

A practical guide to freeing the artist within Expressive drawing Steven Simone

AT THIS ELLSWORTH KELLY

The drawing by Ellsworth Kelly (figure 7) is both lively and unified. According to Kelly, the drawing "happened" serendipitously.

Following in the footsteps of Dada artists such as Jean Arp and composers of chance music such as John Cage, he explored the creative process by deliberately embracing elements of chance.

As the title indicates, Kelly executed this drawing in three steps. First he drew a series of lines in ink on paper, then he cut the sheet into 49 equal-sized squares, and finally he put the pieces back together in a random

fashion. If this drawing "just happened," why does it work so well?

Part of the answer is that Kelly's hand—the expressive quality of his line—is consistent. His lines are confident, direct, and sensitively executed. They're also predominately straight, and those that aren't gently curve. The weight of Kelly's line is consistent as well, with only subtle variations. All these constancies unify the drawing.

However, it's the gridded arrangement that is the ultimate unifier. We read the drawing as a series of equal-sized units, each containing as few as one, as many as five, but most often two to four lines (and in a few instances, dots or dashes). Next, we begin to read these units in aggregate rows, both vertical and horizontal, with each row telling a story of its own. Some of these rows form rhythmic patterns that are appealing, animating, and unifying.

So, in spite of giving over some artistic control in favor of chance events, an artist such as Kelly can produce work that holds together beautifully because of the consistent presence of the artist's hand and the inherent coherency of his chosen foundational structure.

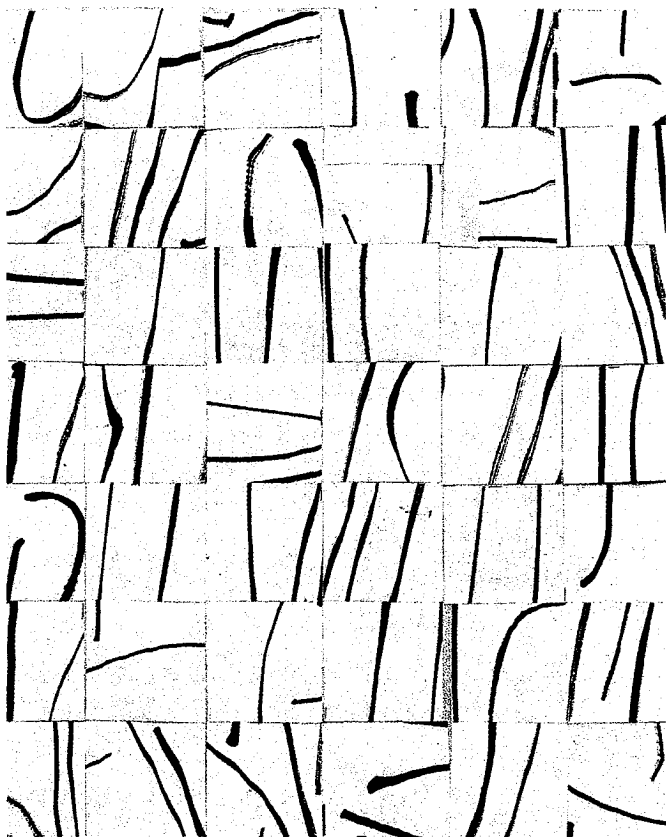


figure 7

Ellsworth Kelly

Brushstrokes Cut into Forty-Nine Squares and Arranged by Chance, 1951

Cut-and-pasted paper and ink

13¼ x 14 inches (34.9 x 35.6 cm)

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WORKSHOP

PLAY 1 ■ PLAYING WITH A GRID

Let's start by working with a grid as foundational structure. We'll follow Ellsworth Kelly's lead (page 196) in the way we draw and compose. First you'll do a drawing, then you'll deconstruct, or cut up, your drawing into a bunch of little squares, and finally you'll reconstruct the drawing pieces to make a new drawing featuring a gridded structure.

For this challenge, you'll need the following: access to a photocopy machine or a printer/scanner; six sheets of 8½ x 11-inch (21.6 x 27.9 cm) photocopy paper; a hard pencil and pencil sharpener; a ruler and scissors; a relatively soft drawing tool that won't smear when dry (pen and ink, acrylic paint and thin brush, a soft pencil, a soft felt tip pen, or a broad marker all work well); and adhesive to collage with (a glue stick, acrylic spray adhesive, or a water-based adhesive such as acrylic medium).

1 Position one sheet of the photocopy paper in a horizontal orientation, to be used as your drawing surface.

2 With the sharpened hard pencil, draw a horizontal line ½ inch (1.3 cm) down from the top, and a vertical line 3 inches (7.6 cm) in from the right side. When you've done this, you'll have created an 8-inch (20.3 cm) square inside the 8½ x 11-inch (21.6 x 27.9 cm) sheet, as shown in figure 13.

In steps 3 to 8 to follow, consider your newly drawn 8-inch (20.3 cm) square area as your drawing space.

3 With your chosen soft drawing tool, start near the top of the paper, and draw a horizontal line that runs from the left edge all the way to the right edge of the 8-inch (20.3 cm) square drawing surface. Don't aim for perfection! Your line can curve or wiggle a bit, have a bump or two, as long as its voyage from left to right remains predominately horizontal. Allow your line to vary in weight if you like.

4 Just below that line, draw a second roughly horizontal line, one that again runs all the way from the left edge to the right. Let this line have moderate variations, too.

5 Continue moving down the drawing surface, making five additional lines in the same way until you've filled the drawing surface with horizontals.

6 If your drawing medium was wet, allow the lines to fully dry.

7 Using a sharpened hard pencil and a ruler, overlay a grid of very light vertical lines spaced 1 inch (2.5 cm) apart. You'll end up with a drawing space full of 1-inch (2.5 cm) squares. You'll have eight rows up and down, and eight rows across, as illustrated in figure 14.

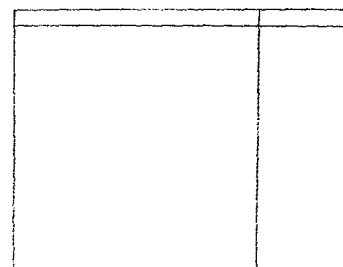


figure 13

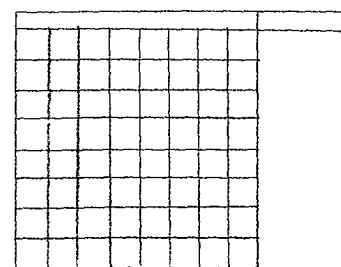


figure 14

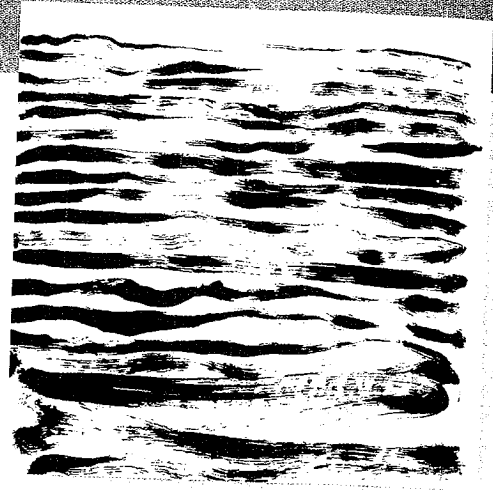


figure 15



figure 16

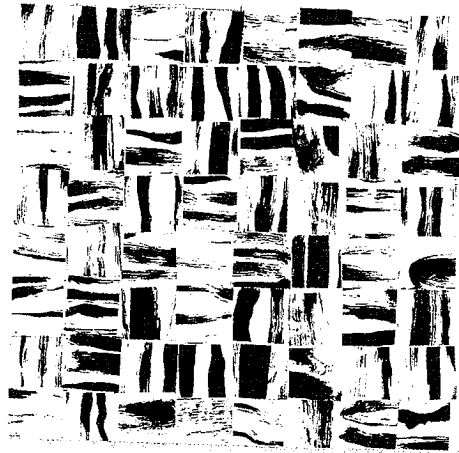


figure 17

Make three or more copies of the drawing with the grid-
ded overlay using the photocopy machine or the scanner/
printer.

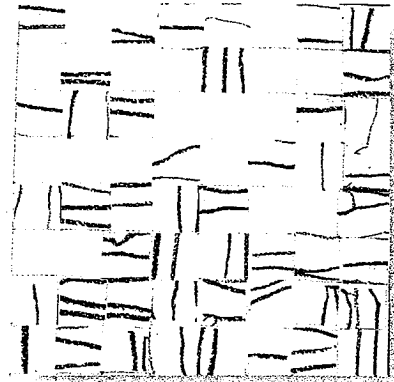
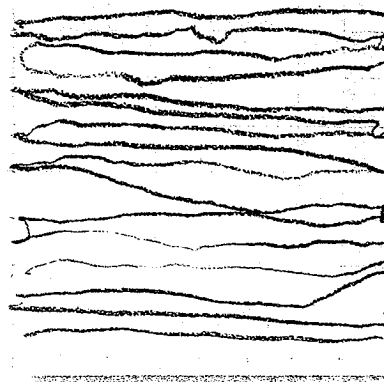
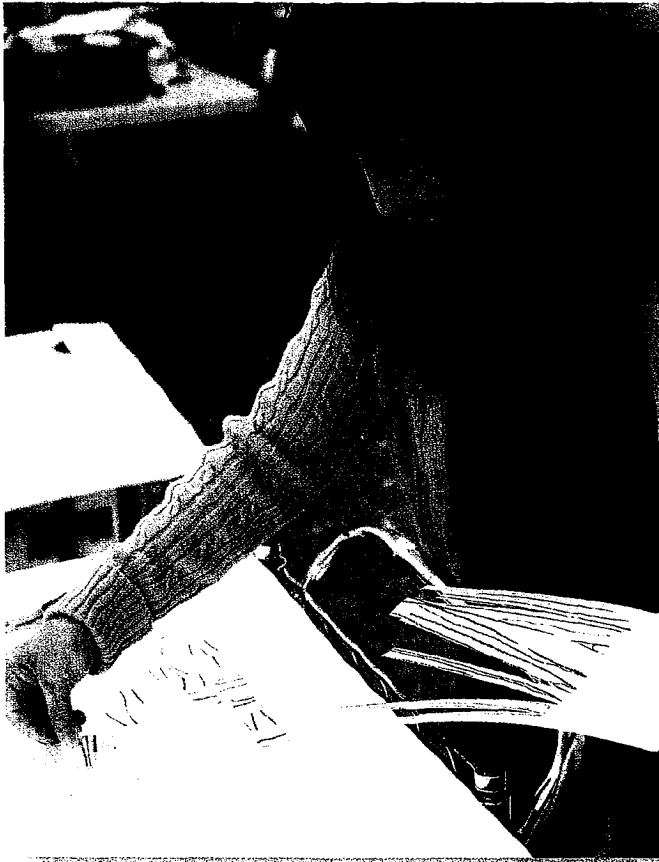
Next, cut off the excess $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (1.3 cm) at the top of the
paper and the 3-inch (7.6 cm) excess on the right side.

Cut up your 8-inch (20.3 cm) square drawing into 64
squares, each 1 inch (2.5 cm) in size, using the overlying grid
as your guide.

Cut down another sheet of photocopy paper to an 8-inch
(20.3 cm) square, and once again draw a grid of light 1-inch
(2.5 cm) squares on it, so that it looks like figure 16.

WORKSHOP

PLAY 1 ■ PLAYING WITH A GRID



Nancy Rice (page 199) and Judy Alvarez (left) arrange cut components. Nancy's original and finished work are shown on page 199; Judy's are above.

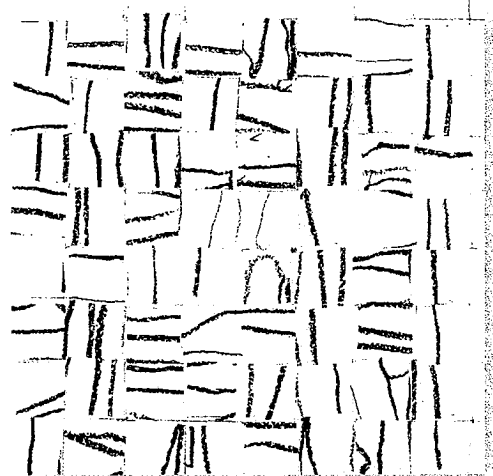
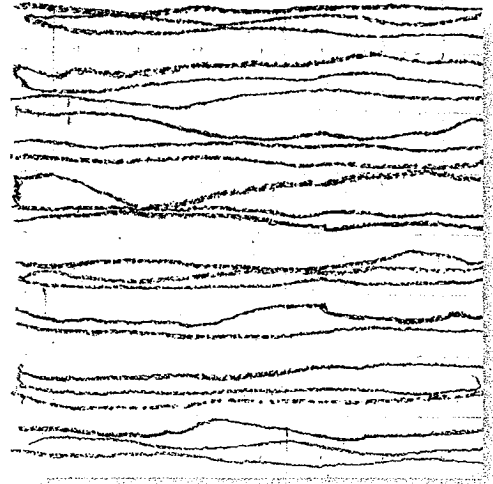
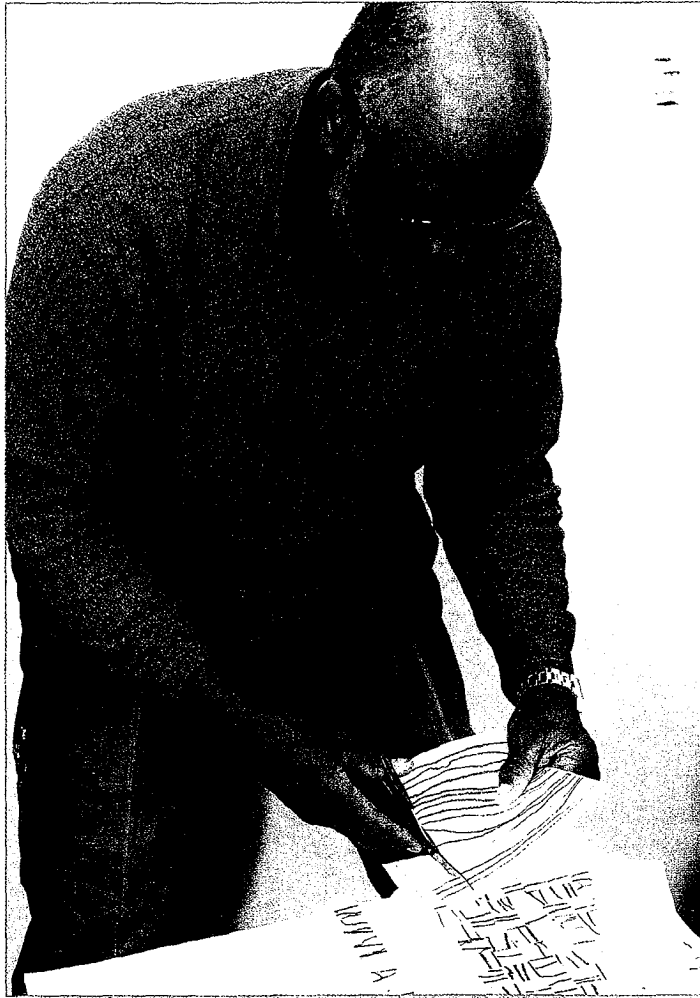
12 Make a couple of photocopies of this gridded 8-inch (20.3 cm) square surface for future use.

13 Now you're ready to reconstruct your drawing. Begin arranging your little cut squares by placing them into your gridded 8-inch (20.3 cm) square paper. Play with them, moving them around a bit if you like. Or simply start pasting them into the grid, one after another, as Judy Alvarez above is doing here.

14 Continue until the grid is at least halfway filled in.

15 Stop and assess the drawing. Feel the arrangement. Then begin filling in additional squares based on what you feel the drawing needs.

16 Continue until the new arrangement is complete.



17 Repeat this Play exercise from step 8 at least one more time. Then compare the two or three reconstructed drawings you have in front of you. Take note of the comparative ways in which the drawings hold together, studying how the gridded foundational structure works as a liberating and unifying principle. How are these drawings similar? How are they different? How does each appeal to you and why?

George Rice cuts his paper along the grid lines (top left). His original and finished work is shown above.