

# Seed-Action

BRETT LITTMAN

## Facing page

Untitled (leaf), 1947; clay, paint, varnish; 1 x 5 3/8 x 3 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

## Below

Untitled (portrait of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein in greenhouse), c. 1930–45; gelatin silver print; 2 x 4 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

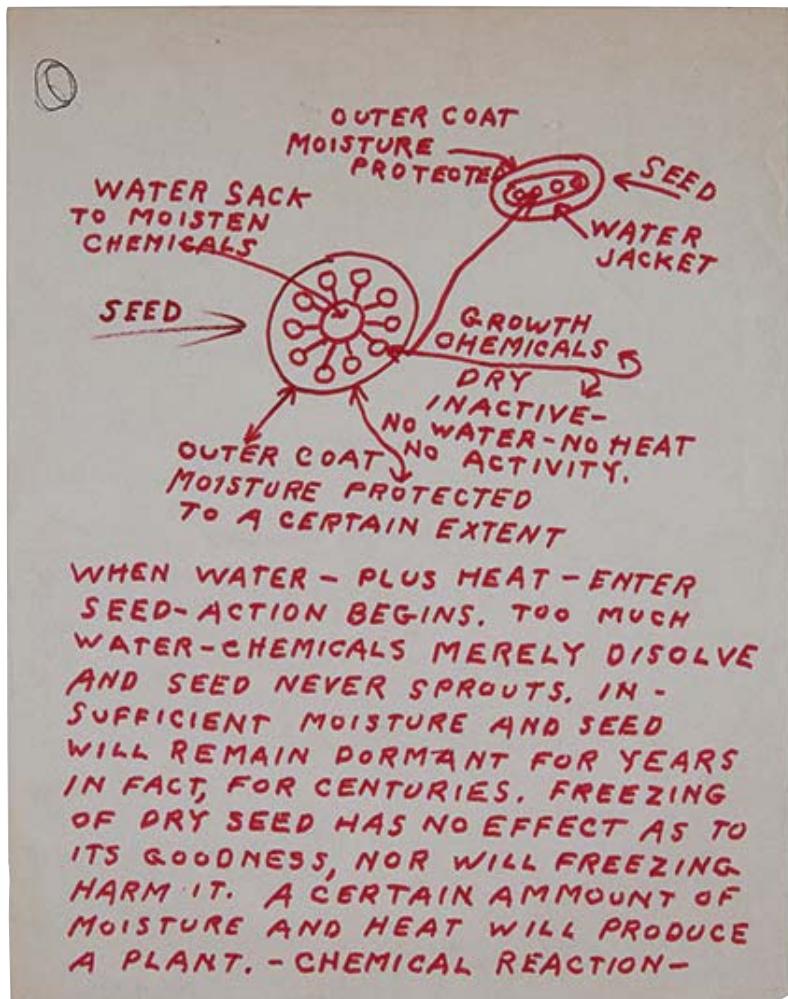
In 2010 I was invited to curate an exhibition on the work of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein for the American Folk Art Museum in New York. I decided to focus on the formal qualities that thread his multidisciplinary work together rather than his biography and personal narrative. My thesis was that Von Bruenchenhein's early interest in botany and later in architectonic structures provided the foundational ideas that act as the visual underpinning of his disparate output.

In that exhibition, I first highlighted the botanical influence on his concrete garden sculptures; the floral backgrounds and dresses in his photographs of his wife, Marie; and the leaf forms that are the basis for his ceramics. In the second part of the exhibition, I focused on his poultry bone sculptures and thrones; his late "tower" paintings on Masonite or cardboard from the 1970s and 1980s; and finally on *Art Work by Eugene From A Thousand and one Nights – Drifting Through the Years*, a large square folio of commercial wallpaper swatches containing

more than one hundred meticulous ballpoint ink drawings made between 1964 and 1966.

Since organizing that exhibition, I have been thinking about Von Bruenchenhein beyond just the formal analysis that I presented at the American Folk Art Museum. I wanted to better and more deeply understand his creative process, and so I kept looking at his work in search of some sort of creative "engine" that drives his compositions and sculptures. A clue came to me on a research trip to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in November 2016, when I





### Left

Untitled (drawing of seed germination), n.d.; ink on paper; 10 x 8 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

### Facing page

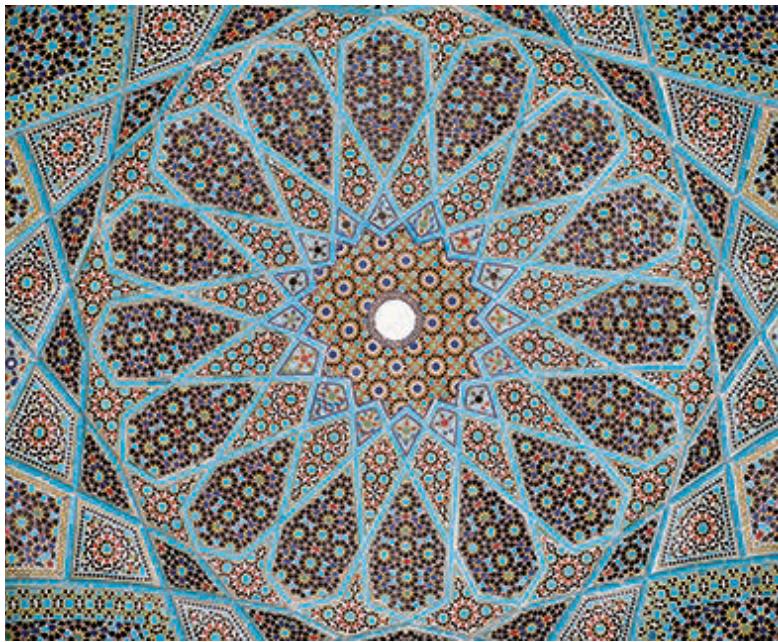
Untitled (bone tower), c. 1970-80; fowl bones, paint, glue, clay, wood; 44 x 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

was presented with Von Bruenchenhein's red ink drawing documenting seed germination (above). The neatly penned inscription describes why seeds grow or don't grow: "When water—plus heat—enter seed-action begins. Too much water—chemicals merely dissolve and seed never sprouts. In-sufficient moisture and seed will remain dormant for years in fact, for centuries. Freezing of dry seed has no effect as to its goodness, nor will freezing harm it. A certain amount of moisture and heat will produce a plant. —Chemical reaction—."

Von Bruenchenhein's interest in botany was greatly influenced by his stepmother, Elizabeth Mosley, who not only painted floral still lifes but also penned treatises on the theory of evolution and reincarnation. For a period, Von Bruenchenhein worked in a flower shop and described himself as a "horticulturist," and in the 1930s he began to collect cacti and other exotic flora in a greenhouse on his property, so the idea of active/inactive seed growth is a good metaphor for his creative process. The drawing confirmed and spurred on speculative thoughts I had







#### Facing page

Untitled (jars and arrowheads), c. 1950–80; ceramic, paint, glass, metal; (left to right)  $22\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{3}{8}$  in.,  $11\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$  in.,  $14\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$  in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

#### Above left

Early Islamic girih tile design from the Tomb of Hafez. Photo: Pentocelo. Copyright courtesy of <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons.

#### Above right

Untitled (flower), c. 1940–70; clay, paint, varnish;  $5 \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times 3$  in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

already been exploring about historical and contemporary aesthetic strategies in relationship to his oeuvre. I was trying to place it into larger historical continuums that would link the artist to other examples of design, architecture, and the visual arts and broaden the ways one could interpret his output. I started to focus on what I would define as self-generating aesthetic systems that bear commonalities with seed growth. These are non-content-driven strategies—often geometric, organic, mathematical, or process based—that use a set of core units or techniques to develop complex images or three-dimensional forms.

Islamic girih tiles (above left) dating from the thirteenth century are among the earliest examples of a self-generative aesthetic system that I identified. Girih, from the Persian word meaning “knot,” are the fundamental designs of Islamic art. The complex, symmetrical interlocking patterns are based on five geometric shapes: decagon, bow tie, rhombus, hexagon, and pentagon. What I find interesting about girih designs in relationship to Von Bruenchenhein is that foundational shapes or groupings of shapes, called “unit designs,” form the basis for creating the quasi-crystalline patterns of larger designs, similar to the way that Von Bruenchenhein used singular botanical leaf and flower forms (above right) as building blocks for his ceramic crowns and “sensor pots.” Although his process was much less mathematically grounded and nowhere near as precise as that of Islamic girih tile design, these simple sets of organic forms allowed him to create disparate groups of objects.

The next example I looked at was the Catalonian visionary architect Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926). Like Von Bruenchenhein, Gaudí was also

strongly influenced by natural geometry as the generative basis for his structures. He used forms that he saw in rushes, reeds, and bones, like the hyperbolic paraboloid, the hyperboloid, the helicoid, and the cone. As it turns out, these natural geometries were well suited to structural design and led Gaudí to develop a whole new system of architectural aesthetics. His greatest achievement is the Sagrada Família, the Roman Catholic cathedral in Barcelona (at right), for which he employed the novel idea of basing the structural blueprint on a canopy of trees. Working modularly and experimenting as he built, Gaudí was freed to allow function to follow form. Looking at the Sagrada Família's drippy, almost hallucinogenic apse and towers, it is easy to see a strong link to Von Bruenchenhein's bone constructions. I would imagine that Von Bruenchenhein took great pleasure in the fact that he could create basic tensile strength for his sculptures by girding the poultry bones together at the base and building ever upward or outward depending on the type of object he was making. Here, like the natural structure of a tree canopy that Gaudí used for the Sagrada Família, the bones themselves act as a material system of support and determining element for the sculptures. As well, it is my personal speculation that Gaudí might have provided some inspiration for Von Bruenchenhein's later architectural paintings from the 1970s and 1980s. In these paintings, the artist's very tactile and haptic process of applying and manipulating paint using his fingertips, fingernails, and unconventional tools like sticks, leaves, combs, corrugated cardboard, and tar paper rather than paintbrushes—and possibly his interest in replicating the texture of stonework or brickwork—directly impacted the types of upward-thrusting, citadel-like forms he was able to materially “build.”

I also started to look for more contemporary examples of self-generating systems. As I moved into the mid-twentieth century—which saw the rise of modernism, abstract painting, and conceptual art—there were many more precedents for this type of approach to making art. One person who immediately came to mind is the multidisciplinary artist Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004). His quasi-intentional or what he termed “diastic” methods for composing poems were predominantly based on transformational chance-derived systems in which word fragments or whole words chosen from charts or other source texts gave him the ability to produce a wide variety of non-repeating texts. What I think relates Mac Low to Von Bruenchenhein is the fact that Mac Low could take a single word or a group of letters, like seeds, and coax them through his aleatory approaches into poetry.



#### Above

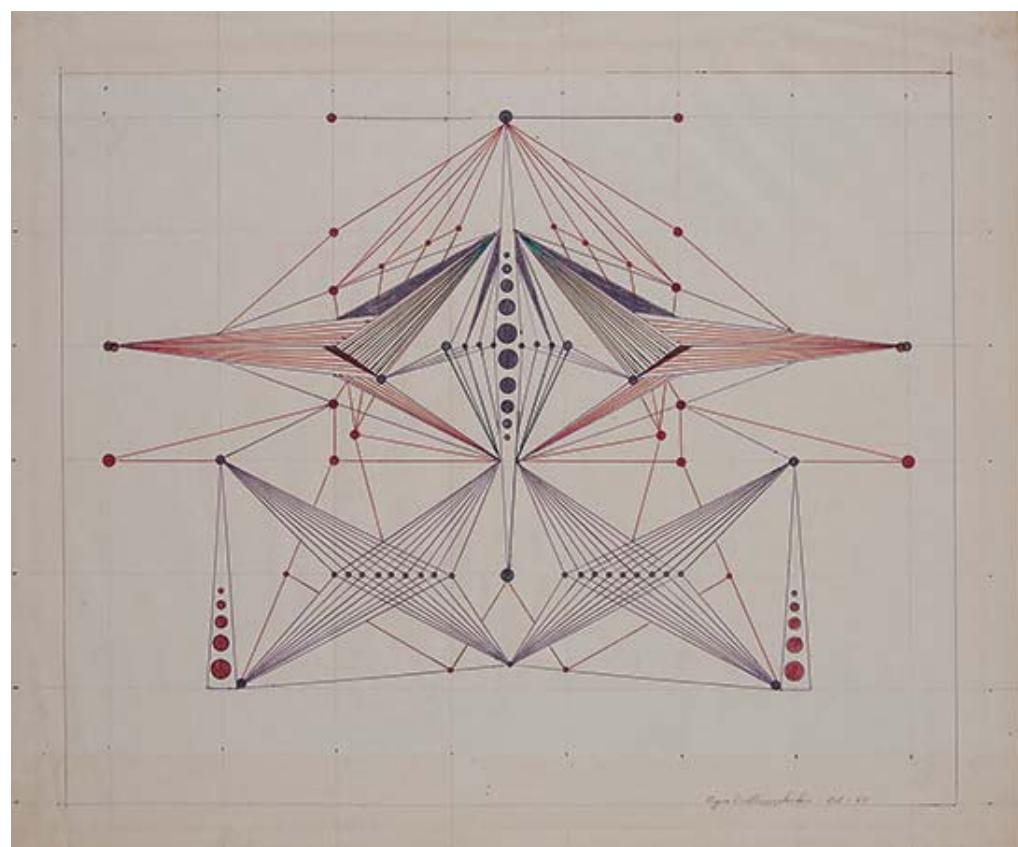
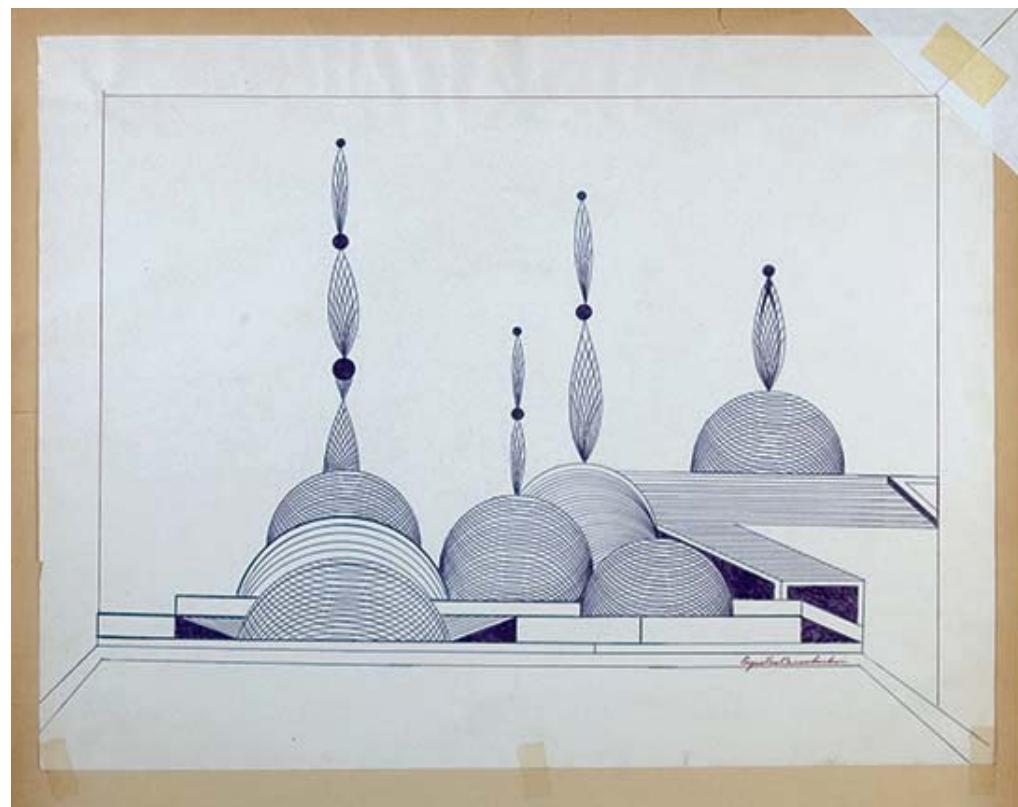
Antoni Gaudí, Sagrada Família (Barcelona), 1882–present. Photo: Jon Bower, Apexphotos, Getty Images.

#### Facing page, top

Untitled (drawing), n.d.; ink on paper; approx. 15 x 18 in. Collection of Selig D. Sacks, NY.

#### Facing page, bottom

Untitled (drawing), 1965; ink on paper; 15 x 18 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.



I identified a group of contemporary visual artists, like Ross Bleckner, Philip Taaffe, Louise Despont, Roxy Paine, and Susan Hefuna, who intersect with Von Bruenchenhein's aesthetics in various ways. In the case of Ross Bleckner (b. 1949), I was mostly interested in his early paintings related to AIDS, loss, and memory, like *In Sickness and In Health* (below left), a composition of what appear to be blood cells. The relationship between Bleckner and Von Bruenchenhein is based on the idea of a mutating cell, which can be linked to the idea of seed growth. Of course, Bleckner's imagery is more directly associated with the cellular pathologies related to the AIDS virus not botany, but the pattern of clustered and overlapping round shapes takes on similar visual properties.

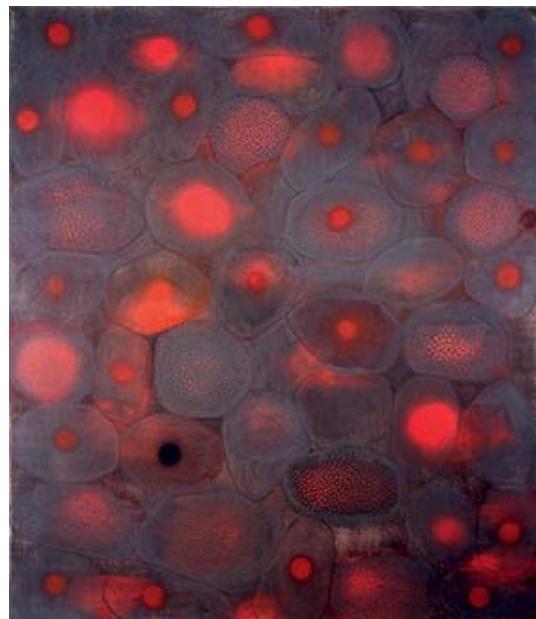
The painter, printer, and draftsman Philip Taaffe (b. 1955) has often been directly compared to Von Bruenchenhein. Taaffe employs many generative strategies to make his paintings, but the core of his practice is the "transformation of things (images, symbols, and signs) from one state of materiality (or immateriality) to another."<sup>1</sup> In *Sphenopsida* (below right), the five bands or towers in the painting come from the lexicons of historical architecture and ornamentation but bear a resemblance to the gossamer-like towers of Von Bruenchenhein's late paintings. For Taaffe, the content of his paintings is not preplanned; he is open to the idea of the organic composition through the layering of complex visual references. In the 2000s Taaffe started to use the difficult-to-control techniques of marbling and decalcomania, the transferring of paint from one surface to another, as methods for inviting chance and chaos into his compositions. Here the images start as blooms of watercolors and inks and grow through Taaffe's deft manipulations of the process into

#### **Below left**

Ross Bleckner, *In Sickness and In Health*, 1997; oil on linen; 84 x 72 in. © Ross Bleckner. Photo courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, NY.

#### **Below right**

Philip Taaffe, *Sphenopsida*, 1998–99; mixed media on canvas; 64 x 56 in. © Phillip Taaffe. Photo courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, NY.





**Above**

*No 622 Wand of the Genii*,  
1957; oil on fiberboard;  
23 1/2 x 23 3/4 in. John  
Michael Kohler Arts  
Center Collection.

variegated plant-like or mandala-related landscapes. These works are visually very close to Von Bruenchenhein's more abstract psychedelic paintings from the 1950s, such as *No 622 Wand of the Genii* (above), when he was first experimenting with applying paint with his fingers and other tools without the use of brushes.

Roxy Paine (b. 1966) has been exploring the ability to create and control chaos within systems for more than twenty years. His early "machines," which are designed to independently make paintings and sculptures, test the limits of the notion of creating unique but reproducible objects. He then began to make simulacra of hallucinogenic or poisonous plants and fungi, installing fields of them in museum-like

dioramas and larger site-specific installations. Paine says of these works:

I wasn't interested in the beauty of a mushroom, or in its form—casting a mushroom didn't interest me at all—what interested me was fungus as another way of understanding the world. So I would take a species and view it through the lens of morphology. I would study every permutation of how mushrooms grow, how they propagate. I studied them for months, looking at them as a series of elements, at the range of their formal properties and the rules by which they are implemented. Then I used those rules to create a new way of looking at the species, as an organism mushrooming into a mycological system. Creating a field of 2,000 (two million—or 20 million, if I'd had enough lifetimes) tied into genetics, into creating a genetic mixing board in my mind.<sup>2</sup>

His later series of sculptures called "Dendroids," such as *Maelstrom* (above), explore the translation of naturally generated forms like fissures, rivers, leaf veins and tree branches, and human nervous systems into large-scale constructed sculptures. What relates Paine to Von Bruenchenhein is his interest in how self-generating organic and nonorganic systems directly affect aesthetics and also the forms his work takes (facing page).

Two artists whose work I recently exhibited at the Drawing Center, Louise Despont and Susan Hefuna, also experiment with self-generating systems. Louise Despont (b. 1983) uses colored pencil and graphite on old ledger paper to explore the spiritual realm, organic geometries, energy paths, and architectural forms such as step wells and astrological structures. Despont says of her self-generative process:

I would finish a work and feel like there was no way I could ever find my way through that maze again. I think what has changed for me is that now I'm comfortable with this process. There is the part that I do control and there is the part that I do not control. I trust in this back and forth. I don't want to over mystify it, but I also don't want to discredit a process that really is beyond my understanding. There seems to be a handful of different ways the drawings develop, and sometimes I can recognize a pattern, but I enjoy it most when I am totally surprised by the work. With certain drawings I have to erase a lot. Other times, I don't have to erase anything. It's a process



#### Above

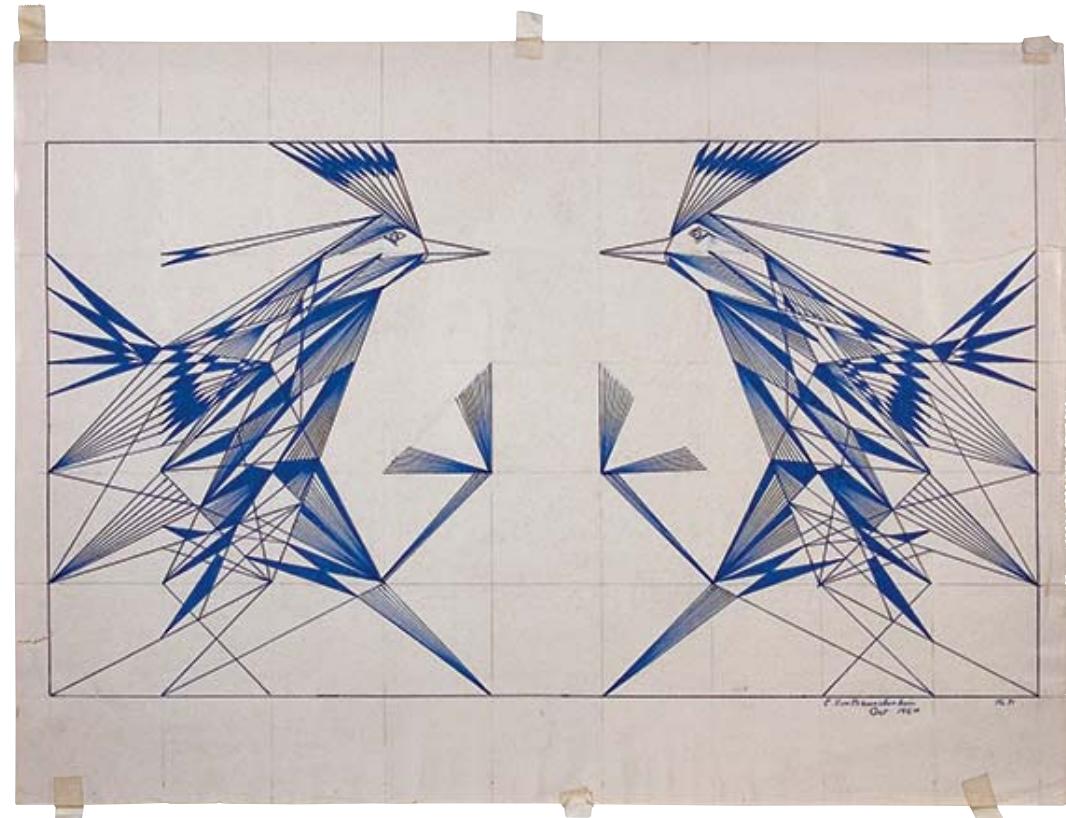
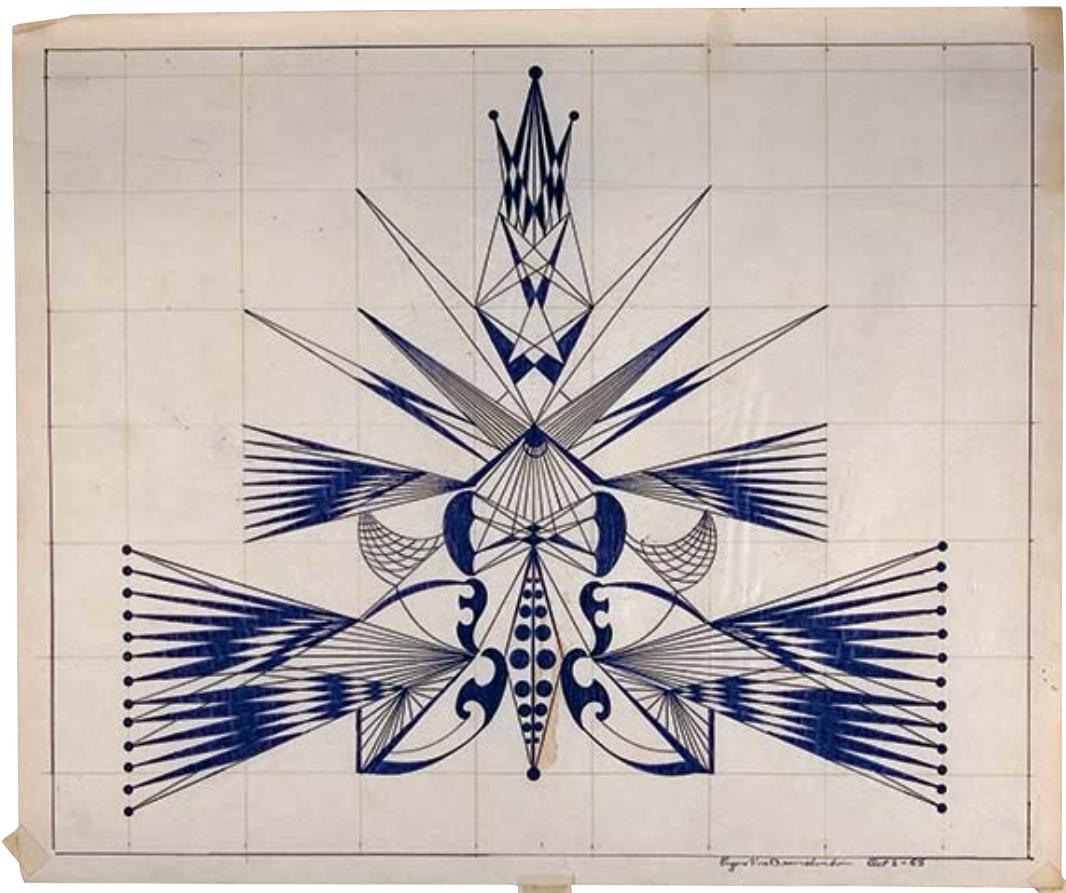
Roxy Paine, *Maelstrom*, 2009; stainless steel; 22 × 140 × 50 in. Commissioned for exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Iris B. and Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, NY. Photo: Jeremy Liebman.

#### Facing page, top

Untitled (drawing), 1965; ink on paper; approx. 15 × 18 in. Collection Selig Sacks, NY.

#### Facing page, bottom

No 71, 1964; ink on paper; approx. 15 × 18 in. Collection Selig D. Sacks, NY.



of putting one foot in front of the other. Each decision is a step toward a more focused drawing, and the work unfolds itself.<sup>3</sup>

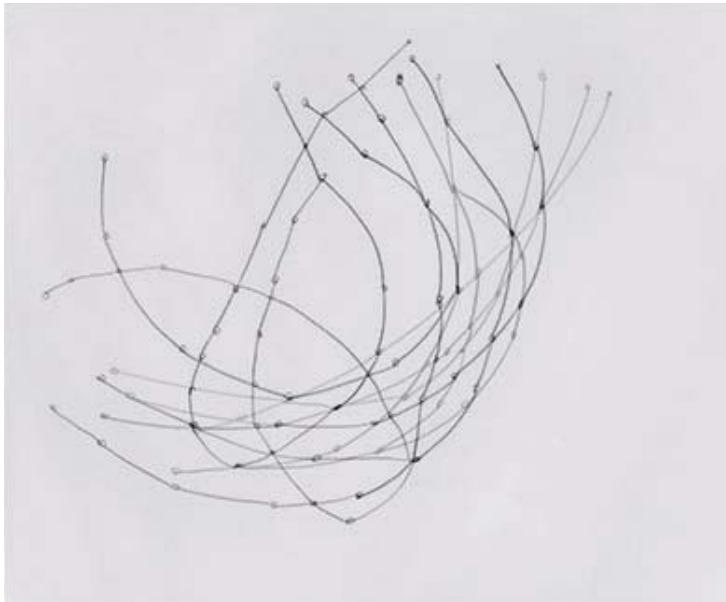
Despont's commitment to letting her compositions evolve from primary forms like grids, circles, diamonds, and ovals is again reminiscent of Von Bruenchenhein's use of a limited vocabulary of natural forms to build his sculptures. In addition, her large-scale drawings, like *Energy Scaffolds and Information Architecture (Embryo)* (below), with their isolated symmetries and mechanical constructions made using "tools" like architectural stencils, French curves, compasses, and rulers, resemble Von Bruenchenhein's drawings in the wallpaper sample book. The precision in Von Bruenchenhein's drawings suggests that he also used drafting tools to create the radiating lines and arabesques in his self-generative and experimental works on paper.

Susan Hefuna (b. 1962) uses a series of connective points to motivate the direction, complexity, and scale of her automatic compositions. Some of her drawings are loose grid structures that reference architectural blueprints or massing diagrams, while others are built from even looser and loopy lines that look like pathways, rivers, human hair, or airplane flight patterns. In an untitled drawing on tracing paper from 2011



**Left**

Louise Despont, *Energy Scaffolds and Information Architecture (Embryo)*, 2015; colored pencil, graphite, and ink on antique ledger book pages; 54 1/2 x 50 1/2 in. (twelve ledger book pages). Collection of Nagesh Alai, Mumbai, India. Photo: courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY.



#### Above left

Susan Hefuna, *Untitled*, 2011; graphite on paper and tracing paper; 14 x 17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, IL.

#### Above right

Untitled (drawing), 1968; ink on paper; approx. 18 x 15 in. Collection of Selig D. Sacks, NY.

(above left), with its asymmetrical wispy lines, one can clearly see how the plotted points provide an understructure for the drawing. In most of Von Bruenchenhein's drawings, points or dots are also clearly part of the compositional strategy, but in his case they aren't connective—rather, they punctuate and act as the end point of articulated lines and curves, as seen in a 1968 drawing (above right).

In all of these examples of self-generating aesthetic systems that I have proposed as relating to Von Bruenchenhein, one thing remains consistent: the desire to synthesize organic (botany, chaos, automation, natural geometry) with the rational (mathematics, structure, and image). These ideas may remain somewhat outside of Von Bruenchenhein's direct concerns related to seed growth and the botanical world, but I feel strongly that they all are useful models for further exploration and can help set new boundaries for research into Von Bruenchenhein's creative methods. As well, they allow us to look further into new links between Von Bruenchenhein and the fields of architecture, design, and contemporary art, which I think should be the most important aspect and goal of future research into the artist's lifelong multidisciplinary work.

#### NOTES

1 John Yau, "The Art of Being Susceptible," *Philip Taaffe: Works on Paper*, ed. Georges Armaos, Raymond Foye, and Alison McDonald (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010), 9.

2 Jill Spalding, "Roxy Paine Interview: 'The Best Ideas Come Out of Long Gestation,'" *Studio*

*International* (November 2014); see [www.studiointernational.com/index.php/roxy-paine-interview-denuded-lens-marianne-boesky-gallery-checkpoint-dendroids](http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/roxy-paine-interview-denuded-lens-marianne-boesky-gallery-checkpoint-dendroids).

3 Brett Littman, *Louise Despont: Energy Scaffolds and Information Architecture* (New York: Drawing Center, 2016), 47.