

# **Positions through Contextualising**

Tao-MA GCD

# 1. Direction Update

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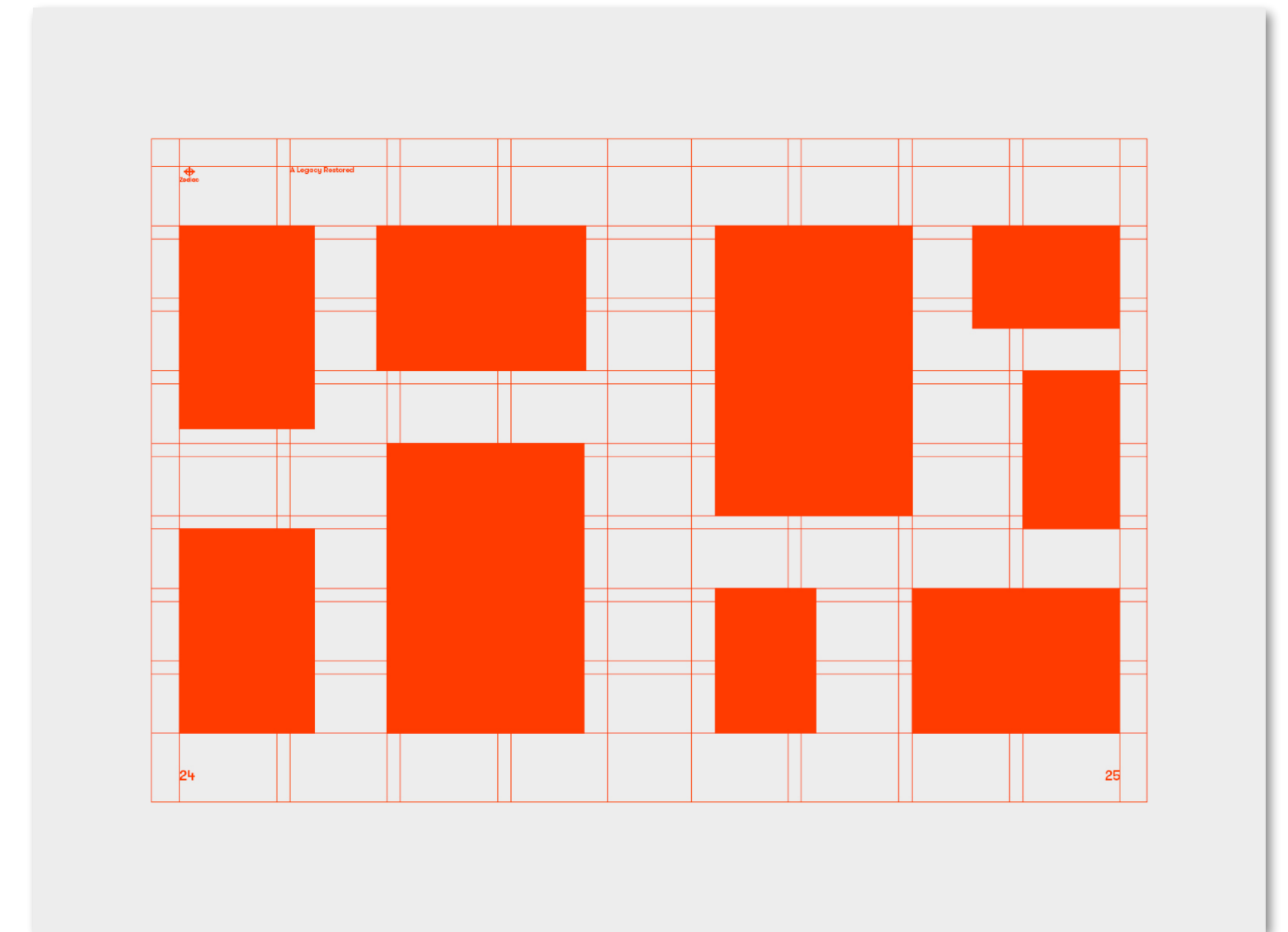
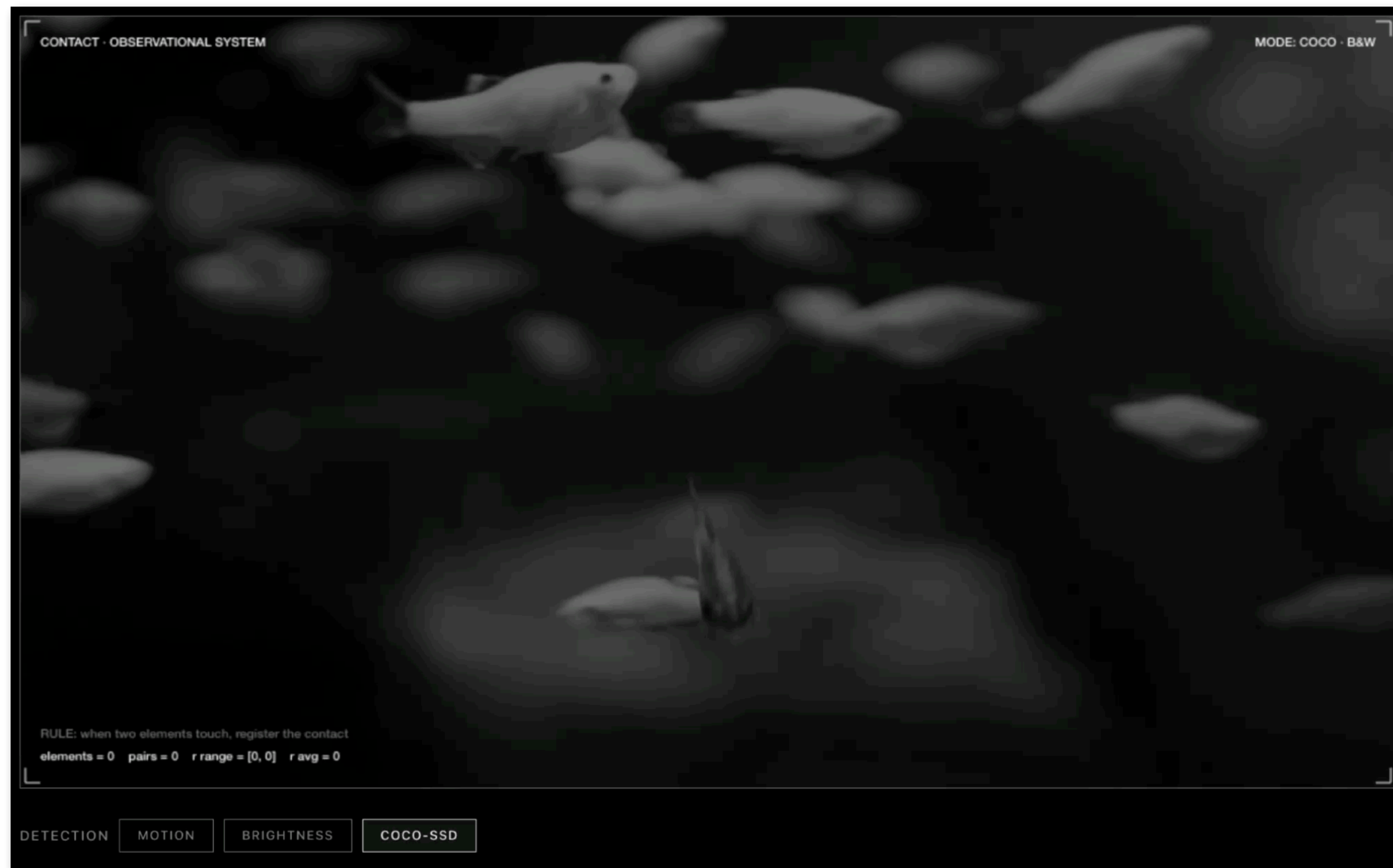
# 1. Direction Update

After completing the Iterating brief, my line of enquiry has clarified into the following position: **an apparatus assumed to be neutral is never neutral once chosen.** CONTACT explored this through machine-vision detectors. For Contextualising, I want to continue exploring tools that have been "set up" as neutral, which extends my enquiry into a different but adjacent territory: **the grid system in graphic design,** treated as another apparatus that has been historically constructed as "objective" and "rational." It lets me open the question further: how do "neutral" visual systems **shape** what counts as legible information?

And a more granular question follows: when a single grid system is executed by different agents on the same content, what irreconcilable hierarchies of information emerge through shifts in "neutrality"? What does the visualisation of those differences let a viewer see about the grid system as a **definition** of what is neutral?

# 1. Direction Update

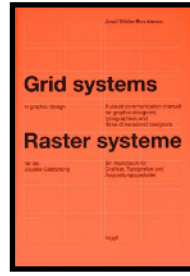



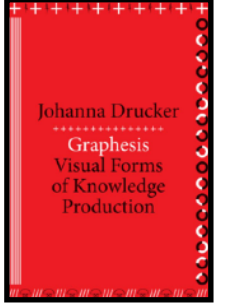
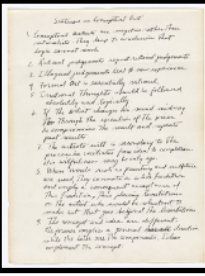


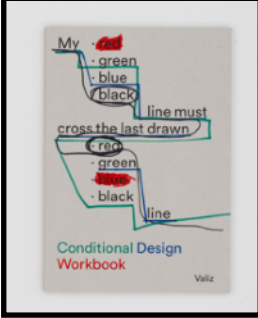

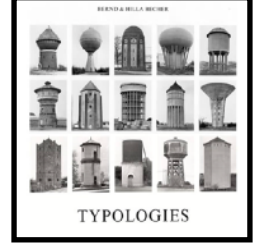

Coding conventions that appear to be assumed neutral are in fact no longer neutral once they are chosen. My exploration of the “neutral” stance of coding conventions led me to shift my perspective—how do so-called “neutral” visual systems shape what counts as readable information?



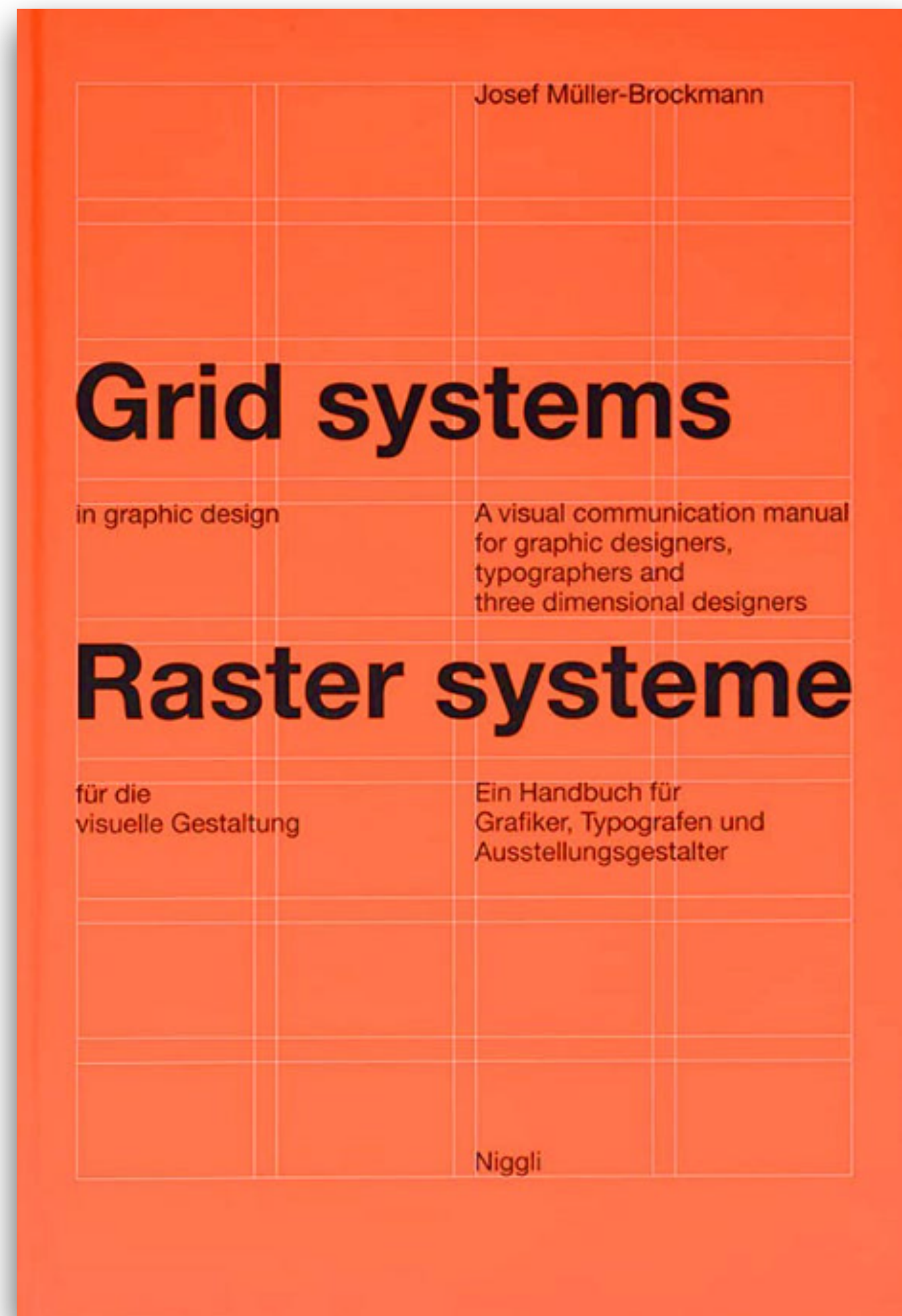
## **2. Bibliography**

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# 2. Bibliography

Axis 1: Grid / Rhetoric of Neutrality	Axis 2: Information / Mediation / Visualisation as Politics	Axis 3: Same Instruction / Different Execution / Neutrality as an approach
<p>Müller-Brockmann <i>Grid Systems</i> (1981)</p> 	<p>Chun 'On Patterns and Proxies' (2018)</p> 	<p>Yoko Ono <i>Grapefruit</i> (1964)</p> 
<p>Crouwel &amp; van Toorn 'The Debate' (1972/2015)</p> 	<p>Drucker <i>Graphesis</i> (2014)</p> 	<p>LeWitt 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' (1969)</p> 
<p>Kinross 'The Rhetoric of Neutrality' (1985)</p> 	<p>Latour 'Visualisation and Cognition' (1986)</p> 	<p>Conditional Design Manifesto (2013)</p> 
	<p>Haraway 'Situated Knowledges' (1988)</p> 	<p>Becher <i>Typologies of Industrial Buildings</i> (2004)</p> 
	<p>Akten et al. <i>Learning to See</i> (2019)</p> 	

## 2.1 Müller-Brockmann, J. (1981) Grid Systems in Graphic Design



"Working with the grid system means **submitting** to laws of universal validity." (Müller-Brockmann, 1981, p. 10)

The object of critique. Müller-Brockmann himself states the position this project will be in dialogue with: "Working with the grid system means **submitting** to laws of universal validity." The word *submitting* exposes what the doctrine of neutrality conceals. The grid is not a neutral assistant but an **authoritative order that demands the designer's submission**. To examine "the grid as an apparatus that pre-decides what counts as order," this canonical Swiss grid manual appears in the bibliography not as authority, but as the specific historical voice the project will be in dialogue with.

## 2.2 Kinross, R. (1985) 'The Rhetoric of Neutrality'

Robin Kinross

### The Rhetoric of Neutrality

#### Introduction

"Information design" has emerged within recent years as a distinct area of practice and investigation, bringing together – among principal participants – graphic and typographic designers, text writers and editors, computer engineers, psychologists, and linguistic scientists. Risking oversimplification, one might say that the information design movement (though *movement* may be too strong a term for it) has been concerned about discovering what is effective graphic and typographic communication. It has been concerned with the needs of users rather than with the expressive possibilities present in design tasks. This is its point of difference with graphic design as usually practiced and taught. The movement is an international one, though centered in Britain and the United States. It has generated a good deal of literature, including, as forums for discussion, two specialist journals: *Visible Language* (from 1971, formerly the *Journal of Typographic Research*, started in 1967) and *Information Design Journal* (started in 1979).

This essay has two broad intentions.<sup>1</sup> First, to discuss, through detailed examination of some of the products with which information designers have been typically concerned, whether information can be neutral. And then to move on from this close criticism of examples to discuss the larger social and political dimensions present, even within the smallest and most mundane designed fragment. Thus, both explicitly and by example of the mode of argument employed, the essay makes some criticism of information design as it is so far developed.

#### Purity of information: some railway timetables

The starting point for this investigation is a passage in an article by Gui Bonsiepe that has been a principal source for recent work in visual rhetoric: "Informative assertions are interlarded [*durchsetzt*] with rhetoric to a greater or lesser degree. Information without rhetoric is a pipe-dream which ends up in the break-down of communication and total silence. 'Pure' information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, to bring it within the range of experience, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins."<sup>2</sup>

1) The essay was originally presented as a paper at the first Information Design Conference, held at Cranfield, England in December 1984. The author is grateful to the editors of *Design Issues* for their criticisms of an earlier draft. In the text now published it seemed appropriate to the aims and content of the paper to retain as much as possible of its original colloquial manner.

"Nothing is free of rhetoric, that visual manifestations emerge from particular historical circumstances, that ideological vacuums do not exist." (Kinross, 1985, p. 29)

Kinross's method begins from a single dotleader on a railway timetable and arrives at an argument about how any information, once given a visible form, enters the territory of rhetoric through typography, typeface, colour, structure, and style. He shows how to move **from a small specific detail to a large critical claim without losing rigour**. Later in this project I will use his **timetable** as the material through which to extend the critique to the grid system itself. Kinross is the most likely candidate for one of the two critical analyses.

## 2.3 Latour, B. (1986) 'Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together'

TEORIE VĚDY XXX/2 2008

POZNÁNÍ A VIZUALIZACE  
ANEB JAK MYSLET OČIMA A RUKAMA

Bruno Latour\*

Visualization and Cognition:  
Thinking with Eyes and Hands

Abstract

*Bruno Latour's article challenges the preconceived notions with which the scholars have approached the Great Divide between prescientific and scientific cultures. In order to account for the immense effects of science and technology without assuming a single grand cause for them, he suggests to focus on many, small unexpected and practical sets of skills to produce images, and to read and write about them. However, only those changes that intervene favorably in the agonistic situation in science should be considered. Crucial in this respect is the emergence of numerous "immutable mobiles" – easily transported, accumulated, combined, yet lasting objects – which made possible the mobilization of new scientific inscriptions and of new ways of looking at and presenting them. They help to constitute an optically consistent visual culture with such technologies as printing press. Their combination on the surface of paper and subsequent mobilization of allies can usher in bureaucratic mode of domination over the world and people in the scientific field. The effects of science and technology thus become essentially a question of a shift in power relations enabled by the manipulation of inscriptions.*

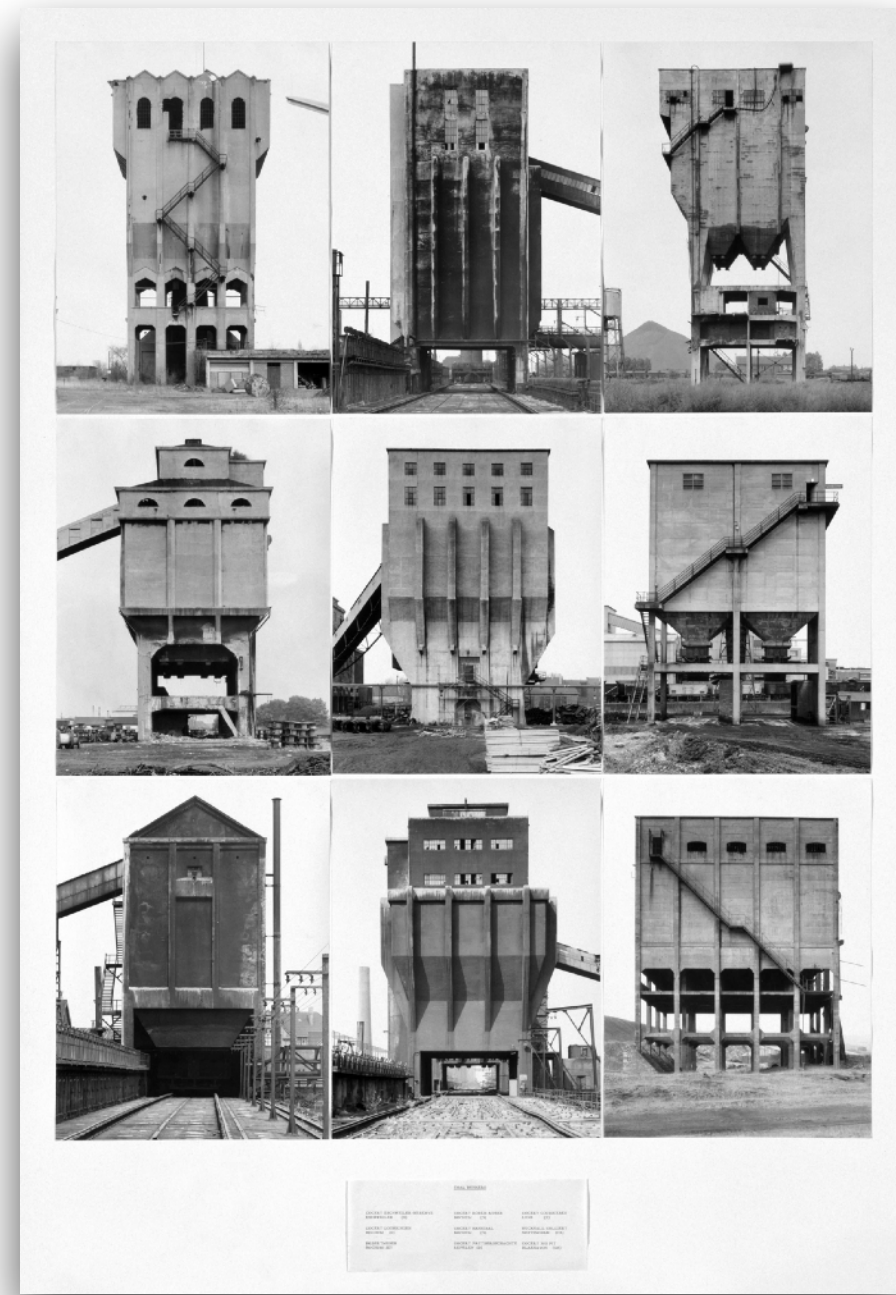
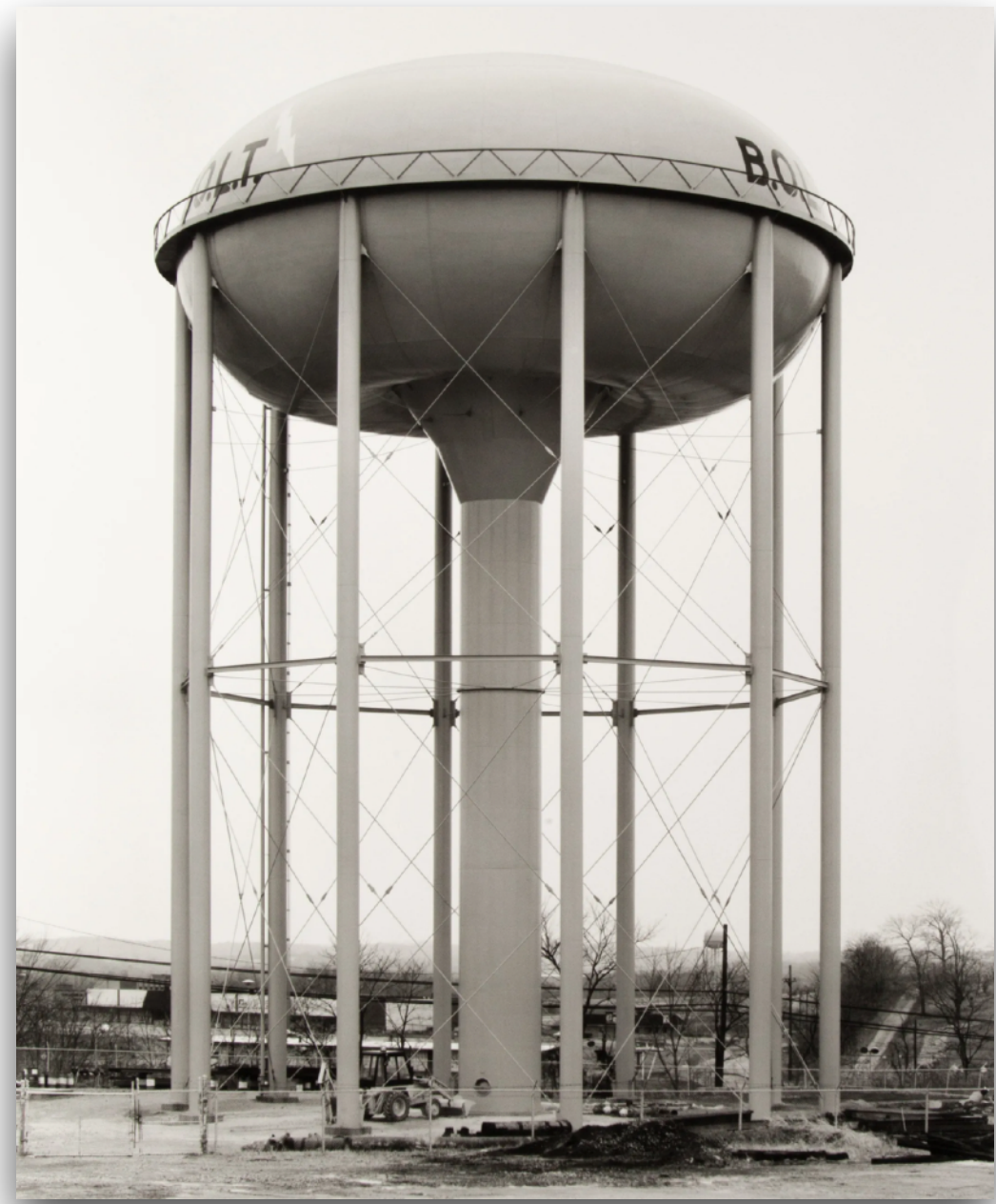
Keywords: science; power; technology; writing; visual

\* Kontakt na autora: Bruno Latour, Centre de sociologie des organisations, 19 rue Amélie, 75007 – Paris, France (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr>).

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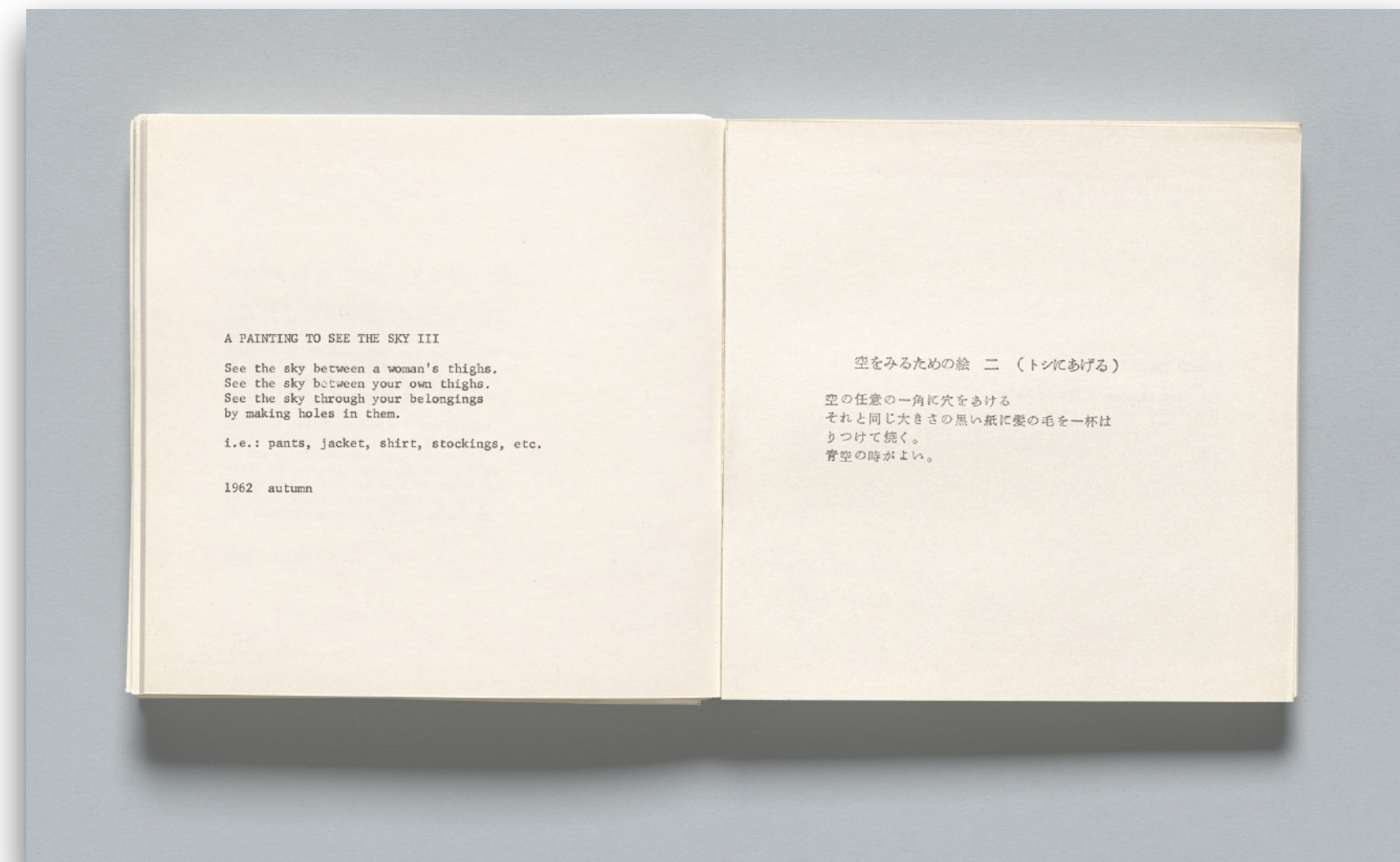
Latour's argument that flat visual artefacts, including maps, diagrams, charts, and grids, are "**immutable mobiles**" through which Western science, capital, and empire have constructed and circulated knowledge directly extends my enquiry beyond design history into the politics of information itself. This reference allows the grid discussion to open outward into a wider question of how visual systems shape what becomes knowable.

## 2.4 Becher, B. and Becher, H. (2004) Typologies of Industrial Buildings



The Bechers photographed similar industrial buildings using a single rigorous protocol. The photographs were then arranged in grids. Their "neutral" documentary protocol is itself an apparatus. In their work, the grid is not a neutral display device but the mechanism through which a typology comes into being. A visual system that claims neutrality may, **in fact, be one in which the supposedly "recorded object" is itself a category produced by the system.**

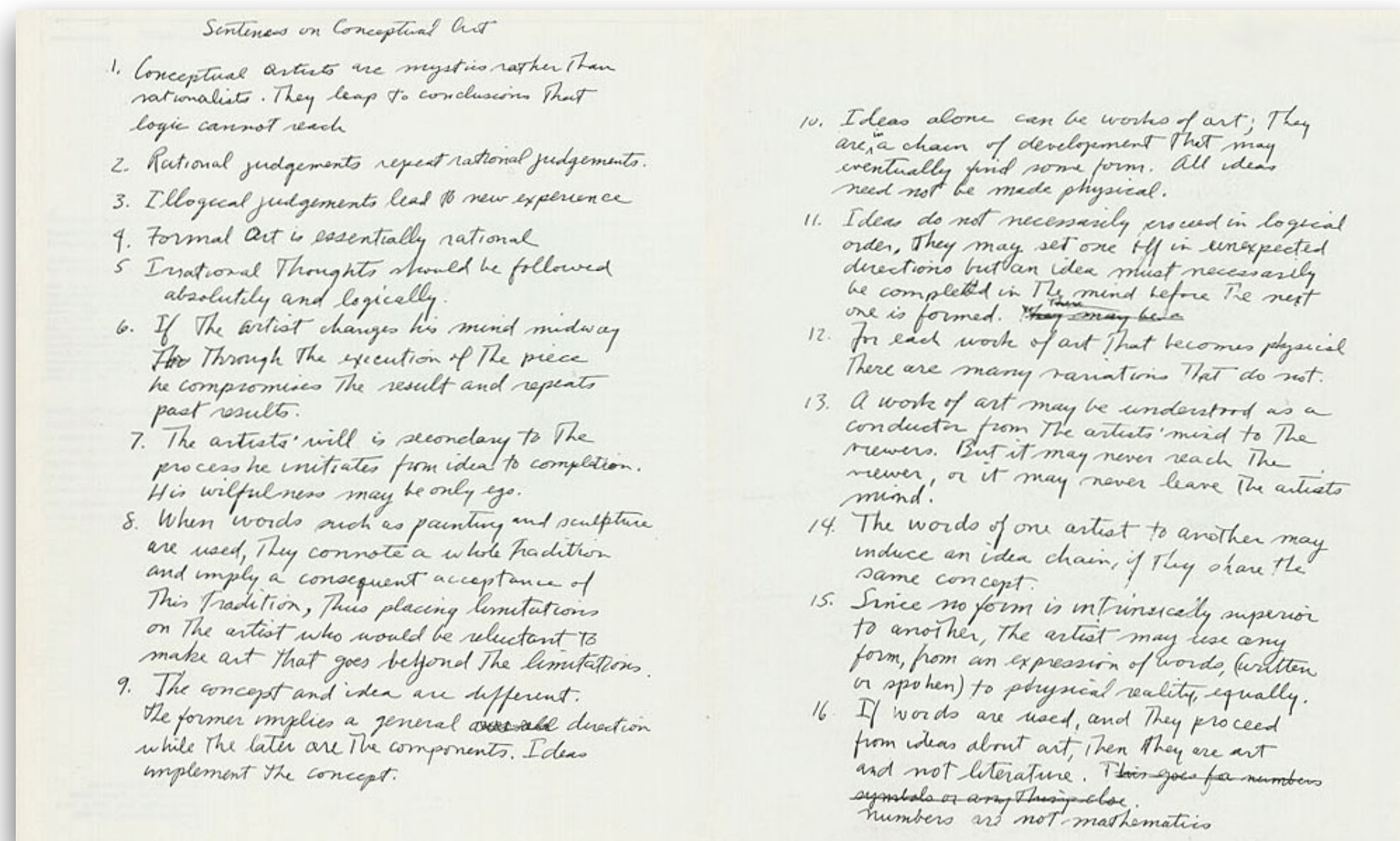
## 2.5 Ono, Y. *Grapefruit*



*Grapefruit* is the artistic ancestor of my method. Each page contains an instruction designed to be executed by different readers, producing different and irreconcilable realisations of the same rule. This is the same structural logic CONTACT performs at the level of machine vision, and it is a way of investigating the variables that emerge inside a so-called neutral rule.

## 2.6 LeWitt, S. (1969) 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'

LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* are the closest historical articulation of the methodological position my project takes. Once the rule is set, the process must run its course; the side-effects the artist cannot anticipate are not failures but the next set of ideas. Together with Yoko Ono and Conditional Design, LeWitt forms the third pillar of Axis 3. He provides the most rigorous demonstration that a single fixed instruction does not yield a single result, but a population of equally legitimate divergences. This way of working is also a key methodology for sustaining neutrality and operating under a pre-set rule.



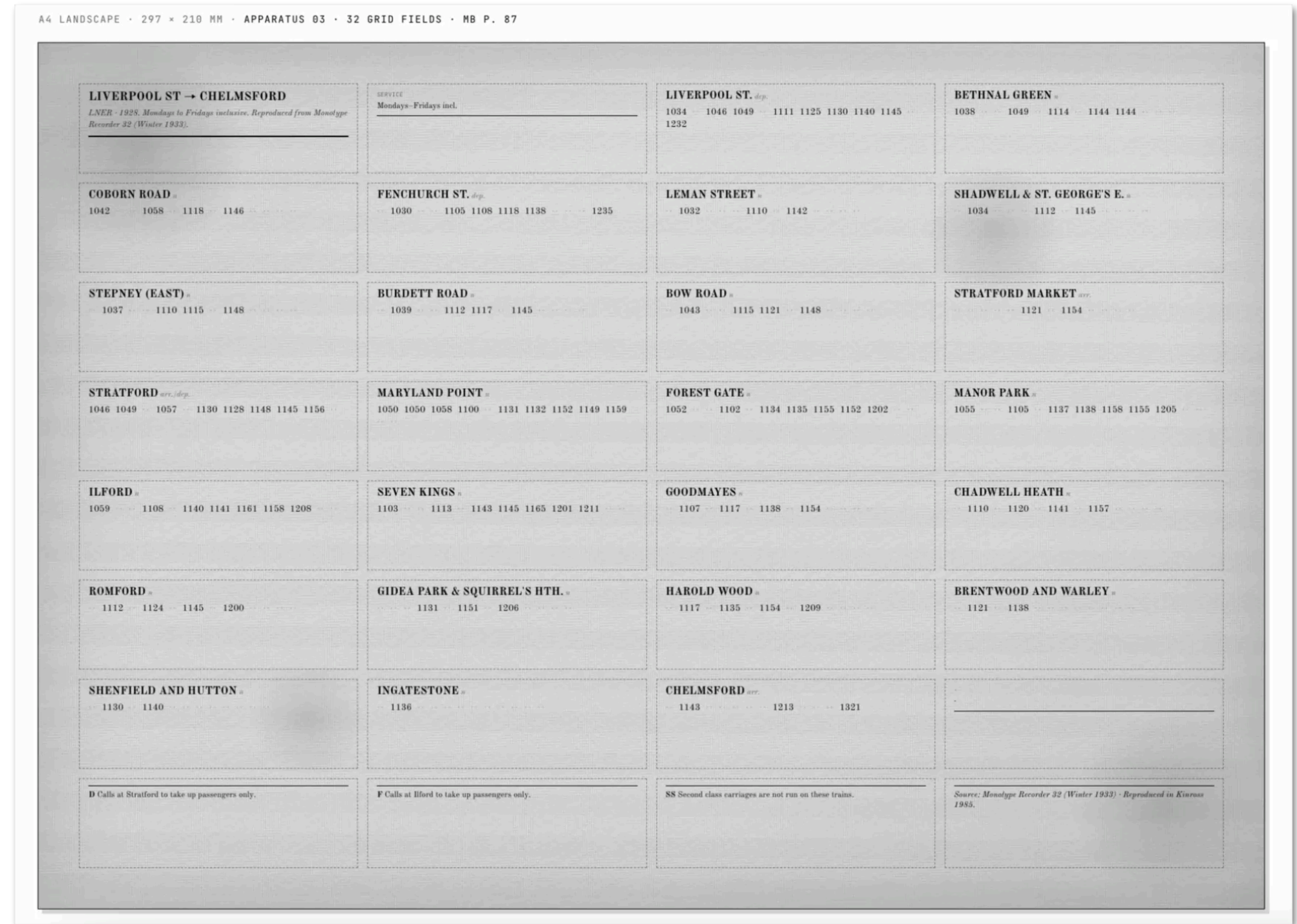
# **3. Studio Response**

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# 3. Studio Response

At first, the grid system was the apparatus — a fixed visual order, claiming objectivity, demanding submission.

Using Kinross’s railway timetable and the grid system in graphic design, I devised a “variable grid” to explore a fixed visual order.



### 3. Studio Response

Then the rule replaced the grid — the same claim to neutrality, but now executable, contestable, made visible through whoever carries it out.

During this phase, I drew on the creative principles of LeWitt, Yoko Ono, and the Bechers, and **set down the key principles of grid design.**

#### TIMETABLE PIECE

A piece of instructions for a single executor.

Materials provided:

- A single railway timetable (eg: Kinross 1985, Fig. 1: London North-Eastern Region, 1928).
- A single grid system (Müller-Brockmann 1981, Grid Systems in Graphic Design).
- A web tool through which the grid is operated.

Instructions:

Choose a number of columns.

Choose a number of rows.

Choose a gutter.

All twenty-five stations must remain visible.

All twelve trains must remain visible.

You may decide what is large.

You may decide what is small.

You may decide what is foreground.

You may decide what is footnote.

Once chosen, the grid is fixed. The process runs its course.

Submit one screenshot of the result.

Do not explain your decisions.

Note: This piece is not the timetable. The piece is the act of submitting the timetable to a grid.