

SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING IN THE WHEAT FIELDS

MARK PILKINGTON

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If something slightly weird was happening in the 1990s then Mark Pilkington was probably there. Amongst a small handful of other assorted eccentrics Mark was involved in the Crop Circle making scene which fascinated our British press and still continues to do so with awe inspiring patterns and a tight sense of secrecy as to their origins. Now though, Mark has published and edited the book, *The Field Guide – The art, history and philosophy of crop circles* which offers a unique insight into the world of Crop Circles. Mark also edits and produces the Journal *Strange Attractor* which boasts essays on the unusual through to the unpopular.

LH: Why did you want to produce a book about Crop Circles?

Mark: The book came about because since the late '90s I've been part of a team who make them. It's something we talked about for a while, partly a book telling people how to make them and partly a history of the phenomenon, but written from the perspective of those people who make them.

As part of an art project in 1994 the authors, John Lundberg and Rob Irving, wrote a very brief guide to making your own crop circles and this evolved over the years. Two years ago they did a small paperback edition, which they asked me to write a forward to and through talking to them we thought we should do a proper book and expand it. That, which was called the *Beginners Guide to Crop Circle Making*, now constitutes one chapter in the book. The rest of the book is a mixture of history and theory about the phenomenon.

It has been 30 years since these things first appeared in the landscape, placed there by two men who were then in their fifties, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley. That was in 1976. It was in about 1988 that things really started going crazy in the media. So it's time to put our perspective across. Also in this country, most people have come to accept that they are made by people, it's different in America and elsewhere, but in this country the story has taken on a new dimension really, a new lease of life. Now the story is about how people make these things and then why people get obsessed with them, devoting their lives to studying them, analysing them, reading them and interpreting them.

LH: The people who are obsessed with them, are they the same people who are making them?

M: All the people I know that make them all started from the perspective of being fascinated with them, and wanting to know how they were made and whether it would be possible to make them themselves. People were going out, making their own, starting with very basic, simple circles, often potatoes rather than circles. The real spur is when you've made one and you see them being studied and announced as a formation that couldn't possibly be made by people.

LH: The people who make them have to wait until they are photographed, as you can only see them from the air. Is it a bit of a double edged sword that you can't actually see you're own work?

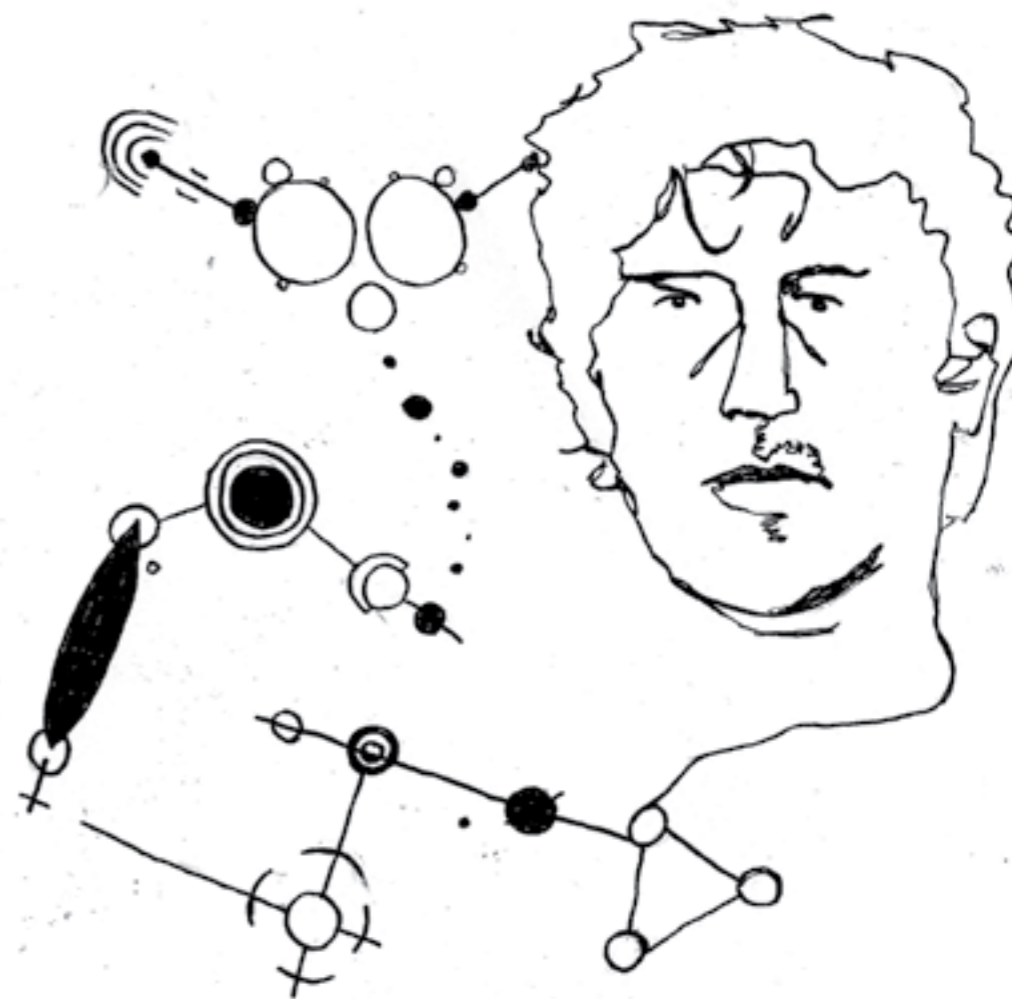
M: That's part of the fun and the frustration. Part of the skill is trying to relate a two-dimensional diagram into a three-dimensional space, which requires an

incredible shape shifting, geometry warping mindset, which I don't tend to have. Usually at the end of a construction I'll have worked out what's going on, but the other guys tend to have a much better idea of what's going where.

You don't know often up to a week later whether it's going to look good; if it's a success or not, or if you made any mistakes. You tend to know if you made any serious mistakes but there might be things that you're not sure about and you won't know until you see the photograph. Of course what's on your side is that nobody else has seen the construction diagram, you're the only people that know what it was meant to look like. Some of the formations that have had the most impact, culturally or visually, or you see people with tattoos of, or people have written books about, they can sometimes be ones which were considered to be total disasters by the people who made them, until they saw them from the air and realised, 'Wow that really worked'.

The other thing to bear in mind is because you are working on such a huge scale, usually the smallest individual elements you are working with are probably the size of this table and so when someone's seeing it from the air they don't tend to be looking at the small details, they are looking at the bigger impact of the image. You are looking at the whole, rather than the details. But when you are a practiced circle maker and circle spotter you start to notice if there are tell tale signs.

Of course, you also have problems like the longer something is left, the more people will trample through it and ruin it, or if you have loads of trails running



through your formation it ruins it a bit. Formations tend to stand up for a long while but they can sometimes get blown over if it's windy. The other big worry is the farmers; some farmers really don't like having them in their fields so they'll erase them immediately the next day. One of the ones I worked on, which was actually quite a nice formation, never got seen by anyone; we worked through absolute driving rain and it was really quite miserable; cold, wet, everything. The next day the farmer erased it instantly in the morning.

In the summertime there are always people flying over so you can be pretty sure that if you've got it in a certain catchment area then someone will fly over and see it. There are rumours that some of the pilots are in cahoots with the circle makers, but I wouldn't know about that.

LH: With that, can people tell whose created what? Is there anything like a signature?

M: Like a tag?

LH: Yeah, like a graffiti tag. I see quite a lot of parallels with the graffiti world but I was going to talk about them later.

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M: Well there aren't that many teams. There are probably no more than 10 teams around every year and there tends to be one individual on each team actually designing the formation.

LH: And do they know each other?

M: Yes, people know each other and if new people appear they tend to make contact with the established teams. You definitely recognise signatures; just stylistic signatures or a revisiting of certain themes, whether it's fractal geometry or organic motifs, but some people will develop their own styles like wavy lines, or ribbons or two tone reliefs. Within the

community people tend to know who's done what.

LH: It's so secretive and underground; how do people know about it and know about each other? How do people get into it?

M: These days there's the internet but before, it was much more secretive and much more difficult. People on both sides of the equation would go to conferences and in the earlier days it was probably quite clear from looking around who was making them – certain people probably stood out, and you would just get to know them.

It was extremely secretive, which made it quite difficult to join the scene. Especially in the heyday; the government were talking about it, the military were interested, the police were interested, farmers were wandering out with guns; you had good reason to be secretive. Never forget that it's criminal trespass and technically an illegal act. Although, only one person in this country has been caught crop circle making, and he actually admitted to doing it. In order to spite one of researchers he confessed to making it; the farmer