It All Begins with the Format

A first way into abstract (non-representational) drawing

To make a picture, you don't need much at first: a surface on which your picture can develop.

But before you make your first mark, something is already there that influences how you begin: the format of your sheet. A side issue? Not quite – try it out.

As soon as you've put something on the sheet, it often suggests how things might go on.

Time: up to 15 minutes.

1 **Prepare two identical formats.**

Make two long, narrow strips of paper – for example 10 × 30 cm (about 4 × 12 in). You can cut them from a larger sheet or tape several strips together. Both strips should be the same width and the same length.

2 **Lay out your materials.**

Put out the materials you'd like to work with: pencils, chalk, charcoal, brushes or anything else.

3 **Start with the first strip.**

Take the first strip and try things out:

How do you want to place it – upright or across? And where do you want to begin – in the middle or far out towards the edge? What do you prefer?

For this exercise we'll stick to lines. That makes it easier to notice what the format does to you. Draw a first line, for example:

long · **short** · **straight** · **curved** · **broken**

Important: It doesn't have to depict anything.

4 **Keep drawing – until it feels like enough.**

Add more lines. Stop when it feels like enough to you. What has the format done to your lines?

- *Do your lines run along the strip – or across it?*
- *How long have they become? Did the strip tempt you into long lines – or short ones?*
- *Do some run off the edge? Or do they stop before it?*
- *Did the format lead you anywhere – or did you push against it?*

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5 Begin a second time.

Now take the second, identical strip. This time, deliberately start differently. What "differently" means is up to you. Again, keep drawing with lines until it feels like enough.

While you work, pay attention to whether and how the format leads you – or influences your decisions.

6 Compare the strips.

- *Where did you begin each time?*
- *How did you place the strips in front of you?*
- *Where did you leave a lot of space, where little?*
- *What did you do differently the second time – and what turned out similar anyway?*
- *How comfortable or uncomfortable was it to work in this narrow corridor?*

If you get stuck … Make a first mark anywhere – the less you think about it, the better. Then ask only: What does the strip need now? More questions that help: Picture Conversation 12.

Variation: Place the strips diagonally.

If you like, make two more strips and lay them diagonally in front of you: one from top left to bottom right, the other from bottom left to top right. Work on both as before.

Where do you begin on each? Do you tend to work your way down – or up? Does one feel different from the other?

Why this exercise

When we draw or paint, we usually think about what we put on the paper. But the paper isn't just the ground. The format alone influences where we begin, which direction we work in, how large we make things and how we use the space we have.

You can follow these impulses. But you can also decide otherwise.

Narrow formats like this come up more often than you might think: your strip is almost the size of a bookmark. And in art they have a long tradition – for example in Japanese hanging scrolls, which hang tall and narrow on the wall. Perhaps one of your pieces will turn into a bookmark.

Finally, a question for yourself:
What have you discovered about the way you begin?

Picture Conversations is a series of 13 exercises – you'll find the worksheets at ekke-scholz.de/en/picture-conversations.
New exercises and thoughts from the studio: **ekke-scholz.de/en/newsletter**

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