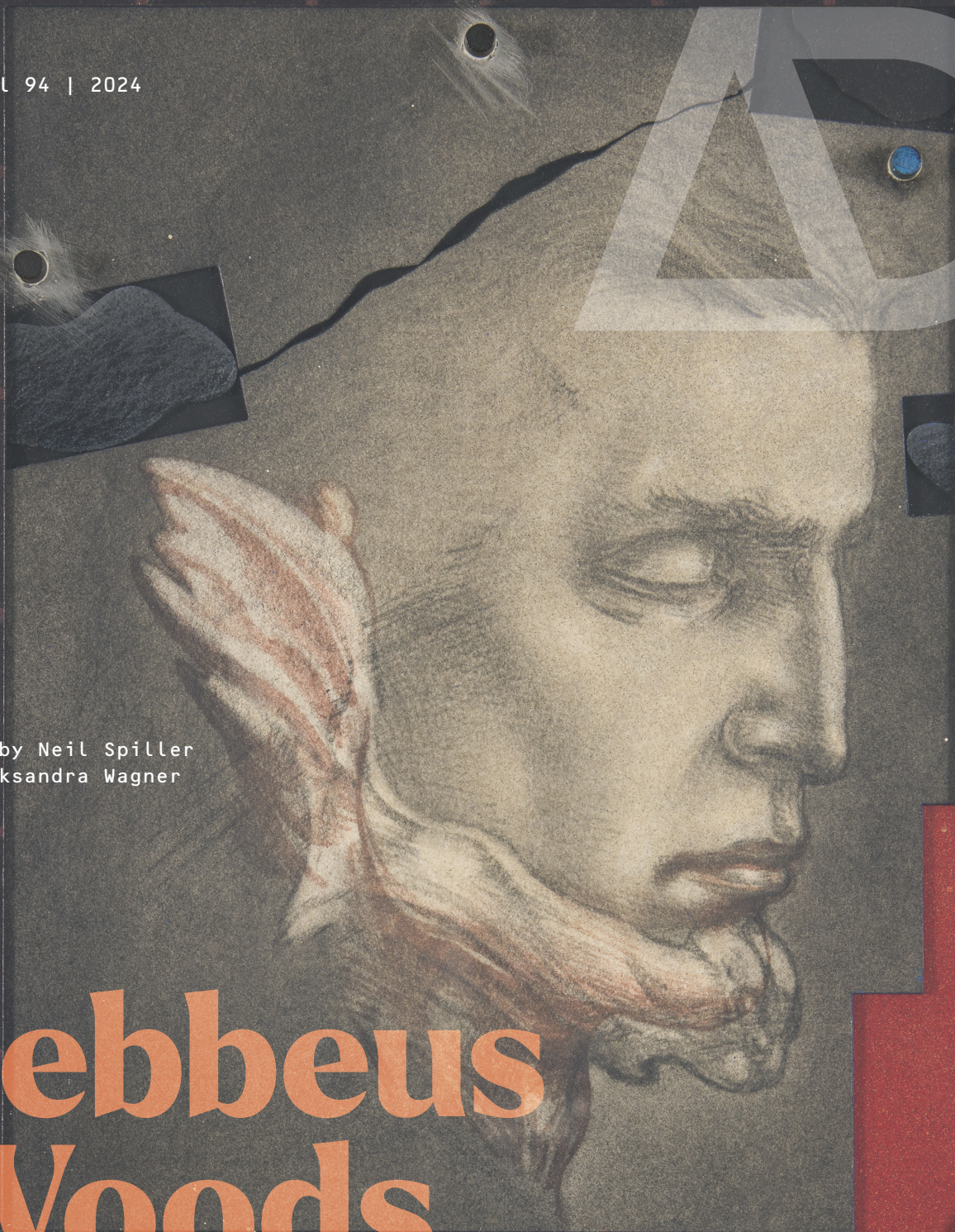


02 | Vol 94 | 2024

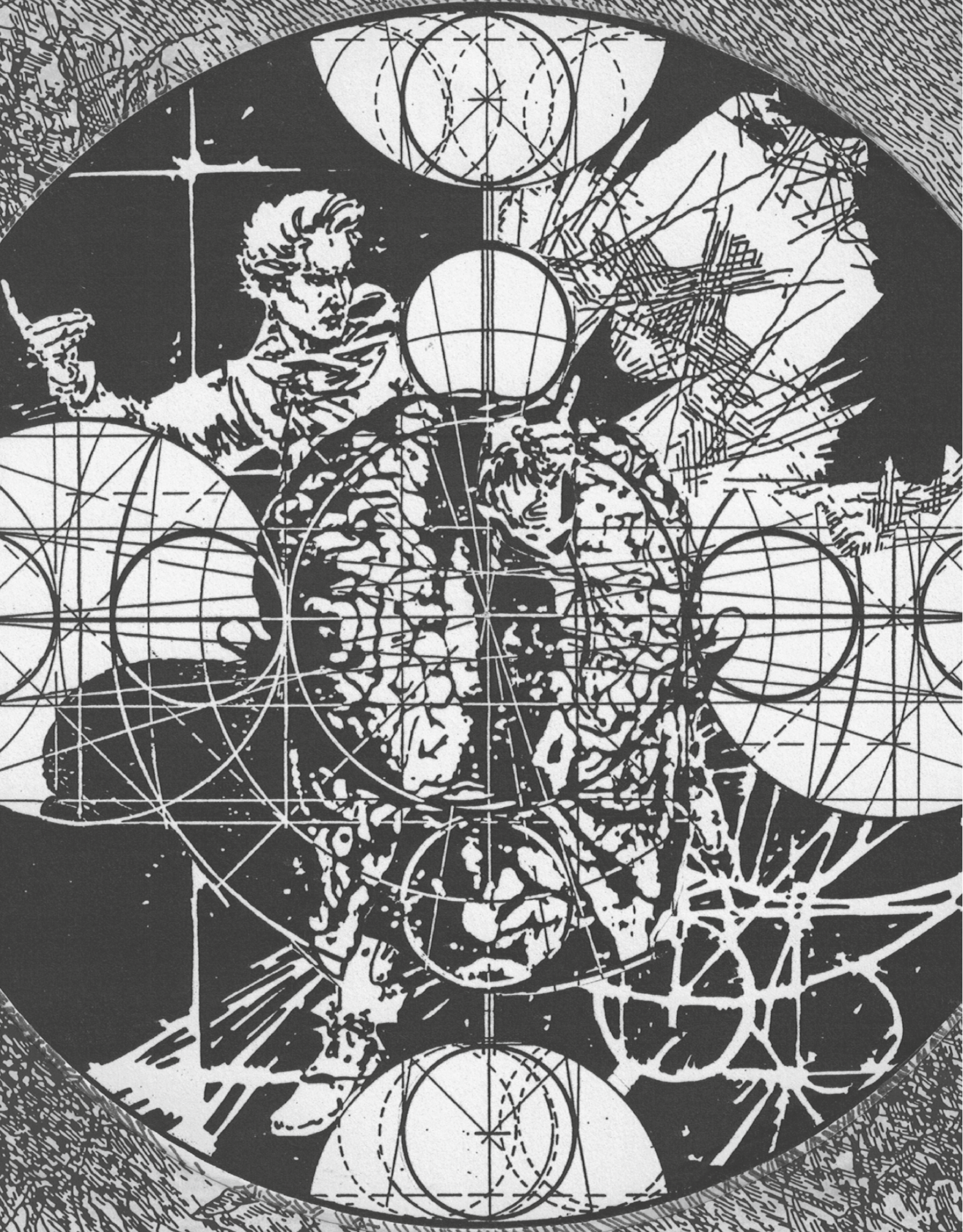
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and Aleksandra Wagner

# Lebbeus Woods

EXQUISITE EXPERIMENTS,  
EARLY YEARS

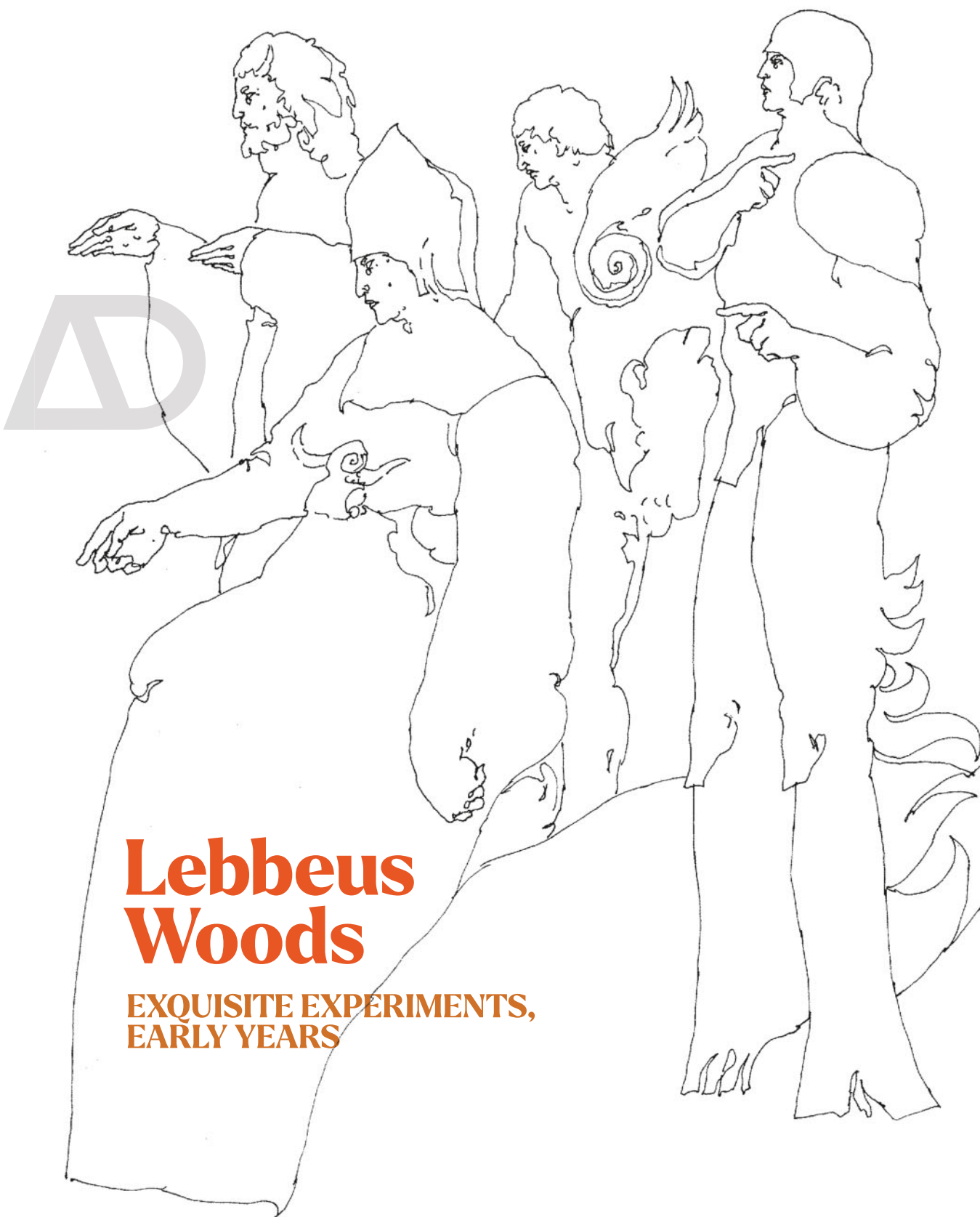








Edited by Neil Spiller  
and Aleksandra Wagner



# Lebbeus Woods

EXQUISITE EXPERIMENTS,  
EARLY YEARS





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**About the Editors** 5

Neil Spiller and Aleksandra Wagner

**Introduction** 6

**A Fecund Lucidity**

Spadework for a Palace

Neil Spiller and Aleksandra Wagner

---

**Self-Portrait with Burned Weapon** 14

The Wound That Does Not Heal

Mark Dorrian

**Inventing the World** 22

In and Around Illinois, 1960–75

Sharon Irish

**From Experimental Epistemology to Experimental Architecture** 30

Ben Sweeting

**Framing the Sky, Etching Clay** 38

Walls of the Midwest

Kevin Erickson

**Lebbeus – A Postmodernist?** 48

Early Scenes of Shopping and Dwelling

Aaron Betsky

**Attuned Rigour** 58

Between Pictorial and Material Conditions

Riet Eeckhout





**Magical  
Transubstantiations** 68

A Voyage to Italy

**Aleksandra Wagner and  
Neil Spiller**



**Myth and Measure** 74

Drawings of the 1970s

**Lawrence Rinder**

**Post-Apocalypse** 84

The 'Ring' Cycle

**Jörg H Gleiter**

**In Place of Light** 92

On Early Writings

**Eliyahu Keller**

**Polymorphic Matters** 102

Architecture, Change  
and Imagination

**Ashley Simone**

**Exit Velocity** 110

Einstein Tomb

**Joseph Becker**

**Catalytic Moments,  
Friendships and  
Journeys** 118

**Peter Cook**

**'The notion of "early years" – a search for modes of thought and for techniques that would make such thoughts readable – has an aura of excitement and discovery, combined with a youthful productivity of output'**

— Neil Spiller and Aleksandra Wagner

**From Another Perspective**

**The Samizdats** 128

Subversive Polemic

**Neil Spiller**

**Contributors** 134



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Artmedia, London

**Printed** in the United Kingdom  
by Hobbs the Printers Ltd

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Print ISSN: 0003-8504

Online ISSN: 1554-2769

All prices are subject to change without notice.

## Identification Statement

Periodicals Postage paid at Rahway, NJ 07065. Air freight and mailing in the USA by Mercury Media Processing, 1850 Elizabeth Avenue, Suite C, Rahway, NJ 07065, USA.

## USA Postmaster

Please send address changes to *Architectural Design*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., c/o The Sheridan Press, PO Box 465, Hanover, PA 17331, USA

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Δ is published bimonthly and is available to purchase as individual volumes at the following prices.

Individual copies:

£29.99 / US\$45.00

Mailing fees for print may apply

## Front cover


Lebbeus Woods,  
*Untitled*, 1970s.  
© Photo Clara Syme / a83

## Inside front cover

Lebbeus Woods,  
*Quadrupolar distortions: violation of the second law*, 'Cycles of Unity', c 1985.  
© The Estate of Lebbeus Woods

## Page 1

Lebbeus Woods,  
Drawing from Black Notebook #20, 21 April 1976 (detail).  
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	ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN		
March/April	Volume	Issue	
2024	94	02	

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ABOUT THE  
EDITORS

NEIL SPILLER AND  
ALEKSANDRA WAGNER



Editor of *Δ* Neil Spiller considered Lebbeus Woods a friend, a mentor, and a fellow traveller with whom he shared spaces of architectural discourse, a high regard for the medium of drawing, and a deep affinity for experimentation and teaching. He considers it a great honour to have co-edited, with Aleksandra Wagner, this unique publication based on explorations of the richness of the Lebbeus Woods Archive.

Neil was Visiting Professor of Architecture at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada (2020–22), and Visiting Professor at IAUV Venice in 2021. He was previously Hawksmoor Chair of Architecture and Landscape and Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University of Greenwich, London. Prior to this he was Dean of the School of Architecture, Design and Construction and Professor of Architecture and Digital Theory at Greenwich, and Vice-Dean and Graduate Director of Design at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL).

He has guest-edited eight *Δ* issues, including the highly successful *Architects in Cyberspace I* and *II* (1995 and 1998) and *Drawing Architecture* (2013), and more recently edited the issues *Emerging Talents: Training Architects* (July/August 2021), *Radical Architectural Drawing* (July/August 2022), *California Dreaming* (March/April 2023) and *A Sublime Synthesis: Architecture and Art* (September/October 2023).

His books include *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination* (2006), *Educating Architects* (2014) and *Architecture and Surrealism* (2016), all published by Thames & Hudson. He is also the author of *How to Thrive in Architecture School: A Student Guide* (RIBA, 2020).

Aleksandra Wagner is a psychoanalyst, and Professor Emerita at The New School in New York City. She is a training and supervising analyst and faculty at the city's National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP) and at the China American Psychoanalytic Alliance (CAPA), and the Interim Editor of *The Psychoanalytic Review*. She is the editor of the *Shame* special issue of *Cabinet* magazine (2008), and co-editor of *Considering Forgiveness* (Vera List Center for Art and Politics, 2009) and *Lebbeus Woods: Zagreb Free Zone Revisited* (ORIS House of Architecture and Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, 2021). She translated Lebbeus Woods's *War and Architecture* (1993) into Serbo-Croatian, and co-edited and co-translated the *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (Workman Publishing, 1993) into English. She is the Executor of the Estate of Lebbeus Woods. ▢



# A FECUND LUCIDITY SPADEWORK FOR A PALACE

## INTRODUCTION

NEIL SPILLER AND  
ALEKSANDRA WAGNER

Lebbeus Woods,  
*Untitled*,  
1970s

A pensive figure engaged in their  
labour. An alchemist? An astronomer?  
A sculptor? Or simply an ink and  
marker on board with collage?





Since my earliest involvement with architecture and art I have been concerned with finding the architectonic, design means for expressing [to] myself and others both those timeless qualities of the human mind – found in the noble and perfect forms of mathematics, geometry, and works of art and architecture we call classical – and the ephemeral qualities of mind derived from moment to moment experience and found anywhere, everywhere – epitomized perhaps in the great urban centers, the cities, where there is no perfection, only a continuum, an evolution of myriad forms. These are paradoxical qualities and lay foundation for an inner human conflict and struggle from which human creativity is born.

— Lebbeus Woods, 1974<sup>1</sup>

In a succinct and lucid entry in one of his 'Black Notebooks', written in June 1974, Lebbeus Woods – then 34 – describes what became a series of architectural and artistic preoccupations that sustained a lifetime's creative career. Some of these are spelled out through prose (diaristic, reflecting on art and architecture, as well as fiction), myth-research and myth-making or polemical passages on the state of the field; others through inquiry into potentials of visual imagination. The unifying strand is the record of an extraordinary deftness and variety – technical as well as conceptual – with which Woods expresses his fecund ideas. The quoted paragraph encapsulates and interpolates his interest in the roots of architectural discourse and its intersection with the arresting complexities of the great chunking engine of the city.

Woods also articulates his understanding of the importance of transience and fluidity – conditions of modernity. Never conflict-free, they all enable, even require, rejoicing in differences between individual actors and the ways they construct realities based on their conversation with, and an awareness of, what surrounds them – physically, emotionally and intellectually.

### **In the Beginning**

The notion of 'early years' – a search for modes of thought and for techniques that would make such thoughts readable – has an aura of excitement and discovery, combined with a youthful productivity of output. Lebbeus Woods's 'juvenilia', if one may call it that, is a painstaking celebration of personal liberation through the habits of thinking, writing and drawing. The outcomes are both unsettled and unsettling, but are always motile and appear assured. This has prompted some to ask (as early or as late as the mid-1980s): How did he arrive on the 'scene' so fully formed, from 'nowhere'?

One manner of answering involves a good dose of literalness, nearly an agreement with the imperial tone addressed to the 'nowhere': from 'the lost region'<sup>2</sup> of the American Midwest, and from the then less-than-fashionable quarters in and out of New York City. Another (addressed to the 'how') offers a chance to be more psychologically, even professionally, astute: by way of solitude – sometimes contextual, but more often a result of self-imposed discipline.

Yet, the real weight may be in different questions: What constitutes the 'scene' from which the accounting starts? What 'scenes' were there before?

Most architects have a 'family tree' that can be traced back through genealogies of tutors, mentors or influential practitioners. Woods appears to be an exception in this regard, insofar as he never spells out his influences in a singular, cogent statement. Still, the famed trope, 'anxiety of influence',<sup>3</sup> does not apply. Woods's deep interest in the achievements of others – not necessarily all architects – is inked in his notebooks and on the loose pages of his unpublished early writings. For attentive interpreters, influences are also evident in the work that marks him as a proponent of a particular kind of visual sensibility. This world – Woods's world – is predicated on the will to find out 'what if'.

### **Lost and Found**

Luckily, many of the tracings of the early moments have survived, to marvel at, enjoy and speculate about. Though Woods's later oeuvre has been widely exhibited, published and acclaimed, his early work was rarely shown, mostly in the time closer to its origin, and without publications that would offer another layer of meaning. When seen through his Archive – in conversation with what came later – it points to the same energetic mind, eye and hand, prone to risk-taking. This  $\Delta$  seeks to bring to a wider international audience a few of these exquisite experiments, by having them discussed from a variety of perspectives. Some of the contributors were colleagues and friends of Lebbeus Woods; others met the work without ever meeting its creator. Some faced what Woods himself may have maintained – that 'the past is a foreign country';<sup>4</sup> others have been keen to recognise lasting continuities.

Spanning the period between the late 1960s and 1985, the works and the attendant critical discourse are only partially set out in the chronological order in which they were made. The collection of articles commences with an eloquent introduction to the existence of the Black Notebooks that Woods kept in the 1970s, by Mark Dorrian, Forbes Chair in Architecture at the University of Edinburgh, UK. The Black Notebooks' meticulousness reveals a young man sometimes prone to despair. Dorrian's piece centres around an enigmatic self-portrait, from which he extrapolates both Woods's complexity as a person and his graphic industriousness.



## The Midwest

As Woods advocated all his life, the notion of where one lives, and how one interacts with one's location and community, organises who one becomes. The formation is an ever-dynamic, evolving process. Woods spent a number of his early years in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, in America's Midwest – not in the hustle and bustle of the academic and urban metropolises – although it was Manhattan where he anchored the second half of his life.

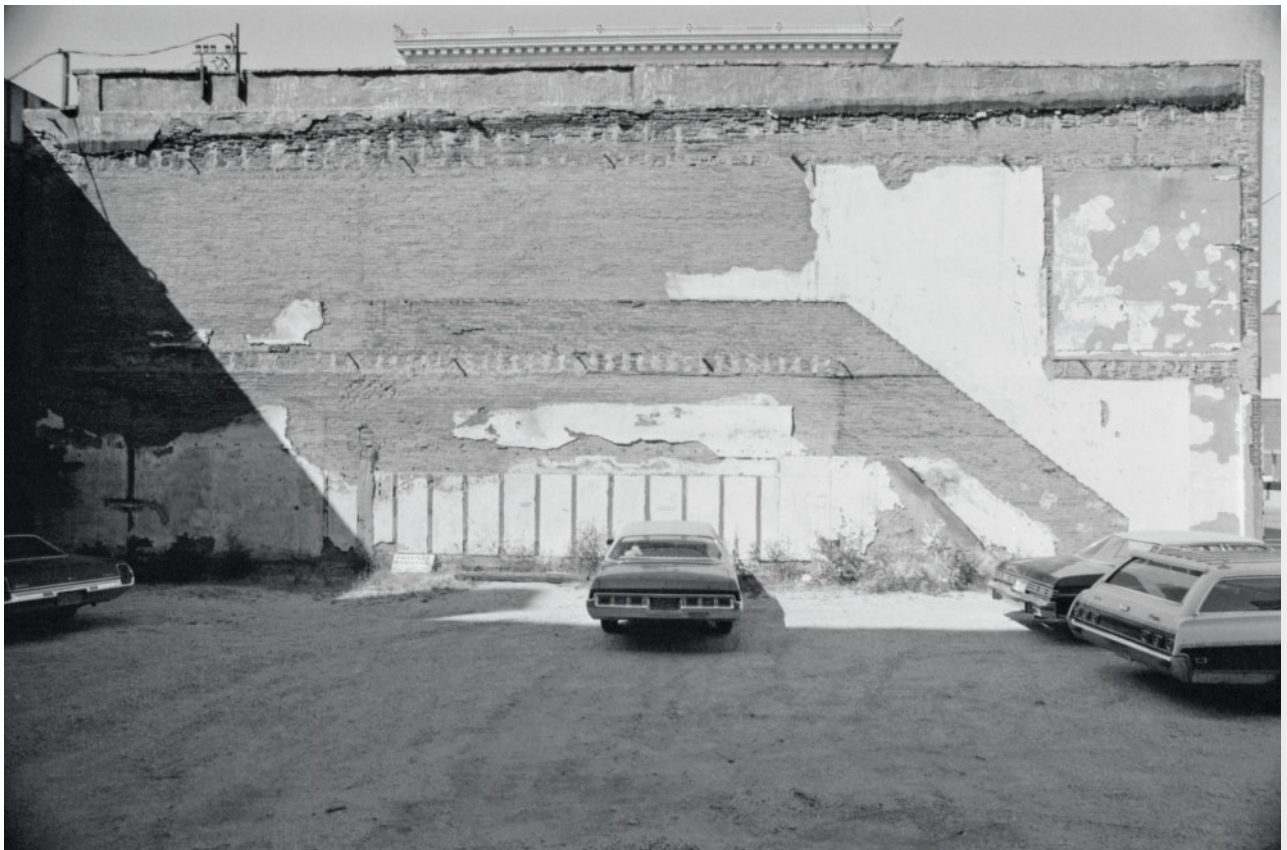
Urbana-Champaign are two contiguous municipalities dominated by the large and lively public University of Illinois; Woods studied architecture there. Architectural historian Sharon Irish situates some of Woods's early contacts and influences – his mentors of urbanity – through this lens. Ben Sweeting, who teaches architecture at the University of Brighton, UK, explores the flowering of one of the most profound encounters and friendships Woods had whilst still an architecture student, with scientist and cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster. Their exchanges sparked and sustained Woods's lifelong interest in cybernetics, documented in the drawings Woods did for von Foerster's papers, but also in his overall approach to the practice of architecture.

Lebbeus Woods,  
*Gray Works*,  
1976–8

left: A quiet study of light and darkness, the ultimate media of life and of architecture.

Lebbeus Woods,  
*Waiting for Odysseus*,  
1975

below: Photo by Lebbeus Woods of a forlorn parking lot in Champaign, Illinois, with the wall where he will draw his *Odysseus*.





Architect and University of Illinois associate professor Kevin Erickson examines the built and natural topology of the Midwest – a land of few walls – and comments on two of Woods's local 'Wall' projects. Aaron Betsky, a professor in the School of Architecture and Design at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, asks the question: Was Woods a Postmodernist? He substantiates his arguments by addressing the work from the early to mid-1970s, including the first significant acknowledgment Woods received: the Progressive Architecture Award of 1974.

### **Elective Affinities**

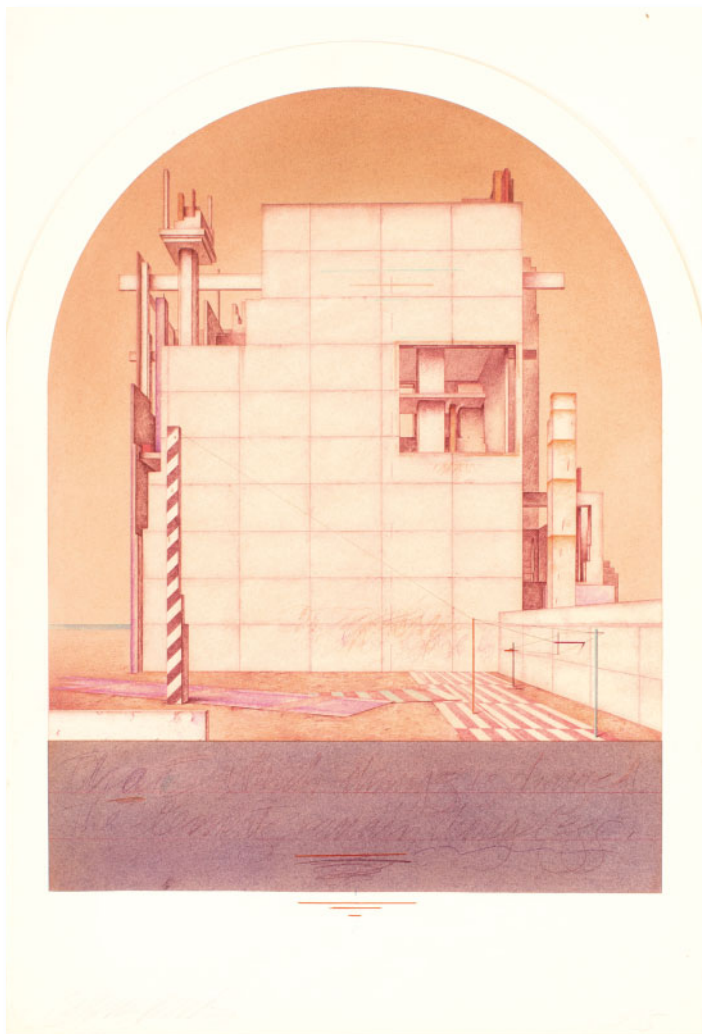
Riet Eeckhout, a guest professor and post-doctoral researcher at the faculty of architecture of KU Leuven, Belgium, explores Woods's experimentation with differing surfaces and treatments of representation through the media of Mylar polyester film and oil pastels. Continuing the theme of drawing, the Guest-Editors follow Woods's Italian journey of 1978, and his ability to weave the varied patterns, building typologies and synthesis of art, sculpture and architecture into his own work. The sojourn continues through the contribution by Lawrence Rinder, Director Emeritus of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, who determines a resonance between the 18th-century Venetian painter and printmaker Giambattista Tiepolo and Woods's output – particularly in relation to the depiction of the human/mythic figure.

**As Woods advocated all his life, the notion of where one lives, and how one interacts with one's location and community, organises who one becomes. The formation is an ever-dynamic, evolving process**

Lebbeus Woods,  
Painting on textile,  
24 January 1976

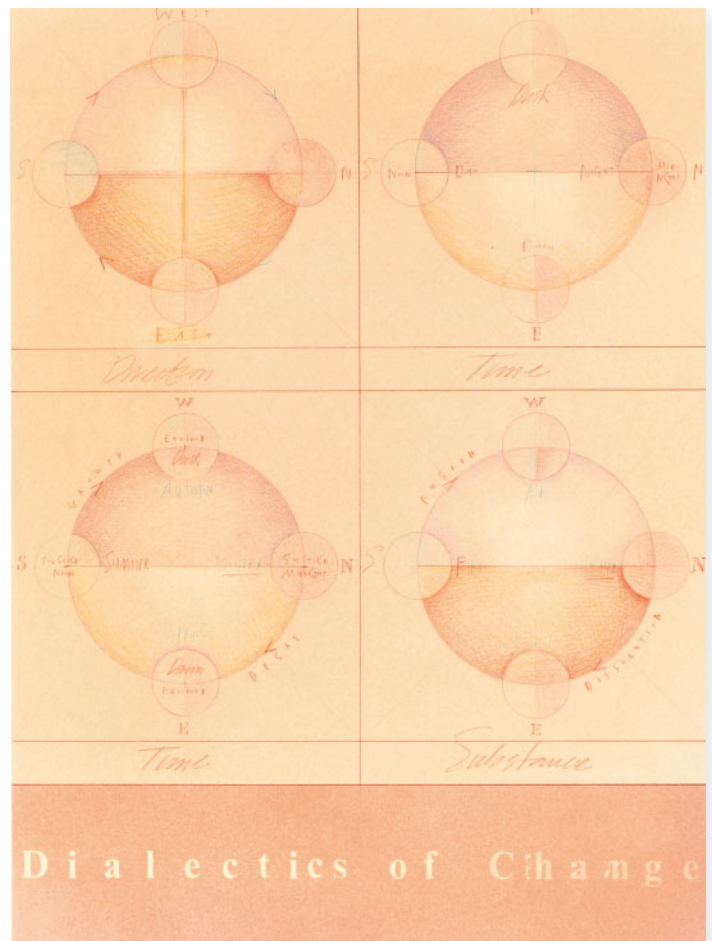
A rare experiment by Woods of painting on muslin.





Lebbeus Woods,  
Drawing from 'The Four Houses',  
1975

The 12-drawing portfolio 'The Four Houses' was conceptualised as a series of visual essays – an allegory of change, an epistemological quadripartite macrocosm. In the language of Woods, each House is seen as existing in a timeless mythic world, each the temple of a different stage of human epic.



Lebbeus Woods,  
*Dialectics of Change*,  
'The Four Houses',  
1975

Some works in the series, like this one, have enigmatic titles such as *The Great Tension*, *Form as Meta (form/phor)* and *Four Corners of the World*.



Lebbeus Woods,  
Poster for the 'Origins'  
exhibition at the  
Architectural Association (AA)  
School of Architecture,  
London,  
1985

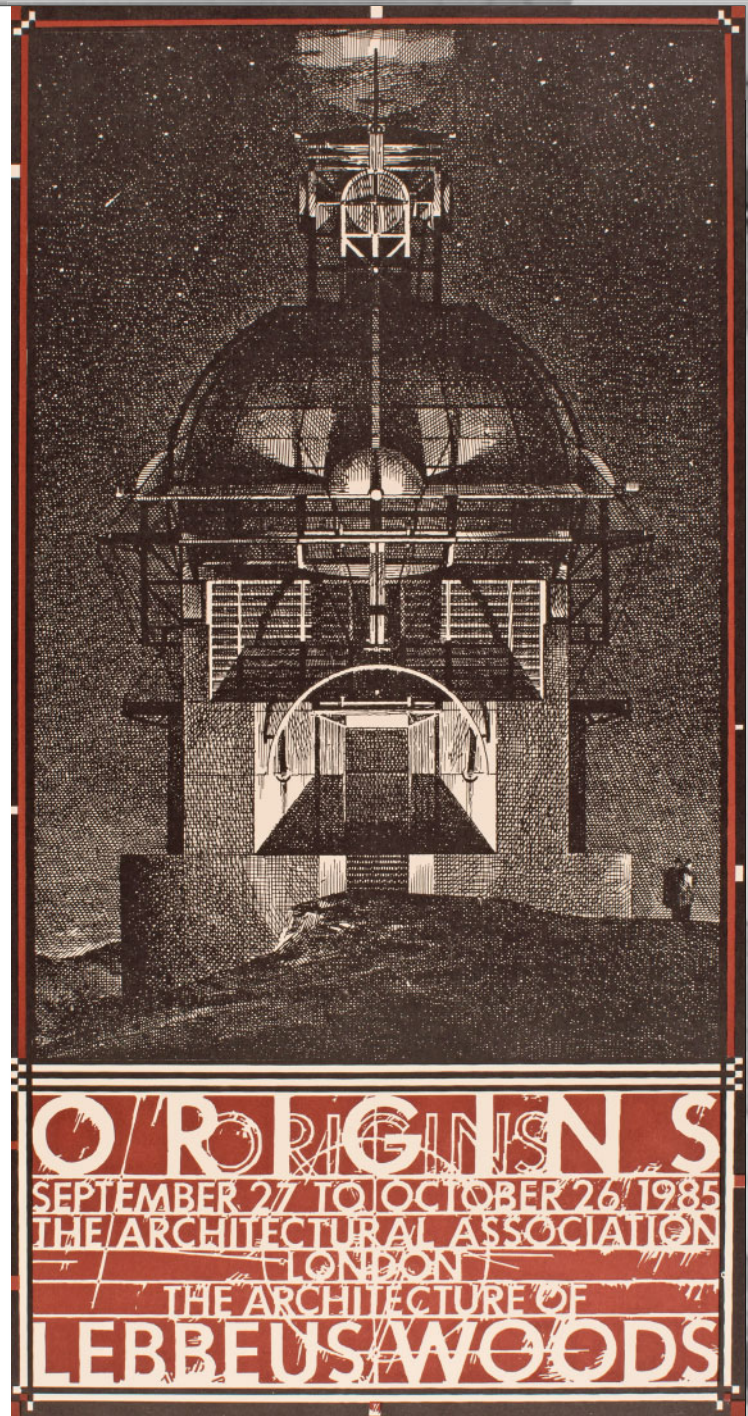
Poster designed by Woods with an image of  
his *Epicyclarium*, a project 'conceived  
as a cure for fever – a fever to build'.

While these themes may be new to those who have encountered Lebbeus Woods and his work after the mid-1980s, even less known may be his affinity with the 19th-century German composer Richard Wagner and especially his opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*, 1848–74). Jörg H Gleiter, an architect and Professor of Architectural Theory at the Technical University Berlin, introduces us to the anatomy and mythology of Wagner's operas, and to Woods's drawn response. In Gleiter's interpretation, both Woods's and Wagner's works are post-apocalyptic visions, evoking the calm after the storm and the birth of a very different dawn.

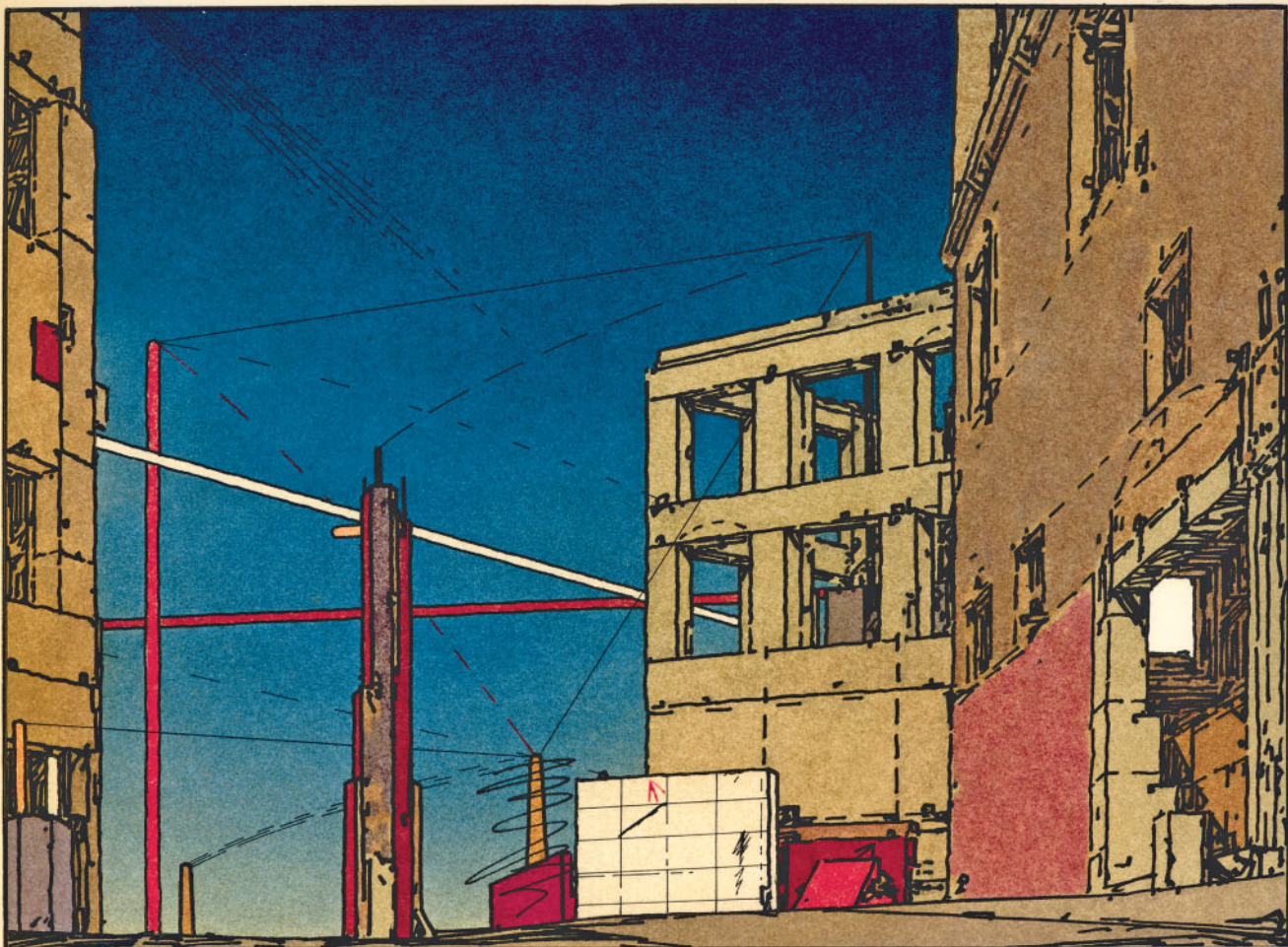
Eliyahu Keller, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, investigates Woods's early written work (emergence of a writerly voice) and its calligraphic intent (texts treated as drawings). He also focuses on Woods's use of light and darkness, conveyed at the intersection between drawings and thought.

### Space-Time Continuum

Ashley Simone, an associate professor at the Pratt Institute School of Architecture in New York City, explores time, change and polymorphism in Woods's oeuvre, and particularly his 'AEON' project (1979–85) – consisting of four cities, each dedicated to one of the elements (air, water, earth, fire). This overarching epistemological quadripartite macrocosm, Woods believed, could also be seen in the microcosms – always soft binaries – of men and women, life and death, nature and technology.







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