

Making Visible: Abstract Drawing

Dawn Ades

It is over a century since the first abstract works of art were produced, and Richard Deacon's selection goes right back to some of the earliest. The way in which he has made his choices, however, has nothing to do with tracing an evolution. The idea that art was ineluctably moving towards abstraction and that abstract art was the inevitable conclusion of modernism no longer holds, although it was influential for a while. Artists have engaged with abstraction from the start, and in a diversity of ways, from those who 'inched their way slowly into abstraction' over many years, like Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, to those who seemed to leap straight in, like Kazimir Malevich, who wrote: 'Objects have vanished like smoke.'¹

The idea, too, that art had lost something in going abstract, that there were limits to its possibilities in comparison with figuration – a kind of heroic denial – now seems strange given the richness and mutability of the field, and especially with respect to drawing. Abstract drawing has never been less aware of its limitations than it is today. This exhibition shows how objectless drawings have infinite resources on which to draw, quietly inviting close attention, often without claiming meanings or intentions beyond what is there to be seen. Each is so distinct in its procedures, marks and surfaces that it is difficult to generalise. The focus below will be on a small number of the drawings, not as exemplars, but useful in charting some lines of enquiry set off by the earliest works in the exhibition, by Malevich and Hilma af Klint.

Drawing has always had its own arena, as well as being a tool in the service of something else. Perhaps more than in any other medium, drawing lays bare its processes, so that beginnings and endings may be glimpsed or perceived, trajectories followed. It can liberate 'what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recordings and axiomatics: the pure process that fulfils itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfilment as it proceeds – art as "experimentation"'.² The experimental is understood as describing an act whose outcome is unknown, and has nothing to do with its success or failure. One of the fundamental differences dividing the practices of the artists in the exhibition is between those who began with a preconceived idea or idiom and those whose starting point was more arbitrary, or random, and the outcome unpredictable.

'Abstract' is a handy term that overrides the heated and long-running debates about terminology. While the general public was still decades away from accepting abstraction at all, artists were arguing over alternative terms: non-objective, concrete, constructive, neo-plastic. Hans Arp, one of the Zurich Dadaists, wrote: 'I understand that a cubist painting might be called abstract, for parts of the object serving as a model for the picture have been abstracted, but in my opinion a picture or a sculpture without any object for model is just as concrete and sensual as a leaf or a stone.'³ Malevich preferred 'non-objective' as a theoretical term and called his 1927 Bauhaus book *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (The Non-Objective World). He abruptly turned his

back both on nature and on his immediate predecessors in contemporary art. 'In the year 1913 in my desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world I fled to the form of the Square and exhibited a picture which was nothing more nor less than a black square upon a white ground...It was no empty square which I had exhibited but rather the experience of objectlessness.'⁴ *Black Square*, which he exhibited in 1915, is one of the most minimal paintings ever produced, whose dumbness endlessly puzzles.

Malevich's abstraction did indeed seem to spring, as John Golding said, 'Athena-like, ready formed from the brow of its creator'.⁵ Malevich called his system Suprematism and it was one of the two great routes to the future laid out by artists in Russia just before the 1917 Revolution, and pursued after it with intensity, until they were blocked by the doctrine of Socialist Realism. The other route was broadly speaking that of the Constructivists, which included those, like Vladimir Tatlin, who sought a productive and practical application of their 'abstract' investigations. Malevich projected his revolutionary dream into the future, and believed his objectless art would have the power to create a consciousness fit for a new world.

From the static stillness of the *Black Square*, Malevich's forms took off into the endlessness of space, freed of gravity and earth-bound perspective. *Composition 9 m* (1917–18), the drawing in this exhibition, brings together different formal elements from Suprematism: the flat, outlined shapes of square and rectangle, and three fainter shapes, a triangle and two volumetric forms, with pencil shading gradually fading to the right-hand edge. Apart from the square, which is aligned with the edges of the paper, the forms float and are all tilted at angles. They are a little imprecise, irregular, like the roughly drawn internal frame that just fringes the edge of one of the volumetric shapes. The effect is not at all one of hard-edge geometries, but rather of layers of space, of attractions and dispersals. The captions that Malevich gave to the drawings in his 1920 publication *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* warn us that their abstract forms are expressive, if in an impersonal way: 'Suprematist elements expressing the sensation of flight'; 'Suprematist Composition expressing magnetic attraction'; 'Suprematist element denoting fading away'.

Form, or the 'Suprematist apparatus' 'clearly indicates a state of dynamism and, as it were, is a distant pointer to the aeroplane's path in space – not by means of motors and not like the conquering of space by disruption, caused by a clumsy machine of totally catastrophic construction, but the harmonious introduction of form into natural action, by means of certain magnetic interrelations'.⁶ The non-objective did not eliminate intuition or the human explorer in favour of pure reason or the utilitarian concerns of the constructivists: 'Follow me, comrade aviators.'⁷

A recurring issue in the writings of the artists pioneering abstraction was the question of the real. Naturalism in art seemed to have increasingly little to do with reality as concepts of the real changed and what is immediately visible to our senses shrank in importance compared with that which is hidden. For Malevich, 'Art requires *truth*, not *sincerity*'.⁸ The scientific or pseudo-scientific search for the truth, in psychology,

physics, biology and politics, had fastened more and more on the invisible rather than on what is manifest in human life and in explanations of the physical universe. Technological discoveries such as the X-ray that pierced the human body, electromagnetic waves and the aeroplane would change forever man's limited perspective on the world. On an individual human level, Freud demonstrated the importance of the unconscious – of what is unknown to consciousness – in the human psyche, which the Surrealists explored through automatism. Abstraction as a response to the notion of an expanded reality, not limited to the immediately perceptible, has taken many forms. In Paul Klee's words: 'Art does not reproduce the visible, rather, it makes visible.'⁹ Some artists took a route internal to art – for example, in the cases of Mondrian and Malevich, passing through Cubism – while others such as Hilma af Klint went through a process that might be called unlearning, suspending deliberate, conscious control in a form of automatism. For some, like Malevich, the abstract work of art continued to have a symbolic relation to the world and to feelings; for others, the works were 'Realities in themselves, without meaning or cerebral intention.'¹⁰ As Arp wrote in 1915, 'Our works are structures of lines, surfaces, forms, colours. They strive to surpass the human and achieve the infinite and eternal. They are a negation of man's egotism.'¹¹

Tomma Abts sides with Malevich in choosing the term 'non-objective' rather than abstract. However, her starting point is not just elements free of any outside referent but something unspecified:

People often use the term abstract to describe my paintings. I don't consider them abstract because I'm working from a somewhat indistinct and hazy place towards a very specific and concrete image. I am constructing an image from nothing and try to define it very clearly, so that it becomes legible. At the same time, I want it to be as open as possible.¹²

But whereas Malevich built on readymade geometrical forms – square, rectangle, triangle etc – Abts develops her forms more intuitively. However, she effortlessly draws on geometrical structures and measurements: the proportions of *Untitled No. 5* of 2008, for example, hint at the Golden Ratio.

There is never a closed, illusionistically three-dimensional element in Malevich's drawings. The volume indicated in the shaded forms, as in *Composition 9 m*, is not enclosed but a kind of infinite depth, fading into the ether, or into the paper. On the whole, the tensions between surface planarity and spatiality, which were prominent in the work of the Constructivists and of El Lissitzky's extension of Suprematism in his Prouns (Project for the Affirmation of the New), are absent or present only in very subtle ways in the drawings in this exhibition. Lissitzky, in the Prouns – which he thought of as a crossing place between painting and architecture – sets up illusions of three-dimensional forms, which he then visually contradicts by introducing counter-perspectives or concave-convex switches. In Victoria Haven's *Rabbit Hole Study #1* and *#2* (2004), the painted tape is cut out and stuck on the wall surface, creating portals on an architectural scale, but without touching floor or ceiling. Like Lissitzky's Prouns, they reject fixed spatial orientation and float free

of gravity, potentially turning in space. Rather than the contradictory but solid bodies of the Prouns, however, these are openings, formed by the painted strips that turn in space and simultaneously eliminate the wall. Their mysterious topologies baffle and lure the spectator.

Apparently more tentative than Malevich's Suprematist drawings and paintings, Mira Schendel's works on fragile rice paper from 1964–65 nonetheless draw on what she calls the 'relative immortality of the symbol' – geometrical shapes as well as letters. The drawings here range between symbol and simple mark; circles and lines that form a 'pre-literal, pre-discursive writing'.¹³ The minimal, precarious marks register time, but as she puts it, cannot seize 'the unretrievable living experience that characterised this time'.¹⁴ A heavy line is partly scribbled out, another fringes but doesn't touch an uncertain circle. Schendel exhibited her *Monotipias* suspended in space, so that viewers could see the marks from both sides and the drawing 'bounced back from symbol to life'.¹⁵

Implicit in the question of process is that of generation – how to begin, and also how to end. In some of the works in the exhibition the starting point is a random mark or stain that might lead in many unpredictable directions; in others, the finishing point is predicated, in some way set from the start – there is a plan that has to be fulfilled. Here, though, the possibilities unroll again. In Lothar Götz's pencil drawing *Untitled* (2013) the horizontal lines and some of the vertical structures are there from the start, but the endings of the thin, dense, repetitive coloured pencil lines are intuitive, unplanned and oscillating. In Bob Law's *Two Crosses* series (2000), the slight slippages, which might be of the ruler or the hand, interrupt ideal geometrical symmetries, while his *Cross for Me, Kiss for You* plays with them as arbitrary signs.

Apparently similarly initiated by geometry, David Austen's *Untitled (Black Squares)* (1998) and *Untitled (Blue)* (1995) are extraordinarily intense and, for all their apparent simplicity, full of paradoxes. They are, firstly, painted in very opaque gouache: the white lines are not drawn in but the paper left blank. The grid aims at flatness but there is still a slight figure-ground oscillation. In each case he started in the centre, with a square, and worked outwards. In *Untitled (Black Squares)* he repeats the square, but working by hand and eye, not measuring with a ruler, so that the squares gradually and irregularly tilt, rather like the unconscious slant of handwriting, and at the edges of the paper are incomplete. In this case the squares could multiply indefinitely, and are only ended, arbitrarily as it were, with the edges of the paper, itself irregular and lightly torn. But in the case of *Untitled (Blue)*, the edges are formed by the variously interlocking painted shapes themselves, which have to resolve precisely into an overall rectangle. The effect is more like a woodcut stamped onto the Japanese paper. However, the dense blue gouache still betrays the painting's hand-made character, pooling and streaking in places, very occasionally covering the line.

Both works are, although geometrical to the core, and meticulous in the making, full of incident caused by the hand. In this they are the opposite of the geometrical paper collages made by Hans Arp c.1918, which were cut with a guillotine to avoid the personal and to banish feeling, and the expressive, altogether.

Unlike the artists discussed so far, John Golding moved into abstraction from figure painting, and even insisted that the human body was still always there in his work. However, very early on he did leap temporarily into abstraction, in a small group of collages. The flat rectangles in *Untitled* (1965–66) give the illusion of overlapping layers, with the black pedestal-like shape alone establishing the picture plane. Although without any of the referents (to music, instruments, furniture) of the Cubist collages of Braque, Golding's collages are closer in spirit to these than to the Russian avant-garde, though Cubism ultimately lay behind that too. Collage was instrumental in breaking up the pictorial space that was married to traditional systems of representation. Collage did all kinds of disruptive things: fragmenting objects, juxtaposing the unlike, emphasising the flat surface while not actually being part of it. Collage is sometimes alluded to in works in this exhibition, as in Victor Ciato's *Variations in the Spirit of the Tang System* (1973), without being literally present. With Golding, it was a direction he did not pursue, preferring the freer movement of pastel and wax and the subtle coloured surfaces. He was both art historian and artist, and wrote illuminatingly about Cubism as well as Malevich and other abstract artists such as Pollock and Barnett Newman. Familiar with the arguments about abstraction and its histories, he described his own work as moving into abstraction from the figurative image – more, in other words, like Mondrian or Kandinsky than Malevich. His comments about his own experience of abstraction underline the discontinuities in these histories, at the same time as the historically determined character of his own formation in the postwar years, with both the New York school and the Mexican mural painter José Clemente Orozco as guides. 'Given the fact that abstract art has been with us for some seventy-five years, it never ceases to amaze me that it was only the generation of painters after my own that accepted abstraction as a language that could be immediately picked up rather than as something that had to be worked into.'¹⁶ Despite the fact that he seems to be regretting that 'abstraction as a language' was not open to him, there is the implication that 'working into abstraction', as he calls it, with the personal struggle it entails, will lead to more satisfying and original results. Golding ascribed the vertical structures – bands and lines – in the pastel and wax drawings to the persistent presence of the body.

I was curious, on seeing Richard Deacon's selection for *Abstract Drawing*, to know how many works were by painters and how many by sculptors – identities perhaps blurred now, but which I understand to be those who work primarily in two dimensions and those who work primarily in three. As it turned out, it was about half and half, though this criterion hadn't been on his mind. Drawing has seemed to me to have a special relationship with sculpture – perhaps because of being put under pressure to respond to a medium with other demands, to something in the round with an almost infinite number of possible profiles from its narrower two-dimensional possibilities.

For Alison Wilding it is the other way round: drawing does have a special relationship with sculpture but it does what sculpture can't do. Her two drawings in this exhibition, *Reactor1* (2000) and *Crate3* (2001), belong to different series. Both have a specific but non-determining starting point and are delicately but intensely worked; positioned in the centre of the surface of the paper, they have no particular orientation and could be any way up, anywhere in space. The map-like stain in *Reactor1* is hibiscus juice; purple liquid (now faded) from the soaked flowers was scattered on the surface then pressed with blotting paper. Partly encircling this configuration is an elliptical shape like a shallow dish. To knit the two together Wilding plotted a framework using the points of contact, producing a pyramid-like shape, with graphite dust smudged in the corner. Pinpricks form narrow curved bands extending into space. The starting point for *Crate3*, the most heavily worked of the drawings in its series, was also a colour stain; she found some weird strips of colour-impregnated photo-paper which bled onto the surface, leaking sunset hues unusual for Wilding. The series was called 'Crate' because the idea of protection was linked to the wrapping and crating of her sculptures, each one requiring its own womb-like purpose-made home. The two inner, painted forms of grey and black, and the outer casing round the ellipse, although asymmetrical, resemble an architectural floor plan, perhaps of a church or an archaeological site. This is probably unintentional, since the forms were generated by a process of plotting points and then linking them together to form an enclosure, but it signals the unfixed scale of the drawings. In both cases they can expand and contract as their associations change. *Crate* can be as small as an eye or as vast as a nuclear explosion; *Reactor* could be spilt liquid from a bowl or an unknown geography. Their titles license fancies like these, which is not to say that such fancies are supported by any logical intention on the part of the artist. Things happened as she went along. But it is also hard not to link the two series together, in the sense that both, in totally non-referential ways, speak to fragility, danger and the need for protection. At the same time one can imagine a cold-eyed curiosity about the fact that graphite, a form of carbon used for the lead in pencils, was a key material in the first nuclear reactor built in a squash court at the University of Chicago in 1942 (57 layers of graphite, uranium metal and uranium oxide). Out of the drawings in these two series came the sculpture *Rising* (2001).

Eva Hesse's linear drawings also explore what drawing can do that sculpture can't. She seems to be testing out the implications, for abstract drawing, of the relationship between a diagram or a pattern and the thing to which it refers. She fastens on fragments of the things around her, machines and materials: one of the untitled drawings here suggests the mechanical, the other sewing and cloth. In one she delineates connections between tubes, rods, sheets; in the other, close-up details of stitches, seams, cording – or rather, she sets up analogies with them. These drawings are not recreations of specific objects but of some of their effects and properties: joints, folds, falls, hems and so on. They vividly conjure up substances in space, using the freedom of the two-dimensional drawing to transform and experiment.

A number of the drawings verge on the sculptural, oscillating between two and three dimensions, or are treated in a way that emphasises their physicality as objects. Wilding punctured the surface of *Reactor 1* with pinpricks; Gordon Matta Clark, in the *Untitled* drawings of 1976–77, cut into paper stacks with geometrical incisions that parallel his architectural interventions that bored or sliced into buildings, but on an intimate scale. Susan Hefuna's *Buildings* are layers of semi-transparent tracing paper, through which the ink marks on earlier sheets are visible.

Automatism (automatic drawing and automatic writing) is the most extreme form of the apparently spontaneous. But it is not quite the same as starting from a given random mark on the paper, or allowing full rein to chance. For both the Surrealists and the spiritualist mediums to whom they were so close, making an automatic drawing demanded a particular state of mind, a kind of suspension from the immediate surroundings to allow something to flow without conscious interventions and interruptions. This, the Surrealists believed, was the true functioning of thought, 'in the absence of any control exerted by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic considerations'.¹⁷ The Surrealists drew parallels between their practice and the automatic drawings and texts of the spiritualist mediums, with the proviso that they denied that what they drew (or wrote) was dictated from the beyond. Thinking of themselves as 'modest recording instruments', they insisted that what they recorded came from within themselves, rather than from some outside source. But it proved to be much more difficult to achieve this state than anticipated, and various other techniques were developed to surprise the imagination which were closer to chance and less dependent on the unconscious hand, such as frottage and decalomania. Pollock, who was strongly influenced by Surrealists like Masson in the 1940s, and knew about automatism, developed variations on these experiments in works such as the *Untitled* drawing of 1951.

With automatic drawing, the results usually hovered between abstraction and figuration; in effect there was no rigid borderline between them and on the same sheet one would find pure marks and recognisable things like bodies, flowers or stars. The act of drawing did not necessarily end with the intrusion of an object. The abstract was not in itself evaded by the Surrealist artists, and 'thought' did not have to be verbalised. Visual or tactile images 'like the representation of whiteness or elasticity' are not necessarily accompanied by words, and 'freely operate in the immeasurable region that stretches between consciousness and unconsciousness'.¹⁸

There is no doubt that Hilma af Klint was able naturally to enter the state of mind that the Surrealists sought but found so elusive. She believed herself to be a spiritualist medium and the drawings in her sketchbooks to be spirit-guided. Her automatic drawings are among the first instances of abstract art. In the same sketchbook, though, there are images of flowers and the same concentration – the same receptivity – is evident in these. It is possible that some of the pencil marks in her sketchbook of c.1906 are related to her *Paintings for the Temple* (1906–15), which contained spiral shapes. But the abstract drawings have an

especially powerful energy and sweep, an urgent sense of an invisible reality to be captured, that can take shape only through the uncensored, regular sweep of her hand: the dictation of pure, pre-verbal thought, whether from within or without.

They are, in a sense, the opposite of Malevich's Suprematism. In his introduction Deacon suggests that Malevich is a transmitter, af Klint a receiver. The idea of these as two poles in the field of abstract drawing reverberates convincingly right through the works in the exhibition. But Malevich and af Klint also have something in common: both envisaged a future world that art could bring into being. For their successors, precarious human experience in free-fall, the tentative and experimental, have replaced utopian dreams. But art can still make these visible.

¹ Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: the New Painterly Realism* (1915) in John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, Viking Press, New York, 1976, p.132.

² G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p.371.

³ Hans Arp, *On My Way: Poetry and Essays 1912–1947*, Wittenborn, Schulz Inc., New York, 1948, p.50.

⁴ Kazimir Malevich, *Die Gegenstandlose Welt (The Non-Objective World)*, Albert Langen, Munich, 1927, pp.65–66.

⁵ John Golding, 'Malevich and the Ascent into Ether', in *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, p.67.

⁶ Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, in *Malevich Art & Design*, London, 1989 p.17.

⁷ Bowlt, *op. cit.*, p.145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.119

⁹ Paul Klee, quoted in Matthew Gale, 'Carefully ordered confusion', *Paul Klee: Making Visible*, Tate Publishing, 2013, p.24.

¹⁰ Hans Arp, 'Dadaland', in *ibid.*, p.40.

¹¹ Hans Arp, statement in exh. cat. for Galerie Tanner, November 1915.

¹² Tomma Abts, quoted in Laura Cumming, 'Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists – review', *The Guardian*, 9 November 2013.

¹³ Mira Schendel, 'Statement', in *Mira Schendel*, Tate Publishing, London, 2013, p.196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John Golding, *Visions of the Modern*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1994, p.336.

¹⁷ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Paris, 1924, p.42.

¹⁸ André Breton, 'Le message automatique', *Minotaure* 3–4, December 1933, p.140.