

ELUSIVE
GEOMETRY

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Master of Fine Art in the Department of Furniture Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Text by Lauren Richards © 2023

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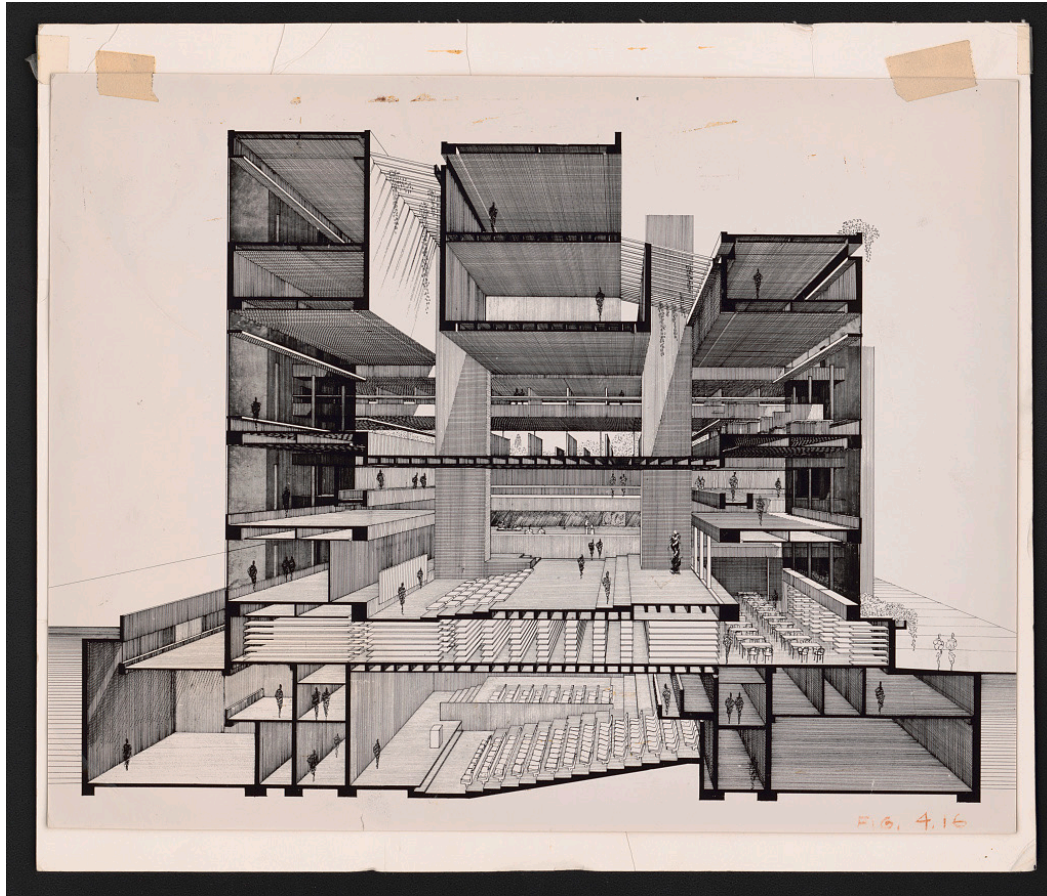
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Thesis Guest Critic

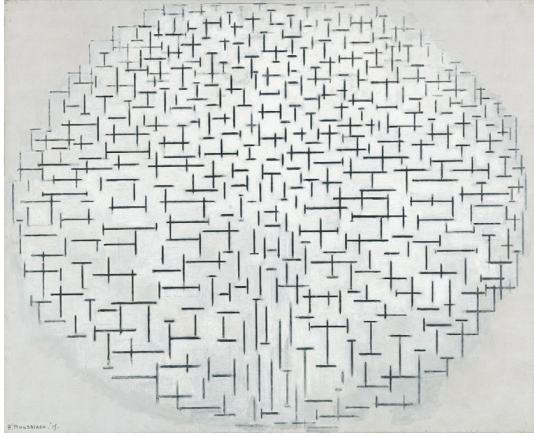
STRUCTURAL VISUALIZATION
THEATRICAL AMBIANCE
INTUITION HOUSE
DOMESTIC DAYDREAM
TENDING GROWTH
CODES AND FICTION
SYSTEMATIC METHOD

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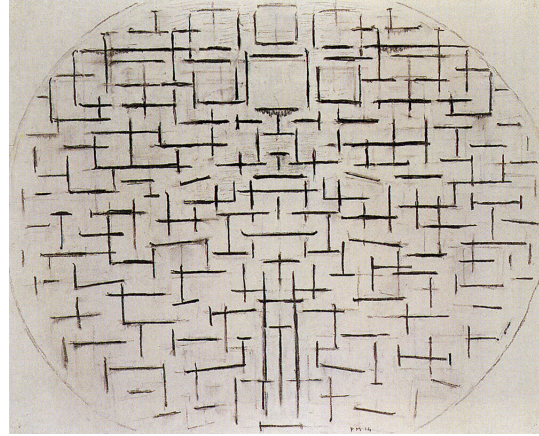
All I have is a collection of parts. Fragments and pieces, segmented and turned over in my mind and in my hands as I try to understand them, stack them together and try to find a system. It seemed so simple at first - I just want to know how it works, of course I can put it back together again. Sometimes it's a constant dissection, and the tide of incoming information is impossible to keep track of. But it's alright to sit down and think about where they go and what they're made of. What structures do I know? What systems can I follow? Don't worry, if the pieces are small enough, the surface will look almost smooth.



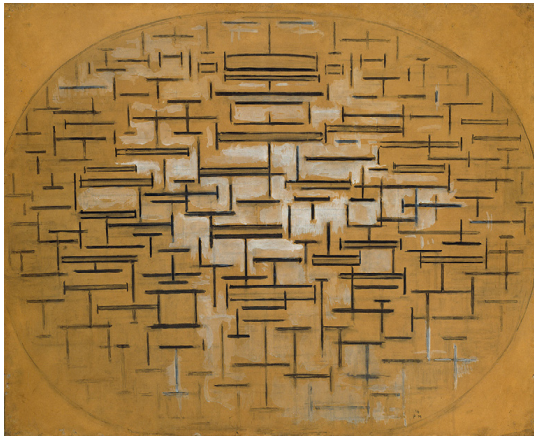
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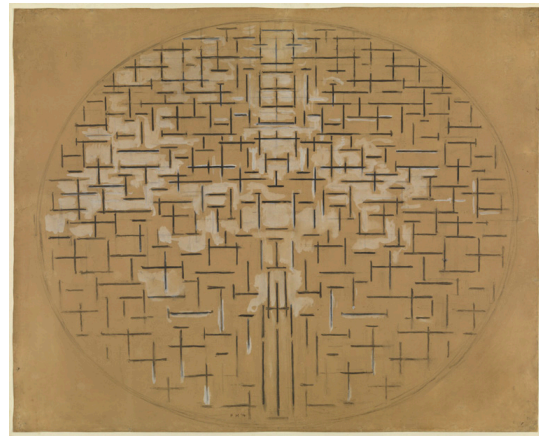
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STRUCTURAL VISUALIZATION

Over everything, we project a network of rules. Spatially expansive in its application, infiltrating the immediate and giving form to the remote. Grids and units contracting into divisions and subdivisions, then expanding, multiplying, periodically subsumed into groups of larger denomination. Lines of latitude and longitude, warp, weft, miles and millimeters, strung across our vision. What horrifying universality.

Louise Bourgeois spoke of using the grid to feel grounded - calming her sense of overwhelming panic by triangulating herself between the stars. But I find this sense of self all the more disembodied for its intangibility. What was it our teachers told us when we plotted our points on the graph? That pencil mark is only a symbol of place. That place on the grid is no real place, it has no quantity, it takes up no space. The point is only theory, an intersection we could never stand on. All of our intuition tells us that intersection exists, but to examine its smallness is to hold as an object in our mind the infinitely huge and infinitely empty. There is no "there" there. Somehow these invisible threads cluster everything together, making the world someplace we can move through, something we can think about. Tenuous threads that really live as concept alone, their effects more visible than themselves. A free-floating mass of incongruous particles held together by invisible rules.

Some limitations are necessary, so the point gets the point across.

“A beautiful thing about a quarter circle is that it is a fragment that implies a circle, but is also a complete thing in itself.”

- Robert Mangold¹

T H E A T R I C A L A M B I A N C E

Another day the curtains might open to a wash of sunlight, but this evening they only framed a variegated darkness and the windows reflected back in warped approximation the scene that they contained. From the doorway two figures paused in momentary hesitation amid the hum, and considered the arrangement of people and furniture that confronted them. But, like the previous arrivals, they fell susceptible to the emotional resonance of scripted lighting, which seeped into their consciousness and glamoured their vision. Candles stood openly on tables and clustered to disperse dark corners, and faces and hands dipped periodically into their pools of light. Loose laughter, thoughtful glances, and animated smiles sank into the upholstery and perched lightly on the table tops, while the house's domestic habiliments offered up their best china to the occasion.

The atmosphere permeated the scope of immediate awareness, reverberating throughout the room and finding in each individual a responsive particle. In this way, it was more real in its effect than its existence, mired in intangibility, and anchored only to a fabricated familiarity. With different light, it's a different room, the space itself cannot be occupied, only the moment.





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“There were fireflies riding on the dark air and a dog baying on some low and far-away ledge of the cliff. The table seemed to have risen towards the sky like a mechanical dancing platform, giving the people around it a sense of being alone with each other in the dark universe, nourished by its only food, warmed by its only lights. And, as if a curious hushed laugh from Mrs. McKisco were a signal that such a detachment from the world had been attained, the two Divers began suddenly to warm and glow and expand, as if to make up to their guests, already so subtly assured of their importance, so flattered with politeness, for anything they might still miss from that country well left behind. Just for a moment they seemed to speak to every one at the table, singly and together, assuring them of their friendliness, their affection. And for a moment the faces turned up to them were the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree. Then abruptly the table broke up — the moment when the guests had been daringly lifted above conviviality into the rarer atmosphere of sentiment, was over before it could be irreverently breathed, before they had half realized it was there.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald “Tender is the Night”²

I read once of a house designed entirely by intuition. First the site was walked through on different days in different weather, the views contemplated and the space “felt”. Then the owner paced out the perimeter of a large rectangle and directed his waiting masons, “Here is my outer wall.” Bricks were laid and a solid empty block raised. Then he approached the block from different sides of the property, at different angles, until he faced the solid brick and said “Here is my front door,” and a hole was broken through. I suppose the story continues in this way with every feature being marked and realized in real time, with no translation from a plan on paper to three-dimensional space. This goes down a rabbit-hole of so many details, so difficult to create retroactively, that my immediate reaction is to smirk at the naive inefficiency. But where planning could set up the possibility for plans to go wrong, or for their translation into reality to be disappointing, making decisions in real-time sounds refreshingly direct. Maybe the square of bricks really did become the perfect house.

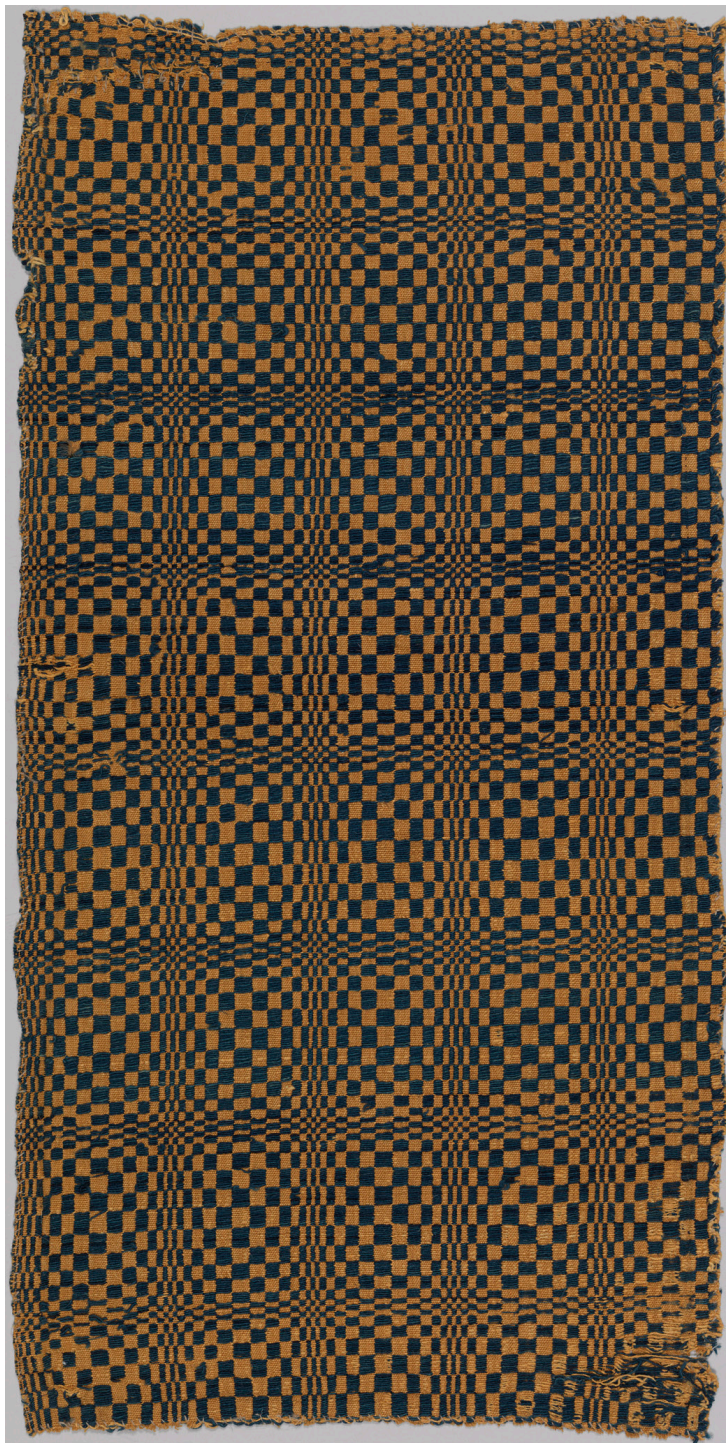
I, on the other hand, already have some small visions of my perfect house. I’ve walked through some of those rooms in my mind, and despite its intangibility it has the feeling of home. Building purely in response to what is in front of me would let the reality destroy the feeling.

DOMESTIC DAYDREAM

The Domestic Daydream is a place, grounded in potential but unrealized, to which you are pleasantly tethered. This domestic center is your own, and here you can arrange your accumulated objects into their complex network of signals and associations, attempting to silently convey your mind's fantastic projections, which the home reflects back in meandering approximation. Here those drifting spores of shadowy hopes have taken root, drawing together nostalgic echoes of memory with incipient future realization. These memories are moments that you've often taken out and rolled over in your mind, until all the rough edges have been polished away and the smooth, satisfying weight can sit comfortably in the palm of your hand. Some people say twenty percent of our memories are false, like dreams we believe were real.

It's this editing, this omission that is the most untruthful, and we can edit our memories retroactively, but experiences have to be taken as they come. If you can stay long enough in this one place, the experiences can accumulate into memories that sit and wait to be explored like dusty and inviting piles of junk. But you're still searching for that sense of homecoming, trying to return someplace while only moving forward, and the fear is you won't have enough time.





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When you plant seeds, it's very hard to tell what the end result will be. That blank earth seems so sparse, even the richest dark soil looks unpromising. Your plans for specific pairings of height and color end up going unheeded, as the granular dust of lobelia seeds get stuck beneath your fingernails, and the remnants of every packet is upended in compensation. Every day this patch of earth gets a little attention, as you wonder how much time has gone by. How has the weather been? Are you watering too much? Are you watering too little? Is that a weed you should pluck or finally a sprout? It's hard to accept when nothing should be done, and in reality you've already done too much. Once the tendrils start to emerge, they seem to multiply daily, competing with each other for resources as you try and tend their needs. You know that successful cultivation requires some thinning, but you and this garden have been drawn together now by time spent and the density of growth never feels like over saturation. Every day you can note more loops of the morning glory as it wraps around the wires you strung up the wall, and sometimes when you miss a day (or was it two?) it feels like the roles have been swapped, and you've been moving slower, making less progress than the vine. Eventually you're ensconced in foliage, absorbed in this deep, quiet chaos.

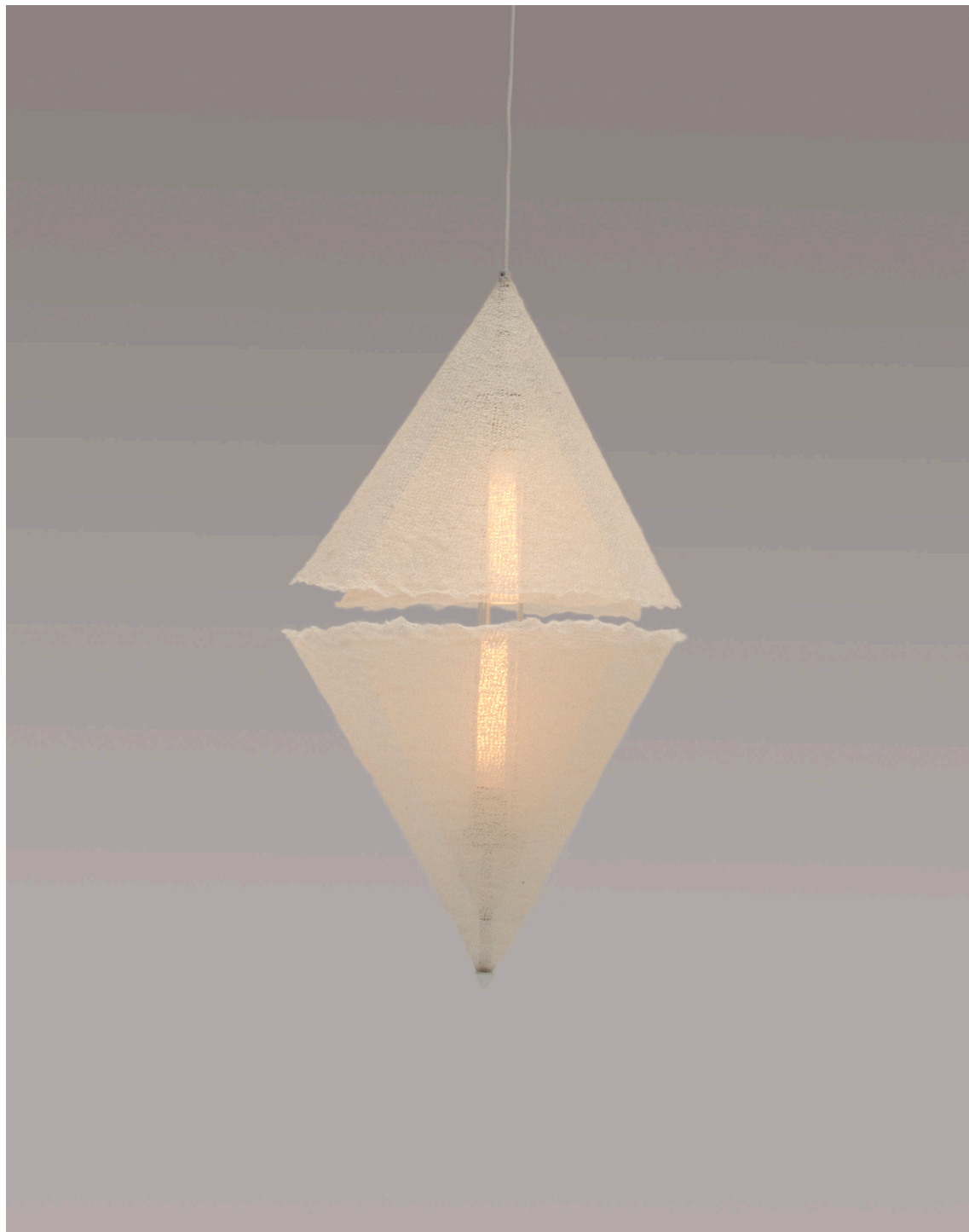
In high school, I had a strange fantasy about reading every book in the library. I wanted to start from one end of a shelf and systematically work my way along. In the nonfiction sections, this might lead to nothing more than thorough research, as a single subject was addressed over and over with slightly shifting perspectives, but I was most interested in what might happen with fiction.

I had a feeling then, and I still entertain this superstition, that somehow this process would reveal something to me. It would be through no design other than the chance of the universe (and alphabetical organization) that Austen might be thrown against Auster, and my suspicion was that a secret knowledge could be unleashed by this unsuspecting clash. My (niche) optimistic personal belief system offered the promise of enlightenment not through agonized mental convolutions, working for true understanding, but as a reward for plodding persistence, and delivered through osmosis.

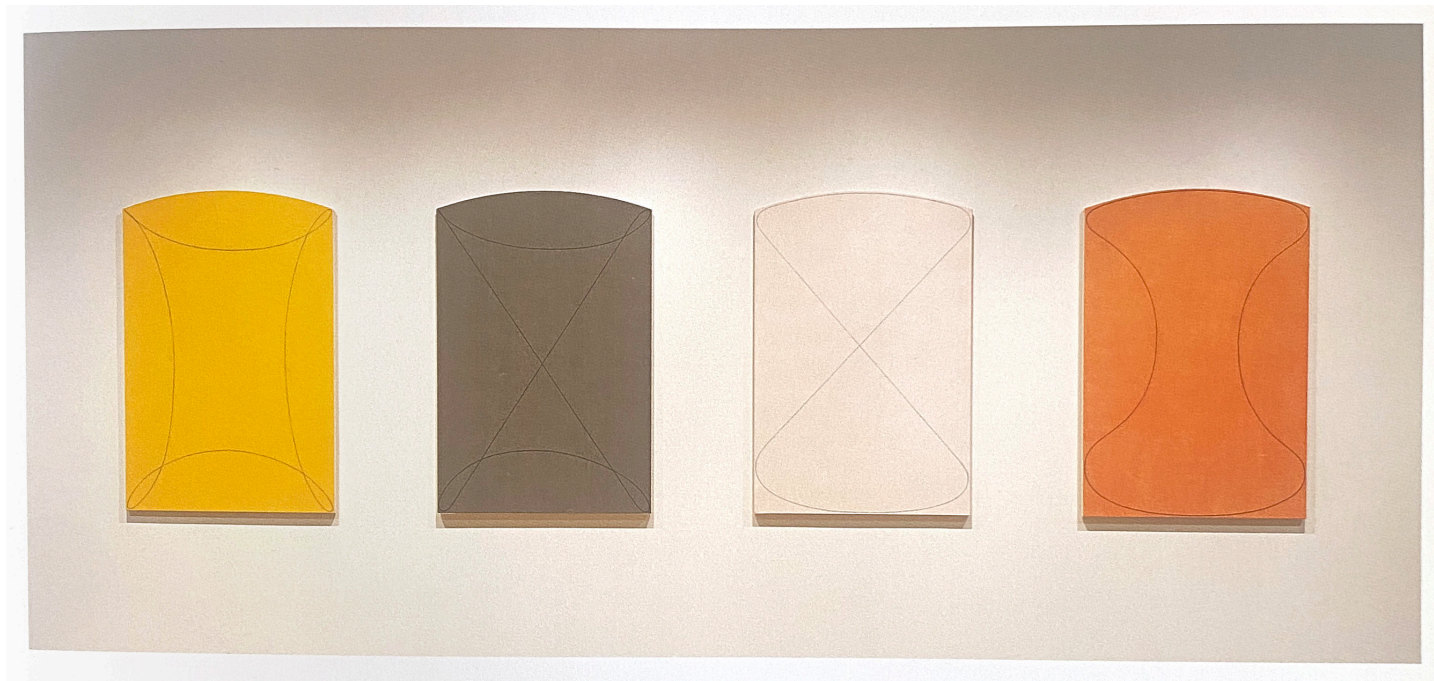
My approach might parallel the most bumbling of alchemical philosophers, blindly but systematically combining substances and vaguely expecting a miracle. Or a lock-pick at a combination safe, diligently attempting to find the code before someone makes them aware of exponential mathematics. The process is simplistic and strangely enticing for its inefficiency. If there was something there to discover, it would be a code hidden in plain sight, a buried language, too obvious to suspect. Perhaps the overwhelming demand on time adds to the process' intrigue by tingeing it with unattainability, and perhaps it is only searching without knowing what you are looking for, and hoping to leave no stone unturned.



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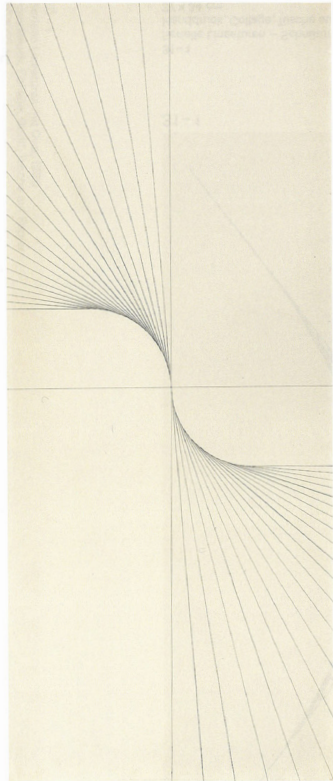


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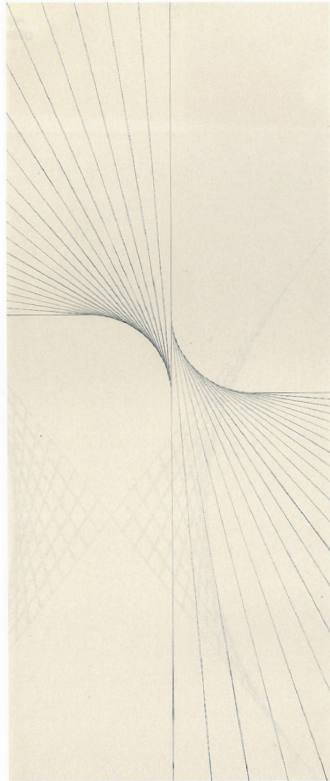




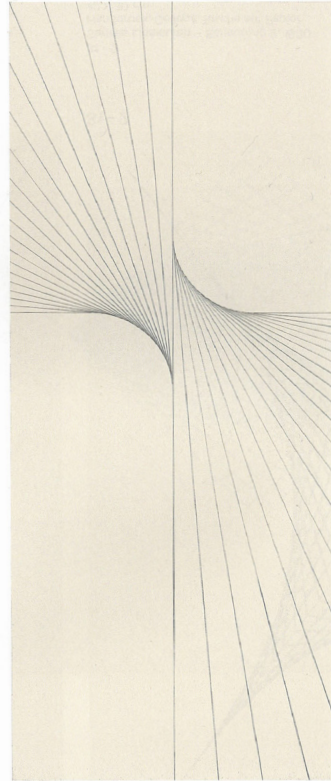




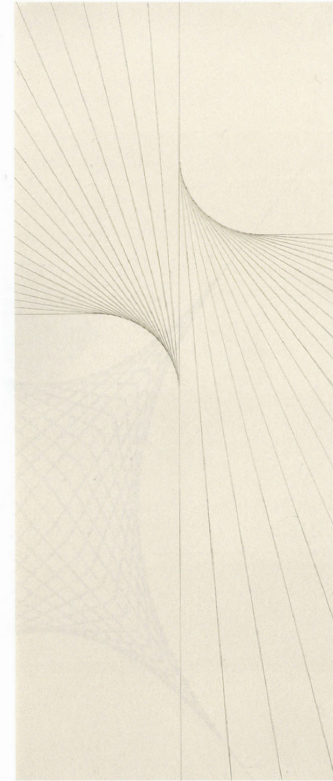
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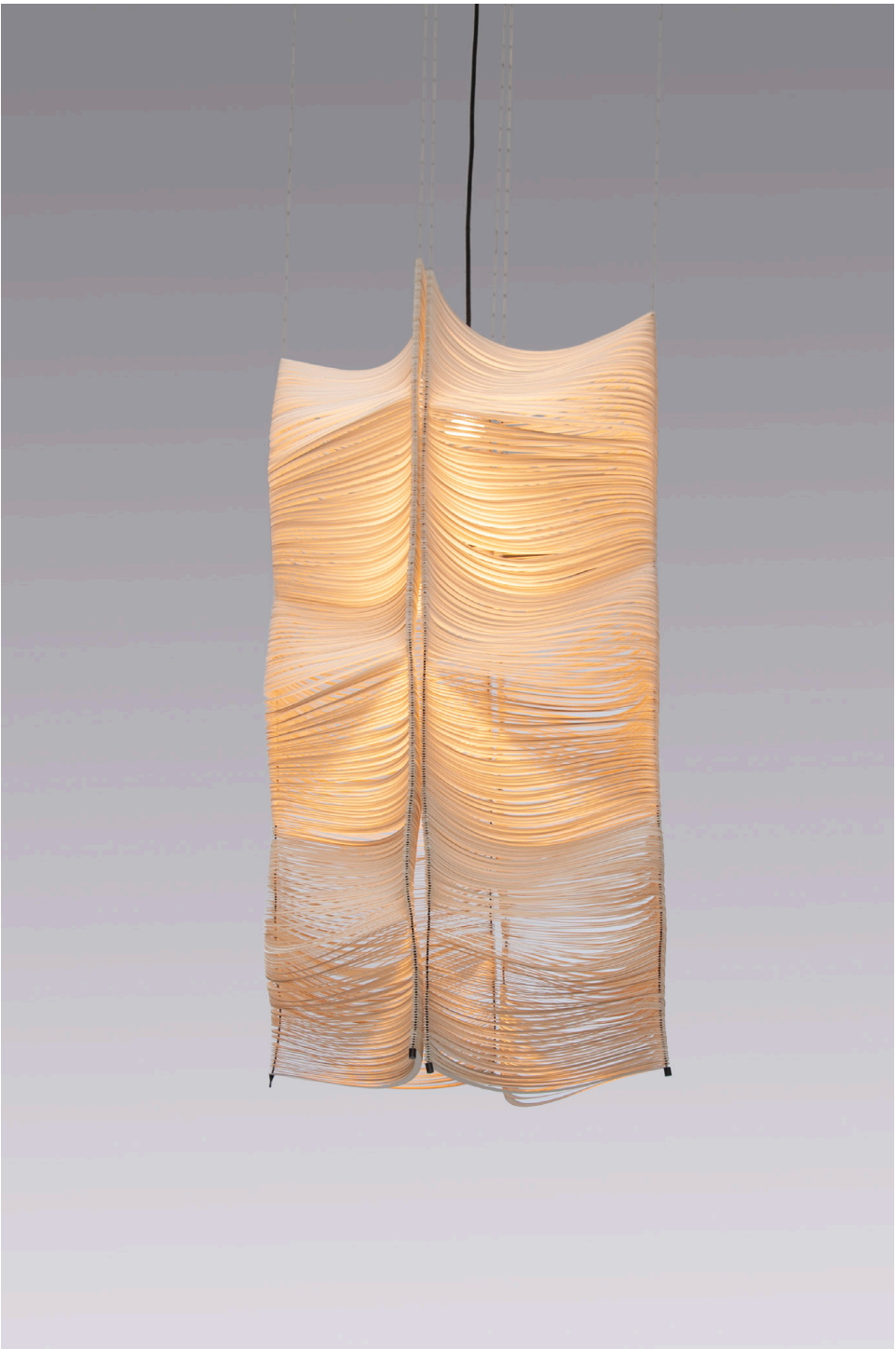


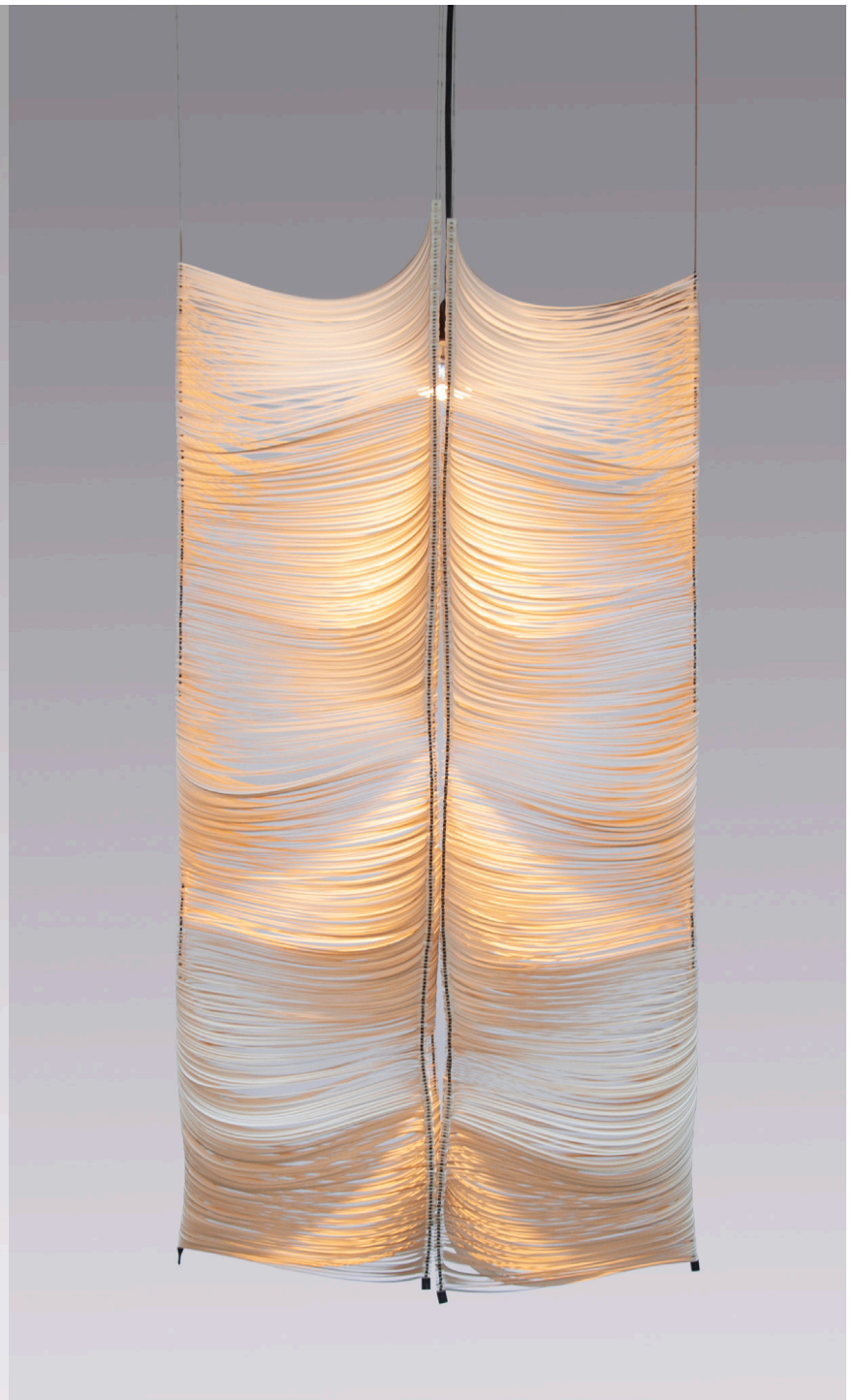
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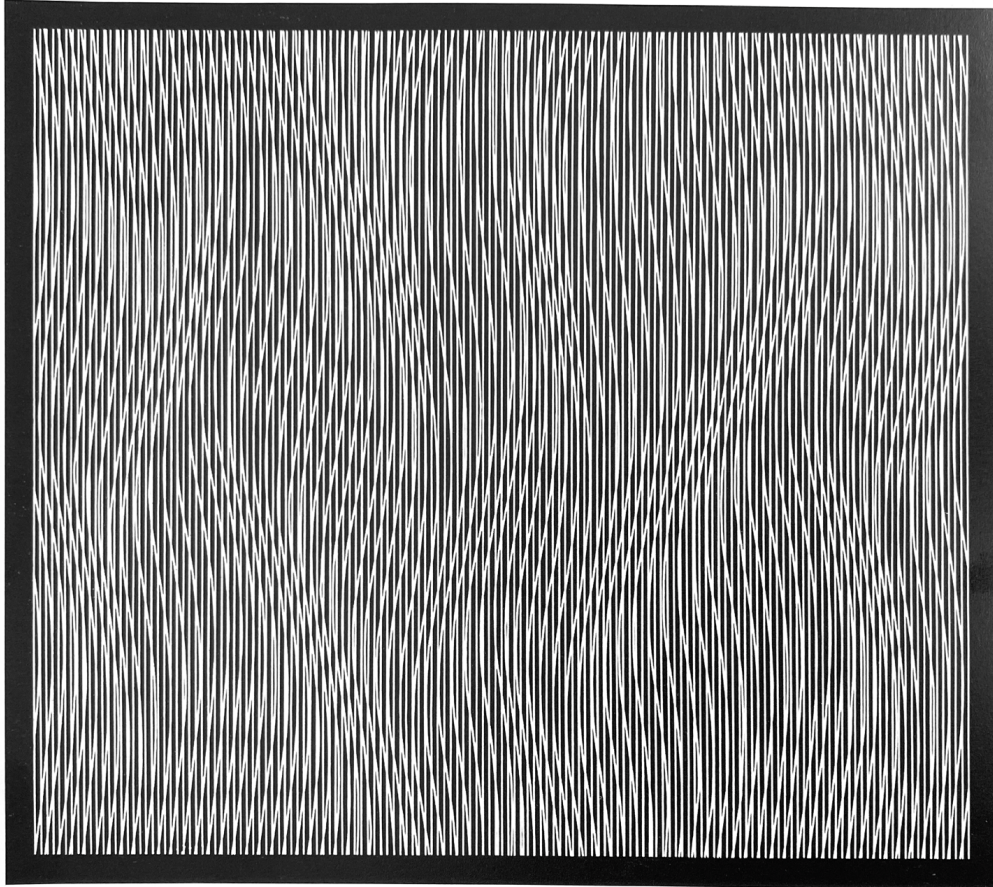
Measuring progress often seems to be just as important as progress itself. It also works as a form of task management, dividing and subdividing the overwhelming goal to be accomplished one step at a time. Maybe this is why these small, accumulative repetitions have become a soothing mechanism, a place of stability when feeling particularly uprooted. Repetitive additions, slowly filling a blank space, give proof of progress, and the little demon preaching productivity is temporarily mollified while the rest of your mind takes time to ruminate - time spent or time wasted.

“I would as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down.”

- Robert Frost³







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IMAGES

- 01 Art and Architecture Building, now Rudolph Hall, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Perspective section. Photograph of drawing.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018645176/>
- 02 “Composition 10 in Black and White” Piet Mondrian, 1915.
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/composition-10-in-black-and-white/NgEozt-0sWt3eQ?hl=en-GB>
- 03 “Pier and Ocean 4” Piet Mondrian, 1914. <https://www.piet-mondrian.eu/introduction/an-overview/the-foundations-of-a-new-space-1914-1915/>
- 04 “Ocean 5” Piet Mondrian, 1914. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3009>
- 05 “Pier and Ocean 5” Piet Mondrian, 1915. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/33419>
- 06 Villa Necchi, Piero Portaluppi, 1935. (own photo)
- 07 Coverlet Fragment (USA), ca. 1850. <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18407727/>
- 08 Winter in Maine, own photo.
- 09 “Four Figures I” Robert Mangold, 1998.
Robert Mangold, Phaidon Press, 2000, p.277
- 10 32-1, 32-2, 32-3, 32-4 Serielle Lineaturen, 6 Sequenzen, Blatt 1-4, 1987 Zeichnung, Grafit auf Karton.
Karl-Heinz Adler: Art in the System. The System in Art. Hilke Wagner. Spector Books, Leipzig, 2017. p. 32
- 11 Fragmented Whisper, 1966. Julian Stanczak.
- 12 Julian Stanczak: A Retrospective: 1948-1998. Barbara M. Stanczak, The Butler Institute of American Art, 1998. p. 24

QUOTES

- 1 Quoted in: Robert Mangold, Phaidon Press, 2000, p.42
- 2 F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Tender is the Night*. New York, Scribner, 1933. p. 34
- 3 Robert Frost as quoted in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*. Ed. Brenda Danilowitz. Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 2000. p.53

