

‘Draw a Square’:
Translating and
Interpreting the Writings
and Artworks of Sophie
Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943)

Susanne Nørregård Nielsen



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5, Pencil, colour pencil,
watercolour and gouache on paper.
Pencil to Paper, Exhibition, Glasgow School of Art, 2018

Image credit: Alan McAteer

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Project Details

Glasgow School of Art
Research Development
Funding in 2017
(£1,478) for covering
expenses for
production and framing
for the exhibition *Pencil
to Paper*, part of
Glasgow International
2018.

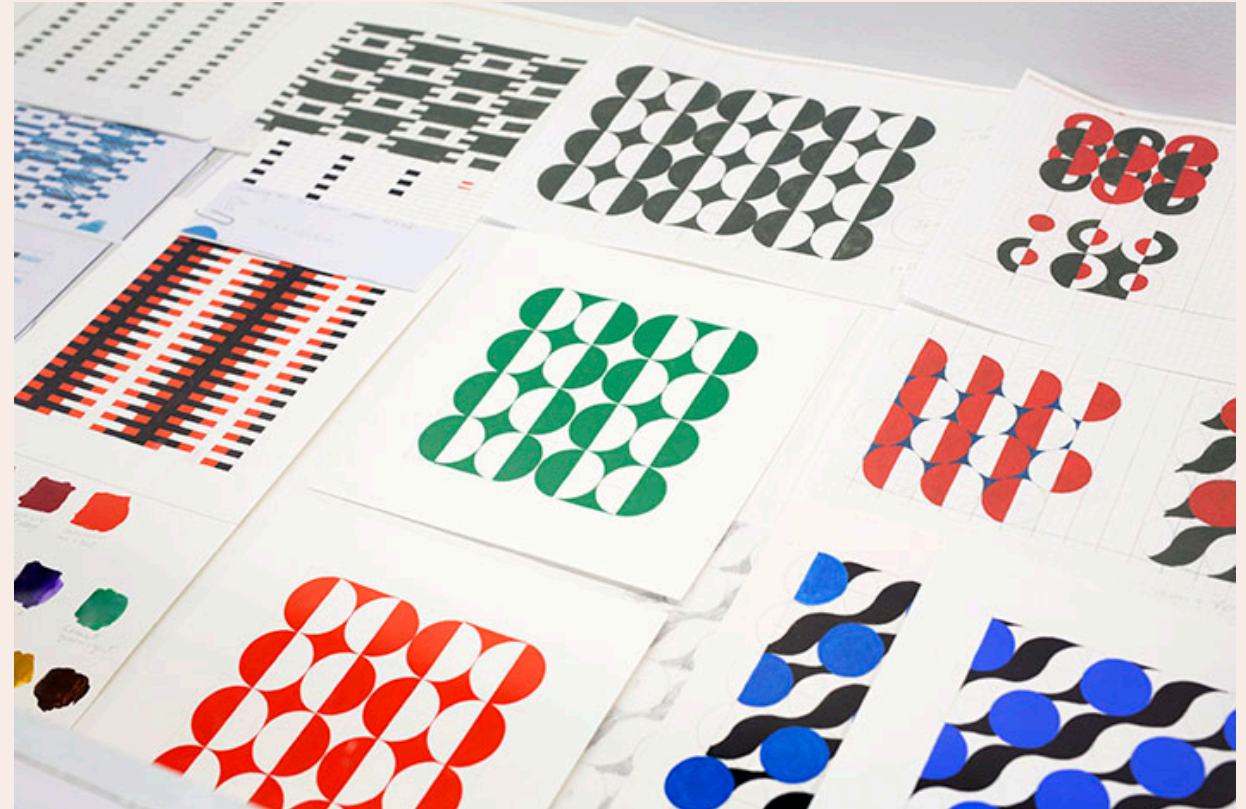
Stiftung Hans Arp und
Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V.
Arp Fellowship 2018
€1,200 towards
undertaking research at the
archive at the Stiftung Hans
Arp und Sophie Taeuber-
Arp e.V., Berlin.

Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie
Taeuber-Arp e.V. Publication
Grant Supported a book
publication, working title *Draw a
Square*, centred around the text
'Remarks on Instruction in
Ornamental Design', from 1922.
with a publication grant of
(€800) in 2019.
The fee went towards
commissioning the essay *Sophie
Taeuber-Arp: teacher, role
model, artist by the German Art
historian Walburga Krupp*.

Research Questions

How might a new English language translation of Sophie Tauber-Arp's writing on ornament and pattern in design, illuminate current art historical understandings of her oeuvre?

Can a practice-based research enquiry reanimate historical documents to reveal new knowledge of a modernist artist's practice?



Preparatory work for drawing no. 1, 2,3 and 4
Pencil, colour pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Research Output

This output comprises a new English language translation of Sophie Tauber Arp's text 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design,' originally published in 1922, which I commissioned and collaborated on, and a series of 8 pencil and gouache drawings (all 45 x 45 cm)) that I made by closely following the design instructions included in this text. The output is underpinned by 82 preliminary drawings (pencil, colour pencil, watercolour and gouache, sizes variable). I commissioned Sarah McGavran - an expert translator of European Modernist texts - to write this new, more faithful, translation of Tauber-Arp's essay. The essay is a series of carefully composed design instructions. I collaborated on the translation to ensure it captured the nuances of the original text so that I might then test these out through a contemporary drawing practice.



Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943)
'Im Büro der 'Aubette', 1926/27
Stiftung-Arp e.V.



Sophie Taeuber-Arp, "Bemerkungen über den Unterricht im ornamentalen Entwerfen" in: Korrespondenzblatt des Schweiz. Vereins der Gewerbe- und Hauswirtschaftslehrerinnen 14, no. 11/12 (December 31, 1922)

Context

The long-term aim of this research project is to investigate and interpret Taeuber-Arp's (1889-1943) early designs, artworks and writings for contemporary audiences. Taeuber-Arp's textile art, dating from the early twentieth century, has been under-researched partly due to its sidelining by Hans Arp, her husband, and Hugo Weber, fellow artist and historian, who included only thirteen items of applied art in her *Catalogue Raisonné* (1948); up until quite recently, it was more or less excluded from exhibitions of her work. Consequently, much of Taeuber-Arp's legacy has been omitted from the historical record and her contribution to this period of avant-garde alliances between the fine and applied arts has still to be fully acknowledged.

Therefore, the overall aim of the project is to activate a historical text by carrying out the instructions of Taeuber-Arp to uncover new insights into debates over decoration and ornament that preoccupied avant-garde artists, architects and designers of the early twentieth century; to situate Taeuber-Arp's contribution to these ideas and debates as relevant for 21st century audiences.



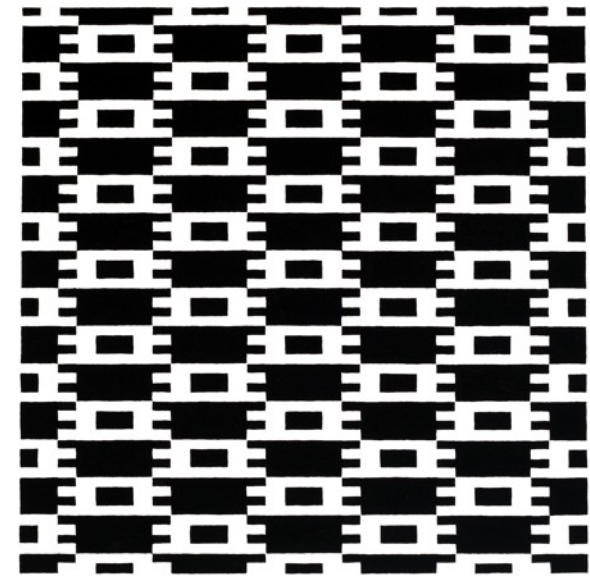
Monograph:
Georg Schmidt (ed.), *Sophie Taeuber Arp* (Basel: Holbin 1948)

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Context

This project resonates with other recent work in this field, such as that of design historian, Elie G. Haddad, who has rediscovered and reinterpreted the original 'Manuscript on Ornament' by Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), adding new perspectives to our understanding of Modernist principles and debates surrounding ornament during the period.

For the exhibition, *Pencil to Paper*, and the submission of a selection of these works to the 'Taking Dada Seriously' project publication – part of a larger interdisciplinary online project *Decorating Dissidence* - the objectives of all aspects are to demonstrate how, as an artist, I might reassess original writings and artworks from the early part of the twentieth century, and their significance for anti-ornament debates during the period. In its practical application, Taeuber-Arp's essay also provides instruction for the production of a series of patterns and repetitive designs suitable for textiles; as an intellectual premise, the text offers an insight into the ways in which craft worked alongside avant-garde theory to resist historicism, while strongly foregrounding work traditionally produced by women. These objectives are realised in the exhibition displays for *Pencil to Paper* and in 'Taking Dada Seriously', an online publication from *Decorating Dissidence a Journal for Craft Culture*.



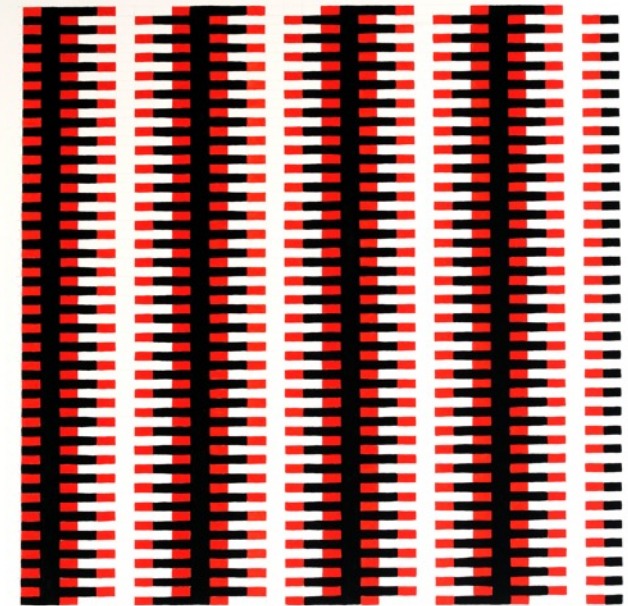
*'Draw a square and try to divide it in its most natural and simplest way,
so that you can use those shapes or division lines as decoration'*
Drawing No 1, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop

Context

Previous interpretations of Taeuber-Arp's writing have focused solely on the didactic function of her teaching and instruction. For this output, the research has been led by my own practice, in following Taeuber-Arp's directions to designers, and in meeting the objective of combining translations in language and image.

Reassessing the work of Taeuber-Arp and the place of textiles within a Modernist canon of art and design practice describes the broad context of my research. Over a number of years, I have explored ideas surrounding Modernism, Abstraction, applied arts and theory; and how these might be understood today, particularly in relation to feminist contexts.



'A further exercise is trying to divide it more complex and paint the different fields with two or three clear colours'
Drawing No 2, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop

Context

My research and practice might be considered in a similar vein to other artists and writers who seek to reclaim historical works and reinsert these into the canon, such as Scottish artist Cath Keay's research on Bruno Taut's Glass Chain correspondence on architecture and society from the early years of the Weimar Republic. She uses the structure of Taut's correspondence to form a new book *'Extending the Glass Chain One Hundred Years On'* with a range of contemporary artists and thinkers to reflect both on his practice and theirs. Another pertinent example is Martin Boyce's reinterpretation of concrete trees after the work of Jan and Joëll Martel's Cubist Concrete Trees at the *exposition des arts decoratifs*, Paris 1925, for the Clore Commission, Tate Gallery, 2018.



'Try to do the same with a circle'
Drawing No 3, gouache on paper, 45 x 45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop

Context

Simon Starling's reworking of WB Yeats' play, *At The Hawk's Well*, combining modernist literature and art, in *At Twilight*, The Common Guild, 2016, provides another example of a practice-based researcher revisiting and reinterpreting Modernist works.

The German artist Rosemarie Trockel, provides another comparison to my own approach. Her practice is making 'knitting pictures,' playfully reminiscent of the work of Barnett Newman's iconic abstract paintings. Her enquiry questions, not only the simplistic dichotomies between fine art and craft but also how western high art has marginalised the domestic and the feminine.



Simon Starling in collaboration with Graham Eatough, *At Twilight: A play for two actors, three musicians, one dancer, eight masks (and a donkey costume)*, 2016, performance, Holmwood House, Glasgow

Image credit: Alan Dimmick

Context

Writers such as Briony Fer, T'ai Smith and Medea Hoch and Walburga Krupp have all worked to reassess the Modernist canon, addressing the impact on 'medium specificity' relating to female practitioners and assumptions on the role and value of feminine work.

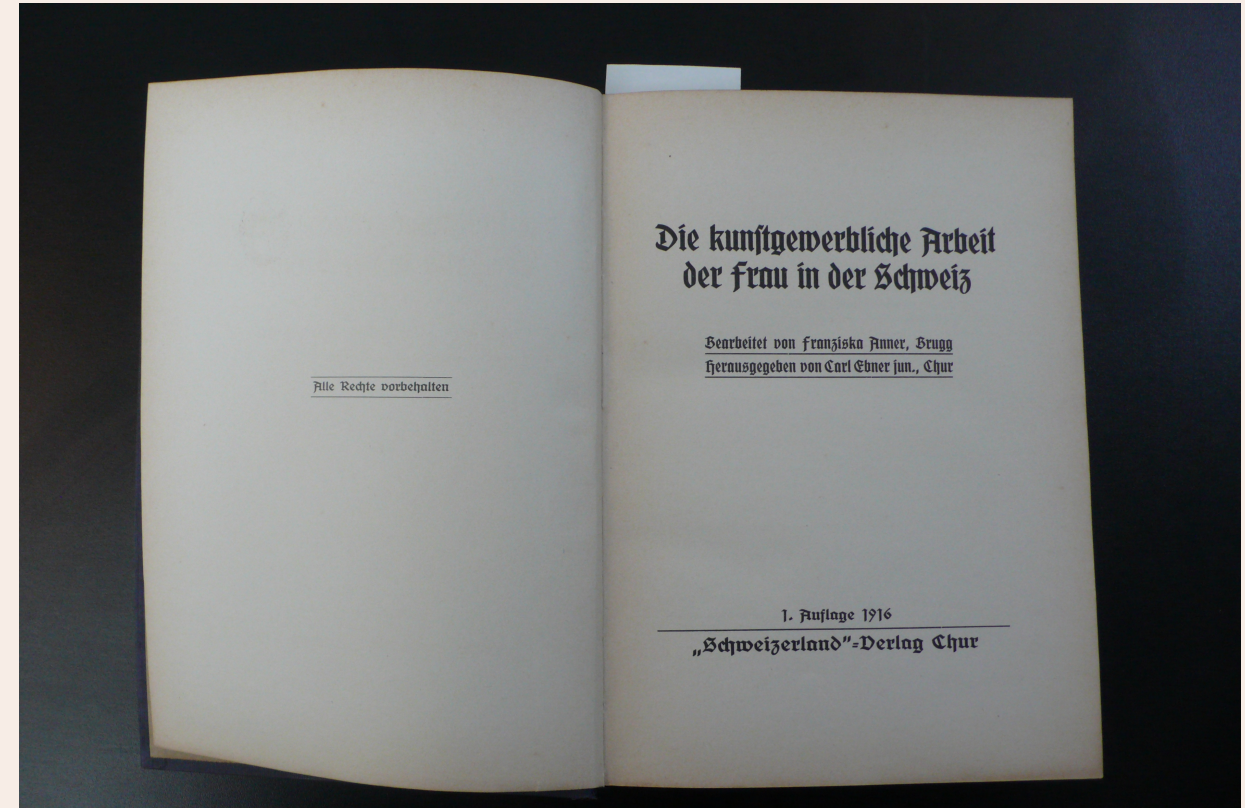
Books and essays :

Briony Fer: *'On Abstract Art'*, 1997 and an essay *'Black Mountain College Exercises'* in Anni Albers Tate Modern 2018.

T'ai Smith: *'Bauhaus Weaving Theory, From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design.'*

Medea Hoch: essay *'Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Interdisciplinary Work within Art History's System of Categorization'* in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp Today is Tomorrow*.

Walburga Krupp essay *'Floral-Linear: Figuration and Abstraction in the work of Sophie Taeuber Arp'* in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp Today is Tomorrow*.



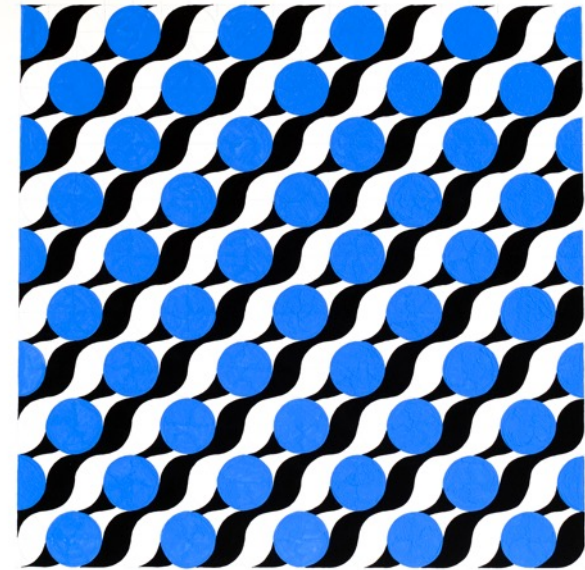
‘Die Kunstgewerbliche arbeit der Frau in der Schweiss’, 1916

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Context

More recently, my research has involved an increasing specialisation in the interrogation of practice of early twentieth-century artists and designers; those who worked in dialogue with avant-garde theories that combined the fine and applied arts. This includes, predominantly, textile art, but also reinterpretation and translation of works that may have been considered as periphery to an idealised Modernist principle. For example, in placing Taeuber-Arp's essay, 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design,' (1922), in relation to more widely-known texts, such as Adolf Loos' 'Ornament and Crime' (1908).

Just as Loos's work has been revisited by scholars recently, recovering aspects of his writing that correspond with twenty-first century issues of sustainability and economy in design practice, (Masheck, 2013 and Sarnitz, 2013), (arguably, sidestepping Loos's more unpleasant framing of his ideas in imperial and colonial perspectives), women's conceptual viewpoint, such as that of Taeuber-Arp, must also be taken into account.



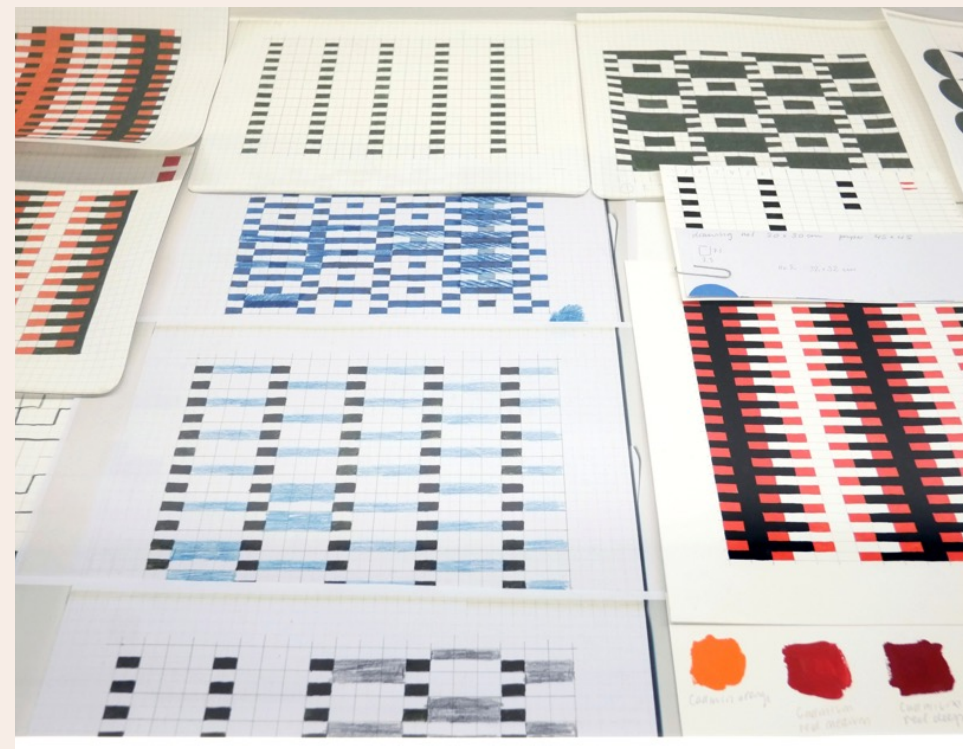
'A further exercise is trying to divide it more complex and paint the different fields with two or three clear colours. Try to do the same with a circle'

Drawing No 4, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop

Methodology

Theoretically, the majority of my research sits within feminist strategies of reclaiming and rediscovering the works of marginalised women artists and designers. Therefore, the methods that underpin my practice involve archival research; locating unknown or less-well-known artworks, designs and writings of the early twentieth century, and remaking and reimagining works that have been forgotten, or misinterpreted. This body of work is centered on my continuing practice-based research which sets out to illuminate artworks central to the early 20th century Modernist canon, and to provoke new thinking on the impact of artists' practice using feminine gendered materiality, an exploration of art, design and craft productions that foregrounds women's interaction and involvement with materials. Feminism recognises an 'array of materialities' (Butler, 1993) and for this investigation, the construction of the feminine, and ideas of women's labour, have contributed to the legacy and understanding of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's artworks. For example, reapplying Sophie Taeuber-Arp's instructions to designers, reanimating her original ideas that incorporated craft-skills commonly associated with amateurs or women (cross-stitch method) within ambitious abstract works of the early Modernist period, is an important feature of this work. Other characteristic methods involve drawing, painting and printmaking more generally, particularly as these relate to abstract designs and other complex materialities of textiles production.



'Draw a square and try to divide it in its most natural and simplest way, so that you can use those shapes or division lines as decoration. A further exercise is trying to divide it more complex and paint the different fields with two or three clear colours'

'Preparatory work for drawing no. 1 and 2

Pencil, colour pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

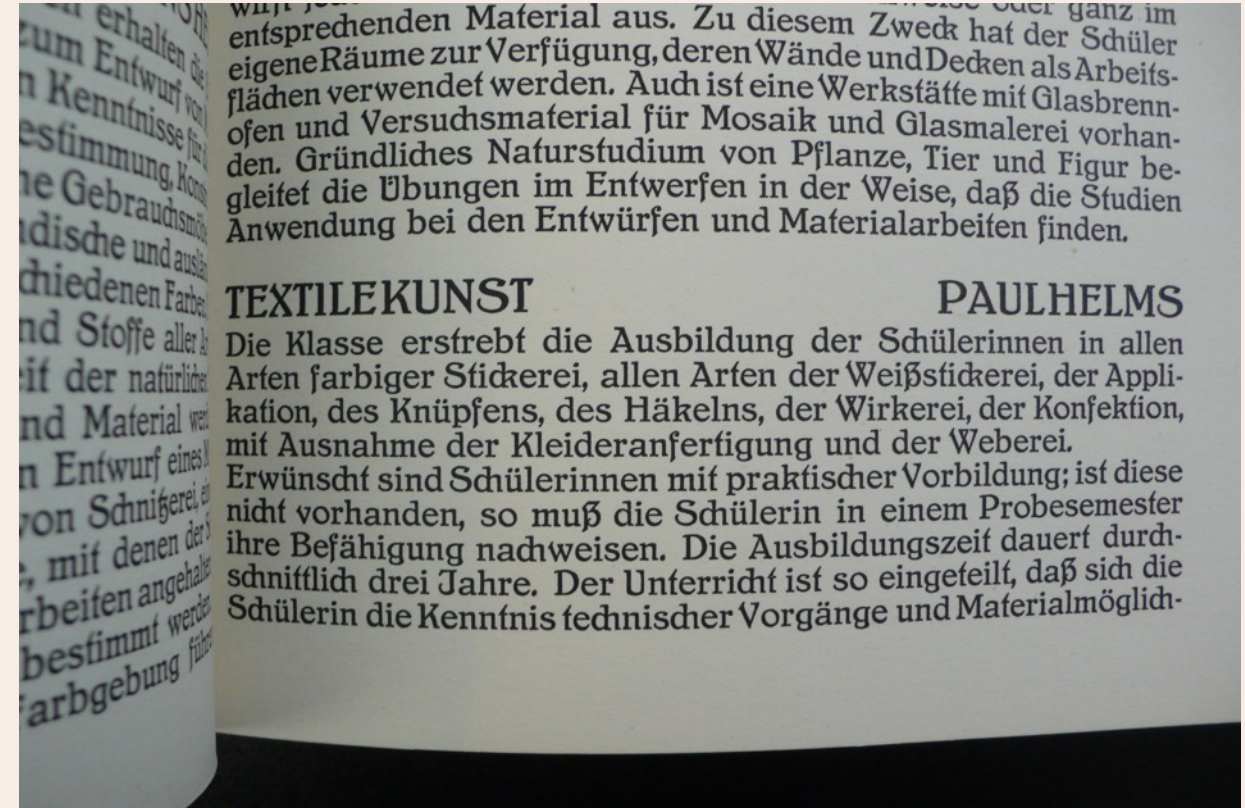
Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Methods

During my Arp-Fellowship residency in May 2018, funded to the amount of €1,200, I explored the archives at the Stiftung-Arp in Berlin and uncovered original material on Sophie Taeuber-Arp's education and early career as an artisan.

I discovered a translation of 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design' in English in a catalogue published by the Museo Picasso 'Avant – Garde Pathways' and realised that there was a need for a new translation. With my deep knowledge of what one gets from thinking through making, by carrying out the instructions, I realised that a new translation was needed to pay more attention to meanings revealed through translation, style and critical evaluation, providing a new and timely translation of her essay.

In dialogue with the Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber–Arp Stiftung, I commissioned and collaborated with the art historian and translator Dr Sarah McGavran to produce a new translation that reflects a more nuanced interpretation of Taeuber-Arp's essay from 1922.



‘Die staatliche Kunstgewerbeschule zu Hamburg, Oktober 1913’

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Methods

The first English translation of Tauber-Arp's essay appeared in the exhibition catalogue: 'Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Avant- Garde Pathways' 2009, Museo Picasso Málaga. Having discovered this essay, whilst undertaking research on modernist women artists, I located the original German-language version and proceeded to compare the two; it became clear that much of the original meaning had been lost or not quite accurately represented in the English-language version. I conducted close analysis of Taeuber-Arp's original text in German and highlighted specific terminology that relates to form/shape and colour theory that needed to be more accurately represented and better understood in English. In dialogue McGavran and I revised the text. McGavran's expertise as a translator helped to refine the English translation.



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5, Pencil, colour pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper.

Pencil to Paper, Exhibition, Glasgow School of Art, 2018

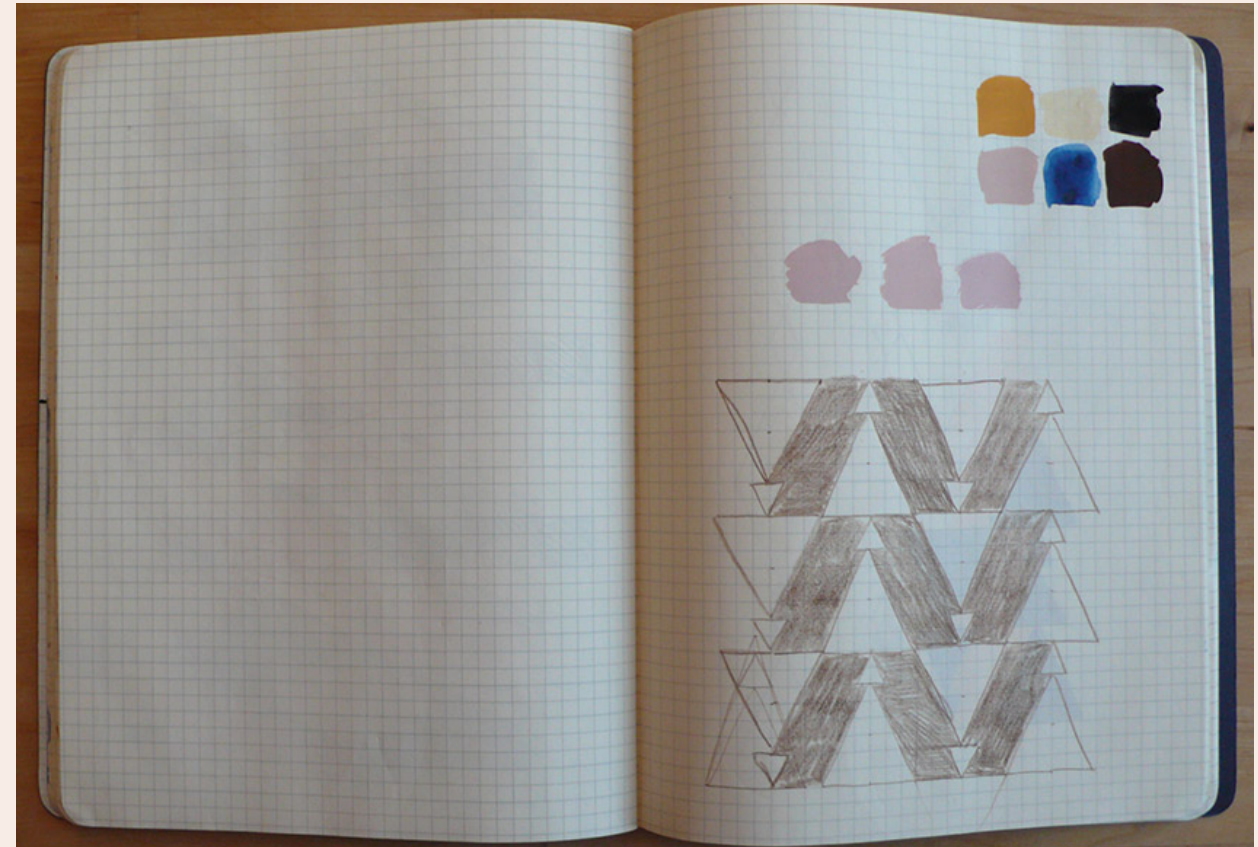
Methods

For each pattern I followed this process, directly from Taeuber-Arp's instructions:

Based on the initial pencil drawing in a sketchbook I would make a new pencil drawing on a bigger sheet of square paper and photocopy the drawing to repeat the pattern in order to scale up. Through this process I was able to decide on the size of the pattern. The full scaled photocopy enabled me to draw up a unique grid structure on to a sheet of paper. Using the grid, I could draw the pattern, finally adding colour.

Working through the instructions it become clear that there are three layers of structures. The grid is the first structure, then structure of the pattern, and thirdly colour structure.

The eight instructions are laid out in four pairs. One instruction flows into the next and refers back to the first. This movement between each pair of instructions significantly increased my understanding of the potential of the next pattern. At the same time, I developed a fundamental understanding of the pattern I had just made.



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5, colour pencil, gouache on paper.

'Put a very small shape right next to the same very big shape and repeat this several times next to each other.'

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

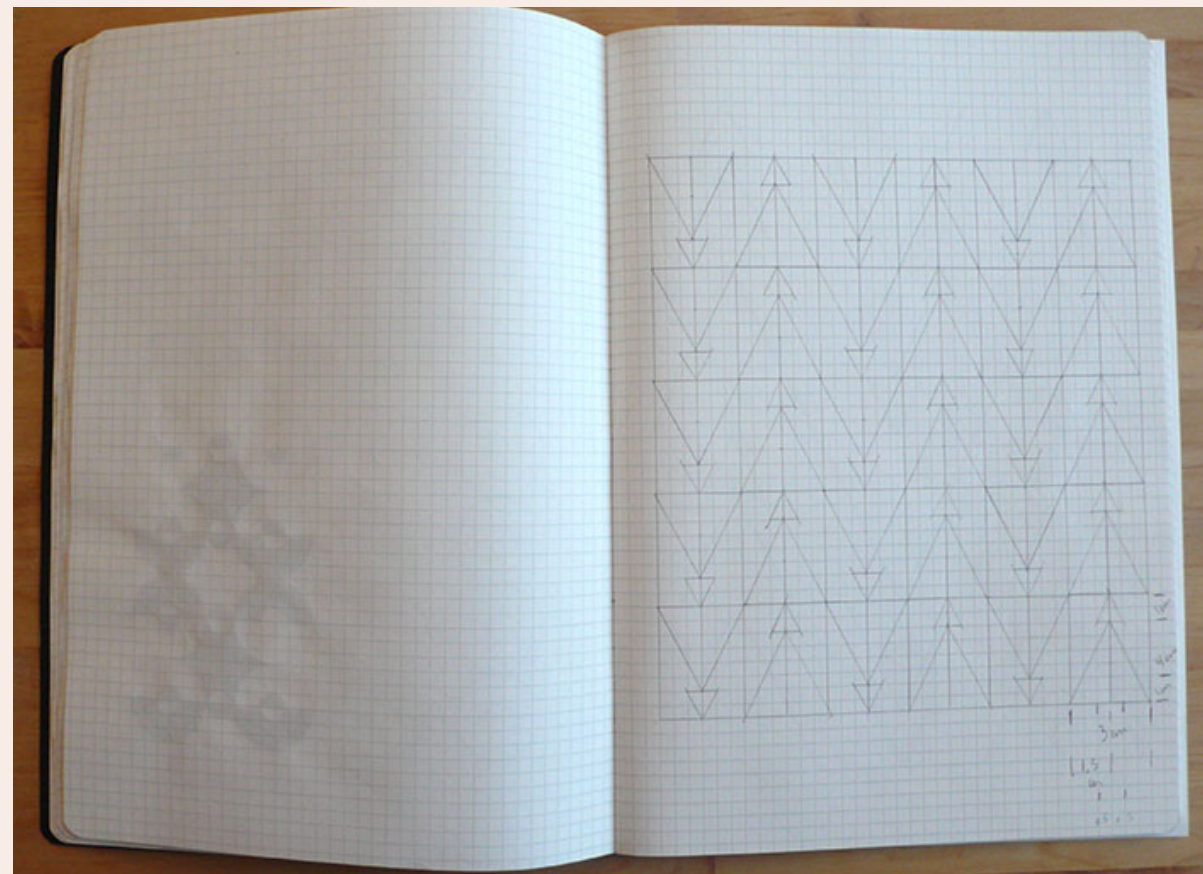
Methods

An example of two instructions for Drawing no.5 and no.6

'Put a very small shape right next to the same very big shape and repeat this several times next to each other.'

By putting a small shape right next to the same very big form you are making a 'motif', used to create a repeat pattern.

Taeuber-Arp invites you to repeat this several times but leaves it open for you to decide which direction to repeat. You are essentially making a linear symmetry, which leaves options for creating a repeat pattern. Intuitively one starts to try out possibilities. It is also somewhat left open for you to embrace what are seen as the four basic operations for making pattern: Reflection, Rotation, Translation and Glide Reflection.



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5, Pencil on paper.

'Put a very small shape right next to the same very big shape and repeat this several times next to each other.'

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

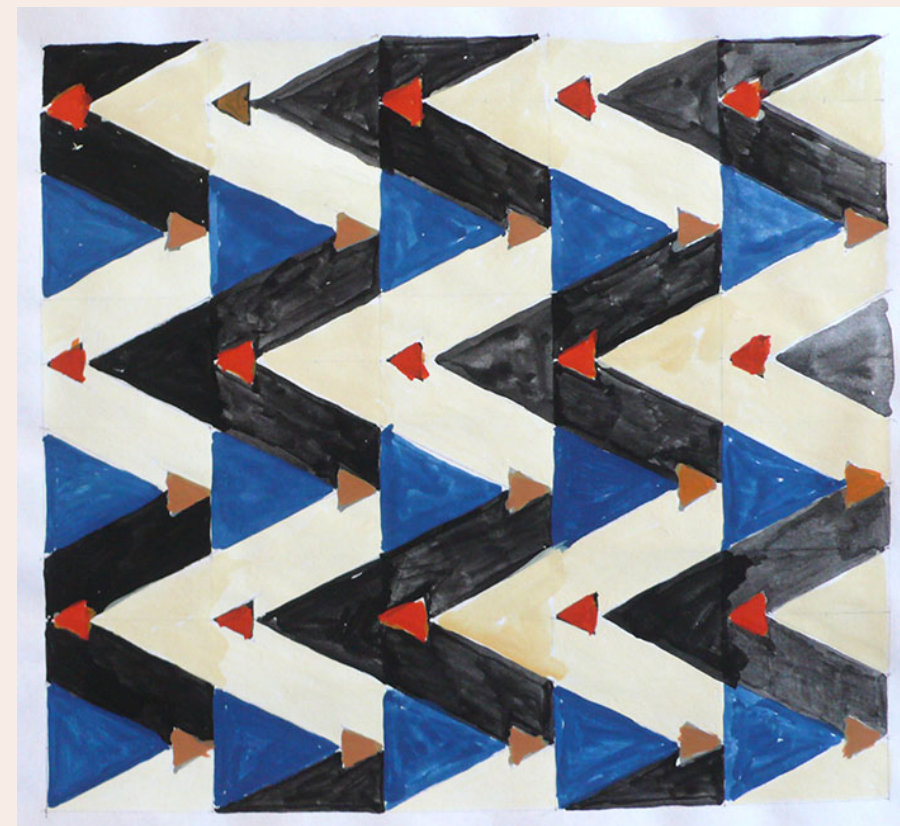
Methods

Drawing no.6

'Try to achieve a good rhythm from this, for example by putting three small shapes next to a big one or three forms of decreasing size several times after each other. Make sure when using simple shapes that the negative one is always as good as the positive. We call a negative space the room between two shapes creating the ornaments.'

By pointing out that shapes and their negative spaces are equally important, you are made aware of the distance between the shapes when making a repeat pattern. There are many variations of a pattern you can make by just experimenting with spacing.

If the practitioner works through all eight instructions they have touched on all the fundamental key elements of designing a pattern. Carrying out the eight instructions for patterns gave me an understanding of the complexity of the three interactive layers of structure of the grid, the pattern and colour structure.



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5, Pencil, gouache on paper, 18.5 x 20cm, 2018

This is an example of how radical one can change the appearance of a pattern using the same colour on a 'positive shape' like the triangle and a 'negative space' the space between the triangles.

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Contribution to the Field

As a result of my research into this subject, commissioning a new English language translation of Taeuber-Arp's essay, and following her detailed instructions, these important new understandings of the significance of her work were uncovered:

- The new translation of 'Remarks on Instructions in Ornamental Design' into English helped to clarify the use of form/shape and of colour theory. This is important for understanding the text. Another significant definition, for example, is use the of word 'ornament' which was historically situated as an art historical signifier and therefore needed to be replaced by the word 'design' in places, to get it to flow better in English and in general to make a more useful translation.
- These new translations and re-enactments of Taeuber-Arp's instructions make her work more accessible and available for English-speaking audiences.
- Working through the instructions and carrying out this lengthy period of testing, it became clear that there are three layers of interactive structures embedded in the instructions. These are: the grid structure, structure of the pattern, and thirdly colour structure.
- This is key for understanding the importance of Tauber-Arp's background in textile design and production, to her development of ground-breaking work of early twentieth-century abstraction.



*'Put a very small shape right next to the same very big shape and repeat
this several times next to each other'*

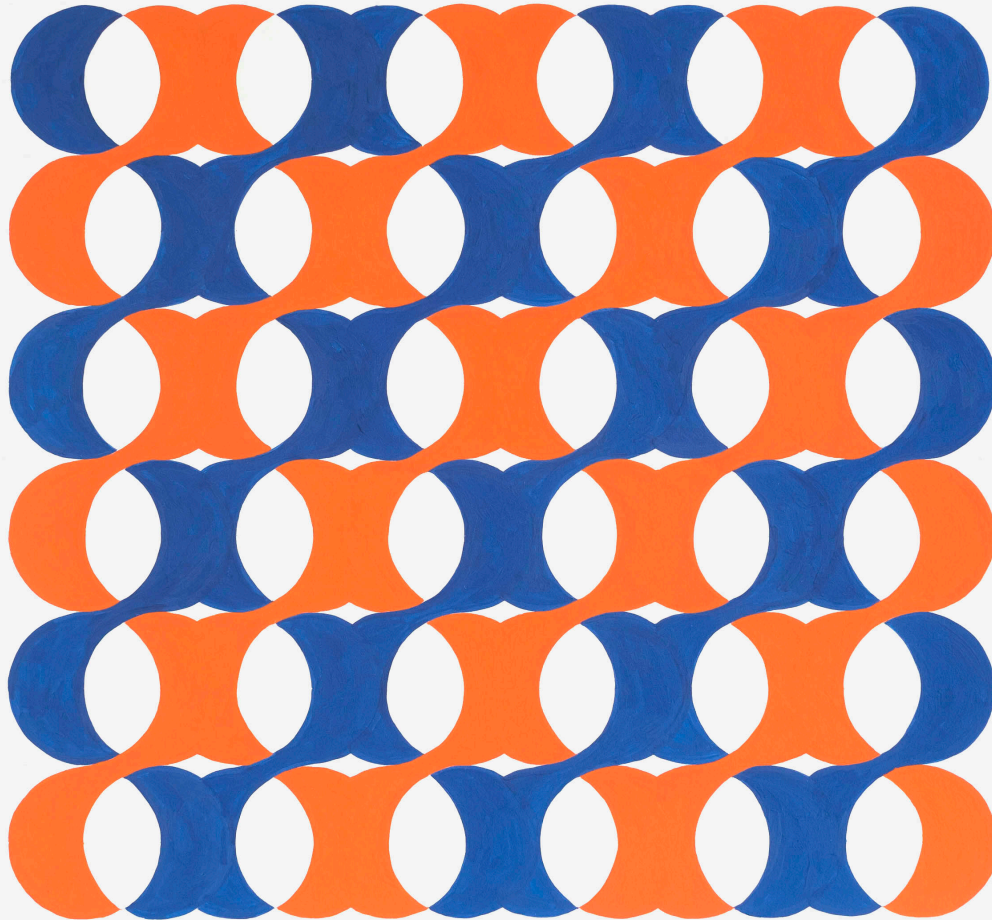
Drawing No 5, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018



‘Try to achieve a good rhythm from this, for example by putting three small forms next to a big one or three forms of decreasing size several times after each other.’

Drawing No 6, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

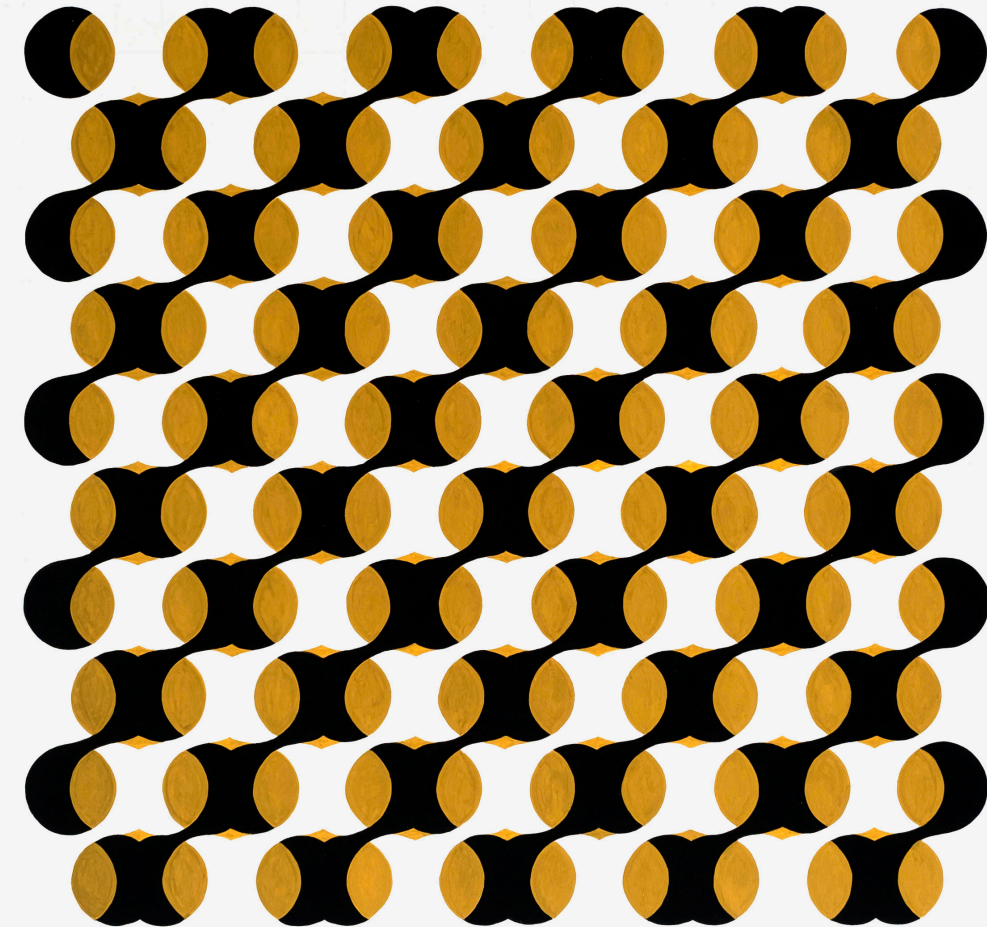
Image credit: Gair Dunlop



‘You could also start with the line. Try to see what expression you could achieve with different wavy lines or jagged lines.’

Drawing No 7, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop



‘Try to interweave those lines in complicated ways.’

Drawing No 8, gouache on paper, 45 x45 cm, 2018

Image credit: Gair Dunlop

Contribution to the Field

There are strong pedagogical connections between Sophie Taeuber-Arp's approach to design and those of Rudolf von Laban; for example, in dance and performance, using the Five Crystals or 'solids'. This is an area of this research I will continue to explore.

My research has attracted significant interest from scholars, artists and designers working within the field of Modernist art. My contribution to this field bridges the fine art/design divide, paying close attention to methodologies from scholarly research combined with creative practice. Exploring the Instructions by carrying them out in 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design,' is a new methodology to researching Taeuber-Arp's work that has not been previously deployed.

My research for *Pencil to Paper*, generated new knowledge and interest, particularly around the writings of Taeuber-Arp and how these might be reappraised in comparison with other artistic writing of the period. Taeuber-Arp's concept of avant-garde design had been, hitherto, relatively unknown. My research brought to light this critical text from a leading exponent of Modernism in the early years of the twentieth century. The exhibition, *Pencil to Paper*, presented Taeuber-Arp's ideas in material form, creating artworks directly from the instructions left to us by this pioneering artist and designer. In this sense, my contribution to the field is a physical remaking and reimagining of the works of Taeuber-Arp, as she intended these in 1922.



Lisa Ullmann moving in a Icosahedron structure, the fifth of the solids.
Laban Library and Archive, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and
Dance

Image credit: June Petit

Dissemination

Pencil to Paper formed part of Glasgow International 2018, the largest festival of contemporary visual arts in Scotland, with over 4,000 visitors to the exhibition over a period of two months. In order to facilitate conversations and dialogue around my research for this project, I led a number of guided tours of the exhibition, specifically for curators interested in the interconnections between the fine arts, craft and design, and for a more general audience, I was interviewed by critic, Laura Davidson, for an accompanying review of my show in the online publication: *instantloveland*.

<https://instantloveland.com/wp/2018/06/22/laura-davidson-writes-on-susanne-norregard-nielsen/>

The Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V. One of the Stiftung's core activities is to support International research communities. As part of this the organisation publishes a summary of all Fellows' reports on its website:

<https://stiftungarp.de/en/fellows-2018/>

https://stiftungarp.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Nielsen_Fellowship_Report.pdf



Preparatory work for drawing no. 5,6,7 and 8
'Pencil to Paper', Exhibition at Glasgow School of Art, part of Glasgow International 2018

Dissemination

Take Dada Seriously! – is a Decorating Dissidence project. Take Dada Seriously! set out to challenge art history and open up new perspectives on the Dada movement and how we might reclaim avant-garde methods we can use today politically.

<https://www.takedadaseriously.com/dada-resources/susanne-nielson-pencil-to-paper/>

Decorating Dissidence a Journal for Craft Culture is co-founded by Dr Lottie Whalen, Jade French and curator & writer Suzanna Petot. Their core aim is to critically engage with feminist art and craft history from the Modernist period to the contemporary.

<https://decoratingdissidence.com/>



‘Sophie Taeuber dancing the ‘Abstract dance’ to sound poems by Hugo Ball, Galerie Dada Zurich 1917’
Courtesy of Stiftung-Arp e.V.

Evidence

I am the first practice-based researcher to be awarded a prestigious Stiftung-Arp Fellowship, granted in 2018, with a stipend of €1200.

A look ahead to Glasgow International with its artists and curators, Adam Benmakhlouf, *The Skinny*, 30.03.18: <http://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/interviews/glasgow-international-2018>

Glasgow International 2018: recommended shows and works from across the festival, Laura Davidson, ed. Chris Sharratt, A-N, 24.04.18: <https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/glasgow-international-2018-recommended-shows-works-across-festival/>

8 Must-See Exhibits at Glasgow International, Louise Long, *Vogue Online*, 24.04.18: <http://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/vogue-guide-glasgow-international-contemporary-art-fair-2018>

Glasgow International Festival 2018: The largest festival for contemporary visual art in Scotland, the eighth Glasgow International, under the directorship of Richard Parry, has a plethora of exciting work. Below is a roundup of what's on offer, David Gibson, *Studio International*, 1.05.2018:

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/glasgow-international-festival-2018-review>

Essay by Laura Davidson on Instantloveland
blog: <https://instantloveland.com/wp/2018/06/22/laura-davidson-writes-on-susanne-norregard-nielsen/>



Viewing artifact Stiftung-Arp e.V., Berlin 2018
Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Untitled, woven carpet, date unknown (after a collage by Hans Arp from 1916)

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V. and Dr. Jana Teuscher for all the support during the Fellowship periods and continuing support for the upcoming publication centred around the essay: 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design', from 1922.

Many thanks to Jenny Brownrigg, Exhibitions Director at Glasgow School of Art, for supporting the exhibition *Pencil to Paper* and making it a joy to make.

Many thanks to the art historian Walburga Krupp for enjoyable correspondences, sharing insightful knowledge on Taeuber-Arp and enthusiasm for the *Pencil to Paper* work.

Many thanks to the translator and art historian Dr Sarah McGavren for her interest, attention and extremely careful production of a new translation of Taeuber-Arp's essay.

Many thanks to Helen McCormack, Reader in Art and Design History at Glasgow School of Art for mentoring support and focused dialogue on design.



Curator Dr Jana Teuscher and Cole Collins
Stiftung-Arp e.V., Berlin 2018

Image credit: Susanne Nørregård Nielsen