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A Harmony of Opposites

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A HARMONY OF OPPOSITES

by

PATRICIA REPPENHAGEN

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TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF IDEAS, CONCEPT

The central concept of my work is to bring opposing visual elements into harmony with one another. I feel that every aspect of life is composed of contradictory components or forces: order vs. chaos, the beautiful vs. the offensive, work vs. leisure, excitement vs. stability, method vs. chance. The examples are endless. These opposing elements are components in life which need to be balanced against each other to achieve harmony and order, as opposed to strife and conflict. Personally, the need for order and control in my own life is important and, I feel, is reflected in the above classical idea of harmony and balance.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

A wide range of experiences and interests has influenced me in the development of my work. I have always lived in urban areas: Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and now Portland. Like most other people, especially those living in the city, I have been exposed to the attention-getting tactics of the mass media: billboards, neon signs, posters, handbills, television commercials. My awareness of the visual imagery in advertising has been heightened through my studies and work as a graphic designer. Since the representation of specific subject matter has also always interested me, as opposed to the motifs of non-objective art, it is not surprising that my work can be seen as having some similarity to some of the imagery associated with the Pop Art Movement. The clean, graphic shapes of Allan d'Archangelo's Highway Number 80, 1964 (ill. 1), are similar to the forms in my Tomatoes and Grapefruit painting (ill. 8). The straight, diagonal lines of the highway resemble the diagonal lines of the grid behind the fruit. The organic forms of the landscape are strikingly similar to the irregular shapes inside the tomatoes and grapefruit. Another Pop artist, Andy Warhol, used the posterization process that I have adopted in my work. This device, which is commonly used

in advertising art, accounts for the similar "high contrast look" of Warhol's Elvis I and Elvis II, 1964 (ill.2), and my Crossing Pedestrians painting (ill.10).

I have always enjoyed mathematics. This was a special interest of mine during my studies at Wayne State University. Also I had four years of accelerated math and science in high school. The mathematical challenge of my geometric grids, which are superimposed on some of my imagery, is a particular delight to me. In my Resting Man painting (ill.9), I applied the algebraic formula of $\frac{X+1}{2}$, $X=1,2,3,4$ to determine the number of inches of gradated space in the horizontal gray bars and the spaces between them. In this vein, Victor Vasarely has caught my attention. He says, "Everything that I have been able to produce of major scope has tallied as by enchantment with the most recent achievements of science and technology."¹ Just as Vasarely employs technology through the use of a computer, I use darkroom techniques, a projector and airbrush. The geometric grid in my Onions II painting (ill. 13) was directly inspired by the upper right-hand corner of Vasarely's Supernovae, 1959-61 (ill. 3). Patterns achieved through geometry are an important element in Vasarely's work as well as in my own. From this purely technical description, it might be feared

¹ Marcel Joray, Vasarely (Switzerland, Editions Du Griffon, 1976), p. 44.

that dryness and sterility might afflict the work. Hopefully the artist will be able to use these technological tools in an imaginative and creative way to make personal and unique works of art.

Another artist who has influenced me is Georgia O'Keefe. I remember being especially taken by one of her paintings from the Jack in the Pulpit Series. I saw it at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1978. At that time, I admired her use of an enlarged image, as well as the subject matter of the flower, with its elegant organic shapes. These elements are apparent in my Pineapple I painting and drawing (ill. 14 and 19). Note the similarity of composition and form of these works and her Single Lily with Red, 1928 (ill. 4). O'Keefe is loosely associated with the Precisionist Movement, and Charles Sheeler is one of the predominant artists of that movement. Sheeler's subject matter is typical of the Precisionists; factories, skyscrapers, railroads and bridges. Although I do not take my subject matter from the American industrial scene, I do use man-made geometric imagery. Take a look at Charles Sheeler's Water, 1945 (ill. 5). He uses photographs to define his initial imagery. His paintings are also brought to a sharply defined and near-flawless finish, with little evidence to me of brushstrokes or the trials and hesitations of arriving at the finished stage. I hope my work shares this quality, which I mainly attribute to that portion

of my personality which demands a high degree of "precision" in the work. Other similarities to Sheeler's work include the use of straight lines, flat planes and formalized geometric compositions.

During Fall Term 1981, my research for an art history term paper, entitled A Question of Art and Science: Georges Seurat, made me aware of some interesting parallels in our thinking. In a letter to Maurice Beaubourg, dated August 28, 1890, Seurat gave a complete exposition of his esthetic:

ESTHETIC

Art is harmony.

Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of similar elements of value, hue and line, considered according to their dominants and under the influence of lighting, in gay, calm, or sad combinations.

The opposites are:

For value, a more luminous, light, for a darker one.

For hue, the complementaries; i.e., a certain red opposed to its complementary, etc., red-green, orange-blue, yellow-violet.

For line, those forming a right angle.²

I was startled to find such a striking similarity to my ideas about art and the harmony of opposites. Our concern for the balance of light and dark values is parallel. Our approaches differ slightly concerning hue

²Letter of Seurat to Beaubourg, August 28, 1890, as published by William Homer, Seurat and the Science of Painting (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964), pp.186-187.

and line. I use black, white and grays vs. color, as opposed to complementary hues. And instead of using lines of opposing directions, as Seurat suggests, I employ organic, irregular shapes and lines vs. geometric, man-made forms. Seurat states that "Art is harmony." I think of life in general and each of our personal life experiences as being harmony. I see most decisions and experiences as being the resolution of two opposing forces which represent the extremes of possible behavior. This is actually what I am trying to represent in my artwork.

CHAPTER III

INCORPORATION OF CONCEPT IN THE WORK

I have developed the ideas in my work by trying to incorporate opposite visual elements in a harmonious balance. By a harmonious balance, I mean artwork that is optically pleasing to me. Specifically, I use contrary formal elements, such as irregular, organic, curvilinear shapes and lines vs. regular, geometric forms; color vs. black, white and grays; gradated color vs. flat color. In the Around the Table painting (ill. 7) the seated figures are made up of irregular, organic shapes which are contrasted with the regular, geometric elements of the circular table and grid-like tile floor. Similarly, the Bananas drawing (ill. 22) shows the brightly colored, organic forms of the fruit played against the contrasting gray, man-made grid.

My view is generally a positive, optimistic one, particularly in my outlook on resolving conflicts between humankind and nature. I want to present a successful relationship between man-made and organic forms by bringing them into harmonious visual interaction. I also try to use colors that are pleasing to myself, although some of the darker colors in my works could be interpreted as gloomy. Looking again at Seurat's Theory of Esthetic:

Gaiety of value is the light dominant; of hue, the warm dominant; of lines, lines above the horizontal. Calmness of value is the equality of dark and light; of hue, of warm and cool; and the horizontal for line. Sadness of value is the dark dominant; of hue, the cool dominant; and of line, downward direction. ³

To a degree, I have referred to this portion of Seurat's theory. However, I have made allowances for color selection with regard to subject matter, and the darker colors of my work conform with the division of the image into three major value groups (discussed in Part IV, PROCESS). I directly use his principle of "Calmness of value is the equality of dark and light."

A similar value range and area coverage of each value is the key element which brings the black, white, and gray areas into visual harmony with the color areas. This can be easily seen in the Reading Couple painting (ill. 11) as well as in the Tomatoes and Grapefruit painting (ill.8). The image remains intact and recognizable because the values of the gray and the color representing one shape are the same. I have always remembered Johannes Itten's principle, "Equality of light or dark relates colors to each other, tying or bracketing them together. Light-dark contrast between them is extinguished. This is an invaluable resource of

³Homer, pp. 186-187.

artistic design."⁴

The pair of opposites that I have most recently incorporated into the work can best be seen in the Onions I painting and in the Green Pepper I and Pineapple I drawings (ill. 12, 19 and 20). This is the use of color gradation vs. flat color areas. In the paintings, the gradation of color is achieved with the use of an airbrush and in the drawings, with varying intensity of colored pencil.

My central concept also determines subject matter. I look for imagery that has natural organic form as well as geometrically based form. Figures in urban settings and fruits and vegetables contrasted with geometric elements provide the necessary opposing shapes and lines. At the beginning of my program, I started out with human figures in man-made geometric settings. I found that this imagery sometimes leads viewers to receive unintended messages from the positions and the activities of the people shown. For instance, the Crossing Pedestrians image (ill. 10 and 15) often elicited comments about the social isolation of these urban dwellers. This was quite a learning experience for me. Initially, I was upset by these comments. Then I realized that these comments

⁴Johannes Itten, The Art of Color (New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1973), p. 53.

from the viewers were certainly valid ones, and that perhaps I did include other messages of my own on a level that was not a conscious one. So, I have realized that ideas are perceived differently by the viewer and that this really is acceptable.

The fruits and vegetables have a more neutral content. Their visual image is consistent and exists in a wide range of cultures, so they have little meaning or connotations of their own. I also find them to be a bit humorous, especially those on a larger-than-life scale, like the five foot tall Pineapple I painting (ill. 14).

CHAPTER IV

PROCESS

I use a well-defined, methodical process to produce the work. This systematic procedure suits my temperament and parallels my approach to other areas of my life. I begin by taking photographs. After having the film developed, I take the negatives into the darkroom and expose the image to a high contrast film called Kodalith. I experiment with several different time exposures until I have two films that have broken the image into the desired value families. This step in the process, called posterization, breaks the imagery into three general value groups with approximately equal area coverage of each value. This helps give my work a uniform look as well as creating a more personal, stylized way of seeing imagery. Posterization of the image enables me to see the basic structure of the subject. Using an Astroscope opaque projector, I project each of these kodalith images separately onto the canvas or paper, and then pencil in outlines of the form. The projected outlines are used as guides for the application of acrylic paint or colored pencil. Some painted areas are masked with frisket film and then sprayed, using a Model 350 Wagner Power Painter. The areas of flat color are obtained

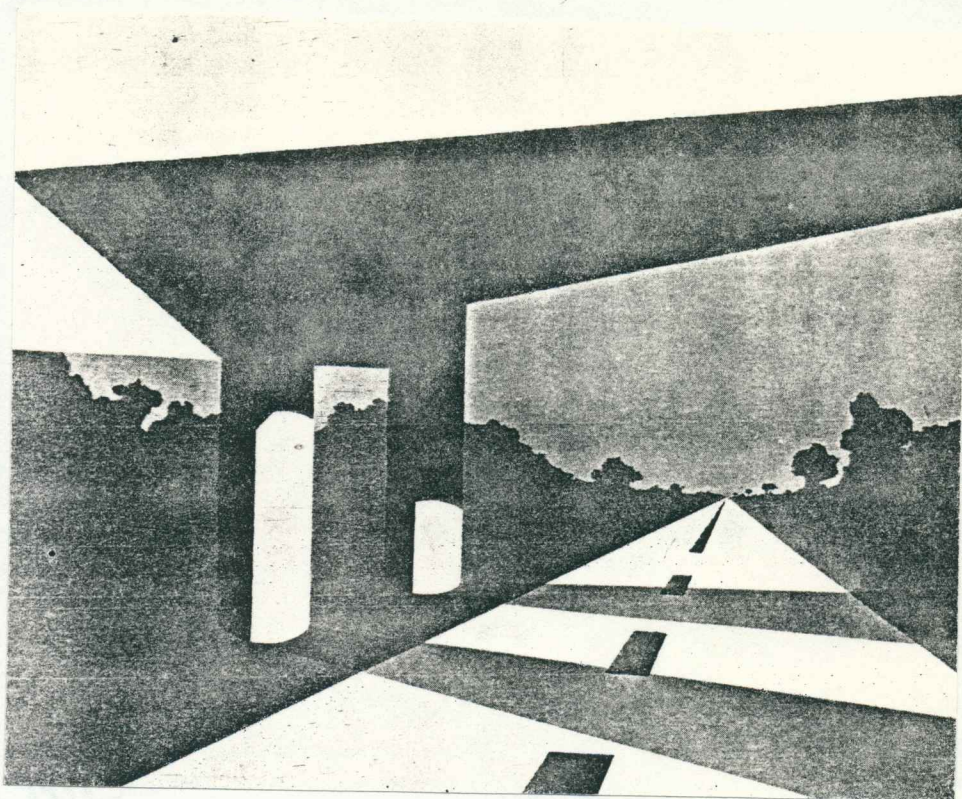
with several thin coats of paint applied with a brush.

I have been using the spray gun on larger areas of recent paintings as I master the technical problems of this technique. A considerable number of changes and additions are made from the initial pencil outline. Some changes are made to emphasize the central theme of the work and others to make allowances for practical considerations, such as the amount of detail that can be handled.

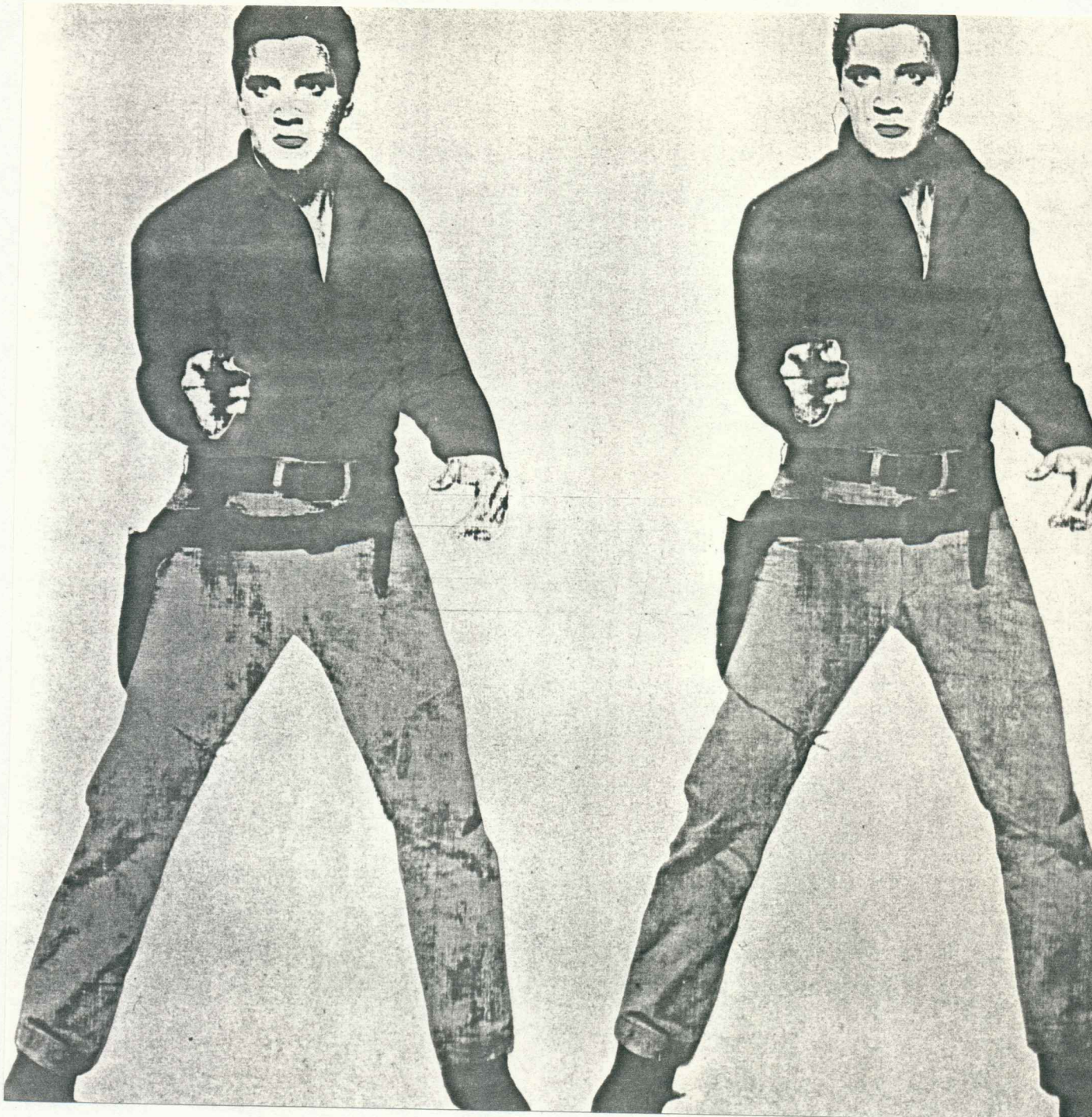
CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS

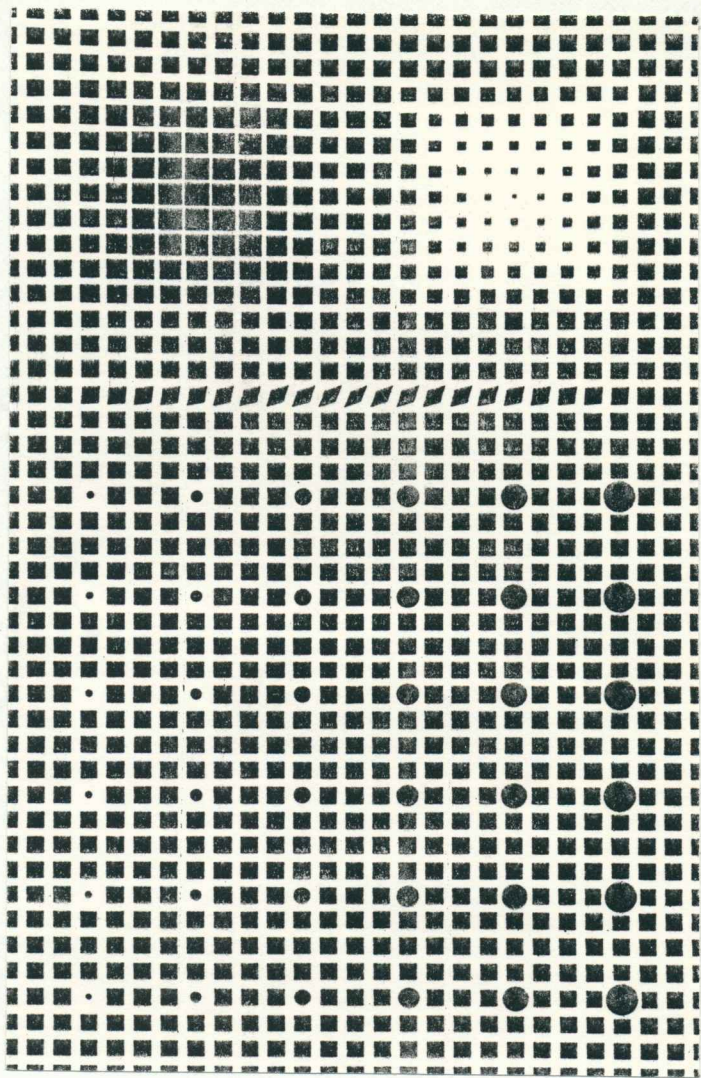
As my graduate program draws near to its end, I can look back on the past two years and feel that it was a significant learning experience. Primarily, I have learned about myself. I have addressed soul-searching questions; i.e., What is art? What is my art? Where did my art come from? What does it mean to me? Where does art fit into my life? As I reflect on these issues, I realize that I have barely scratched the surface in their resolutions and I have been made aware of the vast horizons that could be discovered through the further development of my work.



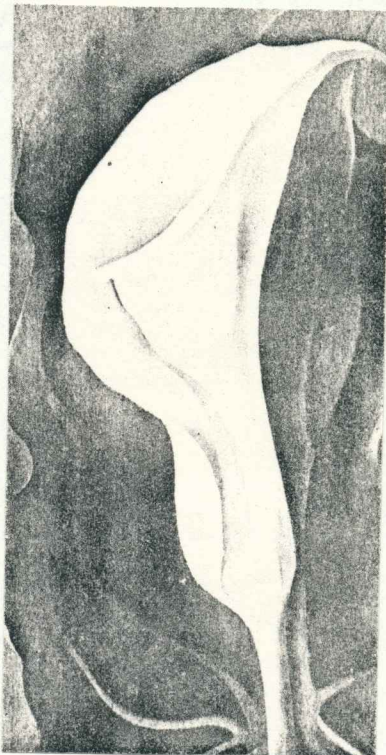
(ill. 1) Allan d'Archangelo. Highway Number 80, 1964.



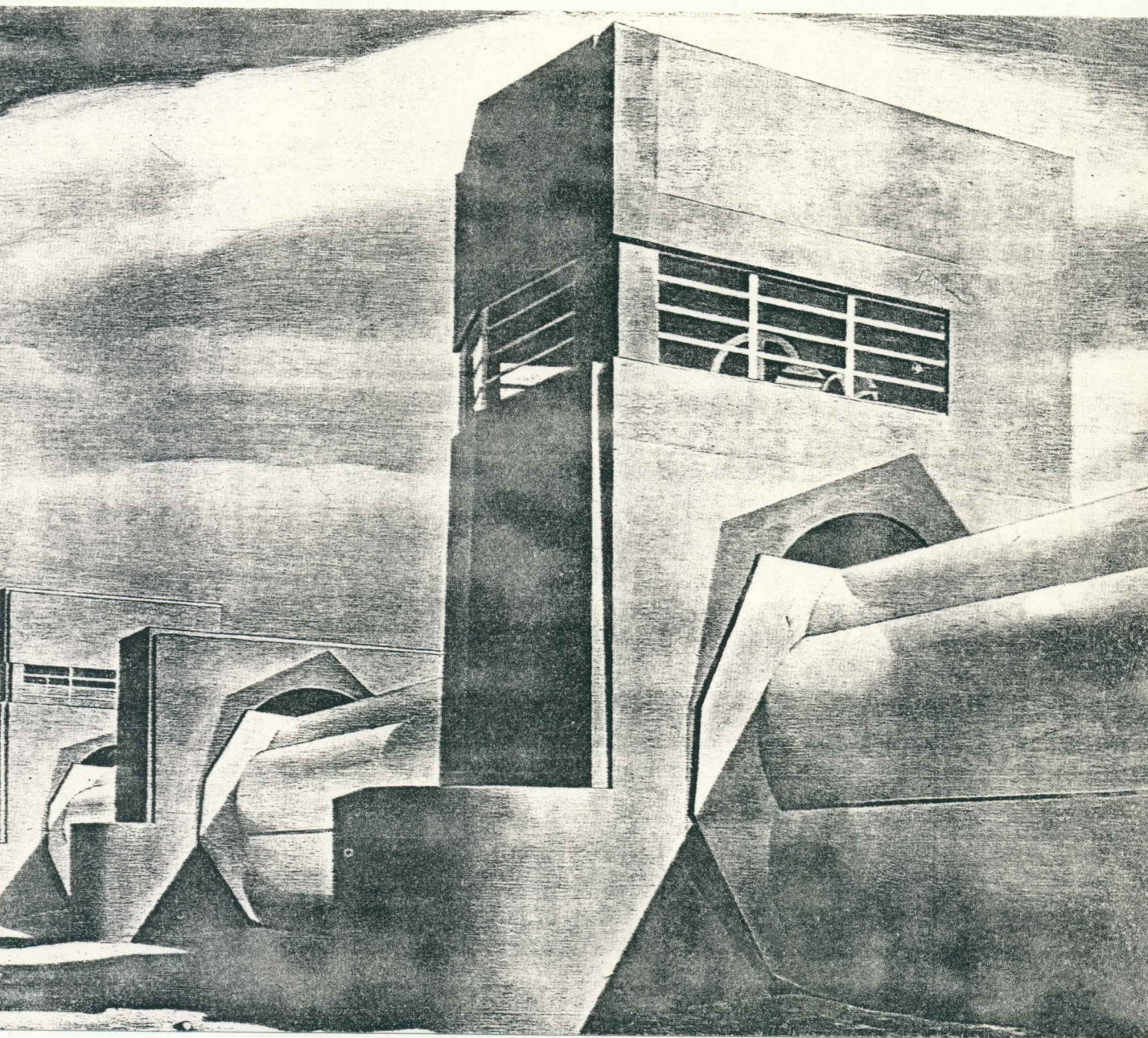
(ill. 2) Andy Warhol. Elvis I and Elvis II, 1964.



(ill.3) Victor Vasarely. Supernovae, 1959-61.



(ill. 4) Georgia O'Keefe. Single Lily with Red, 1928.



(ill. 5) Charles Sheeler. Water, 1945.

ILLUSTRATION SOURCES

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