


Kill John Bull with art! *What went wrong?*

Ralph Rumney

No. 10

VORTICIST EXHIBITION.



DORÉ GALLERIES,
35, NEW BOND STREET, W.

OPENING 10th JUNE, 1915.

THE VORTICIST GROUP.

MEMBERS.

DISMORR.
ETCHELLS.
GAUDIER-BRZESKA.
ROBERTS.
SANDERS.
WADSWORTH.
WYNDHAM-LEWIS.

The first Exhibition of the Vorticist
Group, opening 10th June, 1915.

PICTURES.

1. DISMORR.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Shapes. b) Interior. c) Movement. d) Design.
2. ETCHELLS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The Pigeon-Juggler. b) Painting.

Mr d'Offay's unique and carefully chosen exhibition, 'Abstract Art in England, 1913-1915',¹ is of major importance. It is likely to be the only occasion we shall have to see a considerable selection of important work from this period. Surprisingly little beyond what is assembled in his gallery is known to survive from this clamorous and heady period in English art. Almost without exception the artists involved underwent a radical change of style in the period immediately following the war, and with the dispersal of the John Quinn collection for derisory prices in 1927, 150 of their paintings and drawings disappeared and few have since come to light.

What is perhaps as surprising as anything about this work, is the discovery that these pre-war artists were as closely linked with the international avant garde as English artists have ever been, and that not until the late 'fifties did English painting recover the sort of international standing that it enjoyed before the unaccountable defection of these artists. With the exception of Bomberg they were all signatories of the Vorticist Manifesto or contributors to *Blast*. They were all (except Laurence Atkinson who was 38) under thirty in 1912, and were beginning their careers at a moment when a wind of abstraction was stirring all over the world and the first art that was genuinely of this century was being produced. Hartley, Dove, Weber and Morgan Russel were active in the States. Robert Delaunay was painting *Simultaneous Disc* (Tremaine Collection), Mondrian was making his first abstract drawings, Malevitch's earliest *Suprematist Composition* (in the Peggy Guggenheim collection) is dated 1913, and Prampolini, Giacomo Balla, Arp, Kupka and Van Doesberg were all producing abstract paintings which can be dated before 1914.

There is little evidence that much of this work had been shown in England, though Allied Artists (a sort of English *Salon des Indépendants*) had shown Kandinsky in 1909 and 1910, and Brancusi in 1913. Marinetti had lectured in London, but he soon found that Lewis was a publicist of his own calibre who was unwilling to resign himself to the subaltern role of running the English branch of the Futurist movement, and so a minor feud developed between Futurists and Vorticists. What there was in London, which was undoubtedly essential to the development of the movement, was a last vestige of Edwardian café society. The city had a centre and there were places like the Café Royal at which artists met. The Vorticists even had their own night-club, the 'Golden Calf' run by Strindberg's third wife, with walls frescoed by Lewis and columns by Epstein. It was here that the Manifesto of Rebel Art was read 'to the sound of carefully chosen trumpets'. But this feed-back of frequent meeting and discussion is not in itself enough to explain the group. Roberts, Bomberg, Wadsworth, Lewis, Saunders and Hamilton had all been at the Slade under

Tonks and in the summer of 1913 six of them at least were working at Fry's Omega workshops designing furniture and textiles; it is tempting to think that the 'Great English Vortex' was the product of the unlikely mating of the influences of Tonks and Fry. In any case, by 1913 abstract art was being produced, and abstract art which owed nothing to Futurism and Cubism beyond the most casual stylistic influence. By the following year the words were ready to explain the phenomenon.

Bomberg, who always carefully maintained his independence from the Vorticists and who had already painted *Ju-Jitsu* and *In the Hold* (Tate), wrote in the catalogue of his show at the Chenil Galleries in 1914, '...I reject everything in painting that is not pure form.' T. E. Hulme, the critic, writing on Roberts in 1914: 'The interest of the drawing itself depends on the forms it contains. The fact that such forms were suggested by human figures is of no importance.'

Ezra Pound: 'Every statue, every picture, is a series of ordered relations as the body is controlled in a dance by the will to express a single idea. ... Art is an adjunct to existence, a reproduction of the actual. For indeed, it is not essential that the subject matter should represent or be like anything in nature; only that it must be alive with a rhythmic vitality of its own.'

Wyndham Lewis in the second number of *Blast*, July 1915: 'Whatever happens a new section has already justified its existence... that is, for want of a better word, the Abstract. ... There should be a bill passed in Parliament at once FORBIDDING ANY IMAGE OR RECOGNIZABLE SHAPE TO BE STUCK UP IN ANY PUBLIC PLACE....'

And finally from the catalogue of the only Vorticist show in this country at the Dore Gallery in 1915: 'By Vorticism we mean (a) Activity as opposed to the tasteful passivity of Picasso. (b) Significance as opposed to the dull and anecdotal character to which the Naturalist is condemned. (c) Essential Movement and Activity (such as the energy of a mind) as opposed to the imitative cinematography, the fuss and hysterics of the Futurists.' But most of the literature and history of the movement is familiar; what are not known are the works. In fact the Vorticists are usually dismissed as a coterie of minor painters functioning under the aegis of Wyndham Lewis, who later was to say 'Vorticism is what I did and said at a certain time'. We must be grateful to Mr d'Offay for providing the first opportunity since the period to see what remains of these artists' work in a setting which does not subordinate them unduly to the 'Old Man of Notting Hill'. What emerges perhaps more than anything else from this show is the virility and vigour of the work of even the most obscure painters who were previously little more than names under smudgy blocks in *Blast*. There is a

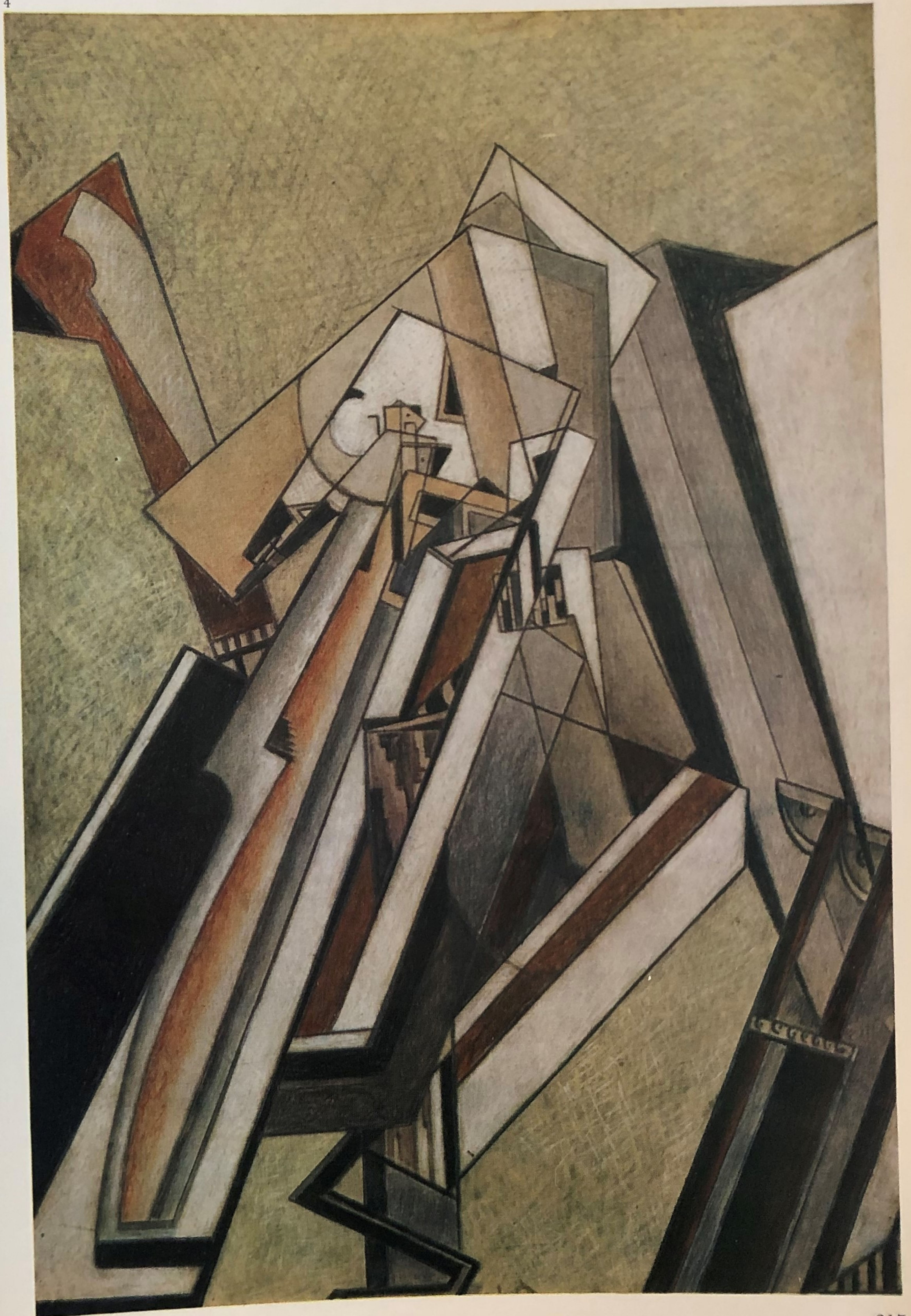
1
Front cover of catalogue for Vorticist Exhibition held at the Dore Galleries in 1915.

2
Title page of the 1915 Exhibition catalogue

3
William Roberts
The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel
Spring 1915

Watercolour 12¼ × 15 in.
The artists seated are, from left to right, Cuthbert Hamilton, Ezra Pound, William Roberts, Wyndham Lewis (wearing a scarf), Frederick Etchells and Edward Wadsworth. In the doorway stand Jessica Dismorr and Helen Saunders

4
Laurence Atkinson
Abstract Composition
Pencil and coloured crayons
31½ × 21½ in.



5

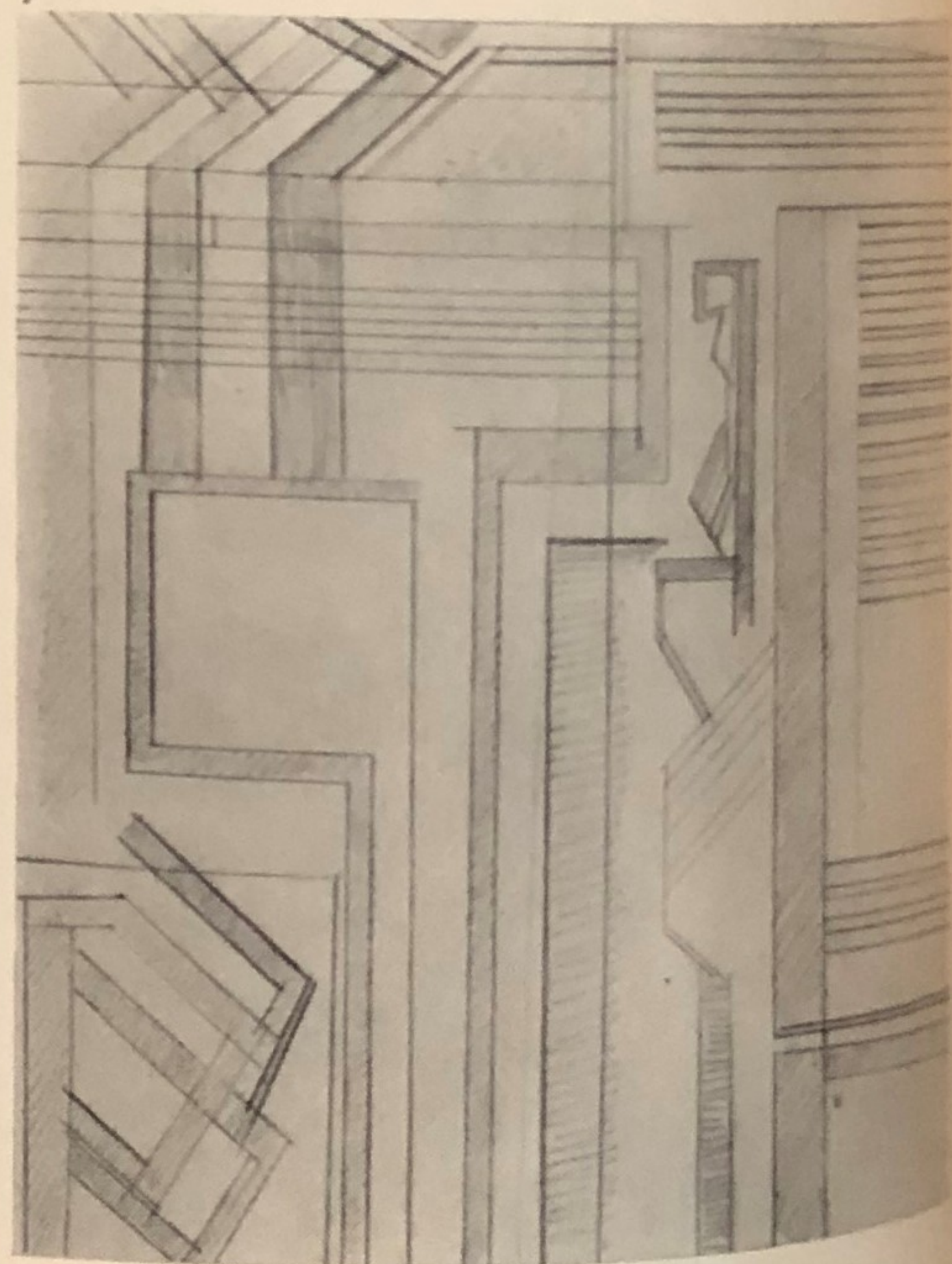


W. Davis 1950

6



7

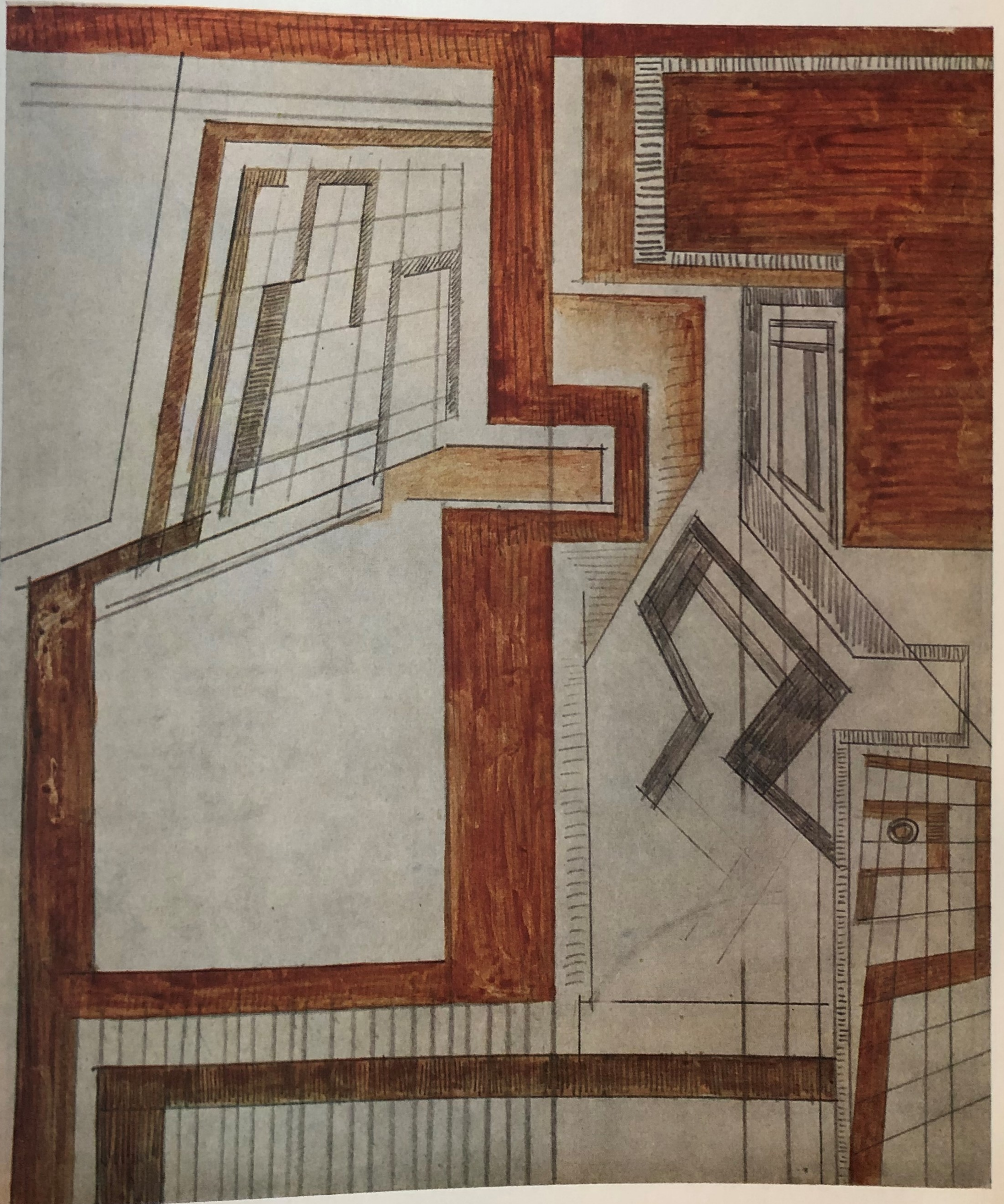


5
Percy Wyndham Lewis
Composition in Blue 1915
Ink, crayon and watercolour
18½ × 12 in.

6
Percy Wyndham Lewis
Timon of Athens 1913
Pencil, pen and Indian ink
13¾ × 10¾ in.

7
Percy Wyndham Lewis
Abstract Composition IV
Pencil
11½ × 10¼ in.

8
Percy Wyndham Lewis
Abstract Composition II
Pencil and watercolour
12 × 10¼ in.



9
William Roberts
Two Step
Pencil, watercolour and gouache
11½ × 9 in.
A study for the painting *Two Step* exhibited in the
Dore Galleries Vorticist Exhibition in June 1915

10
David Bomberg
Verso of study for *The Mud Bath* 1914
Black chalk
17½ × 26½ in.

11
Edward Wadsworth
The Open Window
Woodcut printed in three colours
6½ × 4½ in.

12
William Roberts
St George and the Dragon 1915
Pencil
9½ × 7½ in.
A study for the drawing published in the *Evening
News* on 23 April 1915

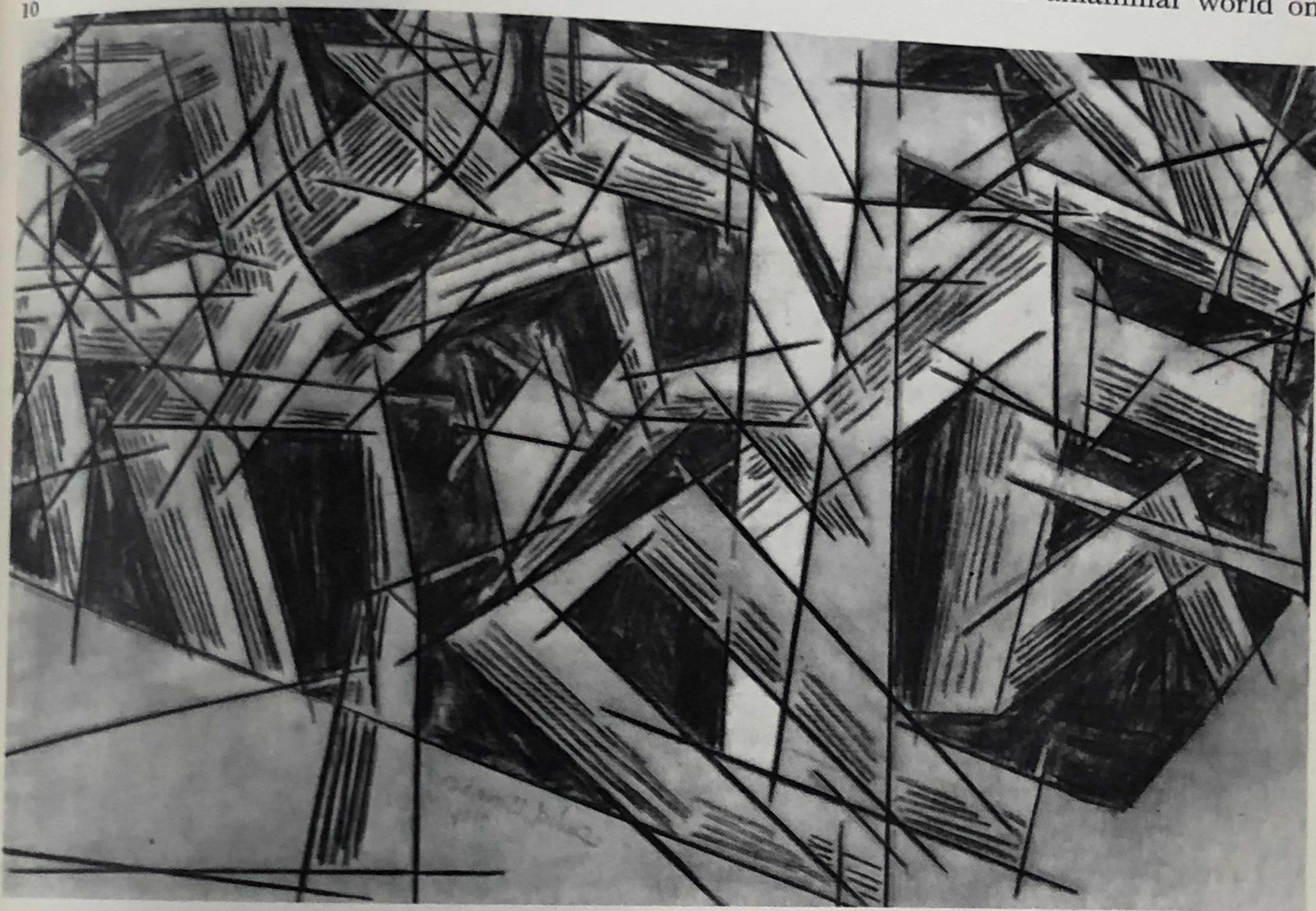


fine water-colour by Cuthbert Hamilton (loaned by the Tate) which is his only known surviving work, an extremely powerful drawing by Dorothy Shakespear and indeed works which bely the modest reputations of all the 'minor' artists. But the show is inevitably dominated by the ten leaves of a Lewis sketchbook which have not previously been seen and by the eighteen major works by Bomberg which are probably all that survives of his abstract work outside public collections. One is left feeling regret that these artists all turned away from abstraction and bemusement that

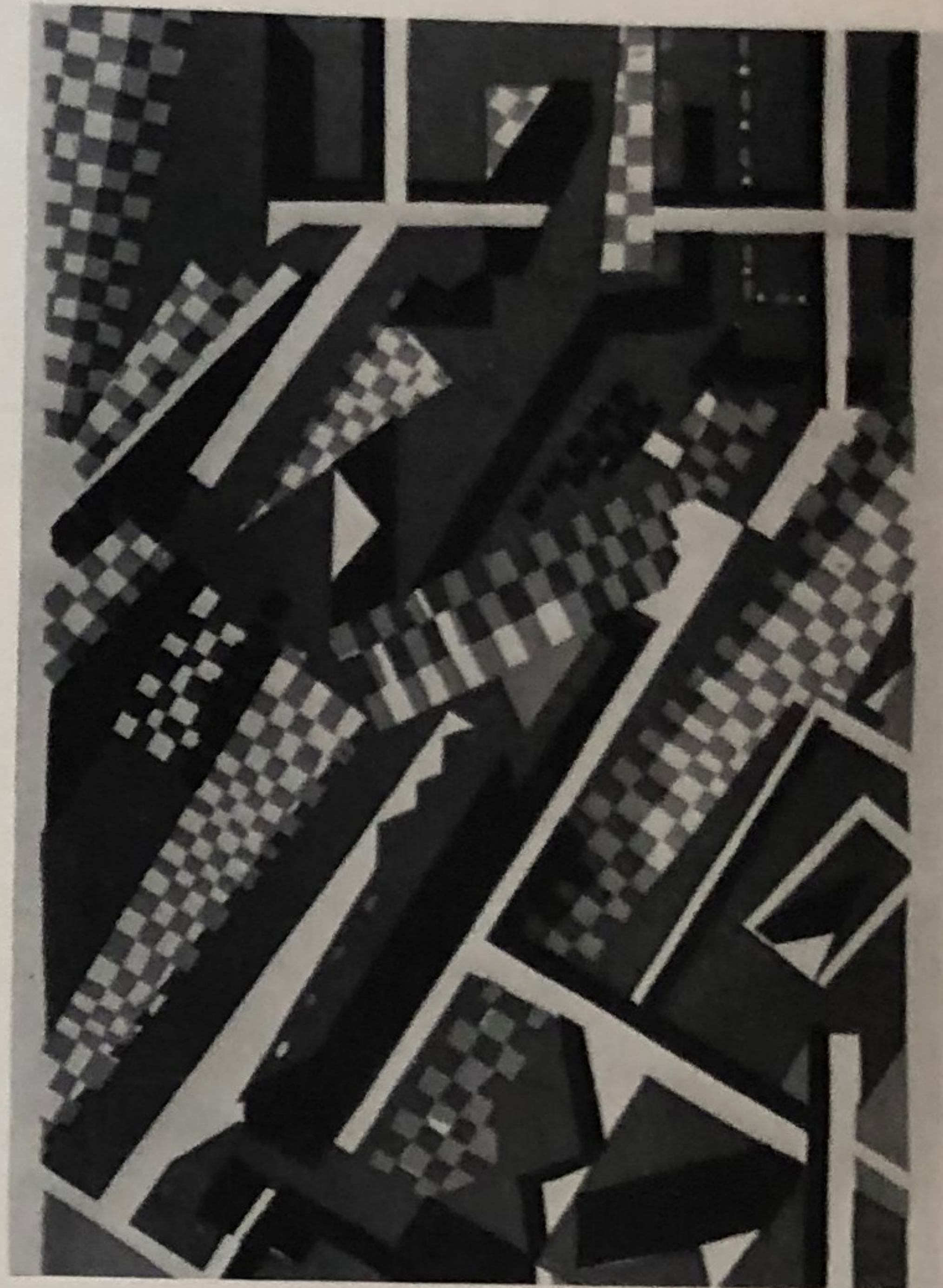
probably teach in the same art school with him. The art scene is broken into small groups who have only occasional and suspicious contact with each other. An artist's best audience is other artists who know, from the inside, what he is doing while it is new....' It is my contention that in this sense of the disappearance of an efficient working environment the war was indeed 'bad for art', and that the change from rebellion to a sort of conformity which eventually led us to the insipidity of Unit One was the product, akin to brainwashing, of an unfamiliar world on

actual collapse during the war, it is known that the cumulative effect of constant fear and uncertainty is likely in itself to be sufficient to so disrupt the normal reasoning processes that the mind welcomes and embraces any opportunity to conform to whatever appears to be generally acceptable, and that once such a conversion has taken root it is exceedingly tenacious and can only be dis-

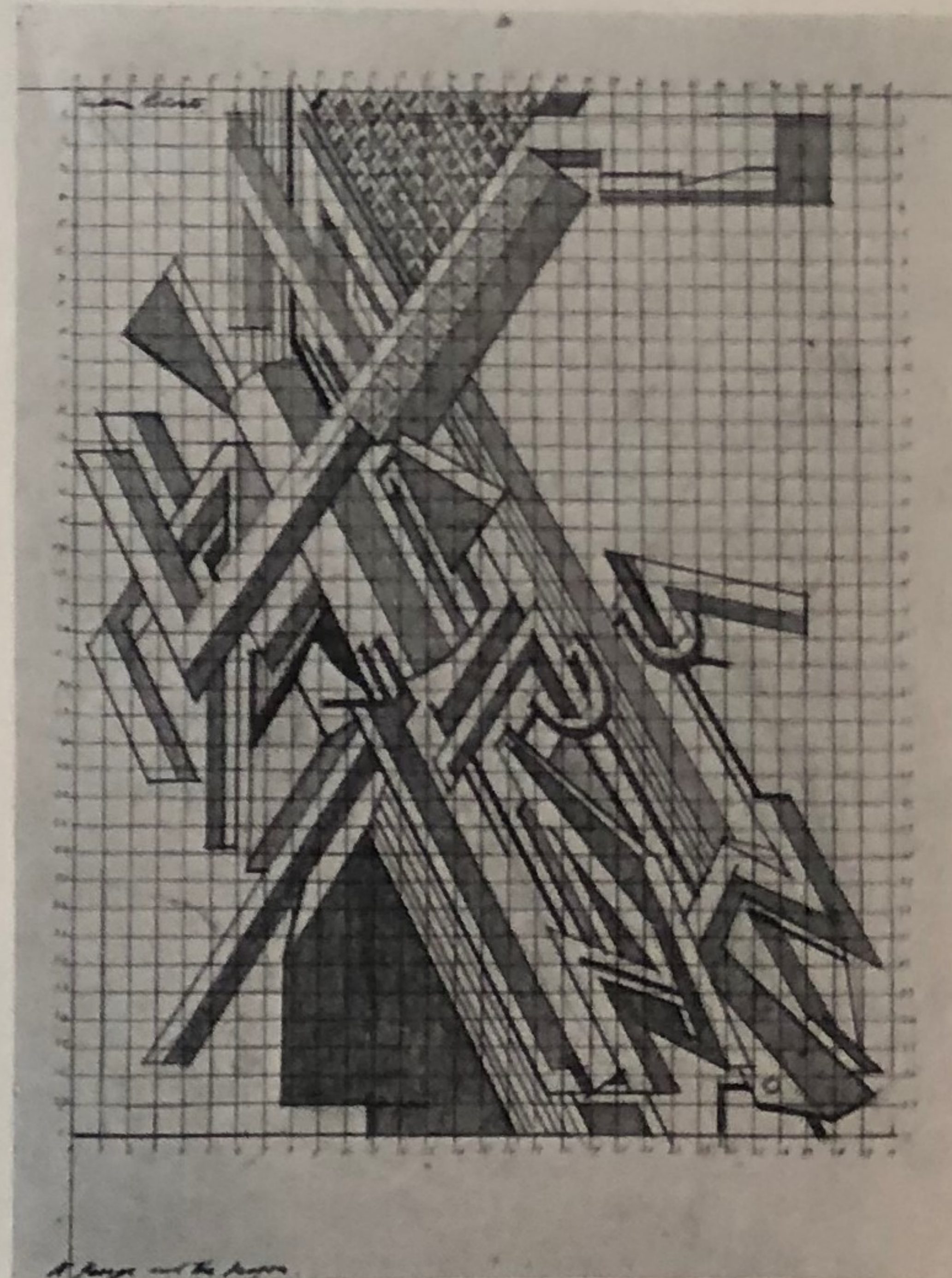
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11



12



a mere five years later, Clive Bell could write of them with apparent justification, 'Were they really born to be painters? I wonder. But of this I am sure: their friends merely make them look silly by comparing them with contemporary French Masters.'

Was Augustus John right when he said to Bomberg in the Café Royal on the night of August 4, 1914, 'David, this news of the outbreak of war is going to be very bad for art'?

What happened during the war to change radically the attitudes of a group of rebel artists into near conformity? Why was it only in England that the mainstream of art was interrupted and diverted?

I am going to suggest that these questions can only be answered in terms of the psychiatry of religious conversion and its marked similarities to the effects of combat fatigue, and to the fact that the Edwardian character of life in London was ineradicably destroyed by the war, so that artists were deprived of cafés and meeting places—as Lawrence Alloway put it in his Granada lecture, 'Here there is almost no professionalism among the artists, by which I mean a level of interpersonal contact which is sustained and open to newcomers. In London no artist seems to know enough other artists; there will be a few others, of his own generation probably, and some of these will

men suffering from acute mental strain.

'...we have concluded that all normal men eventually suffer combat exhaustion in prolonged and continuous combat.' R. L. Swank and E. Marchand—*Combat Neurosis Development of Combat Exhaustion*. Arch. Neurol. Psychiat. LV. 236. 1946.

'Once a state of hysteria has been induced in men or dogs by mounting stresses which the brain can no longer tolerate, protective inhibition is likely to supervene. This will disturb the individual's ordinary conditioned behaviour patterns. In human beings, states of greatly increased suggestibility are also found, and so are their opposite, namely states in which the patient is deaf to all suggestions however sensible....The anxiety.... created a state in which large groups of persons were temporarily able to accept new and sometimes strange beliefs without criticism.' *Battle for the Mind*. William Sargant. Heinemann, 1957.

The suggestion is that all humans who are sane can be reduced to a state in which they are willing to adopt totally different ideas and behaviour patterns, once they have been softened up by mental overstimulation. This can take many forms, ranging from Revivalist preaching to brainwashing. While, as far as is known, none of these artists was reduced to

lodge by a similarly violent process. Thus the attempt to 'kill John Bull with Art' was a failure, most of the art has disappeared and we are left with the tantalising prospect of what might have been if these artists had recovered from their wartime experiences and gone on producing abstract art through the 'twenties and 'thirties, to compare with the dim reality of art in England from 1915 to 1955. □

1 d'Offay Couper Gallery, 9 Dering Street, London W.1. November 11 to December 5, 1969.

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Cover: one of the images from
Robert Rauschenberg's latest suite
of prints, *Stoned Moon*, published by
Gemini, Los Angeles (see pp. 246, 247)

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