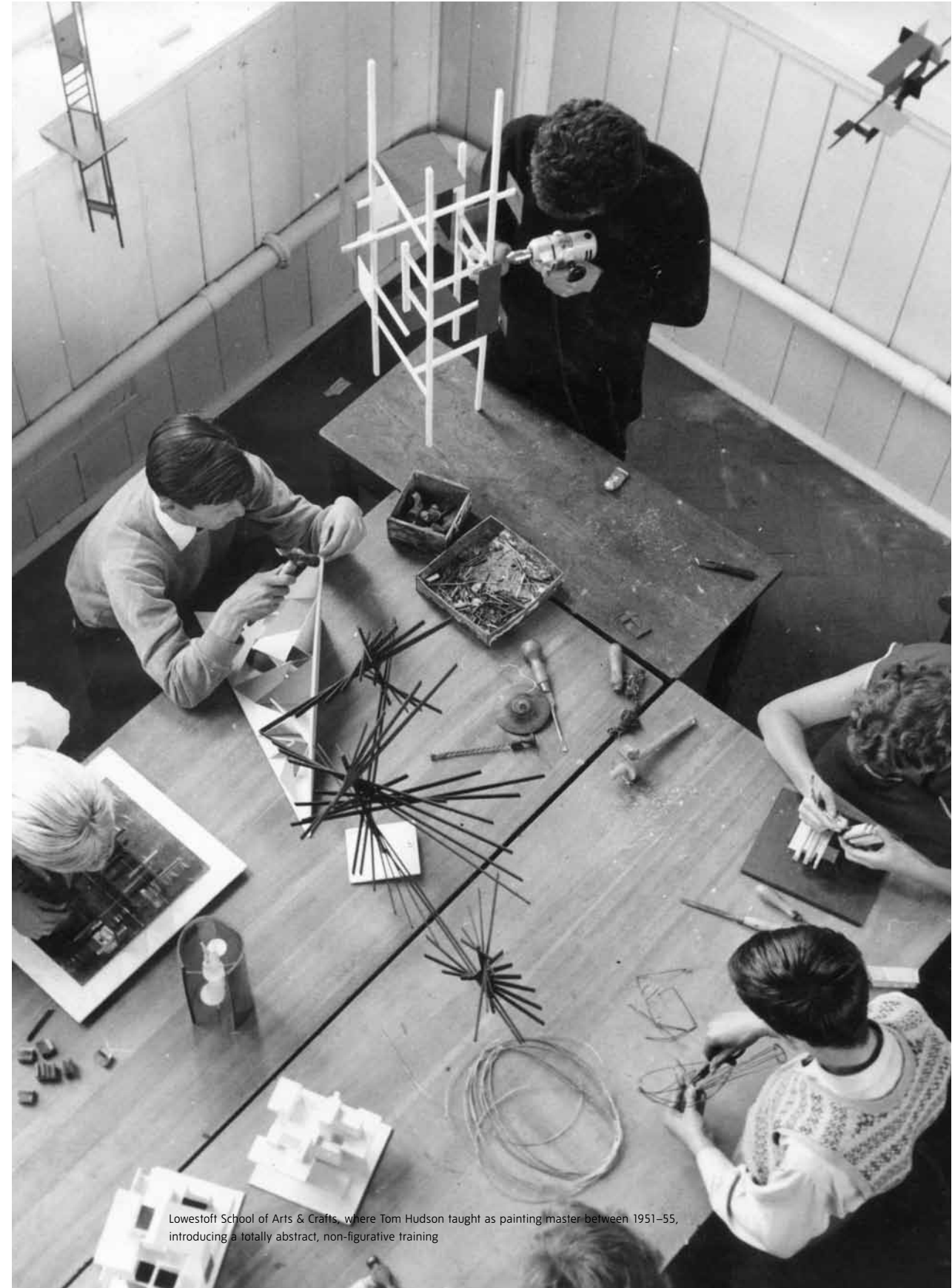
Basic Design

Elena Crippa and Beth Williamson

This display presents a turning point in the history of British art education. It explores the origins, influences and practice of 'Basic Design' training in British art schools through some of the artworks and artists it produced. At a time when approaches to art education are being reconsidered, it seems important to look back at historical developments such as Basic Design and review their significance both then and now.

In the art schools of the 1950s in Britain, Basic Design emerged as a radical new artistic training. It emerged in response to already-existing teaching methods embodied within the skills-based National Diploma in Design and was the first attempt to create a formalised system of knowledge based on an anti-Romanticist, intuitive approach to art teaching. What actually constituted Basic Design was disputed at the time and continues to be debated now. Its contested nature is underscored by the fact that it was variously termed Basic Design, 'Basic Form', the 'Basic Course', 'Basic Grammar' or even 'Basic Research'. Ultimately, Basic Design, as we shall call it here, was rooted in the German Bauhaus and its *Vorkurs* course, started by Johannes Itten (1888–1967) in the 1920s, a preliminary or foundation course that focused the art student's attention on the manipulation and understanding of materials. Formal exercises were tempered by other much freer activities that aimed to develop students' sense impressions of the world around them through nature studies and new forms of life drawing.

In mid-20th-century Britain, Basic Design was taken up and taught by different art teachers in different ways. Therefore,



Lowestoft School of Arts & Crafts, where Tom Hudson taught as painting master between 1951–55, introducing a totally abstract, non-figurative training



Student working on a panel for a wall in polyester and polystyrene realised by students from Leeds College of Art for the Branch College of Science, Leeds, c.1963

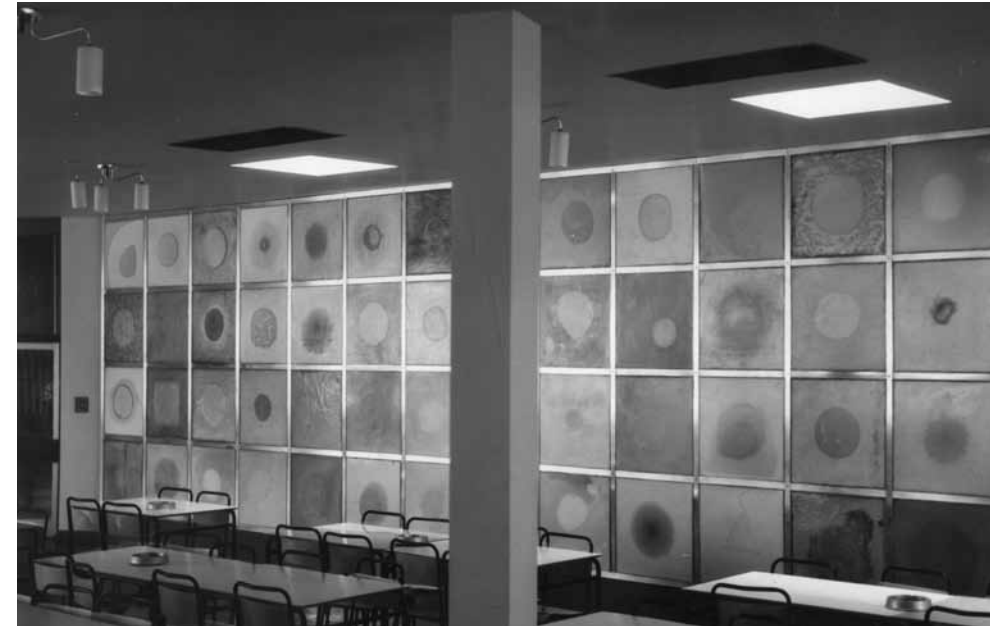
Wall panels installed at the Branch College of Science, Leeds, c.1963

each variation of Basic Design and its influences might be explored through the work and ideals of its key protagonists and their students. By contextualising these variants, the aim here is to provide a fresh narrative that explains the different approaches to the practice of Basic Design teaching in Britain during this period.

Much of what constituted the origins of Basic Design training in Britain was rooted in the influential thinking of the artist and educator William Johnstone (1897–1981). Principal of Camberwell School of Art (1938–46) and then of the Central School of Arts and Crafts (1947–60) in London, he was interested in design and the ideas of the architect and founder of the German Bauhaus school, Walter Gropius (1883–1966). Johnstone had already credited earlier beginnings in Basic Design teaching in Britain in the 1930s to Jesse Collins and Albert E. Halliwell (1905–87) although their focus was on graphic and industrial design rather than fine art.

Johnstone claimed that ‘the battle for change in the whole of art teaching was fought and won at Camberwell, 1938–39’. But if the important groundwork was laid at Camberwell, it was from 1946 at the Central School of Arts and Crafts that Johnstone led the way in radical pedagogical reforms. Here he assembled a group of young artists to teach part-time in new and experimental ways. The teaching and making of art informed and inflected each other and open-ended experimental working was encouraged in the teaching studio. William Turnbull (b.1922), Alan Davie (b.1920), Richard Hamilton (1922–2011) and Victor Pasmore (1908–98) were among those whom Johnstone recruited to teach at the Central School. Classes provided training in understanding the qualities of line, pattern and form and their interaction when freed of representational content. Tasks ranged from exercises in drawing in a relatively free manner to others calling for order and precision, with exercises acting simply as a starting point from which students could develop their work and ideas.

Exchanges among innovative art teachers, through conferences and short courses, were central to the development of Basic Design teaching. From 1955–7, Pasmore directed the two-week Scarborough Summer School, in Yorkshire, attended mainly by secondary school art teachers. In this setting, Pasmore worked together



with Harry Thubron (1915–85) and Tom Hudson (1922–97) from Leeds College of Art and Wendy Pasmore (b.1915) from Sunderland College of Art. The artist-teachers shared their pedagogical views towards the development of a course that aimed to provide a basic training in keeping with the demands of modern visual art. Rather than imparting knowledge on how to reproduce the appearance of nature, the course offered knowledge of the causes by which these effects are produced. It provided opportunities for the exploration of the essential principles of space, form and colour through drawing, painting, carving, modelling and construction. This constituted a revolutionary approach to art teaching, whereby students were expected to formulate their own objective bases for these principles, rather than finding them in nature and replicating them. Joining the group of teachers and broadening its scope of references were also the painter Alan Davie, with his interest in the philosophy of the irrational, and artists Terry Frost (1915–2003) and Hubert Dalwood (1924–76).

In broad terms, we might identify three themes common to Basic Design teaching, as it developed out of these first seminal exchanges: Rational Process, Science and Nature, and Intuition. These themes are not mutually exclusive but might be said to identify key sentiments that were embodied in particular teaching programmes at particular schools. Basic Design teaching associated with the notion of an intuitive approach to making, while still largely informed by Bauhaus pedagogy, was equally informed by child art and underpinned courses run by William Johnstone at the Central School and Harry Thubron at Leeds College of Art, for instance.



Students at work, Cardiff College of Art, Cardiff, where Tom Hudson was Director of Studies between 1964–77

Johnstone's interest in child art informed his approach to Basic Design teaching and he had previously set out his ideas in *Child Art to Man Art* 1941. His focus in this book was on the education of the adolescent child and he was careful to define art education as one part of a larger holistic approach to education, which he understood as 'not an end but a process'. Here he was indebted to his colleague and supporter R.R. Tomlinson, a Senior Inspector of Art for the London County Council (LCC). Johnstone's ideas in *Child Art to Man Art* were also shaped in part by the thinking of earlier European child educators such as Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) and Franz Cizek (1865–1946).

Harry Thubron's thinking stemmed from his engagement with the ideas of the poet and critic Herbert Read (1893–1968), especially Read's *Education Through Art* 1943. Thubron's commitment to an intuitive process of making was evident in his teaching and in the work he produced. It was unusual for Thubron to commit his ideas to print, but in a rare written contribution to the catalogue for *The Developing Process* exhibition in 1959 he predicted that courses would 'become increasingly concerned with a more analytic and scientific approach to colour-form, space and nature – and in complementary terms, with a more vital and free pursuit of the intuitive and instinctive mark.'

During his time as Head of Fine Art at Leeds College of Art, Thubron also ran a number of summer and winter schools around the country. A ten-day winter school ran at Byam Shaw School in London in 1963, when around 70 painters and students participated in the course,

which was convened by Thubron with close colleagues Maurice de Sausmarez (1915–69), Hubert Dalwood and Terry Frost. Painter and filmmaker John Jones (1926–2010) filmed the course with selected commentary by Thubron and a backdrop of improvised jazz. The resulting 30-minute film, *Drawing with the Figure* 1963 captures something of the new freedoms brought to the studio with this kind of approach. Figuration was not abandoned, as in the case of Pasmore, but the static and contemplative relationship between the artist and the model was shaken up by the introduction of movement and sound. Thubron's desire to 'saturate the place with the nude' shifted the dynamic of the studio and students were forced to engage with the life model in new ways. The point was to destroy habitual practices, make any preconceived solutions impossible, and encourage a creative response.

Among those with whom Thubron taught at Leeds was Maurice de Sausmarez, whose book, *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* 1964, set out his ideas on the subject. De Sausmarez's approach to Basic Design was focused on developing an inquisitive attitude within the artist and he called for an art education that would allow the student to develop emotionally and intellectually as well as intuitively. His hope was that, 'out of it all might ultimately come a new art academy pre-eminently fitted to educate and express the consciousness of the age.'

The balance to be attained between the development of a rational process and nurturing students' self-expression was the subject of fierce debate, a debate that was first given a public hearing at the conference 'Adolescent Expression in art and Craft', organised at Bretton Hall in 1956. During the conference, traditional and more innovative views clashed. On one side, a child-centred model that emphasised the expression of feelings and inner development was represented by educators such as Barclay Russell and Veronica Zabel. On the other side, Victor Pasmore, Harry Thubron, Tom Hudson and Maurice de Sausmarez all agreed that, at adolescent and adult stages, a more objective and rational approach was necessary. Richard Hamilton also shared this radical position in the rejection of self-expression. In his text 'Diagrammar' from 1959 he stated: 'The tasks I set my first year students are designed to allow only a reasoned result. Rarely is a problem presented in terms which permit free expression or even aesthetic decision.'

In 1954, Lawrence Gowing (1918–91), Professor of Fine Art, asked Pasmore to join his teaching staff in the Fine Art Department at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which at the time was part of the University of Durham. From 1954 to 1961, Pasmore was Master of Painting. He sought out Hamilton, who had joined the teaching staff of the Design School the previous year, to help him establish within the art school the pedagogical methods previously developed at the Central School. Together they intended to devise – for the first time – a Bauhaus-inspired foundation course common to fine art as well as design students.

Although Pasmore was not in a position to close the life class, as students beyond his department used it, he did not believe in the value of drawing or painting figurative work from the model. So strong was Pasmore's hostility towards figurative practices that Hamilton was unable to reintroduce exercises based on figuration until after his departure. Instead, Pasmore's practice in constructed abstract art fed into a definition of the creative process that relied solely on abstract forms. Students' works were mainly the result of specific instructions imparted in the areas of point, linear and planar development, colour, shape-making, shape relationship, analytical drawing and analytical sculpture, which adopted a wide range of materials and processes. In some exercises the precision of the instructions given to the students was counterbalanced by the invitation to let chance guide the development of the work. For example, in one of the exercises set by Pasmore, students were asked to throw a number of matches onto a piece of paper from varying distances and draw charts of the different movements and progressions of the matches.

Rita Donagh (b.1939), a student at Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1956–62), was one of the pupils who created a drawing in response to this set of instructions. These types of exercise, mixing chance with a rigorous approach to the mapping of movement, may have influenced her later teaching in the School of Fine Art at Reading University. The painting *Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970* 1971, charts Donagh's experience of a group action that her students performed at Reading. While working on this studio project, the radio transmitted the shocking news that four American students had been shot by the National Guard at Kent State University in Ohio, during a protest over



Students' works, Scarborough Summer School, Yorkshire, c.1956

the Vietnam War. Donagh decided to incorporate references to the shooting into her work, opening up abstract forms to politically charged meanings.

Like Donagh, Roy Ascott (b.1934) studied art at King's College under Pasmore and Hamilton (1955–9). In 1960, while working on the course as a studio demonstrator, he created his first in a series of works titled *Change Paintings*. These works were conceived in order to be manipulated and re-arranged in different configurations, fostering Ascott's desire for an active spectatorship. They can also be seen as Ascott's attempt to bridge his fascination with Pasmore's and Hamilton's different notions of process: a materialist, constructivist and visual process, mostly driven by formal preoccupations, with an intellectually challenging and conceptually based approach that followed sociological and critical concerns. In 1961, Ascott left Newcastle-upon-Tyne to establish a new foundation course at Ealing School of Art. In this and his later teaching positions, Ascott was to retain much of what he had learned at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, while developing innovative and radical approaches to teaching and learning.

One last theme common to a number of Basic Design courses relates to science and technology. Such a theme was addressed differently by different tutors, but tended to reflect a shared belief that artists were to engage with rather than ignore the impact of scientific discoveries and industrialisation on people's surroundings and lives.

Tom Hudson had taken part in the early developments of Basic Design courses, through his participation as a teacher in the Scarborough Summer Schools in the mid 1950s. From 1960 to 1964, having left Leeds College of Art, Hudson became head of the Department of Foundation Studies at Leicester College of Art. In this setting, the artist-teacher distilled a pedagogical approach dependent upon two equally important drives. On one side, he aimed to foster the development of independent human personalities. On the other side, he supported the need to embrace the modern world with its science and technology. For Hudson, the study of new materials was meant to stimulate students' thinking towards the adoption of the best technical solution. Students were to realise that technical problems are also aesthetic problems and were encouraged to investigate the potentially creative link between art and technology.

For his part, Pasmore understood art as having developed following the major scientific developments of the 20th century, for which the natural world is not only visible, but also invisible and internally abstract – governed by atomic and nuclear laws. Moreover, for Pasmore the relationship between the artist and the natural environment had changed. He drew on the thinking of Paul Klee (1879–1940), the Bauhaus artist and teacher famous for his *Pedagogical Sketchbook* of 1925. This important book presented something of Klee's teaching methods and was translated into English in 1953 for the first time. Following his interpretation of Klee's theories and pedagogy, Pasmore saw objective and subjective approaches to art-making as complementary, with the subject being actively engaged in the process of nature rather than being an outside observer. The artist was to attempt to understand in abstract terms and create equivalents of the formative processes taking place in nature.

In 1964, the introduction of the Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD) – the three-year degree equivalent to today's BA degree – overturned ideas about art pedagogy. Requirements for a DipAD place included the applicant's being 18 years old, having passed a minimum of five GCEs (O Levels), and the completion of a pre-Diploma course. To bridge the gap between secondary education and the degree-level Diploma courses, the DipAD was proposed in 1960 by what has become known as the 'Coldstream Report', named after the National Advisory Council on Art Education (NACAE) chair, Sir William Coldstream. School leavers were required to spend one or two years, often at their regional art school, on a pre-Diploma course.

The Coldstream Committee conceived the pre-Diploma as the academic equivalent to its precursor, the two-year Intermediate Examination in Art and Craft – the exacting preparatory course for the National Diploma in Design (NDD). The NDD spanned four years, so in its attempts to devise a degree with higher academic standards, the Coldstream Committee added the one-year (minimum) pre-Diploma to the three-year DipAD. The pre-Diploma course thus prepared students with a common training before they specialised in specific fields. It was also understood, at least by its authors, as serving diagnostic – as well as portfolio-building – functions. In this way, the Coldstream Committee allayed anxiety that students were specialising too soon, and hence had an inadequate knowledge of the different disciplines.

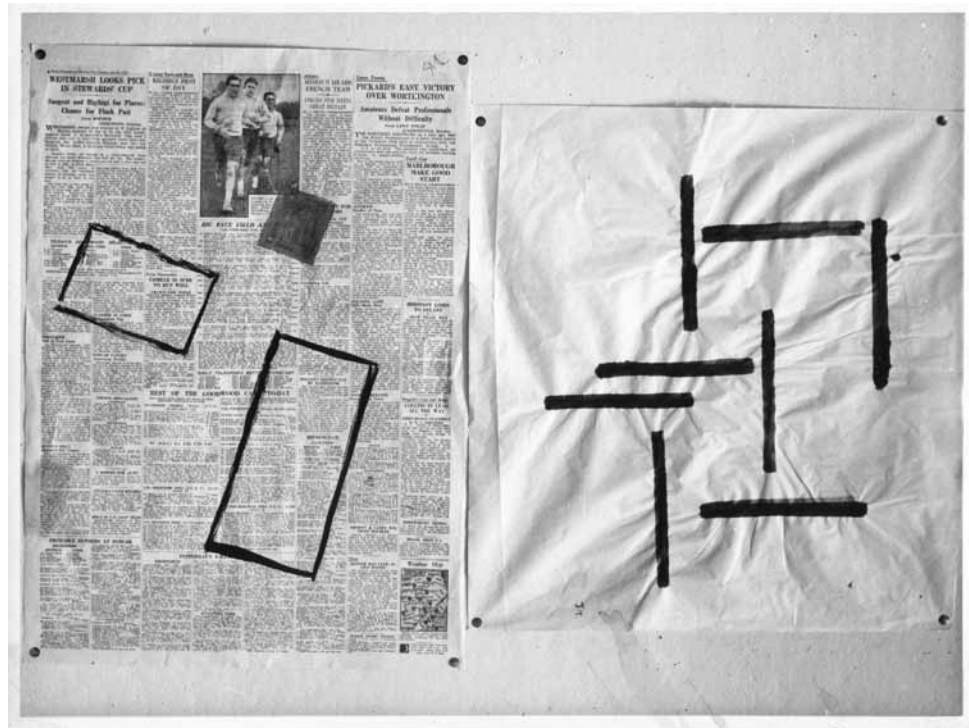
But the difference between theory and practice was enormous. The nation's art schools struggled to implement



these new pre-Diploma courses in the absence of any precedent or guidance. The NCAE optimistically declared: 'We think that art schools should be free to work out their own ideas.'

The reality was that many art educators did not know what ideas they should be working out. Despite the liberational potential it had promised to art teachers, the Coldstream Report had also confusingly cautioned: 'The general aim of all these courses should be to train students in observation, analysis, creative work and technical control through the study of line, form, colour and space relationships in two and three dimensions. A sound training in drawing is implicit in these studies.'

On one hand, these directives may appear to have prescribed a traditional approach based on figuration. On the other hand, the directive could also be seen as an invitation: it legitimated the progressive teacher's explorations in the Bauhaus-derived concept of Basic Design. This double nature – entirely progressive or wholly traditional – arose from the ambiguity of the term 'drawing'. Did it emerge from studies of the figure (in the form of the life class)? Or, did it, as the innovative pedagogues of the 1950s proposed, begin in the Bauhaus *Vorkurs*?



As a result of this confusion – an ambiguity in the description of the course itself, and an absence of a national validating body – pre-Diploma courses varied immensely from art school to art school. Many pre-Diploma courses remained traditional, sending unprepared hopefuls to interview for the modern DipAD courses with old-fashioned-looking portfolios bursting with life drawings. For other art schools, the very mention of figuration was viewed suspiciously. And still others sought to balance traditionalism and progressive models that offered a new visual grammar based on Basic Design. At no point was there an explicit effort on the part of NCAE to explain how such different approaches might co-exist, so the students and the tutors found themselves in uneasy contradictions between new and old ideas of art practice.

This absence of a coherent approach was only the first of many concerns about the pre-Diploma courses. Many students were under the impression that completing a pre-Diploma course assured them of a place on a DipAD. To clear confusion, the Department of Education and Science issued a letter in May 1964 to local education authorities to advise students that such a guarantee of admission was impossible. The confusion led the Coldstream Committee to publish an Addendum to its first report, in 1966, in which it criticised the term 'pre-Diploma' itself: 'We therefore recommend that these courses be known as "foundation courses" to indicate the function which they have in practice assumed.'

Course prospectuses from these years show the many identities that these courses assumed. St Martins School of Art, for example, introduced a 'Beginner's Course' as early as 1953; this became known in the early 1960s as the 'Department of Basic Studies', before becoming the 'Preliminary Studies Department'.

Beyond its simple preponderance of names, the Foundation courses also led to a proliferation of teaching positions. For example, at St Martins, the 'Department of Preliminary Studies' went from employing seven teachers in 1964/65, to 27 teachers in its 'School of Foundation Studies' in 1966/67. The increase that renowned schools such as St Martins experienced was, at first, a result of the paucity of pre-Diploma courses offered elsewhere. The level of competition was therefore high: in a report to the governors in a meeting on 26 October 1967, the principal of St Martins

Students' works, Leeds College of Art, Leeds, c.1955–64



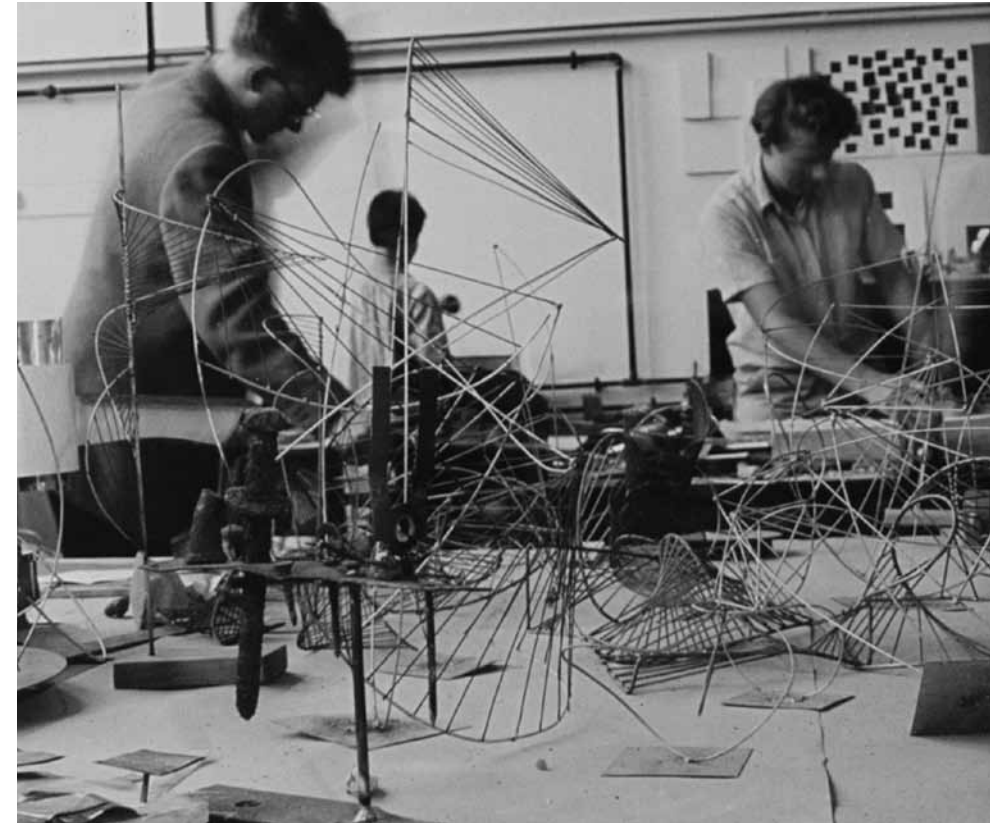
Student's work, Leeds College of Art,
Leeds, c.1955-64

Students at work, Leeds College of Art,
c.1958

reported that there were 585 first-choice candidates for 74 places on the Foundation Course. This initial crush levelled out as more pre-Diploma courses were offered across the nation, but only to reveal another problem. By 1969, there were nearly two Foundation students for every place on a DipAD degree course.

By the time of the publication of the 1970 Joint Report of the NACAE and the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD), the Coldstream Committee confessed to considering the 'invalid[ation of] the principles and concept of foundation courses as set out in the First Report' of 1960. But the Committee overcame these public doubts because it believed that such a course's goals were entirely indispensable for a complete art education. In an effort to resolve this impasse, it proposed a 'central guidance to promote greater consistency' – which, in real terms, meant that the courses had to be approved by the NCDAD.

A chameleon and a contradiction, the pre-Diploma course promised an escape from an outmoded traditionalism. Its many complications – administrative as well as intellectual – invited criticism, but also encouraged innovation. In its final manifestation as the Foundation Course, however, its revolutionary heat cooled into a new orthodoxy – drawing on (or, as its critics believe, misappropriating) Basic Design.



The artist-teacher is a familiar figure throughout the history of Western art. Whether in guilds, artists' studios or art academies, practising artists were vital to the education of future artists long before Basic Design. Basic Design did, however, engender a transition in the identity of the artist-teacher in 20th-century Britain. The educational context in which Basic Design was introduced had been relatively specialised. Previously, the National Diploma of Design (NDD) had followed a set curriculum in which artistic practices were cleanly delineated along practical lines. After having studied general courses for their Intermediate Certificate in Arts and Crafts, NDD students specialised in subjects such as pottery, shoe design, leatherwork, lithography, painting or stained glass.

The prevailing view of a teacher was therefore as a skilled practitioner of a certain art form, and the teacher's standing was established by such mastery. A set syllabus likewise constrained teachers' capacities to shape their own courses. Basic Design suggested instead a more heterogeneous view of art where it was taught with an experimental, subjective approach: a discourse and a process rather than concrete tuition in a given medium. Such a position would naturally destabilise the basis on which teachers had previously taught: those whose authority rested on practical abilities – an aptitude for architectural perspective drawing, for instance – now needed another foundation for their teaching, and increasingly this foundation took the form of an artistic career. This emphasis also led to an increasing use of part-time teachers, whose attention could be split between teaching and the artistic practice on which their teaching positions ultimately depended.



In catalysing this reinvention of the artist-teacher, Basic Design was importing to Britain a distinction previously made at the Bauhaus. There, tutors were divided into 'Masters of Craft' and 'Masters of Form' to distinguish between artisanal labour and higher-status artistic work. The British shift away from craft could be seen in the early 1950s at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, where the sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi was employed to teach Textile Design, while the painter Alan Davie taught Industrial Design. What qualified them was neither expertise as teachers nor experience in those fields, but their recognised status as artists. And although these ideas initially percolated into British art education gradually, the influence of the painter Victor Pasmore in the reforms to art education of the early 1960s quickly led to their broader adoption. By 1970, the joint report of the NACAE and the NCDAD *The Structure of Art and Design Education* would find that: 'In the final analysis, the quality of an educational system depends greatly on the quality of its teachers. The appointment of practising artists and designers to the staff of art colleges ensures that a high degree of art and design expertise is brought into the studios.'

Pasmore (centre) teaching at Scarborough Summer School, Yorkshire, c.1956

The need for teachers with a different profile reflected the difficulties presented by a less prescriptive curriculum in art education. Richard Hamilton, who taught at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, argued that the old system of rigid specialisation had placed far fewer demands on the teacher. He suggested that for Basic Design, 'the quality of teaching must be higher than that needed for the still life or antique room. Basic form studies are lamentably unrewarding for the student.' The belief that artists were best placed to provide this improved teaching was not universally shared. The painter Carel Weight (1908–97) had a different view of William Johnstone's original introduction of recognised artists to the staff at Camberwell in the 1940s: 'There was [at Camberwell] a madman named Mr Johnstone who I think made a great reputation by getting as many well-known young artists on his staff because he was more interested really in the advertisements of the school than he was in the actual running of the place.' Prominent artists might bolster an art school's reputation, but the consequences of appointing artist-teachers also ran deeper. The teaching of art requires a multitude of abilities: intellectual, practical, artistic, social and bureaucratic. Basic Design influenced a

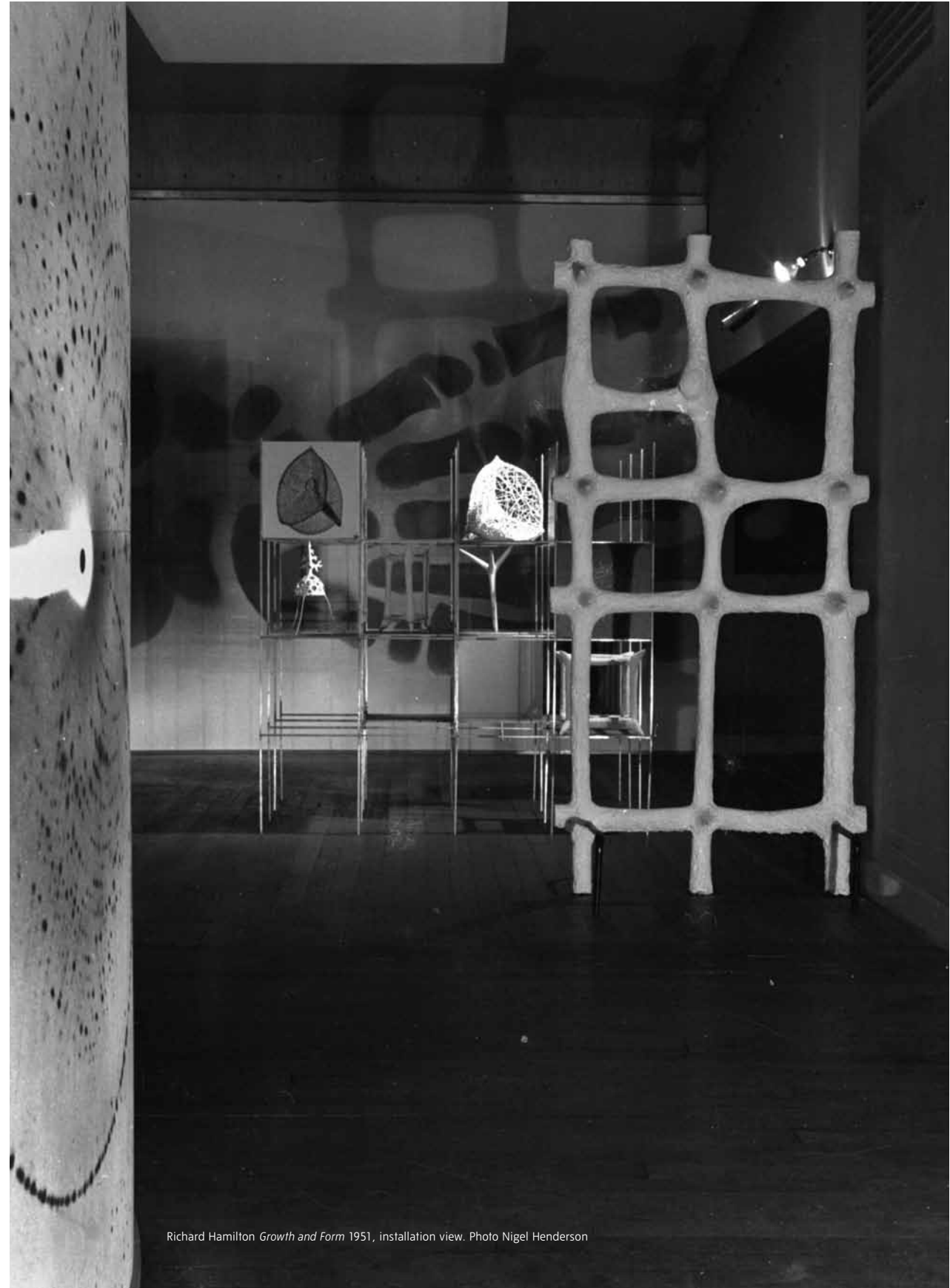


reconfiguration of emphasis among these abilities, placing greater weight on the value of teachers' artistic and intellectual qualities.

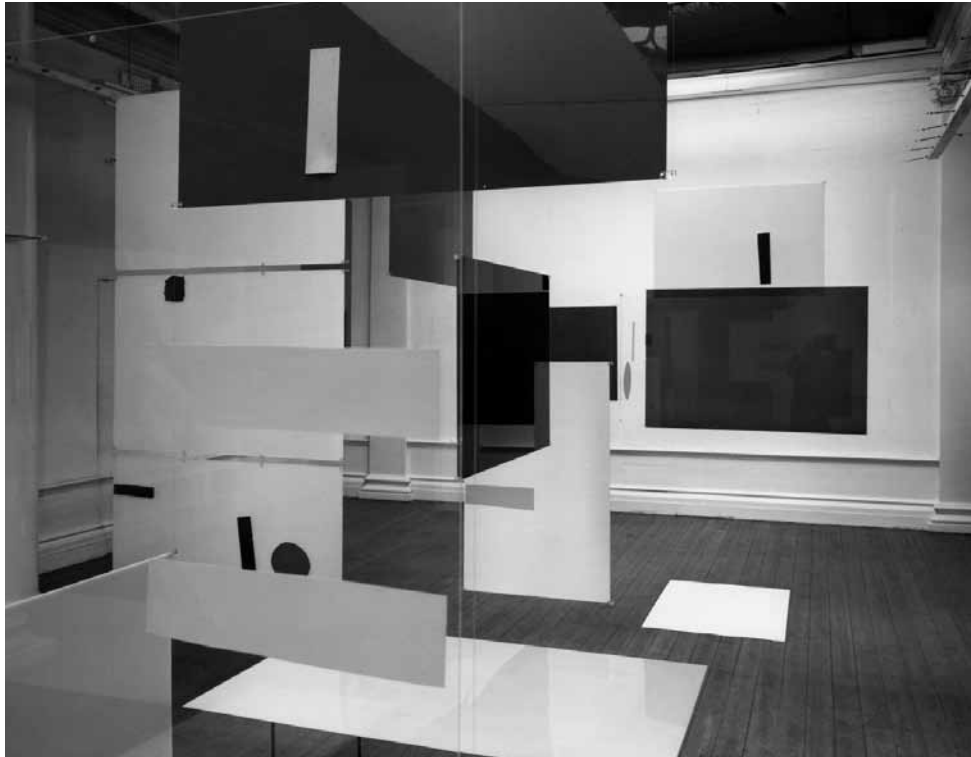
The ambiguity of the term 'artist-teacher' – where 'artist' might equally describe the teacher or the student – was arguably amplified by Basic Design: the focus on subjectivity gave greater weight to students' input, and in some cases they became seen as collaborators rather than students. For all the adjustments to teaching associated with Basic Design, it is perhaps in this other sense of 'artist-teacher' that the movement's influence was most profound. In the second half of the 20th century, art students became increasingly to be considered artists in their own right. Basic Design was an important contributor to this development.

While studying at the Slade School of Art, London (1948–51), Richard Hamilton supported himself by making models for large commercial exhibitions, such as *Ideal Home* and the British Industries Fair. It was at this time that he began to feel that the exhibition is an art form in its own right and, throughout the 1950s, he investigated and stretched its possibilities. In 1951, on the occasion of the Festival of Britain, Hamilton realised his first display: *Growth and Form*, hosted at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London. The exhibition provided an environmental visualisation of the principles underpinning D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* 1917. This illustrated book was inspirational for many artists of the time. It develops a structuralist approach to biology, describing the laws governing the development of form in organic matter. Hamilton's exhibition was a visual embodiment of his fascination for Thompson's theories. It displayed the qualities of organic forms, such as crystal and skeletal structures, which had been made visible by scientific studies and apparatus. In the years following the exhibition, Thompson's book remained an important reference among artists and tutors. Both Hamilton and Victor Pasmore discussed it with their students and assigned exercises that entailed the progressive development of elementary forms.

Over the same period and yet independently from Hamilton, Pasmore became involved in the organisation of a number of exhibitions that presented works by a loose and yet coherent group of British constructivist abstract artists. They were Kenneth Martin (1905–84), Mary Martin (1907–69), Robert Adams (1917–84), Adrian Heath (1920–92) and Anthony Hill (b.1930), although other



Richard Hamilton *Growth and Form* 1951, installation view. Photo Nigel Henderson



artists took part in some of the numerous exhibitions organised between 1951 and 1954. In 1954, Pasmore collaborated with Kenneth Martin, Adams and the architect John Weeks (1921–2005) in the organisation of *Artist versus Machine*, which took place in the Building Centre, London. The exhibition explored the possible uses of machine-made materials and industrial techniques by abstract artists. It reflected the belief, shared by various members of the group, that art should engage with science, technology and architecture.

While teaching in the Department of Fine Art at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hamilton and Pasmore continued to develop their interest in exhibition-making, organising displays at the Hatton Gallery. Situated in the entrance hall of the Department of Fine Art, the gallery provided a crucial addition to the curriculum. In 1955, Hamilton organised *Man, Machine and Motion*, which travelled to the London ICA later that year. The exhibition dealt with the mechanical conquest of time and distance, presenting an iconography of man in motion. It displayed some 220 images of structures created to extend the human powers of locomotion and exploration to the deep sea, the sky, and the space. If *Artist versus Machine* addressed mechanisation in relation to technical and architectonic developments, *Man, Machine and Motion* dealt with the representation of the relation between man and machine in mass culture. On his part, Pasmore's role at the Hatton Gallery was fundamental in instigating

the organisation of a number of exhibitions that promoted abstraction over figuration. The exhibition *Abstracts*, 1956, included works by Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Adams, Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) and Harry Thubron, among many others.

In the same gallery, Hamilton and Pasmore developed a number of experimental and collaborative exhibitions, such as *an Exhibit* (1957) and *The Developing Process* (1959). *An Exhibit* resulted from a collaboration between Hamilton, Pasmore and Lawrence Alloway (1926–90) and travelled to the ICA after being presented in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The work consisted of a large cubical framework in nylon, with a number of panels of acrylic in several colours suspended within it. *An Exhibit* was conceived as a changing piece, which would have taken on different configurations before settling into a final arrangement on the planned opening day. This innovative work, created on an environmental scale, resulted from the convergence of Hamilton's interest in flexible exhibition structures and Pasmore's engagement with architecture and transparent relief constructions. Alloway played a major role in the conceptual framing of the work, which was described as 'a game, a maze, a ceremony completed by the participation of the visitors'.

The Developing Process, presented in 1959 first at the Hatton Gallery and then at the ICA, was the result of a joint effort on the part of Hamilton and Pasmore from King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Harry Thubron and Tom Hudson from Leeds College of Art. The exhibition served as a seminal occasion, bringing together and showcasing anonymous examples of the kind of work produced in these art schools. The display of students' exercises highlighted the step-by-step process followed in the development of assignments whose aim was to establish founding principles in the creation of abstract work. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition served as a platform for the artists teaching the two courses to voice their new ideas on art education. These included Hamilton, Hudson, Alan Davie and Terry Frost. The first text in the publication, Pasmore's 'A Developing Process in Art Teaching', acted as a one-page manifesto advocating a radically new art training, founded on abstraction rather than figuration, through the introduction of new foundations in art training, on a scientific basis, in all schools of art and technology.

The Developing Process was one among a number of exhibitions that promoted Basic Design training. In 1963, Hudson organised another seminal exhibition titled *The Visual Adventure*, showcasing work by his students from the Department of Foundation Studies at Leicester College of Art. The exhibition first opened at the Drian Galleries in London, before travelling to the School of Visual Arts in New York. The organisation of exhibitions undoubtedly played a central role in the development of innovative courses on the part of artist-teachers, fostering new collaborations and experimentations that informed their students' thinking and practice. Exhibitions also served to promote Basic Design courses nationally and internationally, spreading pedagogical views that were to influence higher education in art for generations to come.

Richard Hamilton, Victor Pasmore and Lawrence Alloway, *an Exhibit*, produced by the Department of Fine Art of King's College, University of Durham, and presented at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1957. Photo Richard Hamilton

‘As we begin principally with the material, color itself, and its action and interaction as registered in our minds, we practice first and mainly a study of ourselves.’

Josef Albers *The Interaction of Color* 1963

The influence of the German Bauhaus and its teachers was felt acutely in mid-20th-century British art education, particularly in Basic Design teaching. Josef Albers (1888–1976) had emerged as an important figure in the field of colour teaching. Through a formal exposition of his ideas on colour theory in the *Interaction of Color* 1963, as well as a more extended and pragmatic exploration of colour and form in his *Homage to the Square* series of paintings, begun in 1949, his ideas were made accessible to a new generation of art teachers and students. The *Interaction of Color* offered ‘an experimental way of studying color and of teaching color’, in which Albers put a practical exploration of colour above any theoretical study. In the same way, Basic Design teachers in Britain adopted an exploratory approach to studying and teaching colour that always put the experience of art before theoretical concerns, even if the nature, focus and method of colour teaching varied from school to school.

Harry Thubron’s approach at Leeds College of Art (1955–64) allowed for an intuitive way of working within set systematic exercises. Thubron set very simple exercises with ‘thrilling’ results. Exercises included making secondary colours from primary ones, studying the clarity of hue and the intensity of colour, and exploring discordant colour relations.



Tom Hudson had taught with Thubron and Victor Pasmore since 1954 at summer schools in Scarborough, where the Basic Design course emerged and evolved through exercises in form, space and colour. He joined Thubron at Leeds in 1957 before moving to Leicester College of Art three years later. Hudson had encountered Fluxus in New York, something that was to inform his approach to teaching during a subsequent period at Cardiff College of Art. In the film *The Colour Experiment* we see examples of this approach in his work with students at Cardiff c.1968. A montage produced here of fragments of student works and performances all dealing with the use of colour reveals something of the exploratory nature of his teaching. In a whole series of experiments, coloured papers, cubes, flaps and levers were variously swung, rolled, flipped and laid out, colour against colour.

What seems clear is that while the experiments were partly contained and controlled by the materials and instructions given to students, there was an element of chance encounter or unpredictability as students followed their intuition and colours came together in some unexpected ways. That element of unpredictability became even more pronounced when students took to the city streets for another experiment. This time two students walked around the streets with brightly painted faces and wearing clothes in coordinating colours. Another group, with sheets of coloured paper pinned to the fronts and backs of their clothing, enacted a chaotic group crossing of a main road, halting briefly to perform on the central reservation, before continuing on their way, leaving bemused drivers and passers-by in their wake.

Despite the vibrancy and inventiveness of such exercises, Hudson's teaching notes reveal an approach to colour teaching that seems to be more thoroughly embedded in a theoretical and historical understanding of colour than Thubron's, while at the same time demonstrating a continued commitment to intuitive ways of working. In Hudson's colour teaching, historical perspectives sat alongside discussions of optics, nature, harmony and discord, contrast, intensity, hue, transparency and opacity. It is difficult to know whether Hudson's treatment of colour in the teaching studio was any more comprehensive than Thubron's but it was certainly more firmly situated in an

understanding of colour theory, regardless of the two men's common grounding in intuitive ways of working.

Maurice de Sausmarez, Thubron's close teaching colleague at Leeds, published his important book *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* in 1964. He offered his ideas as 'a spur to the young artist to continue for himself a constant inquisitiveness about the phenomena of pictorial and plastic expression'. In two chapters on colour de Sausmarez set out colour wheels, tonal scales, colour charts, and definitions of 'hue', 'tone', 'chroma' and other terms. He discussed colour analysis and complex systematic colour exercises, and referred to the Ostwald and Munsell colour systems. Yet in the midst of theory and system we find that it was a tacit understanding of colour that dominated de Sausmarez's thinking, not a coolly intellectual one: 'Energy or inner force is that factor in colour which the artist needs to be most aware of... The "energy" is of course our own psychological reaction.' Hence, it was not a method but an attitude that de Sausmarez recommended.

Richard Hamilton took a very different approach in his teaching at the Department of Fine Art of Durham University, at that time situated at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In Hamilton's thinking, our relationship with colour is a symbolic one and related to the material objects that dominate our everyday lives. Hamilton recognised that certain colours had become associated with products or brands. For instance, a particular shade of pink was, at that time, associated with a Cadillac or Kleenex tissues while a cool ice blue conjured up images of a Frigidaire freezer.

During his time at King's College, Terry Frost was assigned the task of teaching colour, an interest that dominated his own making during that period. In *The Developing Process* 1959 Frost set out five basic problems that students might come to understand through a study of colour: the grammar of colour mixing; objective drawing; the training of the eye; the training of the hand; and training in seeing. Just as Albers had worked together with colour and form, Frost recognised that '[t]he drawing (constructed) and the colour (felt) are both put into one's grasp at the same time'. In a sense this returns us to Thubron and a colour pedagogy thoroughly underpinned by personal discovery and 'a vital and free pursuit of the intuitive and instinctive mark'.

List of exhibited works

Roy Ascott (b.1934)
Change Painting 1960
Cellulose on Perspex panels
in wooden frame
Lent by the artist

Hubert Dalwood (1924–1976)
Large Object 1959
Aluminium
Tate. Purchased 1960
T00323

Alan Davie (b.1920)
Celtic Dreamboat I 1965
Lithograph on paper
Tate. Presented by Curwen Studio through
the Institute of Contemporary Prints 1975
P06103

Rita Donagh (b.1939)
Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970 1971
Oil paint and graphite on canvas
Tate. Purchased 1972
T01687

Terry Frost (1915–2003)
Red and Black Linear 1967–8
Lithograph on paper
Tate. Presented by Curwen Studio through
the Institute of Contemporary Prints 1975
P06208

Richard Hamilton (1922–2011)
Heteromorphism 1951
Etching and aquatint on paper
Tate. Purchased 1982
P07656

Richard Hamilton (1922–2011)
Transition IIII 1954
Oil paint on wood
Tate. Purchased 1970
T01201

Richard Hamilton (1922–2011)
Five Tyres Abandoned 1964
Screenprint on paper
Tate. Presented by Rose
and Chris Prater through the Institute
of Contemporary Prints 1975
P04248

Tom Hudson (1922–1997)
Kit Construct 1965
Polyester, glassfibre, metals, Perspex
Mark Hudson
X46431

Tom Hudson (1922–1997)
Rainbow Room/Box of Clouds 1965–9
Perspex, fibreglass, resin, found industrial
and organic materials
Sally Hudson
X46429

William Johnstone (1897–1981)
Golgotha 1927–8 and c.1948
Oil paint on canvas
Tate. Purchased 1981
T03292

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998)
*Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red,
Grey and Pink* c.1963
Perspex and wood
Tate. Purchased 2005
T11978

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998)
Points of Contact No. 2 1964
Screenprint on paper
Tate. Presented by Rose and
Chris Prater through the Institute
of Contemporary Prints 1975
P04888

Wendy Pasmore (b.1915)
Oval Motif in Grey and Ochre 1961
Oil paint on plywood
Tate. Purchased 1962
T00490

Harry Thubron (1915–1986)
(Construction) Siena 1976
Wood, paper, metal
Ms. Rebecca Ungpakorn
X46432

William Turnbull (1922–2012)
Head Black/White 1956
Screenprint on paper
Tate. Purchased 1976
P07205

The exhibition also includes 10 students' exercises by pupils of Richard Hamilton, Tom Hudson and Victor Pasmore, realised in response to specific instructions developed as part of Basic Design courses and dating approximately from the mid 1950s to the early 1960s, as well as two moving image documentations of students at work:

The Colour Experiment 1968
with documentation of Tom Hudson's 'The Colour Experiment', Cardiff
DVD (transferred from 8mm film) 23 mins
Tom Hudson Archive at the National Art Education Archive
Z03884

Harry Thubron, Drawing with the Figure 1963
Film 30 mins
National Arts Education Archive @ YSP,
Harry Thubron Collection HT/FV/5
Z03885

All students' works and moving image documentations are part of the NAEA Collection.

Further reading

The developing process: work in progress towards a new foundation of art teaching as developed at the Department of Fine Art, King's College, Durham University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and at Leeds College of Art [with contributions by Victor Pasmore, Harry Thubron, Richard Hamilton, Tom Hudson, and others], (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Durham University, King's College, 1959).

James G. Daichendt, *Artist-teacher: a Philosophy for Creating and Teaching* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010)

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

Mark Hudson, *Transition: The Inner Image Revisited*, exhibition catalogue (London: Art Space Gallery, 2011)

William Johnstone, *Child Art to Man Art* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1941)

Victor Pasmore, 'Looking into Things with a Fresh Eye', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 31 December 1961, p.6

Maurice de Sausmarez, William Turnbull, Richard Hamilton and Robert Brazil, 'A Visual Grammar of Form' in *MOTIF*, 8, Winter 1961, pp.3–29

Maurice de Sausmarez, Kenneth Martin, Oliffe Richmond and Denis Broodbank, 'A Visual Grammar of Form (2)' in *MOTIF*, 9, Summer 1962, pp.47–67

Maurice de Sausmarez, *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* (London: Studio Vista, 1964)

David Thistlewood, *A Continuing Process: the New Creativity in British Art Education 1955–1965* (London: ICA, 1981)

John A. Walker, 'Learning to Paint: A British Art Student and Art School 1956–1961', <<http://fineart.ac.uk/collection/pdf/walker.pdf>> [Accessed 8 December 2012]

Richard Yeomans, 'Basic Design and the Pedagogy of Richard Hamilton', in *Histories of Art and Design Education: Collected Essays*, ed. by Mervyn Romans (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005), pp. 195–210

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Art School Educated: Curriculum Development and Institutional Change in UK Art Schools 1960–2010

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