RICHARD HAMILTON

edited by Hal Foster with Alex Bacon

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Richard Hamilton in Conversation with Michael Craig-Martin

Michael Craig-Martin

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN: One of the things that has always struck me about your work is that all of its characteristics—of analytic investigation, its sense of excitement and being comfortable with the modern world—seem to be there so early on, right from the beginning. Can you start by saying something about how you came to art, how that basic sense of the world came to you?

RICHARD HAMILTON: I have often said I'm an old-fashioned artist. It comes as a bit of a surprise to be informed that I'm not. My training was certainly Beaux Arts, one might even say bizarre. At the Royal Academy Schools I went through all the normal experiences of a student of that time, painting and drawing plaster casts and nude models day after day. At St. Martin's, where I had my first formal evening art classes, they had giant-sized plaster details of the human head, an eye, an ear, and a nose, which new students were required to make pencil drawings from. Looking back on it, I can't think of a better way of learning how to use a pencil. As a fourteen-year-old, people thought I was a bit "slick"—that is to say, overfluent. As a student I learned by imitating, I was a persistent *pasticheur*. The Academy School has the virtue of being adjacent to Bond Street, so students have the advantage of seeing new work by professional artists. One morning my life-drawing would be something like a Picasso, and the next day I might be taken by a Man Ray drawing and try to do something like that. I ran through the whole gamut. There was the period, during 1940–45, when I became a technical draughtsman; which was a way of escaping from other, less pleasant, ways of enduring the war.

I managed to avoid being a combatant, so those war years were gainfully employed in learning about engineering, and I was introduced to a world for which I had never imagined I was at all fitted. I became a tool designer. When the Royal Academy School closed in 1940, I went to the labor exchange, being too young to be called up, and I was asked, "What can you do?" I told the man I was an art student, and he said, "Can you use a pencil?" When I replied, "Yes, that's what I've been taught to do," he decided I could be a draughtsman and sent me off to a government training center, and so I learned how to use a file as a preliminary to learning about engineering drawing. I failed every mathematics test they offered me, but, because I had a certain facility in using a pencil, they endured all this horror of my not being able to count except on my fingers (I didn't even know what a decimal point was) while I acquired sufficient schooling to get me through the war. I happened to drop into a specialized field of engineering, jig and tool design, for my first job after training, and that happened to be a high category of reserved occupation. The work consists of designing tools to make components which are to be mass-produced. You are presented with an object, maybe just a nut or a bolt, and then you have to think, "What is the best way to manufacture it?" It's like making a world: you're kind of following the processes of nature through mechanical engineering. It's the human equivalent of controlling the creation of a flower or a tree, and I found it a very exciting kind of experience.

CRAIG-MARTIN: What age were you when this was happening?

HAMILTON: I suppose in my late teens and early twenties.

CRAIG-MARTIN: It seems to me that the characteristics of what you're talking about inform virtually all of your work. Is that right?

HAMILTON: I probably learned to value the exercise of mental agility required in solving diverse problems. The fascination of tool design is that every object is different and a certain ingenuity of approach is required to conceive of the best way to produce it. It is about processes and procedures.

CRAIG-MARTIN: If we could go on to the work of the fifties, when I see that work—I was a child in America during the fifties and all the imagery in the work was everything that I grew up with—can you say something about what that meant? So much of it looks to America as the model of the modern world. How did it seem during that time?

HAMILTON: After the war a number of what would now be called mature students came out of the forces or out of industry, as I did, to attend places like the Slade or the Royal Academy. These older students tended to stick together. Nigel Henderson was at the Slade, and he encouraged me to try to get in there. Bill Coldstream was a Slade professor, and the atmosphere was marvelous at that time. I was friendly with Henderson and therefore accepted by Bill Turnbull and also Eduardo Paolozzi, who left just as I arrived but who maintained close links with the school. So we were a kind of circle. A bond between that group of friends was a common interest in the cinema, and we liked to go to the American embassy library because that was where all the best magazines were freely available, spread out over the tables. Magazines like *Esquire* and *Life*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Time*, and *Scientific American* and a good deal of reading matter one couldn't easily reach by other means. So the interest was directed at America because there was really very little happening in England. Anything that was at all exciting was likely to be in the American magazines or Hollywood films, and there wasn't much else. We would have been particularly interested in pictorial reportage, but *Scientific American* was perhaps the greatest stimulation. The influence of all those magazines was very strong, especially the imagery. There was *Picture Post,* but that didn't have the glamour of *Life* magazine in the postwar years.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Can you say something about the nature of design—your ideas about design? It seems to me that your interest in exhibition design and the design of objects, design of products, was there very early.

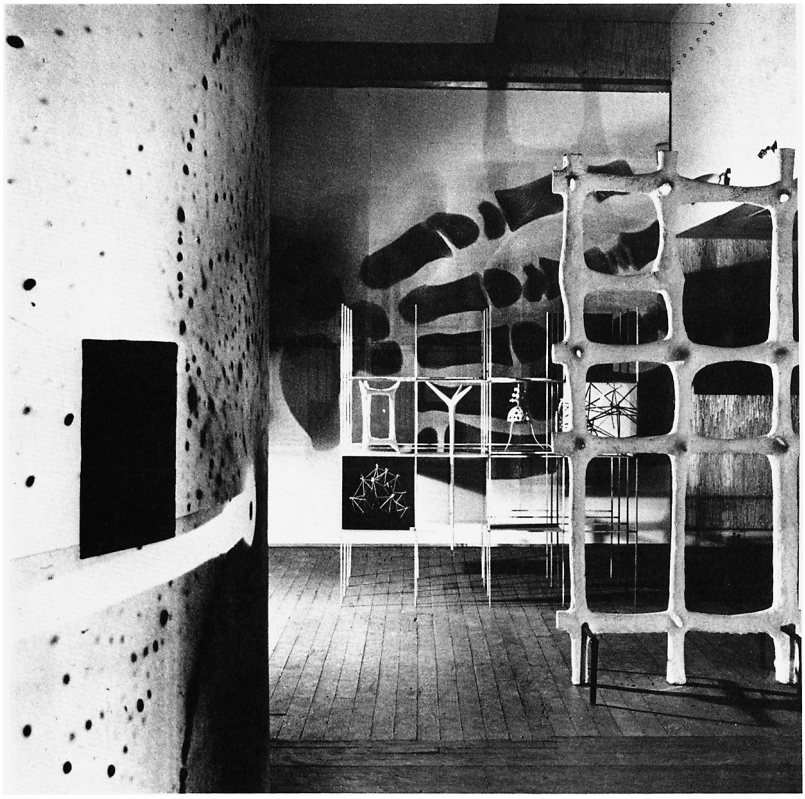
HAMILTON: Nigel Henderson was a seminal figure. The reason for his extraordinariness is rather odd, in that he was the son of Winn Henderson, who ran the Peggy Guggenheim Gallery in London, so he had an entrée to the great artists of the time. He was on nodding terms with Max Ernst and Miró. He'd been given a *Green Box*—a Marcel Duchamp *Green Box*—by Peggy Guggenheim at around the time it was produced, a mere Christmas present or something of the sort. He was a very aware kind of person. For example, he put a large tome, *Growth and Form* by d'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, into my hands one day, saying, "This might interest you." I was overwhelmed by it and felt that it might make an exhibition. I was thinking a lot about exhibition as a form because I was earning money working in my spare time as a model maker, so I was often in Olympia or Earl's Court. The great advantage of model making as a source of income is that all you need is a razor blade and a piece of balsa wood and you're

away. I did mundane things for the big annual exhibitions like *Ideal Homes* or the *British Industries Fair*. My wife and I also made models of new towns for the 1951 Festival of Britain. I had begun to feel that exhibition was an art form in its own right. The exhibits were subsidiary to the way they were treated. I looked at the great examples of the form in books on architecture and design. There was the pavilion Corbusier did for the Paris exhibition in the twenties, there was marvelous work done by Max Bill, by Persico and Nizzoli in Milan, and Ernesto Rogers, an uncle of Richard Rogers. *Growth and Form* seemed like a subject which could be presented in this way, and the newly opened Institute of Contemporary Arts was the place to do it. I had met Roland Penrose, the leading light of the ICA, and Lee Miller, naturally enough through Nigel Henderson. The surrealist art world of London was opened to me by Nigel. We put the project to Roland—that must have been in 1949—and it became the ICA's contribution to the 1951 Festival. Paolozzi was also to have been involved in the *Growth and Form* exhibition, but we had fallen out, and he wrote me a letter saying, roughly, "I'm going to do my own exhibition in 1952, which will be covering a similar area."

That became the important *Parallel of Life and Art* show he did with Nigel Henderson and the Smithsons. It was at about this time that the Independent Group [IG] started up. Then, when I went to teach in Newcastle in 1953, I started on an exhibition project called *Man, Machine & Motion*.

CRAIG-MARTIN: One of the things that struck me about the Independent Group in retrospect was the way a lot of artists seemed to be looking for a new form in which to be able to work. The exhibition form itself seems to be the one that's most clearly modern.

HAMILTON: It would be a mistake to think of the Independent Group as being an organization that was concerned with form, with formal creativity. It was a discussion group, a place to meet and argue about ideas, but it wasn't like the Cedar Bar in New York, where painters got drunk and argued out the ideas that led to abstract expressionism. The IG consisted of people with many different backgrounds and professional aspirations—a number of architects, a very few painters, and some writers like Alloway, Banham, and del Renzio. The only formal thing that I can think of that comes directly out of the Independent Group ideas is my own painting. Paolozzi gave the first talk—a startling epidiascope presentation—at the Independent Group, and his aesthetic stance was well-established. I



Installation view of *Growth and Form,*
1951.

don't suppose it would have been much changed by IG discussions. "New Brutalism," the Smithsons' contribution to the architecture of the period, was not modified by the IG's meetings. When the Independent Group was established, we elected Reyner Banham to arrange meetings, and these meetings were formal. They had subjects, an invited lecturer: we had a talk by a physicist, by a helicopter designer, and A. J. Ayer discussed logical positivism with us. After about a year, Banham's convenorship changed to the joint convenorship of Lawrence Alloway and John McHale, and the subject matter changed overnight. It was then much more oriented to America and to the popular arts. We could discuss Elvis Presley; we could discuss what went on in the cinema; we presented papers to each other. There was an evening given by Alloway on "Violence in the Cinema." Then

Reyner Banham, a young architectural historian—but he was also very well informed on painting—was getting very involved with American car styling, so he delivered a wonderful lecture on that subject, which opened up a whole range of ideas. Toni del Renzio talked on fashion. My contribution in this group of lectures was to discuss American domestic appliances. I was fascinated by "white goods" as they were called, washing machines and dishwashers and refrigerators—not simply the objects in themselves as designed objects but also in the ways in which they were presented to the audience, the buyer, through the advertisements that presented them. I could see that there was a relationship between the object and the kind of woman that could be associated with the appliance.

There were other evenings when we might be asked to talk about some book or other. Alloway would come up with a subject like "Theory of Games," and no one would know what "Theory of Games" was. Then we would be told: "There's this book that's just come out by John von Neumann which proposes something rather exciting about value judgments being irrelevant: we can't take a moral position any more because it's all to do with flipping coins and roulette wheels and chance, and that means there is no longer any justification for Aristotelian logic." After a week or two to prepare ourselves, we felt able to discuss the ideas of the first chapter anyway. We got enough out of that to learn that maybe there is something in this idea that you don't make judgments. Then there was another book that we discussed: Claude Shannon's book on communication theory, and from that we got the idea that anything in the world can be expressed in digital form—as a series of switchings, on and off, noughts and ones. The idea that everything is expressible in such simple terms was pretty shattering, and as far as my thinking was concerned, it would be those two books which were most important to me, and it may well be that they were the most formative influences of those years. The idea that you can express everything with something as simple as ones and zeros, and that value judgments don't count—you can't say this is good and this is bad—means you're in another kind of space altogether. You're really forced into wondering what makes sense and what doesn't. When the IG started. we talked about Siegfried Giedion's book *Mechanization Takes Command*. It didn't take long, with Alloway's influence, for the discussion to turn to Marshal McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride.*

CRAIG-MARTIN: I don't think we've yet used the term *pop art*. From the beginning there was a notion about trying to bring together the concept

of high art and fine art with the notion of popular art and popular culture, comic books and films. Was that a conscious thing, or did it develop naturally?

HAMILTON: When John McHale visited the U.S. in 1955, he returned with a box full of exotic things he had acquired there. He had gone around buying *Mad* magazine and comics of the most extreme kind and lots of pop records. Elvis Presley and Bill Haley's *Rock around the Clock* were being heard and discussed at the Independent Group before they were even played on the radio here. They were analyzed at the ICA and regarded as a sociological phenomenon, though there was an admiration and enjoyment of them. So much so that it directed our interest into what was going on in the popular arts, other than the cinema. Alloway was developing a theory of a different view of the relationship between the popular arts and fine arts. He said, it's a linear continuum not a pyramid: it doesn't make any sense to think of our culture as a pyramid with Picasso sitting on the top and Elvis down at the bottom. You can say at one end of the continuum there's Picasso maybe, and at the other end there's Elvis Presley. I began to make paintings which reflected that kind of thinking in 1957.

The contribution of my group—I worked with John Voelcker and John McHale—to This Is Tomorrow was concerned with the world of pop and the way we perceive the world. Nobody at that time among the Independent Group had ever said, "What kind of images can we as artists make out of this kind of thinking? What do we do to create forms which show our interest in this subject matter?" When I proposed, after the Whitechapel exhibition, that we could investigate that possibility, it was rather badly received. It went down like a stone. Maybe because it was seen as a distortion of Alloway's idea. If you say, "Well, if it's a linear thing—you've got an Elvis at one end and Picasso at the other—what happens if you put those two ends together and make a circle?" Closing the circle, finding out what happens if you join fine art to the popular arts, was a heresy, and my results were treated with extreme suspicion until it was observed that a similar sort of thing was happening in America.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Did you first know about pop art through reproductions or actual work? When was the first time that you saw American pop art?

HAMILTON: Not until, I suppose, the sixties, maybe 1960 or '61. I saw a Warhol at the ICA, a great Warhol, a great Marilyn, an enormous square

with—I don't know how many—forty or fifty Marilyns. That's how I remember it, anyway.

In 1963, when I went to America for the first time, I met a whole bunch of artists, Oldenburg and Warhol in California, Dine and Jasper Johns in New York. I went for the Duchamp exhibition. I had been working on Marcel Duchamp—and with Marcel Duchamp—for some years, so when the first Duchamp retrospective was put on in Pasadena, I went there for it. The exhibition attracted a lot of young artists, all fans of Duchamp. So that immersion into American pop was sudden, and I thought that there was something quite alien in the way I'd been approaching these problems. It seemed as though I'd been doing everything in a very analytical, prissy way. I was trying to make marks—although I was always shouting that I was not making value judgments—but at the same time I couldn't refrain from making a lyrical little passage somewhere. I thought: these guys don't care!

CRAIG-MARTIN: What you are saying seems to be very important to me. Did you envy their apparent freedom? Did it seem wonderful?

HAMILTON: Tremendous, yes. My feelings coming back were that it was a bit saddening to think that I was so unable to cope. But what I did when I came back was that badge called "Epiphany." That was the result of going to America.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Well, it's always seemed to me that what's called British pop is culturally distanced or analytical, as in your work, whereas American pop art always seems to be right in the midst of things arising from the very center of American culture.

HAMILTON: I was on the edge of things—we all were here. Until 1963 I knew the work of Jasper Johns better than anything else because he was an admirer of Marcel Duchamp: we had something in common. He knew Duchamp and John Cage, so there was a little circle of people that I felt some contact with.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Was your first contact with Duchamp through Nigel Henderson—with the *Green Box*?

HAMILTON: Yes, that was an important moment. It was later proposed that we should have an evening on Duchamp at the ICA, and that Anthony Hill, Sandy Wilson, and I should each do something. I didn't really know

very much. I think everybody had difficulty in understanding Duchamp's handwriting, and the ideas in the *Green Box* are so abstruse anyway. I got a friend of mine, George Knox, an art historian in Newcastle, to sit with me every lunch time. He translated, literally, what every word in the notes contained in the *Green Box* meant in English while I wrote it down. It didn't make much sense in that form, but I would then make choices between alternative readings and say, "Well, maybe he means this." At the end of a few weeks we had a complete transcription to English, and I decided that there was something going on here, so I made a diagram of the textual ideas as I thought they related to the *Large Glass.* I made a slide of my diagram, and this was my contribution to the ICA discussion. Somebody in the audience said that he had been associated with the American magazine *View* and that he'd been one of the people responsible for the big Marcel Duchamp issue of *View* that we all knew as one of the great publications of the period. He thought our presentations all very silly and said, "Marcel Duchamp would think you were absolutely mad if he heard you talking like this" and that Marcel had meant it all as a joke, so I sent the diagram to Duchamp asking him to correct it. I didn't hear from him for a year and that convinced me even further that I'd been a bit foolish. Then, almost a year later, I got a letter in a familiar handwriting that I'd been studying for a long time, and there was a nice note saying something like, "I'm sorry I haven't written to you before. I've had many disappointments about the *Green Box*, but a friend of mine, George Heard Hamilton, professor of art history at Yale University, wants to do a complete translation of the *Green Box* and would like to collaborate with you." He didn't say anything about the diagram or correct me, but at least it was encouraging. I feel I'm the only monolingual translator in the business. I then began a three-year period engaged in this extremely difficult typographical exercise.

CRAIG-MARTIN: It's an extraordinary amount of your life devoted to the work of another artist. What do you feel about that?

HAMILTON: I felt I got a great deal more out of it than one would expect. I learned so much. The more I knew about Duchamp, the more I admired him, and it was a total devotion. It was an extravagance and a luxury, but it paid off in the sense that it was immensely rewarding.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Richard, you must have a good Duchamp story that we should hear.

HAMILTON: I have a few Duchamp stories. The one that I like most is: When we were in Los Angeles for the Pasadena retrospective, we went to the Irving Blum Gallery and saw the Warhol show together. Irving Blum had a small bottle rack, not exactly the Duchamp ready-made but a shorter version, rather rusty, that he'd no doubt found in an antique shop or flea market. He asked Marcel if he would mind signing his bottle rack. Marcel, with his usual graciousness, said, yes. There was a table with ink and paint and brushes laid out, so Marcel took a brush and some paint and signed the thing. And then as we were leaving the gallery Marcel turned to me and whispered, "I like signing these things, it devalues them." Duchamp must have realized that he had added some monetary value to the object, but since he was adding to the number of signed versions, he was removing their uniqueness and thus making them worth less from an aesthetic point of view.

CRAIG-MARTIN: You were a much more visible presence when I first came to England than you have been over the past few years. I'd like you to say something about the work you have been doing over the last five or ten years—and particularly about the political work.

HAMILTON: I made a conscious decision to avoid following the field. Marcel Duchamp had been the great iconoclast of his period. There was nothing he did which looked to a precedent. If he saw any glimmering of a precedent, he would avoid it like the plague. During the late sixties and early seventies, there was a movement towards Duchamp's ideas. Duchamp had a deconstructive and a constructive side to his artistic personality, and the fashion was going towards his more nihilistic approach to things. It made me think that, rather than follow the solutions of Duchamp, it would be interesting to seek the opposite of his solutions. This is a technique that he'd always used—to work in opposites. So I took one notion of Duchamp's, that painting should be antiretinal: it's what goes on in the brain that counts and not what goes on in the eyes. I thought, "Okay, suppose you reverse that and say what's important is what goes on in the eyes. How do you make retinal paintings again but without rejecting the importance of the mind?" So I began to paint romantic subjects in an overly sentimental manner, and of course they were seen as absurd in the context of conceptualism. It was taken to be a retreat into fuddy-duddyism, senility, especially when it got to painting flowers and turds, girls in the woods, romantic landscapes, and sunlight coming

through the trees. They were certainly not perceived as iconoclastic by their audience, but they were against the prevailing mood and nonetheless conceptual for me. What I was really concerned with was the crisis of modern art which occurred at the middle of this century. The first half of the century showed a move towards abstraction. You end up in a Malevich black square. So everybody in the fifties, I think, was looking to where you go beyond this. A lot of the most interesting people found the pop solution. You go towards figuration again, but you do it in a different way. But you were asking about the political thing.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Yes, come to the political. How did you go from those works, the romantic works?

HAMILTON: It was a feeling I had that maybe I was wrong in my adherence to non-Aristotelian logic. Value judgments do have to be made. You can't, in the face of Mrs. Thatcher, say that nothing is wrong. I thought that it would be worthwhile to try to express the things that shocked me about the morality of the world. The Hugh Gaitskell painting was a reaction to his Scarborough speech about going naked into the conference chambers of Europe—that meant without an atom bomb. I felt that maybe it was necessary to look at the issues of our time and use images that aroused questions. The things I began to do were usually the result of experiencing some image with a very strong impact. Perhaps seeing something on a television screen, a Kent State student lying in a gutter shot by U.S. civil guardsmen, and it's come to you over satellite within hours of the event. Or the shock of seeing IRA prisoners on the blanket protest after it has gone on for three years, to see on a television screen a man wearing nothing but a blanket, with long hair and a beard, and the walls covered with excrement. It's such a startling experience that you think, "That's a powerful image. What should I do with it?" That's the kind of question I ask myself. Often the material is so strong it introduces doubts about the advisability of using it. But I've rarely reached the conclusion to reject it. Whether at a technical or philosophical, political or social level, whatever the context, I think there's a way of arriving at fruitful conclusions by a series of aesthetic decisions, and that process goes on to manipulation of paint and everything else about the project.

CRAIG-MARTIN: Richard, I think this is a good point for you and I to end our discussion. Perhaps you would answer some questions from the audience.

QUESTION: With one or two exceptions, like the Long Kesh painting, your works have been getting emptier and emptier of people. What happened to the people, and what should we understand by that?

HAMILTON: Yes, it's true. My last painting is called *Lobby*. It does have a figure in it, but it's a reflection of half of a figure, not a real figure, so the space is almost empty. In an original study for the painting there were two rather hopeful occupants—a loving couple, sentimental, mawkish even. But as I began to work on the painting, I felt that they were somehow irrelevant. I've said about that picture that it's an old man's painting, and I feel that to be true. It's a reflection on life, and I suppose there's a kind of melancholy in it that is inevitable at my age, looking back at what I enjoy in life, and thinking, "Well, how much more have I got?" The space is conceived of as a kind of purgatory—that is to say, a place of waiting. It represents a lobby, a hotel lobby, but it has a metaphysical concern.

QUESTION: There seems to be a distrust of the material in a lot of your work. How do you feel about painting as a making process?

HAMILTON: Maybe I don't like paint. I've never really felt comfortable as a painter since I was a child. When I was finger painting, I was happy enough, but I feel that now it's an effort to find solutions in that medium. When I work with copper, I can do more or less anything I want because it is resistant. To take a burin and cut a line in copper is satisfying physically. Cutting and working directly on metal is precarious in the sense that things can go wrong: it's living dangerously. I find paint a bit slimy; it moves around too easily. I can cope with it and produce results that satisfy me, but it's very easy to slip into mannerist solution. I make a gesture with a brush and think, "Well, that's paint, you know. It's the slimy stuff you put on a canvas."

QUESTION: Can I ask what your current preoccupations are in your work?

HAMILTON: The difference between what I'm doing now and what I was doing in 1957 and '58 is that at that time I felt that every hour of the day I was faced with an agony of creativity. Now it's more a question of doing something that I know. I have always worked subject by subject, and it is the subject that determines the result. I was talking to some people this afternoon in my studio, and I had to explain the painting I was getting on with at the moment. It's a painting of an Orangeman—very much the same scale and composition as the painting called *The citizen*. Indeed, it's

a companion piece to *The citizen.* Each picture is a pair of canvases—one almost abstract and the other completely figurative. I began to explain that *The citizen* painting shows a confined situation: the picture is very flat. The painting I'm working on now is much more spatial. The subject is in the street: there's a hint of the cell window which appears in *The citizen,* but the Orangeman is on the outside. He's in the shit, too. The left-hand canvas is the shit of destruction: it's bomb rubble, armored car lights. It's hell.

QUESTION: You have done works in collaboration with Dieter Roth. Is there another artist you would like to collaborate with?

HAMILTON: I don't really like collaboration, but Dieter Roth is an artist I admire enormously, and he is into collaboration. He thinks it's like jazz: you get three or four guys together, and they all mess in and improvise. We have been close friends for twenty-five years, and I love him, so it is difficult to refuse. When I've worked with him, I have to change my normal pace. I have to run to catch up with his inventive genius. I'm not very good at chasing and find it exhausting.

Looking at the things we've done after the event, I cannot see myself in it at all. But I take comfort in the knowledge that Dieter would not have done it that way if he hadn't been with me.

February 1990