Basic Exercises

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At the beginning of a graphic design education, students traditionally practice the so-called *Grundlagen* (basics) of design. To reduce complexity, these are taught in thematic units such as color, form, drawing, lettering, typography, photography, etc. before they are combined in an applied project. Within a variable set of basic competences—which has differed according to era and institution—certain teaching methods, theories, and exercises became established on the graphic design educational landscape of the 20th century in the Western world. One constantly recurring example comprises exercises with dots and circles in black and white. Such point exercises were a common part of the basic design training at various institutions, but different examples of them also show different teaching approaches.[1]

In three examples from Magdeburg and Basel, the focus was on the control of the materials and tools. [Figs. 73, 74, 75] By using tools such as the compass or ruler, the students first constructed a geometric grid, scratching the lines with a ruling pen and then filling the shapes with ink.[2] Two of these are student works that were made either as an assignment or based

on a template.[3] [Figs. 73, 75] The third example is one of ten teaching templates that the students had to trace precisely. [Fig. 74, see also Fig. 13] The experience the students gained in these exercises was mainly of a manual, technical nature. However, the motifs of these sheets are striking: all three are built on a geometrical grid, show a light–dark gradient, and create optical effects. The point and the circle, and especially their multiplication were part of a visual culture that was oriented towards the exact working methods of a machine, and sought to hide any individual or human gestures.[4] With this choice of motif, the teachers also influenced their students aesthetically.[5]

In a later point exercise from the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, the technical challenges were of secondary importance. With nine pre-cut points in a square, different types of "orders" were to be expressed. [Figs. 76, 77] Here it becomes clear that there was not one correct solution, or a specific motif given by the teacher, but an infinite number and an open outcome. Finding a solution was not a matter of execution, but of approximation. The teacher distinguished "between mental, emotional, and accidental arrangements" ([. . .] zwischen verstandesmässigen, gefühlsmässigen, [sic] und zufälligen Anordnungen).[6] Some of the twelve tasks aimed to achieve a certain expression or meaning, while others referred to an invisible grid given in the assignment. [Fig. 78]

The next two exercises were based on a completely different situation. It was not the blank page that was the starting point here, but the dot itself. In the example from Basel the dot is divided by a grid into nine unequal parts, [Fig. 79] while the example from Paris originates from paired semicircles evenly distributed on a grid. [Fig. 80] By removing individual parts, variations in shape were created. The student was encouraged to experiment, but only within a narrow framework. While the Basel example offered only a limited number of combinations, in the Paris exercise "the transition from an even grid to a sign," ([. . .] der Übergang von einem gleichmässigen Raster zum Zeichen [. . .])[7] and thus the search for new forms, was open-ended. However, the learning objective of both exercises seems to have been more than just creating variants. The goal was not only to find a solution, but also to use or even develop a system for finding solutions. This approach is particularly evident in the German-language title of the publication from which Fig. 79 is taken (*Methodik der Form- und Bildgestaltung)* and can also be found as a "program"[8] in the publication of one of the author's students.[9]

The point was also treated in typography lessons. [Fig. 81] This image shows a compilation of lead typesetting exercises that the students arranged and labeled. Although only superficially treated, it becomes clear what they were supposed to achieve, namely to grasp

universal principles for typography and visual communication, such as their teacher himself published in 1967.[10] These principles were based on visual perception and technical production and found their way into basic technical typesetting exercises by means of the motif to be set.

Rules and grids were first staged and then broken again in later examples. What at first appears as a humorous answer to strict design with grids turns out to be a visual translation of linguistic terms.[11] In the example from 1966, these are dynamic terms, verbs of movement. [Fig. 82] In the example from 1990, different sizes of points were used to visualize adjectives. [Fig. 83] But the points themselves seem to represent objects such as feathers or bubbles in *leicht* (light) or the sparkle of diamonds in *reich* (rich). This was less about optical perception, as in the previous example, and more about interpretation and notation, both of which are culturally conditioned and can therefore have no universal claims to validity. In the examples given here of basic point exercises in graphic design education, it is noticeable that most of them take place in a square format and refer to a grid. While these exercises reveal similarities on a formal level, there are obvious differences between the methods and learning objectives involved. Up until the 1940s, the focus was mainly on technical skills accompanied by the transmission of aesthetic preferences. In exercises from the 1960s and 1970s, instead

of copying, the students created new forms out of the circle, with specific systematized methods. Repeatedly, the point was used as a universal shape for formulating new principles or in representations of linguistic expression. These examples show how diversely the instructors approached an initially very limited topic at various institutions and in different eras, or rather how the exploration of the point was used for the acquisition of different graphic design and typography competences.

1   Half of the examples shown here are taken from the graphic design program at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule (AGS) Basel between 1940 and 1980. The others are taken from schools in Magdeburg, Zurich, Paris, and Aarau between 1930 and 1990. Although our focus on Basel shows that these exercises have a certain tradition at the AGS and have been developed continuously, by looking at other schools we can see that such exercises have also been used internationally in graphic design education.

2   On closer inspection, the punctures of the compasses and the pre-drawn grid are visible, but there are no errors or corrections.

3   See Klein & Renner 2019: 481–483; Rappo 2019.

4   These design approaches were already formulated in Tschichold's "Elementare Typographie," and much later in even stricter form by the Swiss constructivist graphic designers of the 1950s. See Tschichold 1986 (1925); Bignens 2000: 25–32.

5   Providing an aesthetic education by means of templates and collections of models was common practice until the 1940s. See Klein 2018.

6   Müller-Brockmann 1960.

7   Meyer 2019.

8   See Gerstner 1964.

9   See Hofmann 1965.

10   See Ruder 1967.

11   These examples are typical of the time when the term "graphic design" was being called into

question. The development of the discipline resulted in an expansion of its title. "Language of vision," "Visual literacy," or "Visual communication" were suggestions that understood graphic design less as a craft and more as a means of communication, and thus as a cultural technique. See Kepes 1944; Dondis 1974; Kunstgewerbemuseum der Stadt Zürich 1978.

Fig. 73   Student work from the course Elementare Gestaltungsübungen, F. Berthold (student), Kunstgewerbe- und Handwerkerschule Magdeburg, Oct. 25, 1933.
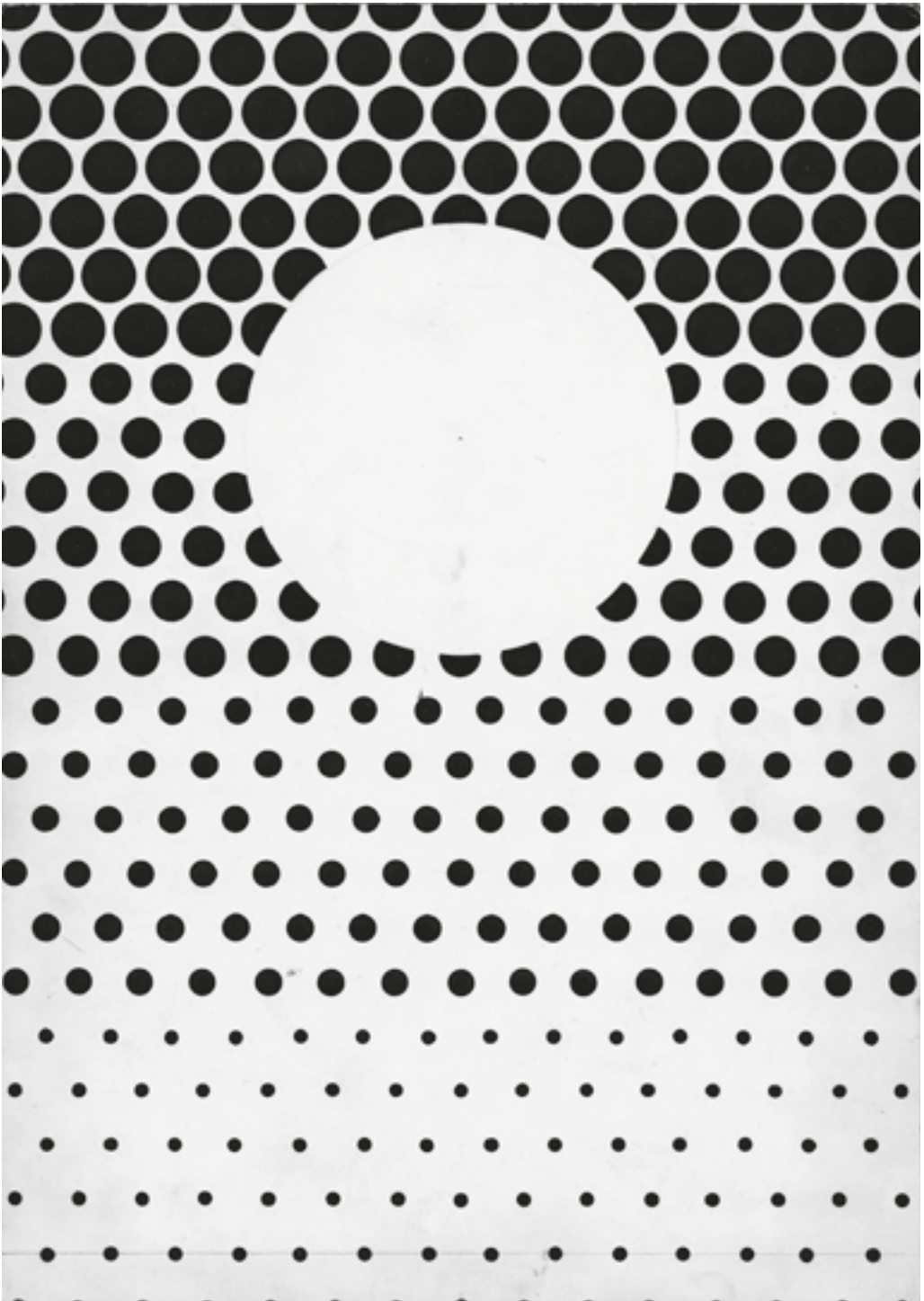
Fig. 74   Template for basic exercise, Ernst Keiser (teacher), Fachklasse für angewandte Graphik, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, before 1939.
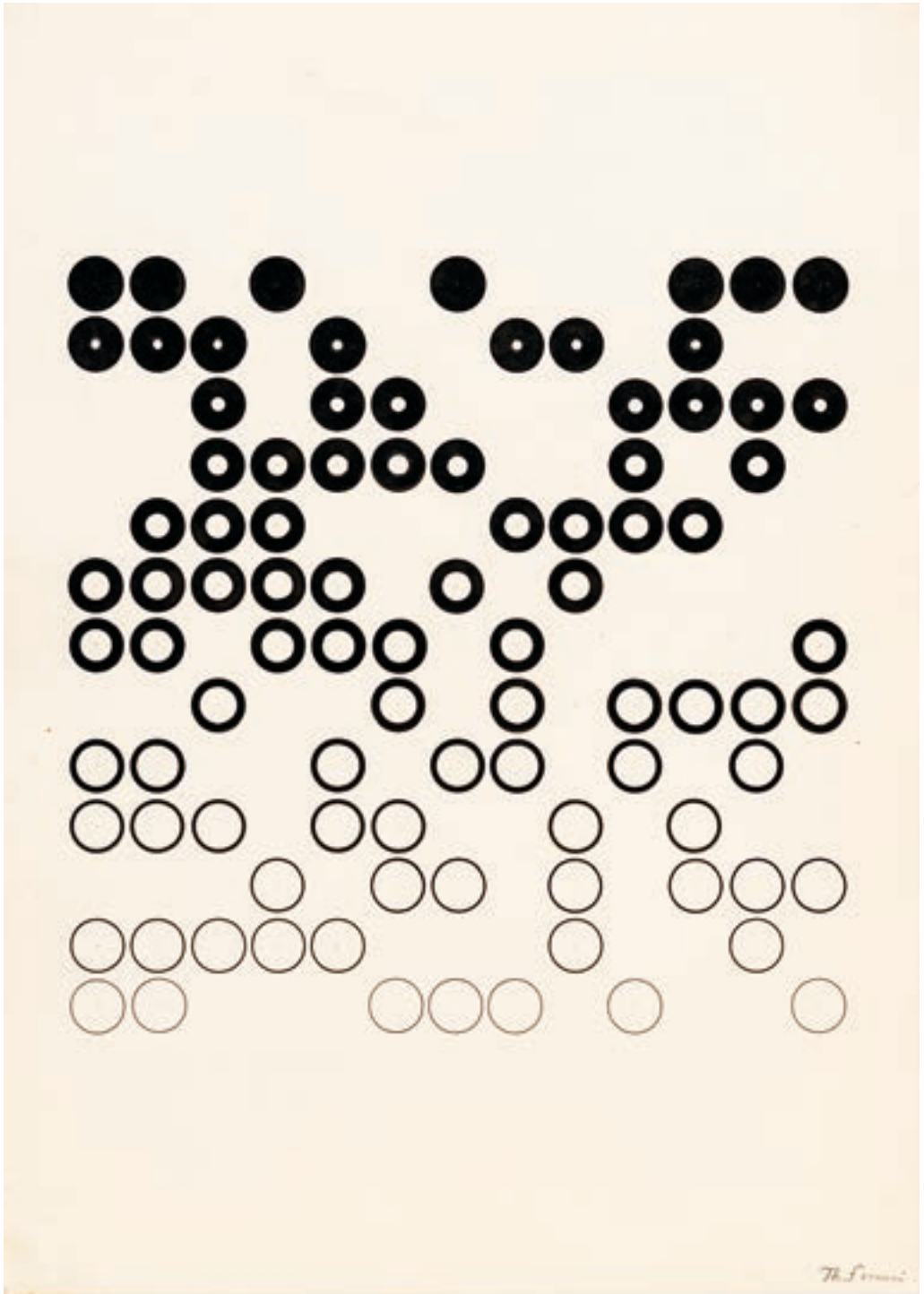
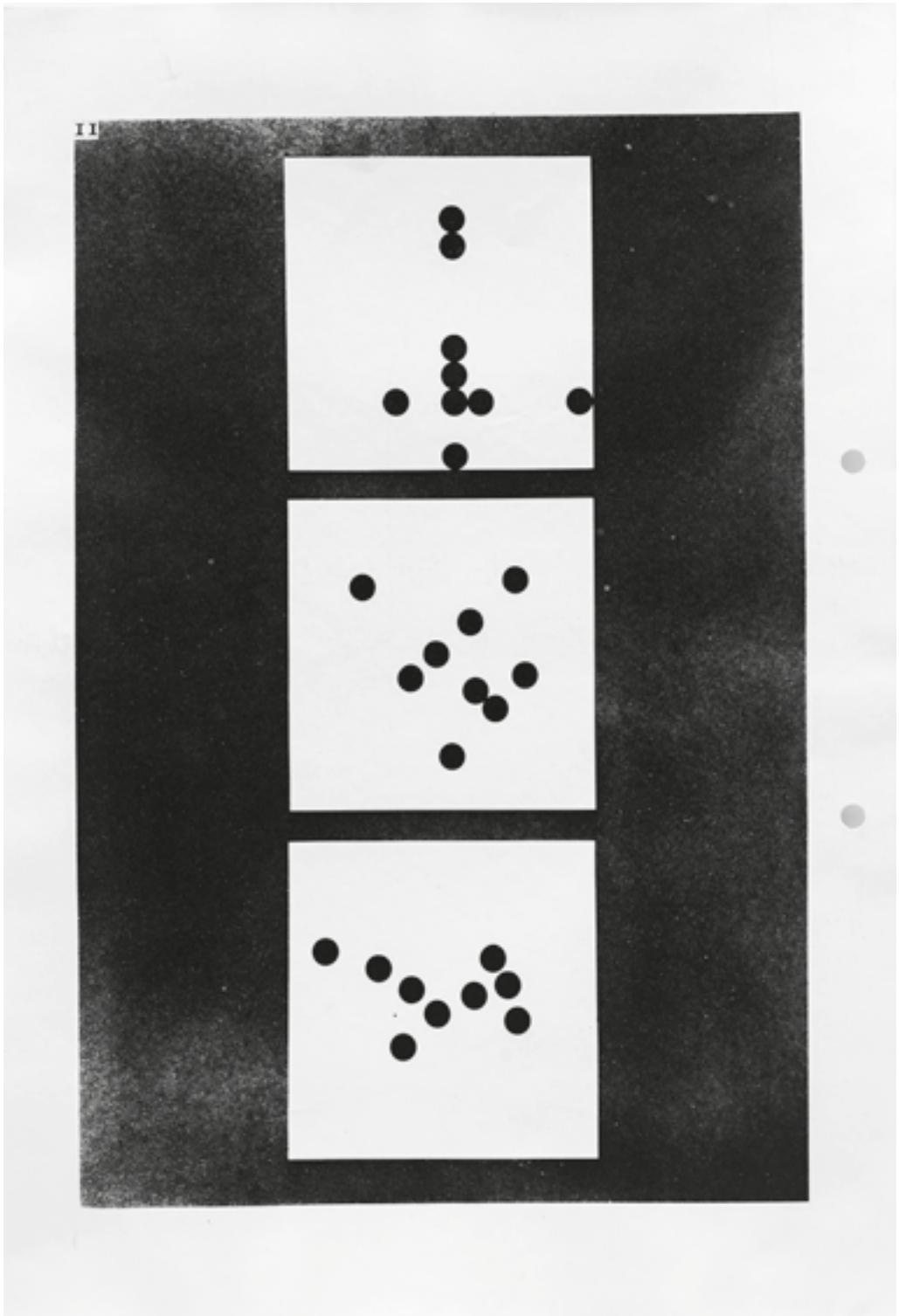Fig. 75   Student work, Theo Ferrari (student), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, ca. 1943.

Fig. 76   Point exercise no. 11, Josef Müller-Brockmann (teacher), Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, ca. 1960.
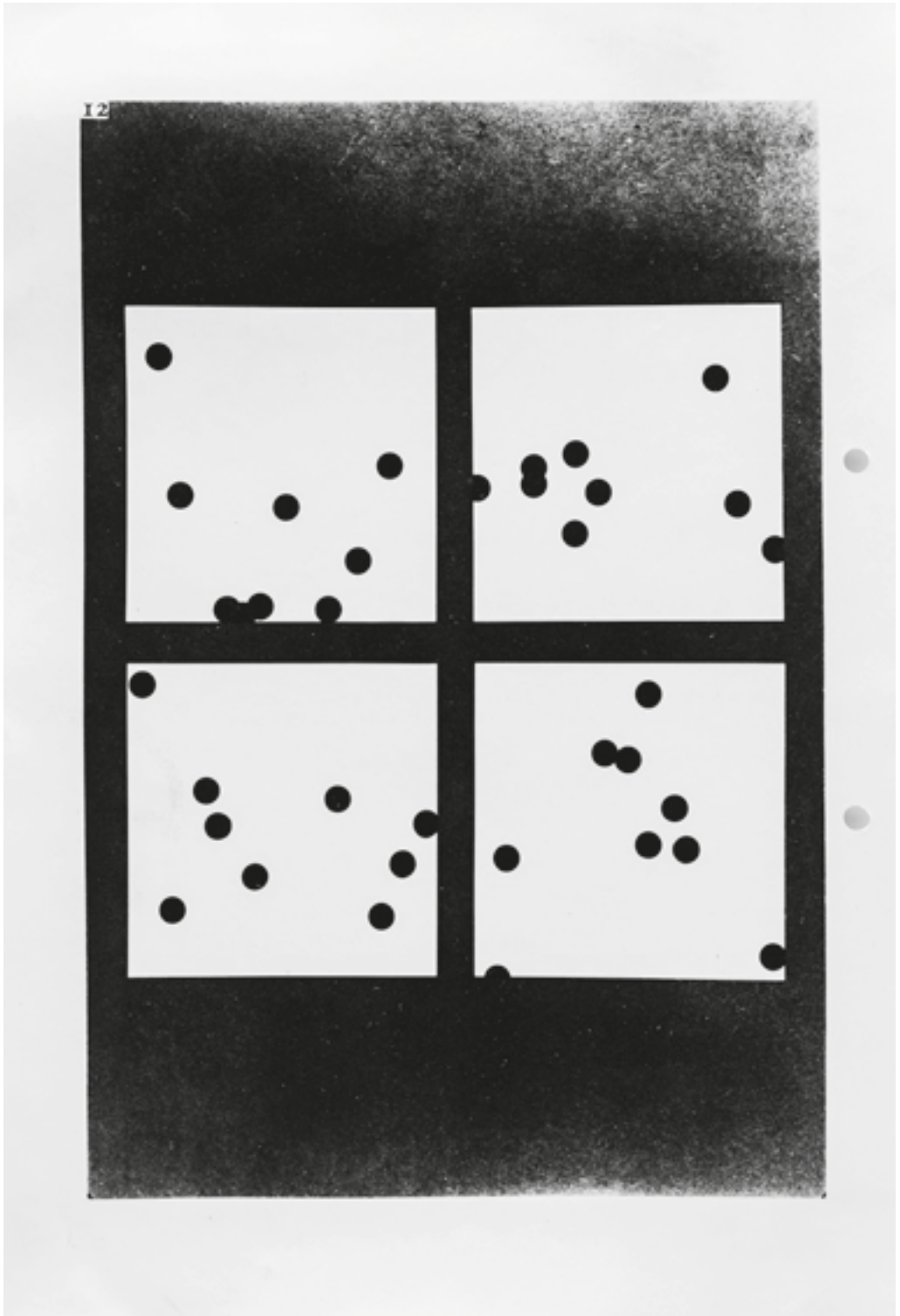
Fig. 77   Point exercise no. 12, Josef Müller-Brockmann (teacher), Kunstgewerbeschule
Zürich, ca. 1960.

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Blatt 1 und 2        symmetrische Anordnungen

Blatt 3              a. asymmetrisch
                     b. symmetrisch - asymmetrisch

Blatt 4              a. gefühlsmässig
                     b. durch Einwirkung einer Kraft
                        (Stösse von den vier Seiten her)

Blatt 5 und 6        Ortbetonungen
                     5a. Rand betont
                      b. Zentrum betont
                      c. Ecken betont
                      d. ganze Fläche gleichmässig betont

                     6a. oberer Rand betont
                      b. unterer   "     "
                      c. linker    "     "
                      d. rechter   "     "

Blatt 7 und 8        kontrastierende Gruppen
                     7a. regelmässig - unregelmässig
                      b. wenig - viel
                      c. locker - eng

                     8a. aussen - innen (Schale - Kern)
                      b. links - rechts
                      c. oben - unten

Blatt 9              a. steigende Bewegung
                     b. fallende      "
                     c. zentrifugale  "

Blatt 10             Betonung der Zahl
                     a. 1 / 2
                     b. 2 / 3 / 4
                     c. 1 / 3 / 5

Blatt 11             Anordnungen auf einem Netz
                     von unsichtbaren Verbindungslinien
                     a. horizontal - vertikal
                     b. auf schrägen Verbindungslinien
                     c.  "  bogenförmigen   "    "

Blatt 12             durch Zufall
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Fig. 78   Assignment point exercise, Josef Müller-Brockmann (teacher), Kunstgewerbe-schule Zürich, ca. 1960.

[Sheet 11: Arrangements on a network of invisible, connecting lines. a. horizontal—vertical; b. on diagonal connecting lines; c. on arch-like connecting lines
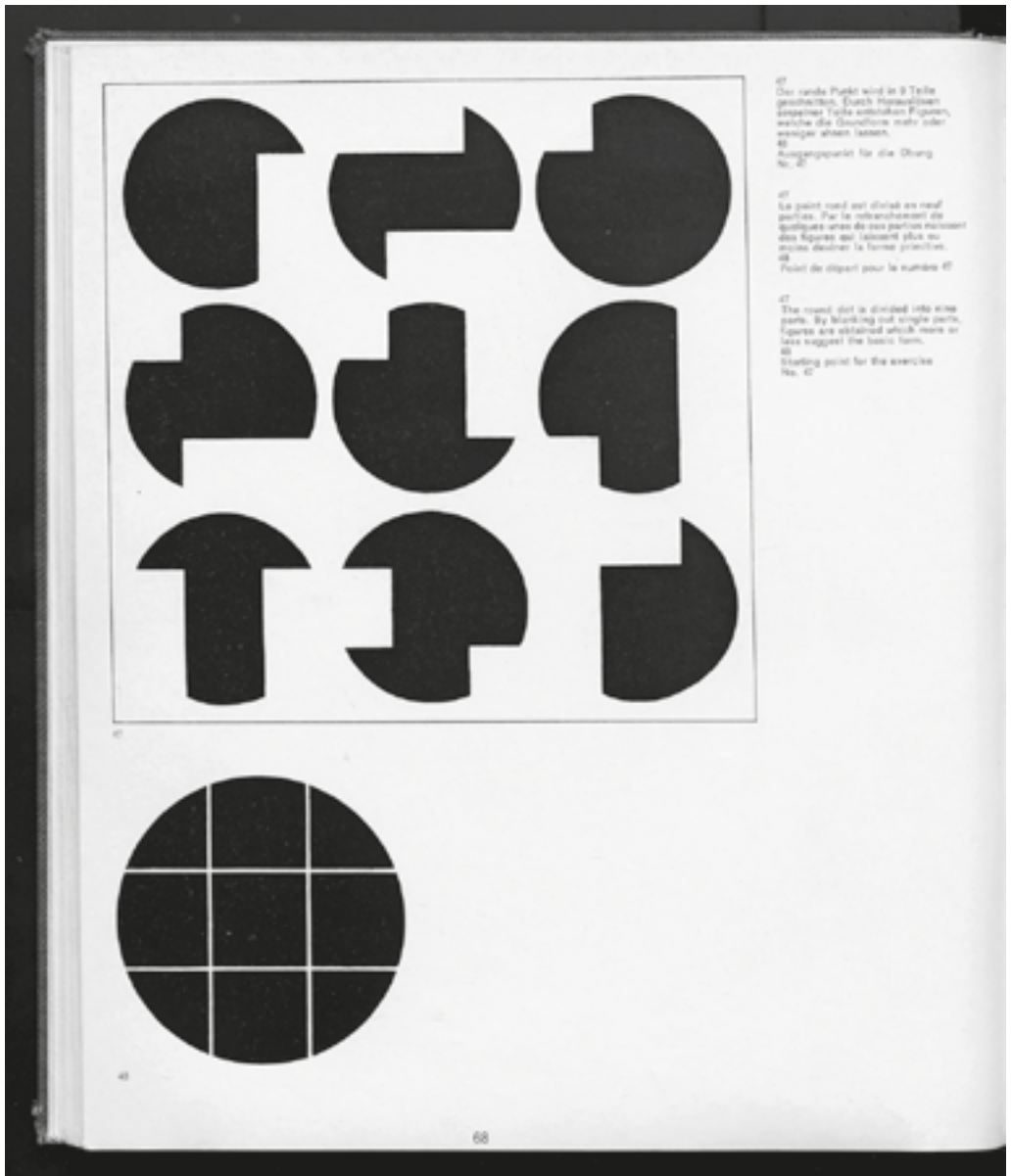Sheet 12: by chance]

Fig. 79   Point exercise with nine parts, Armin Hofmann (teacher), Allgemeine Gewerbe-
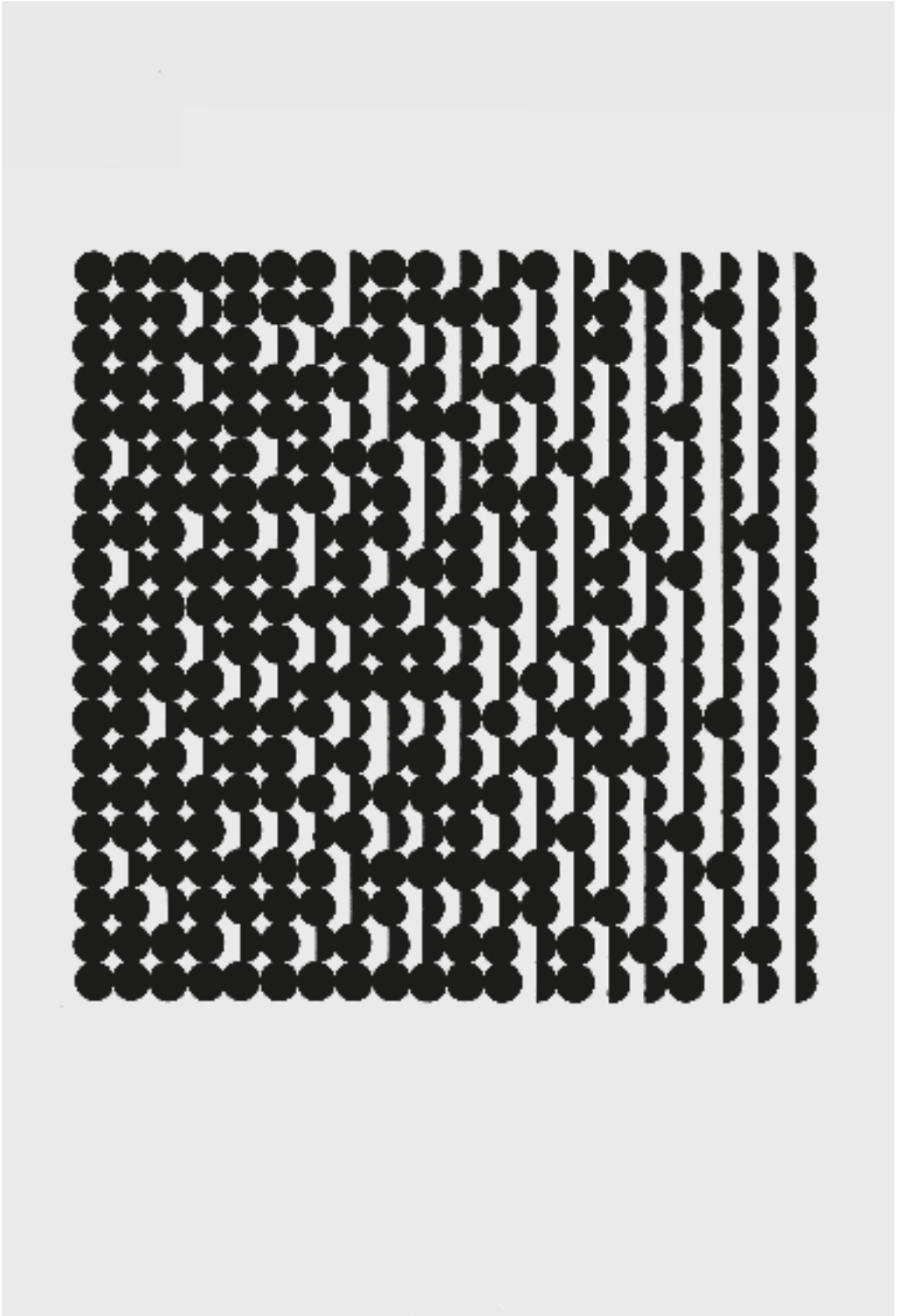schule Basel, ca. 1965.

Fig. 80   Point exercise starting from a grid of semicircles, Rudi Meyer (teacher), École nationale des arts décoratifs Paris, ca. 1970.

Fig. 81   Lead typesetting exercises, Bruno Pfäffli (student), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule
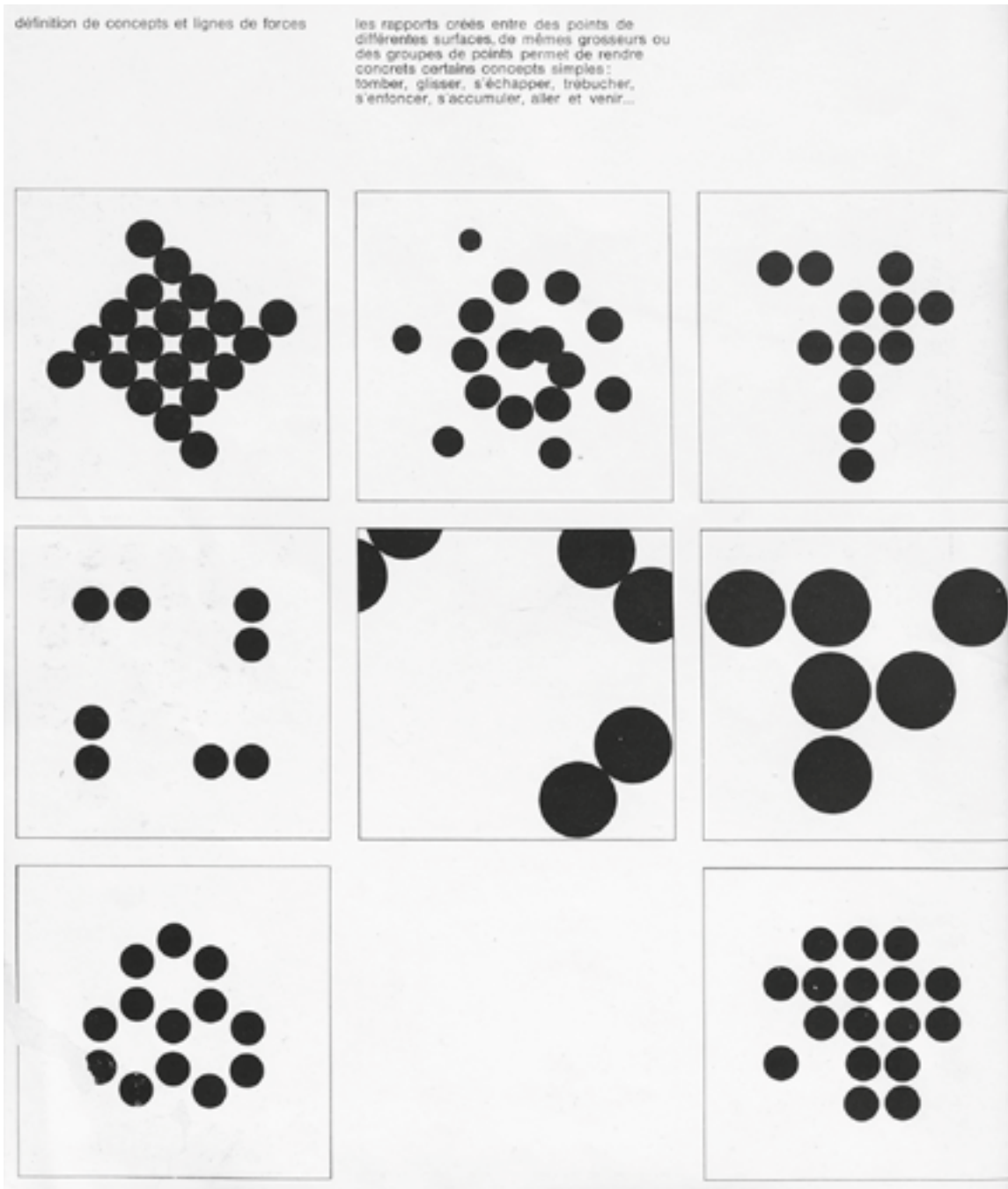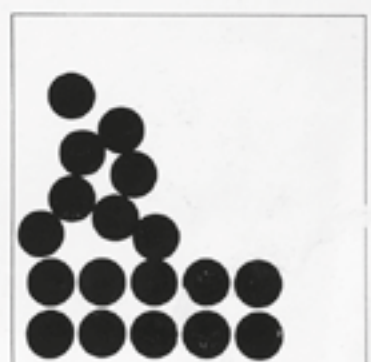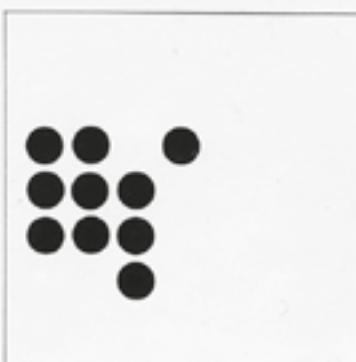Basel, 1959.

définition de concepts et lignes de forces

les rapports créés entre des points de différentes surfaces, de mêmes grosseurs ou des groupes de points permet de rendre concrets certains concepts simples : tomber, glisser, s'échapper, trébucher, s'enfoncer, s'accumuler, aller et venir...

Fig. 82   Basic exercise, Jacques Roch, Hans Rudolf Lutz (both teachers), Paris, 1966.

20   Punkt

Grösse

ohne Bewegung	Form wird wahrgenommen	nimmt an Bedeutung zu; Flächenwirkung	sprengt alle Grenzen; wirkt grösser als Format; Wechselwirkung der Positiv-Negativ-Form

Stellung

aktiv; oben, entfernter	passiv; unten, nahe	spannungsvoll mit Unruhe; mit Bewegungs- möglichkeit noch rechts	spannungsvoll ohne Unruhe; am Ziel angelangt

Form

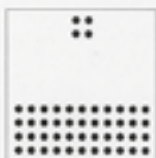|			
weich, warm	hart, kalt	dynamisch, unstabil	frei, unsauber

Fig. 83   Point, Dario Zuffo (teacher), Aarau, 1990.
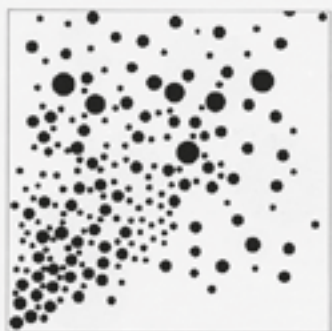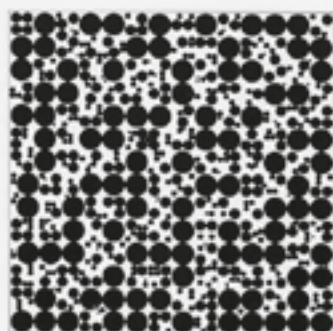
Anzahl/Menge

gleichwertig

spannungsvoller, deutlicher

wenig–viel, kleine Gruppe schwebend

viel–wenig, grosse Gruppe lastend

Grösse/Stellung

keine Verbindung, «verlorene» Wirkung

grosse Spannung, Steigerung der Eigenschaften

Verbindung besteht, ruhige Wirkung

verlieren ihre Eigenständigkeit

Visualisierung von «leicht». Werner Haas

Visualisierung von «reich». Dieter Eggenschwiler