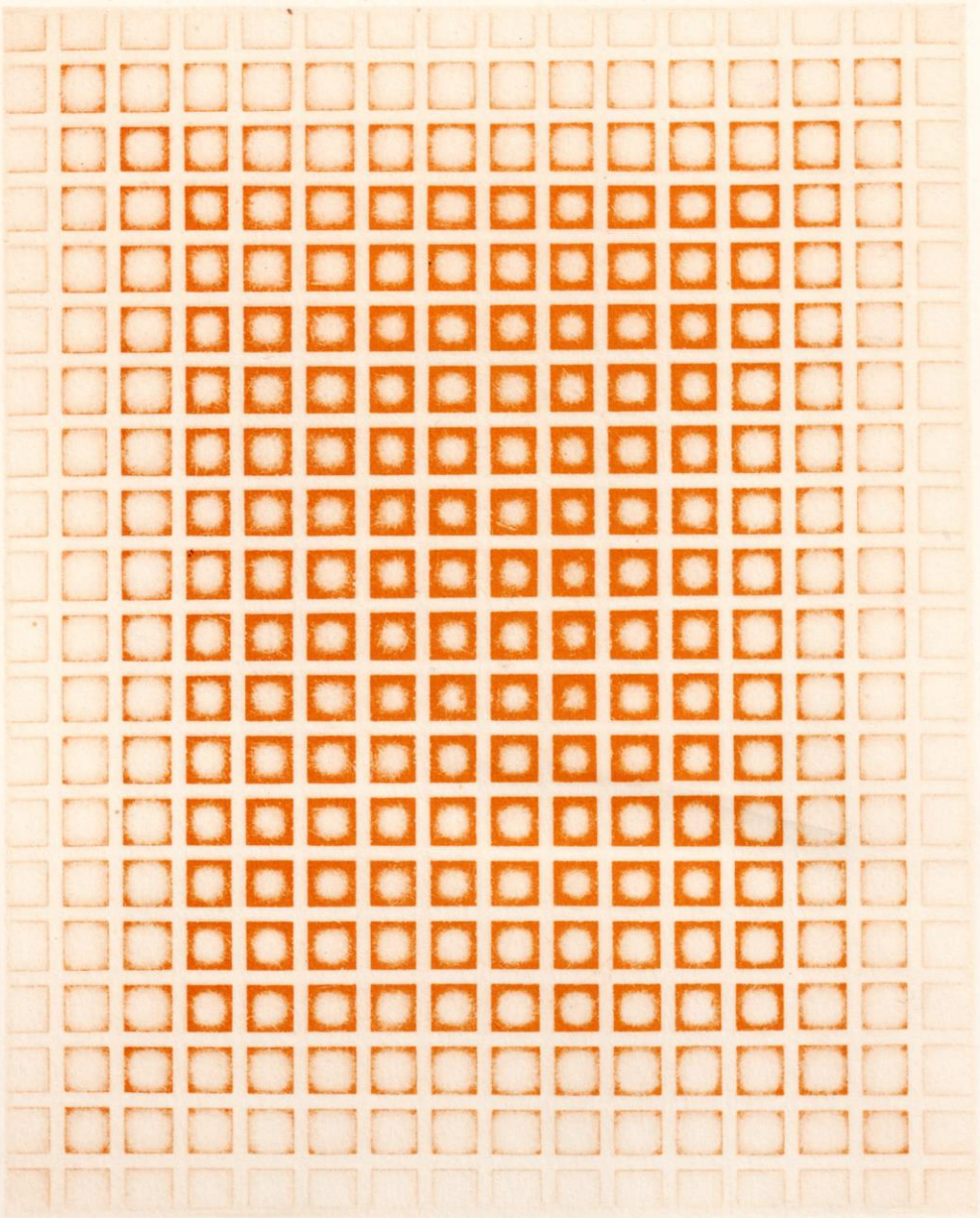

VINCENT LONGO

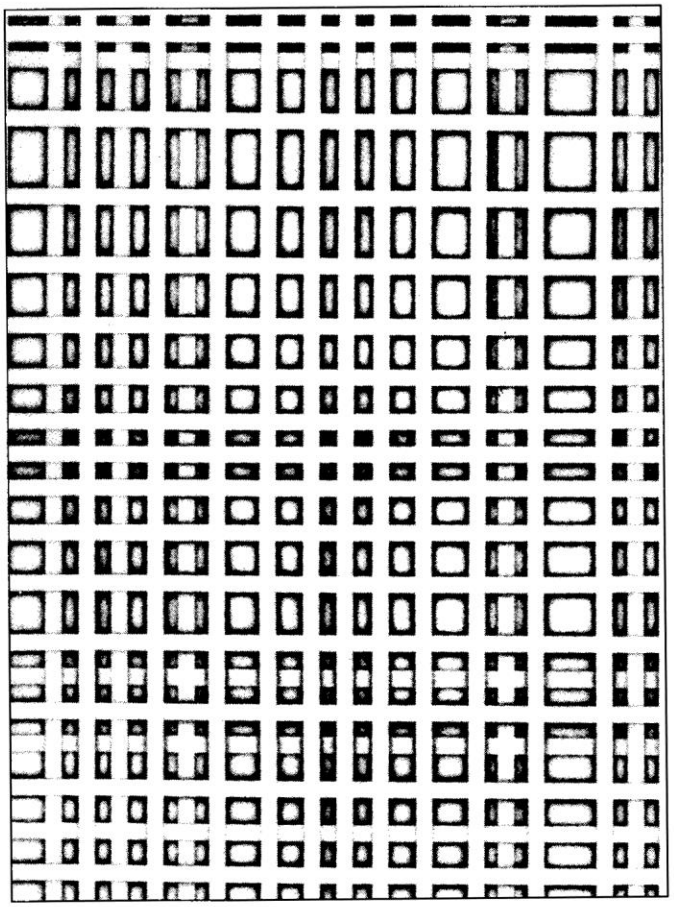

fig. 9
*Jack Back*, 1973
etching

## Vincent Longo Interview

When I first met Vincent Longo in the early 1970s, I was a printmaker and editor of The Print Collector's Newsletter. My preferred media, like Longo's, were etching and woodcut, but, unlike Longo, I was only an enthusiastic amateur who loved paper and ink. I had tried my hand at abstraction and knew how difficult it was to make a good abstract print. The graphic arts remain essentially narrative media; small in scale, black and white. The history of printmaking is also the history of illustration and decoration. Early prints tell stories, decorate walls and books and convey information. Even now, four decades after the advent of pyrotechnic printmaking and American publishing workshops, only a handful of artists have produced successful abstract prints, among them, Josef Albers, Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella and Vincent Longo. From the start, Longo's etchings and woodcuts were basically abstract. In woodcuts, he painted, then cut swirling calligraphic lines. Later, in etchings, he drew and etched grids in metal and built tones and spaces out of diagonal lines. Two qualities, rare to printmaking, characterize Longo's prints: A naturalness, seen in the ease with which he carves forms in wood, and a spirituality, felt in the atmospheres and grace that emanate from his best prints.

The following interview took place over a period of several months, from May to August of 1995. Most of it was conducted by fax. I sent questions to Longo who would return neatly typed answers. After each batch of answers, I sent more questions. Finally, when it seemed like we had covered enough ground, I edited both the questions and answers and sent the manuscript back to Vinnie for a final edit.

Judith Goldman

*When did you first think about becoming an artist?*

I was twelve years old. It was in 1935 at Saint Agatha's Home for Boys in Nanuet, New York, where from age two, my brother Frank and I were raised by the Sisters of Charity. We arrived there in 1925 after our parents became ill and died within a year of each other. Art was not a regular course of study. On rare occasions, we were instructed by a visiting "art teacher" who gave us crayons and passed out pictures of birds and animals to be colored. I liked to draw but wasn't especially gifted. Well, on that particular day, Sister Mary Estelle, the principal, who thought I had a vocational calling to the priesthood, put my hands together, and raised them and said, 'You have beautiful hands, Vincent. What do you think they were meant to do?' My immediate response was —' I am going to be an artist.' As it turned out, I meant it.

*And why did you say that ? Where did your desire to become an artist come from?*

From out of the blue, I suppose. I had no idea what being an artist actually meant. Sister Estelle was nonplussed because she felt certain I was headed for a life much like her own.

*Had you really considered becoming a priest?*

Ritual and prayer were an every day routine. I rather took to the notion of a possible meditative future. We were already cloistered, but I soon harbored serious doubts about Catholicism itself— even more about devoting my life to it. In retrospect, I think teaching may have been a compensation for my turn away from Catholicism.

*Did you paint as a child? As I ask the question, it occurs to me that children love to paint and draw. That the instinct to make art is a nat-*

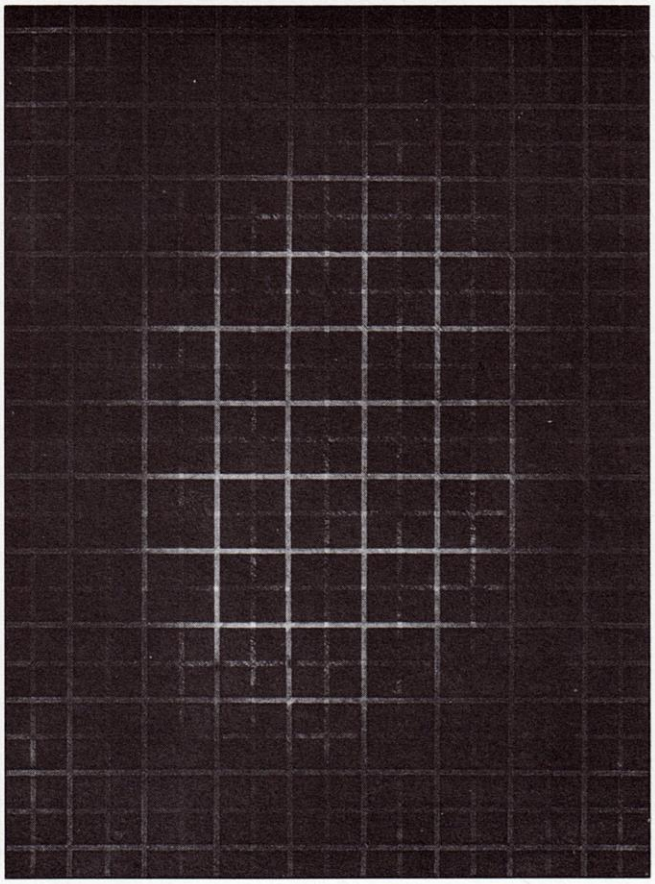

fig. 10
*Between*, 1969
etching

*ural one, that it is indigenous to childhood. Was that your experience?*

I drew a lot, but I did not have paints. I only had pencils, crayons and chalk. I drew on the sidewalk. I also made comic strips featuring cowboys and racing cars and airplanes. In the early 1930s, airplanes were still a novelty. Two of my classmates were more talented than I was. They could draw better. Still, I drew fairly consistently and took it quite seriously.

*As a child, I remember falling in love with the materials of art — with the smell of paint and turpentine and just the way paint looked. But museums also were an even more important influence. For example, I liked Van Gogh's Bedroom at Arles at the Art Institute of Chicago so much that I used to pretend it was my room. As a child, did you have similar experiences?*

In 1937, a distant cousin, Rose Ferrari, adopted me and my brother, and we left St. Agatha's and went to live with her in Brooklyn. She had a large and boisterous family. They were very Italian, loved classical music, especially the operas of Verdi. It was an exciting change from the cloistered life. After I moved in with my cousin Rose, I vis-

ited The Brooklyn Museum once, but that experience wasn't particularly memorable. But what did lead me in the direction of art was an older cousin, Dominic Ferrari, who was a top commercial photographer, and he thought I was talented enough to become an illustrator. He encouraged me to attend Textile High in Manhattan which offered a concentration in art. Then I met a family friend, Ed Casarela, who had just graduated from Textile and was a student at Cooper Union. I followed Casarela to Cooper where I discovered that painting was my favorite medium and that art would be not so much a career as a way of life. Casarela was a good friend, an informal tutor, and my guiding influence. For a few years, our artistic development proceeded along parallel lines. We both became intensely interested in printmaking, and we both eventually exhibited at the Zabriskie Gallery.

*When did you make your first print?*

In 1946, during my final year at Cooper Union, I studied lithography and drypoint. But initially I was rather indifferent to the media and only moderately successful, and I did not take up printmaking again until 1952 when I returned from a Fulbright in Europe.

*Where did you go on your Fulbright and what did you do?*

My Fulbright was for painting, and I spent it in Italy. I looked at all the great paintings that I could find. I saw the frescos of Piero della Francesca, and I especially liked the *Resurrection* at San Sepolcro and the surprisingly small oil panel of *The Flagellation* at Urbino. They were profoundly affecting pictures. The *Resurrection* was so majestic and *The Flagellation* represented a kind of perfection of vision. But I was also interested to see how much bad art was made during the Italian Renaissance and how much cliched abstraction was being produced in Italy when I was there. When I returned to New York, it made me take a closer look at Jackson Pollock.

*It sounds as if your time in Italy reinforced your connection to American art, as much as it exposed you to your Italian roots. Did you come away with a sense of being Italian?*

I visited relatives in the South and met aunts and uncles and their children and my grandfather who was still alive at 84. It was an enjoyable, emotionally intense and fulfilling experience. But the whole Italian experi-

ence proved how unItalian I really was. I was an American 'straniero'. My psychological roots were decidedly American.

*You said that after your Fulbright, you had a new interest in Pollock. Can you elaborate?*

I did have a renewed take on Pollock. I recognized in his work a new, fresh view of what abstract painting could be. He had a directness usually associated with children' s art and Asian calligraphy. I was interested in his fluid, formal inventions, and I wanted that same intensity in my woodcuts that he reflected in his paintings. Pollock offered a new visual language, if not a whole new language of depiction. For him, painting was no longer a picture of something that was looked at and restructured onto a flat surface. It was the painting itself. The act of painting became a way of finding the self. It was about thought and attitude as "incipient action" (Kenneth Burke) leading to acts that could be called symbolic ... acts that would soon redefine abstract painting. Already committed to abstraction I was trying to find my own way into the mix ... and I'm still working at it.

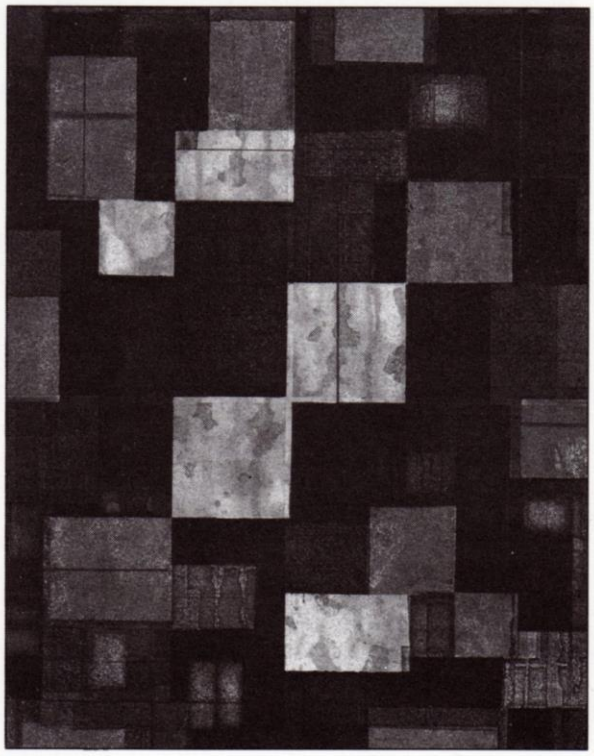

fig. 11
*Frontal, 2nd State*, 1993
etching

*At the time you returned from Europe in the early 1950s, printmaking occupied a secondary position; it was relegated to a craft status — despite the fact that important artists had worked in the media. I'm curious as to how you avoided all the predjudice against the media and were able to take it so seriously?*

When I returned from my Fulbright, I studied block printing at The Brooklyn Museum with Louis Schanker. He was a New York School painter who made vigorous black and white paintings and bold abstract prints. He was friendly and encouraging and a very laid-back, casual teacher. He'd carve out woodcuts and after he'd editioned them, he turned them into paintings. He would carve an eight-foot plank and print it by covering the block with rice paper that he would then rub with his bare feet. He was completely committed to woodcuts. He liked my approach to the medium and he recommended that I succeed him the following term. I did and I have taught ever since.

*What was it you liked about printmaking?*

I liked the resistance presented by the wood. With a pen or brush, the hand can be facile, but it's harder with wood. I also found the physicality of the wood appealing. Printmaking consists of fragmented methods and processes, and I countered its indirectness by never working from a primary sketch; instead, I'd paint directly on the wood's surface and carve it out. I followed Schanker's example. I was also strongly influenced by Pollock and de Kooning and I tried to emulate the confrontational energy I felt in their work. As a young printmaker, my goal was to bring spontaneity and directness to a medium that was often stilted and reproductive, because it was so often employed to repeat images that initially appeared as paintings or drawings.

*I also studied with Louis Schanker, and I remember that he would spend the entire class talking about de Kooning and action painting. He was completely committed to Abstract Expressionism, and he brought its aesthetic to printmaking and it sounds like you did too. Were your prints always abstract?*

I made one quasi-representational woodcut of a winged bird creature, and my first large woodcuts, like *Swinging Black* were almost figural images. They were inspired by Rilke's "Duino Eligies" and his terrible angel motif. As far as Abstract Expressionism goes, some of us had those inclinations. Robert

Conover was in Schanker's class and Clinton Hill came when I took it over. To a degree, we influenced each other. Hill's prints were loose and direct. He was looking at Motherwell then. Conover and I tended toward an easy geometry. I looked at Schanker more than they did, but I was more inspired by Gauguin's and Kandinsky's prints. In the late 1950s, my woodcuts grew larger and bore a close relationship to Abstract Expressionism.

*Did you regard yourself as an Abstract Expressionist?*

I was part of the second generation of New York artists but never identified with Abstract Expressionism to the extent that others did, like Michael Goldberg or Joan Mitchell who announced to me one day in Paris that she was an "action painter." We were all closely linked to de Kooning, Rothko, and Motherwell as well as to Pollock. Pollock was the force, in a way that other painters could not be. However hard they might try to make a break, they were still tied to European abstraction. When I was 19 and just starting to go to Cooper Union night school, I met Pollock. We were both working at the Creative Printmaker's Group, a spinoff of the WPA. Pollock was always polite, but we never became friendly because he worked at night and I left for another job shortly thereafter. The Creative Printmakers Group was an important silkscreen shop in the 1940s. It was run by the Velonis brothers who were developers of photo serigraphy.

During the WPA years, CPG employed artists to assist in the printing of fine reproductions of work by regional American artists. I worked there after it had become a commercial silkscreen plant. I was hired to match and mix colors for most projects. Some of my friends from Cooper Union, like Ed Casarella, also worked there.

*Your prints and paintings appear so intertwined. Each medium so clearly informs the other. Still, I'm curious if you have a preference?*

Because I was immediately successful with printmaking, it led me to explore it further. In 1956, I taught myself etchings and began to explore the media. My explorations became more intense in 1957, when I began teaching at Bennington College. At the time, my print production increased, but it did not lessen my primary interest, which was painting. But I did find printmaking to be a welcome relief from painting, which can be over-

ly intense and anxiety producing. Printmaking processes develop in stages. Sometimes innovations in the craft led me to formal ideas that could then be explored in more direct and possibly richer ways in painting.

*So in other words, your prints did inform your paintings?*

My paintings and prints shared similar formal concerns with centering and radiance, and with the visual energy that moves from the center to the edge and back. Some paintings had an overall free brushing. At that time, my work had an affinity to Philip Guston's soft geometry. I responded to his moody, troubled lyricism. My abiding interest was and still is in abstract painting. But, at times, my prints have greatly influenced my paintings. Etchings from the mid-1960s had an enormous impact on my paintings and their minimal orientation. During that period, both my paintings and prints became increasingly spare and meditative.

*In the last three decades, graphic techniques have grown so sophisticated that prints are able to emulate paintings and vice-versa. Do you think there is still a valid distinction to be made between the graphic and the painterly?*

They are separate and distinct pursuits. Paintings can be graphic, like paleolithic art or Picasso, or more recently Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein. But prints can also be painterly, as evidenced in the lithographs of Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg. But there are basic differences. Prints tend to be stamped out and unambiguous in their intention. They tend toward a visual clarity and graphic reduction. The syntax of print usually simplifies what is more complex in other media. To be printable, images must be reduced mechanically to the essentials of black and white and to tonalities that are achieved by systems of cross hatching. The printmaker must resort to black and white delineations. This is especially true in etching and woodcut, but much less so in lithography. Printmaking's history has followed a reproductive course. The print has reproduced drawings, designs, paintings and more recently photography (another kind of reproduction). So the origin of the printed image invariably lies in another medium. Of course, the contemporary printmaker altered the role of the print and gives it a creative justification of its own.

In contrast, I think painting thrives on

ambiguity and, at its most telling, on an uncertainty like the doubt which one finds in Cézanne. It seems to me that painting involves more of a search — and when that searching quality is evident in the work, when there is something problematic or only partially resolved, the paintings have more affect. But when a painting relies on a macquette that then has to be enlarged or copied, I think the pictures suffer though I've done my share of paintings using that method. Painting needs to be worked out more than thought out. That probably sounds retrograde in these postmodern times.

*But don't you think that printmaking, with its ability to combine, reproduce and recycle images is perhaps the quintessential postmodernist media?*

Printmaking does seem ideally suited to postmodernist art, and it is often combined with other media, but I think photography, video, and digital imaging are more suited to the complexity and multi-layering of images that is seen so much in current visual art.

*Do you think the fact that you were naturally inclined toward the linear made graphics more accessible to you?*

Probably. And yet, in the beginning, I resisted my natural propensity toward line and chose to work instead in the relatively coarse and blunt medium of woodcut. I did not want to repeat what I had already done in drawings and early paintings, which were rather linear. My very first woodcuts were planar and post Cubist, but they soon became more fluid, calligraphic and gestural. They obliquely alluded to German Expressionism and to the woodcuts of Kandinsky and the ukiyo-e artists. When I finally got around to working in intaglio, my work was closer to drawing, and by 1964, I began a sustained exploration of different kinds of linear syntax. My cross-hatched lines developed into screens and lattices and grids. These etchings affected my paintings which returned to a more geometric mode.

*Do you have a favorite graphic medium ?*

I like woodcut and etching equally. Although etching is closely tied to processes, I actually find it a medium in which it is easier to achieve successful results. Woodcut is more primitive; it has its origin in stamps and seals. It requires carving skills and is dramatically removed from drawing — which is closer to etching. My artistic sensi-

bility is well suited to both media, and I'd be hard put to decide which I've used to better effect. In recent years, I worked with Sue Hover amd John Micoff on several small editions of collagraphs which I made and they printed. These relate directly to my paintings, but they have a rich intaglio look that is unique to the carborundum surface.

*You've never shown much interest in lithography or screenprint. Is that because you don't like the look of the media or because they are more complicated and less direct than etching and woodcut?*

Lithography tends to reproduce pencil and crayon drawings, and screenprinting is synonymous with poster art and sign painting. They are the newest of the traditional graphic media, and they were both developed for mass printing purposes. I'm not drawn to the look of either, although I've occasionally worked in both. However, I do like to look at Picasso's lithographs and Alber's screenprints.

*Woodcuts and etchings are easier to do alone. All you need are tools — a plank of wood or sheet of metal and some acid. Has this made these media more attractive to you ?*

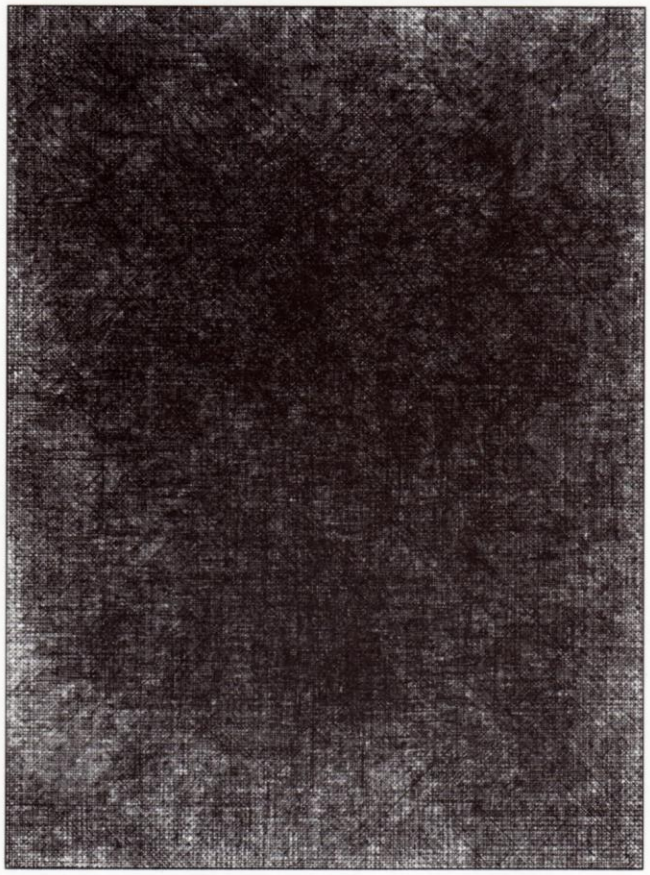

fig. 12
*Other Side Revised*, 1971
etching

In the 1950s, there was not much print publishing going on, nor were there many print studios available to artists. Most of the printmaking was done in the individual artist's studio. That was how it was when I began. I have always liked the relief from painting that woodcuts provided. Teaching printmaking offered me access to a press and to the communal activity that occurs in the print studio. At the Yale summer school in Norfolk, Connecticut, where I worked from 1956 to 1959, the faculty tended to spend their free time around the press. It was there and then at Bennington that I began to investigate etching techniques. But I produced more than 50 etchings before I felt confident enough to exhibit them. I had a reputation as a woodcut artist, and I wanted my etchings to be taken as seriously. By 1964, my etchings had attained their own kind of effectiveness.

*What artists have exerted an important influence on your work and what printmakers have you looked at the hardest?*

I've always felt an affinity to Canaletto's etchings. His use of line to create tonal areas in deep space has rarely been matched by other masters. One can feel the effort in great prints like Durer's, but Caneletto's line appears effortless. I'm most attracted to innovative etchers, like Rembrandt, Picasso, Morandi, Jacques Villon and, of course, Piranesi. As I think I already mentioned, I had a special interest in Gauguin's and Kandinsky's woodcuts and in the Blaue Reiter group. I liked Kirchner and Nolde and, as a young printmaker, Lyonel Feininger's cityscapes also had an appeal for me. I also liked the wood engravings that Winslow Homer made for *Harper's Weekly*, but I especially liked prints that weren't obviously reproductive or taken directly from a work originally conceived for another medium.

I 've often looked to artists who ostensibly have little to do with my own work. Everytime I seea Matisse, a Léger or a Monet, I learn something new. Chronologically, I am a product of the second great wave of abstract painting; I came out of the New York school painting of the 1940s and 1950s, but I feel a real affinity to the first European wave, particularly to Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian. I see a vital link between the systematic and serial painting that dominated abstraction in the 1960s and the move away from an aesthetic of relational painting which relied mainly on sensibility and taste. I admired the structural insistence of Agnes Martin, the 'dumb' clarity of Sol Le Witt's

permutations, and the logical restructuring of Frank Stella. However, my most telling influence has been Tony Smith. From Smith I learned to have a special concern for modular invention, but his real influence was as a friend and colleague.

*The image I associate with your work more than any other — is the mandala. I associate with a sense of order, a kind of sublime order — that I've always felt in your work.*

It does have to do with order and with finding or seeking a kind of formal closure. After all, the mandala is a wholeness sign — to the Navaho and Jain and Tibetan Buddhism, and even to Palladio and early Greek and Roman architects. It also has a close parallel in Hindu yantras. I came upon it in the 1940s through reading Lao Tse and Carl Jung who, before he called it an archetype (a word he borrowed from St. Augustine), referred to it as a primordial image. It was that phrase that hooked me and caused me to reach back to ancient sign making for inspiration. The woodcut image is my first conscious move in that direction. The mandalic forms that appear in paintings and prints look for a modern parallel. For me, the etching *Squaring* is one of my most successful interpretations of the mandala. I created that square with only curved lines; the central square emerges, appears to be a forward plane that is induced without straight lines, only arcs were etched into the plate's surface ... a representation of the alchemical metaphor for wholeness ... squaring the circle.

*I think of Bennington during the years you taught there in the late '50s and early 1960s as being not just a school, but a place which stood for a specific aesthetic and modernist view of painting. Did your time there affect your work?*

Paul Feely taught at Bennington when I was there. He had been a friend of Pollock's and they both had been students of Thomas Hart Benton's. When I met Paul, he was trying to break away from the influence of Pollock. I was also quite infected with New York painting. Tony Smith's arrival at Bennington changed a lot for both of us. My development was diverted by Smith's theorizing. He talked a lot about the monumental — about how art had to have scope and had to represent something that was vast. He talked of modular composing. Glimmerings of his own exploits with form were beginning to take precedence over his work in architec-

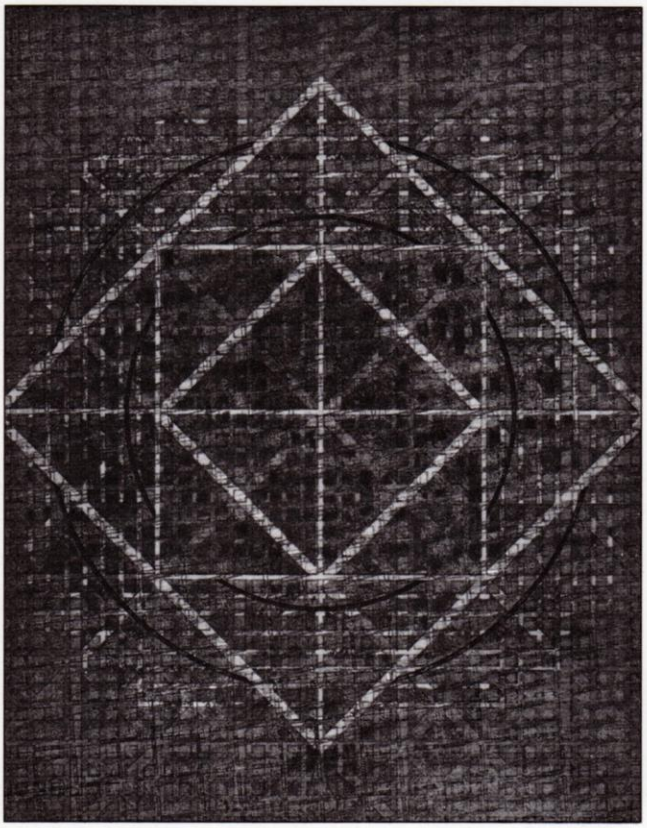

fig. 13
*Other Plan*, 1980
etching

ture. He had his students collaborate with him in building a monumental structure composed of hexagonal units. We were all inspired by Tony in our teaching and in our work.

In the early sixties, Ken Noland came to Bennington, my own work was becoming more central. At the time, Noland was painting horizontal bands. Then Lawrence Alloway came over from London followed by Anthony Caro and Peter Stroud who, like myself, was doing emblematic abstractions. and quite coincidentally my work changed further. He was very taken with what he called Pop Art. My own work, however, was becoming more central, frontal, and geometric — what would later be called Minimal. Clement Greenberg saw one of my paintings of a mandala and said, "Centering has been used up by Noland." I told him my reference and allusion was to 18th-century Tibet, not to target painting. But it was an exciting and vital time for me. Had I stayed in New York and not gone to Bennington, I think my work might have taken another course than it did.

*What was it like teaching at Bennington in the late 1950s?*

New York City in the 1950s was the best

place for a young painter, or it certainly was for me, and it was equalled in significance by my ten years at Bennington. The influences and effects on my development were interchangeable. Bennnington was an exciting center of intellectual and creative energy — which in many ways functioned as an annex of the New York art world. David Smith and Clement Greenberg were frequent visitors. I spent a lot of time with Shirley Jackson and Stanley Edgar Hyman and with Howard Nemerov, Paul Feeley and then later with Richard Elman, and, as I've mentioned, Tony Smith and Kenneth Noland. There were a lot of casual symposia and what, in retrospect, were ground breaking exhibitions. Barnett Newman had his first retrospective exhibition at Bennington as did Jackson Pollock. But some of the most memorable moments were at the poker table. There was a tremendous intensity to the place – social as well as academic. I learned that education was as much about awakening the student's creative interests and leanings as it was about imparting information and instruction.

*I'm also curious how you escaped the overwhelming influence of Greenberg. I think of Bennington as Greenbergian. He had an Old Testament way of proclaming the truth in art and demanding loyalty from his followers. However, I think of you as always having been very independent, of following your own drummer. Was it hard not to follow Greenberg's modernist dictates?*

That's an intriguing question that can't be completely answered here. I met Greenberg in New York in 1957 ... we were in a drawing show ... I think his was a figure drawing .. we met, talked, became friendly. I told him I used to look forward to his "Art Chronicle" essays for *Partisan Review* in the late forties. So, to an extent, I had already been under his influence. But I'm not a joiner and even less a follower. It wasn't Clem so much as the people around him that gave Bennington the Clemsville tag. We had many talks there and in New York. He thought enough of me to spend an afternoon in my studio in 1967 long after he was in the habit of visiting studios. He thought I was "diffident" about my work and certainly lacked the requisite desire to be "number one" ... he dismissed my interest in the systemic ... and by association Stella's to him unwarranted critical attention ... he put down the dreaded "Cubist grid" that had again beocme the structural grounding of my work. But you don't have to be Greenbergian to acknowledge his importance to late

modernism. No one championed abstract painting as convincingly ... no one spoke with as much conviction. He is yet to be superseded as the major art critic of our time.

*Some years ago, I taught a graphics studio class at Hunter, and I remember being immensely impressed with the energy of the students. It was an evening class and many of the students had put in a full day's work before they arrived there. They were incredibly vital and demanding students. Wasn't it a contrast teaching at Bennington and at Hunter?*

In the expected ways, they are very different places. The hothouse closeness and familiarity of Bennington would not be possible in the subway campus atmosphere of Hunter, which serves the needs of students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Bennington students made great demands on one's time and attention. Hunter students tended to earlier maturity, if not sophistication. But the educational approach is quite similar in both schools. At both Hunter and Bennington, the aim was to incorporate fine art into a liberal arts curriculuum.

*Have you thought much about the future of the printmaking media?*

The print media will continue to implode upon one another and to influence other visual art forms in interesting and dynamic ways. Since photography has not seemed to diminish the creative uses of painting and drawing and since McLuhan's electronic age has not done away with Gutenberg's moveable type legacy — more books are printed now than ever before — I don't see the effects of digital imaging totally changing how artists make prints, at least not in the foreseeable future. But I'm not familiar with the newer print technologies to be comfortable making predictions about their probable effects on how artists disseminate and reproduce images. I like the old ways, the archaic methods of making prints — the less mechanical, all the better for my purposes.