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# Schema: World as Diagram

By [Cassie Packard](#)

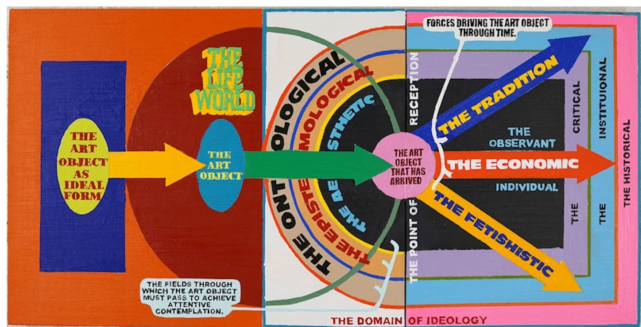


Installation view: *Schema: World as Diagram*, Marlborough Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York. Photo: Olympia Shannon.

ON VIEW  
 Marlborough Gallery  
*Schema: World as Diagram*  
 May 11–August 11, 2023  
 New York

“Everything in the world is a diagram,” writes Amy Sillman in “Notes on the Diagram” (2020), a lively essay on the diagrammatic as a mode of relational understanding, an apparatus of control and administration, and a meaningful—and capacious—artistic strategy. “Diagrams are great because you can put anything in them,” the artist continues, “No wonder they have been so useful for generations of kooks, mystics, Cubists, ecstatic poets, Dadaists, Futurists, and weird scientists.” In limning the art historical significance of diagrams, Sillman is in good company: David Joselit’s 2005 essay “Dada’s Diagrams,” for example, proposes that the diagram ranks among the photomontage and the readymade as a key Dadaist form, while Natilee Harren’s “The Diagram Dematerialized” (2008) foregrounds the centrality of diagrams to Fluxus event scores.

Sillman’s abstract painting *Machine* (2023), with its cast of droopy cogs and kinked belts, chimes with Eva Hesse’s mid-1960s mechanical drawings and is one of seventy-three works on view in *Schema: World as Diagram* at Marlborough. Curated by writer Raphael Rubinstein and artist Heather Bause Rubinstein (whose labyrinthine fabric painting *City as Shape* [2019] is included in the show), *Schema* takes up the question of how artists have employed a broad cross-section of diagrammatic forms, from the map and the mandala to the isarithm and the ideogram. Knit loosely enough to be breathable but tightly enough to have a (pleasingly baggy) shape, the exhibition proffers the diagram as an alternative to the tired and arguably discounted binary of abstraction versus figuration. Assembling work by over fifty artists, *Schema* spans from the mid-twentieth century to our networked present, wherein hyperlinks schematize knowledge and social networks chart relationships. Among the prevailing works on paper, paintings, and mixed media pieces are a few notable outliers, such as a geometrically patterned Shirvan rug (ca. 1900, maker unknown) hanging solitary in a stairwell, a nod to the symbolic abundance that characterizes Central Asian tribal rug design.



Loren Munk, *The Ontology of Art, Study I*, 2016. Oil on linen, 24 x 48 inches. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York.

Because they are adept at making invisible forces visible, diagrams are often used to tether unseen energies to observable—and thus more readily

graspable or metabolizable—forms. Loren Munk’s self-reflexive flow chart *The Ontology of Art, Study I* (2016) concretizes the nebulous journey that an artwork takes from conception to reception to historicization. A turquoise oval labeled “the art object” barrels through layers of discursive mantle (“the ontological,” “the epistemological,” “the aesthetic”) to become a buoyant pink circle: “the art object that has arrived.” Sober graphite sociograms from conceptual artist Mark Lombardi’s investigative “Narrative Structures” series excavate a different kind of invisible force, as thickets of arrows and bubbles point to systematically obscured links between crooked political and corporate actors in the context of current events, like the 1988 Silverado scandal (*Neil Bush, Silverado, MDC, Walters & Good* [ca. 1979–90; 2nd version 1996]). While Munk’s chart has a clear end point, Lombardi’s—in the manner of conspiracy theories—could seemingly balloon ad infinitum.

In the world of the exhibition, the powers brought to light by artists’ schematics often skew mystical. An undated Jain cosmological diagram on creased paper sketches out the divine contours of the universe via concentric circles, while the mandala-like, glowing fuchsia egg at the center of Stephen Mueller’s color-flooded painting *Vesper Dancehall* (2008) simultaneously evinces and enables a spiritual journey inward. The event for which a diagram acts as a premise or catalyst need not be divine: dance notation, for example, might bring about the movement of bodies, while a mechanical drawing can prompt the construction or use of a machine. (Extrapolating the logic of diagram-as-event to its extreme, the charting of a different world might, in some small way, hasten its arrival or help to set it in motion.) The diagram’s potential for animacy and transformation—its latent *verbiness*—blossoms in Wadada Leo Smith’s *The Enclosed Garden of Truth* (2018), a panoply of bright biomorphic forms on a peach ground. Evoking the luscious lyricism of Arshile Gorky’s “Garden in Sochi” series of the early 1940s, Smith’s artwork is also literally a musical score, informed by an idiosyncratic notation system that the trumpeter-composer first realized in 1967.



Mark Lombardi, *Hot Money - The Political Dimension, 2nd Version, 1997*. Pencil on paper, 24 1/2 x 48 1/4 inches. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York. Photo: Olympia Shannon.

For all their possibility, diagrams are often disciplinary. Flow charts, for example, can chain events to an overly narrow route, while blueprints might proffer violently confining or exclusionary architectures. Of all the diagrammatic forms, the most fraught may be cartography, with its close ties to destructive imperialist and capitalist projects. One of a handful of cartographic works in the show, Miguel Angel Ríos’s *Pleats and Borders #2* (1994–95) is a massive, curved map projection of the world. The concentric canvas strips that comprise it have been intricately pleated—Ríos’s reference to Indigenous crafts that have persisted in flourishing in the face of European imperialism—and covered with a dizzying tangle of crisscrossing lines, aesthetic moves that undermine a functionality so often put to violent ends. The land masses notably have no borders.

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#### Contributor

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