

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

MAL-CONTENT

Curtis W. Brooks, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

Thesis directed by:

Professor W.C. Richardson, Department of Art

Mal-Content is a project culminating in an exhibition including several laser-cut etchings, a large vinyl application to the wall, and a small book of symbols. This document consists of visual documentation and an edited transcript of a self-interview about the genesis, intellectual basis, and critical and material realities of the project. *Mal-Content* explores the nature of information as it is carried, rather than what it carries, through application of successive processes of technological and manual manipulations.

MAL-CONTENT

by

Curtis W. Brooks

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2017

Advisory Committee:
Professor W.C. Richardson, Chair
Associate Professor Brandon Morse
Assistant Professor Liese Zahabi

© Copyright by
Curtis W. Brooks
2017

Dedication

For Professor Barbara DeGeneieve of the School of the Art Institute to Chicago;
without her mentorship I would not be the Conceptual artist that I am today.

Acknowledgements

I wish to offer thanks to those who have given me guidance and assisted in my creative development in the past three years as well as in getting me to that point. First, thanks to the critical input of my committee, Professor W.C. Richardson, Associate Professor Brandon Morse, and Assistant Professor Liese Zahabi. In addition, their work to create a supportive environment for creative development did not go unnoticed. I must also recognize my fellow members of the Congress of Conceptual Art: Raino Isto, Gina Takanoka, and Kevin Hird, all graduate students at the University of Maryland, College Park. Zac Benson, also a University of Maryland, College Park graduate student, has been a sounding board and first critic for this and much of my work in the last three years.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iiiv
<i>Mal-Content</i> , A Discussion.....	1
Appendix A: <i>Mal-Content</i> Etching Documentation	10
Appendix B: <i>Mal-Content</i> Exhibition Installation Documentation	18
Appendix C: Visual Timeline of <i>Mal-Content</i> Project.....	26
Appendix D: <i>Mal-Content</i> Brook	38
Bibliography	53

Mal-Content, A Discussion:

What follows is edited for content, and style. It is a transcription of a self-interview performed¹ in April of 2017. It is presented non-linearly, with annotations for clarity and further exploration and draws heavily on the history of the artist from both existing and remembered documents. The interview is an exploration of the implementation of informational structure (or dis-structure) comprising the body of work presented in the 2017 MFA Thesis show under the name *Mal-Content*².

Question: What is the subject of *Mal-Content*?

Answer: *Mal-Content*, like much of my work, is an exploration of information; information in its most basic sense, though. After all, my history with data and information is a complex one. Even the distinction between what differentiates between data and information has changed for me over time. When I was a political operative the question of differentiation was ‘is it actionable?’ That is, given a polling number or data collected from the field, can we compare that data against our

¹Performance has been an open question in all discussions with the artist for many years. In an interview in 2010 the artist responded with a performative denial: “Why would I be presenting myself as anything other than the person who made this work? I am answering you as that person who applied that masking tape to that paper, that pencil mark to that Post-It. But I am no longer that person and cannot be as I do not currently have any masking tape or Post-Its in hand, so how could I be that person.” (Interview with C.W. Brooks by Lauren Comito and Dorian Dean for “Who But?”, February, 2010). When asked if an artist talk was “all a performance” in 2017, the following answer was given: “Calling this a performance is not unfair. But only in the sense that I am performing a self that exists within me. The question comes up in that the self that I am presenting does not adequately correspond to a specific expectation of the audience, which leads to questions of authenticity. But perhaps a person contains multiple selves not only throughout their lifetime; even at any one point we have several authentic selves which may be expressed. Didn’t Walt Whitman say ‘I am large, I contain multitudes?’*” (C.W. Brooks, Artist Talk, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, March 8, 2017; *Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass 51*, Kindle edition (Amazon.com), March 24, 2011)

² C.W. Brooks, *Mal-Content*, University of Maryland Art Gallery, April 26 - May 26, 2017

assumptions and in doing so learn something such that we can confirm our guiding assumptions that we used in planning, or such that we can disconfirm our assumptions and form now, hopefully more informed, assumptions and adjust our plan of action accordingly? Alternatively, when I worked in mapping, geospatial data more easily became information because it was a simple referent to the physical world and from there could be enriched by additional descriptive data points which we chose to include, or often unwisely exclude, from our database.

Q: And what does this distinction mean in this work?

A: Well, these are both examples of applied information. In *Mal-Content* I have a more abstract interest in information. What we are doing here is communication, perverse as it is, as I am performing two selves, that of both interrogator and interrogated, and in *Mal-Content* I am interested in the communication, not the meaning therein. Claude Shannon drew this out well in an early information theory paper by saying:

“The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. **These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem** [emphasis mine]. The significant aspect is that the actual message is one *selected from a set* [emphasis in original] of possible messages. The system must be designed to operate for each possible selection, not just the one which will actually be chosen since this is unknown at the time of design.”³

³ Read in the interview from *The Bell System Technical Journal*, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication”, C.E. Shannon, p.379, Vol. 27, July 1948

So, here as an artist I am approaching this representation as an engineering problem by first stripping out as much meaning as possible.

Q: What do you start with in this stripping process?

A: I begin with photographs.

Q: What are the photos of?

A: I don't believe that it assists the viewer to know. I was largely arbitrary in choosing the precursor images and processed them to the point where even I was unable to read the original subjects of the photographs. The hope is that the subject now becomes just the information contained within, in that it is specific without being meaningful. While I have a large number of processed, or stripped, images, *Mal-Content* uses just a single stripped image as its source material.

Q: But an image remains. What is it doing?

A: I have to leave something for the viewer. Past attempts where I and others have removed too much information have led to anger and near revolts. I can't remove all of the information and have a satisfying experience for the viewer. I am looking to remove information on a particular level, or a particular order of information. There remains a great deal of meaningful information about these pieces, such as that they are printed etchings and therefore cannot escape consideration in that tradition. The decisions I've made on this material order are for aesthetic and

practical purposes.⁴ However, the hope is that the image information functions in a unique manner, on its own order.

Q: What do you mean by order?

A: The easiest analogue is that of scale. Differing information can be resolved at various scales of observation. From one point, where you can see the whole Earth, the planet is clearly round. But an everyday experience of a person on the surface can act under an assumption that the Earth is flat. In the case of these works it is tempting to confuse the medium with the message.

Q: Are you concerned you are picking a fight with Marshall McLuhan in saying that?

A: If we dig into the specific use of this medium, let's say we focus on the small prints, it is meant to be relatively neutral. Context matters and carriers matter, of course. Here quasi-traditional methods have been employed. There is an intended space in this work between etching and drawing, drawing and vinyl application. The concerns of drawing, mark making, surface, form, and so on, are considered here, even though these marks have a digital machine origin as transmitter. These concerns are yet another order of information.

⁴ Etchings were pursued as an output medium after significant time was invested in computer CNC technology, which was used to make very large woodcut blocks for printing. However, the image within these prints did not sufficiently balance with the medium, which was an unsatisfactory state for communicating a message, even if that message was not intended to have a traditional meaning. The laser-cut etching plates and the resultant prints have a delicacy and fineness of detail that serves the images well, inviting closer engagement with details in a seemingly intimate interaction for the viewer.

Q: What do you mean by ‘transmitter’?

A: Once again I’m cribbing from Claude Shannon’s ideas of communication. He draws out five parts to a communication system. They are: information source, transmitter, channel, receiver, and destination⁵. Translating these to our question respectively: the precursor image, the computer processing, the art medium in the traditional sense⁶, and finally the viewer, comprising both the receiver reconstructing the signal and the intended recipient of the message.

Q: Why think about art making in these terms?

A: Because in this case I am less interested in content generally and more interested in systems. And systems of understanding and action are constantly being formed and reformed within our minds. As people, what are we, after all, but sorting machines? Our brains are well tuned to filter information and look for patterns; such patterns may indicate food or safety or sex opportunities. And we are now living in a symbolic paradigm, one where real opportunities for food or safety or sex are coded in language and visual culture. As a cultural worker I’m interested in dismantling these coded, or mediated, systems of communication to expose the structure that governs the models of the world that guide our decision making⁷.

⁵ *The Bell System Technical Journal*, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication”, C.E. Shannon, p.380, Vol. 27, July 1948

⁶ Shannon explains the channel as “merely the medium used to transmit the signal from the transmitter to the receiver, it may be a pair of wires, a coaxial cable, a band of radio frequencies, a beam of light, etc.” (ibid, p.380). In this case it is a complex system with heavily weighted traditions which carry their own meanings and have their own partisans.

⁷ Taking this another step, my project in teaching is an extension of this: to make students more aware of the mediated world in which they live so they are both better able to critically understand that world, as well as to better manipulate that world.

Q: Is that all you are interested in?

A: No, I am also interested in food and safety and sex.

Q: With work which purports to have “no information” isn’t this just going to frustrate viewers?

A: First, there isn’t “no information” in these images, but let’s come back to that.

Second, I have received feedback that some feel left out of the ‘inside joke’ in some of my work. I suppose if there is an inside joke, it is that there is no inside joke. But there is left a space for interpretation, even an invitation for the apopheniacs among us to find a perceived pattern that fits whatever model or paradigm they are operating within or processing the world through. Perhaps my approach is best described as a subversive neutrality. The work is intentionally problematic to open a space for confusion, which can expose, hopefully, the working model that we unconsciously filter our perceptions through. But I’d like to come back to discussing the work.

Q: Okay. What sort of filter is used on the images?

A: The precursor images are systematically degraded to lines. Given the process, they could even be expressed as sets of connecting coordinates within a given field. So they are degraded, but not in the way that much information is degraded by destructive noise. Instead these images are degraded by being simplified. But we are not looking at some sort of essence of the original image, simply the result of a process which favors certain aspects of the image and disposes of the information

related to other aspects. This is an intentional and willful negation of information, but of information that will only serve to distract by directly conjuring thoughts of a puppy or perhaps something else delightful. After all, if we are going to live in an unintentionally indifferent universe, what better way to examine it than in a neutralized environment?

Q: But what are the precursor images?

A: The precursor images are gone. Much like when you perform a chemical reaction and your precursors are no longer there, they have become something else. Once the images are processed, stripped, there is no going back because that superfluous, meaningful⁸ information has been removed and cannot be regained, even if you do completely know the process and the end state. You can't unbake a cake. And in this case I am moving from the photographic tradition of taken images to a drawing paradigm of made images. The nice thing for me is that I am like a catalyst, in that I am unaffected and can perform the function again. That being said, this entire show relies on a single image. And my hope is that this image is an embodiment of the idea of information, not an illustration of an idea.

Q: Why not just draw these "drawings" if that is what you regard them as?

A: I am a pattern recognizing, model forming person, just like everyone else. I am unable to maintain something as close to seemingly random as I would like. And I

⁸ Meaningful in that the information can be directly mapped onto an idea or experience that the viewer already holds in their mind. If the precursor image is known to be a landscape then that will necessarily mediate the viewer, obscuring the subtleties that I am most interested in.

feel that the output mechanisms I have are adequate. I prefer a line that is very much on the surface of the substrate, or even in the case of the vinyl cuts simply on the wall⁹. A line with a strong surface immediacy is the most effective for my purposes¹⁰.

Q: How did you arrive at these end products of etchings and vinyl cuts?

A: In the beginning this was an experiment that failed in the physical world. My initial effort to take the processed images from the computer to tangible product failed. The first prints were from an inkjet printer and were entirely unsatisfactory, to the extent that the project was nearly abandoned. Fortunately, a wide format architectural copier was available at a local copy shop and I was able to print several images. This toner based system laid the lines on the surface of the paper, rather than soaking into the paper as inkjet imaging does and that made all the difference. This surface immediacy provides an almost tactile sense of the lines, without which they cannot stand on their own. From there I tried other outputting methods, including using a CNC router to cut large woodcut plates for printing. This ended up with too much material interest and the question of the process overwhelmed the image in that manifestation. The etchings, which are laser cut into the plate, were a logical step as

⁹ Even though the wall is not a neutral surface at all, carrying strong connotations from the work of Sol LeWitt and three-year-olds with a box of crayons everywhere.

¹⁰ Working with printmaking methods rather than a hand-drawn line is an extension of my experience with physical and motor disabilities, these methods are both mechanical and ritualized, which has often been an approach I have used in making my work. That these lines are similar to those that could be made by hand, but not the same is information of a different order, informing the image itself. This distance created between the hand and the image through use of photography, computer processing, laser outputting, and printmaking is enabled through a long-term practice in which I have an intimate knowledge of each process and material used.

they have both the delicacy to not overwhelm the image and the surface immediacy to support it.

Q: And the vinyl cut?

A: The vinyl cuts are much more a story of luck. I acquired the vinyl cutting machine last year without specific plans or a well formed project. Fortunately it is a versatile tool for both practical and abstract projects. And with it I am able to come as close to directly drawing on a wall as I dare. Sure, I am mediating this drawing through a computer, but this allows me to introduce another level of negation, that of the hand in the drawing.

Q: What happens when or if a viewer does find meaning in the image?

A: They'll receive a free souvenir book¹¹. I expect some viewers will find meaning¹². And I'll leave you with two thoughts. First, Marshall McLuhan, "If I hadn't believed it, I would not have seen it."¹³ Second, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."¹⁴

¹¹ See Appendix I

¹² Again, this is due to nature of the brain as a sorting machine, looking for patterns which indicate food or danger (etc.). This urge is important to get through the day and is not one that I expect a viewer to leave at the gallery door. Within the gallery there is a particular context that brings up particular expectations, which I hope to subtly work against, challenging the place and purpose of the art work in our lives.

¹³ Douglas Coupland, *Marshall McLuhan: You Know Nothing of My Work!* (Atlas & Co., New York), 2010p. 62

¹⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, *Mother Night* (Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, New York), 1961, 2009, p. v

Appendix A: *Mal-Content* Etching Documentation

Following are images of the 7 etchings included in *Mal-Content*. These were printed from laser-cut Plexiglas plates.

All images originate from a single source image, which is included in its unaltered form in the first image *Untitled*.

The images appear in the following order:

Page 11:

Untitled, Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 12:

Untitled (Repulsion 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 13:

Untitled (Repulsion 2), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 14:

Untitled (Attraction 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 15:

Untitled (Attraction 2), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 16:

Untitled (Flow 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 17:

Untitled (Flow 2), Etching, 7"x7", 2017















Appendix B: *Mal-Content* Installation Documentation

Following are images of the gallery installation of *Mal-Content*, on display at The Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, April 26 – May 26, 2017.

Page 19:

Installation view of all etchings.

Page 20:

Installation view of the following etchings:

Untitled (Flow 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Untitled (Flow 2), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 21:

View of etchings:

Untitled (Attraction 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Untitled (Repulsion 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Untitled, Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Untitled (Repulsion 1), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Untitled (Attraction 2), Etching, 7"x7", 2017

Page 22:

Installation view of vinyl cut piece:

Untitled (Reach), Vinyl 63"x269", 2017

Pages 23, 24, and 25:

Detail installation view of vinyl cut piece:

Untitled (Reach), Vinyl 63"x269", 2017

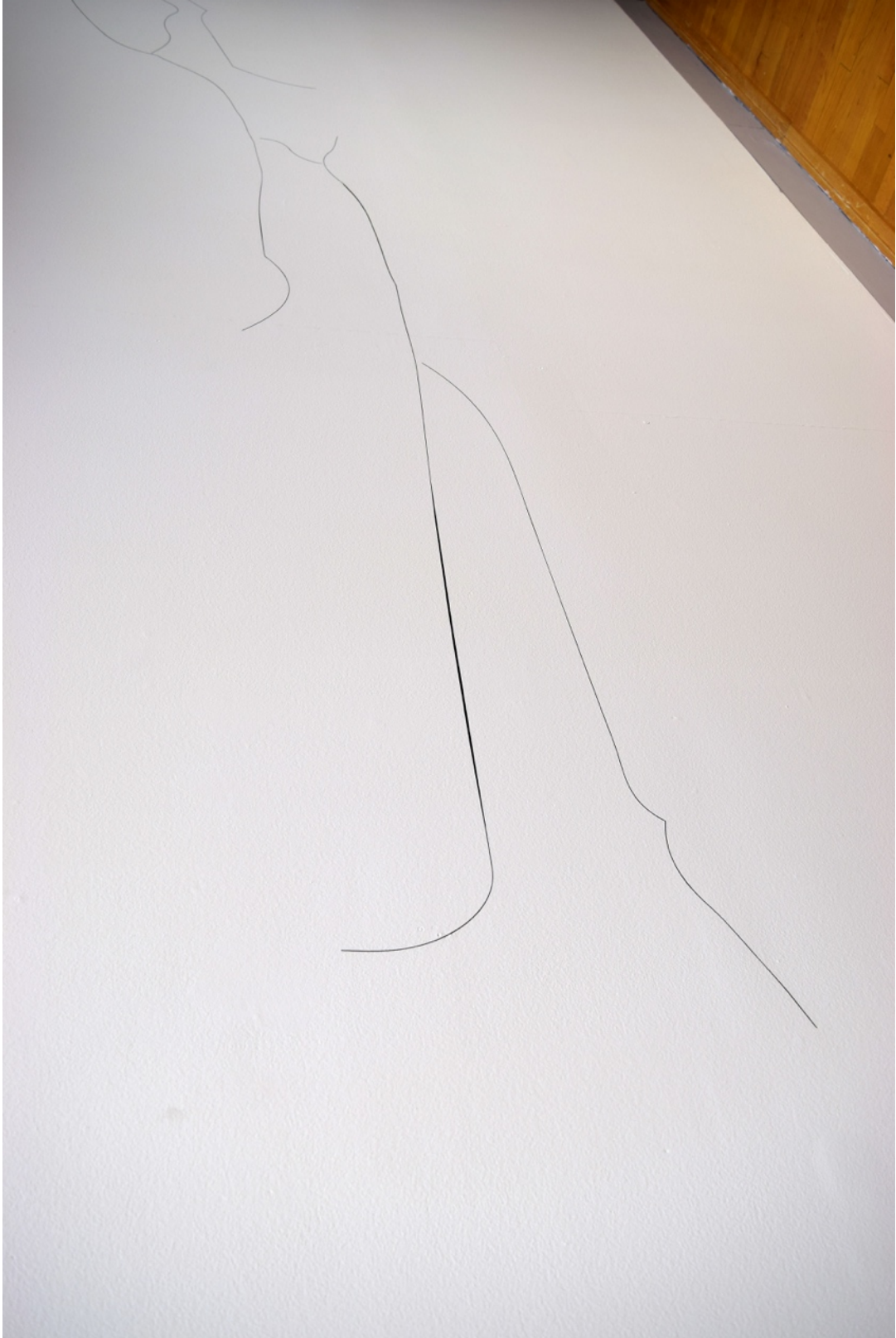












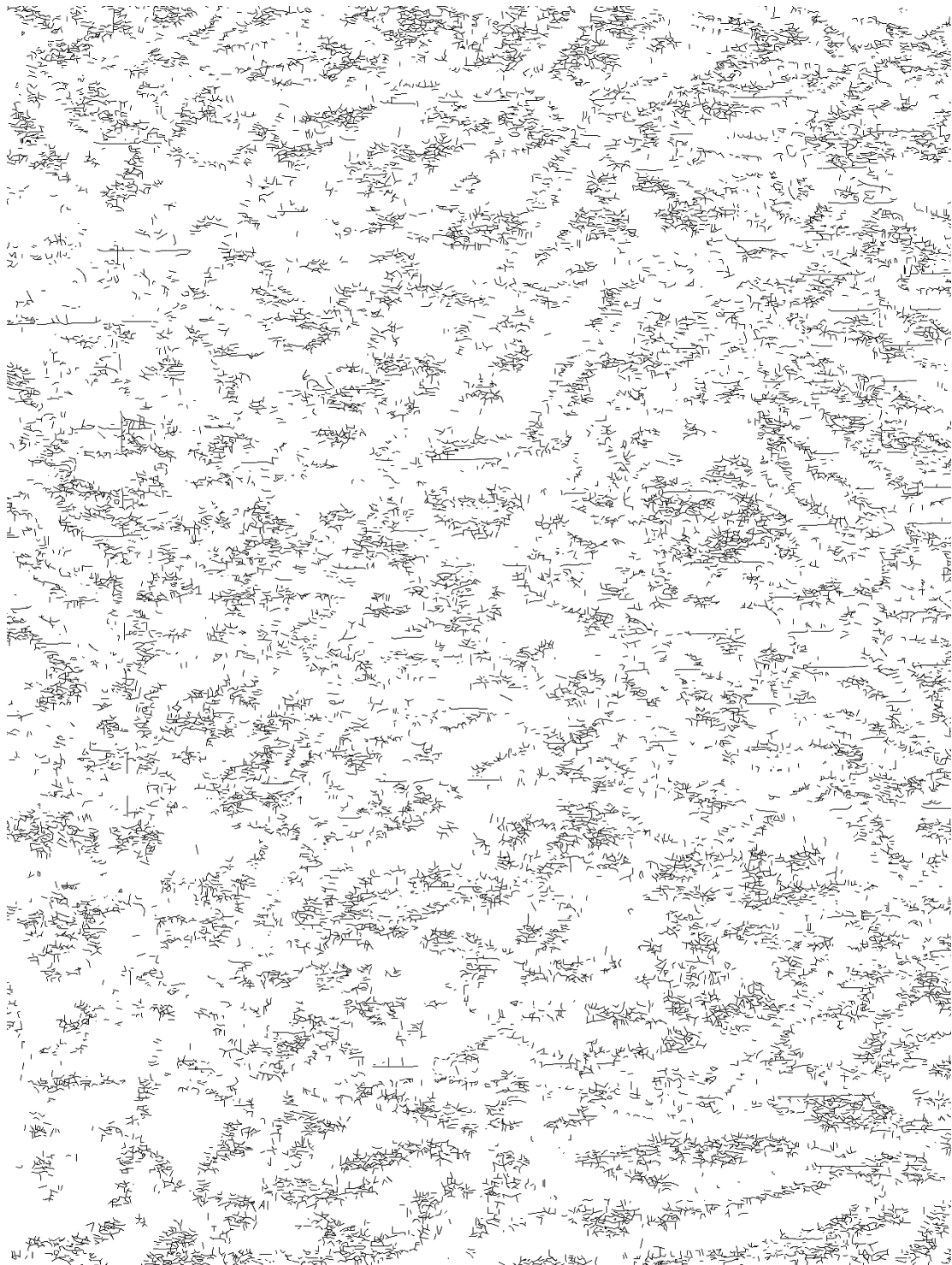


Appendix C: Visual Timeline of *Mal-Content* Project

On the following pages are photographs and information about the development of the *Mal-Content* project.



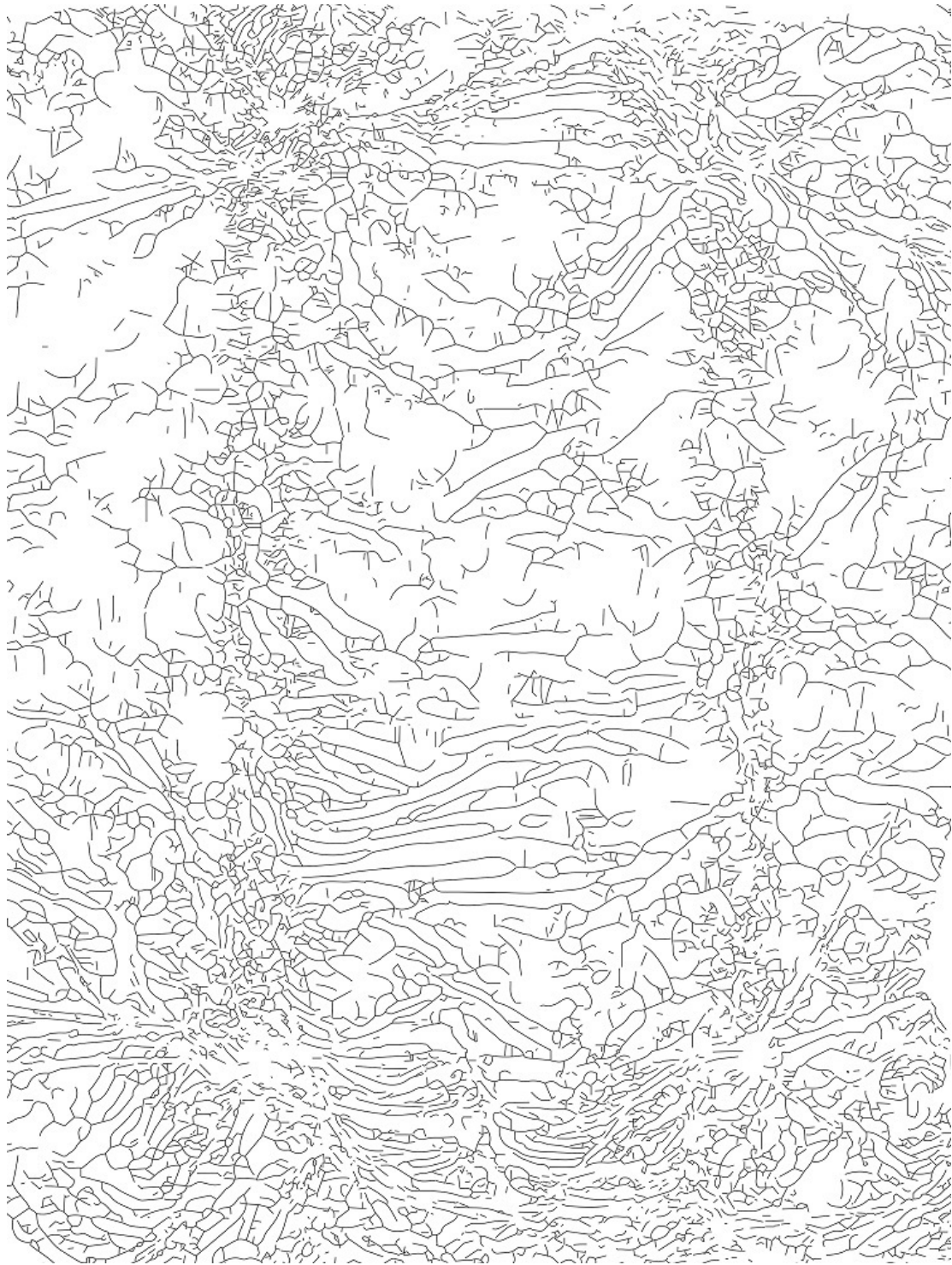
Model SC Vinyl Cutter in The Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park. Before installation of *Mal-Content*, April 2017



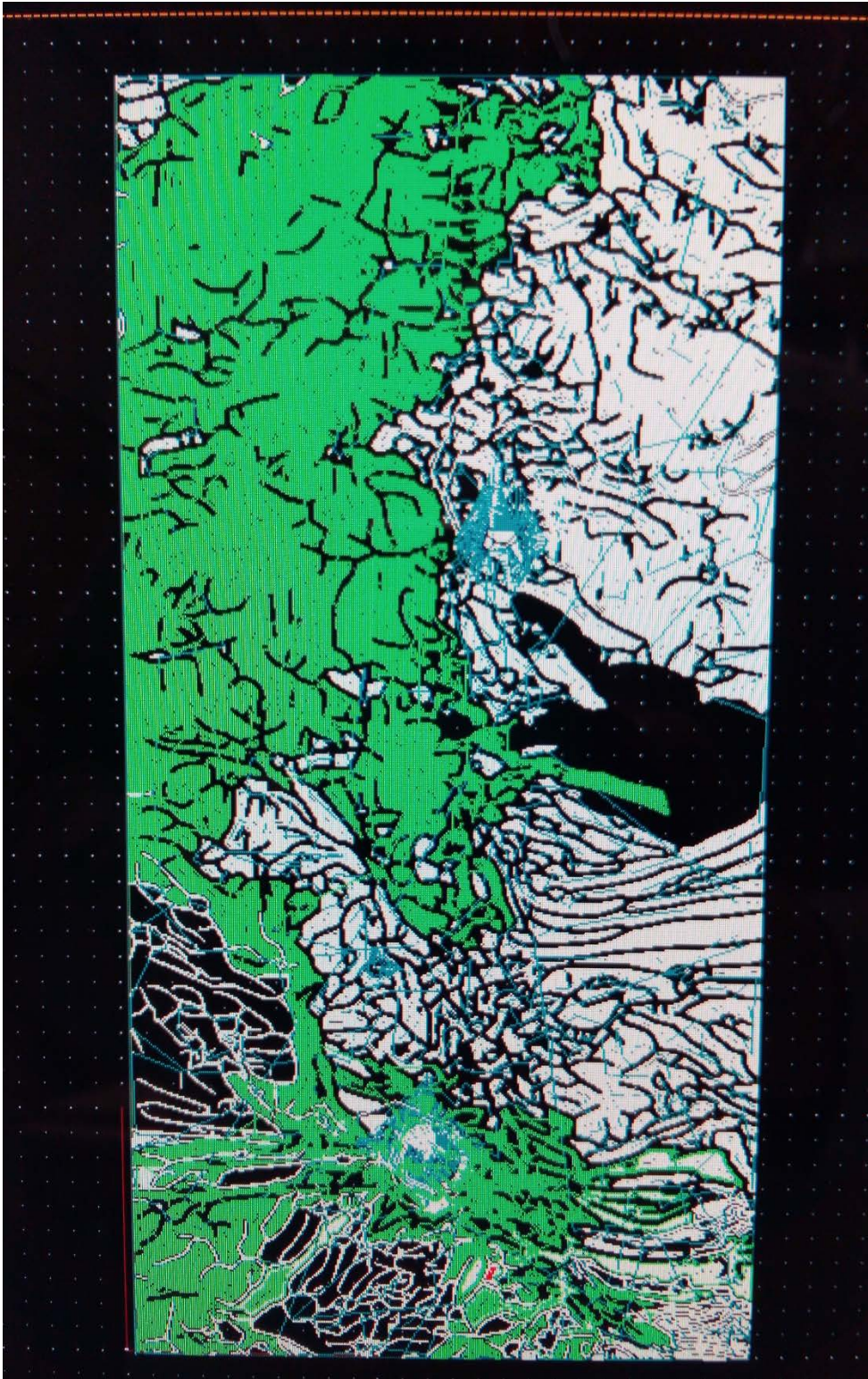
Line drawing *In-Line*, February 2016. One of the earliest images created in this process.



Line drawing *Warp*, March, 2016. Another early line drawing.



Line Drawing *Untitled*, April, 2016. One of the early computer-created line drawings where photographs were used and information stripped out. This image was the source for the entirety of *Mal-Content*.



Screen capture from CNC control software of woodcut plate machining.
October, 2016.



Inked test woodcut plate. Woodcuts were initially pursued because of the artist's connections to parts of the woodcut community. October, 2016.



2'x3' test print of woodcut, November, 2016. Large woodcuts were initially attempted, but abandoned due to issues of lack of apparent density. Because of this issue the decision was made to utilize the USCutter SC Vinyl Cutting machine acquired in November 2016 to make large detail vinyl cuts and small prints of the larger image.

C.W. Brooks: *On Line*

"For C.W. Brooks, drawing offers a method to translate between the world of images and the world of things. These line drawings begin with an undisclosed found image, which Brooks processed on a computer to the point of total ambiguity. Laser printed at a large scale, the resulting pattern emerges as a highly physical presence on the prepared surface. This sense of immediacy is echoed in Brooks's practice of drawing lines in silverpoint on board here in the gallery over the course of the exhibition. Unscheduled and hovering in and out of view, this performance is at once a private meditation and a public provocation about the act of drawing and its capacities to embody image, thing, and artist."

—Cecilia Wichmann

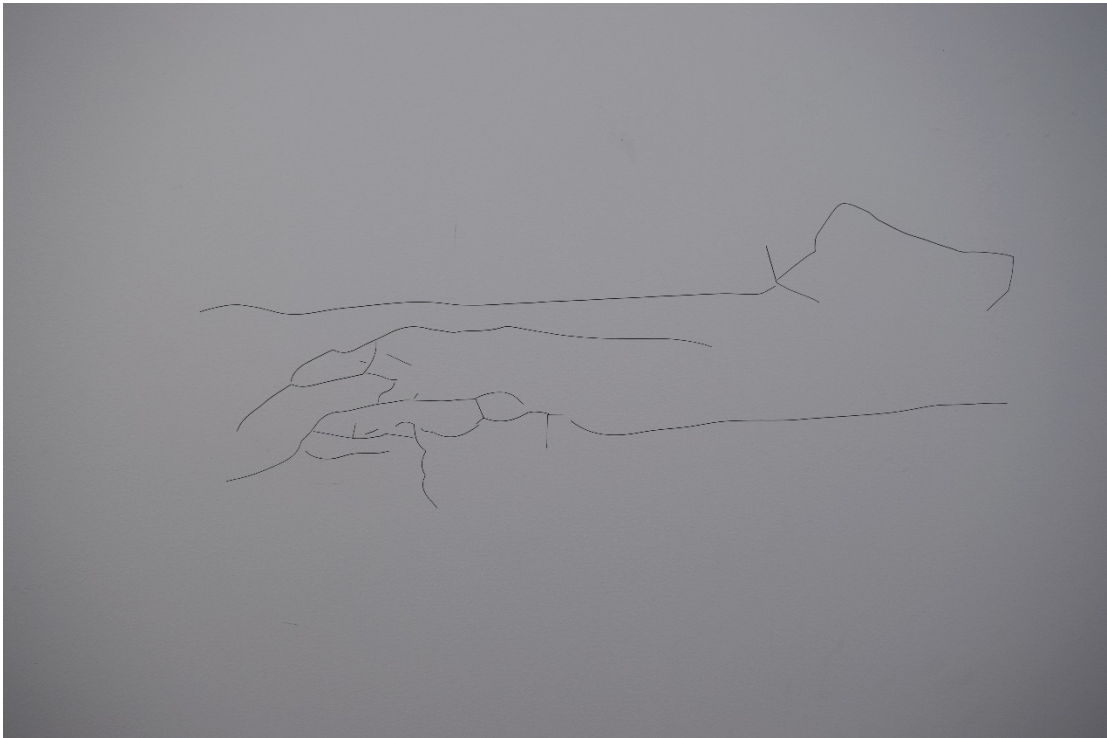


Laboratory is a research gallery operated by the Graduate Students of the University of Maryland-College Park Art Department, C.W. Brooks, Director

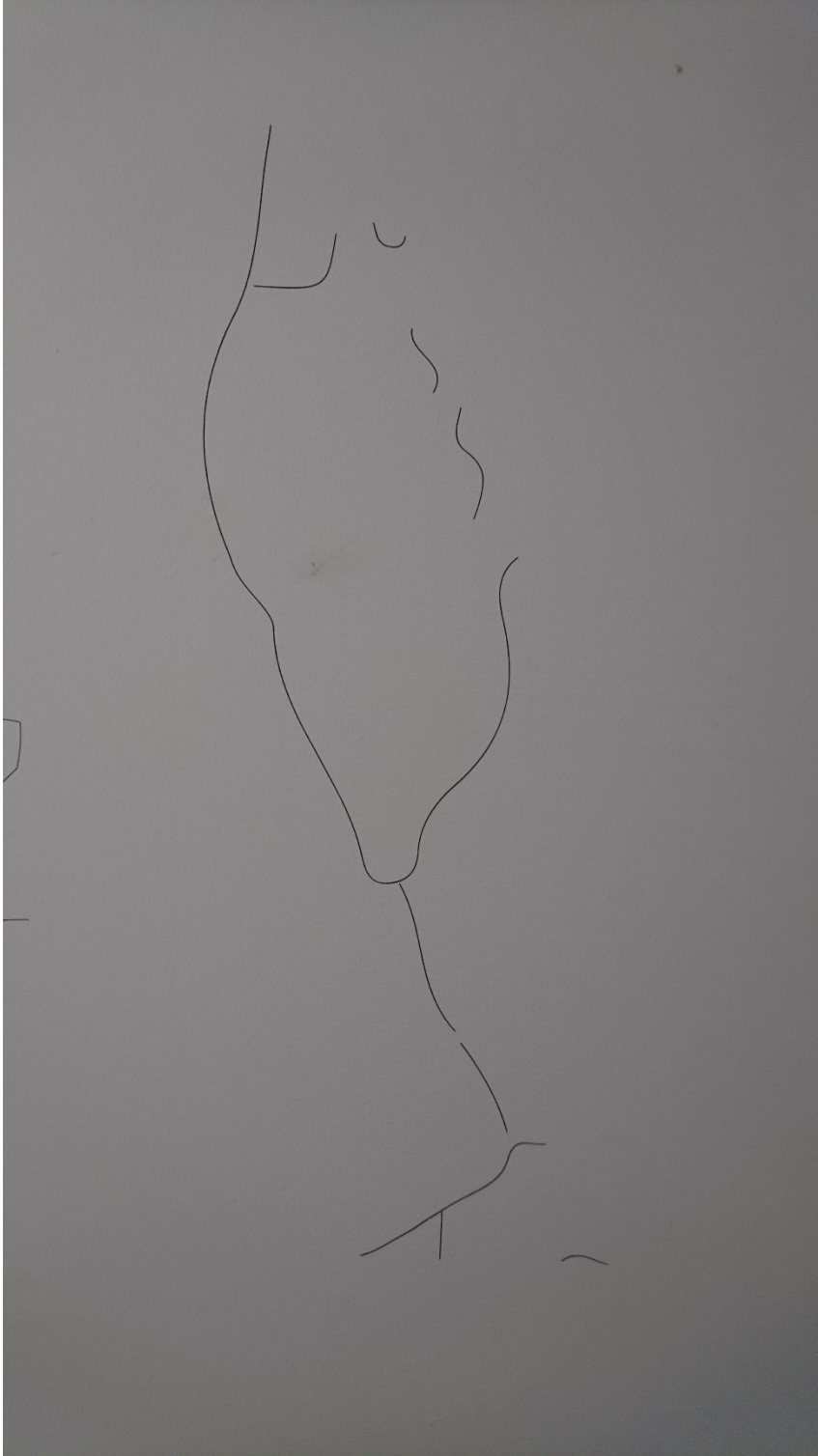
On Line, an early show of the line drawing series. Curated by Cecilia Witchman. November, 2016. This show, staged in the Laboratory Research Gallery at the University of Maryland, College Park, provided an opportunity to learn how the line drawing images would function in relation to each other. This eventually led to the decision to mine a single image for content for *Mal-Content*.



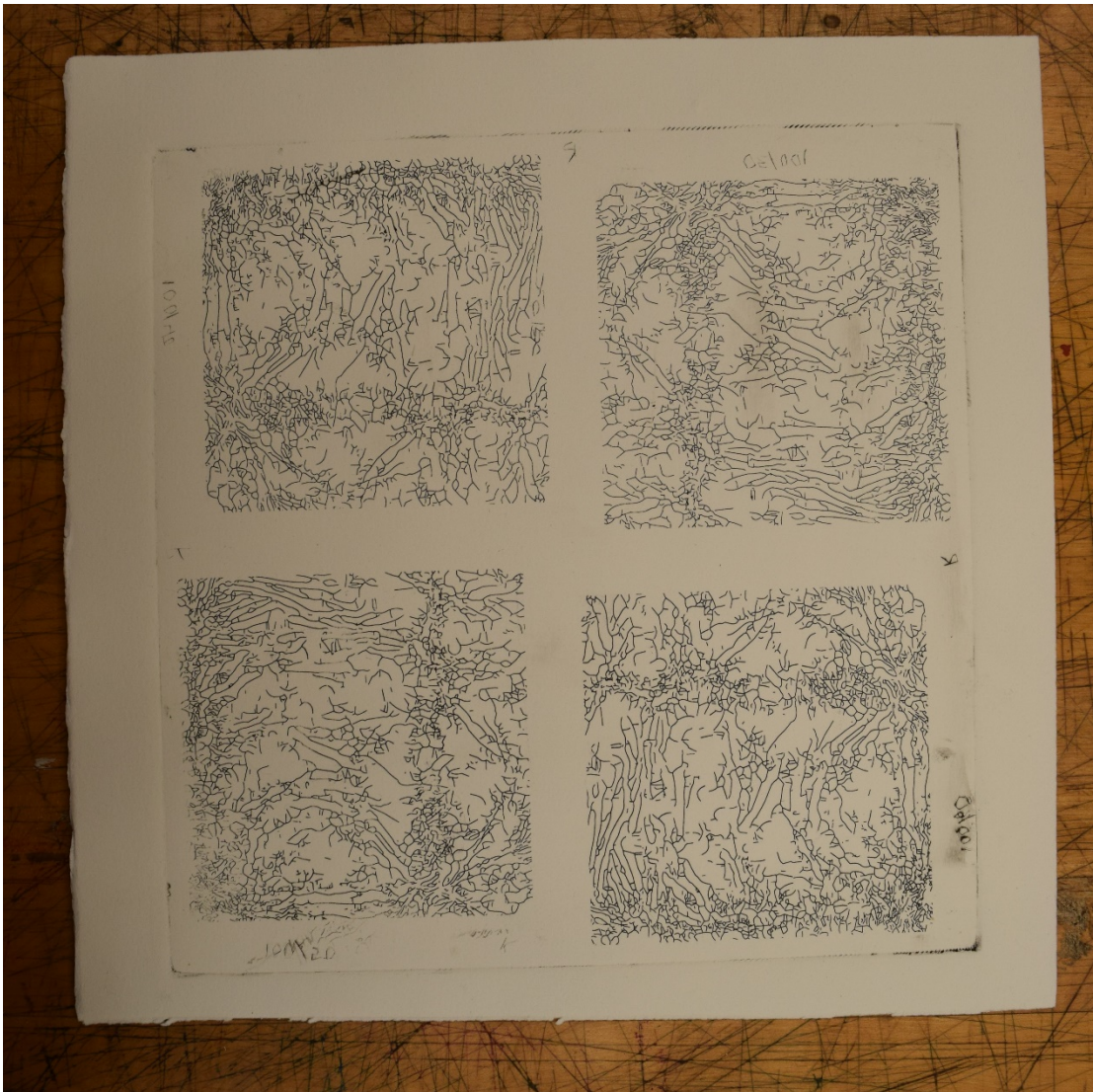
Initial vinyl cut test, January, 2017. This exposed issues of line weight and surface immediacy in applying lines directly to the wall.



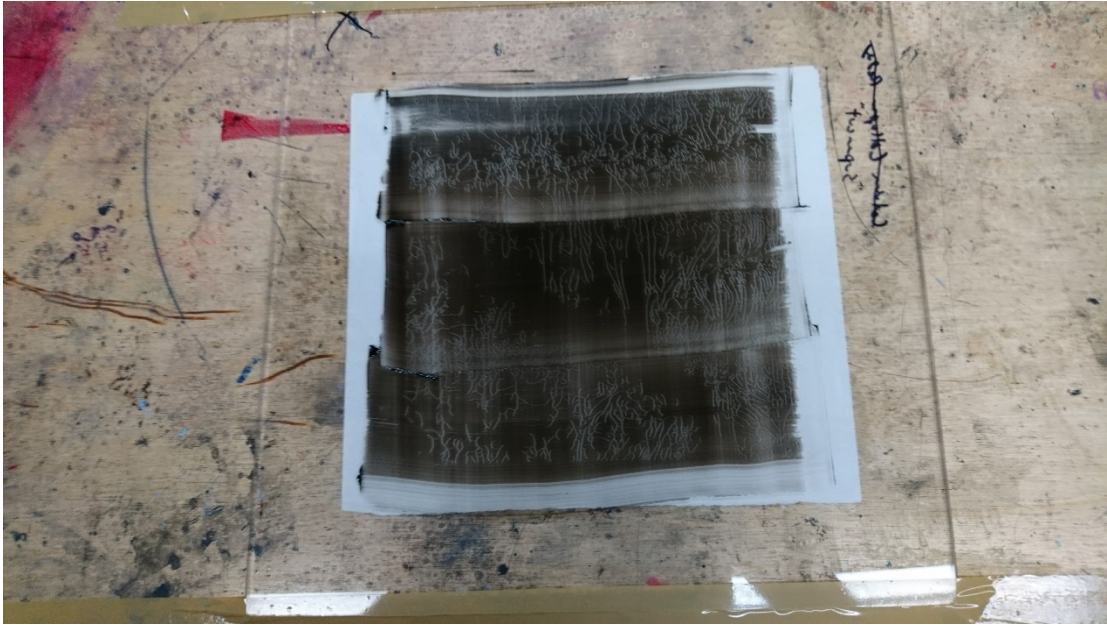
Vinyl cut test, February, 2017. Refinement of lines to appear as if they may have been drawn with a pen reintroduces the possibility of the artist's hand, while refuting the possibility at the same moment.



Vinyl cut test, March, 2017. Isolation and enlargement of elements allow the viewer the chance to misinterpret.



Bringing these images into etching required significant testing to find the correct methods to etch lines into Plexiglas in the appropriate way. March, 2017.



An inked Plexiglas plate, waiting to be wiped down before printing. April, 2017.



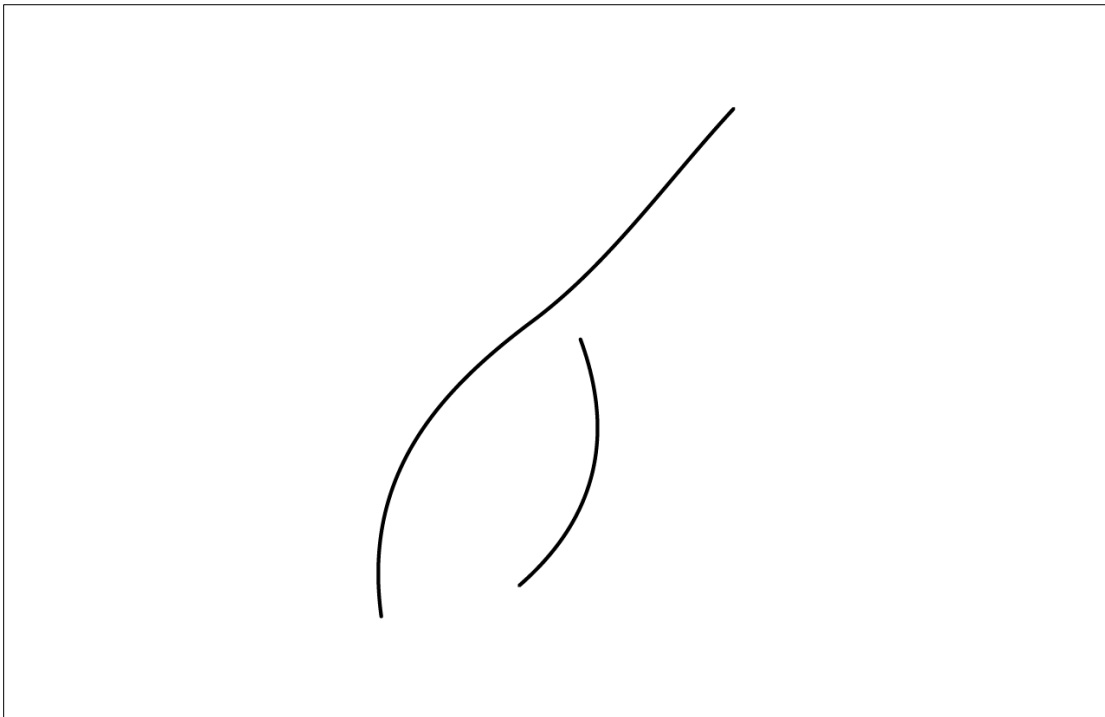
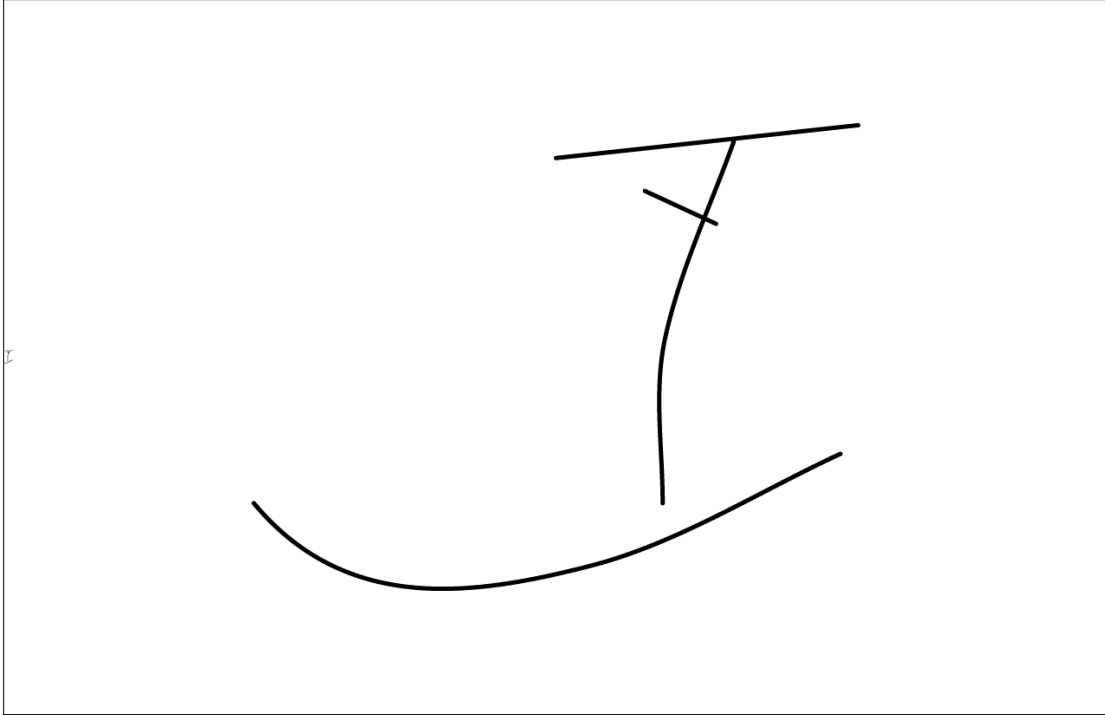
The completed etching *Untitled (7"x7")* as included in *Mal-Content*. April, 2017.

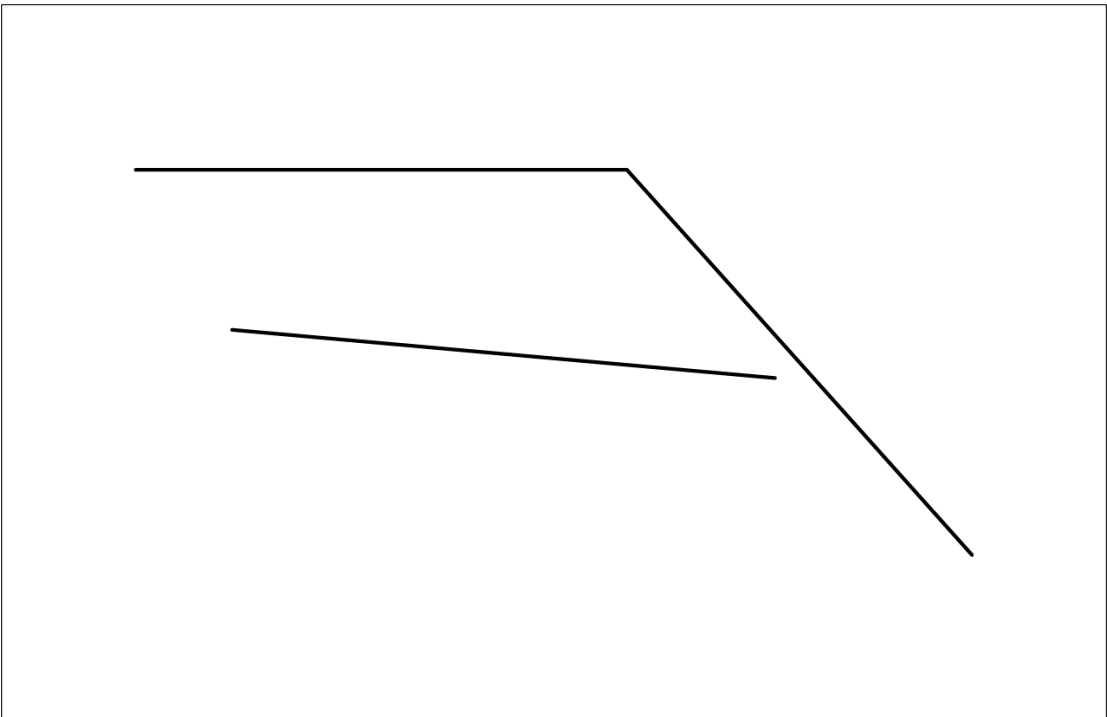
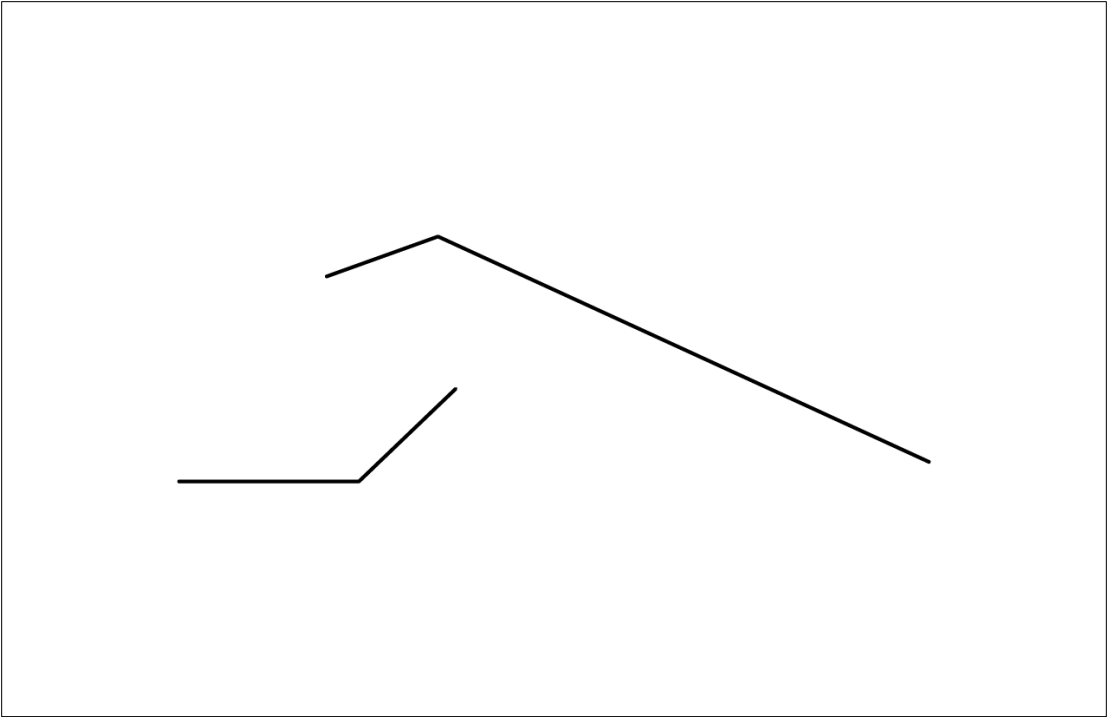
Appendix D: *Mal-Content* Book

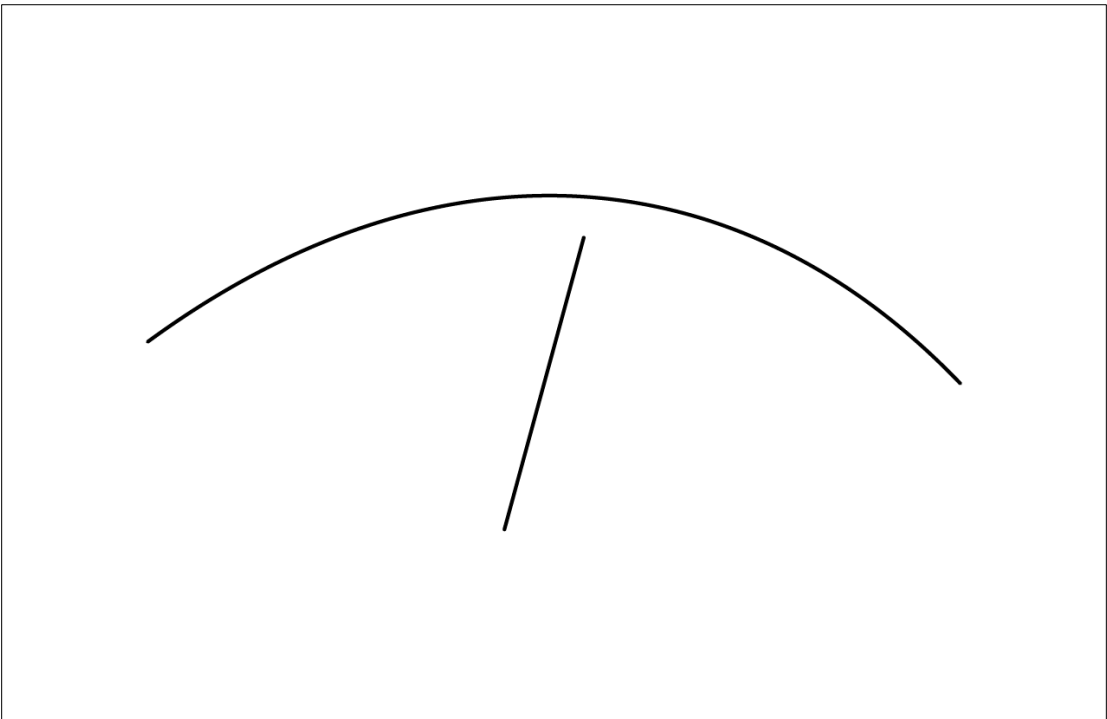
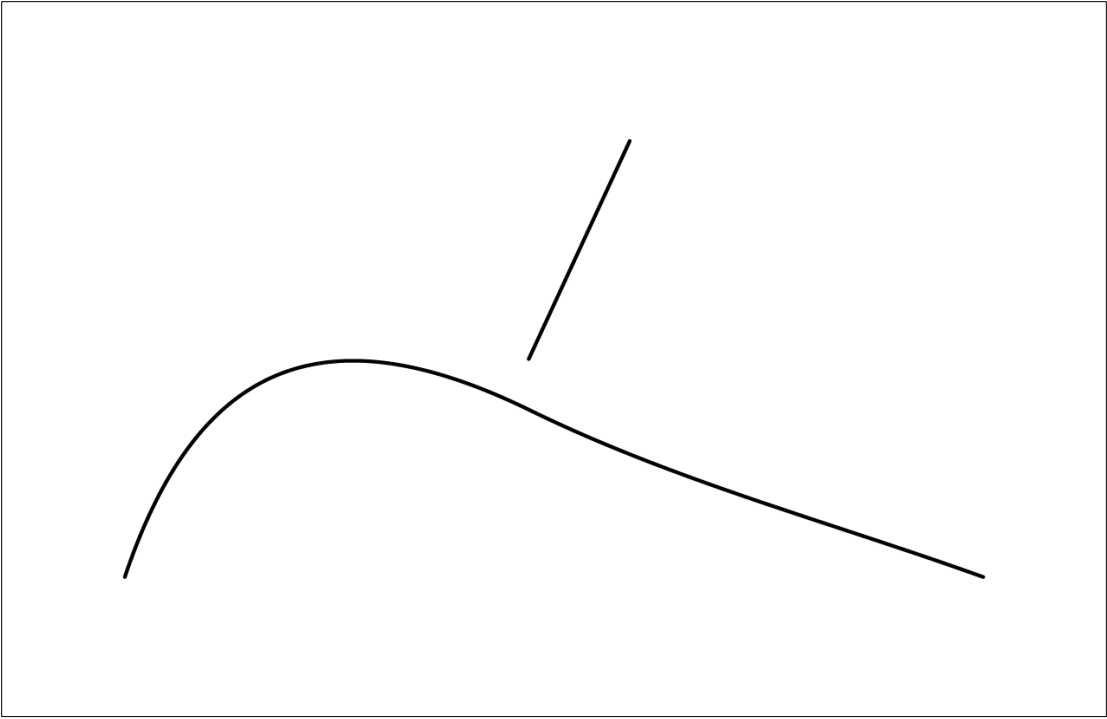
On the following pages are the contents from the “souvenir” book included in the exhibition (*Mal-Content*, artist book, 5.5 inches by 8.5 inches, 2017). During the course of the exhibition viewers were offered a copy.

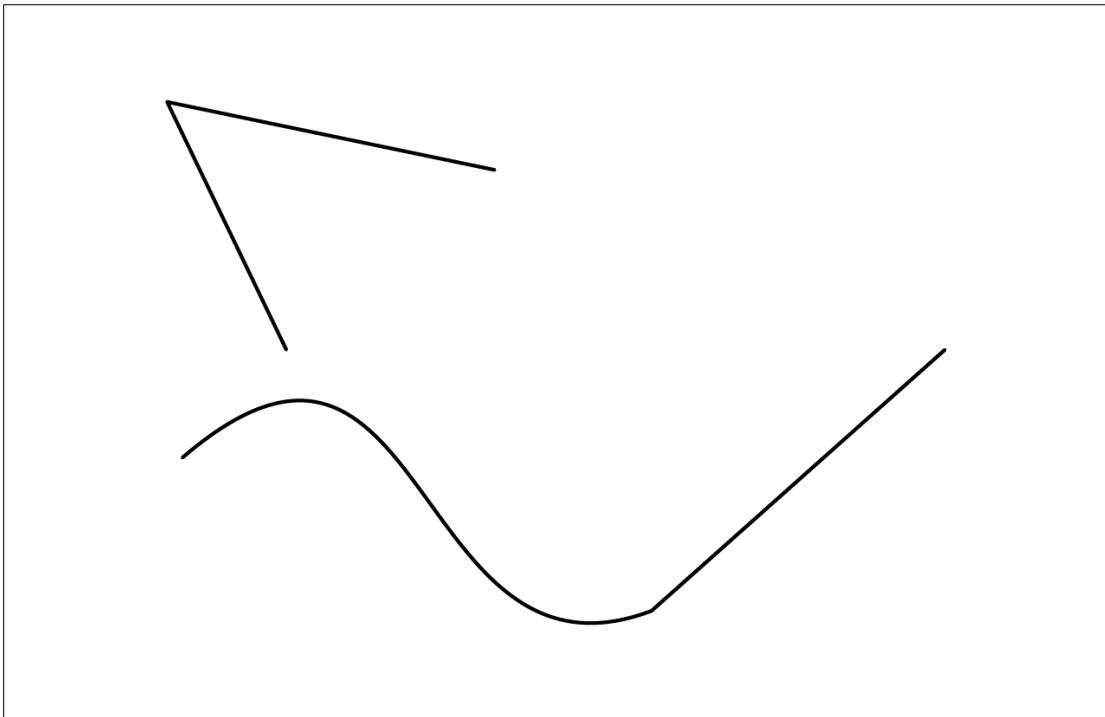
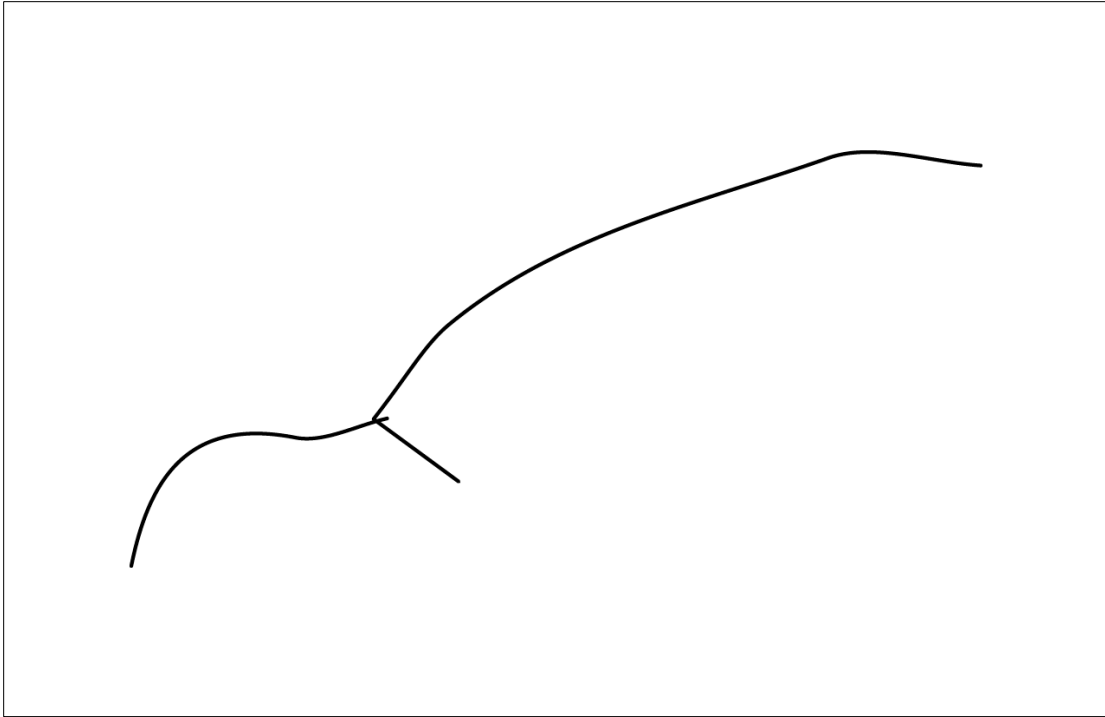
Mal-Content

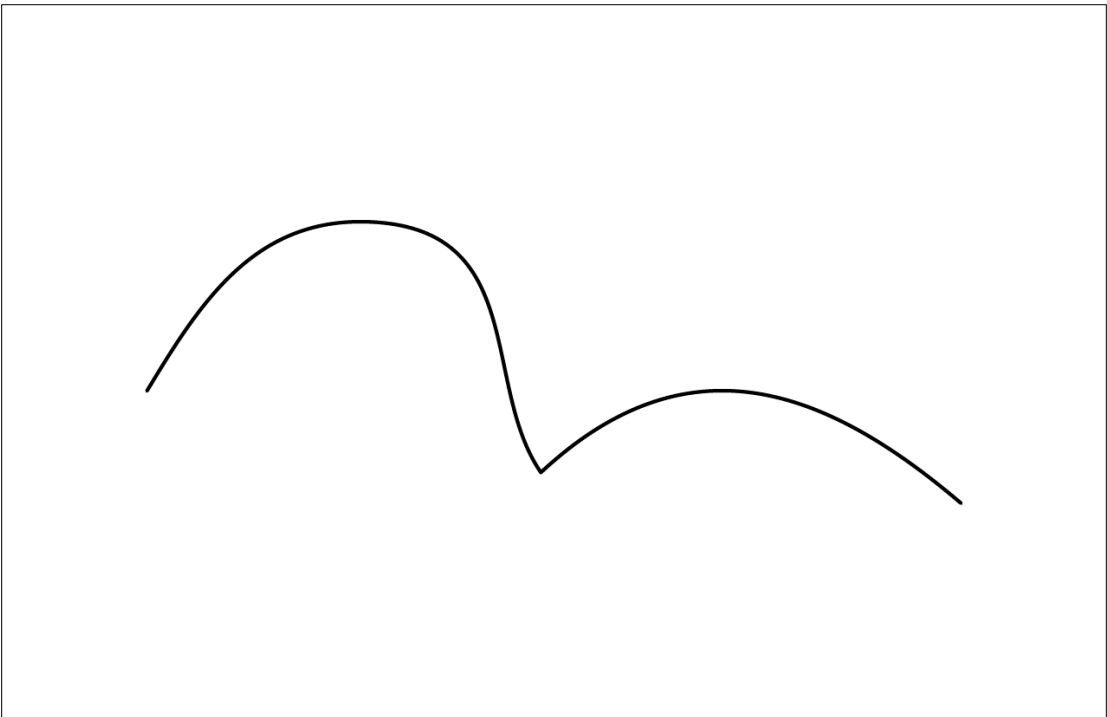
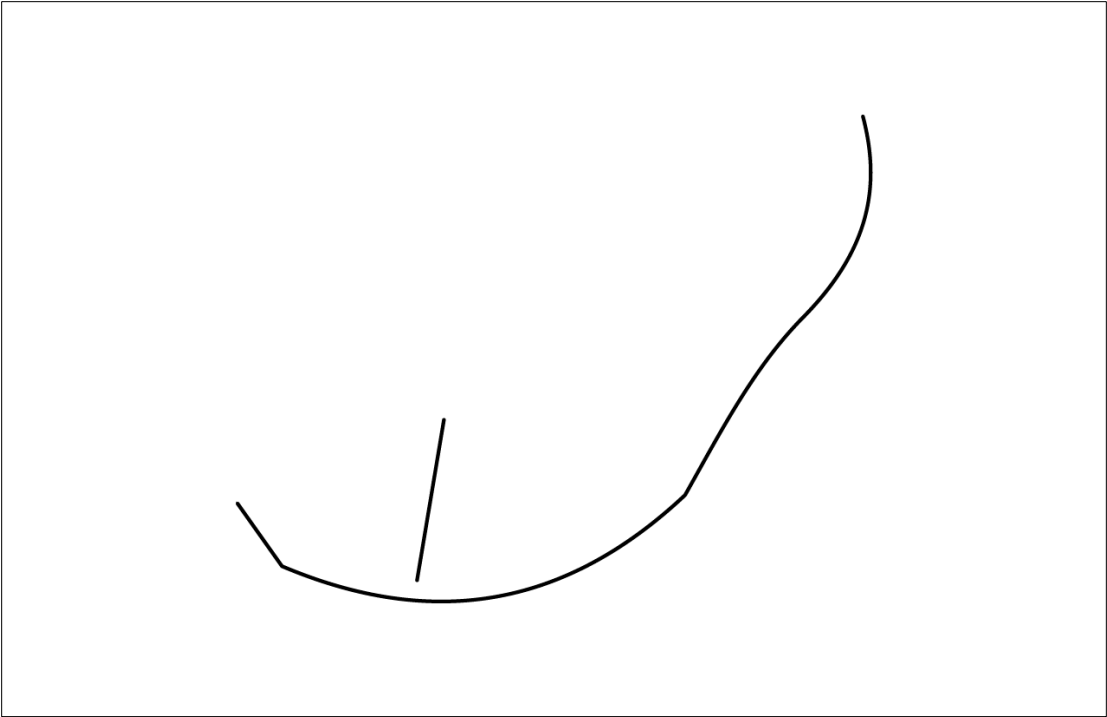


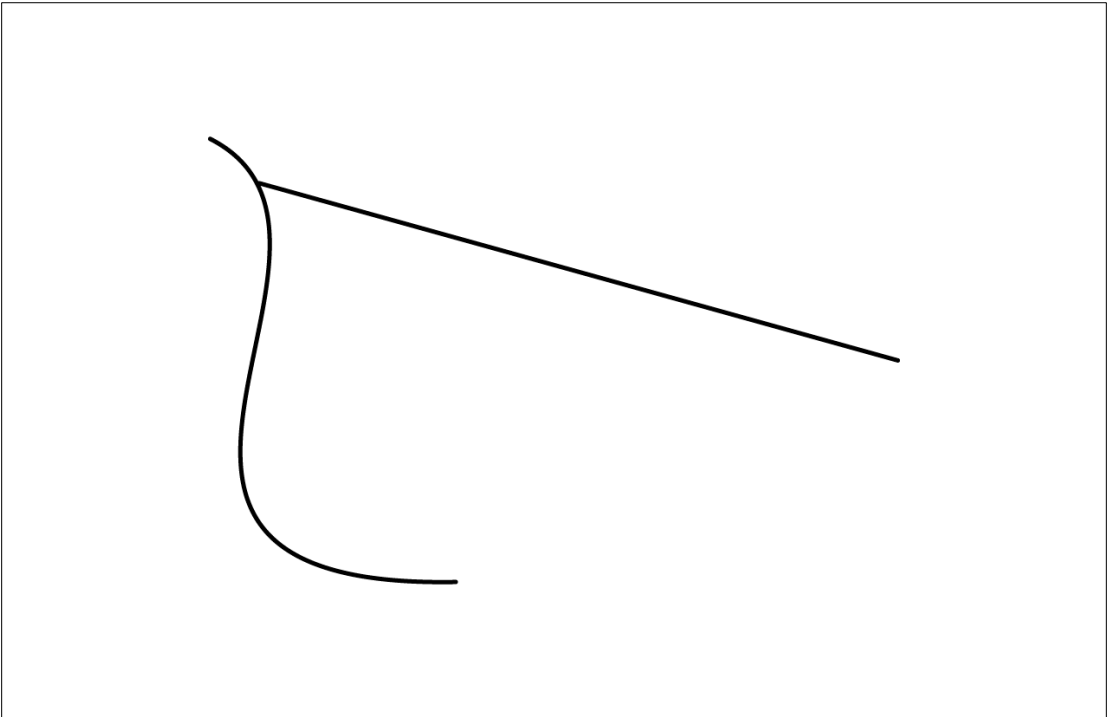
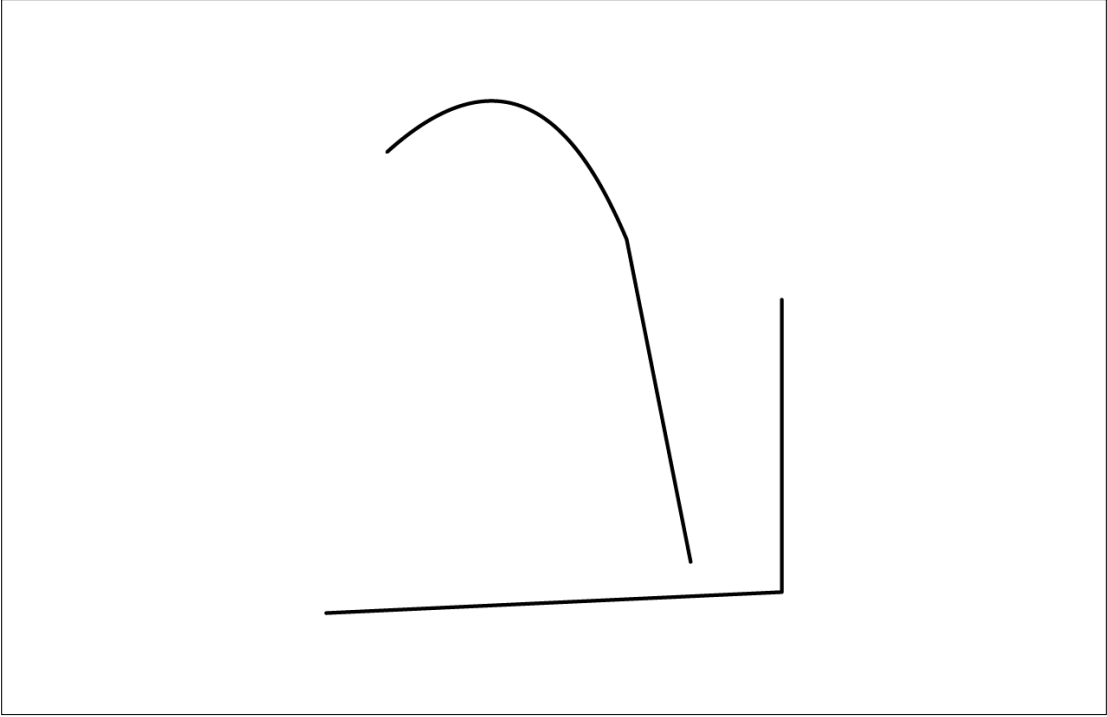


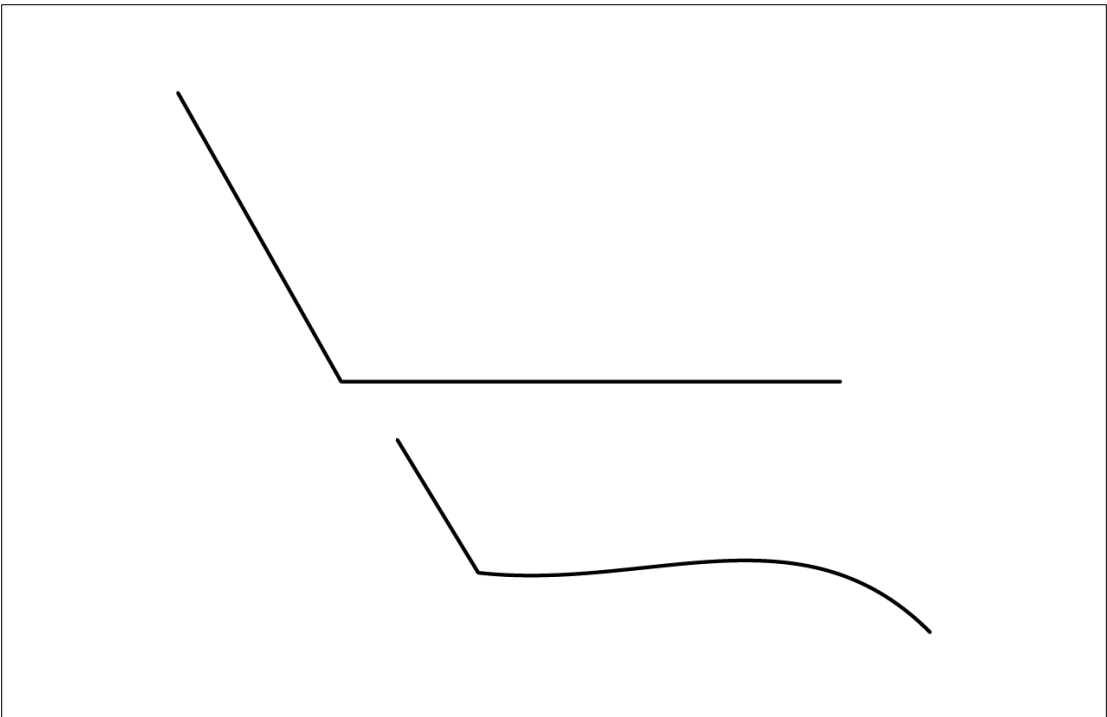
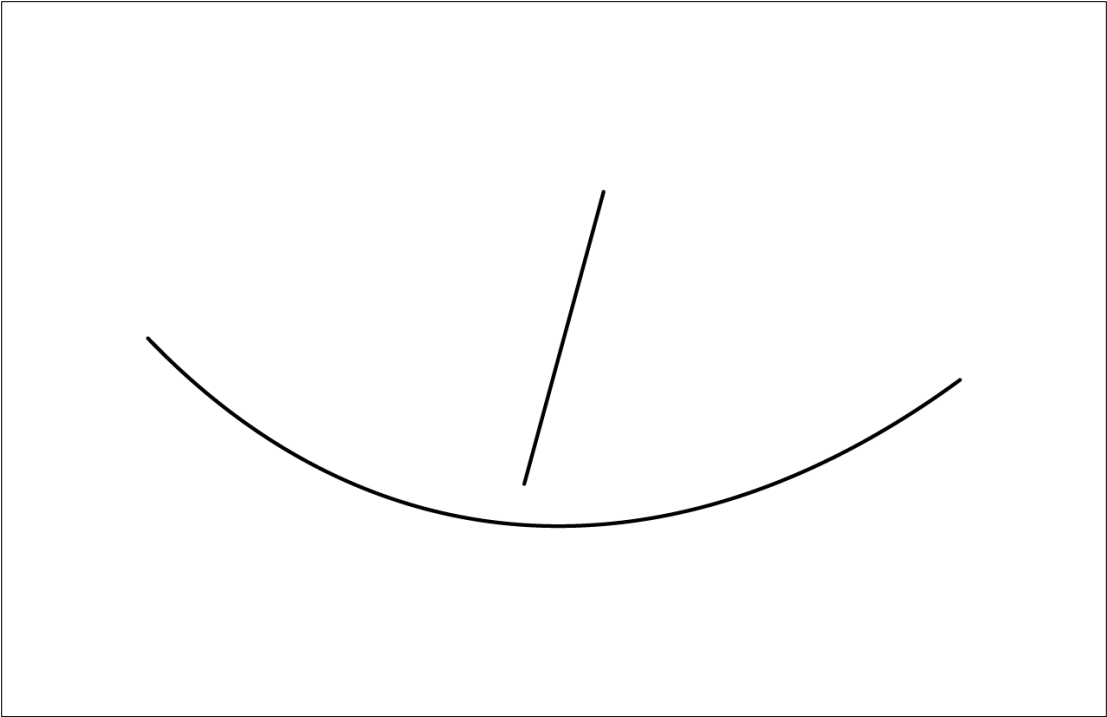


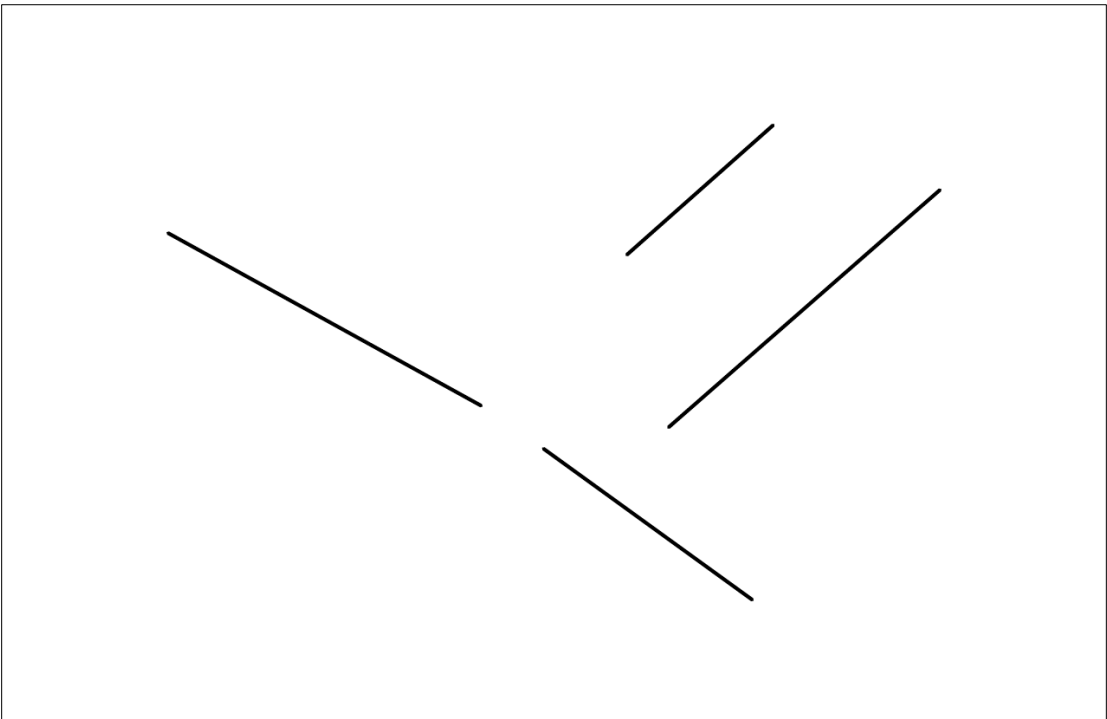
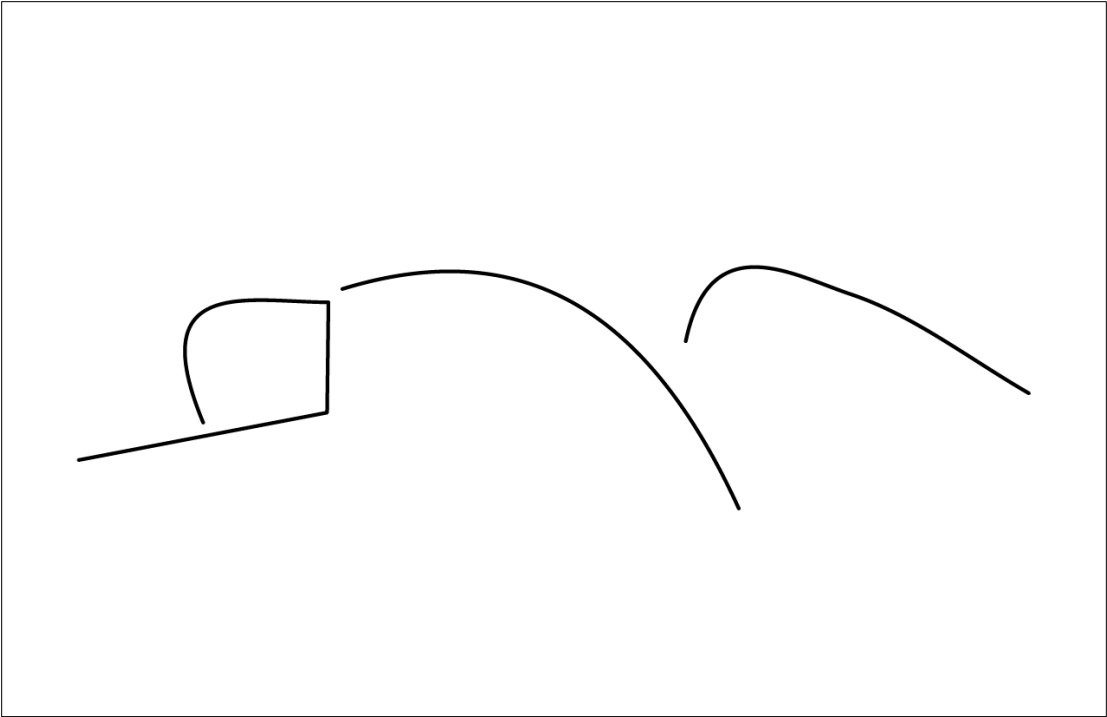


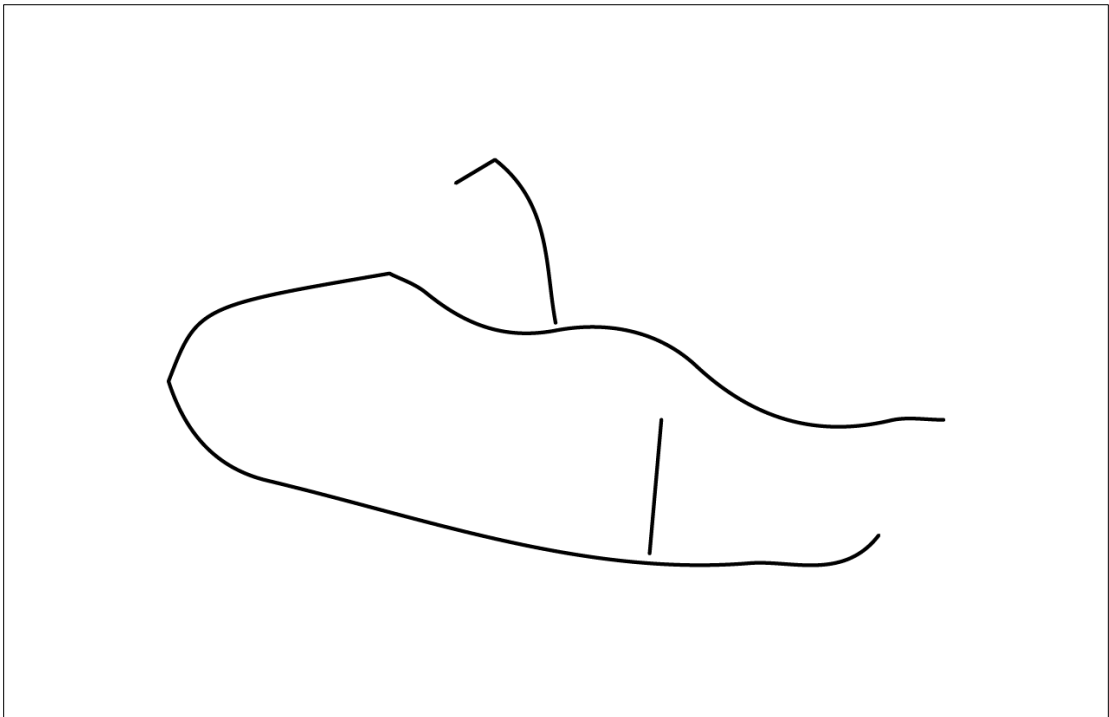
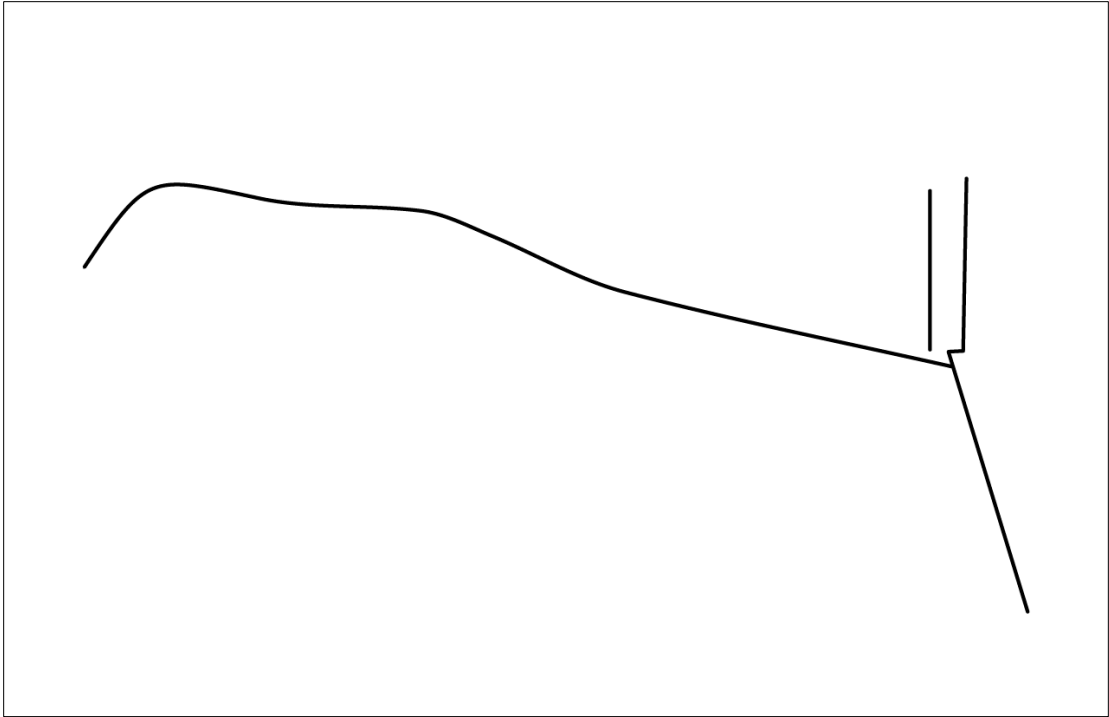


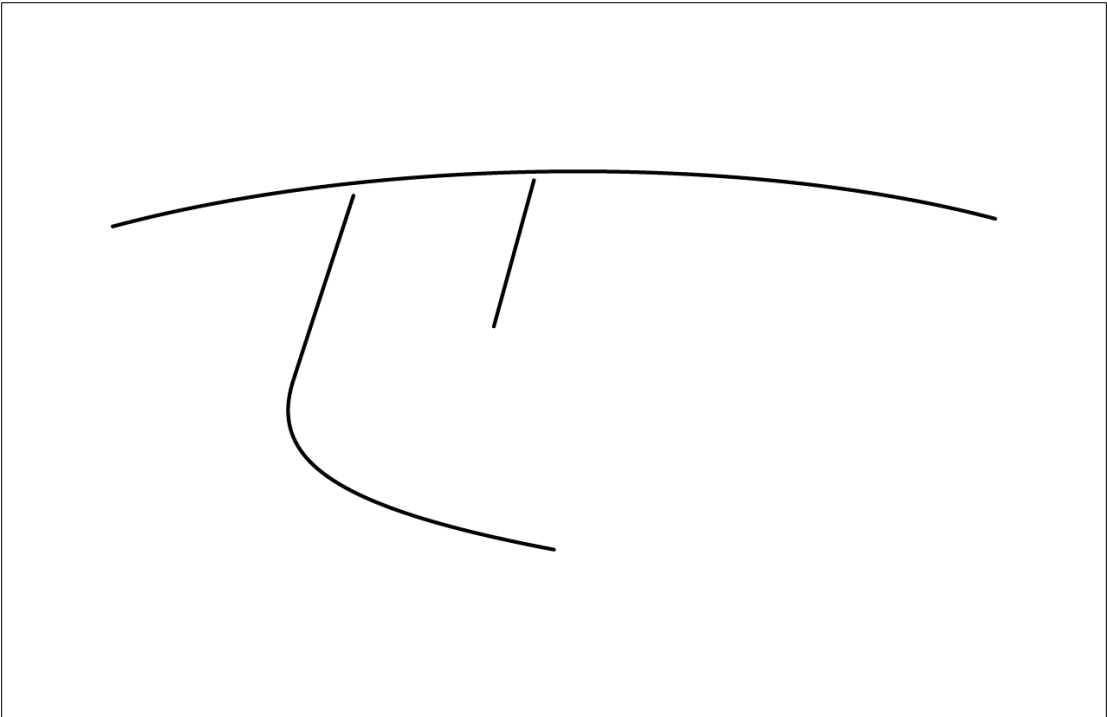
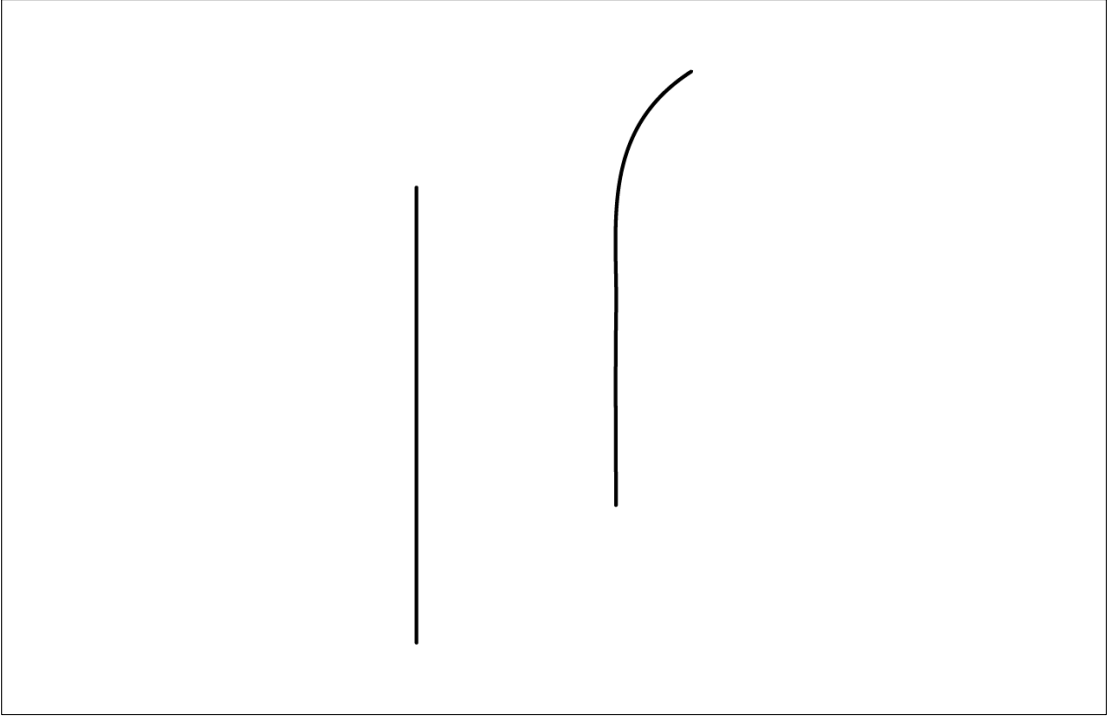


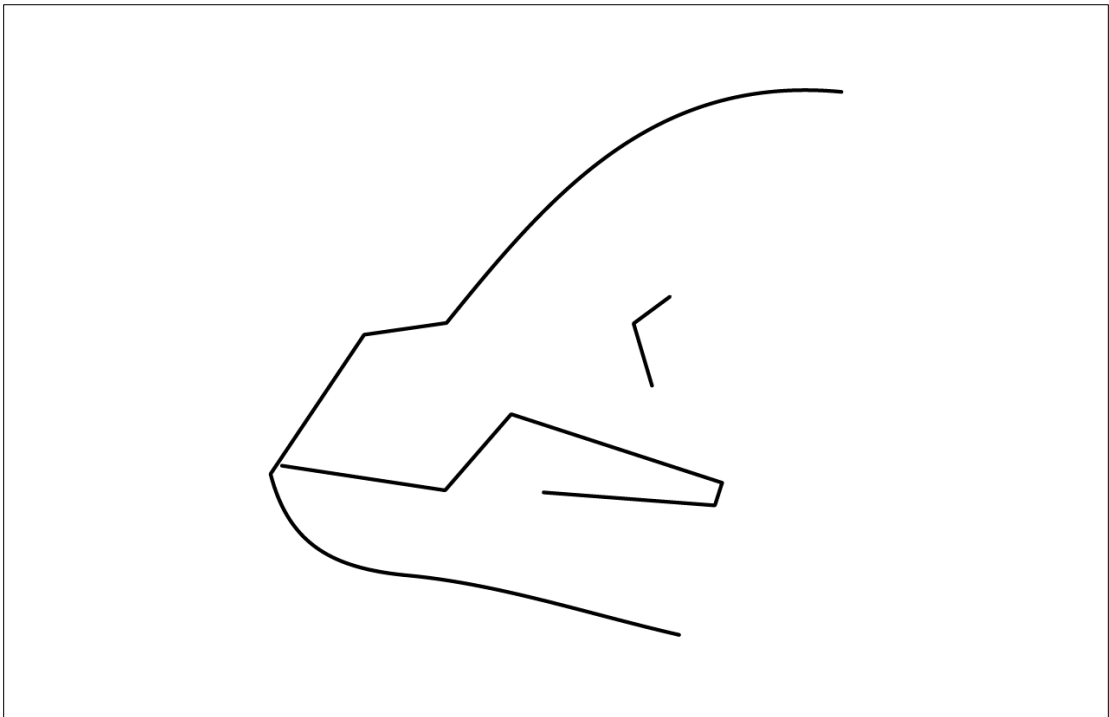
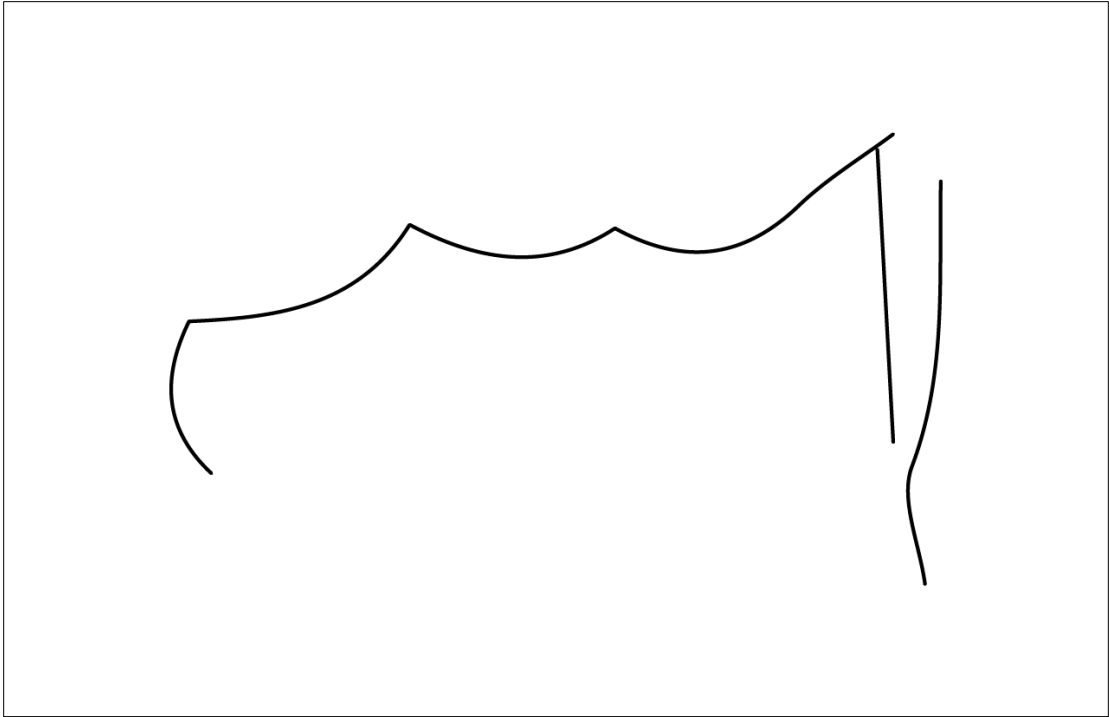


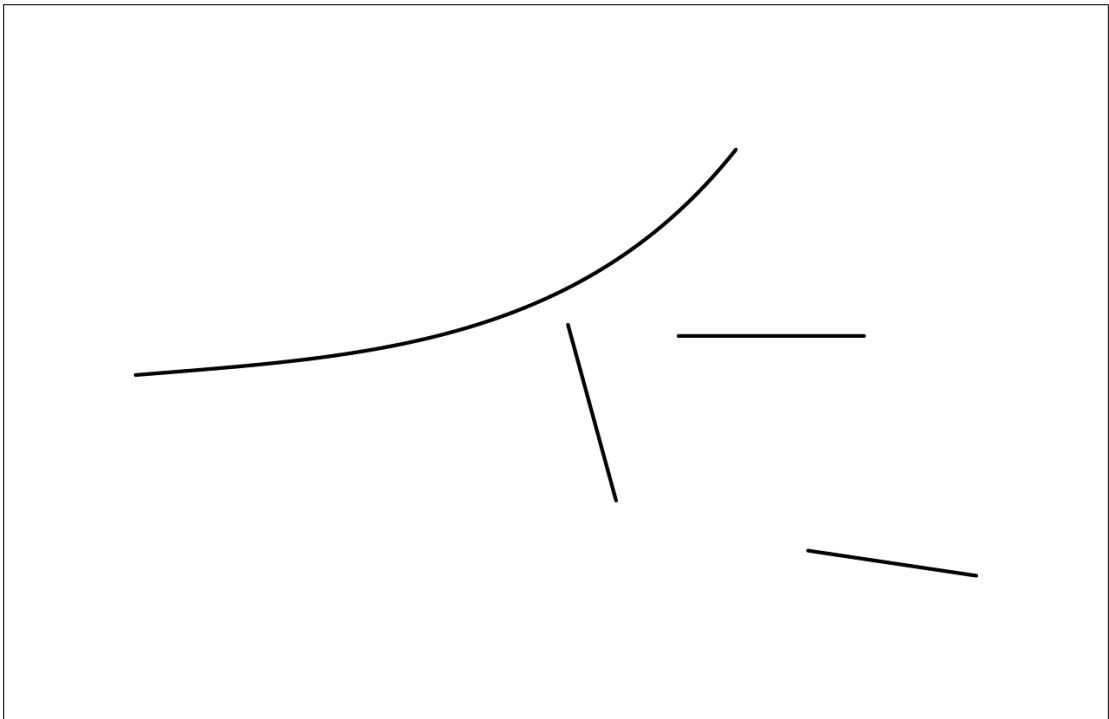
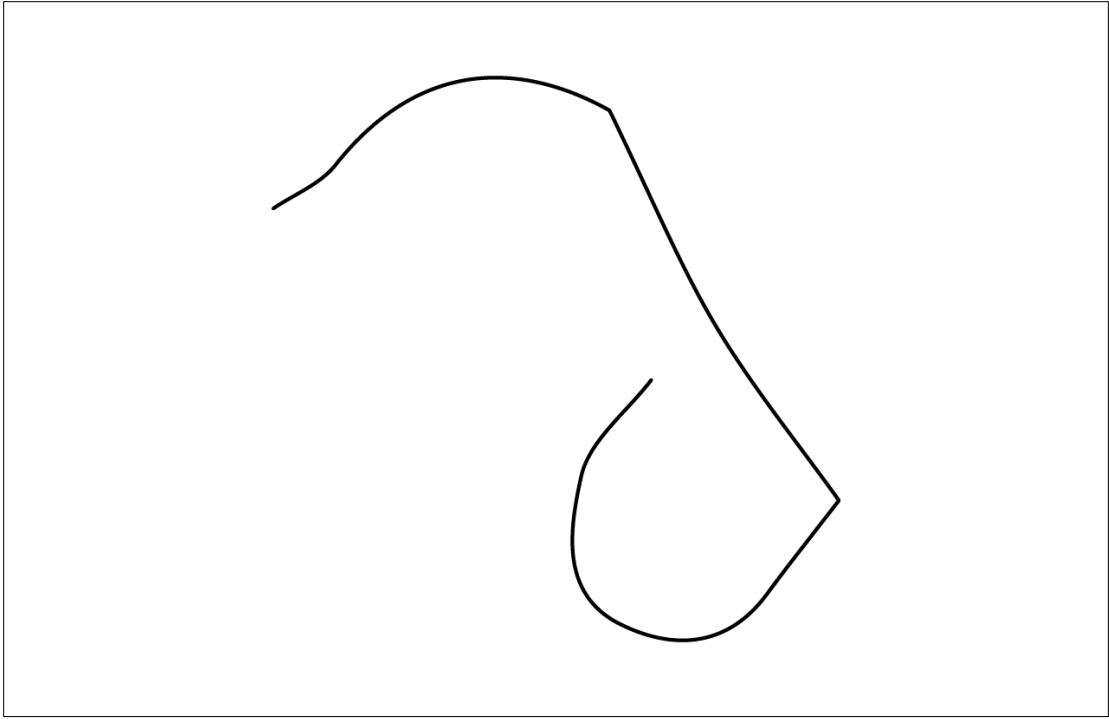


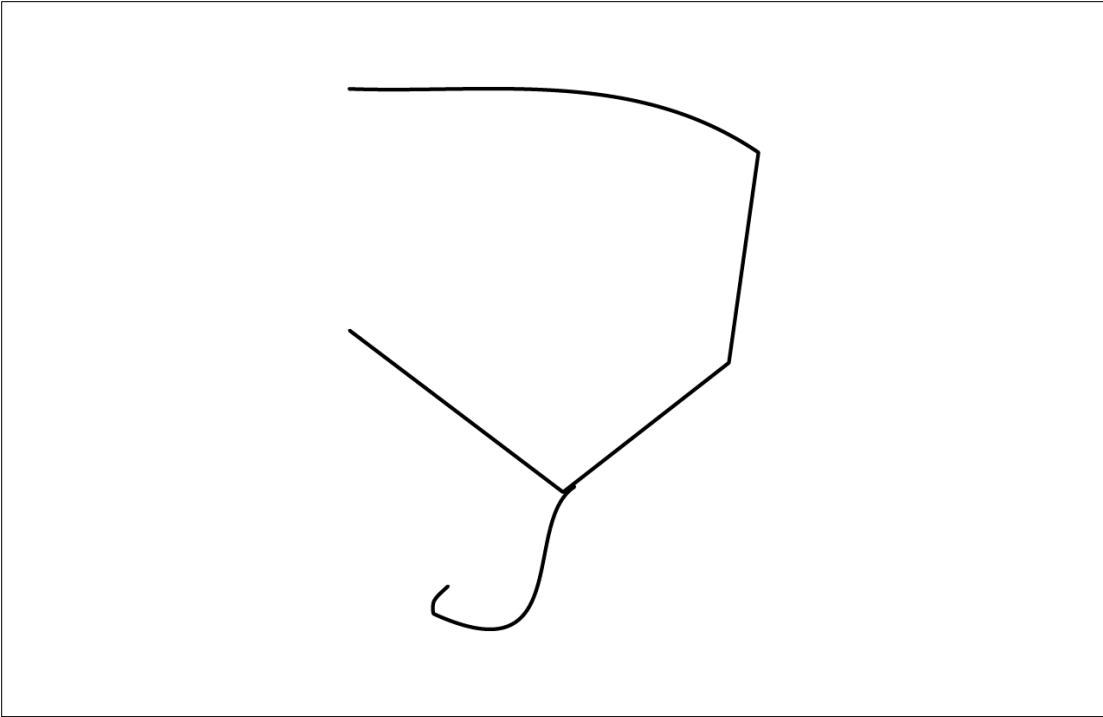












C.W. Brooks
2017

Bibliography

C.W. Brooks, Artist Talk, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, March 8, 2017

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass 51*, Kindle edition (Amazon.com), March 24, 2011

The Bell System Technical Journal, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication",
C.E. Shannon, Vol. 27, July 1948

Douglas Coupland, Marshall McLuhan: You Know Nothing of My Work! (Atlas &
Co., New York), 2010p. 62

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, *Mother Night* (Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, New York), 1961,
2009