

István Orosz



Mirrors and More

1. The Mirrors of the Master (with movie)
2. Two Anamorphoses with movies:
The Column
Escher's Self-Portrait
3. Selected prints



ΟΥΤΙΣ

(no one)

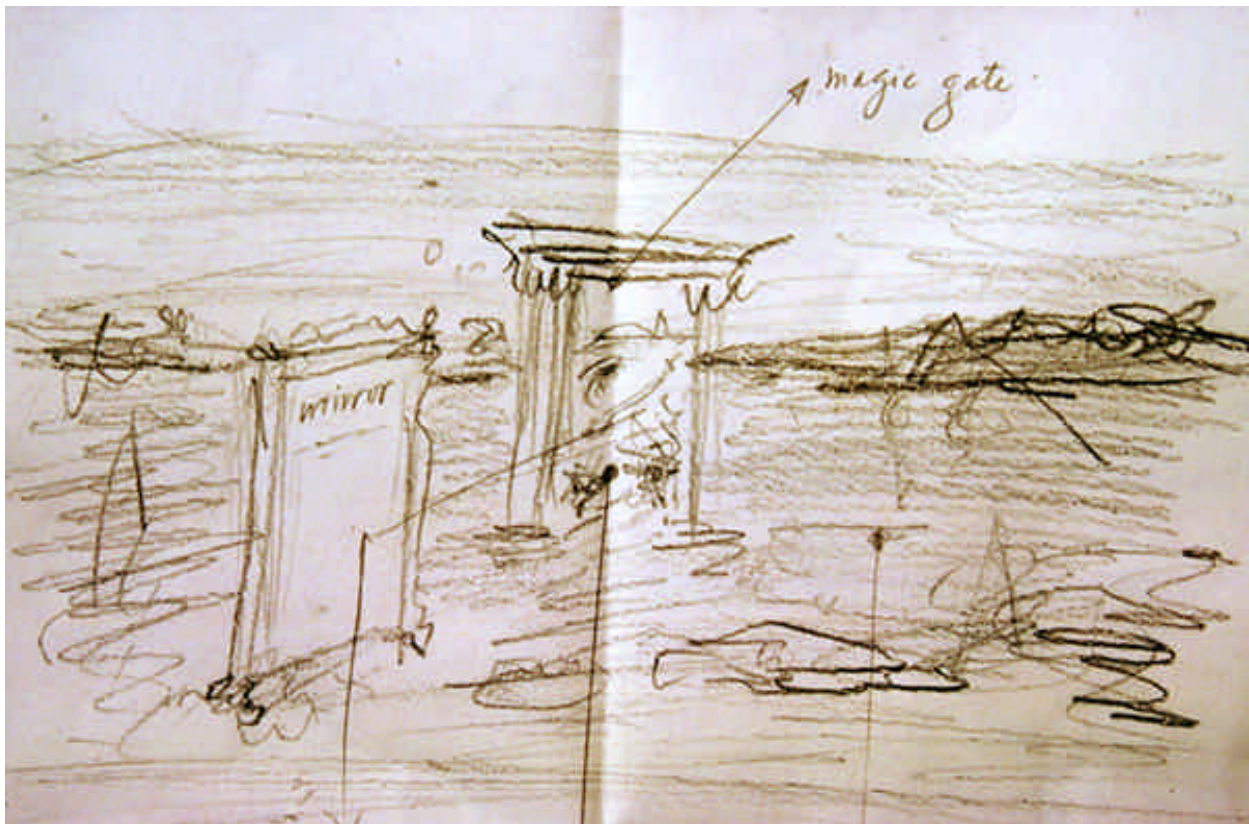
István Orosz

The Mirrors of the Master

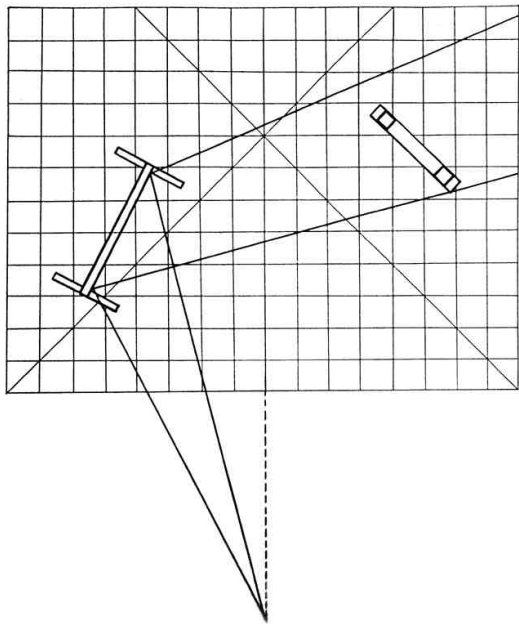
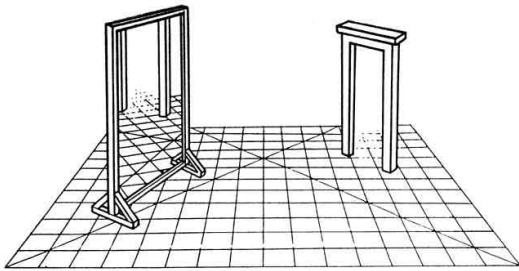
“The mirror is the master of the painter”

This notion comes from Leonardo da Vinci. For Leonardo mirror is not only a symbol of an everyday object or a useful tool. Those who have the ears for that will hear from it the eternal question of art: the dilemma of showing illusion and essence, the transcendent and empirical world. Mirror is the starting point of every visual presentation; to show a mirror up to the world that is to face the world with itself is the most ancient metaphor of art.

Mirror and master – for me these words have recently gained a personal meaning. I was just preparing for the congress commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Escher’s birth when I got a letter from Bruno Ernst, Escher’s close friend. He sent me a pencil-sketch showing a mirror and a gate but in such a tricky disposition that the territory behind the opened gate can only be seen by the mirror.



A pencil-sketch by Bruno Ernst



Reflection scheme constructed on the basis of the Bruno Ernst sketch

Originally he offered the idea to Escher. He suggested that he make a graphic print based on the design but the ailing artist could not get to work. Obviously the opportunity to try the impossible, to imagine myself in Escher's place fascinated me. What would he have done with the idea, how would he have developed it further, had he had the strength to work on it? While I was making design sketches based on Ernst's rough sketch, I had the feeling that Escher's eyes followed me by a strange special optic transfer characteristic of Escher, – if you like, from the *anamorphic* viewpoint of another dimension.

It seemed to be the obvious first step before getting to work to look over the pieces in connection with mirrors from the Escher oeuvre, and then those from Bruno Ernst's works in which mirrors and reflection play an important part. And finally to collect my own memories: what have I already done with mirrors. It was unavoidable from time to time to recall some other mirror depictions in art history partly as reference point or simply just because I could not escape their influence on me. Here in my essay I should like to sum up my theoretical efforts in this field and through the enclosed figures I am going to show what I have achieved while drawing.

At the first step, with the study of mirrors by Escher, Bruno Ernst helped me. As is generally known, he classified the oeuvre and grouped his works in Escher's lifetime and in constant consultation with the artist. The first category was given the title: *Penetration of Worlds*. The drawings in this group, just a dozen in number, are all mirror depictions. If we should further divide this category, the convex surface mirrors and the spherical mirrors that are also self-portraits, would form two separate groups.

The message of the mirror self-portraits is not difficult to interpret, especially in the light of the earlier mentioned Leonardo motto – but if we wish a verbally more precise explanation, it is worth recalling a notable mirror painted about five hundred years earlier but not that far from Escher’s homeland. This is the famous convex mirror hanging in the centre of the *Jan van Eyck* painting just behind the *Arnolfini-couple*.

In the mirror you can easily recognise the painter just leaving the room. On the wall above the mirror there is a notice in Latin: “*Johannes de Eyck fuit hic*”. Johannes de Eyck has been here. Let us try to interpret the mysterious text along with the mirror as if we put the elements of a puzzle together. It would sound like this: Johannes de Eyck has been the mirror here. This is not only the ars-poetics of the younger van Eyck but also that of art in general and the most explicit formulation of the artist’s role. So according to Jan van Eyck the artist is nothing else but the mirror itself, and this idea is expressed by Escher’s spherical mirror self-portraits as well.



Jan Van Eyck: The Arnolfini-couple, 1434. Detail

For the second type of mirror depictions the approach is characteristic for what Escher used in his lithograph *Still-life with Mirror* and in the woodcut *Still-life and Street*. In both works the external space appearing in the mirror and the internal space surrounding the mirror is united in one single coherent view. He leads the perspectives of the spaces outside and inside the mirror to one common vanishing point so naturally that we can only guess we are already “inside” and just stepping through the surface of the mirror as if we had joined the hero of a *Borghes* short story.

The mirror and the perspective are brothers from the beginning. Let me refer to the famous experiment of *Brunelleschi* with the hole in the picture and the mirror in which he is said to demonstrate perspective for the first time. The discovery of perspective, or rather the fact that Renaissance artists began to apply perspective so it became part of European thinking, brought about a crucial change in a philosophical sense too. The consequences of that invention can hardly be overestimated. The world commonly perceived and homogeneously experienced by everyone suddenly changed. Let us imagine the nets of constructing perspective, the often-mentioned pyramid of *Alberti*. If we step to the right or to the left, the viewpoint changes and it turns out that nothing is eternal any longer. The infinity of the world is right there at the meeting point of the orthogonal lines, and just opposite it, on the top of the pyramid there is that certain

point, our eyes' angle, what we may call the Archimedean point, so the self is made to be discovered. The invention of perspective, the idea of infiniteness and the sensing of the personality being left alone are all parts of the same story having begun here in Italy. And in this story, in its twentieth century chapter, Escher played a main role. Perspective, Infinity, Personality: he leads these three elements ad absurdum in his art.

The next type of Escher's mirrors can be seen in his lithograph the *Magic Mirror* made in 1946. Especially this Escher print, with the shape of the mirror and its diagonal placing, most reminds us of the Bruno Ernst sketch. As if it had been inspired by *Lewis Carroll* tales, the magic mirror wittily transforms reality and illusion into each other. The little winged fairy creatures are going round and round in an endless Mobius-ribbon. The mirror in the middle of the picture is the place of birth and rebirth. They step out from the mirror into reality as three-dimensional drawings. In the lithograph the task of the magic mirror is to reflect reality and to create new reality all at the same time. Bruno Ernst possibly wanted to refer to this, to the creation of new reality when he chose the title *Magic Mirror* for one of his books on Escher.

When the Bruno Ernst sketch was drawn or at least when Ernst showed it to Escher more than twenty years after the *Magic Mirror* was finished, the master was already interested in other things. First of all in "impossible objects". These are drawable but unimaginable forms in the three-dimensional world. From 1958-61 he produced his three significant lithographs: *Belvedere*, *Waterfall* and *Ascending and Descending* which are considered the heights of the oeuvre. The most "Escherish" Eschers, as Bruno Ernst put it, are probably the best known faces of the artist.

Ò *Whoever Makes a Design without the Knowledge of Perspective will be Liable to such* –

Hogarth had written this in 1754 under one of his engravings in which he collected the most astonishing impossibilities. Allegedly he wanted to make a dilettante aristocrat ridiculous. From nearly the same time are Piranesi's *Prison Capriccios* in which the Italian architect broke up with the traditional perspective view constructing for the first time, (although he kept on using it in his landscapes to boredom) his composed whimsical, dreamlike spaces, in which walls, arches, columns are not designed by the academic rules of geometry but by the impulse of expression.



Hogarth: Book-cover, 1754. Engraving



Piranesi: Prison Capriccios, 1749. Etching

For Escher the constructing of impossible objects probably meant an escape from the burden of formal geometry, but it did not mean getting rid of the rules as in the case of Piranesi, and it did not mean the parody of paradoxes as with Hogarth. "If you want to express something impossible, you must keep to certain rules" – he said in one of his lectures. I think we may suppose that if Escher could deal with the offered design he would surely have made use of his experiences gained while drawing impossible forms.

We may believe this because later Ernst himself also turned to that direction. I do not know if the discussions between Bruno Ernst and Escher had any part in the fact that in his photographs Ernst has begun to analyse the connections between the impossible objects and their reflections. In one of his works he builds up – seemingly precisely – the best-known and most simple impossible object, the Penrose triangle, but the strangeness he created becomes obvious only in the mirror put beside the object. From the angle of the mirror only the slat construction is visible, twice broken and twisted.



Bruno Ernst: Impossible Triangle, Photo

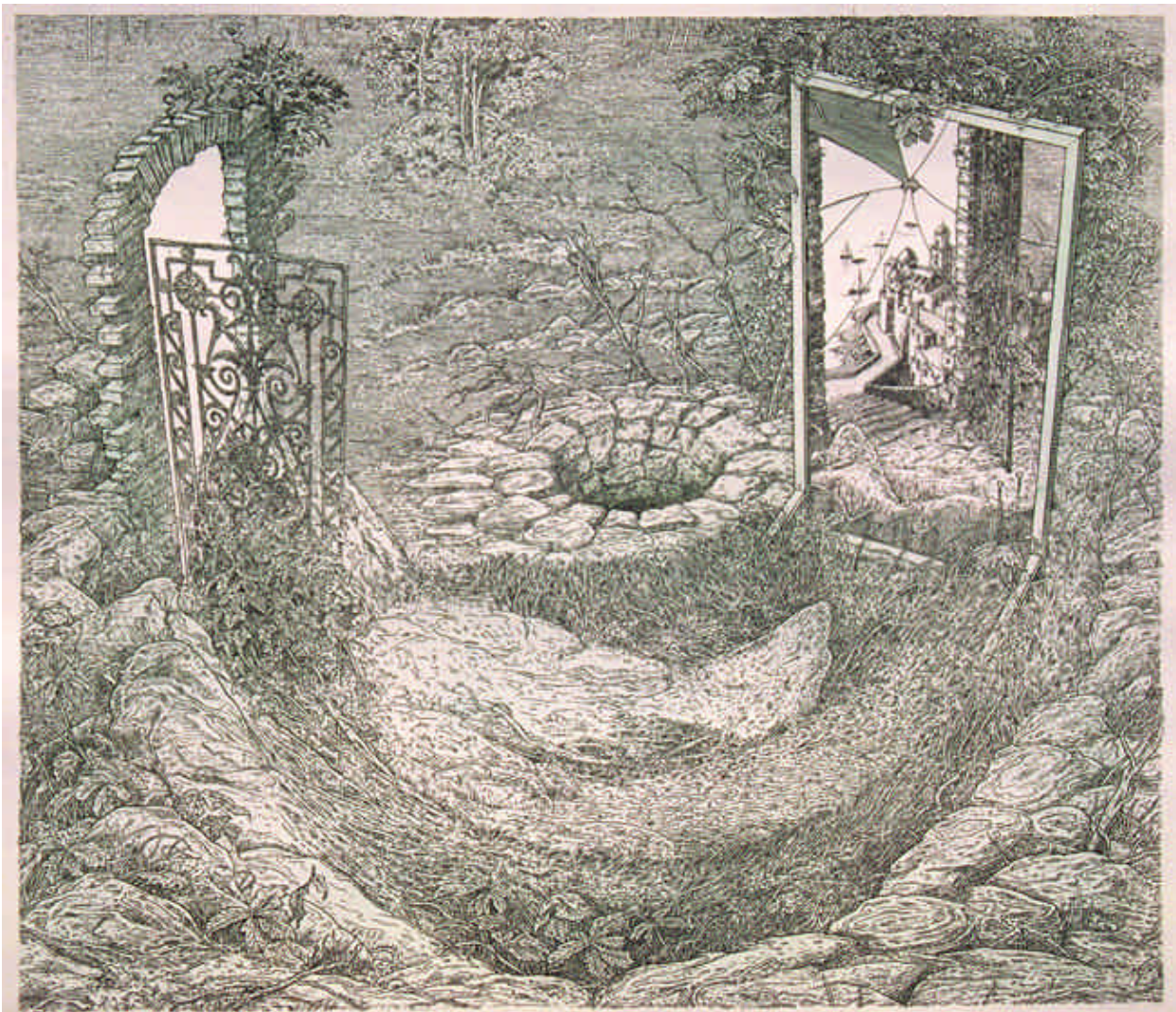
I feel a sickening uncertainty when I see the same set of objects in different roles in his other photo. Here by changing the position of the camera (that is our point of view) the object to be seen in the mirror becomes impossible. The conclusion might be that the impossible is true and the real is false. Other artists also notice that the forms considered impossible are unimaginable, but only for a traditional and conventional way of thinking. In a more cunning view – if you like, with *anamorphic* vision – they are not unreal.

It is not by chance, that I use the word *anamorphosis*. I admit I have been dealing with this field of art for several years. Anamorphoses were very popular in the 17th and 18th century but it has been more or less forgotten since that time. Art historians use this world for amorf figures without meaning, which gain their message from a special angle or they reveal their secrets on the surface of a mirroring object. Perhaps my mirror games might have given Bruno Ernst the idea to send me the drawing originally meant for Escher. The mirror cylinder of the anamorphoses, and the mirror appearing in the Ernst sketch fulfill in fact the same function, as both make the hidden meaning of the picture visible. In the first case the mirror is part of the drawing while in the second case it is a real object which is independent of the picture. The crucial difference is not this but the character of the picture appearing in the mirror, “the picture in the picture”.

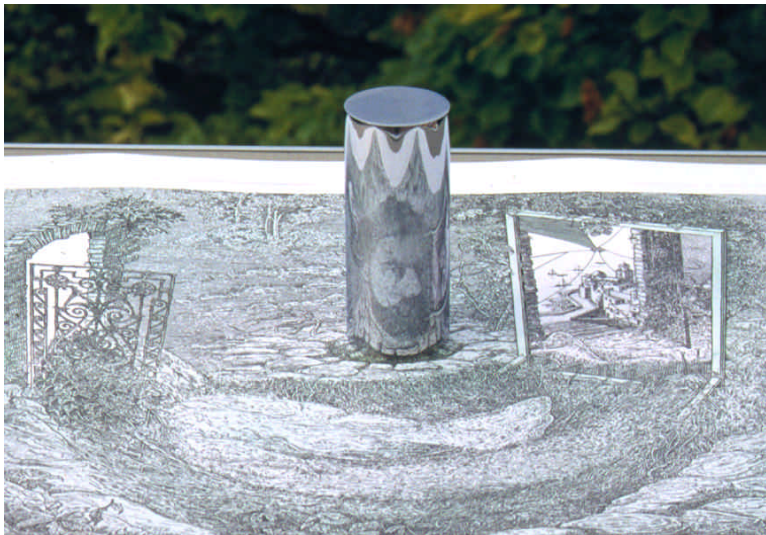
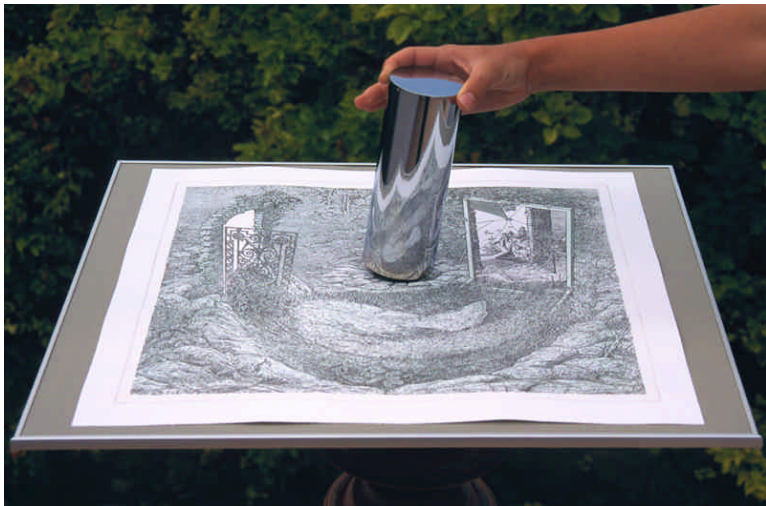
In opposition to the two-dimensional reality of the drawing, the image of an anamorphosis is just a virtual phenomenon which is not obvious either in the flat figure or on the surface of the mirror put onto it. Two and-a-half-dimensional speculation, we can also say, referring to the two Latin words: *speculum* and *speculari* – meaning mirror and thinking, so we may interpret the connection between them as to think

means to reflect. This way reflecting and thinking are two parts of an equation, so this message is also included in Leonardo's metaphor on the master.

From among my works prepared for the Escher Congress I think the etching *The Well* is the nearest to Bruno Ernst's idea, at least if I think of his notion to show fairy scenery behind the gate. The surroundings of the Amalfi-coast look like such a happy fairy-tale place and it couldn't be more like this for Escher who had a beautiful time there. I designed the front side of the gate to hide Escher's self-portrait of 1934, which can be made visible by a mirror cylinder, or in another word, anamorphically.

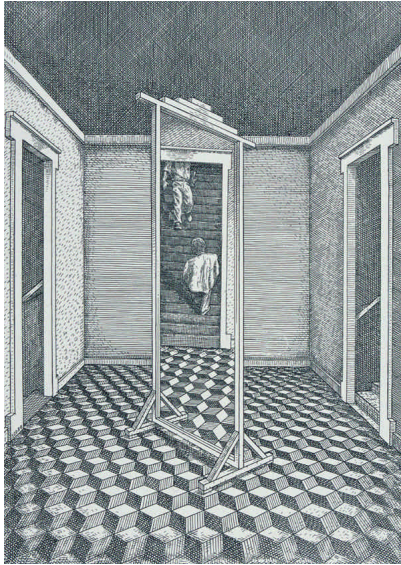


Istvan Orosz: The Well, 1998. Etching



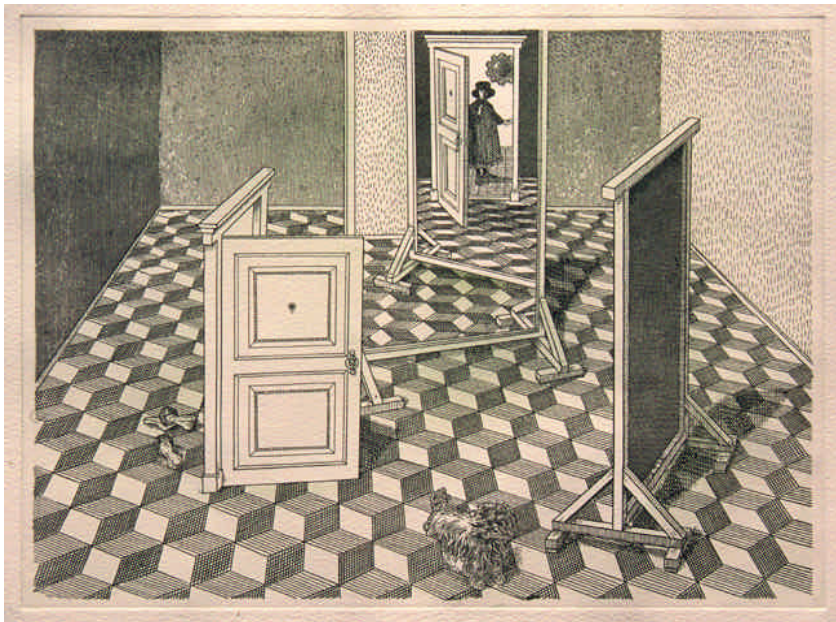
CLICK ON THE TOP PICTURE TO SEE THE EFFECT OF ADDING THE MIRROR CYLINDER

As I have mentioned, impossible spaces and objects attracted Escher towards the end of his life. In my work *Up and down* I tried to draw this kind of impossible mirror which is able to show or reflect the two staircases behind the two doors opposite each other.



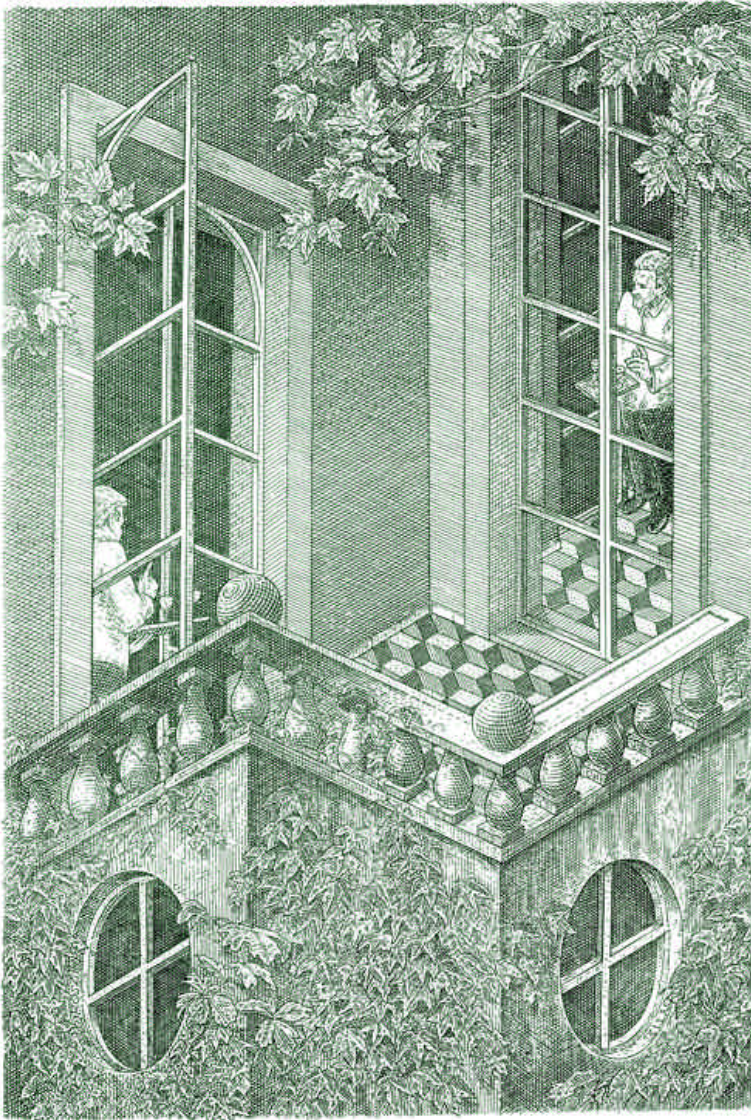
Istvan Orosz: Up and Down, 1998. Etching

Johannes de Eyck fuit hic is the title of my drawing using the elements of the Arnolfini painting and this one is meant to show the world behind the door, this time with the help of two mirrors.



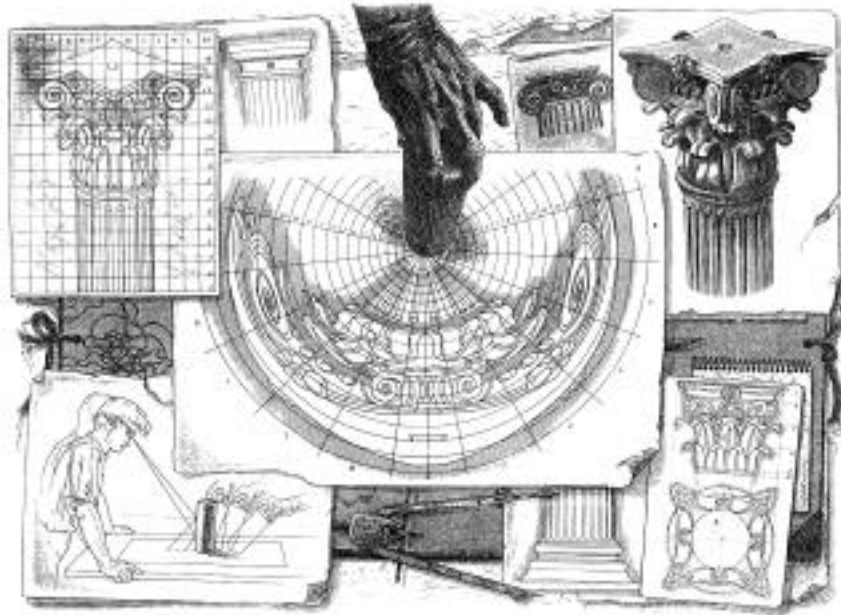
Istvan Orosz: Johannes de Eyck fuit hic, 1998. Etching

In my etching "*Balcony*" I have also studied the reflection coming from the combination of the two viewpoints realised in a paradoxical space.



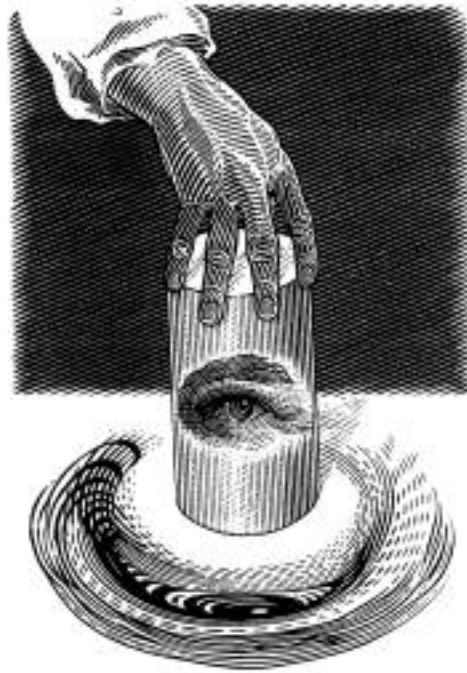
Istvan Orosz: Balcony, 1998. Etching

Of course I admit that although I started with studying Escher and the Ernst sketch greatly influenced my way of thinking, still unconsciously or perhaps consciously, I have created independent works. This independent approach can also be perceived as I wanted to be faithful to the mirror. Let me cite again another Leonardo quotation. “*L’ingegno del pittore vuol’essere a similitudine dello specchio*”. That is “*the spirit of the painter must become similar to the mirror.*” From this sentence the idea is clear: that very human attitude or basically human situation in which we refer to everything in relation to ourselves is like a reflection in the mirror, which means we are unable to see, to feel, to perceive anything objectively, separated from ourselves. To think, to write a poem, to create a piece of art or to look into a mirror – these are basically all the same. When we would like to find the spirit of Escher’s oeuvre I guess it is important to realise his individual gesture of turning to the mirror, the outsider motif of this gesture, and that by doing so he gave up depicting a certain part of the world he saw. For me, Leonardo’s words also include the fact that in the mirror of my works Ernst is reflected in a way, and he is there in Escher’s and in Escher’s, Leonardo’s face also dawns a bit... and so on.



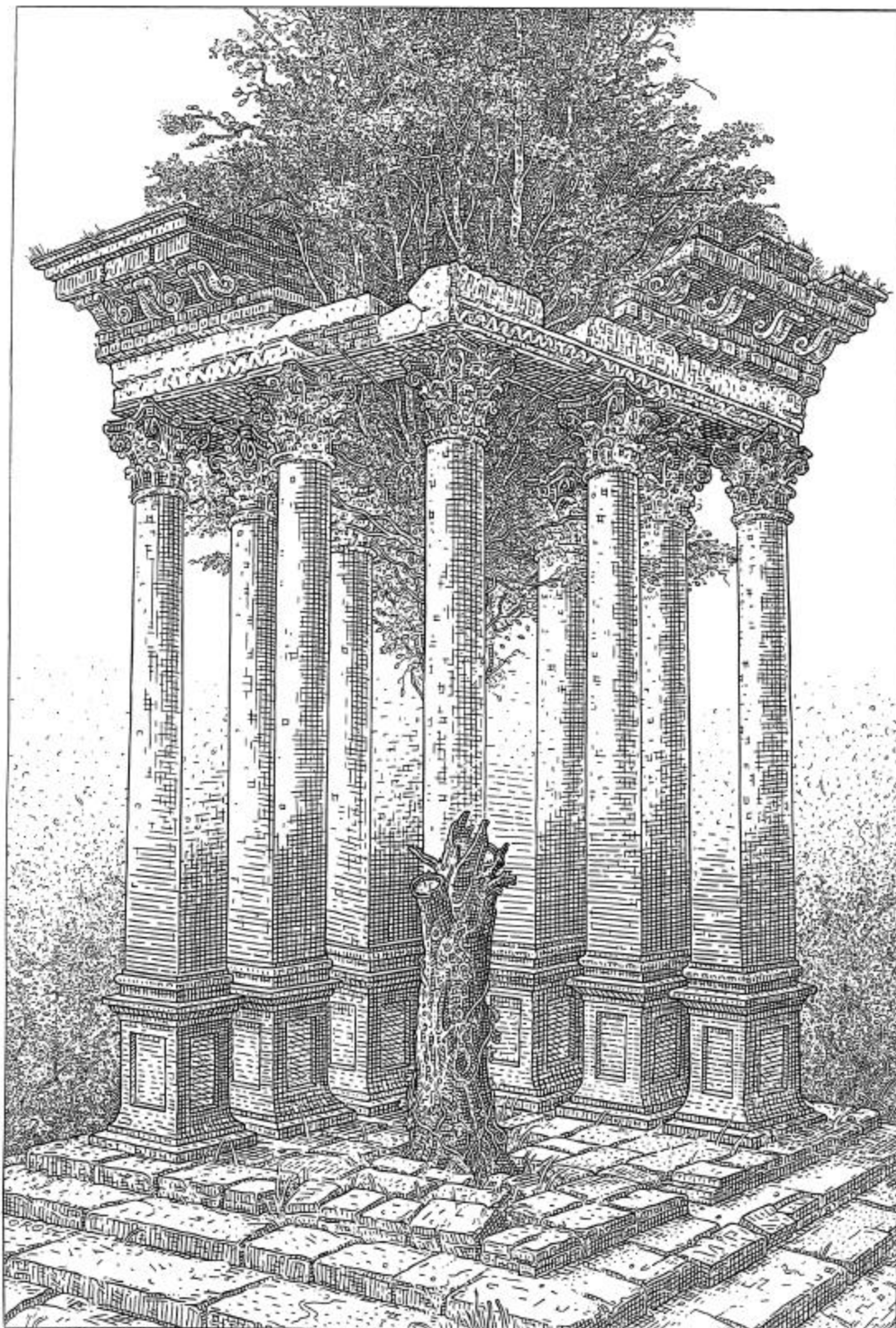
Anamorphosis With Column. Etching, 1994.

Click on the picture above to see the *Column* anamorphosis.

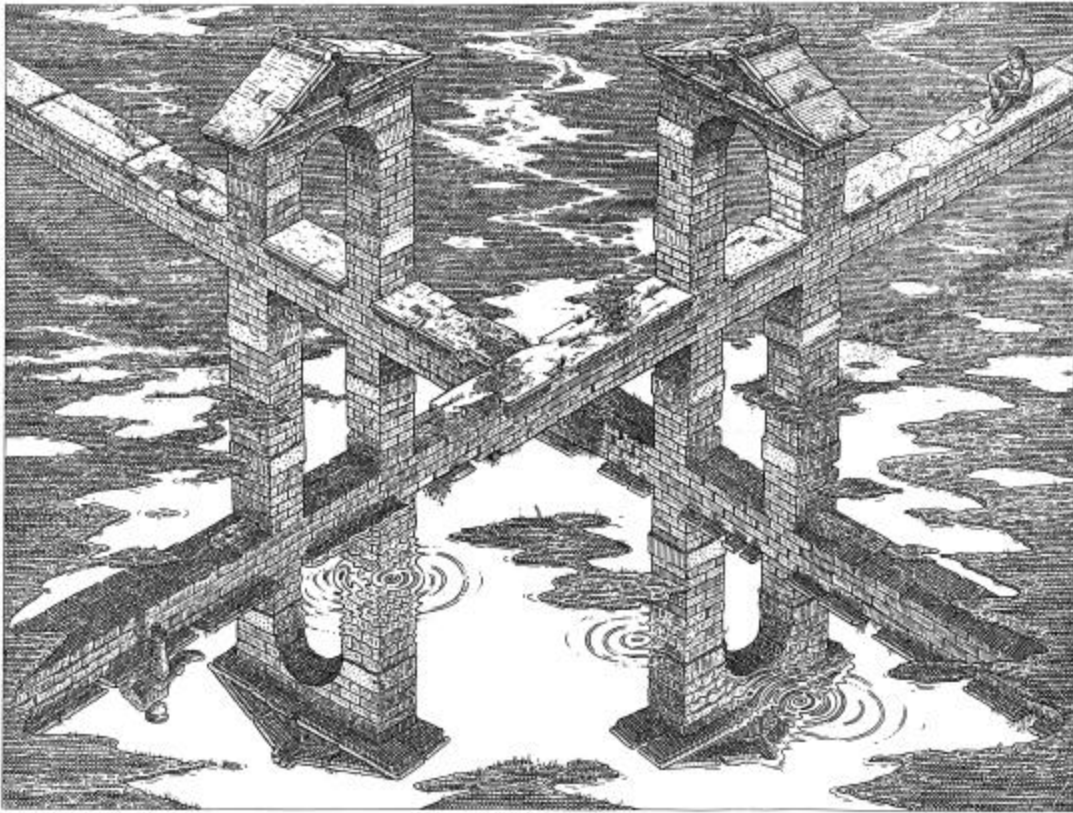


In 1943, M. C. Escher made a lithograph that is a haunting self-portrait in a circular mirror. In my anamorphic version of this portrait, it is the cylindrical mirror that transforms a semicircular smear into his visage with penetrating eye.

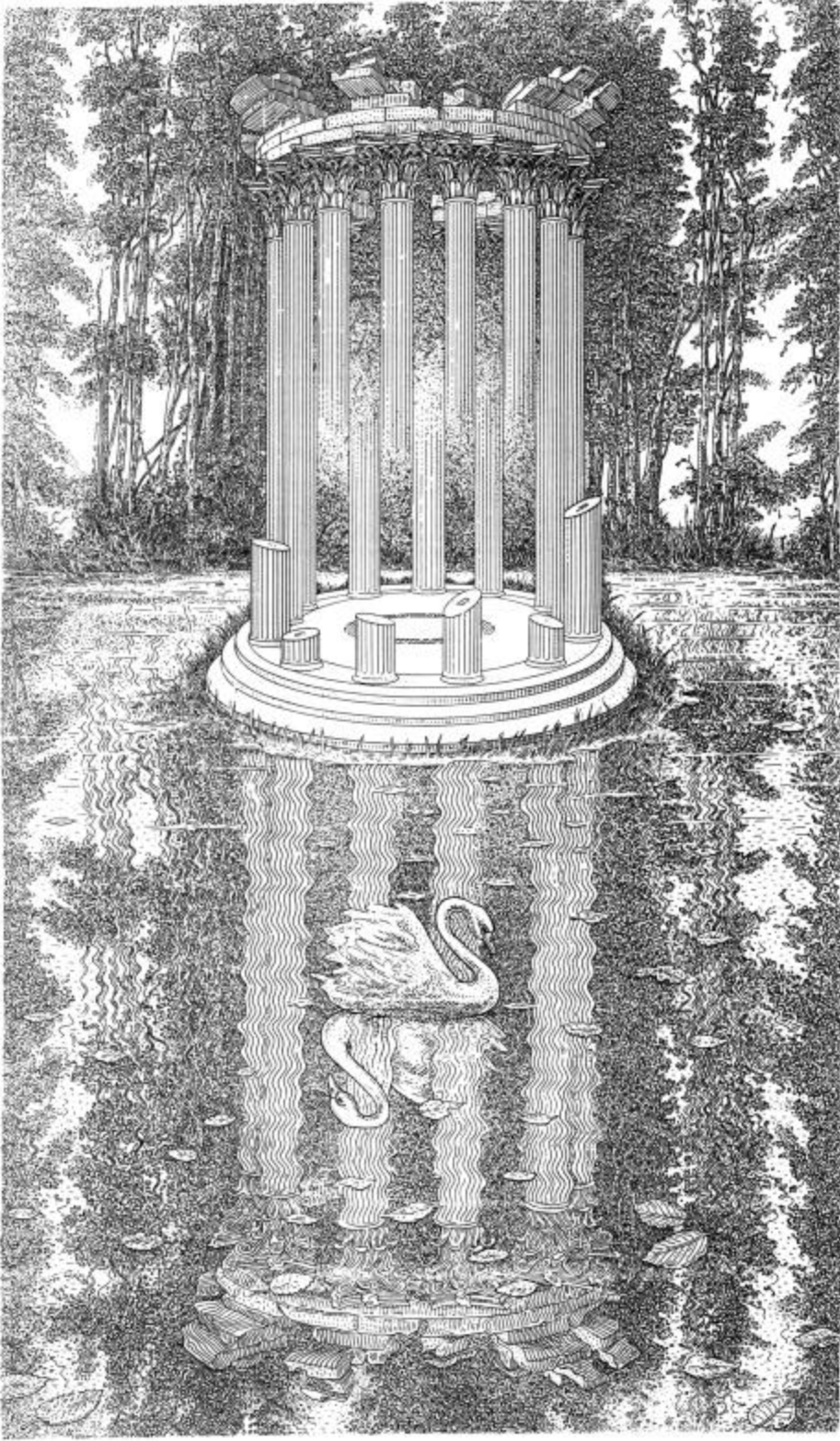
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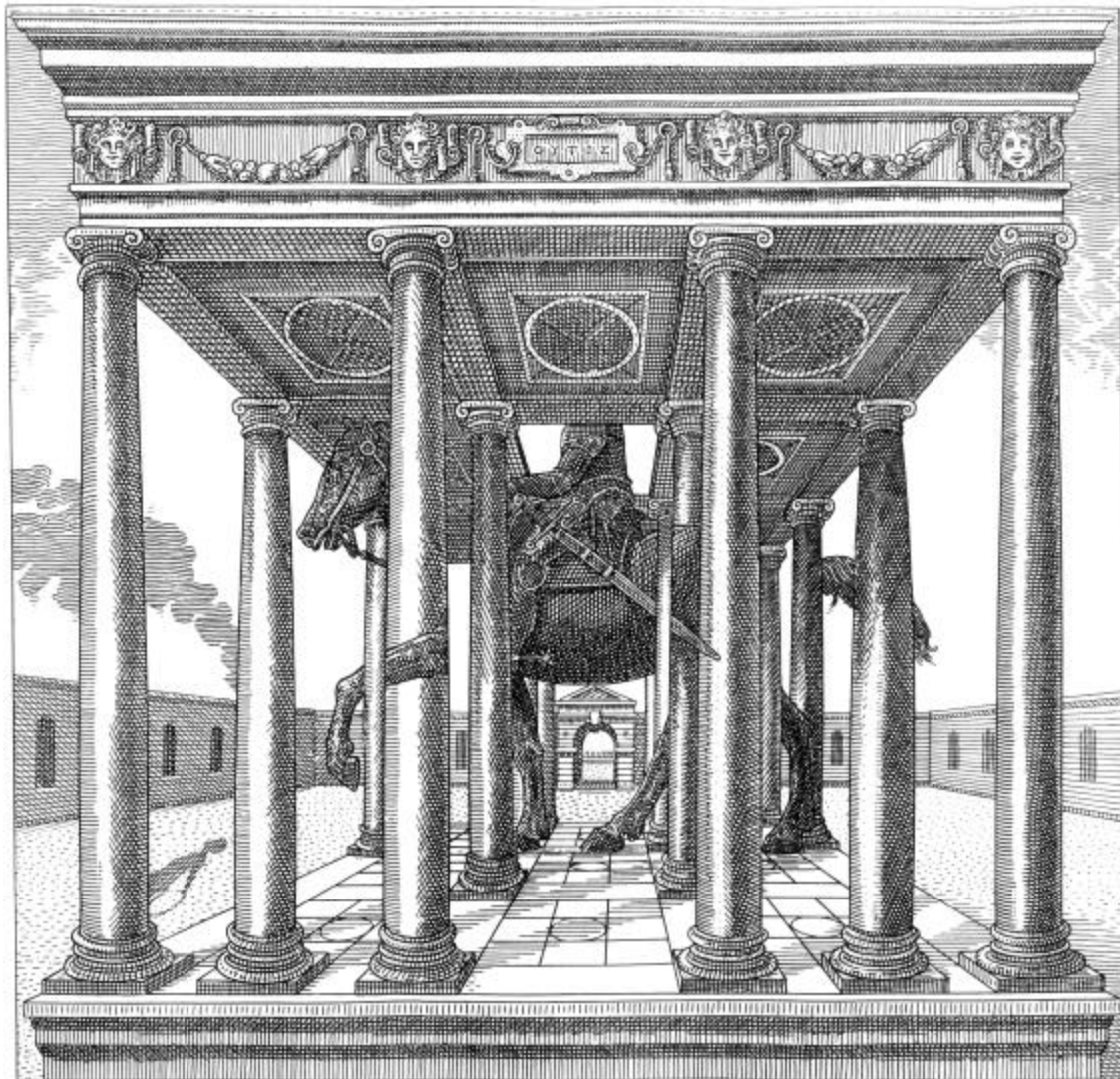
Mythology, 1999. Etching



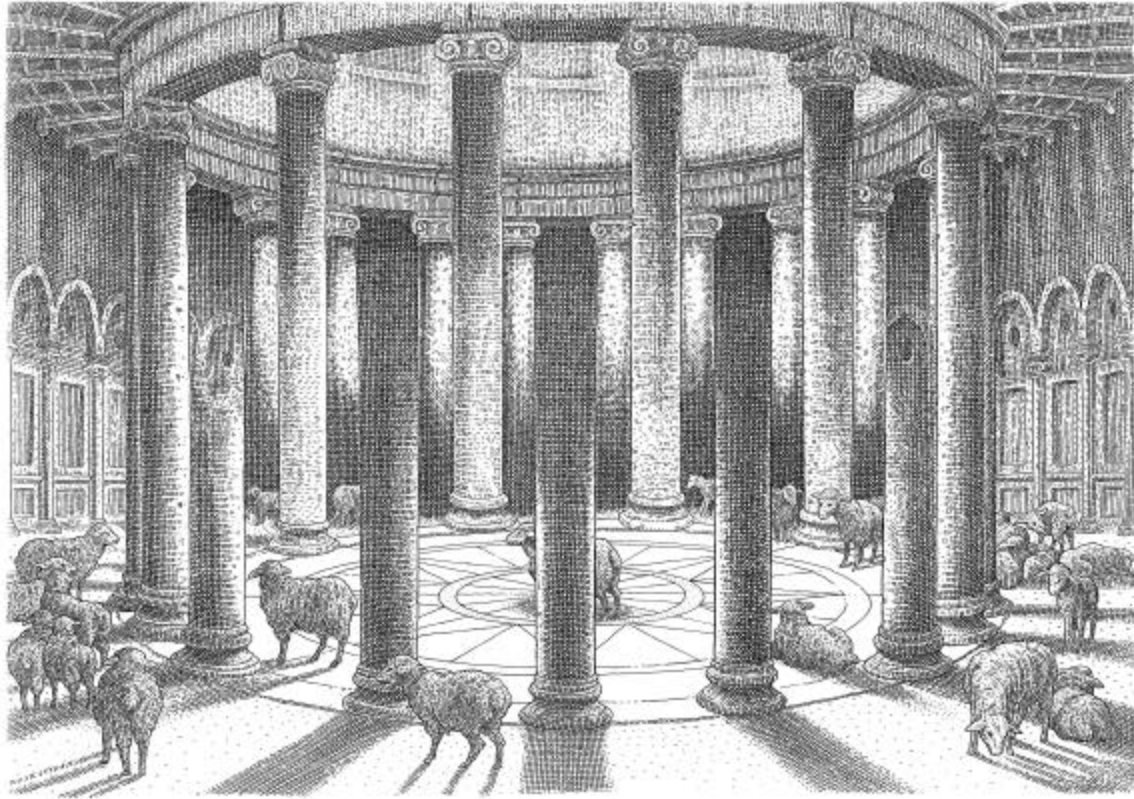
Crossroads (refleXions) 1998 – 1999. etching



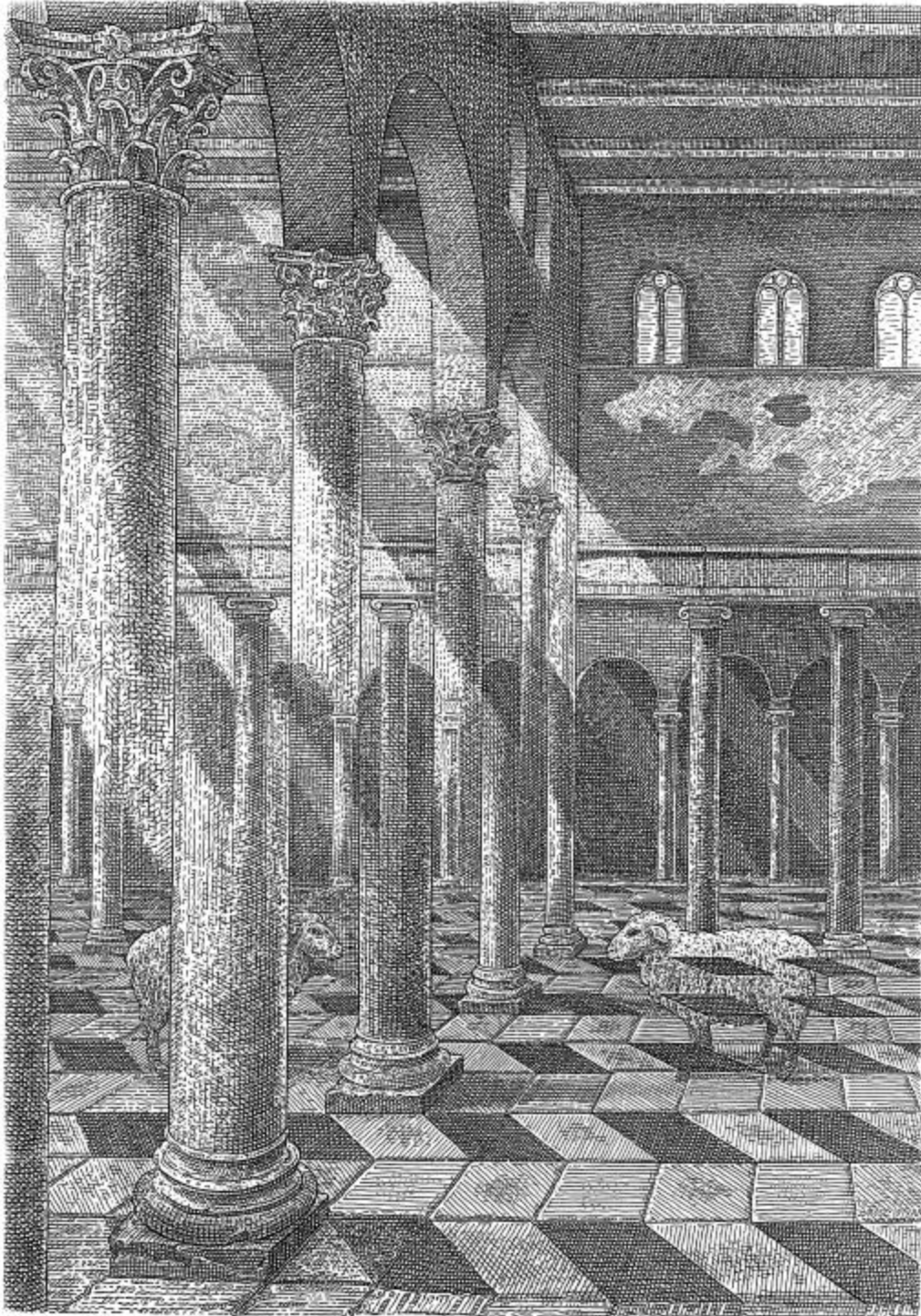
The Swan. 1996. Etching



Cavalier. 1996. Etching



Santo Stefano Rotondo Paraphrasis III. 2000. Etching



Santo Stefano Rotondo Paraphrasis II. 2000. Etching



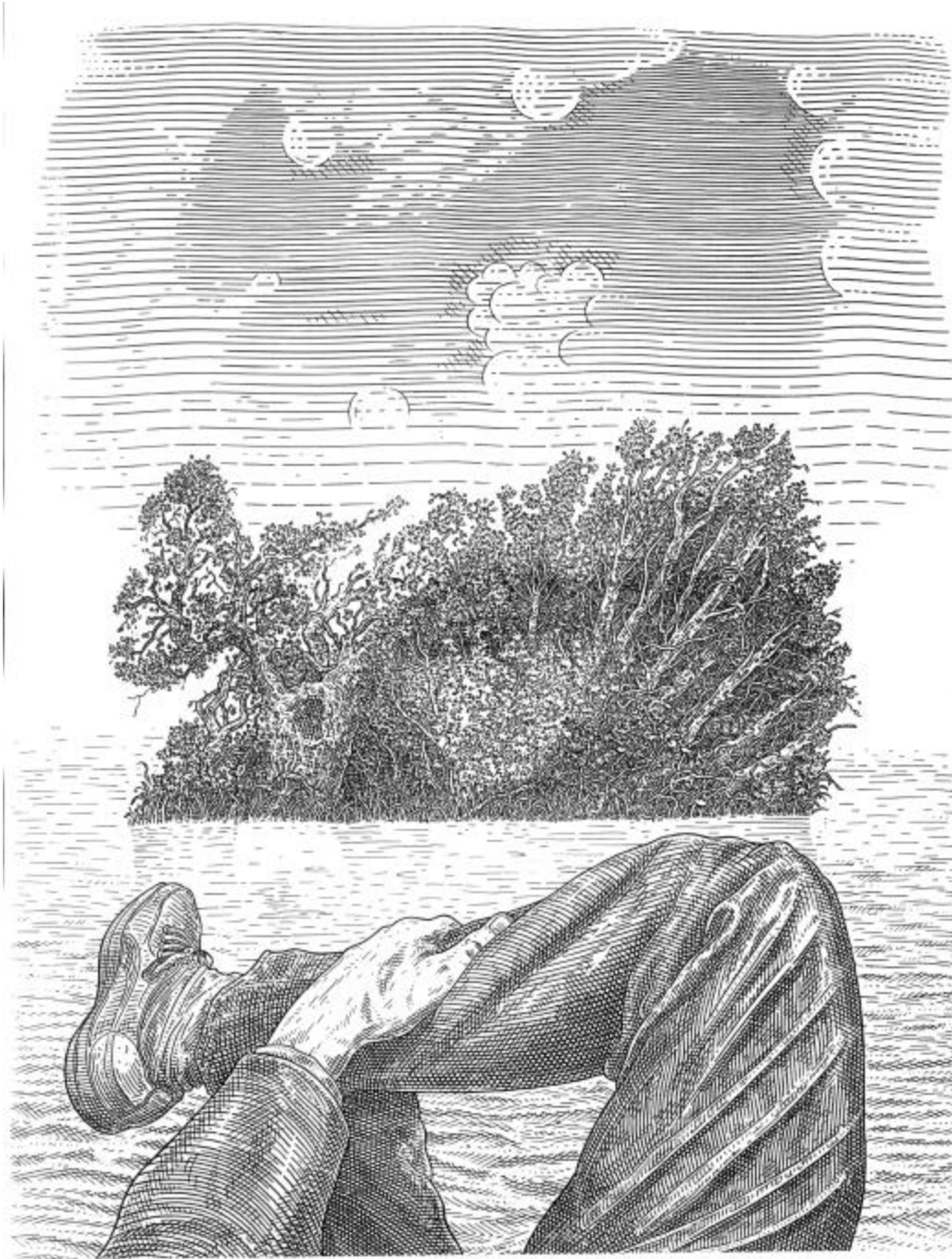
Tivo Liszt. 1991. Etching



Durer. 1988. Etching



Table 2000. Etching



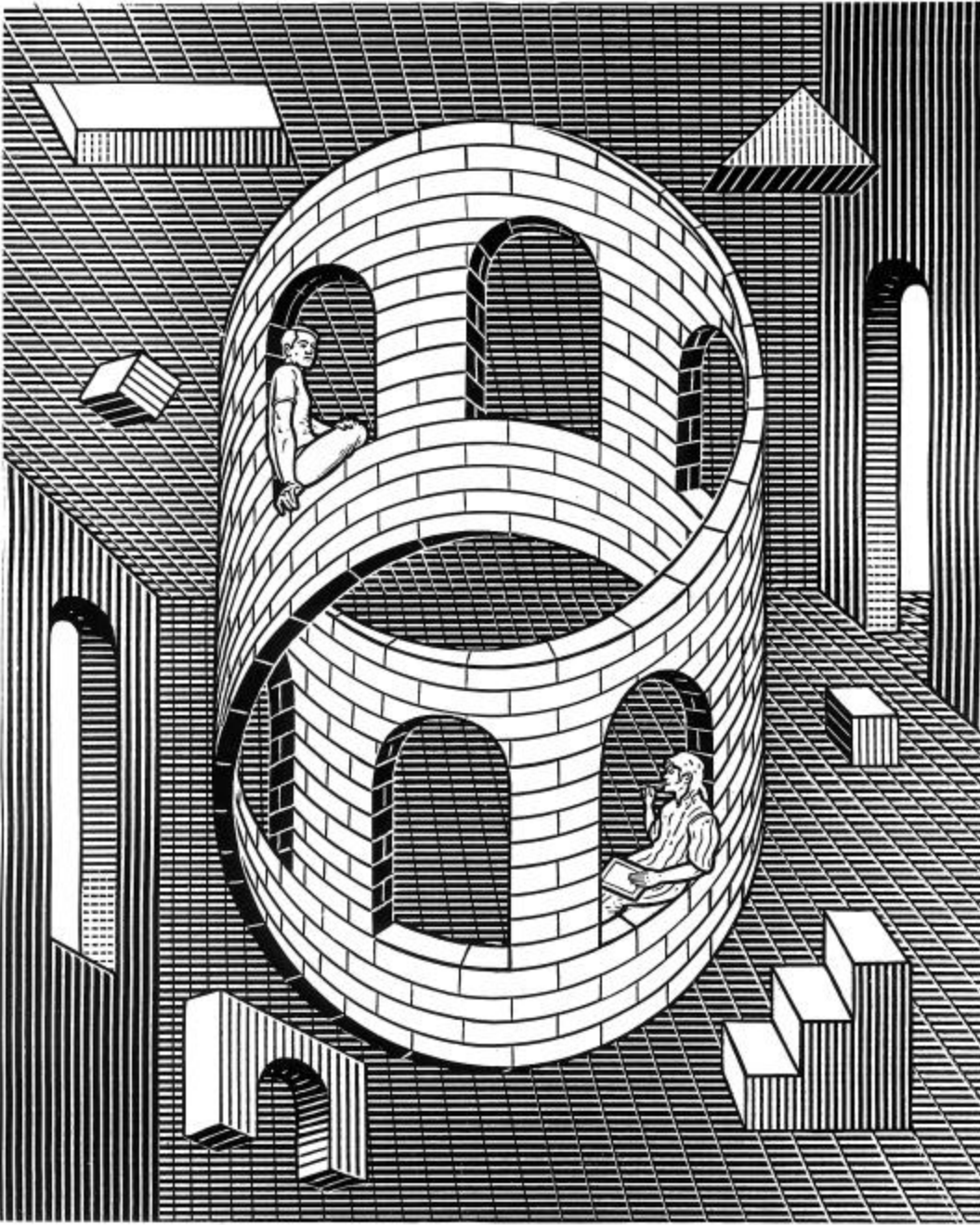
Three Islands. 1992. Etching



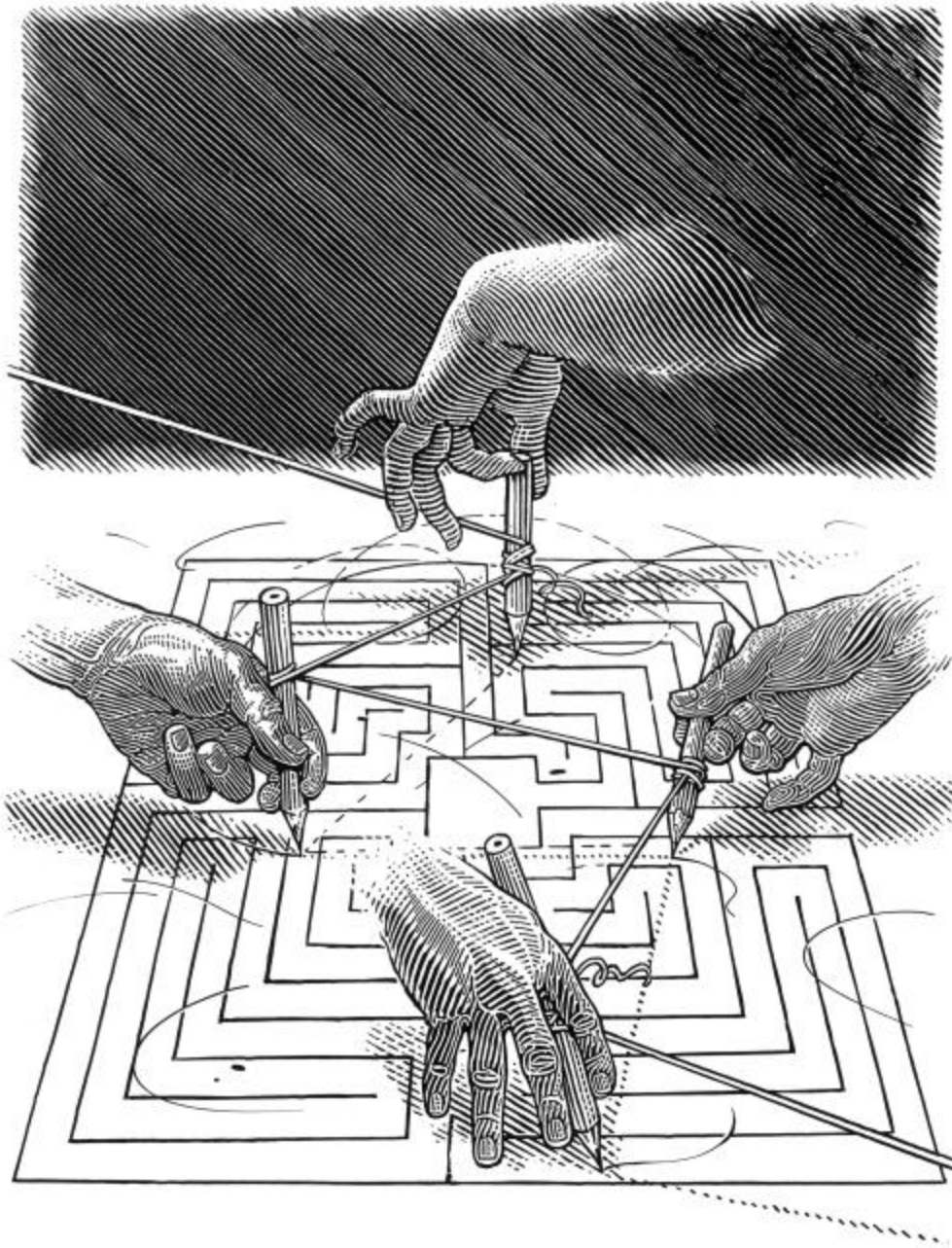
Pergola, 1993. Etching



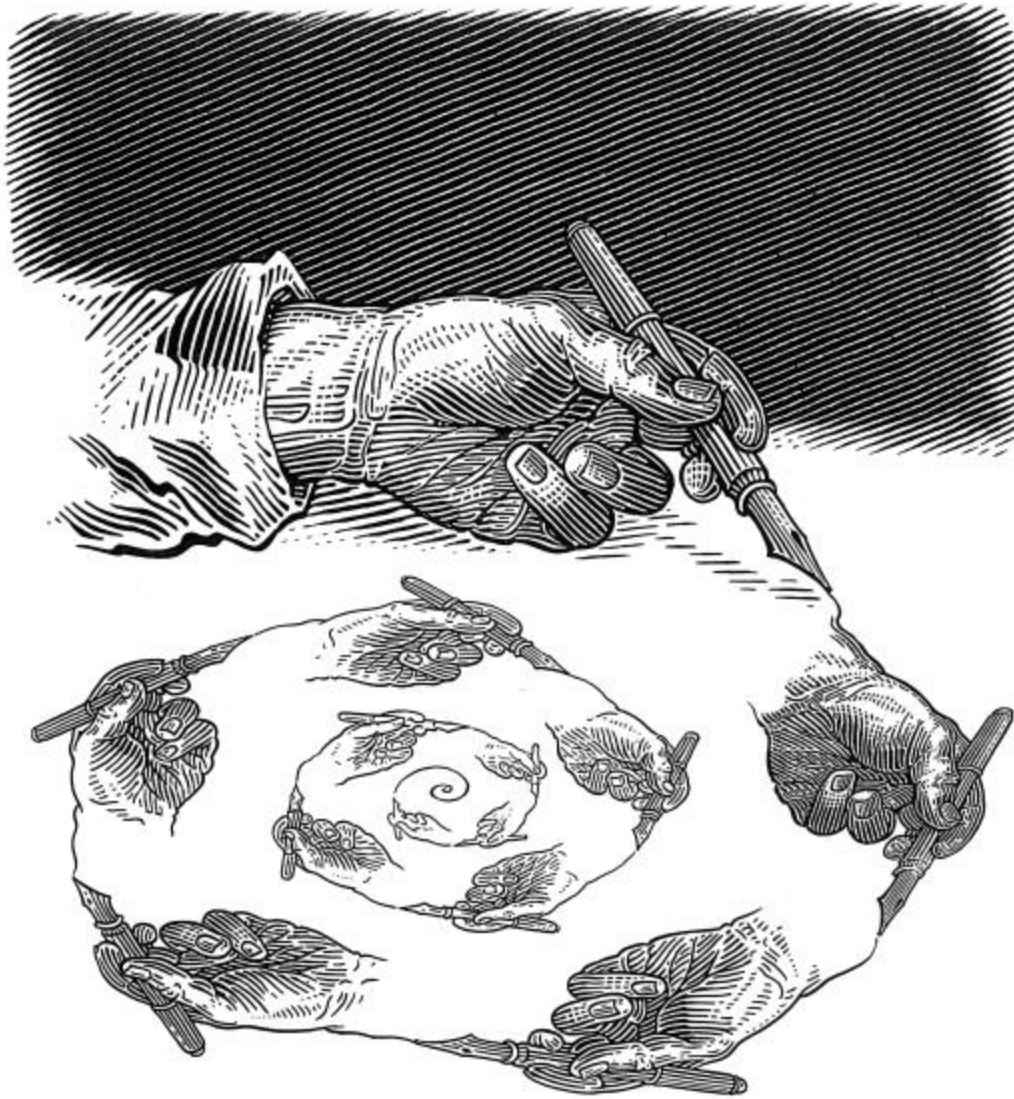
Columns, 1994. Etching



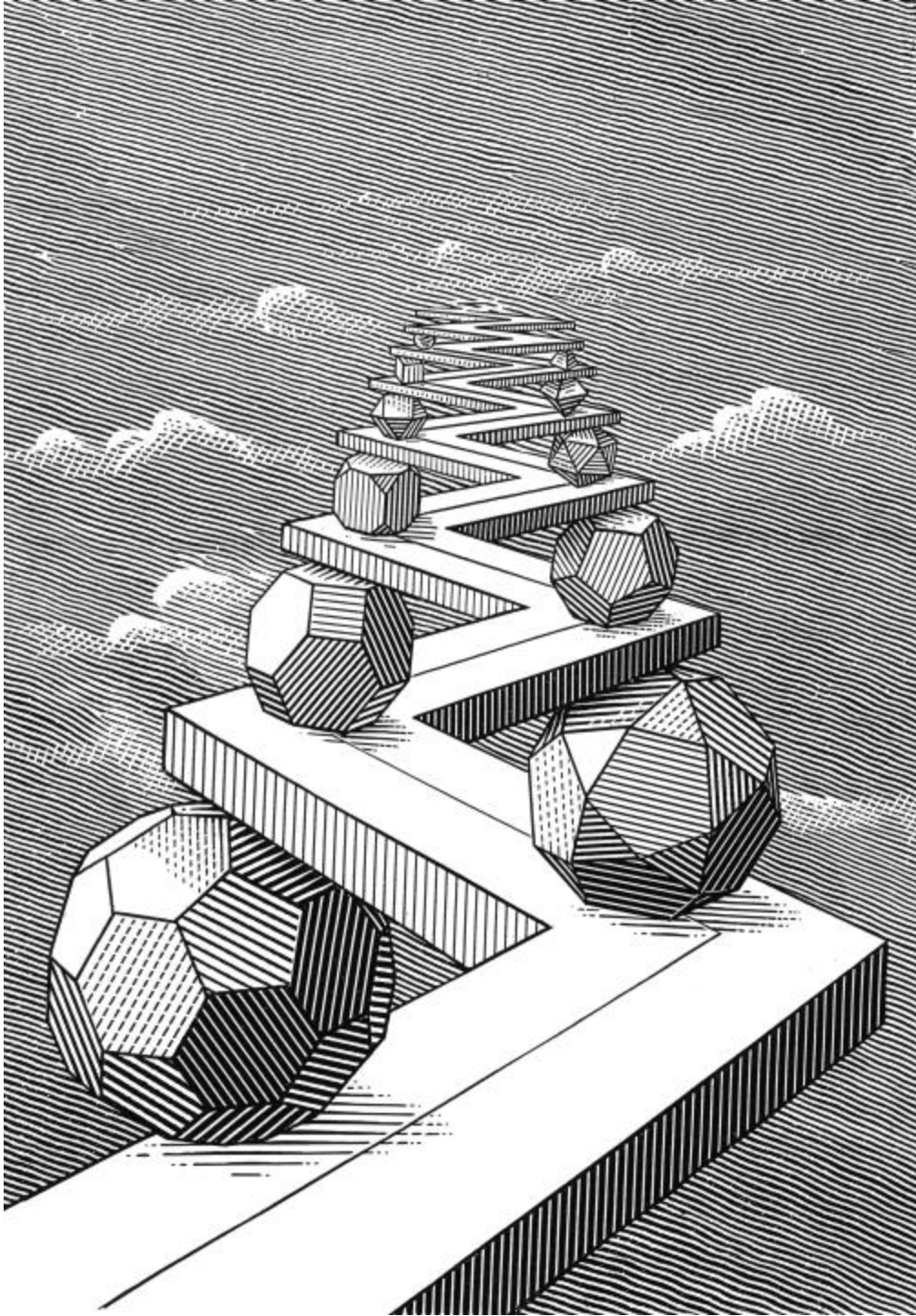
Poster design. 1997. Pen and ink drawing



Poster design. 1997. Pen and ink drawing



Poster Design. 1995. Pen and ink drawing



Poster design. 1995. Pen and ink drawing



Poster design. 1997. Pen and ink drawing