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Faculty of Design
Department of Visual Communication

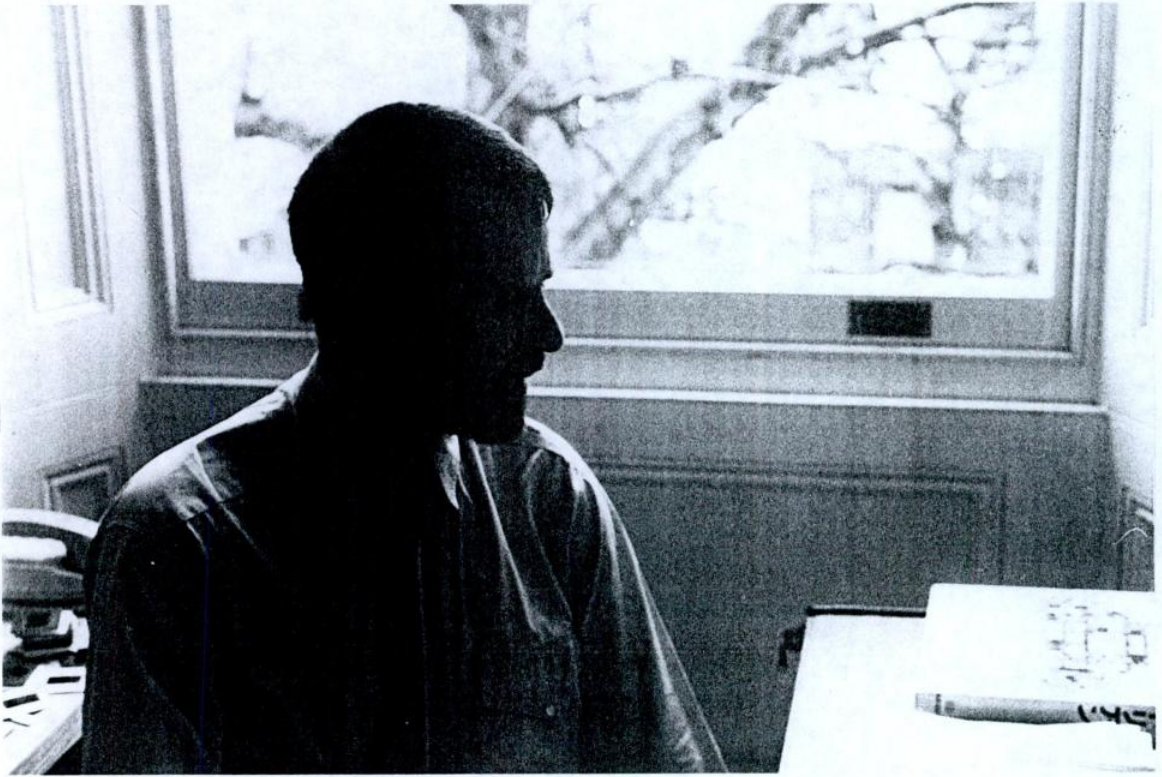2 Heaves of plates
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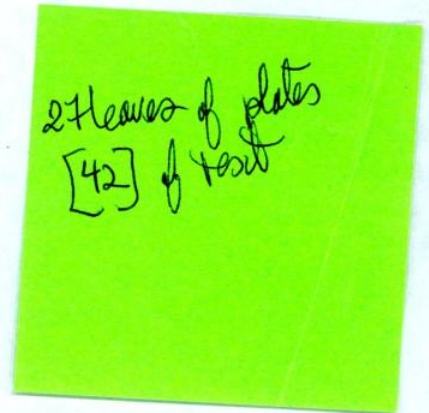
The Work of Dan Fern
by
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Many thanks to **Dan Fern**,
without whom, this thesis would not be possible.

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Introduction

Dan Fern is a contemporary British illustrator and is presently Professor of Illustration at the Royal Collage of Art , London. Fern resents the traditional role of illustration - a picture or diagram that is employed to explain or decorate a piece of text - and his rejection of this tradition is expressed in his work of the 1980s, where he began to integrate typography and ephemera. This thesis will mainly focus on an analysis of this work as I am particularly interested in the fact that these images came to communicate on a dual level : within both a commercial and a " fine art " gallery context.

Chapter I will discuss Fern's move from figurative illustration to abstract collage, when his students at the R.C.A. during the '70s had an effect on his illustrative approach. Fern was tutor to such radical illustrators as Russell Mills who strived to break down the boundaries between Fine and Applied Art. In 1980 Fern introduced abstract collage into his commercial work and the style of his commissioned pieces became inseparable from that of his personal projects. By the late 'eighties , however , Fern's collage technique seemed to slip into a stylistic formula.

Chapter II is an analysis of Fern's collage work of the 'eighties under the subheadings of structure , typography and ephemera.It investigates the differences between the influence of Fern's past on his work , and the more inspirational effects of contemporary design. It will also discuss Fern's important

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role as a collector in shaping the imagery of his work (this is particularly of personal interest as I believe the " flotsam and jetsam" of our lives to be precious).

Chapter III will briefly discuss Fern's most recent and unpublished work. The imagery demonstrates Fern's movement toward purism in the increasingly " ecologically – aware " society of the 'nineties. The work is stripped of layered collage and probably has less of the influence of Fern's contemporaries than his previous work did. Finally , the position of illustration in the present day will be examined. The discipline is still widely viewed as a lower art form by designers and fine artists alike.

Fern's largely unknown outside of the illustration circles he inhabits and in terms of art criticism , little has been documented or published outside of magazine articles. Therefore , much of the information and ideas within this thesis is based on unpublished interviews and a lecture , given by Fern , as well as a direct study of the artworks themselves.
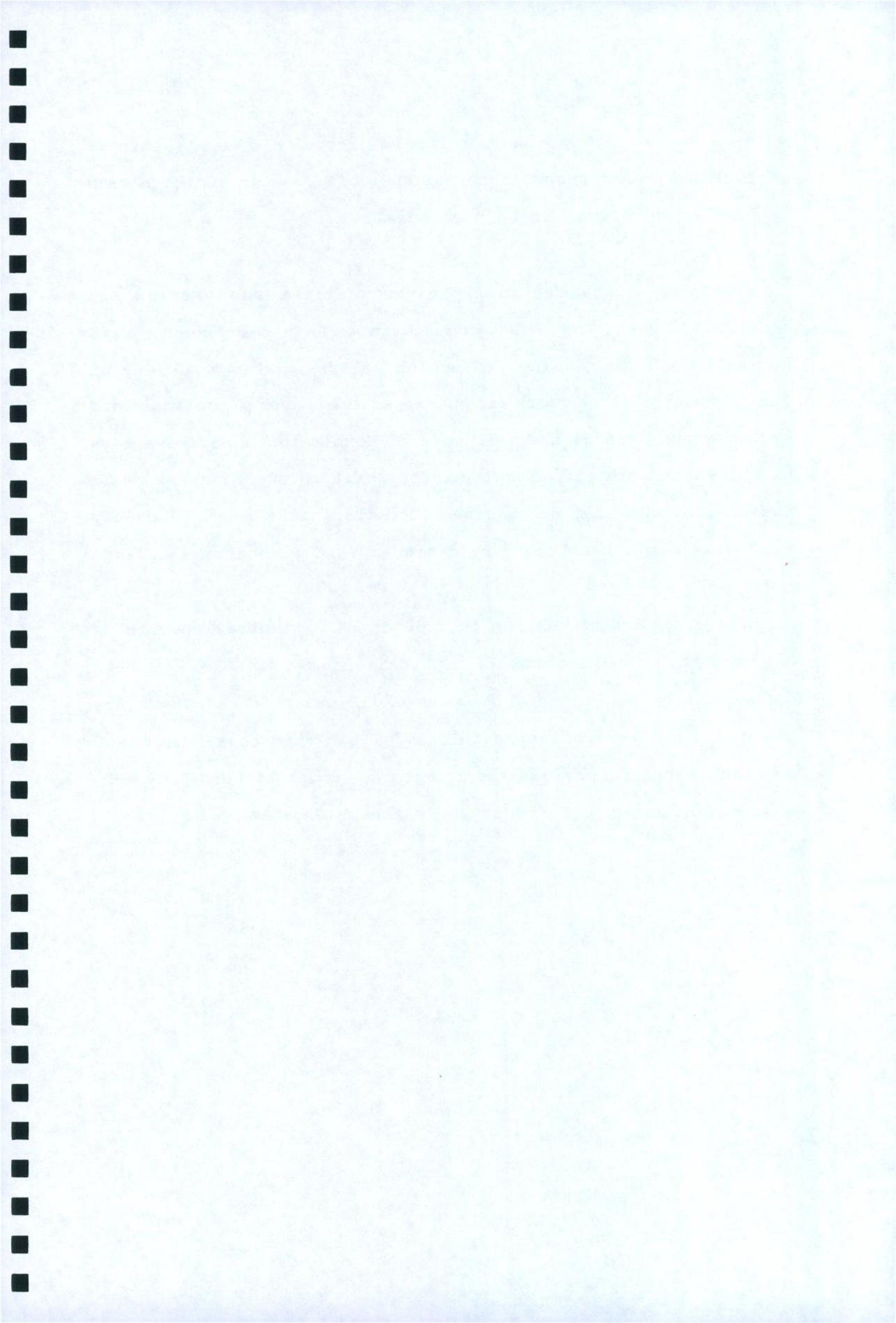
Dan Fern and Illustration in the Sixties

In the exhibition catalogue <u>Art Meets Science</u> Fern states that the art of illustration, the making of images to accompany a written or spoken text, is an ancient art.(8, pp. 6) Simple diagrams and symbols originally emerged to convey ideas along with the spread of logical speech. Elaborate imagery was used in religious texts by ancient Egyptians and in ancient Chinese scrolls. Technological advancements in the form of the printing press in the fifteenth century revolutionized the practice and use of illustration, and so on. However, in such a long history of illustration it is the relatively recent work of illustrators since World War II that Fern views as more broadly creative and innovative.(8)

Born in 1945 in Sussex , Fern was directly affected by the events taking place in post-war Britain. During the 1950s material prosperity prevailed in the western world which has remained unmatched. As the decade progressed , Fern , then a teenager, experienced the birth and development of television and the revitalisation of the advertising industry. The boom of children born directly after World War II became the target audience for advertising. This reorientation toward the young in turn had a radical effect on everything which followed. This young generation had an increased sense of solidarity, largely due to advertising , and a new confidence through a collective prosperity. Fern describes his own generation as brash, energetic
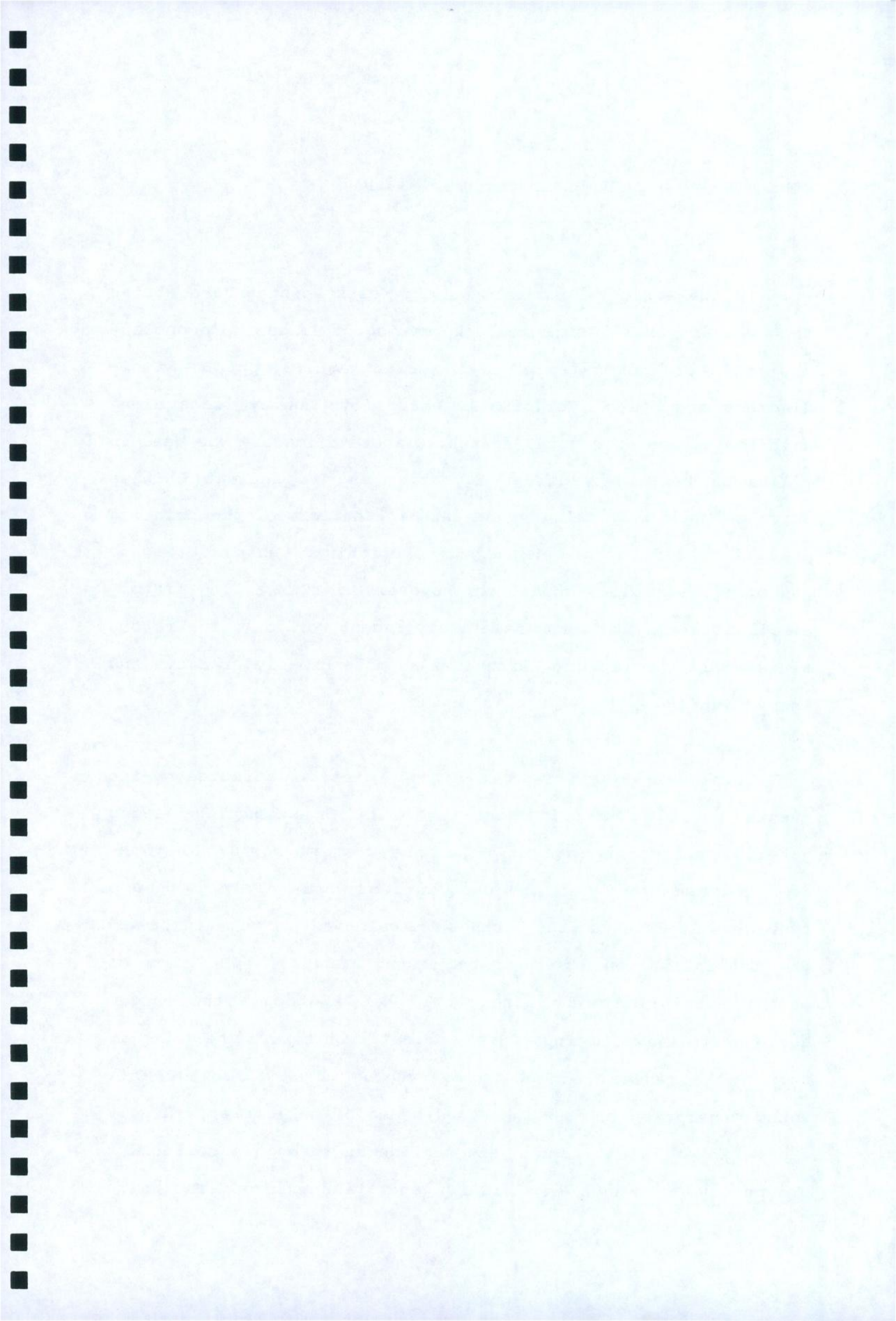
and creative. Out of the drabness of post-war Britain their new spirit of invention led to a flowering of the creative arts. Consequently this led to the new importance of art schools in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties.(8)

In 1962 the introduction of the Diploma in Art and Design marked a new kind of seriousness and professionalism in Art Schools. Increased entry requirements were introduced to achieve higher standards and avoid uncommitted art students, often typical of the past. In 1964 Fern went to Manchester College of Art to take a diploma in Graphic Design. Fern was taught typography and made posters using a combination of printing , collage and figurative drawing in a decorative style. Increasingly he became devoted to making illustrations rather than graphics. Fern sees this diversion as been largely directed by his tutors at the time. The introduction to typography at the college was for Fern uninspiring. The subject came across as a rather rigid discipline. He also feels his tutors encouraged his conclusion that he should be doing children's book illustration.(5)

Besides the personal guidance of his tutors towards illustration Fern was evidently influenced by the broader artistic activities of the 'sixties. In the book Works with Paper, Rick Poynor describes Fern's college illustration as surrealistic and typical of the 'Yellow Submarine' era.(16, p.9) Indeed, seminal influences on young illustrators in the 'sixties ranged from Milton Glaser, working in New York as 'Push Pin ' studios, to Alan Aldridge who illustrated dreamlike
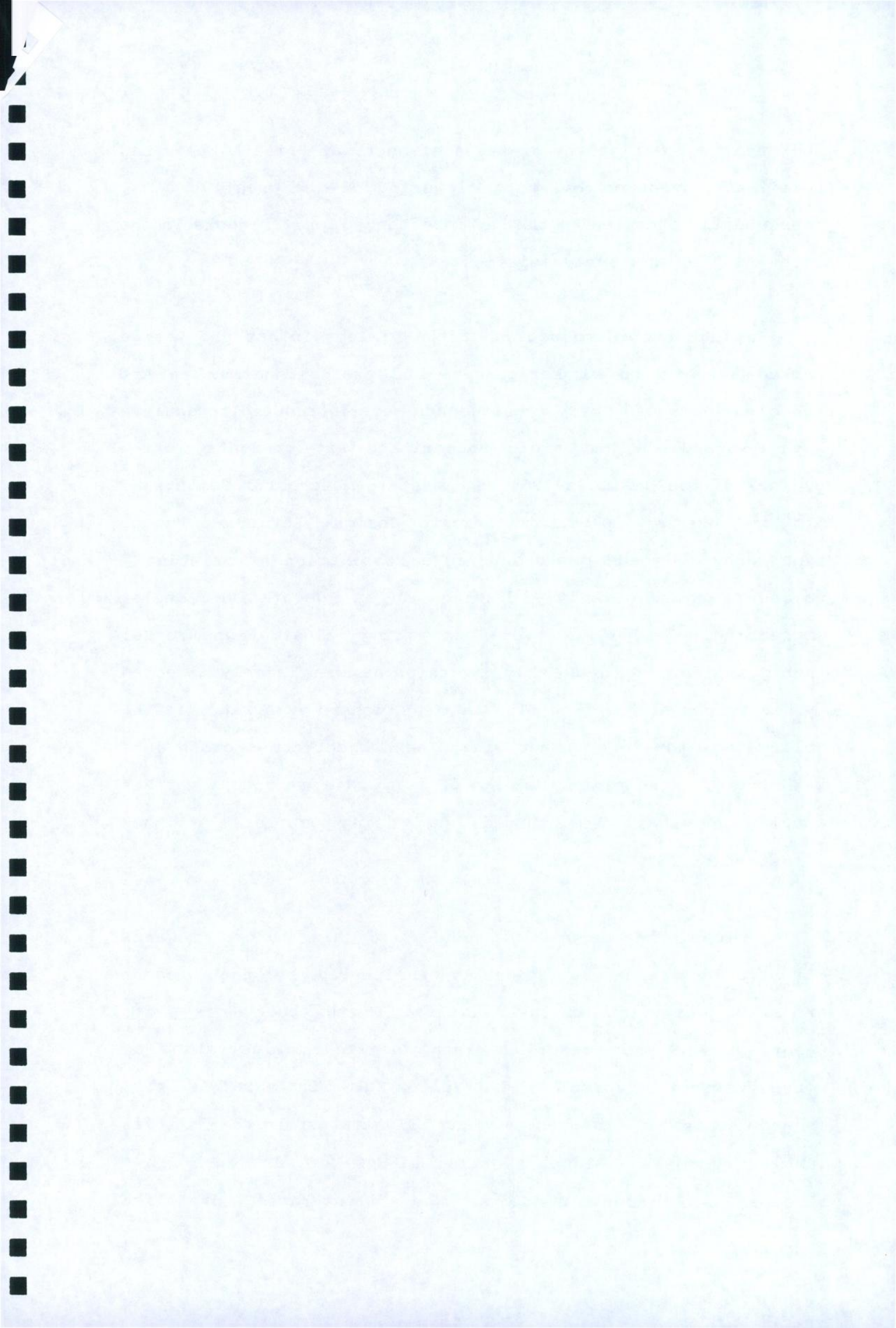
interpretations of the lyrics by the Beatles. It was not fashionable to make pictures about politics. To convey the optimistic mood of the 'sixties colour was luminous and brilliant. The airbrush , much valued instrument of the graphic artists of the Art Deco period, was rediscovered and became an essential tool for Fern. Huge new markets opened up, particularly the record industry and publishing houses, industries demanding imagery to promote their public image. Children's book production particularly expanded and illustration in general became greatly valued in the image consuming world.(8)

For Fern , as a student emerging from art school, the 'sixties era offered an environment of creative possibilities. In his degree show in 1967 Fern showed two illustrated childrens books. However, rather than working in the commercial world Fern decided to continue his studies at the Royal College of art on the Post-Graduate illustration course. On coming to London in the late 'sixties to study at the R.C.A. Fern relates that he began to take real notice of Pop Art which was prevalent in the city. Fern states that he realised now 'that the liking I have had for those sort of cheap colouring books and transfers and stickers and all that was actually a sort of Pop Art and it wasn't me being interested in children's books.'(5) However, at that time Fern still did not make the connection that he should actually use his childlike imagery in a more "fine art" way.

Fern continued to work on ideas for children's books one he wrote and illustrated, titled Wandering Albert Ross attracted interest of a publisher. Yet Fern became increasingly
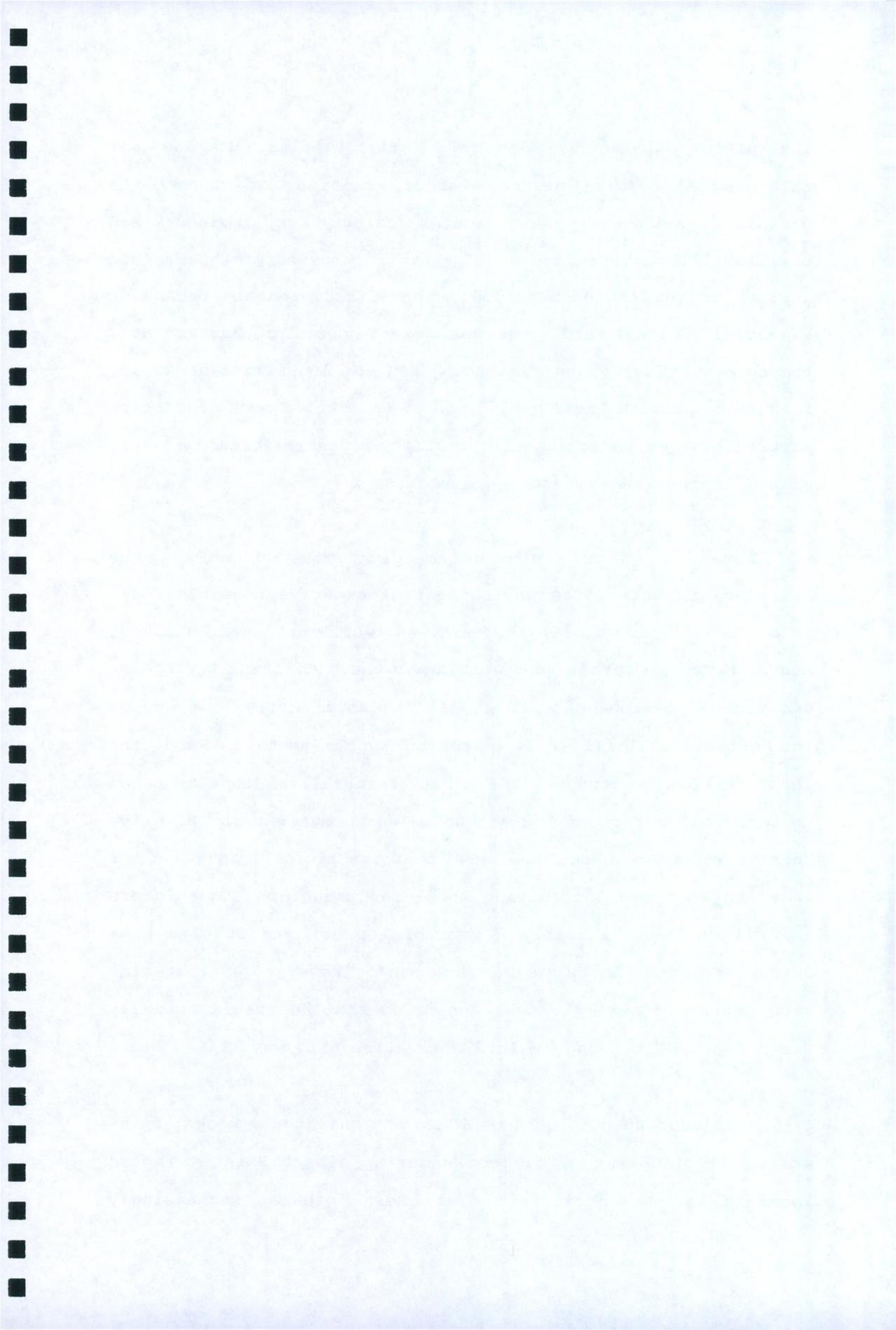
dissatisfied with this direction. He seems to have particularly reassessed his work under the advice of his tutor and established children's book illustrator, Quentin Blake. Fern no doubt held great respect for Blake. ' I'd simply never met anyone with his depth of knowledge about illustration , literature , theatre , art history and soon'.(16, p.9) Although the illustration Fern did for his degree show and prior to this is no longer in existance, one can conclude from his screenprint of 1969 that his imagery was lively and colourful (Plate 1). His style was very much in vogue at the time: on the strength of his work at the R.C.A. Fern was asked to design a number of posters along with a T-Shirt for the Kings Road fashion shop in London, Mr. Freedom (Plate 1). Fern describes the shop as 'ultra-trendy.'(23, p.18)

Fern and the Years after Graduation

Although by 1970 Fern was unenthusiastic about the figurative style of his work , it was well received commercially. In turn this set Fern on series of commissioned illustrations. Fern says 'because of that and the money I kept doing it for a bit and I tended to stick with it and consequently it took longer than ever to get on to what I'm really about'.(5) In 1970 Fern moved to Amsterdam with his wife and there his work remained undirected. Fern made an animated film, drew a comic strip for a bank and designed magazine advertisements. However, this period in Amsterdam did prove to be a time of experimentation and Fern's first attempts toward abstraction coincide with his time spent there. In 1972 Fern made one of his first abstract collages (plate 2) but he kept these experimentations sperarate from his
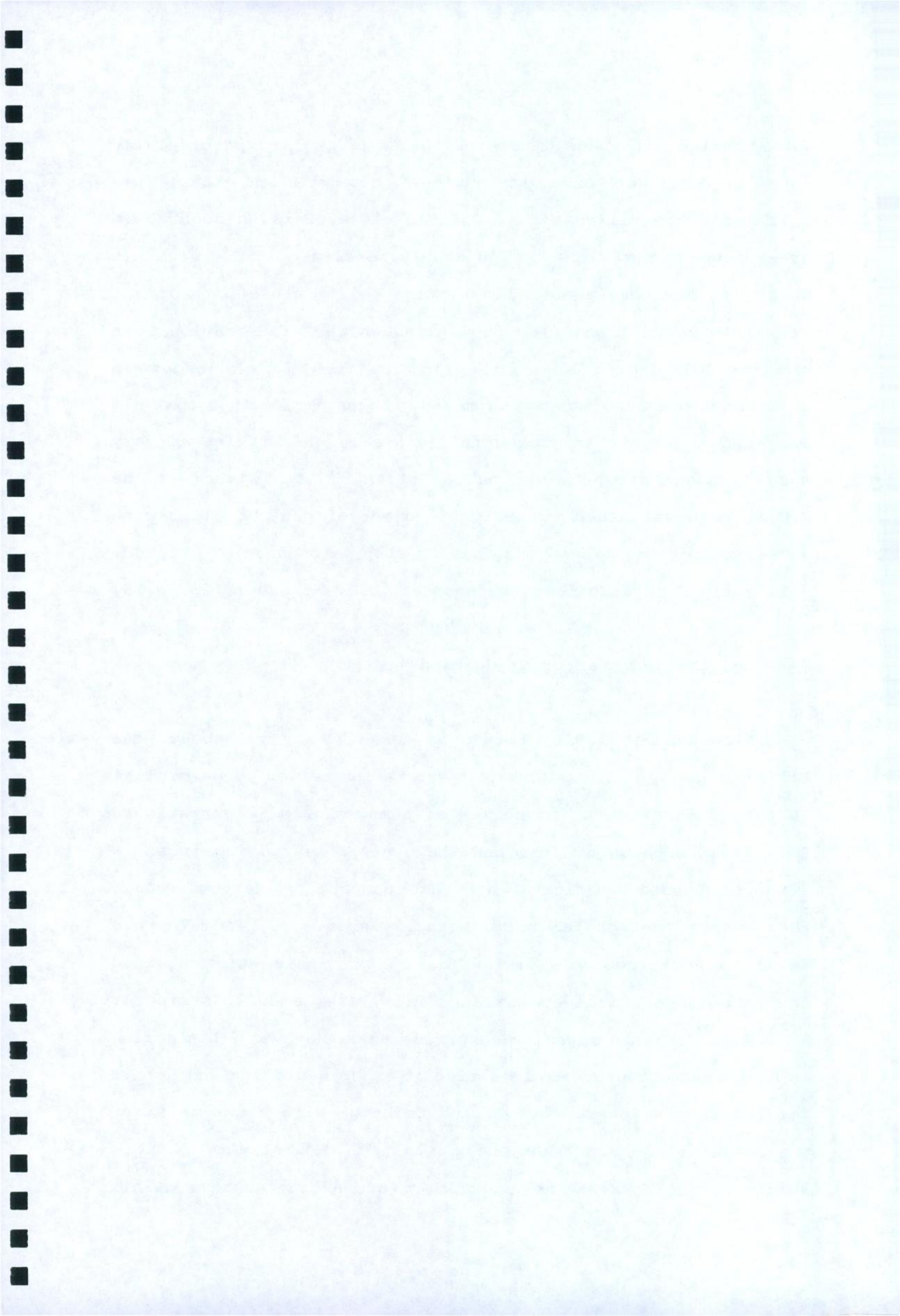
commercial work.

Fern became very interested in the work at the Stedelijk
Museum in Amsterdam. He views the work of the De Stijl and
modernist typographers as being very influential. However, there
are no traces of their typographic inspiration in Fern's work
until several years later. It would seem that the work of the De
Stijl painters, particularly Mondrian had a more immediate effect
on the style of Fern's work: The introduction of the grid
structure in Fern's first personal collages, a feature that later
became essential to Fern's collage work (Plate 3).

Returning to London in 1973 the figurative nature of Fern's
work still directed his commercial illustration. A commission for
cookery book illustration in the same year was handled by Fern
as air-brushed drawing. Yet it seems Fern's new preoccupation
with structure is applied to their layout: the images were cut-
out and mounted in highly formalised, even symmetrical
arrangements. Despite Ferns attempt to introduce new aspects to
his commercial illustration he was still particularly
dissatisfied with his out-put by the mid-'seventies. This marked
Fern's new position as an illustration tutor at the R.C.A. by
request of his tutor, Quentin Blake. Impressed by the
'iconoclastic'(5) attitudes of his students Fern became his own
hardest critic. He viewed himself as a late starter and burned
his work which he no longer liked. As Fern says:'I wanted to
completely purge myself of it and start fresh'.(5)

Unconventional Illustration of the 'Seventies and the R.C.A.

The Royal College of Art saw a new wave of illustrators in the '70s reacting against the established dogmas of illustration and the more recent air brush fantasies of the 'sixties. The illustrators went beyond the home spun world of illustration. They turned to Dada, Surrealism, Constructurism, Flemish art and the Renaissance for inspiration. It is this type of student that Fern tutored in 1974. In fact , he found himself with the responsibility of being tutor to a radical group of final term students: Sue Coe , Su Hantly, Paul Leight and others. Most influential among these illustrators was Sue Coe , a creator of often stern and savage images (Plate 4). Indeed, pictorial violence became fashionable at the time. Although Fern himself was not interested in making political statements, he admired the approach of these students and their sources. Their innovative techniques proved to be of great benefit to the development of Fern's own work. One of this new generation of R.C.A. illustrators, Terry Dowling, combined quirky drawing with proto-punk taped down collages – a medium which proved to be ideally suited to he new street culture (Plate 5). Evidently this became an inspiration to Fern's collage technique in the 'eighties.

In effect , these pioneers also influenced a second group of students who continued to challenge conventional assumptions about the role of illustration. These newcomers to the R.C.A. in the mid-'seventies, Robert Mason , Ian Pollock and Russell Mills for example, particularly strived to breakdown the artificial barriers between art , illustration and design. They defied the

sedate and bookish world of British Illustration.   The work of
these young illustrators was largely motivated by their
determination to express personal themes. The R.C.A. offered an
ideal environment for experiment . Russell Mills recalls the
college in being 'exceptional in that it did not promote a dogma
or a philosophy of teaching , as did most others'.(14, p.6)

The students rejected the generally held view of
contemporary illustration, which was and still is common, that
illustration involves literally the eludication by means of
pictures and is totally devoid of intellectual content. In
contrast these radical illustrators worked on imagery which was
based on their private investigations, had various layers of
content and involved the manipulation of unconventional
materials. In short , they wanted their work to attain a level
of self - expression and intellect equal to that expected of Fine
Art.

Russell Mills in particular was , and still is , frustrated
by the compartmentalizing of the various disciplines. To
demonstrate his concerns as an illustrator Mills compares his
attempts to elevate illustration to the views on painting held
by Marcel Duchamp. In the book More Dark than Shark Mills quotes
Duchamp 'I was interested in ideas - not merely visual products.
I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the
mind'.(14)Mills' own work involved mixed media images often
inspired by song lyrics. His illustrations of the late 'seventies
incorporated grid - based figuration to interpret the bizarre
song lyrics of Brian Eno (Plate 6). These collages were a product

of a series of problems that Mills set himself as a student in the R.C.A. in the mid '70s.

It has been assumed that Fern was particulary influenced by the work and ideas of his student, Russell Mills.(13, p.56) Indeed , in certain aspects of Mills' work can be associated with Ferns later developments : (a) the artistic sources, eg. Schwritters, Malevich, (b) collaged elements and grid structure, (c) an involvement with textures. According to Fern he had already considered applying the ideas of Constructivism and Modernism to his own work while living and working in Amsterdam. Indeed, there is evidence that Fern did explore abstract collage and employed a grid structure in his personal work prior to his teaching career at the R.C.A. (Plate 2). For me, it is the later rich textures of Mills' 'eighties collages which have inspired aspects of Fern's 'nineties work. (Chapter 3 Plate 60-61).In fact , Mills is regarded as the pioneer of such seductive surfaces in the area of British illustration and has been widely imitated.(11, p.51)

In another article the 'Life and Times of Dan Fern' Graham Vickers criticizes Fern for being overly impressed by his students work in the 1970s.(21, p.17) Yet Rick Poynor in the book Works with Paper explains that the new approach in Ferns work was a natural step in the course of events.(16, p.10) As an art tutor Fern was particularly exposed. He required a high degree of self - awareness and self - criticism to maintain credibility among his students. Showing personal work to student groups forced Fern to put his own images on review. It was then necessary to account

for and define his intuitions. In time this gave Fern the confidence to apply to his work more openly the ideas he gained in Amsterdam. It is only toward the end of the 'seventies that Fern introduced a new style to his commercial work. One such image is <u>Vol de Nuit</u> of 1978 - a Mondrian grid with the silhouette of an aeroplane and a collage of torn paper clouds (Plate 7). This basic structure anticipated Ferns collages of the 'eighties. However, these ordered layouts became infused with layered collage by the mid-'eighties. It is in this later work that the influence of Fern's students is particularly evident. The 'thrown - together' look of these collages is evidently derivative of the punk-graphics seen in his students' illustrations of the 'seventies and their contemporaries.

The Commercial Success of "Radical" Illustration

The commercial success of radical illustrators in the 'seventies was naturally determined by the open mindedness of editors and commissioners. R.C.A. illustrators, among others responded to the bleakness of the recessionary 'seventies and the sounds of punk rock. They produced work from personal concerns: Ian Pollock (on drunks), Robert Mason and Anne Howeson (on prostitution) and Sue Coe (on suicide). In turn, their themes captured the problems of the time and found outlets in several periodicals. By the late 'seventies illustrators were offered editorial work in <u>The Listener</u>, <u>Radio Times</u>, <u>New Scientist</u>, <u>Esquire</u> and <u>The Sunday Times.</u>(15, p.42) The preceding shock tactics of Punk had evidently prepared the way for the explicit illustration of their successors.

Fern explains another reason why illustrators got the opportunity to work commercially in an expressive manner. He states 'Fine Art in the early 'seventies went very conceptual and high brow'.(5) Their minimilism and theoretical statements almost totally divorced them from mass audiences. The visual voluptuousness of fine art painting in the 'sixties was popular and worked on a commercial level. The 'seventies experienced a gap in the market created by fine artists' withdrawal into conceptualism. This vacuum was eagerly filled by illustrators. Commissioners offered them the freer briefs which were usually handled by fine artists. In turn illustrators could explore their own ideas and themes. The worn out distinction between illustrators commissioned and personal work was finally becoming overturned.

Despite these new circumstances for the illustration discipline, Fern seems to have taken a quieter stance in the 'seventies. In his work he was out of synch with the political and social obsessions of his students. His illustration Vol de Nuit for an R.C.A. publication may be one of Ferns most expressive works of the 'seventies. The childlike imagery , the use of collage and the emphasis on structure demonstrate Ferns personal preoccupations which came to the forefront in his work of the 'eighties. Fern also made attempts to work in a purely typographic manner in 1977 (Plate 8). However, in 1979 his figurative and airbrush style is still apparent in his commercial work (Plate 9). By the end of the 'seventies Fern's commercial work still had no single direction. Fern states that by this time he had reached a point where his commercial work grew directly

out of his personal interests. However , it is not until the eighties that there is evidence of real progress in making the style of his personal and professional illustration inseparable.

From Figuration to Abstraction : 1980 - 85

The stylistic evolution of artists which Fern admires - Mondrian's move from figuration to formalist abstraction, Rothko's rejection of Surrealism for abstract expressionism - is evidently of personal relevance to his own work. In the early '80s Fern's new approach involved a move toward collage and a final dismissal of the figurative. This abstract style in his commercial work emerged in 1980 (Plate 10). The illustration was for a Chinese recipe in the R.C.A. cookbook. This collage possibly heralded the use of ephemera in Fern's work : the presence of a Chinese take - away box in the back ground. It also showed sign's of Ferns new obsession with abstracted letterforms ; in this case he suggested Chinese characters. Indeed, the beginning of the '80s marked the success of Ferns personal aim which he says is ' to try to find a fusion of typography and graphics with image - making , which would not only be satisfying to my individual needs as an artist , but which would enable me to work across a wide spectrum of commercial outlets '(16, p.5)

The representational nature of conventional commercial illustration was clearly avoided by Fern at this time. In response to his commissioned work Fern uniformly produced collages which combined torn and cut paper with type elements (Plate 11). Through his abstract approach Fern aimed to prove

that illustration can thrive within the limitation of a brief and ' become more interesting than the purpose that inspired it ' In a commission for the cover of the New Scientist magazine in 1984 Fern showed that the serious subject of science can be imaginatively informed (Plate 12). His collage was inspired by the cover line ' Cancer genes ' : the enemy within' and the associated article discussing the connection between cancer and oncogenes. Fern created a ' disturbing vision of polychromatic angular distortion observed through a circle '(22, p.46). The image emphasised the abstract coded nature of genetic realm. Fern chose to ignore the traditional medical diagrams and motifs and DNA helices . In turn he demonstrated interesting alternatives to conventional illustration in the medical field.

As Fern's commercial work developed along these lines of abstraction his personal explorations often became his source materials. His illustration for the cover of the Architects Journal (Plate 13) of 1983 would evidently derived from his earlier print in collage constructions (Plate 14). These self – generated works were part of Fern's first one – man exhibition in 1982. The show was held in the Curwen Gallery , London. The themes of these works were mainly concerned with structure , colour , letterforms , the look of language and balance (Plate 15). The style and intent of this work was equal to that of Ferns' collages arising out of commissions at the time.

The disparities between Fern's commercial and personal work had virtually disappeared , the difference being that Fern would use certain elements to relate to a particular text , piece of

music or theme in a given brief. For example in his poster for Rank Xerox 1985 , (Plate 16) Fern incorporated specific imagery to relate to the project. The theme being colour , Fern integrated into his collage a Japanese symbol ' aoi ' which means blue and colouring book type illustrations such as a lemon for yellow and a blackbird for black. In the same year Fern had his second one man exhibition. Unlike his first show , this event included abstract collages which had evolved through commercial projects (Plate 17). In discussing this show of 1985 Graham Vickers says :'One thing is at once clear this is Fine Art and Fine Art arrived at by an untraditional route '.(21)

A Stylistic Standstill

From the mid to late 'eighties Fern's collage style made little change from his work at the beginning of the decade. In Works with Paper Rick Poyor says that Fern believes that illustrators ' himself has said that illustrators ' can lock themselves into a single , highly recognisable style , which , though at first is original and much in demand , rapidly becomes passe and eventually turns into a prison '.(16, p.15) Indeed , in observing Fern's work in his lecture (7), with image upon image , this 'eighties style collage became repetitive and unexciting. The images in works with paper also verify this (Plate 18 - 19 and Plate 41-43) . It is apparent that by the late '80s Fern was commissioned on the basis of his collage style and a minimum of self - expression was required.

For me , by 1985 Fern had really brought his collage technique to a conclusion. Perhaps the visual intrigue of his commercial work is seen in his advertisement for Rank Xerox. The visual puns to describe colour such as a ' black ' jet and brick red are a novel introduction of the figurative in Fern's abstract collage at the time. In 1986 , this idea is merely repeated in a series of collages for the annual of Dutch Advertising. While these images are witty and clever their style and intent is repetitive. Similar to his Rank Xerox collage , Fern placed dislocated representational elements into abstract settings. Likewise , the images became visual ciphers : a chair represented the chairmans report (Plate 20), a trumpet referred to the idea of ' blowing your own horn '(6) ie. boasting in winning the design awards (Plate 21), the image of a torn saw signified a ' saw with no teeth '(6) ie the idea of criticism in which this section discussed the entries quite harshly (Plate 22   ) and other images worked in the same way.

In the following years Fern's commercial work was treated with a similar approach. He combined relevant figurative elements with torn paper. An annual report for KMPG involved two globes to represent the company's international communications network, the company being divided into four sections is represented by separate colours and so on(Plate 23). Indeed , Fern's collage (Plate 24), for ' Sir John Soanes Museum ', London is aptly captioned in the article ' Art Failure ' , 1989 as " more collage ".(18) In this article Christopher Sharrock discusses the work of illustrators who were selected for the European illustration 88 / 89 book. Fern's collage commissioned by London Underground

(Plate 24) was included. Sharrock mocks the chosen illustrators in general and describes Fern's collage technique as anonymous illustration : '.... arranging diagrams and bits of type , colour , texture and someone elses drawings ?.... Anybody could have done it and anybody probably has ' (18) While I would disagree with this last point of anonymity , (as Fern's collages are very distinctive) , I would agree that collage was truly ' old hat ' by the end of the eighties.

CHAPTER II

a. <u>The Stampbook</u>

'Ever since I've been a kid I was always very organised. I liked to arrange things just so and everything I like - I mean really like - has some underlying sense of discipline and order to it, right across the board through, music, interior design, architecture....', and so replies Fern as we sit in his office in the Royal College of Art. The office in fact reinforces his point : it is narrow and crowded with various objects (books, bottles and samples of ephemeral pinned to the wall) yet it somehow manages to look tidy and uncluttered. Dan Fern himself is smart in appearance, organised in thought and fluent in response throughout the interview. (5)

Fern continues, 'I've got a couple of slides with stamp albums when I was a kid and the way they're actually arranged shows already that when I was 5,6,7 I sort of laid things out in a very ordered way'. This comment was in response to my interest in the underlying grid structure in Fern's collages. His poster <u>The House</u> of 1977 (Plate 8) could be viewed as a sequel to Fern's early hobby of sticking stamps 'on those squares you get in stamp albums.' The formality of arrangement, the centered type and strict geometric form is not far removed from a stampbook layout. However, it is also likely that Fern's structured approach is a consequence of his time spent in Amsterdam.

Working in Holland (the birthplace of De Stijl) and visiting the Stedelijk Museum proved to be of importance to Fern. He describes this time abroad as 'the most intensely educational period that he had'.(5) Fern had already seen in books the abstract and typographic approach of various Dutch artists. However, seeing the actual work on the museum walls 'was a sort of revelation.'(5) Fern adds,'it was like seeing companions'.Fern believes that this encounter with the ordered compositions of several modern typographers inspired his future experiments in type. However, he was perhaps less influenced by the Modernist use of typography at that time than the mathemathical forms of De Stijl painting, which prompted the idea of a grid structure in his work (3,2,25). The architecture in Amsterdam also reflects the formality of geometric arrangements.

Fern's slides of his childhood stampbooks demonstrate an early use of order.(7) However , I feel that it was not until later that he realized their structural relevance to his collage work.

b. The Grid

'Flattened , geometric, ordered, it is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.'(10)

Rosalind Krauss describes the grid as an ideal emblematic

form which replaces pictorial representation and was particularly exploited by Mondrian. For Fern, the grid evidently offered a basic structure to work with in his movement toward abstraction. By his MA degree show in 1970 he wished to 'turn his back' on the figurative style of his work. In retrospect Fern sees his early illustration as ending in 'cul de sacs'.(5)

Noticing the grid structure early in Fern's work I had made associations with the facades seen in Japanese architecture. (Plate 26). (I was aware at the time that Fern had an interest in Japanese culture). Putting this notion directly to Fern , he set out a couple of slides : a sketch by Mondrian and a Japanese dwelling. The similarities are fascinating. It becomes apparent that Japanese architecture had no direct influence on the initial structure of Fern's work. Fern only visited Japan for the first time four years ago and it was only then he observed the structural relevance: 'I went to Kyoto and looked around there and again a whole wedge of things slotted into place - Japanese architecture , gardens and formal arrangements...'. Indeed, the importance of Mondrian's compositions on the structure of Fern's work remains evident (Plate 27,28).

c.Constructivism and Suprematism

> Art like every science is one of the
> branches of mathematics....
> Construction represents the contemporary
> demand for organisation....
> The man who has organised his life,his
> work and himself is the modern man.(4)

Rodchenko wrote this text in 1921 at a time when innovative artists were trying to define a new language, rejecting former decorative experiments and complex compositions in favour of simple linear and geometric forms. In many respects this parallels Fern's own stance in the early seventies. The portfolio Fern first presented in 1963 at the Manchester College of Art is described by Graham Vickers (21) as being 'full of diverse and complicated things'. Although by the end of the decade Fern has focused on childrens book illustration his general image-making lacked the selectivity and order of his later collages (Plate 1) Subsequently Fern pursued the organization of 'his life, his work and himself', searching for a new structure, a fresh approach.

The first appearance of Fern's disciplined or mathematical structure in the 'seventies suggests the influence of Rodchenkos' theories. In combination with the inspiration of Amsterdam, Rick Poynor points out that Fern's admiration for Russian Constructivists had a determining influence on his art.(16, p.10)

The grid format Fern acquired in the 'seventies was applied as a structural framework of a subtler nature in the 'eighties (Plate 29). The collage, List (E), is marked at various points of its frame. Ruled ephemera or squared paper act as guidelines and in turn create the presence of an uncompleted grid. This type of collage which emerged at the beginning of the 'eighties displays a more mature and abstract adaption of what is seen in his experimental collages of the '70. Elements of the compositional approach of Russian constructivists can be

discerned in List (E) (Plate 30,31) and in a number of Fern's 'eighties collages. List (E) does manifest the general visual style which is to dominate the '80s.However, the constructivist influence becomes less apparent and the formality of structure becomes further disrupted as the decade advances. Fern's Moderne x collage of 1987 (Plate 40) demonstrates this point. The geometric shapes are kept in the background and the surface area is occupied with a more 'thrown - together' look.

The mnemonic nature of the shapes in Suprematist compositions, works which Fern also experienced first hand in Amsterdam, possibly effected Fern's thinking at a later date(Plate33,35).Fern first employed triangular cut shapes of the actual collage perimeters in 1981 (Plate 32). Such shapes could be viewed as corresponding to the images of Kasimir Malevich(Plate 34).

d. Mondrian and Punk

> You sort have seen things and you're
>
> thinking that will be something of interest
>
> but you don't know quite how and then
>
> you take it in and slowly assimilate
>
> a whole lot of things and slowly out of
>
> it comes what you are (5)

The ideas of Modernism, De Stijl, Constructivism and Suprematism left a purist, simple impression on Fern. His experimental collages of the 'seventies demonstrate this as do

his ordered arrangements in his first collages of the 1980s. However, by c.1983 a new infusion of 'brashness' emerges. Bold shapes, torn edges and scattered elements are overlaid on the former grid-type layouts of the 1970s. Perhaps this development relates to the seminal effect of Punk. Rick Poynor hints at this possibility: 'What he (Fern) did admire was the "thrown-together" look of Punk graphics'.(16)

In Art meets Science, an article by Fern, he describes the Punk movement as 'deliciously anarchic... sardonic, outrageous, frenetic, nihilistic'. More importantly he adds ' like Dada, it was the sworn enemy of anything that was neat, smart and ordered '.(8) Punk essentially contradicted Fern's primarily purist approach of the 'seventies. Also, Fern was not interested in being ' outrageous' as such: ' I'm not into shocking or anything like that '. However, what he did evidently seek in his work was to make it 'tougher and sort of more spikey '. (5)

Coming in as a part-time lecturer, Fern recognised the work of his students in the mid-'seventies as being 'tough' and 'angry'.In approach their work epitomized the ruleless approach of punk. Fern says the students were 'terrific' and 'fierce' and 'that was very good and good for me as well'. (5) Fern does not initially dismiss his uncomplicated basic approach of the 'seventies during this period of upheaval in the college. Instead, he awaited the calmer period of the 1980s where, the stylistic innovations of the earlier wave were 'regurgitated' by R.C.A. illustrators without 'the politics or conviction that gave them their meaning'(15) Indeed, the 'eighties were the period of

design for design's sake"

Fern integrated a dramatic collaged effect with his symmetrical arrangements at this time. The order and equilibrium of Mondrian's <u>Compositions</u> (Plate 36,37)can be decoded beneath the surface layers (Plate 40-43). It is not clear whether this is deliberate or subconscious on Fern's part. While the graphics of Punk set out to offend with chaotic layouts (Plate 38) Fern's underlying grid helps sustain the distinctive qualities in his collages : structural harmony and graphic co-ordination.

TYPOGRAPHY

A. <u>A Tribute to Werkman in the Post-Punk Era.</u>

Hendrik Werkman's typographic prints of the 1920s/'30s began to become popular in the 1960s and '70s, mainly through the exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. As we have seen, Fern was there to experience these works himself at the beginning of the 'seventies. For Fern, seeing 'such marvellous pictures' made 'just out of type was an eye opener'.(5) He states "when I saw Hendrik Werkman's things particularly.... it started to give me the idea that typography could be " Art " '(Plate 44,45).

However , this " revelation " of typography in the early 'seventies does no appear to have had any direct impact on Fern's work at the time. In Britain in the late 1970s Fern made explorations with type (Plate 7-9) which may have been triggered by his discoveries abroad. Yet , the typewriter faces and the " blackmail " style cut – out letters " of Fern's work relate more to what was happening in the typography of Punk (Plate 38). "Anarchy is the key : Do it yourself is the melody " was Jamie Reid's slogan for Punk.(12) While " anarchy " was definitely out for Fern, the DIY graphics of punk were evidently appealing.

It was not until the beginning of the 1980's that the style of Werkman's typography surfaces in Fern's work (Plate 47) This new approach of Ferns may be directly related to the cultural context of the post-punk era. Modernist typography from the 1920s was being introduced to graphic styles of the late 1970s

and early 'eighties. Barney Bubbles, (born Colin Fruher) is viewed to have ' brought a wider perspective to the torn extemporized graphics of early punk.'(12) He took inspiration from the Bauhaus , Futurists and De Stijl movements. A revival of interest in Modernism was encompassed by several designers , such as Malcolm Garett and Neville Brody , setting a new style for The 'eighties. (Plate 48-50) Herbert Spencer's book <u>The Pioneers of Modern Typography</u> , which included Hendrik Werkman's work , became particularly influential. It appears it was time for Fern to revert to his personal repository of ideas which he had accumulated in Amsterdam.

Throughout the 'eighties Fern has made use of the typographic experiments which Werkman explored in the past. Werkman had his printworks in Holland and in the 1920s he began to make quite abstract designs using wooden type. (18) The typographer explored various techniques such as printing on the underside of his wood letters. He also exploited the subtle texture of the old type for effect (ie the scratches and grains of the wood.) Similarly in Fern's personal explorations he has taken rubbings from trayfuls of wood type. (Plate 46) Fern has also frequently used printed letterforms throughout the 'eighties collages which echo the forms and textures of Werkman's typographic prints.

b. <u>Legibility</u>

Fern's position as an illustrator naturally involved different working conditions from graphic designers in the 'eighties. The typography of designers such as Neville Brody involved certain legibility restrictions. Low budgets and the informative nature of graphics left less room for experimentation. For instance , when Brody deconstructed his type faces into illegible components he was obliged to clue his readers onto their meaning by degenerating the letters over a period of four issues of <u>The Face</u> magazine (Plate 50) Fern on the other hand , had few limitations. Having a steady position as tutor in the R.C.A. he had less to lose by his unconventional approach . Being an image maker, he was free to abstract letterforms past the boundaries of legibility and be accepted on a commercial level as an illustrator.On the subject of legibility Fern says:

> I think that whole thing about legibility it is knowing when something has got to be legible..... if you want to tell somebody some information....but if you want to say something that is a bit less open to interpretation..... you talk poetry.(5)

Indeed , Fern's work has been described as being at times "inaccessible to more or less everybody except those in the vanguard."(21) However, Fern views his work as " a sort of visual poem " and feels that if people really want to , they can interpret fragmented words and decode symbols . Conveying

specific information is not the main function of his work. It is Fern's aim to leave room for the spectator to have his own ideas. This reminded me of the words of Marcel Duchamp about the importance of the spectator :.....it's a product of two poles - there's the pole of the one who makes the work , and the pole of the one who looks at it , I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.(3)

Bearing this in mind I noticed elements in Fern's collages I had previously skimmed over. In one of Fern's illustration for the design category awards of the Dutch Advertising Annual the letters unscrambled to read " good morning " and " good evening " (Plate 51). The " G " in the top right hand corner abbreviates the word " good ". The red capitals spell " morn " and a small blue " ev " implies even which can be both applied to the suffix " ing " . Choosing such greeting may refer to the whole idea of awards, in this case presenting the designers in the formality of the award ceremony.

For commercial projects Fern often plays on the initials of the company for effect. In the double page advertisement for Rank Xerox (Plate 16) the letters " R " and in particular " X " became important features of the collage. The numbers " 85 " (on what appears to be a torn raffle ticket) specify the 1985 generation of colour copier on which the collage was printed. Above the black " X " lies an orange piece of paper which reads as " Qu'est-ce que cette image represente ? " and translates , rather aptly , as ' What does this picture represent ?'

<u>Ephemera : Childhood , Taste and Politics.</u>

On the subject of ephemera in his work , Fern says :' I don't use many modern things ... I do tend to use things ... that have already been around a while.'(5) He basically views this selection as being related to two things a. his childhood b. his personal taste.

Fern states that the old typefaces he uses in his collages often correspond with his childhood toys. (Plate 52) In the book <u>Works with Paper</u> Rick Poynor says that Fern " remembers admiring the graphics of a Messerschmidt 109 " as a child and that " echos of the planes markings .... survive in Fern's graphic collisions in number and shape. " (16, p.7) Fern often includes old games and fragments of colouring book imagery in his collages (Plate 53). He believes that 'a lot of the things you are as a person you already are by the age of seven '.(5) He points to his latest work and says ' these boxes for instance , they are from old trainsets .... which I had when I was a kid ' (Plate 60) Taking this to mean that those boxes were actually his own childhood toys, Fern clarifies that they are from his recent findings in shops and so on.Indeed, it has become apparent, for me , that Fern's hobby as a collector has had a great impact on the appearance of his work.His fondness of children's toys and so on is only one area of his collecting.His personal childhood associations with his work are possibly connections he makes through his collecting and not vice-versa.

In Fern's lecture, February 1992 , he opened the show with some slides of the interior of his home.(7)His collection of old

materials and antiques are the features of his living conditions. For Fern , his work is an extension of his adult life : his collages , a storing ground for his collected objects. (Plate 54 - 55) Post-war ration books , fragments of Islamic papyus , stamps and seals and the like are carefully organised in the plan chests of his studio. A range of letterforms have been gathered from all over the world : existing in ancient letters , tickets , rubbings , stencils and books. A series of letterforms from Czechoslovakia (a form of primitive Letraset) have occurred in Fern's collages from the mid-eighties onward (Plate 53). In fact , the purpose of this collage was to correspond with the text , which discusses the collection of work by unsuccessful design entrants for the Annual of Dutch Advertising . Fern played on this idea to include worthless personal items gathered in a faded envelope.

Fern equates the old with the beautiful. He dismisses contemporary materials as " tacky ." He likes his work to have a " quality that it is not new but has been there " a long time".(5)His perception of good taste (a matter which is purely subjective) is with all that is antiquated or has a faded or worn appearance : " I think for better or for worse my stuff (.work) is very tasteful ".(5)

However , in avoiding contemporary ephemera in his work , I believe , Fern has evidently taken other considerations into account. He states that he is not into shocking and continues , " whereas people like my colleague , Jake Tilson , does work using very contemporary found imagery " (Plate 56). Fern is

obviously aware of the political and social connotations that present day materials entail. (eg. contemporary packaging and lettering would present the familiar and imply statements on current affairs.

Indeed , Fern's source materials set his work apart from established uses of the collage medium. From Dada to Pop Art and indeed Punk , artists exploited icons of the time to highlight contemporary events. Collages and photo montages were important as polemical and political tools in the Dada movement. Kurt Schustters , associated with this group , was less concerned with political messages in his work. However , he was aware that by employing the " throw away ' materials of the day social and political connections would inevitably be made.He states " ...as an abstract artist , I stay clear of the social and political events of our times , but for all that I am even more in and of our times than politicians '.(17, p.102)

In Collages , Anneght Hill states that an iconographic analysis of Schwitters collages reveals the artist's private and public concerns during the inflationary period in Post - War Germany.(9) Schwitters was particularly concerned with the irrational aspects of luxury items (ie. Chocolate , coffee , etc. became more expensive than the theatre and entertainment) As a result , in Schwitter's " Merz " collages (and apt name derived from the word Kommerz meaning commerce) he juxtaposed scraps of packaging with theatre and parking tickets.

Fern compares Schwitters' selection of rubbish in the 1920s

(Plate 57) as being equivalent to using " mars bar wrappers " today. He states that Schwitters was " probably the first true Pop Artist ".(5) Indeed , in the sixties Pop Artists made social statements on advertising by using contempory packaging and printed ephemera in their work. Although Fern's ephemera often reflects post - war Britain (the faded colours of green , blue , beige reminiscent of military uniforms and the presence of flying jets),his collages cannot be categorized in that tradition as a social or political commentary of the present time.

Chapter III

A Purist Approach : 1990s

Fern states :   The thing that I'm most concerned with at the
                       moment with work in general – it had become
                       very complex – (is that) I've been waiting
                       to make my work as interesting and simple for
                       such a long time.(5)

Perhaps this " waiting " refers to the stylistic standstill
that Fern , as an illustrator , experienced by the late 1980s .
As early back to his commercial work in the 1970s Fern admitted
that the demands by commissioners made it more difficult to give
up a certain style. The fact that Fern introduced a simpler
approach in the nineties may relate to the broader activities of
this decade , which were prompted in the late '80s.

By the end of 1980s design in general and , indeed ,
illustration had worked itself into a multi-layered and
decorative state. A group of designers under the name of 8VO in
the late 'eighties had already began to set the new mode for the
'nineties. Their grid based , simple layouts demonstrated a
desire for order. At the same time environmental and moral issues
were causing controversy. Indeed , for the 1990s design
simplicity could reflect a cleaner environment in a world which
Fern describes as a " visual bubble ".(5)

In 1990 Fern said " increasingly, the sort of pictures that

I want to produce require that intense concentration , even meditation ". His series of Fratres images probably best describe these aims nd his movement towards " purism "
(Plate 58 - 59). They are , quite simply , old books opened out. The spines are often torn for effect.In Design magazine Tony Mc Sweeney has described these spines as ' war bandages '" (Plate 58).(13) The textures are reminiscent of Russell Mills' 1980s work, (Plate 60-61) and were similarly inspired by music. Hence , the name Fratres , a musical composition which Fern played to accompany these images during his lecture.(7)

Another collection of images Fern is currently working on are for a book on colour copying (Plate 62).(Indeed , the colour copier has become Fern's technology much in the way black and white copiers were used in the punk era) These pieces relate to the idea of collecting and a range of boxes belonging to toys are opened out and painted. They are stripped of any clear meaning. Fern refers to their crucifix shape and plays African tribal music while showing these slides. Could this imply a spiritual content ? Perhaps not, in the book Works with Paper Fern mentions rhythm and balance being important features in their own right. However , Fern's new concern for the environment may be inherent in these works : fragmented letters pasted on one box can be read as " Re - use - it ", and implies paper recycling. (Plate 64)

With this type of imagery in the 1990's Fern has taken even a further step than he did in the 'eighties to detach his work from the pictrial mode of conventional illustration. This work

could , and no doubt will be , described as " elitist " . However , they demonstrate Fern's pragmatic interest in structure and are probably less influenced by his contemporaries than his collage work of the 1980s. Indeed , Fern is aware of his attraction to styles : ' my day to day work here (the RCA) brings me into contact with alot of people who are doing terrific work and there is something of the butterfly in me - you know you see some-one doing something and think oh that's nice - I'll do a bit of that.'(5) However , after almost eighteen years as a tutor Fern strives to avoid such distractions : I've got to be absolutely ruthlessly disciplined .... I think that's why my work is getting simpler and simpler ".

The Stigma of Illustration

Naturally many illustrators , involved in satire , natural history , fiction and so on , are not concerned with the elevation of illustration as a ' Fine Art '. However, as we have seen there are several illustratores , Fern included , who aim to broaden the level at which their work is appreciated. Indeed an increased number of contemporary illustrators have achieved success in a 'fine art ' gallery situation. Despite their progression , however, Fern himself views the opportunity for illustration to join the ranks of ' high ' or fine art as being slim.

Fern believes that the dismissal of illustration as a commercial art exists within the attitudes of fine artists and is promoted by art critics. He feels the snobbish element among fine artists is deep-rooted in the realm of art eductation (7) . He points out that illustration is rarely appreciated as a ' Fine Art ' yet it has been acceptable for artists in the past such as Picasso , Miro and Hockney to work on a commercial level.

It was this type of imbalance between applied and fine art that Fern's students in the 'seventies had reacted against. Russell Mills probably states the illustrator's case best. In the book More Dark that Shark he argues that it is in the more recent decades that this snobbish attitude towards illustration has prevailed. He makes reference to Kurt Schwitters and Laslo Moholy - Nagy to demonstrate that commercial and fine art went hand in hand in the past : such artists produced paintings , sculptures

and poetry while at the same time worked in advertising. He says : " Artists didn't look upon the commission or the patronage system simply as a means of earning a living but also as an opportunity through which personal ideas and skills could be extended and seen more widely.(14, p.7)

In the book Works with Paper Rick Poynor describes Fern's attitude about the stigma of illustration as ' typically realistic '.(16, p.14) He says Fern noted in a lecture of 1988 that his ' concern is that these restraints (the lack of acceptance of illustrators as 'artiists') shouldn't reduce our level of intent '.(16) However , Fern , no doubt , is frustrated in being short - changed by the fine - art world. He consoles himself and fellow illustrators in saying that , illustration work 'is reproduced by the tens of thousands and seen by a far wider audience than most fine artists could ever hope to reach . (15)

Besides the snobbery of fine artists in degrading the value of illustration , several illustrators feel that the appearance of illustration is ' cheapened ' by the hierarchy of designers. In Direction magazine, 1989 , the illustrator , Christopher Sharrock complains that designers commission and promote illustration and , in turn, reduce illustration to their own mediocre level. He says : ' They (designers) decide what gets published , yet this function is often exercised from a position of weakness and ignorance. Many designers fail to recognise the basic creative process involved in illustration and cannot

without a grounding in design ' the illustrator will always play second fiddle to the art director.'(16, p.5)

However , to a considerable extent Fern himself succeeded in working on commercial pieces from the illustration concept right through to the application of text. He views this achievement in relation to his early college training in design and typography. In his illustrations he has aimed to treat type as part of the image in reaction to the way designers integrate elements : ' typography to show the cool rational approach and illustration as a bit of rough '.(15)

Fern's aim to act as designer and illustrator is , however , not without criticism. The contemporary British typographer , Phil Baines , referred to the information text on Fern's work saying :' He's a bit shaky when he uses proper type '.(1) He makes particular reference to Fern's poster for an exhibition by artists on the theme of the city (Plate 41) In response , I tend to disagree with Baines. In this poster the text , the gallery address and list of artists names , are integrated as a compositional component of the overall poster. The text plays off the rules above them and is positioned within the grid structure (Chapter 2 , Plate 41) In isolation this type may not be accurately sound in that the reading is tight and produces 'rivers ' in the text (ie. visible spaces in the text as a whole) and Fern's use of capital letters reduces legibility. In the context of this poster , however , the look of the type is ideally suited to the subject : the typewriter appearance of the lettering is reminiscent of the street culture typography of Punk

(Plate 38) and , in turn , is in keeping with the theme of the poster , 'the City '.

Despite Fern's success in combining type and image , and his independance in handling design briefs , it is apparant in his later 'eighties work that the designer had the upper hand . Indeed Lynn Tricket of 'Tricket and Webb' design , who commissions Fern regulary, pinpoints how designers really feel about the freedom of creative illustrators : '..... it is difficult because we're the sort of design group that do like to have our own ideas as well and it is quite difficult to give that up. '(20) Indeed, there is evidence in several of Fern's commercial works of his conforming to designers requests. For example in 1988 Fern was commissoned to produce an image of a hammer and sicle for a vodka label under the art direction of Lewis Moberly . Fern had little imput other than to produce a ' picture ' in a required style . The art director cropped the image and added the typography. Indeed , this approach goes against Fern's own principles : ie. to interpret and alter the brief through personal exploration.His own advice to illustrators is to ' never accept a job at face value ' , and to learn to say ' NO ' to designers.(7)

Conclusion

If it's written in a book that A and B are sitting on a rock discussing such and such, what's the point in drawing that again. It seems like knitting to me , but it's what so much illustration is about (R. Mills, 2, p.29)

During the mid – late 'seventies a number of illustration students at the R.C.A. questioned the traditional role of their discipline. From Sue Coe to Russell Mills the emphasis was on techniques which were foreign to the world of illustration. With his position as tutor at he R.C.A. , Fern was there to experience such an upheaval. Consequently , his own illustrative style took on a new direction. While Fern views this period as an 'exciting' time at the R.C.A. he tends to skim over the dramatic effect his students and their contemporaries had on his work.

Fern views his period abroad in Amsterdam (1970 – 73) and his encounter with works at the museum there , as instigating his typographic and abstract collage technique. Indeed , a definite tribute to Piet Mondrian is apparent in the grid structure of his work. However , directly after this " inspirational " period abroad Fern did not alter the figurative mode of his work. It was not until his entrance as tutor to the R.C.A. in 1975 that Fern took steps in reconsidering the style of his illustration. It was at this time he burnt his previous work.

Indeed , in examining the various aspects of Fern's work from the mid '70s – the late '80s the influence of contemporary events relates more to his work than his self – proclaimed debt to the old masters. a.   His late '70's typography correspond to what was explored in Punk graphics (eg. typewriter type etc.) b.his layered collage of the '80s evidently has its roots in the " thrown – together " look of punk which was in the collage work of his students Terry Dowling and Russell Mills in the '70s.

c.this retrospective approach to typography in the '80s relates to the styles of the day in the retro – period of the Post – Punk era.

Indeed , regarding technique and attitude Fern is by no means an innovator. However , what Fern does achieve is a pragmatic exploration of typography , structure and colour. His personal play on words as seen in his work for Dutch advertising annual particularly demonstrates these capabilities. Perhaps taking ten years to investigate the same approach became a little repetitive , however his work of the 'nineties is a welcome progression. Overall , Fern's involvement in broadening the scope of illustration is a worthwhile contribution. Indeed,in his success of exhibiting his 'illustrations' within fine art galleries and in his role as a tutor Fern is fundamental in redefining the Illustration discipline.

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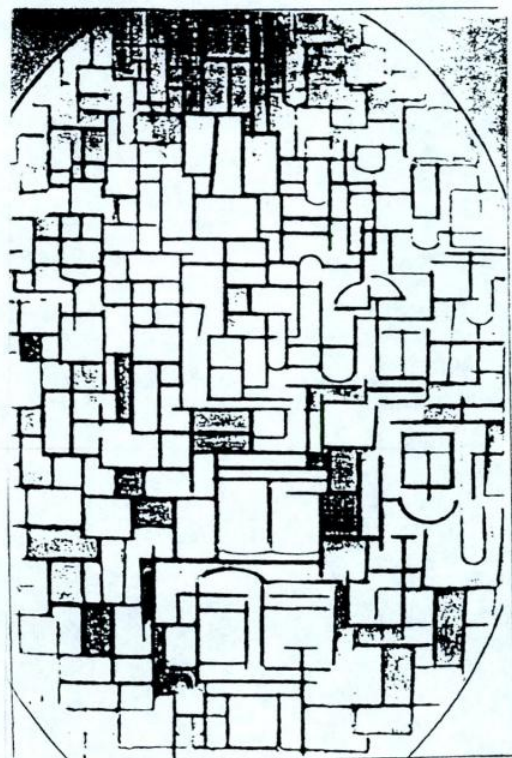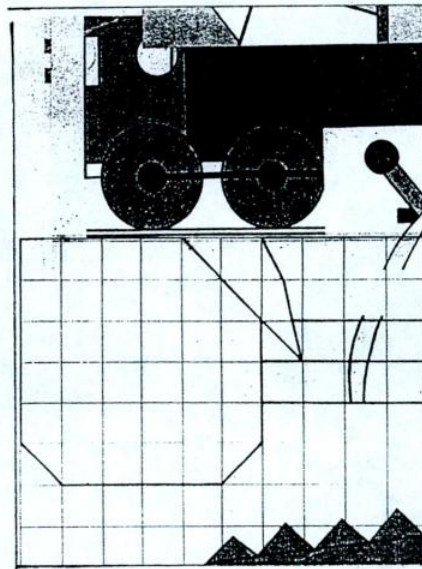
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The risks that count

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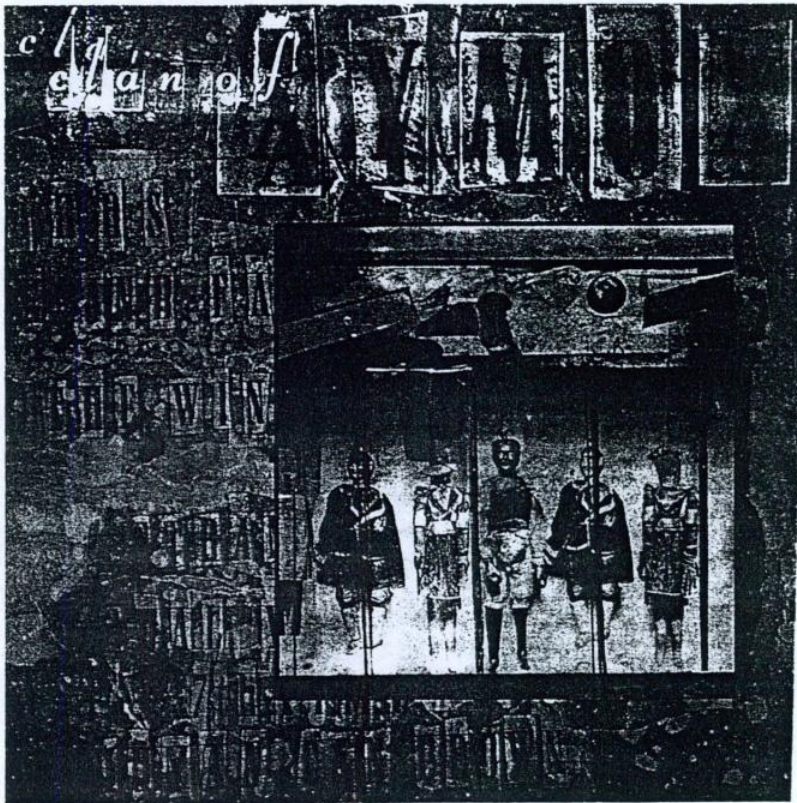
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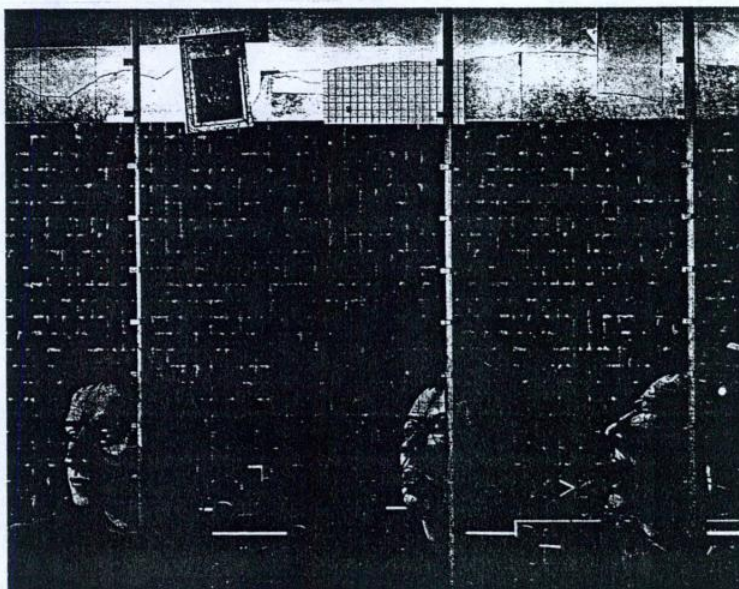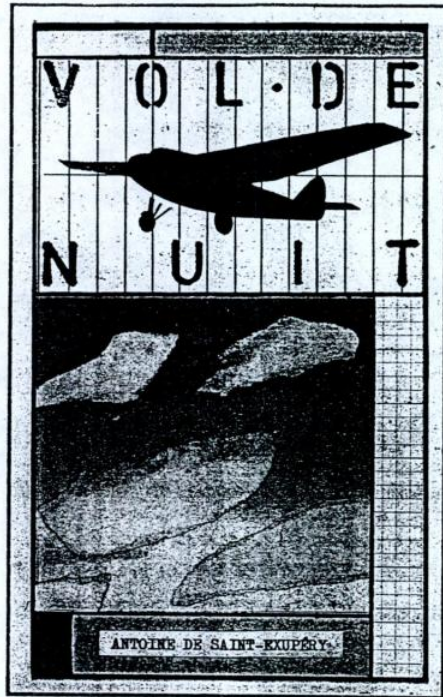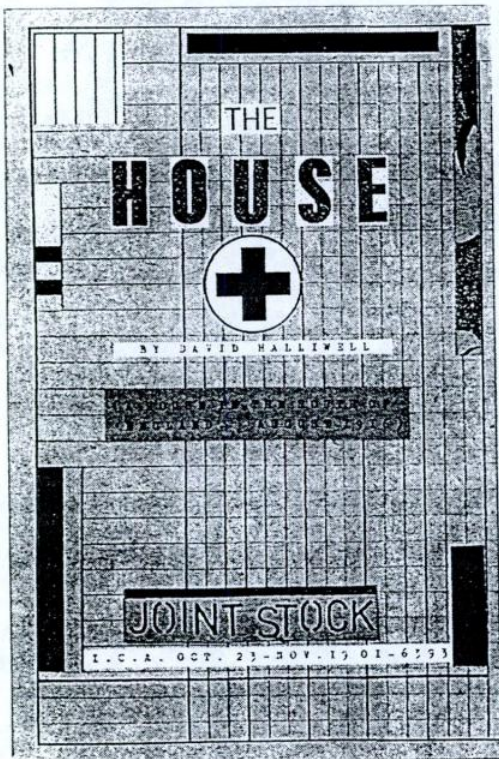
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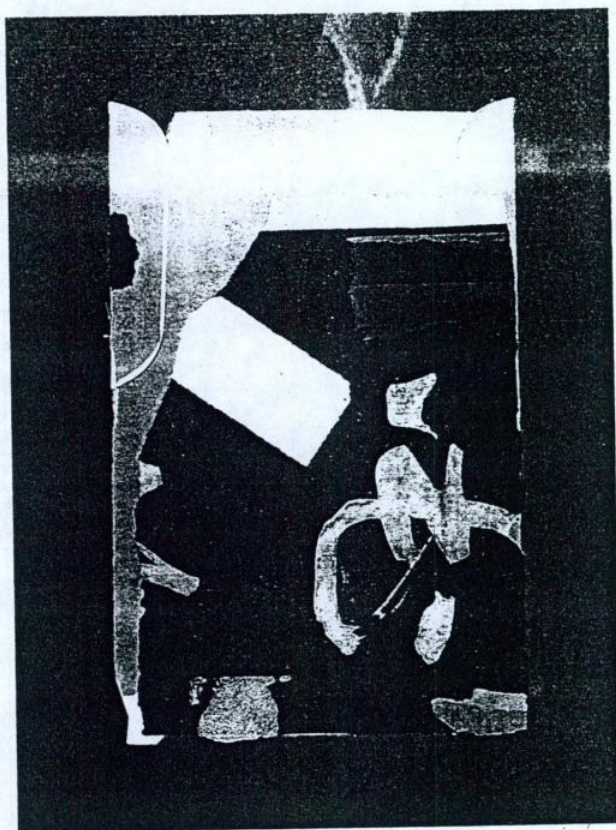
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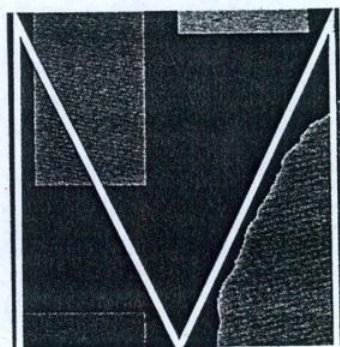
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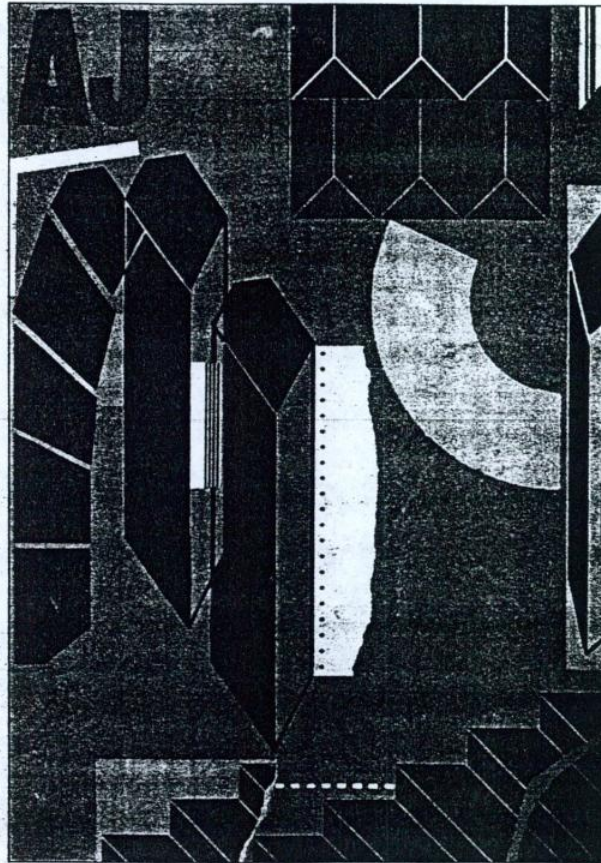
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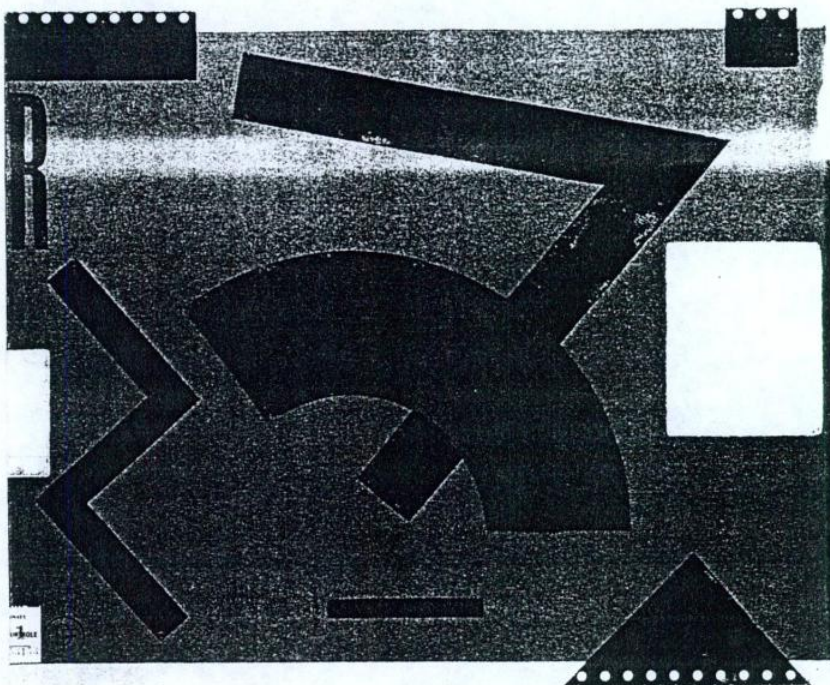
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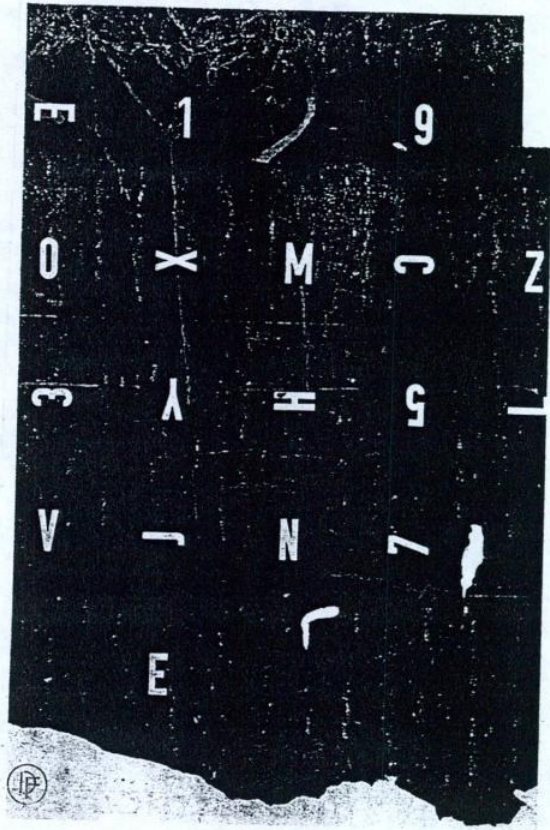
TYPE CONSTRUCTION (1984–5)
Collage on tarred paper
1200mm x 730mm

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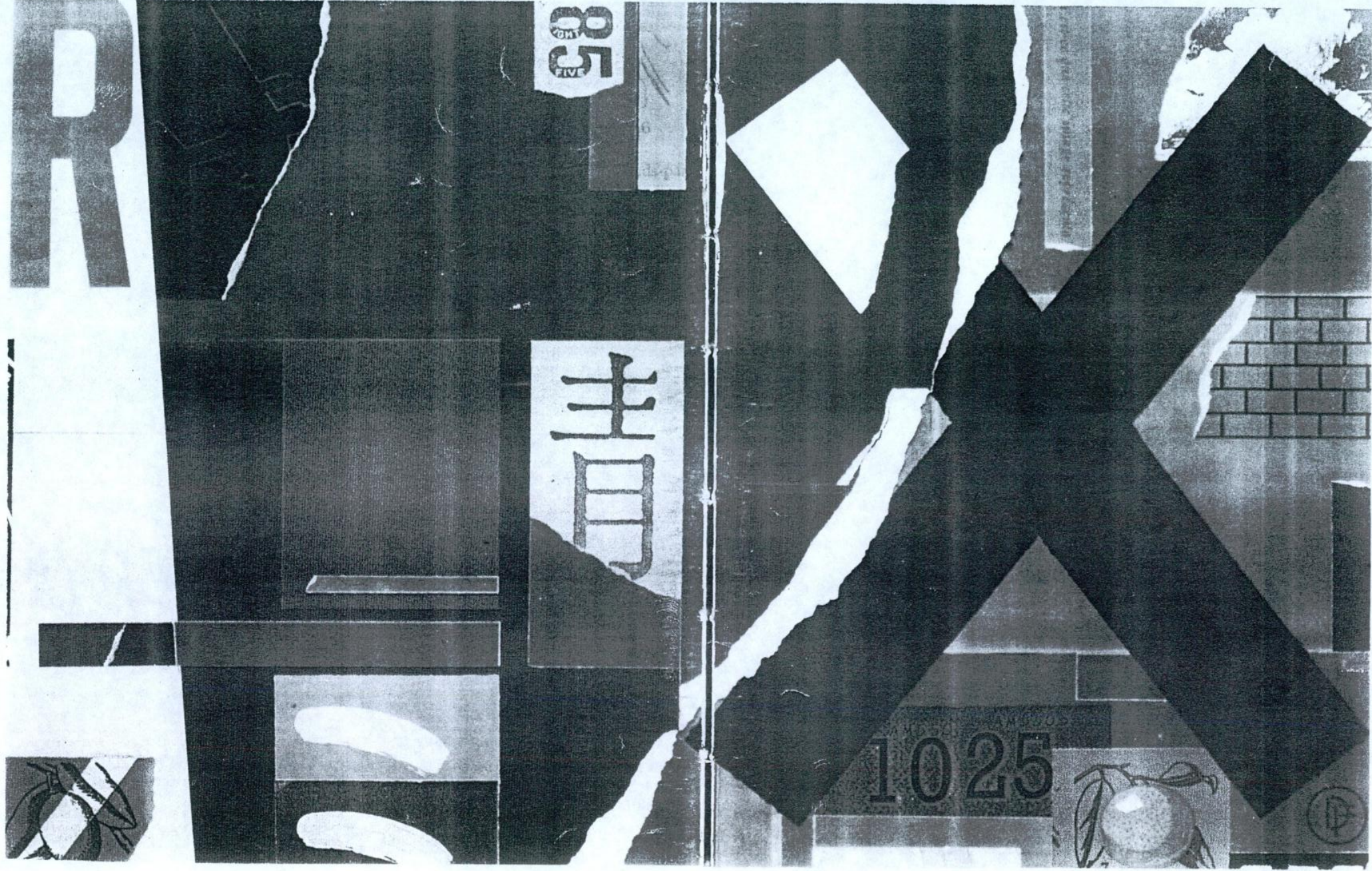
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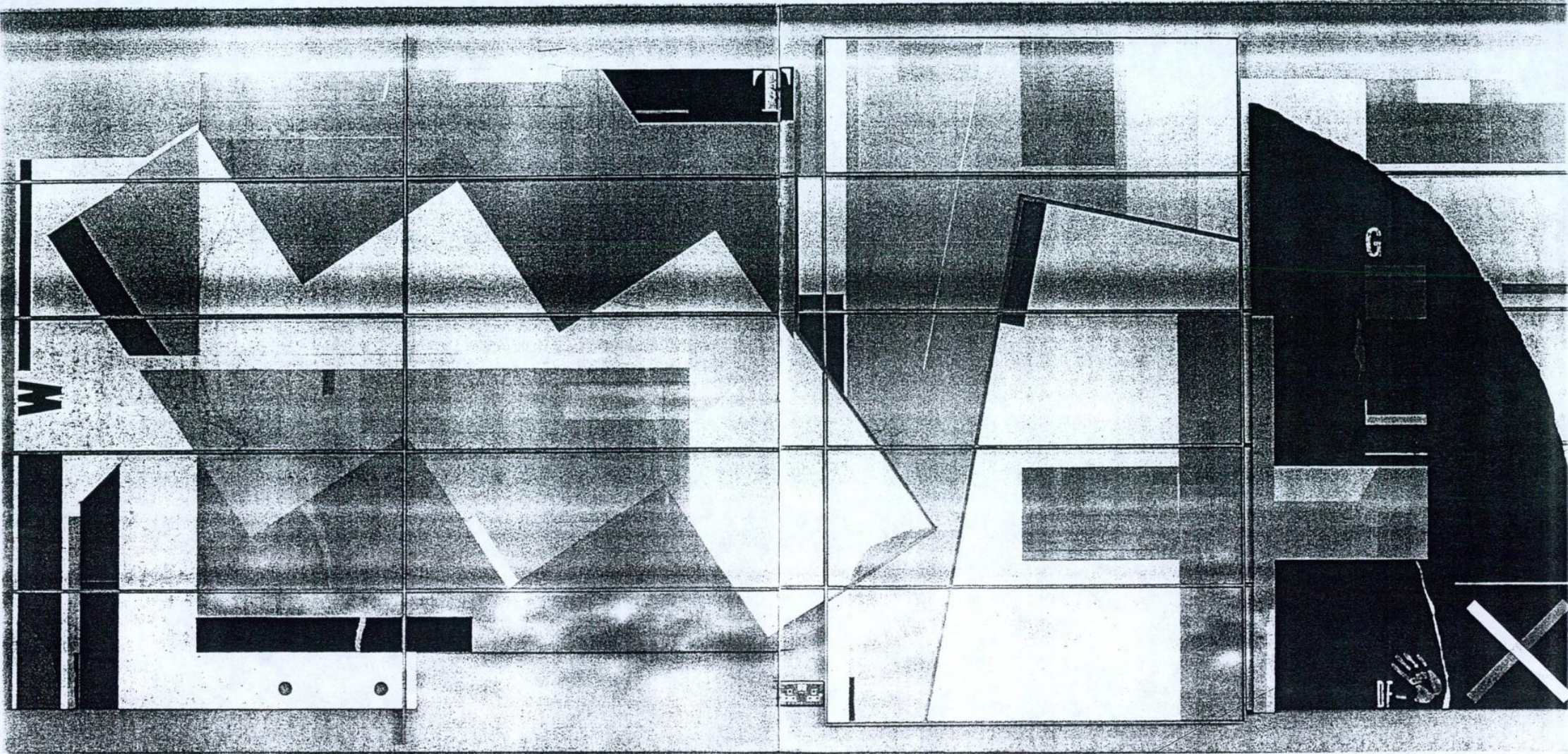
17. Mural for Wiggins teape
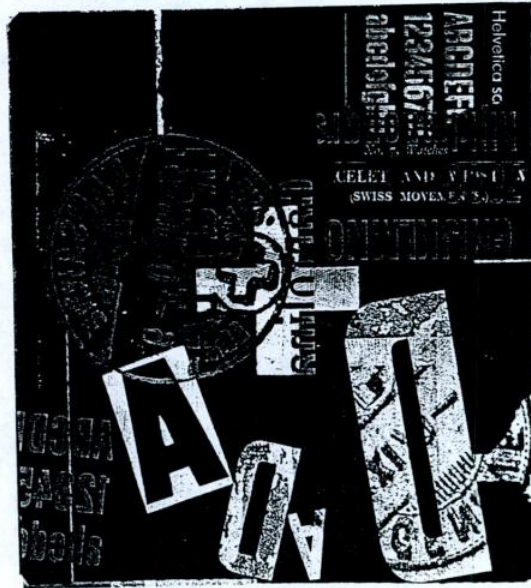
A-AUGST (1989)
Calendar illustration referring to a small town in Switzerland.
Client: Trickett and Webb

19, Dan Fern , A Augst, 1989

CROSS-BORDER DATA FLOW (1984)
Illustration for IRM (Information Resource Management), a magazine
dealing with aspects of communications technology.
Client: Ericsson
Design group: Pentagram

18, Dan Fern ,Cross Border Data Flow 1984
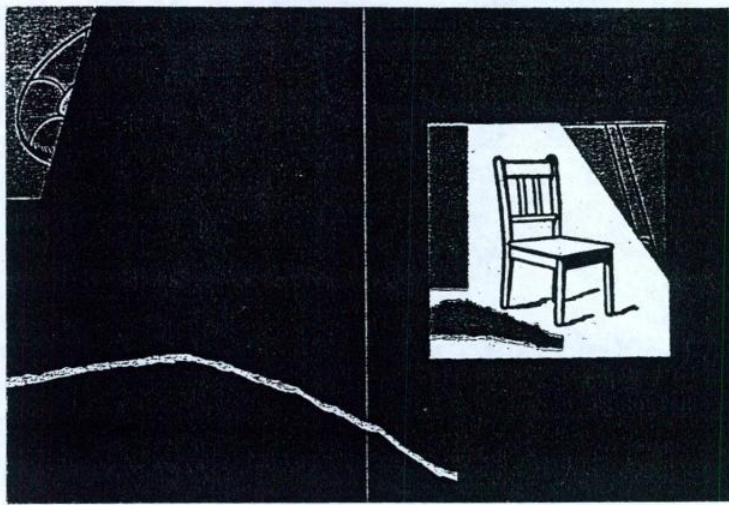
20, Dan Fern ,Chairman Report, 1986
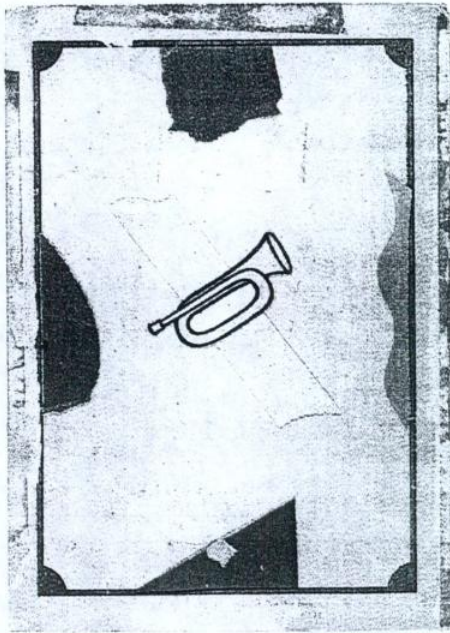
21, Dan Fern, Sponserd Awards, 1986
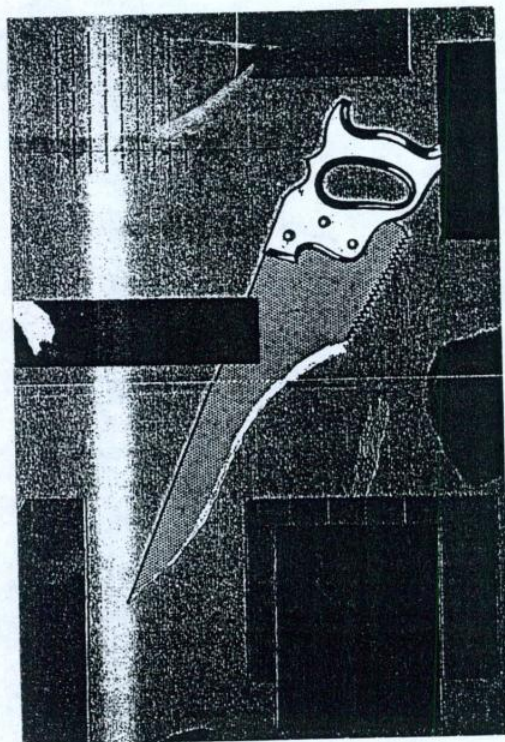
22, Dan Fern, Chairman's Report 1986
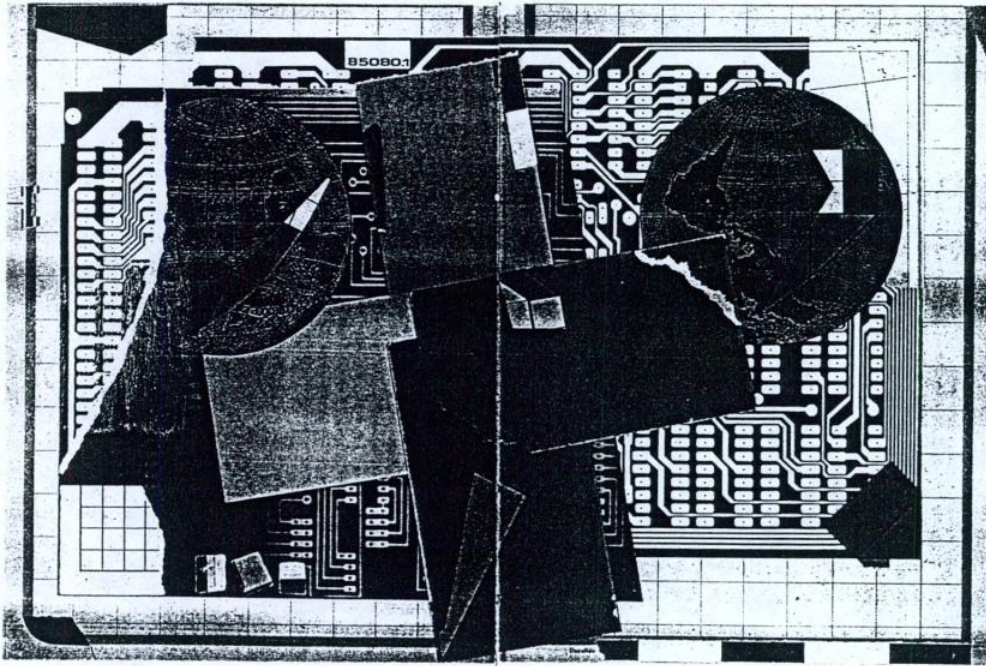
23,Dan Fern KMPG Anual Report 1987

Sir John Soane's Museum (1987)
John Soane was an architect who built an extensive collection of
objects from around the world which he housed in a beautifully
designed museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.
Client: London Regional Transport

24, Dan Fern Sir John Soane's Museum 1987

25, Dan Fern , Construction
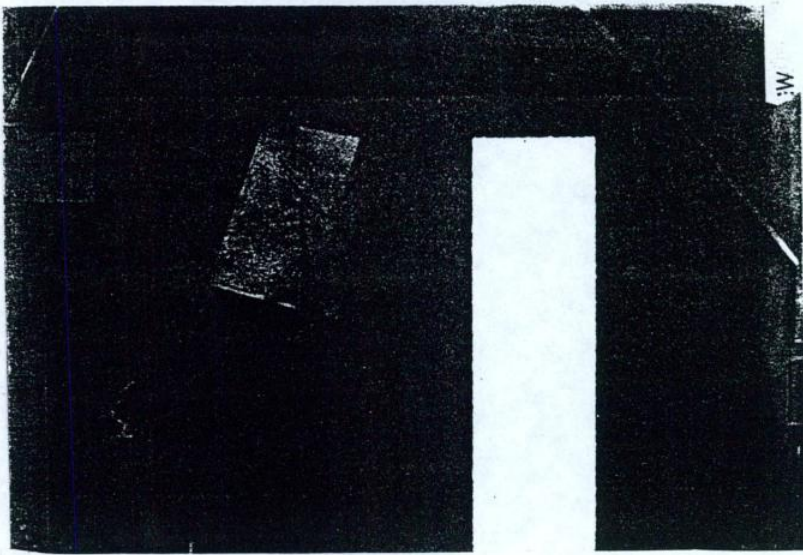
28, Dan Fern, Sketch
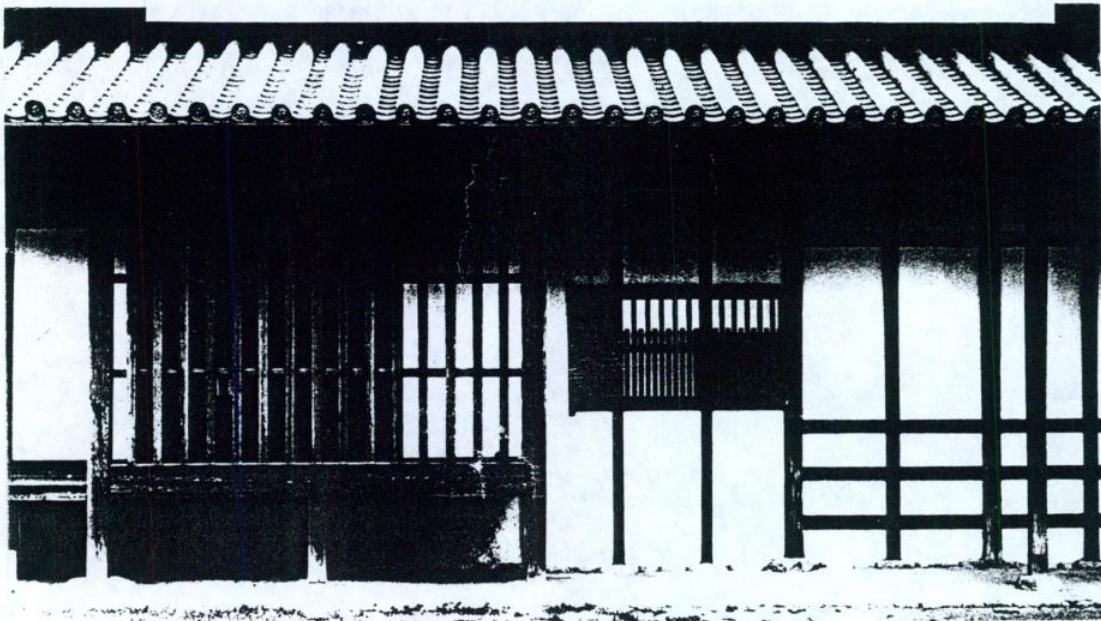
26, Japanese Dwelling 1917
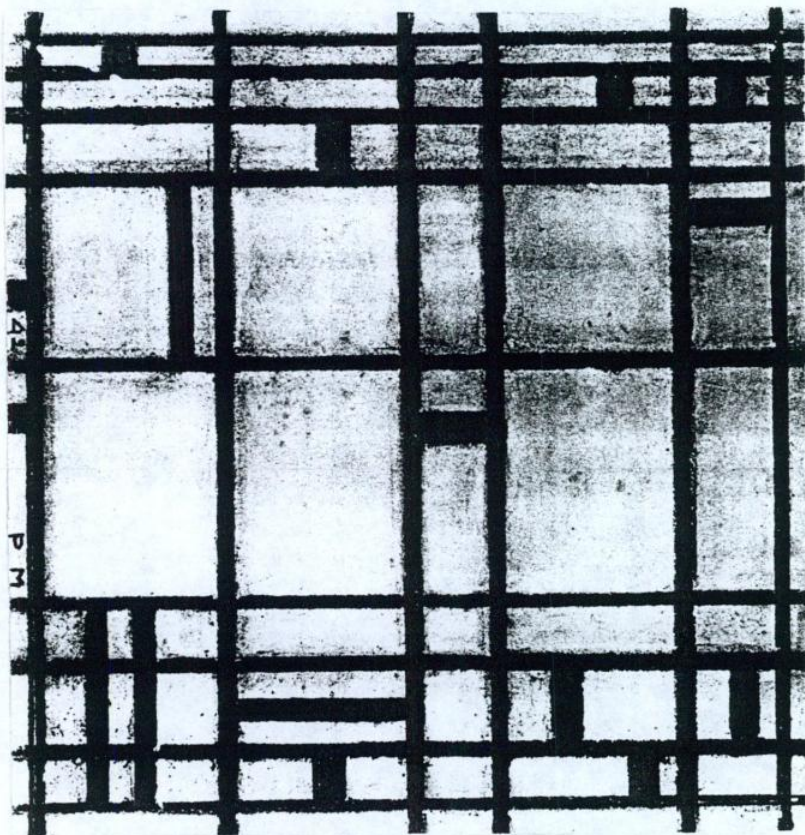
27. Mondrian Sketch
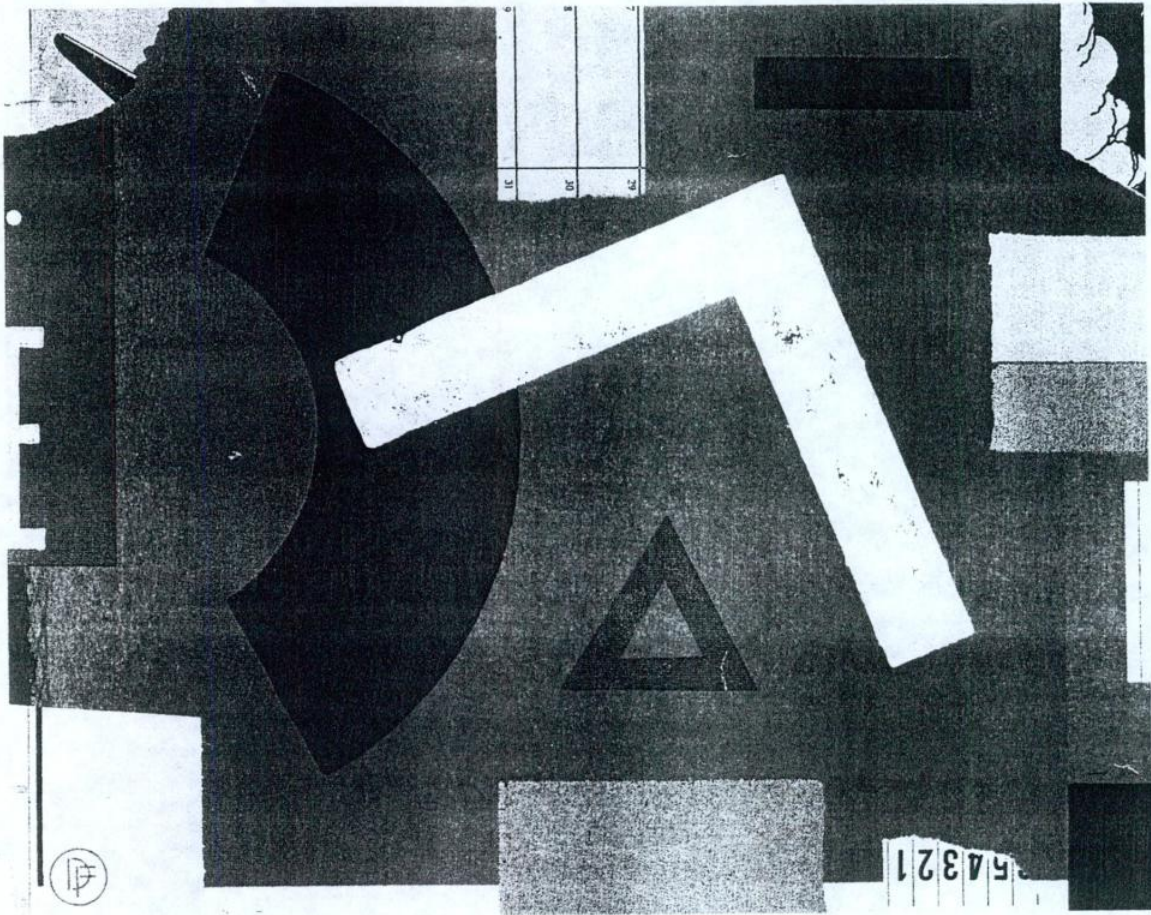
29, List (E)   1981
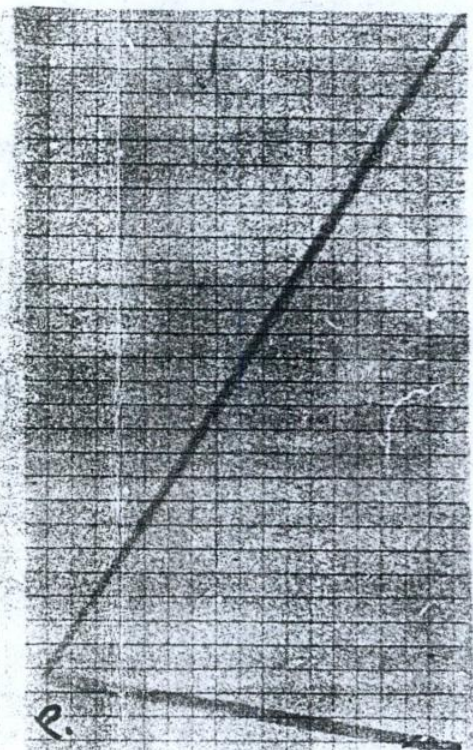
30, Rodchenko 1920

31, Rodchenko, Construction 1929
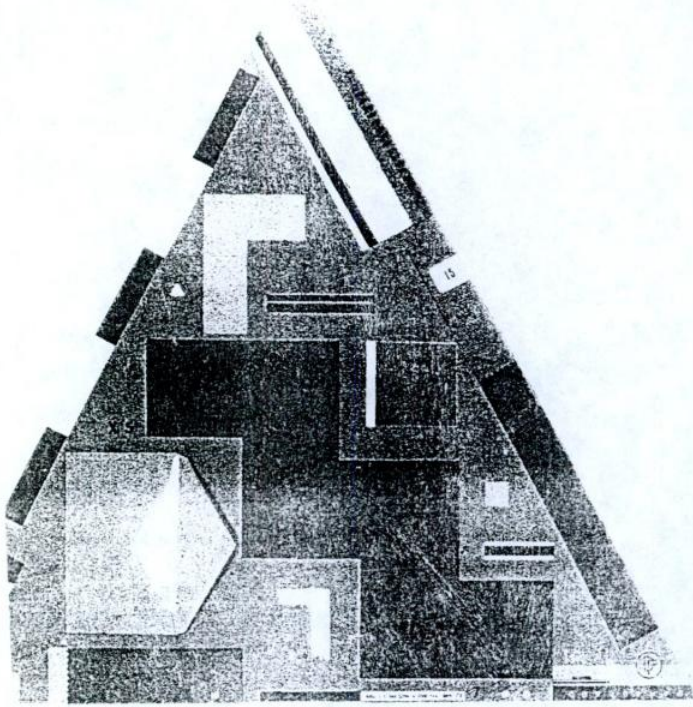
Dan Fern Step List (E5) 1981
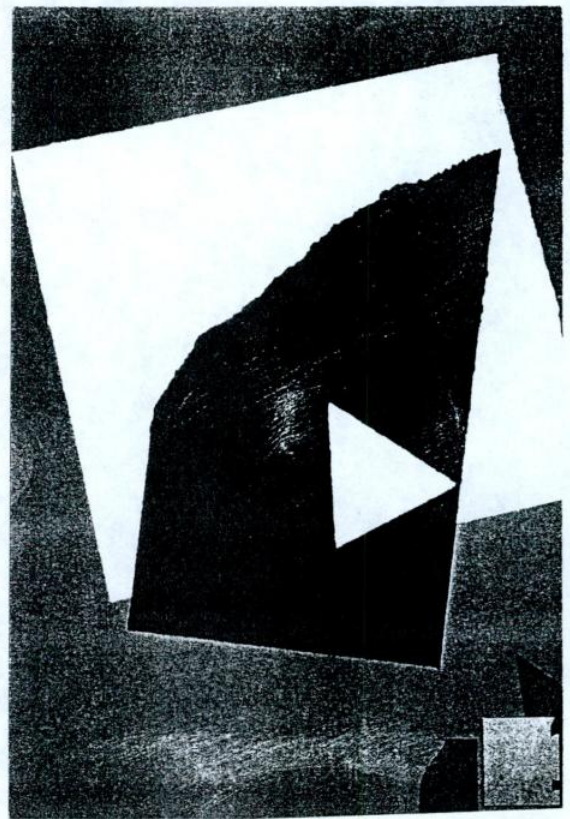
33, Dan Fern Tilt 1985
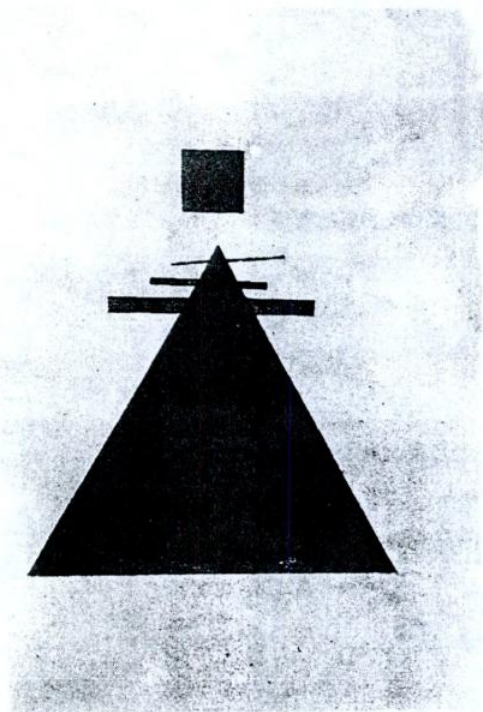
34, Kasimir Malevich

35, Kasimir Malevich, Stedelijk Museum

39, Terry Jones, 1978
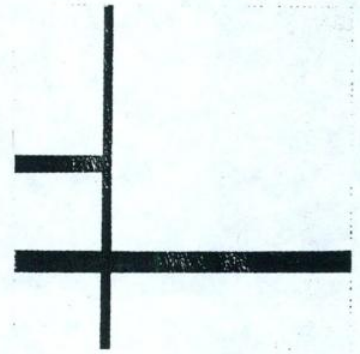
36, Mondrian Composition,
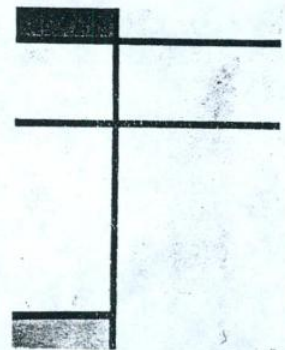
37, Mondrian Composition,
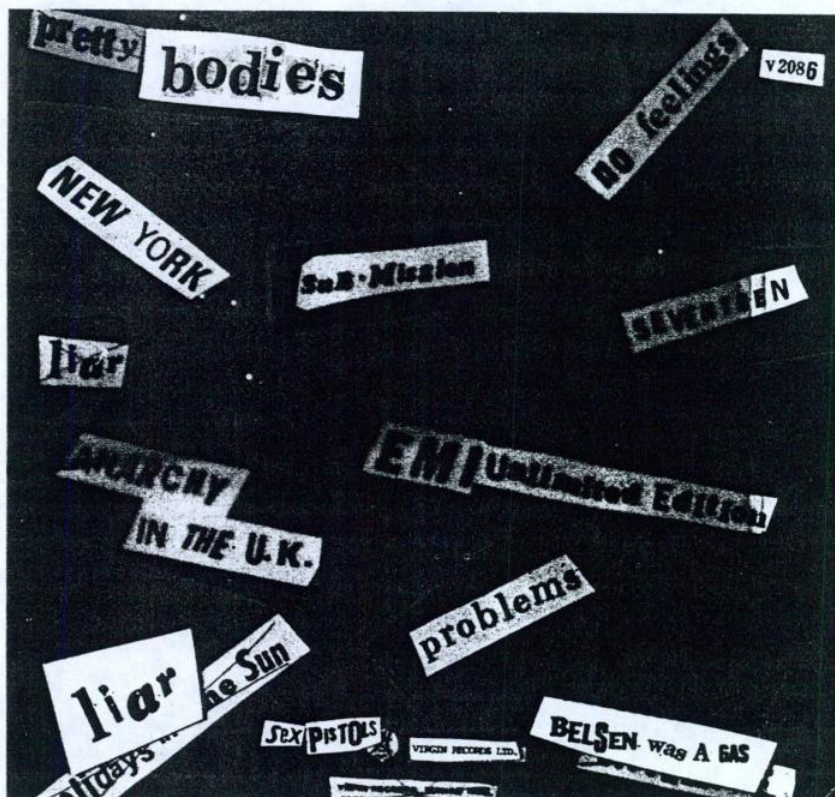
38, Jamie Reid, 1978
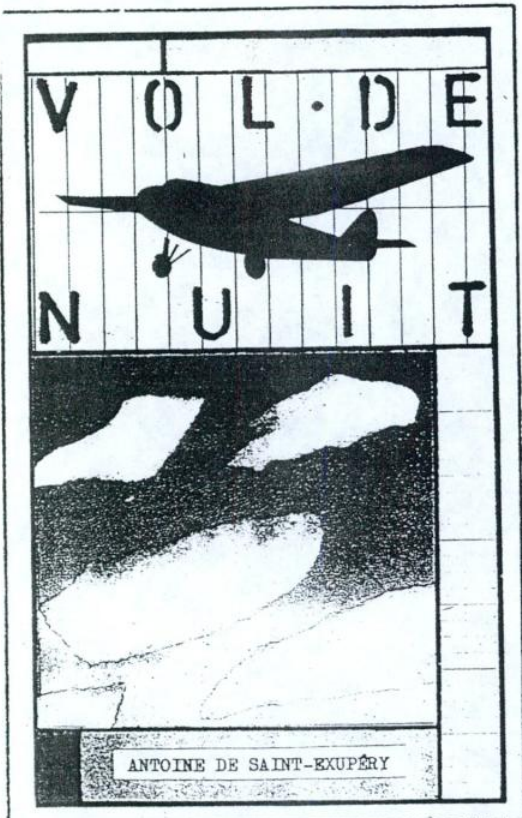
40. VOLDE NUIT, 1978
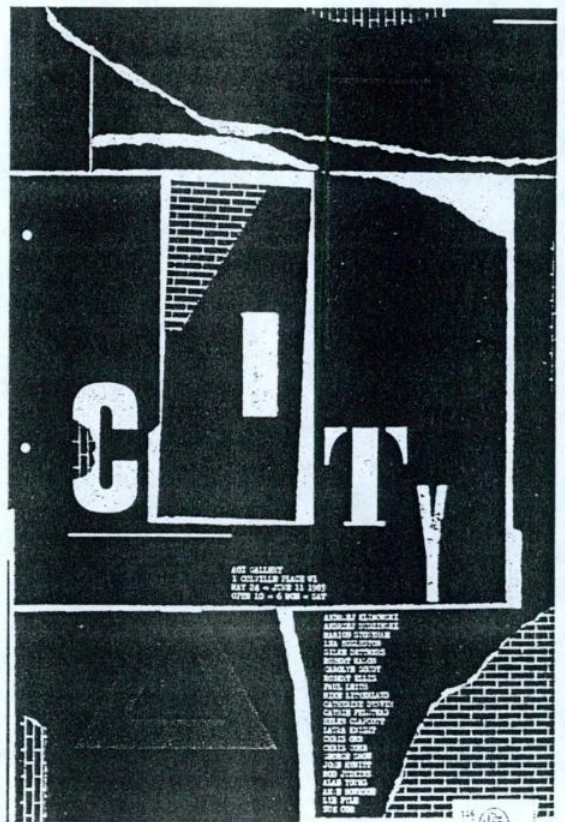
41. CITY, 1983
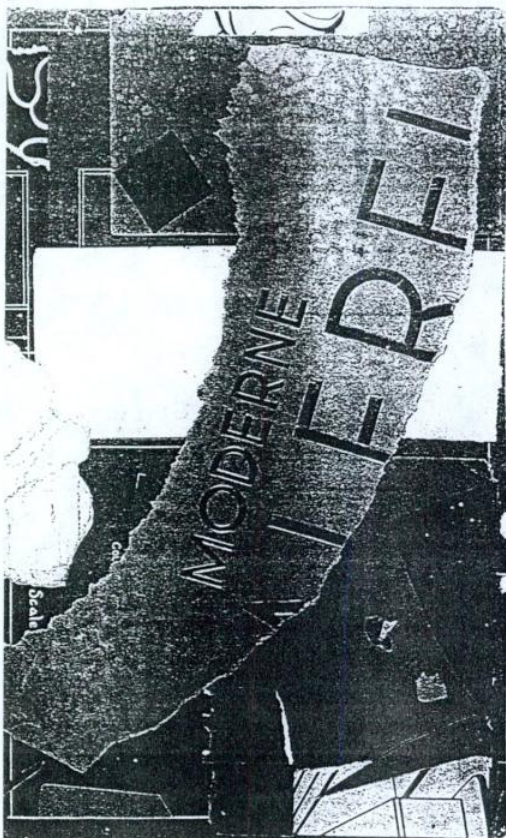
r2. MODERNE, 1978
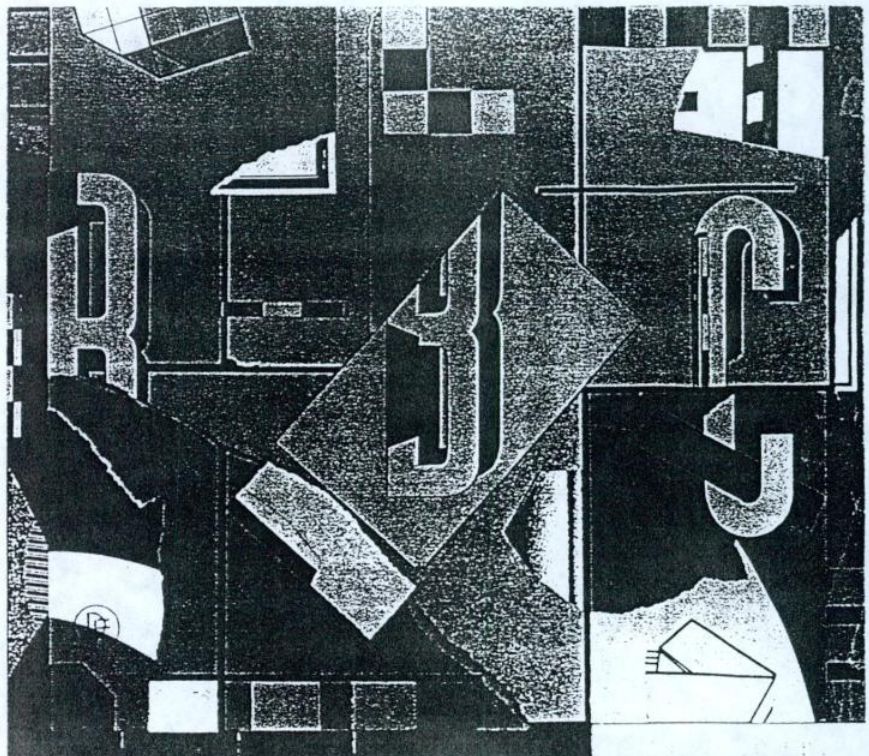
43. B.B.C. 1987
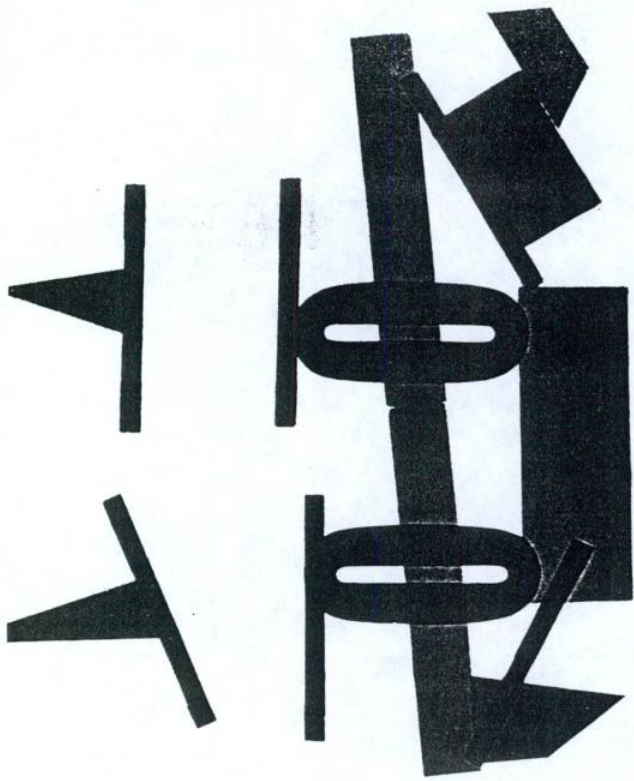
. HENDRIK WERKMAN

45. HENDRIK WERKMAN
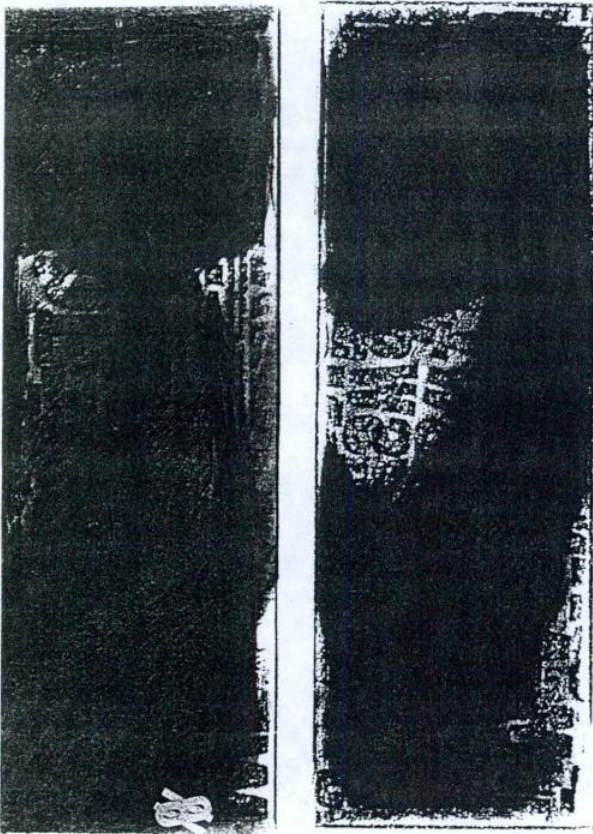
Oil crayon on paper
(Left) 680mm x 240mm
(Right) 760mm x 300mm

Dan Fern: G2, print/sketch for
Wiggins Teape mural (1982)

4 . DAN FERN ,

J FERN , TYPE EXPERIMENTS

BUZZCOCKS

ORGASM ADDICT
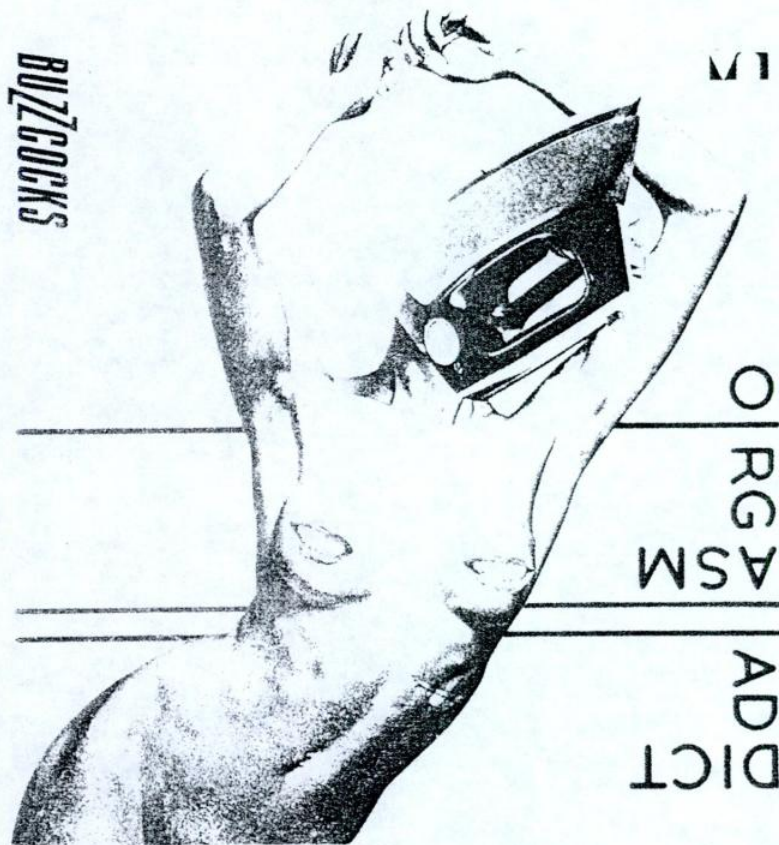
48. MALCOLM GARETT,

STYLE

STYLE

STYLE

STYLE

49. NEVILLE BRODY, MODERNISM

THE MODERN

50, Dan Fern City , 1983
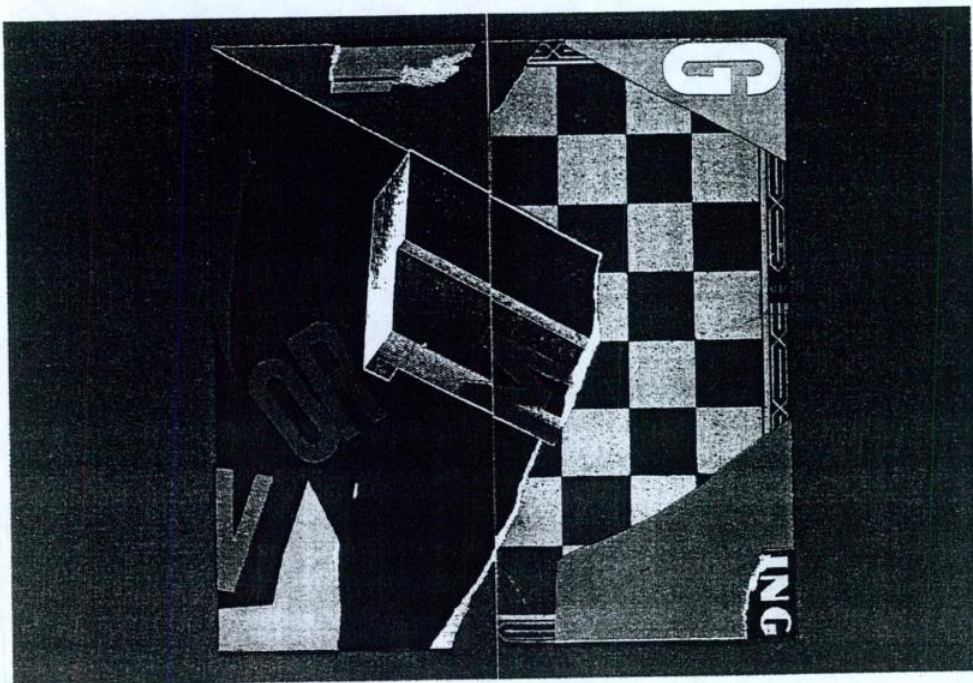
51, Dan fern, Design Category Awards, 1986
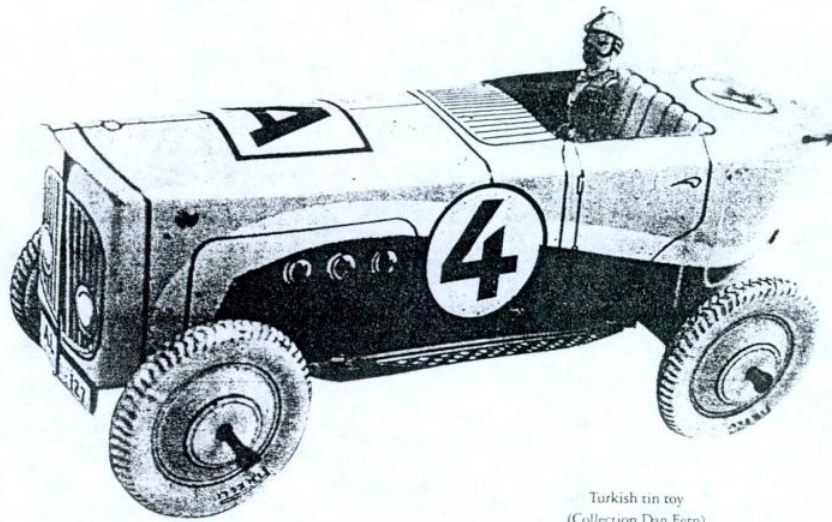
Turkish tin toy
(Collection Dan Fern)

52, Dan **Fern** , Tin Car, Pesonal Collection

53, Dan Fern List of Submissions 1986

Filature de Chappe Ringwald
Bâle.
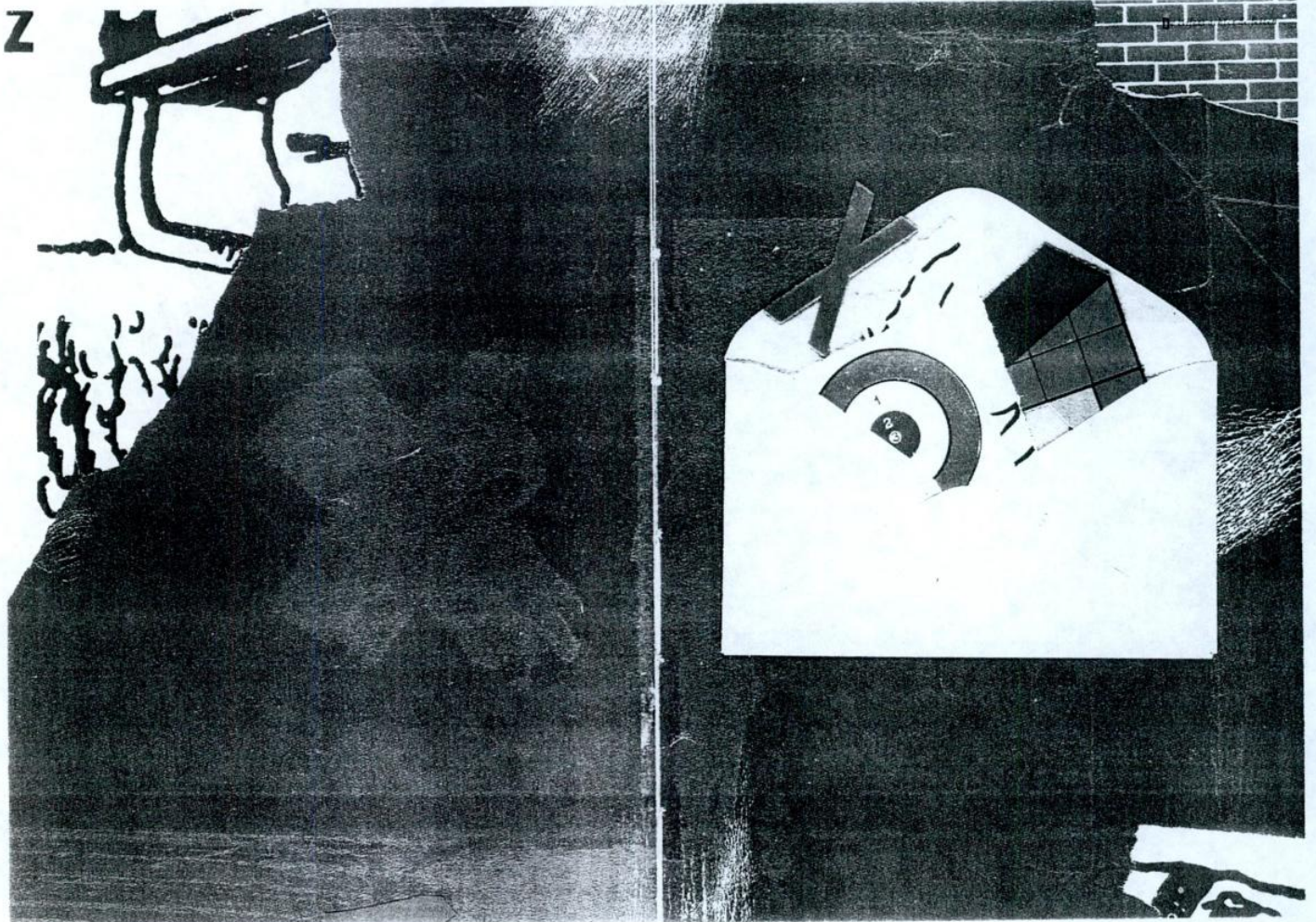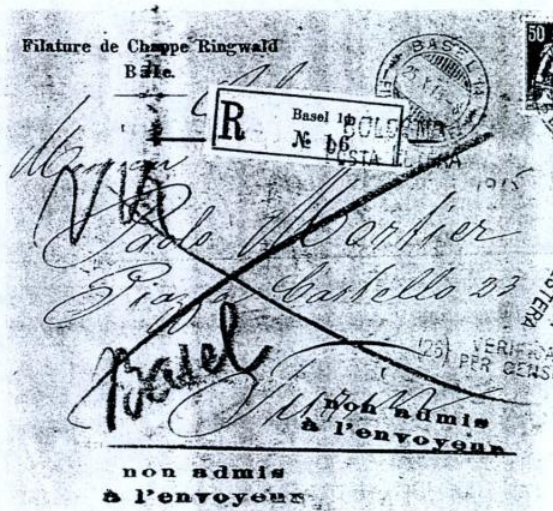
Envelope (1915)
(Collection Dan Fern)

54, Dan Fern, Envelope, Personal Collection 1915

Graphics World (1989)
An image from a series of illustrations for an article about colour photocopying. The pictures were produced by combining several functions of one of the Color Laser Copiers donated by Canon UK to the Royal College of Art as part of a four-year research programme.
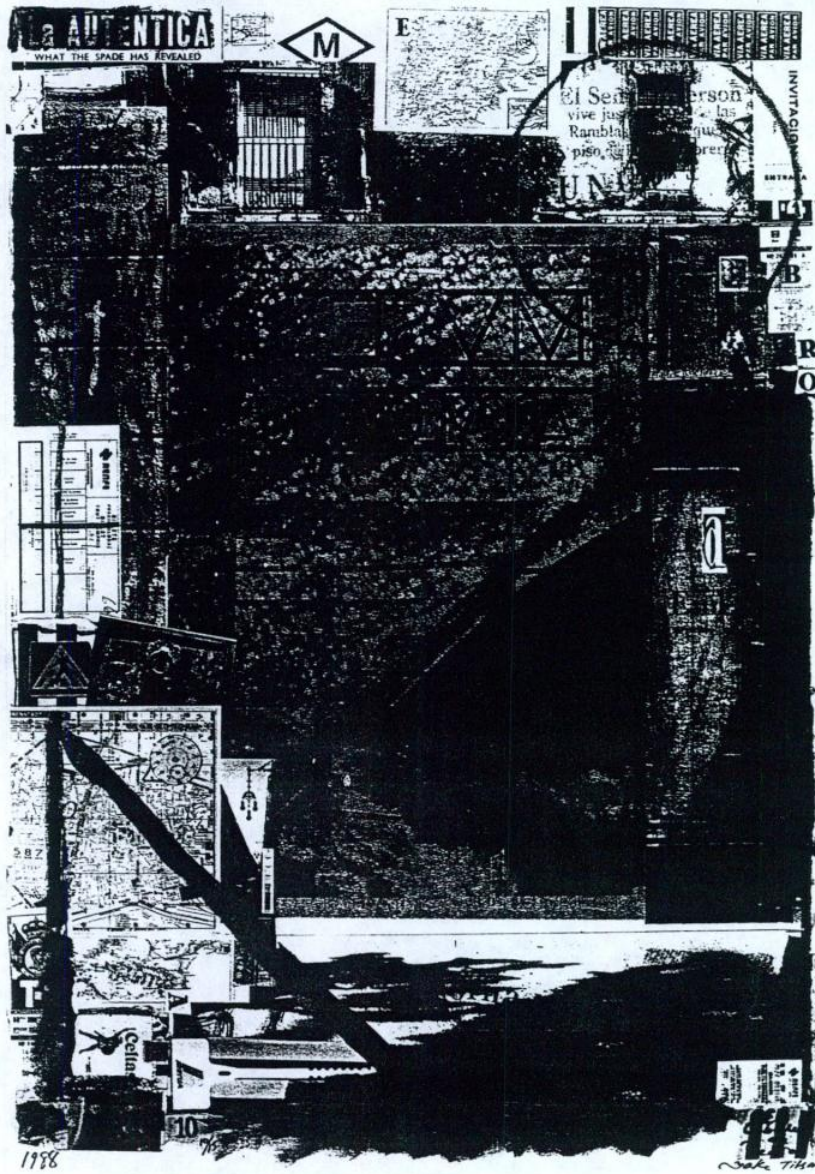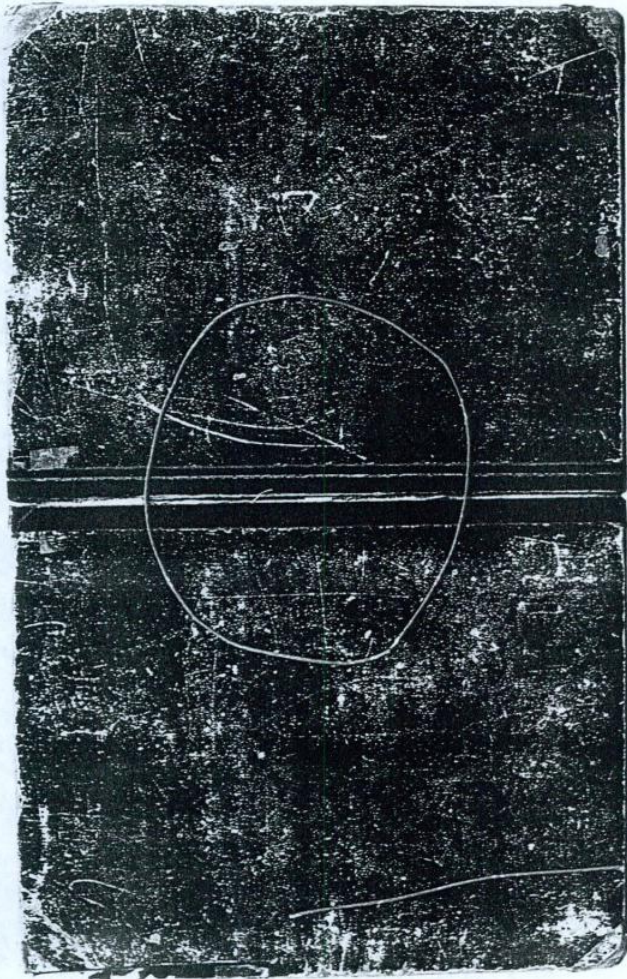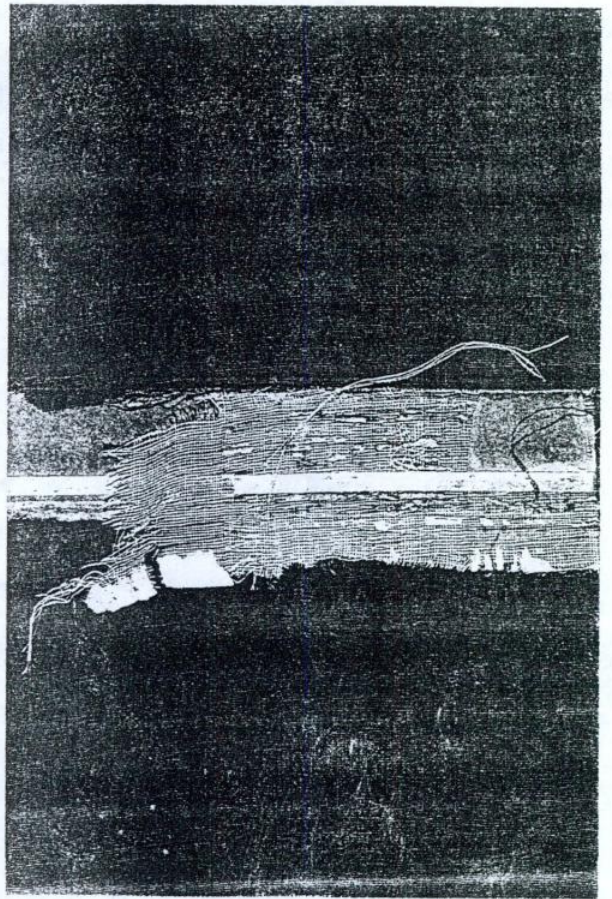
56, Jake Tillson, Miasto Alfabet, 1989
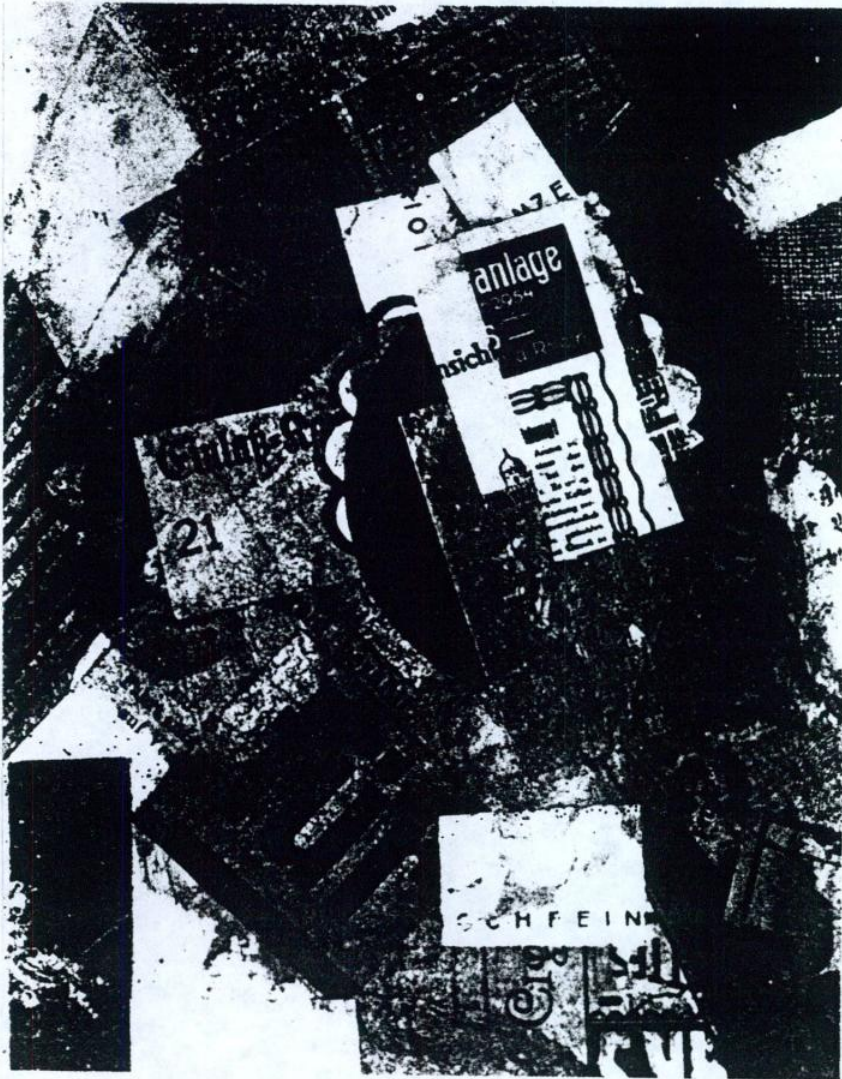
Figure 11.1   Kurt Schwitters, *Merzzeichnung 94: Grünfleck*, 1920
Collage, 6⅝" × 5⁵⁄₁₆".

57, Kurt Shwitters, Collage,
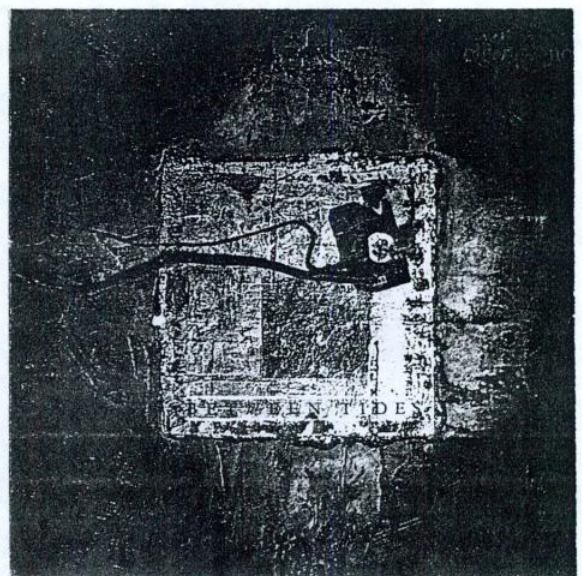
58, Dan Fern, Fratres, 1990

59, Dan Fern, Fratres, 1991

60, Russel Mills, early 1980's

61, Russel Mills, early 1980's