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Bon mot and other confections

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of


MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BON MOT AND OTHER CONFECTIONS

by

Darla J. Kalman

May 6, 1983



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Cameron Taylor-Brown

Mom and Dad

INTRODUCTION

This past year, whenever anyone asked me what my thesis was about, I would reply, "Oh, about twenty pages . . .". I was told that I wasn't approaching this with the best of attitudes. C'est la guerre.

So, for all those who care, this thesis is about grids and color, abstraction and illusion. It's about Sophie Taeuber-Arp and De Stijl, Dada and Mondrian, question games and puns.

Oh, and it's also about twenty pages

WORDS, ET AL

1) MOT:

(French: word, saying from Latin: muttum- grunt)

A pithy or witty saying.¹

2) CONFECTION:

a) The act or process of confecting.

b) Something confected: as 1) a fancy dish or sweetmeat: delicacy; especially: a fruit or nut preserve, 2) a medicinal preparation usually made with sugar, syrup, or honey, 3) a piece of fine craftsmanship.²

3) GRID:

(back-formation from gridiron)

a) Grating

b) A network of uniformly spaced horizontal and perpendicular lines for locating points by means of coordinates.³

4) COLOR:

(Middle English: colour from Old French from Latin: color)

a) A phenomenon of light or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects.

b) A hue as contrasted with black, white, or gray.

c) Vividness or variety of effects of language.⁴

5) ABSTRACTION:

- a) The act or process of abstracting.
- b) An abstract idea or term; a visionary idea.
- c) An abstract composition or creation in art.⁵

6) ILLUSION:

(Middle English from Middle French from Late Latin: *illusio* from Latin: action of mocking, from *illusus*.)

- a) The act of deceiving.
- b) The state or fact of being intellectually deceived or misled.
- c) A misleading image presented to the vision.
- d) Perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature:
Hallucination.⁶

7) SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP:

Born: January 19, 1889, in Davos, Switzerland.

Died: January 13, 1943, in Zurich, Switzerland.

1916-1919: Participated in Zurich Dada.

1916-1929: Taught at School of Applied Arts of Zurich.

1922: Married Jean Arp.

Work defined as "Constructivist Art of Geometric Abstraction organically evolved".⁷

8) PIET MONDRIAN:

Born: March 7, 1872, in the Netherlands.

Died: February 1, 1944, in New York City.

1917: Participated in the founding of De Stijl.

1918: Did first lozenge (diamond-shaped) paintings.

1918-1919: Began to use horizontal and vertical lines as structural elements.

1921: Limited palette to primary colors and black, white, gray.

1925: Left De Stijl over diagonal question.

1940: Moved to New York City.⁸

9) DE STIJL:

(Dutch: literally-the style)

An influential school of art founded in Holland in 1917, typically using rectangular forms and the primary colors plus black and white and asymmetric balance. Ended in 1931 with death of founder, Theo van Doesburg.⁹

10) DADA:

An artistic movement based on deliberate irrationality and negation of the laws of beauty and organization.¹⁰

11) QUESTION GAME:

NO: Statements, exclamations, reiteration of opponent's questions, repetition, non sequiturs, "isn't its" and independent clauses (statements linked to questions).

AND: Calling fouls or keeping score must not be phrased interrogatively.

ALSO: Question marks must be placed at end of sentences.

AND: NO GRUNTS!!¹¹

12) PUN:

(Perhaps from Italian: puntiglio-fine point, quibble)

The humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings or applications or of words having the same or nearly the same sound but different meanings.¹²

13) THEO VAN DOESBURG:

Born: August 30, 1883, in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Died: March 7, 1931, in Davos, Switzerland.

Art critic, painter, poet.

1917: Founded De Stijl.

1920: Involved in Dada activities.

1922: Taught at Weimar Bauhaus.

1924: Developed theory of Elementarism.

1927: Collaborated with Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp on Café de l'Aubette in Strasbourg, France.¹³

14) TOM STOPPARD:

Playwright. Born in Czechoslovakia. Now a British citizen. Noted for utter dexterity with the English language. Plays abound in puns, tautologies and wordcraftsmanship. Besides Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Travesties, Stoppard also has written Jumpers, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor, The Real Inspector Hound and After Magritte, among other plays.

15) PETIT FOUR:

(French: literally-small oven)

A small, frosted and ornamented cake cut from pound or sponge cake.¹⁴

BON MOT

I am an only child. In the hierarchy of important facts, I realize that this ranks rather low, however, it does help to explain why I see things the way I do.

I can't remember a time when I was not able to read. I think that my parents started me reading quite early in life, probably to keep me occupied and out of their way. I remember taking a book with me everywhere I went, even into restaurants. To this day, I find it difficult to sit at a meal without the company of a book (I've been known to read the fine print on sugar packets in moments of desperation).

From this early introduction to words, I developed several games that I played with myself. One favorite involved homonyms--those words that sound the same, but are spelled differently and have different meanings. For example, stair and stare, weak and week, and that all-time favorite, pair and pear. I could just see that tree with those pairs of pears.

Another favorite game was to give non-objective nouns a sense of solid character; i.e. little enigmas with their bushy tails (or tales, as the case may be) bumped into crawling afterthoughts. The possibilities were endless.

I remember thinking about these words for hours on end, sometimes to the exclusion of required homework. This probably says more

for my powers of procrastination, than any precocious bent towards literacy.

So, when the time came to decide on a thesis topic, it seemed almost inevitable that it would involve my word games in some way. I originally felt that I should be doing a vast, scholarly work. After all, this was to be (trumpets blaring) my master's thesis. In the end, though, to paraphrase Shakespeare, to mine own self, I was true. Enter the word games, or as they were now called, visual puns.

Bon Mot is the name of one of the works (as are the other essay titles also names of works). It is also part of the title of the entire thesis. In French, this means good word (literally) or a witty saying. Each of the pieces have witty sayings (or bad puns, depending on how you feel about them) for titles.

The mental picture that I get from the words, bon mot, is one of a little cake or bonbon. Another childhood memory: that of my mother buying petit fours; those little cakes with several layers, icing and swirly decorations on top (not to mention about 500 calories inside).

My pieces remind me of aerial views of those petit fours, hence the title of the thesis, Bon Mot and Other Confections. A confection, besides being a fancy dish or delicacy, is also a piece of fine craftsmanship.

So, those childhood games of homonyms, puns, and the like, have grown to be a master's thesis.

Now, if I could only learn to spell

MY ARP BELONGS TO DADA

I suppose from the title of this, one would assume that it would be about Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Dada. That is not so. It is about influences.

A short biography of Taeuber-Arp: she was born in 1889, in Davos, Switzerland. She studied at the School of Applied Arts of Saint Gallen (Textile section. 1908-1910), the experimental art studio of Walter von Debschitz in Munich (1911 and 1913) and the School of Arts and Crafts of Hamburg, Germany (1912). In 1916, she was appointed Professor of Textile Design and Techniques at the School of Applied Arts of Zurich. At the same time, she was also studying dance at the School of Rudolf von Laban (who is known today for the development of dance notation).¹⁵

From 1916-1919, Taeuber-Arp participated in the Zurich Dada group, particularly exhibiting her considerable dance talent. In 1922, she married Jean Arp whom she had known since 1915.¹⁶

The years after the First World War were quiet ones for her. From 1920-1926, she reportedly produced very little work and only taught. She was commissioned, in 1927, to help design the Café de l'Aubette, in Strasbourg, France. This, she did, in collaboration with Jean Arp and Theo van Doesburg. She and Arp moved to France in 1928, and she stopped teaching in Zurich, in 1929. Sophie Taeuber-Arp died in Zurich in 1943.¹⁷

That is what we know of her life. Of her, as a person, we know that she was a source of influence to many, particularly her husband, Jean Arp. She did not seem to have a narrow vision, but was able to comprehend that all arts complement, and by extension, influence each other. Although she chose not to continue her career as a dancer, rhythmic patterns from dance and music found their way into her work. She did not exclusively work in a textile medium, yet horizontal-vertical lines and shapes were prevalent in her work, at least in the beginning.

Influences. We, unfortunately, do not know who or what actually influenced Sophie Taeuber-Arp (save for Jean Arp). Those inner thoughts have not been recorded by her and can only be guessed at. We can surmise, though, that she must have been influenced by something or someone. It is human nature to be influenced by outer sources.

In today's pop psychology lingo, we call these influences role models. We all have them. I know that I have had them and still do. In a way, they provide a sense of comfort; a sense of knowing that someone has trod down that same path as you (or what appears to be the same path) and reached the end successfully (or with what appears to be success).

That, I suppose, is the key to those influences. We do not always know how people feel while in the midst of their journey. We do not know their innermost thoughts, fears or insecurities. What we do know is the fact that they made it through. This, in itself, seems cause enough for celebration.

I remember the thrill of seeing Sophie Taeuber-Arp's needlepoints (she called them, or someone did, embroideries) at the Museum of Modern Art in 1981. What joy! She, too, had worked in my beloved needlepoint. What inspiration! She had studied modern dance and so had I. And now, MOMA, by granting her a retrospective, had bestowed the royal blessing!

One of the dangers of influences, however, is the tendency to become too submerged in another's identity, to place one's self back in time. It can be something of a jolt to realize that this is not 1918, but 1983 (although it sometimes feels like 1929). As Theo van Doesburg said in 1925, "'Reality' for each individual is only his relationship with his environment, and in fact his relationship is determined by the limits of his possibilities of experience".¹⁸ In other words, look to the past for influences, for inspiration, for that starting point, if you must. Look at the present, however, for the means to realize those inspirations and influences.

STAIR-RIO-TYPICAL

I was talking to a high school friend recently, and told her about my thesis. I mentioned that one of the pieces was called Stair-Rio-Typical and she asked me if I was going to recount the steps it took to do. It's somewhat comforting to realize that there are others with the same sense of humor.

I am not going to talk about the steps that it took to do the piece. That would make it a rather short essay; i.e. up and down, up and down, stitch, stitch. Instead, I want to discuss illusionary space, working small and abstraction vs. realism, not necessarily in that order.

Why do I work small? My immediate reaction to that question, which I've heard a lot lately, is to retort, "Because I am small-minded!". Let's not be hasty. I tried to remember when I began to work small. I couldn't. I've always worked small and been attracted to small, delicate objects.

I am not alone in this. Fabergé made a reputation with small pieces. Paul Klee, as a very young man, spoke "of his art as 'andacht zum kleinen' (devotion to small things)".¹⁹

In my more philosophical moments, I could say that by working small, I am exhibiting a portion of my personality.

By their very smallness, the pieces invite one to come close to them. Instead of a loud, raucous shout, they lure with a silent cry for

attention. To be fully appreciated, one needs to stop, take a moment, observe.

Actually, I do not like to overanalyze my work. I find that some of the magic is gone whenever I do that. So, why do I work small? For want of a better answer, I work small because it warms my heart to do so.

"To abstract is to draw out the essence of a matter. To abstract in art is to separate certain fundamentals from the irrelevant material which surrounds them. An artist may abstract the essential form of an object by freeing it from perspective, or by freeing it from details."²⁰ Ben Shahn said this in 1957.

Abstraction leaves things open to interpretation. There is no spoon-fed information given. Even when titles are specific, as opposed to enigmatic, there still can be several layers on which one can appreciate a work.

Abstraction allows personal stories to be told. By having various layers, ranging from the obvious to the obscure, a person can view the piece and extract from it what he wishes. If he is persistent enough, he might even discover the soul of the artist in the innermost layer.

Illusionary space seems to be almost a contradiction in terms. I use the term to describe the space relationships found on two-dimensional work. We know that these works are done on a flat surface, but when looked at, they seem to have depth. I do not feel that they are true perspective drawings though. Those conform to the mind's view of reality. These could be a metaphor for the visual puns; seeing something that looks to be there, but really isn't.

STIJL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

I was in London in 1977, and one day, when walking about, came upon a pile of trash. It looked as though someone had been doing a pretty extensive job of housecleaning. In the name of international relations, I went through the trash, curious as to what might be in it.

I found, among all of the garbage, what seemed to be pages from a discarded play. I took them back to my hotel room to read. It turned out that they were written by Tom Stoppard and were beginning notations to what we now know as the play, Travesties.

Mr. Stoppard had tried to reuse a rather successful device from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead for the foundation of the play. That device was the question game. He used it to relate and embellish a historical meeting between the two De Stijl artists, Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian.

In the name of intellectual curiosity, I've included those notations.

ACT ONE

(A small café in Paris, at the end of April, 1925. Two men are seated at a table, sipping some wine and glaring at each other. They are Theo van Doesburg, the founder of De Stijl and Piet Mondrian, the best known of its painters. The occasion is Mondrian's withdrawal from the movement. The two men are talking.)

Theo: I still don't understand why you are leaving.

Piet: Would it make it clearer if we played questions?

Theo: I don't know. Why don't we try?

Piet: You start then.

Theo: Okay.

Piet: Statement. One-love.

Theo: No fair!

Piet: Exclamation. Two-love.

Theo: Why are you like that?

Piet: Why shouldn't I be?

Theo: Would you like it if we just stuck with those boring right angles for the rest of our lives?

Piet: Wouldn't that be better than those stupid diagonals?

Theo: Didn't you use diagonals yourself at one time?

Piet: Low blow!!

Theo: Foul. Exclamation. Two-one.

Piet: Don't you think it's a bit hostile to bring up my lozenge-shaped canvases? Don't you remember that I explained them with the reasoning that that shape enhanced the sense of the vertical-horizontal polarity and de-emphasized the sense of diagonality which resided in the rectangular shape?

Theo: Horsefeathers!!

Piet: Foul! Exclamation. Three-one. First game to me.

Theo: Horsefeathers!!

Piet: Foul. Repetition. One-love.

Theo: Could we order another bottle of wine and continue this discussion civilly? Can't you see that I'm still confused as to why you want to leave?

(Waitress, in meantime, has been gestured to and brings another bottle of wine.)

Piet: What is our movement's greatest achievement? Haven't we been able to integrate all of the elements of a painting? Doesn't the use of a diagonal destroy, if you'll forgive the pun, in one stroke, this integration?

- Theo: With Elementarism, or if you prefer, diagonals, aren't we finally exploring the fourth dimension or time?
- Piet: Plagiarist!!!
- Theo: Foul. Exclamation. One-one.
- Piet: (trying to control anger) How could you even suggest that?
- Theo: Rhetoric. Two-one.
- Piet: Didn't I show by 1917, that my asymmetrical, but rhythmical constructions possessed a "dynamic" quality that implied time? Aren't your diagonals really to hide your extreme fear of abstraction?
- Theo: Why do you bring up my fears? Don't you also use a grid modular to divide up space?
- Piet: Can't you see that my grids transcend the mathematical proportions of division that you use?
- Theo: Why are you against mathematical proportions? Didn't that eminent philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, in the 17th Century, use the geometrical method of presentation in order to free his arguments from arbitrary or casual interpretation?
- Piet: Are you going to quote Ethica, Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata to me?
- Theo: Would that be a bad idea?
- Piet: Wouldn't that be a bit off of the subject? Aren't you going off on a tangent, or should I say, diagonal, in your case?
- Theo: Didn't you always like van der Leek better than me?
- Piet: Aren't you being a bit petty?
- Theo: What is reality?
- Piet: Foul. Non sequitur. Two-two. Match point.
- Theo: Why are you leaving De Stijl?
- Piet: Haven't I explained myself by now?
- Theo: Why are you leaving De Stijl?
- Piet: Foul. Repetition. My game.

(He stands up and starts to walk out. He turns to face van Doesburg before leaving the café.)

Piet: Remember Theo, art is only a substitution while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion as life gains in equilibrium.

Theo: What does that mean?

Piet: It means goodbye!

(The light on stage fades as Mondrian walks off.)

At the bottom of the last page, scrawled in what I must believe to be Tom Stoppard's handwriting, were the words:

This is awful, awful, awful!!!

To Mr. Stoppard, all I will add is: Foul! Statement. One-love.²¹

GRID IRON

This is my testimonial to the grid. I love grids. They are as heartwarming as an old bathrobe and a glass of wine on a cold day in Rochester.

Their horizontal and vertical lines move off into infinity, one after the other. Oh, what security they give. What joy one gains from the knowledge that next to one horizontal line is another and next to one vertical line, another.

Grids are like an extended metaphor for life. In one's youth, one runs wild, experiments, finds it difficult to adhere to a routine. Translate this to curves, to amorphous shapes, to no straight lines.

As one grows older, roots are planted, routines formed, life becomes organized and structured. Enter the grid!

Grids are everywhere. As I sit in my apartment writing this, I see grids all around me (sigh heart flutter). My robe's fabric is made of a grid (terrycloth grid). My books and papers are arranged, grid-like, on the floor. Even my dirty laundry is in a grid-embellished basket.

Lists are another form of grid. I have made a list every day since my freshman year of college. Lists can be a comfort. My lists started out from simple affairs on scrap paper and grew to the elaborate production that they are today. I have certain rules that I follow when making my list. The main list must always be on yellow legal paper. "Things to Do" must always be written across the top in red

ink and underlined twice. Actual "things" are then listed vertically, starting on the left side of the page. These are always in black or blue ink. No fair using pencil, since one could erase.

When a "thing" is done, it is always crossed out in a green flair pen, using a circular motion, and moving right to left.

These "things" do not have to be done immediately, in fact, it is even desirable to leave some permanently undone. It serves to maintain an air of spontaneity.

I could go on and on about grids, but I won't. Suffice to say, there is nothing in the world so big nor so small, that it cannot be reduced to a grid. Hallelujah, Grids!

THE GO FISH STORY OR WITH ALL OF THIS
EDUCATION, WHY AM I STILL WORKING FOR SCALE?

I wanted to make a final, sweeping gesture with this essay, however, anyone who has been to my apartment knows that I am not capable of that kind of gesture.

I wanted to bequeath all of the answers, but I still don't know any of the questions.

Instead, I will leave with this quote from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, by the inimitable Mr. Stoppard.

We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.²²

I couldn't have said it better.

TECHNICAL NOTES

This thesis was done on a 60 mesh needlepoint canvas. The mesh size denotes the number of canvas threads per inch, therefore, a 60 mesh canvas means that sixty stitches can be worked to an inch.

The thread used was a 6-ply silk thread; one-ply being used at a time. A continental or basic up and down stitch was used.

As to presentation, my inner voice said to wrap them in tissue paper and store them away for my grandchildren to find fifty years from now. As a compromise, I treated them as paintings and had them flat-mounted and framed.

Contrary to popular belief, these designs did not appear through divine intervention. Instead, they evolved from two-dimensional color studies on graph paper (exploring vibration) to two-dimensional color studies on Japanese drawing paper (exploring spatial relationships). In between, they masqueraded as two-dimensional black and white studies, and attempted to bridge the gap between vibration and spatial relationships.

FOOTNOTES

1. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Massachusetts: G&C Merriam Co., 1963), p. 553.
2. Ibid., p. 174.
3. Ibid., p. 367.
4. Ibid., p. 163.
5. Ibid., p. 4.
6. Ibid., p. 415.
7. Carolyn Lanchner, Sophie Taeuber-Arp (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 19.
8. Mildred Friedman, editor, De Stijl: 1917-1931. Visions of Utopia (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), pp. 239-240.
9. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 225.
10. Ibid., p. 208.
11. Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1967), act one, pp. 42-44.
12. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 692.
13. Friedman, De Stijl: 1917-1931. Visions of Utopia, p. 235.
14. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 632.
15. Lanchner, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, p. 50.
16. Ibid., p. 50.
17. Ibid., p. 50.
18. Ibid., p. 12.
19. Paul Klee, Pedagogical Sketchbook (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 8.
20. Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 63.

21. Mondrian's quote at the end is from Friedman, De Stijl: 1917-1931. Visions of Utopia, p. 9. It is directly quoted. The rest of the dialogue comes from the following sources:

Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea", Art In America, vol. 70, no. 10, November, 1982, pp. 110, 111.

Friedman, De Stijl: 1917-1931. Visions of Utopia, pp. 9, 13, 39, 69, 72.

Jane Livingston, "De Stijl: Visions of Utopia", Museum Magazine, January/February, 1982, pp. 32, 74.

Nancy J. Troy, "Theo van Doesburg: From Music Into Space", Arts Magazine, vol. 56, no. 6, February, 1982.

Spiritual guidance comes from Travesties and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, both by Tom Stoppard. Further spiritual guidance comes from Anne Schmitt and the question games we used to play in high school.

22. Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, act two, p. 61.
23. Howard Teichmann, Smart Aleck. The Wit, World and Life of Alexander Woollcott (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1976), p. 122.

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AFTERWORD

This thesis "was written without fear
and without research!"

Dorothy Parker²³

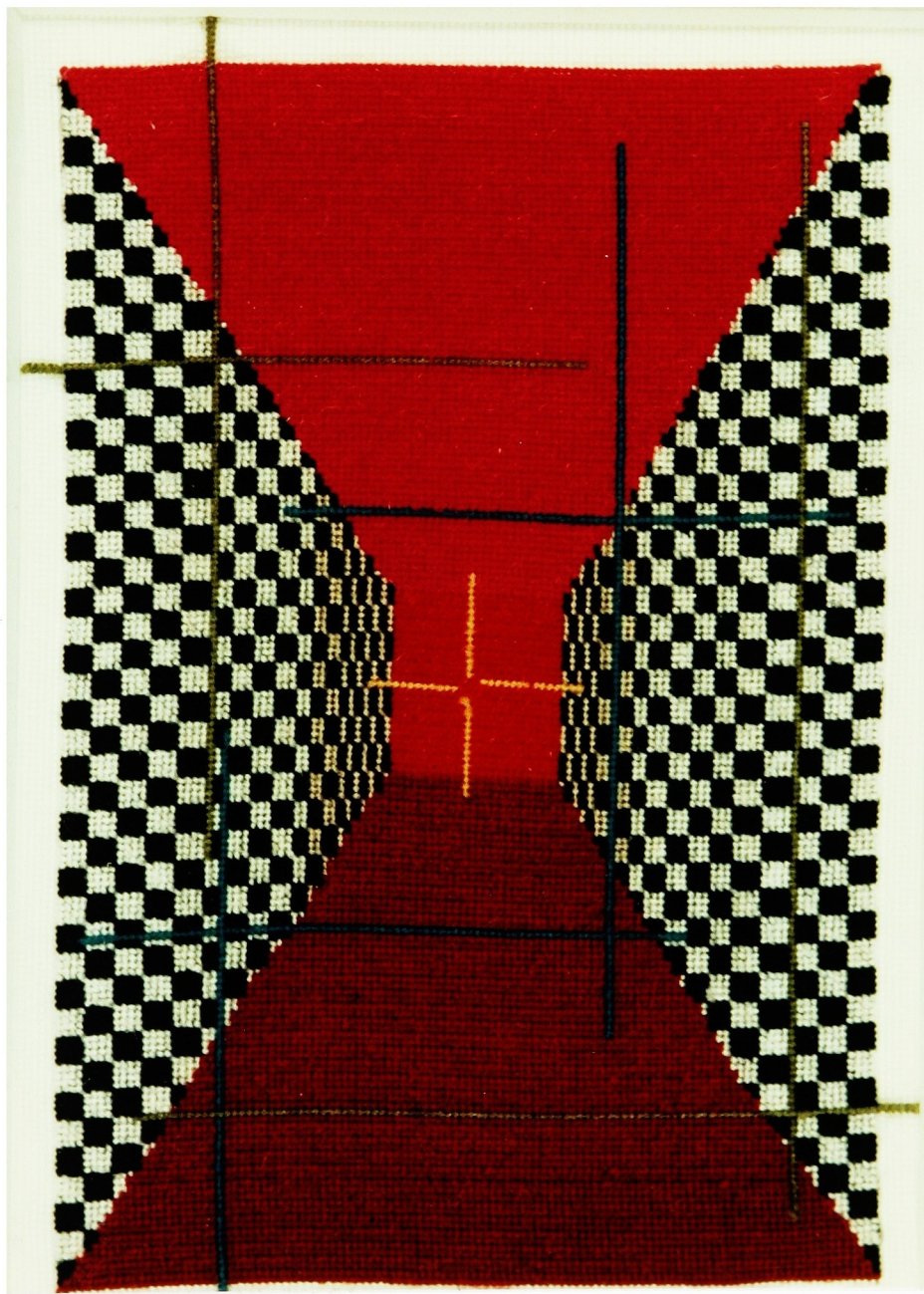


PLATE 1. BON MOT. (2"×3")

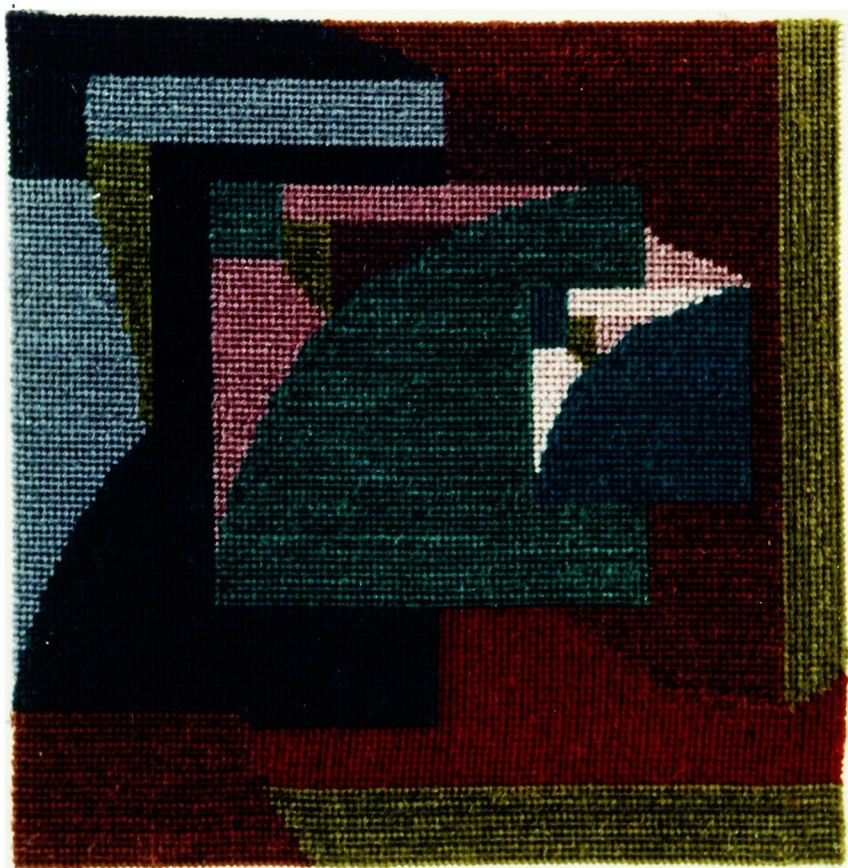


PLATE 2. MY ARP BELONGS TO DADA (2"×2")



PLATE 3. STAIR-RIO-TYPICAL (2"×2")

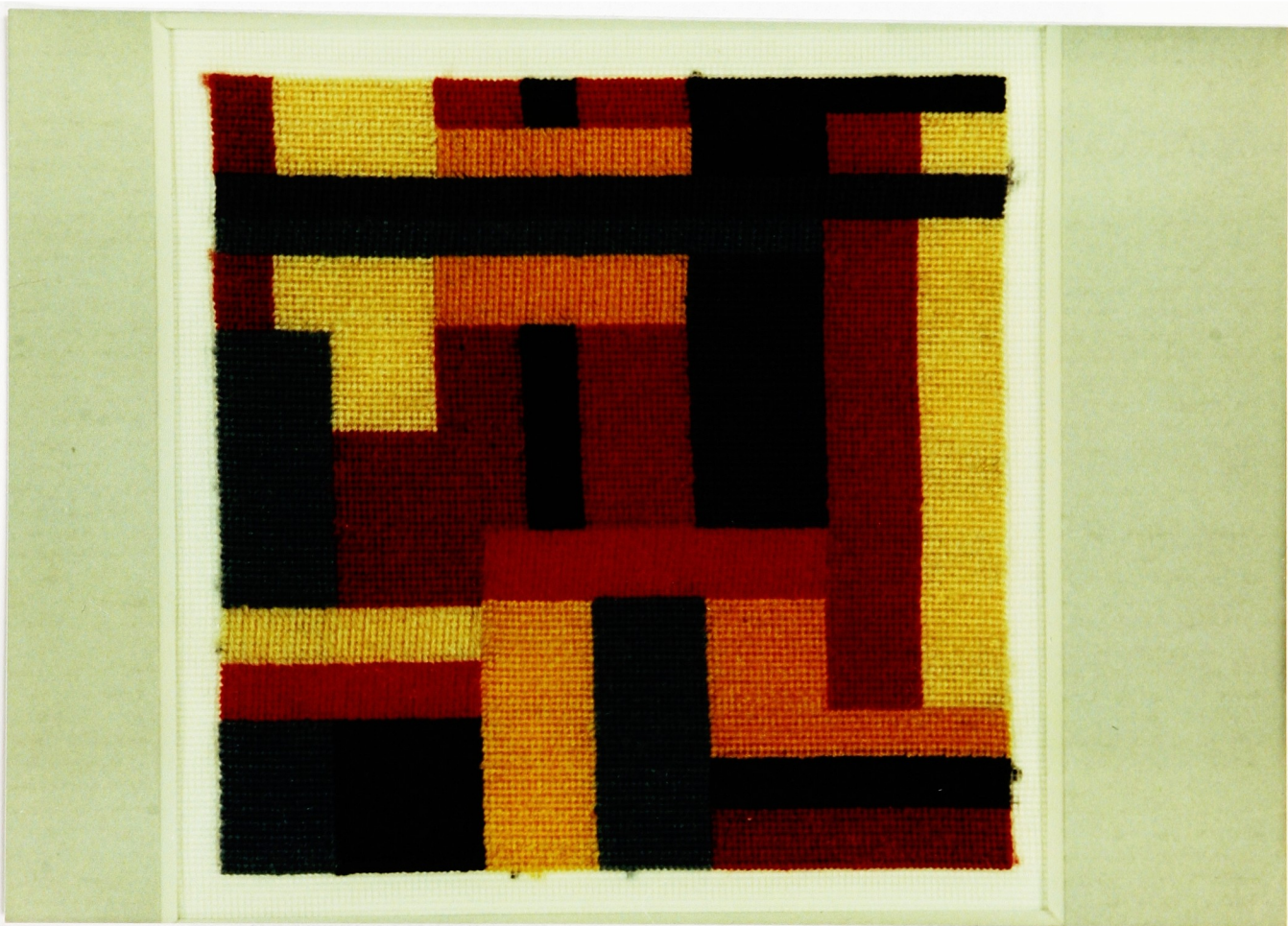


PLATE 4. STIJL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS (2"×2")

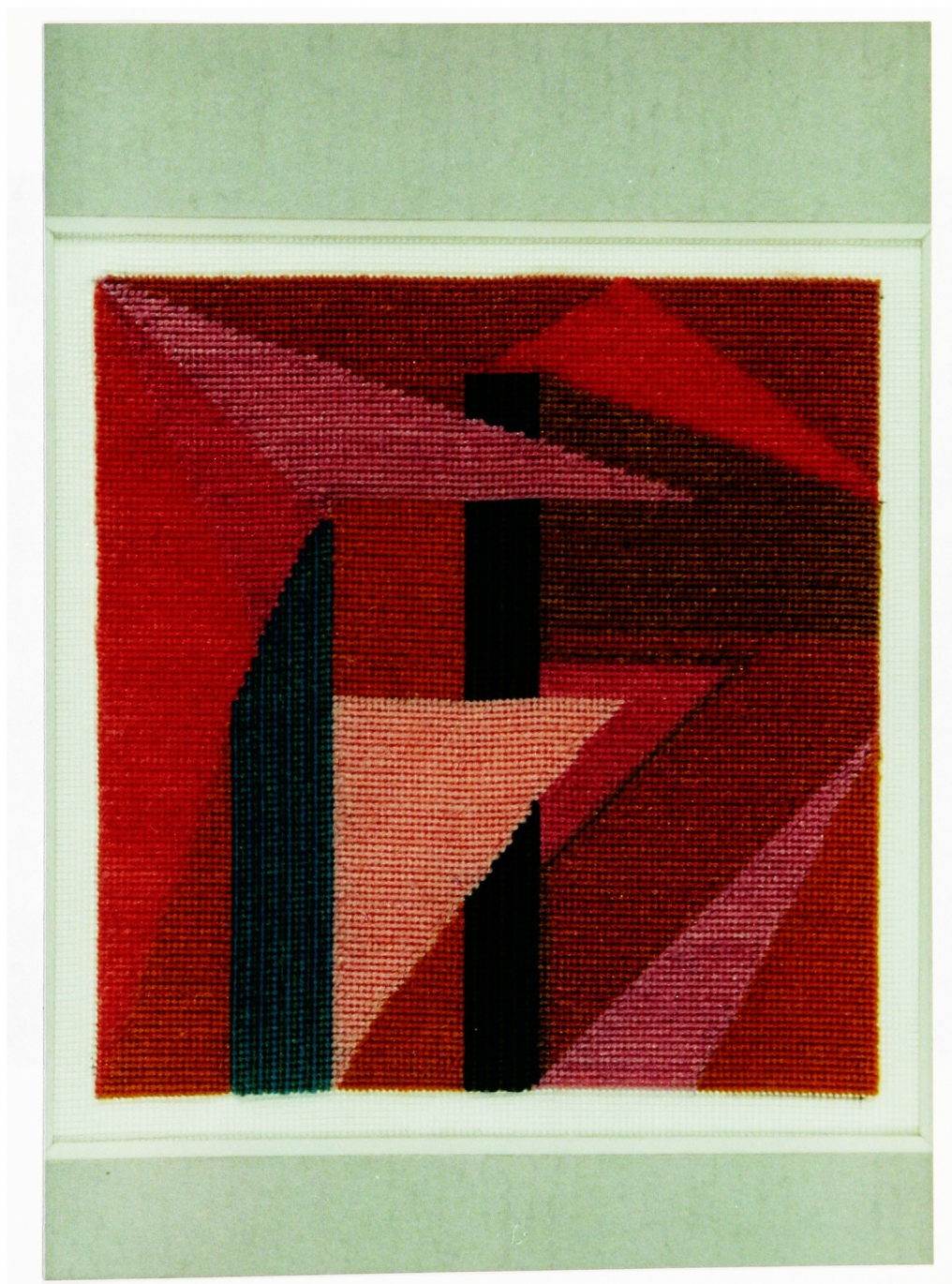


PLATE 5. GRID IRON (2"×2")

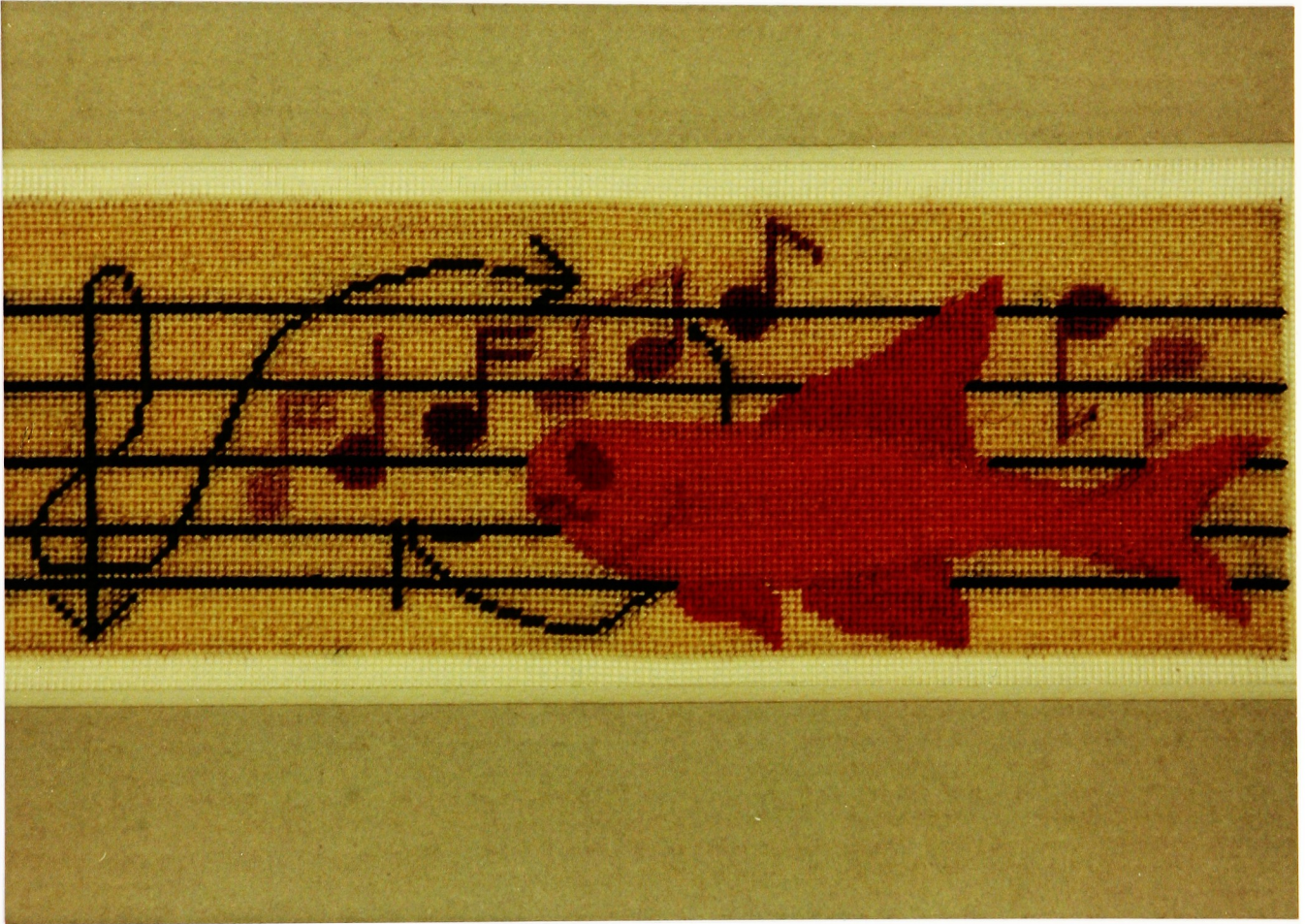


PLATE 6. THE GO FISH STORY OR WITH ALL OF THIS EDUCATION,
WHY AM I STILL WORKING FOR SCALE? (3"×1")