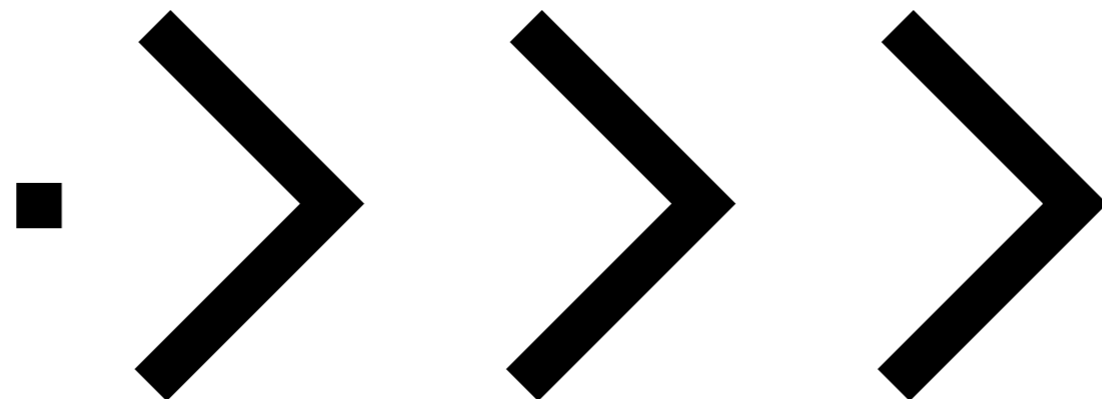




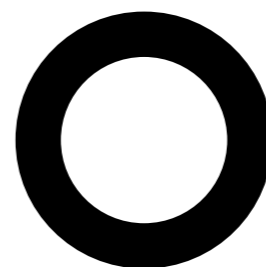
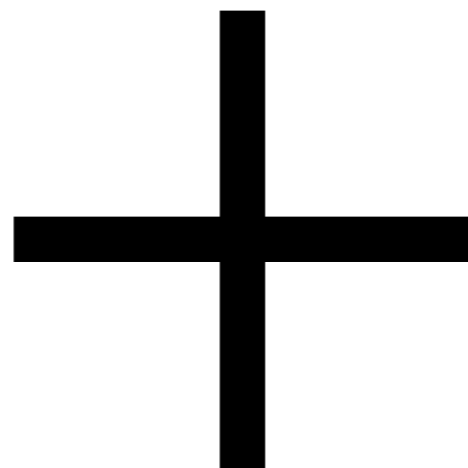
**HUA GALLERY  
LONDON**



**LU XINJIAN**





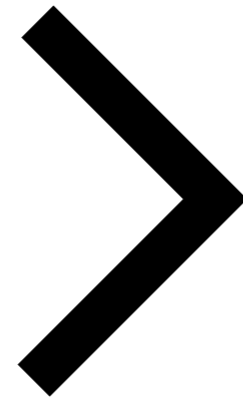
**CITY  
DNA  
IV**

**03.06 - 20. 10, 2014**





# The word Hua means to paint, or a painting, in Chinese.




Hua Gallery specialises in the exciting and sometimes controversial space that is Chinese contemporary art.

As Chinese contemporary art continues to fascinate and intrigue collectors around the world, demand and appetite for fresh and innovative art from this fast-changing region continues to escalate.

Hua Gallery represents and exhibits cutting edge, stimulating works by established contemporary Chinese artists, as well as emerging contemporary Chinese artists who are not as yet discovered internationally.

Hua Gallery adopts a distinctive business strategy by acquiring works from artists before selling them, as well as by exhibiting and selling works by artists on a commissions basis - an approach which demonstrates a passion, dedication and commitment to the artists and also, importantly, provides confidence to art collectors who trust the gallery to help expand their collections.

Hua Gallery's founder and director, Shanyan Koder, has developed strong relationships with her artists, and hopes to build a Chinese contemporary art collection in her gallery that is different and inspirational. Every artist represented by Hua Gallery is chosen for their artistic individuality, the creative symbolism in their work, and the emotional energy their work creates.



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# Overlit Realm/ Inner World

## A Loosely Articulated Series of Notes on the Work of the Artist Lu Xinjian

Prof. Paul Gladston and  
Dr. Lynne Howarth-Gladston

Paul Gladston is associate professor of Culture, Film and Media at the University of Nottingham and principal editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. Lynne Howarth-Gladston is an artist and free-lance writer.

<sup>1</sup> J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London, 2011).

### I

In the 1995 introduction to his novel *Crash*, first published in 1973, one-time Shanghailander and always (as a consequence) uncertainly 'rooted' Englishman, J.G Ballard writes: '[t]he marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the twentieth century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography'. Ballard also writes, '[i]n the past we have always assumed the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination'. Now, contends Ballard, these roles 'have been reversed.' Therefore, '[t]he most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction [and that] the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads'.<sup>1</sup> Lu Xijian's paintings are perhaps both a representation of the outward fiction of our contemporary 'overlit realm' and a trace of the obscure 'reality' of his own inner world.

### II

Lu Xinjian was born in the Chinese province of Jiang Su in 1977. His parents still live there. Lu trained as a designer and illustrator, graduating with a master's degree after studying in the Netherlands between 2004 and 2006. He returned to China in 2006 where he secured a job as a lecturer at the Shanghai Institute of Visual Art – he left after only 3 months. In 2008, Lu took up a lecturing post at the Yeungnam University in South Korea. He now lives and works in Shanghai.

### III

Lu employs both 'Chinese' and 'western' graphic/painterly techniques. There is an evident cultural duality to his painting signified by an (ostensibly precise, but inherently) uncertain organisation of shape, line and colour.

### IV

Lu's initial training as a designer and illustrator stressed the importance of craft. Lu came to painting relatively late. He was taught how to paint by a fine art student while working as a design lecturer in South Korea. His painting is highly crafted.

### V

Lu's work may be read both in terms of manifest and latent significances. One can reflect simply upon the surface conditions of his paintings; the eye quickly takes in the combined gestures of line, shape and colour presented as a superficial whole. There is no need for in-depth discussion or conceptualised analysis at this level of viewing. A generally pleasurable mood or feeling arises in the viewer in response to formal combinations of visual elements. Beyond this manifest significance one may begin to see initially abstract combinations of shapes, lines and colours signifying something other than themselves: hallucinatory mappings of urbanspaces and obscure, uncertainly realised symbolic languages. This text(style) may be contemplated at length like the unfolding of a painted scroll (charting some unknown and perhaps (seemingly) fantastical landscape) and decoded in the manner of the reading of a work of scholarly calligraphy. It is a(n only partially visible/emergent) poetic conveyance as well as the regulated product of a keen (carto)graphic eye. Manifest pleasure gives way by turns (of the scroll) to more complex relays of latent feeling and connoted meaning.

### VI

What exactly is signified by Lu's painting other than abstract form?

(Seemingly) Imaginary street plans: harmonious-schematic projections of complex though perfectly laid out cityscapes (traversed by unseen social, economic and cultural flows) - in actuality abstracted from images on the Internet.

Words: unconventional typographies and uncertainly signifying pictographic sign systems. In approximately 2600 BCE an early Chinese system of signs and symbols made with the assistance of knotted string was replaced by a pictographic writing system. Around 1800 BCE this system developed into one in which pictograms began to stand for abstract concepts.

### VII

Lu's paintings are abstracted from 'Google' maps of world cities readily available on the Internet. He first uses a felt tip pen to trace out a basic template or 'plotter' before going on with the use of plastic foil, canvas and acrylic paint to project full-scale paintings from these templates. Lu initially painted city maps of Beijing, Amsterdam, Groningen, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Paris. He would later

make paintings of Barcelona, Berlin, Tokyo, and Brussels.

### VIII

Historical Chinese cultural conceptions of harmony and ultimate harmony are signified by the terms He and Tai He. The most frequently used of these terms in modern Chinese is He which signifies reciprocal conjunctions between as well as a fundamental unity of otherwise non-identical objects. This conception allows for acceptance of difference as a condition of harmony.<sup>2</sup>

### IX

Pragmatic non-absolutist ways of thinking have persisted throughout Chinese history. These ways of thinking have tended towards the promotion of harmonious reciprocation between otherwise differing states of being. Exemplary of this tendency is the non-rationalist dialectical concept of yin-yang, which has persistently informed the development of the Chinese intellectual tradition. According to the concept of yin-yang, seemingly opposed forces in nature are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. Examples of Chinese thought that have been influenced by the concept of yin-yang include a traditional Daoist-Confucian desire to live in close accordance with nature as well as the Confucian vision of a harmonious, hierarchically ordered society. The classic Daoist text the Zhuangzhi states that '[u]tmost yin is solemn, sombre; utmost yang is brilliant, shining. The solemn and sombre comes from heaven, the brilliant and shining comes from earth. The two intermingle, interpenetrate, perfect harmony and so things are generated from them'.

### X

Both Daoist and Confucian thought uphold the notion that harmony is a fundamental feature of the cosmos. The Laozi states that 'myriad things carry yin on their backs and yang in their arms. Blended qi is their harmony.' As Zhang Dainian makes clear, the 'constant' is therefore regarded as the norm 'governing the process of change' and, since 'harmony is the basic principle of the universe', there is an understanding that 'things cannot leave harmony and still exist'.<sup>3</sup>

### XI

From the point of view of established Chinese discourse, assertions that 'harmony is the basic principle of the universe' and that 'things cannot leave harmony and still exist' present themselves almost automatically as positive. From a western(ized) discursive perspective strongly informed by post-modernist scepticism, however, assertions of this kind invite a rather more critical reception.<sup>4</sup>

### XII

Let us consider (provisionally) another form of 'reciprocal' mapping...

As Craig Clunas has indicated with reference to the work of the film and video installation artist Yang Fudong, the question of whether we choose to emphasise the 'Chineseness' or the globalised nature of contemporary Chinese art is a 'fundamentally political' one that 'has no easy or definitive answer'.<sup>5</sup> Although Clunas does not elaborate further upon this statement, he can be understood to imply that while Chinese national-cultural exceptionalism remains anathema in relation to internationally dominant post-colonialist attitudes towards the critical standing of contemporary art, any move to dismiss outright or to overlook that exceptionalism stands in danger of a return to colonialist relations of dominance. In short, we cannot choose to align ourselves resolutely with an established international post-colonialist perspective against differing localised points of view without what would appear to be a self-contradictory denial of difference.

By the same token, exceptionalist perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art are themselves very much open to deconstruction as both unjustifiably limited in their conceptual scope and as intellectual adjuncts to authoritarianism. This not only includes those exceptionalist perspectives that align themselves openly with governmentally supported nationalist-essentialism within the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also those that invoke deconstructive thinking (overtly or covertly) to justify exceptionalism. Moreover, we should be sensitive to ways in which localised constraints on criticism of governmental authority within the PRC limit the scope of deconstructivist critique reducing its interruption on authoritative meaning down to an eminently manageable abstraction. Indeed, this sensitivity should be extended to discursive conditions outside the PRC where a now institutionalised deconstructivism is, for example, in relation to contemporaneity, also subject to the limiting abstractions of political correctness and recuperation by the market.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Dainian, Edmund Ryden trans., *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (Beijing, New Haven and London, 2002) pp. 270-276.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 273

<sup>4</sup> Donald Wesling, 'Methodological implications of the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature: The Opposition East-West and Several Other Observations' in J.J. Deeney (Ed.), *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Theory and Strategy* (Hong Kong, 1980) pp.79-111.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford, 1997, 2nd edn 2009) p.235.

What persists then is a highly problematic paradox. By taking account of Chinese contemporary art's dualistic relationship to modernity and tradition, there is a danger of entering into unjustifiably orientalist or essentialist views of the significance of contemporary Chinese art and therefore of overemphasising its cultural separateness from other forms of contemporary art. By downplaying the 'Chineseness' of contemporary Chinese art there is also the risk of overlooking the persistence of tradition as part of the critically resistant construction of a modern Chinese cultural identity. The work of the critical interpreter of contemporary Chinese art, as well as of the transnational cultural networks that support its production, display and reception (whether Chinese or non-Chinese), is thus revealed to be a profoundly challenging one, which points towards the critical necessity of new (and almost certainly wholly imperfectable) theoretical paradigms beyond those currently envisaged both within the PRC and in an international context.

One possible way forward, I wish to argue here, is the use of polylogues – that is to say, inter-textual multi-voiced discourses – as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities; a strategy exemplified by Jacques Derrida's radical collage text *Glas* (1974), which juxtaposes readings of text by G.W.F. Hegel and Jean Genet to pervasively unsettling critical effect. Such multi-voiced discourses involve the juxtaposing of differing discursive perspectives whereby the meaning of those perspectives is subject to the possibility of critical remotivation as the result of their mutual recontextualisation in a manner akin to the effects of artistic collage-montage.<sup>6</sup> As the intercultural philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer has argued, in order to go beyond the rash universalism or relativistic particularism of philosophical thinking conducted from a single cultural point of view, it is necessary to engage critically with other cultural perspectives in the form of such a polylogue or 'dialogue of many'.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial to this methodological approach, perhaps, is Derrida's conception of inter-textual telepathy. As Claudette Sartillot indicates, this does not amount to a misplaced belief on Derrida's part in an occultist connection between otherwise materially discrete instances of signification, but instead, and more justifiably, in the deconstructive openness of the medium of language to 'distant influences' as a consequence of the aleatory (chance) processes of reading and re-reading conducted in the space between text and consciousness.<sup>8</sup> The implication of which, Sartillot explains, is a 'telecommunication between words within a single language and between different languages' whereby 'one's discourse is always contaminated by that of the other which never allows itself to be either totally excluded or totally included'.<sup>9</sup>

The following two-part text is part of an attempt to arrive at a first draft of such an analysis. The text below addresses ostensible similarities between deconstructivist theory and practice and aspects of traditional 'non-rationalist' Chinese thought and practice associated in part with the conceptual pairing yin-yang as well as related Confucian notions of social harmony.

### XIII

Indigenous Chinese art theory

As part of dominant cultural discourses within the PRC, there is a persistence of traditional Chinese 'non-rationalist' dialectics – as exemplified by the Daoist conception of dynamic complementarity between the otherwise opposing cosmic forces of yin and yang. This sits alongside and commingles with the official persistence of Marxist-scientific rationalism.

Traditional Chinese thought and practice is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the pre-Daoist conception of yin-yang. The term yin-yang refers to the notion that seemingly opposing forces in nature (for example, light and dark, and male and female) are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent, and that, as a consequence, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. This notion is a fundamental principle of many aspects of classical Chinese science, philosophy and cultural practice.<sup>10</sup>

A Marxist conception of dialectical realism has been and to a large extent remains strongly influential on Chinese intellectual life as part of official government thinking. According to this official line, China's development is predicated on a rationalist-scientific approach towards the resolution of social and material contradictions. It should be noted, however, that a Maoist interpretation or

<sup>6</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London 1985) pp.83-110.

<sup>7</sup> Franz Martin Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie*, Vienna 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Claudette Sartillot, 'Telepathy and Writing in Jacques Derrida's *Glas*', Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group, vol.12, no.3, 1989, pp.215-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.222-4.

<sup>10</sup> See Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, pp.83-94.

translation of Marxist dialectics is often akin to a traditional Chinese non-rationalist dialectics insofar as the desired outcome of class conflict is a state of harmonious social interaction and not simply the outright negation of one class by another. It should also be noted that since the mid-1990s the CCP has supported a return to the traditional Confucian notion of a harmonious society as a way of addressing sharp social divisions brought about by the implementation of economic reforms.

The persistence of traditional Chinese 'non-rationalist' dialectics informs a recently revived tendency towards traditional Chinese metaphysical notions of harmonisation and reciprocal interaction within the PRC.

While traditional Chinese dialectical thinking is distinctly non-rationalist in outlook, it nevertheless tends towards metaphysical conceptions of harmony and reciprocity; for example, a belief, central to both Daoist and Confucian thought, in the desirability of harmonious interaction between humanity and nature.<sup>11</sup>

#### International art theory

International art theory continues to be informed strongly by the theory and practice of deconstruction – that is to say, a performative critique of the authority of legitimising discourses and associated truth claims. The pervasive scepticism/criticality of deconstructivism sits alongside the persistence of metaphysical rationalist thought underlying all discursive representation.

Deconstructivist postmodernism is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the Derridean conception of 'différance'. Différance is a neologism coined by the French theorist Jacques Derrida to signify his view that linguistic signification is made possible by a persistent deconstructive (negative-productive) movement of differing-deferring between signs.<sup>12</sup> This envisioning of difference and deferral immanent to linguistic signification is broadly similar in conceptual terms to the interconnectedness of opposites signified by the Daoist concept of yin-yang. It is important to note, however, that Derridean deconstruction looks towards a persistent disjunctive deferral of meaning, while yin-yang is conventionally understood within a Chinese cultural context to support the desirable possibility of reciprocation between opposites.<sup>13</sup>

Within a mainland Chinese cultural context deconstructivist thought and practice has been compared to the classical Chinese philosopher Zhuangzhi's opposition to rigid Confucian notions of social order and etiquette associated with the term 'Li-Jiao'. Along with feudalism and a patriarchal clan system, li (education) constituted one of the fundamental discursive cornerstones of ancient Chinese society. Li later became a central aspect of Confucian ethics underpinning supposedly proper relationships between individuals and social classes as part of a harmonious social order. During the pre-Qin period (3rd century BC) Zhuangzhi criticised Confucian notions of rigid social order on the grounds that they alienated society from nature and, consequently, from a spontaneous achievement of social harmony. Zhuangzhi also argued that conceptual oppositions signified by language were rigid and arbitrary and therefore pointed away from natural conceptions of value.<sup>14</sup> There is therefore a strand of traditional Chinese thought that can be understood to accord to some degree with internationally dominant deconstructivist theoretical perspectives insofar as it questions the authority of linguistic representations of opposition and hierarchy.

#### XIV

In respect of Lu's painting, what precisely can therefore be classified as Western in approach, and what is conceivably Eastern? Recognisable constituents of the Western(ised) post-De Stijl/post-Bauhaus visual languages of graphic design and illustration commingle - robbed of any obvious use-value - with the aesthetic particularities of modernist abstraction (placed under implicit but inescapable post-modernist/contemporary quotation marks). The paintings of Piet Mondrian are a direct influence upon those of Lu Xinjian. In his late painting *Broadway Boogie-woogie* (1943) Mondrian also projected what may be interpreted as an abstract mapping of urban space. Less immediately obvious, but also in evidence in relation to Lu's painting, is a pictographic sensibility through which abstract form hovers continually on the brink of calligraphic-symbolic representation – it is this which, in the main, connotes the work's 'Eastern' identity. Two cultures are re/conjoined through the effects of globalisation. The outcome is one of multiple parallax. Seen one way, Lu's painting appears to affirm the universalising abstractions (form and thought) of western(ised) modernism. Seen in another light, its refractions of abstract form into a discernible cartography/calligraphy suggests deconstructivist intervention. In China there is a non-adherence to hypostatizing Western ideas and canons of fine art practice. This is coupled with a more general postmodernist/

contemporary blurring of established boundaries between disciplines.

#### XV

While living in Korea, Lu took to gazing out from the balcony of his apartment at night in a state of meditative reverie, drifting across the dreary rooflines of local houses towards the crosses of nearby churches outlined in red neon (an imagery echoed by recent works produced by Lu using actual coloured neon lights). Lu also meandered through the inner world of an acquired visual vocabulary including the geometric abstractions of Mondrian, which he felt were closest to his own artistic vision. Lu was also impressed by the imaginative reach and ambition of Pablo Picasso as well as the gestural abandon of Pollock and the dream-like qualities of paintings by Joan Miró. By then, Lu had read the theories of the De Stijl group. He admired the artistic self-examination exemplified by Mondrian's paintings as well as their distillation and eventual abandonment of visible nature. He also admired Mondrian's incremental attempts to depict a universal harmony. Lu's recourse to an inner visual world was in part a response to unsettling personal trauma. He met with a therapist and began meditation on the balcony of his apartment. It was there that Lu envisioned his painterly cityscapes, dreaming inwardly in the face of an overlit urban realm.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.276–9.

<sup>12</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass trans., (Hemel Hempstead, 1982) pp.1–27.

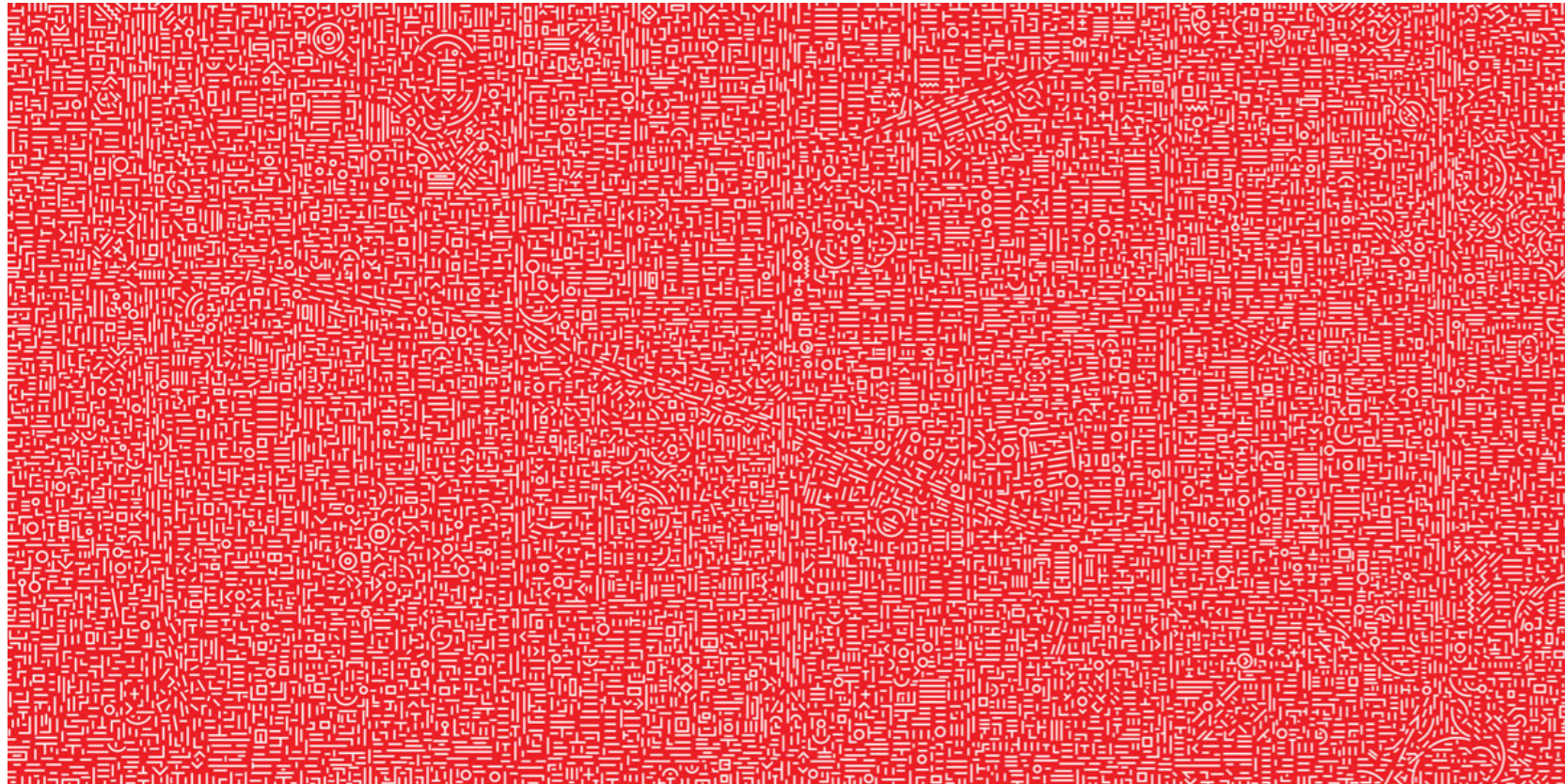
<sup>13</sup> Paul Gladston, 'Chan-Da-da(o)-De-Construction or, The Cultural (II)Logic of Contemporary Chinese "Avant-garde" Art', *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol.7, no.4, 2008, pp.63–9.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Luo Yang "Compare Western Deconstruction and Zhuangzhi", 2008, <http://wenku.baidu.com>, accessed 12 January 2014.



# Lu Xinjian's City DNA: Beijing CBD and the Universal Metropolis

Prof. Suman Gupta

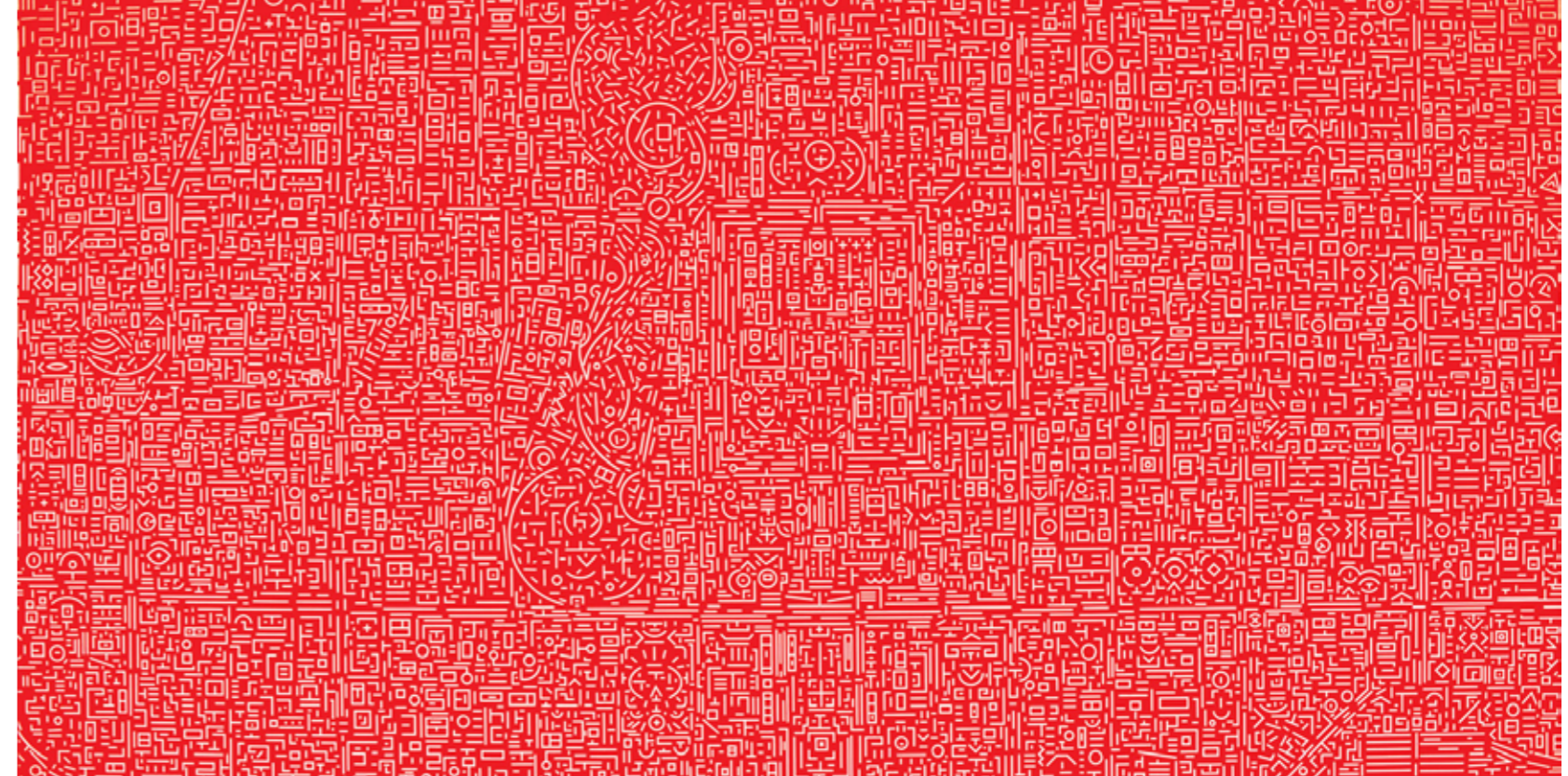


Lu Xinjian, City DNA: Beijing CBD, 200x400cm, 2011, acrylic on canvas

*The metropolis comprises [the] simultaneous death of city and countryside, at the intersection where all the middle classes converge, in the middle of this middle class crowd, which extends indefinitely, from rural exodus to 'peri-urbanization.' The glassing-in of the global territory suits the cynicism of contemporary architecture. A school, a hospital, a multimedia library; just so many variations on the same theme: transparency, neutrality, uniformity. Massive, fluid buildings, designed without any need to know what will go on in them, and that could be here just as much as they could be anywhere.*

*The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection (2007)*

Lu Xinjian's series of City DNA paintings from 2009 onwards are based, as the artist has explained, on the satellite's eye view of various cities that Google Earth provides. However, these abstract renderings of aerial cityscapes have a tenuous link to their Google Earth counterparts (an essay by Danielle Shang, also on the artist's website, offers a visual comparison for the San Diego painting). The viewer has to work quite hard to see the comparable features, have some foreknowledge of the coordinates and altitudes the artist used and be familiar with the cityscape in question. The paintings actually resist such cartographical comparison. Markers in satellite/map images which aid comparison are carefully removed: there are obviously no labels or framing information; the background appears as a continuous monochrome; natural and built features are described in the same way; all the lines are equally discontinuous, and are often monochrome too (where colour variations



Lu Xinjian, City DNA: Beijing No.2, 200x400cm, 2010, acrylic on canvas

appear they are arbitrary); the only discernible boundaries are those of the painting (the cityscapes aren't contained in the painting). Each painting evidently starts from something like a Google Earth image and works towards an image which has its own aesthetic integrity, defined by its frame, its juxtaposition of colours, its scheme of broken lines, and so on. The aesthetic integrity of the paintings tests their connection to empirically imaged cityscapes: there is a visual connection, but this connection is subdued by the internal dynamics and balance of the paintings. The paintings are not simply based on aerial images of cities; the paintings are more a transformation of those images into artefacts.

The question that arises is: do these paintings then have any bearing on how we – the viewers – think about cities? Or are these paintings enclosed by their discrete aesthetic rationale, permanently detached from the cityscapes that inspired them? As Lu developed the City DNA series from 2009 onwards (most paintings feature on his website) certain patterns were introduced in phases. Initially these were simply paintings representing a single city in a generic way (see Beijing 2, 2010); from 2010-11 some of the paintings focused on particular districts of specific cities – such as the one above on the Central Business District on the east side of Beijing; by 2012 Lu was painting smaller areas with abstractions from different altitudes juxtaposed against each other, effectively making for a diptych. From the visual impression, however, there is little to distinguish the paintings apart from their aesthetic choices: choice of colours, choice of frames. The Beijing CBD painting



is substantially similar to the earlier Beijing 2 (2010); and in relation to other cities (Amsterdam, New York, Kyoto etc.) all the paintings appear as variations of aesthetic choices. There are no distinctive city-characteristics to be discerned, only distinctive background and broken-line colours and their placements. And even in the magnified side of the diptych-like paintings, there's little to visually distinguish, say, Chiasso (Switzerland) from Pudong (Shanghai, China) apart from those aesthetic choices. In fact, the visual domination of the aesthetic ordering blurs the specificity of particular cities as those cities: what comes across is an artistic view wherein all cities merge into uniform visual neuterness, with only artificial and arbitrary differentiations which ultimately serve to emphasise that uniformity. Each painting might be labelled such-and-such city, but essentially they all apprehend one kind of space. In these paintings it is the series label – City DNA – which sticks, not the specificity of Beijing 2 or of Beijing CBD as separate paintings. The dominance of aesthetic form fixes the "DNA" metaphor for cities-in-general ("the city" as uniform space) for the series, rather than articulating the distinctiveness of specific cities in specific paintings. We could think of the series then as aesthetically foregrounding the connectedness and homogenization of particular city spaces into one kind of mega-spatialization: characterising the contemporary metropolis. The City DNA series gestures towards the ubiquity of the metropolis that extends across all the cities depicted.

Cities seem to attract life-metaphors, and are often described as "organisms" with "nervous systems", "hearts" and "souls", "throbbing" or "decaying", etc. In relation to cities, "DNA" is used as a metaphor in several different and incommensurable ways:

- For some, the "DNA" of a city signifies that which makes a city distinctive and unique. When novelist Peter Carey, in *Thirty Days in Sydney* (2001), says: "These bright yellow cliffs show the city's DNA – that is, it is a sandstone city..." – the metaphor is picked up in that sense. So does, to take a different kind of example, the Amsterdam Museum's Amsterdam DNA department featuring films on the history of the city. In business circles preoccupied with city branding (Keith Dinney's *City Branding 2011* gives a useful sense of this area), this kind of metaphorical nuance of DNA is commonplace.
- The "DNA" of the city (cities-in-general) could signify that which describes all cities, the total parameters of the species "city" – a kind of hidden code which contains all variations of cities. This sort of metaphoric usage was encouraged by much feted announcements of different stages of the completion of the Human Genome Project.
- In academic circles, "city DNA" generally refers to the essential strands of organization and functioning (economic, administrative, technological etc.) of cities in terms of which their development could be understood and planned. Naturally, in urban planning circles the phrase is widely prevalent. Sometimes scholars contemplating particularly large and cosmopolitan cities as hubs of globalization/globalization processes – theorists of Global/World Cities – also seem to have the metaphor in mind thus.

Given the diminishment of the cartographical by the domination of aesthetic principles in Lu's City DNA paintings, his vision appears more attuned with the latter two nuances than the first. However, the visual effect of the series also suggests a slippage from all those nuances. All the above shades of "DNA" as metaphor are used on the understanding that it is the city – out there – which is akin to a living being; in Lu's City DNA there is nothing to suggest that. The abstracted forms of cities in these paintings are static and fixed; the only life is that of the artist's (or viewer's) abstracting aesthetic gaze – perhaps the "DNA" here is a metaphor for the gaze that transforms cities into such artefacts.

The static effect of Lu's abstract aerial city painting is perhaps best grasped when compared with other artists who have done something similar. Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) has naturally been a frequent reference point for reviewers of the City DNA series; more recently paintings by artists like Jorge Rivas and James Fowler also come to mind. With obviously painterly effect Mondrian

had extrapolated a grid for the cityscape in question – a grid which, so to speak, seems embedded within the city. The fundamental structures of the city appear to be delved and regularised into formal patterns in Mondrian's painting; it draws the viewer into the cityscape. In Lu's City DNA paintings, as in the above Beijing CBD painting, there are no regularities and patterns and grids and lights and flows – the defining features of the cities are dispersed into a density of broken lines which disorientate the viewer. The only choice the viewer has is to hold on to the stabilising effect of aesthetic choices that are not of the cities depicted, but that are offered in the design of the artwork: the arbitrarily chosen colours, the aesthetic integrity of the surface of the painting as painted surface. In these, the artist/viewer draws away from the city.

If a vision of cities – the contemporary metropolis – is to be inferred from the City DNA paintings, it should not be conflated with that found in, for instance, Mondrian's abstract cityscapes. Lu's vision is of cityscapes in his time – our time – and of a context where urbanization has been intense. Urbanization has been a constantly escalating global process through the twentieth century; especially noteworthy has been the intensity and scale of urbanization in China after 1990. In 1990 a bit over a quarter of the country's population lived in cities; by 2012 somewhat over half the population was urban – a proportional doubling. But demographic shift doesn't really capture the connotations of urbanization. In China this has been a matter not merely of cities growing, but of cities being rebuilt, and of towns turning into cities and villages into towns and then cities. More importantly, it has been a matter of the visual transformation of cityscapes and city environments within a couple of decades. The planned transformation of the built environment has been obviously gigantic, and has followed a recognizable template of what a modern city's environment, skyline, and built structures should look like – the kind of visual impact these should have. This visual impact strikes one as analogous to that made by, for instance, downtown New York or Chicago. When encountered by unfamiliar eyes this is apt to be a powerful impact; as, for instance, for visitors from Europe to Manhattan in the 1920s. The result of that impact on film director Fritz Lang when he first visited New York in 1924 was the setting of his futuristic film *Metropolis* (1927); in his reminiscing words later (in an interview with Gretchen Berg in 1966):

*Metropolis, you know, was born from my first sight of New York in October 1924 ... while visiting New York, I thought that it was the crossroads of multiple and confused human forces, blinded and knocking into one another, in an irresistible desire for exploitation, and living in perpetual anxiety. I spent an entire day walking the streets. The buildings seemed to be a vertical sail, scintillating and very light, a luxurious backdrop, suspended in the dark sky to dazzle, distract and hypnotize.*

That's the view of a first encounter with such a modern metropolis. The speed of reconstruction of cities in China has had something of that effect – of the shock of the new – even on the people who live in those cities, that is, when they have the time to pause and consider their surroundings. Unlike Lang, it is not that they have travelled to such an environment and experienced that visual effect suddenly; it is as if that environment has speedily travelled to them and subsumed the surroundings – as if they have somehow leapt in slow motion into the setting of *Metropolis* without quite moving. The citizens have seen it all happen around them, have seen every brick laid and mortar poured, and yet this changing vision has a concentration and speed which must strike many of them, when there's time for reflection, with something akin to Lang's amazement in 1924. It's as if the backdrop of the city changed while they were performing its life in one way, and they had to and are still having to hurriedly adjust their performance of city life as they go along.

It would be a mistake, however, to simply focus on planned large-scale city rebuilding to understand the effect of urbanization on citizens. Population shift from country to city means that shanty towns and semi-regulated localities have grown speedily at the margins and interstices of rebuilt Chinese cities, becoming more densely populated and absorbing the pressures of urbanization at, so to speak, the bursting seams. And yet, these are relatively muted seams, inevitably seen and yet

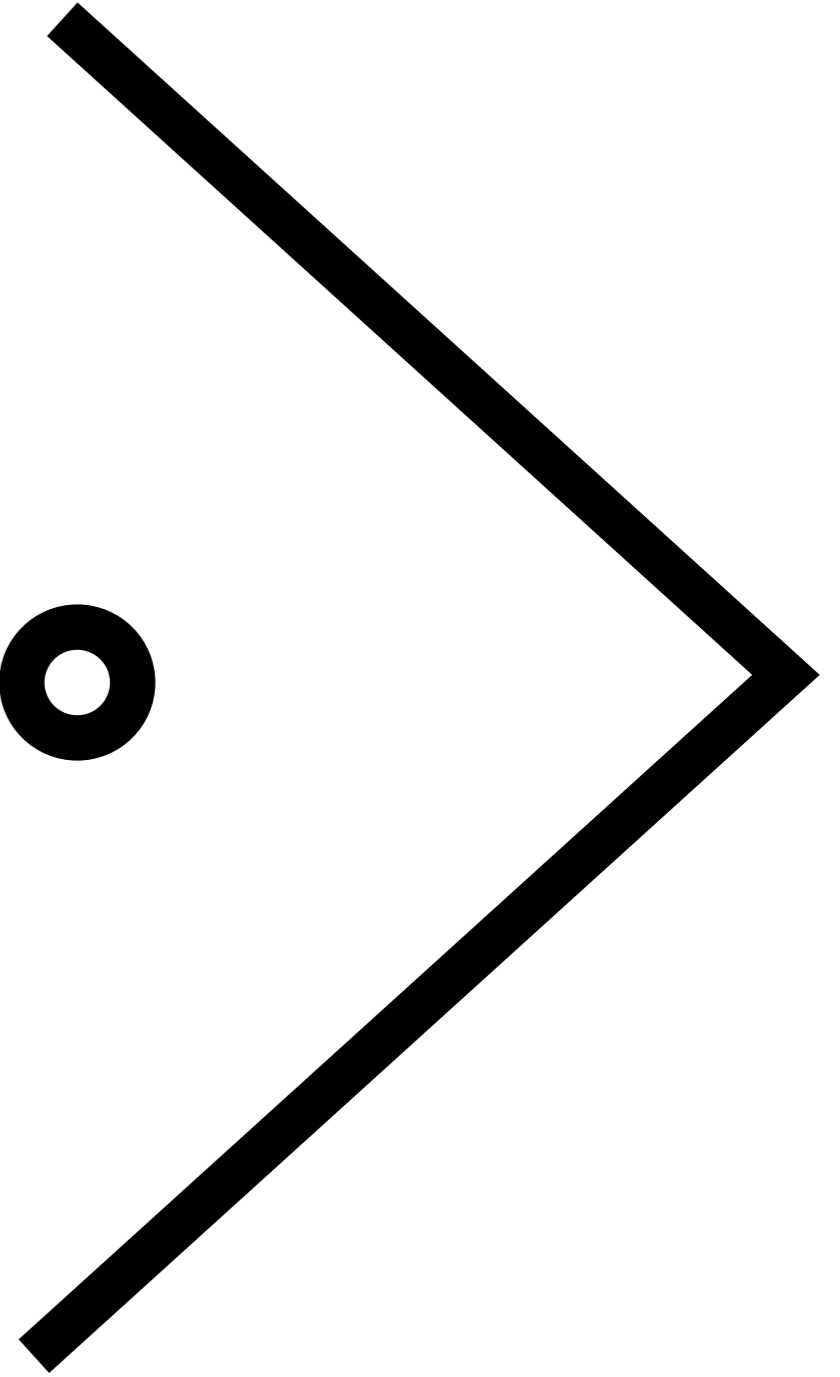
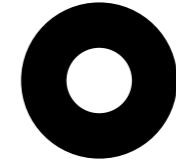
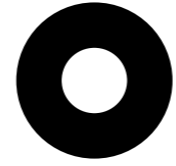
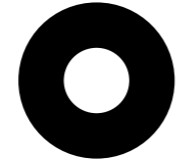
not quite seen – easily overlooked in envisioning the contemporary metropolis.

Anyway: under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that artists who live and work in China register a particular interest in urbanization and its concrete realizations of the paradoxically fluid metropolis. Speedy change in cityscapes around citizens naturally disturbs any prevailing sense of the solidity and stability of city structures, which depend generally on slow and gradual accrual of layers of history in cities. These rebuilt cities seem, despite their impressively solid edifices, collapsible and fragile as cities. At the same time, the distinctiveness of these cities as specifically Chinese cities with particular built histories and traditional visual features is disturbed. Since the programme of rebuilding is based on that template of a modern metropolis and has a corresponding visual effect, what appears in the surroundings seem to be not specifically here but could be somewhere else; the signs and registers of this city appear to cohere with the signs and registers of all such cities and substantiate a universal modern metropolis. Passing through downtown Beijing seems not much different from traipsing through downtown Shanghai or Hong Kong or New York or Chicago or Frankfurt or Dubai or .... These all seem caught in an urban dynamic which is not specifically Chinese or British or American or any other, but to do with networks of economic production and consumption, and the concordant production of lifestyles and environments, and the concordant manoeuvres of government and politics. And there's always, of course, that attendant dizziness of being caught up in a sweep which has precipitately changed conventions of daily performances and everyday selves; all are propelled along by forces larger than can be grasped. All these elements of urban developments in China – which are no more than an intensive enactment of developments everywhere – have been captured by artists in China. Perhaps most effectively, these elements are found combined in installation artworks. The multidimensional features of these developments translate well into three-dimensional artefacts. Numerous recent installations which envision the modern metropolis by, for instance, Liu Jianhua (刘建华), Zhan Wang (展望), Qin Chong (秦衝), Liu Wei (刘伟) (b.1972), Han Feng (韩锋), Wang Du (王度) effectively convey the visual effect, fragility and collapsibility, the "non-place" character (to pick a term from anthropologist Marc Augé), the dynamics of global production and consumption. These installation artworks may sometimes have some defining features of particular cities – of Beijing or Shanghai – but they can just as easily be constituted into other cities in other countries. But really these are all depictions of the universal metropolis of our times. This universal metropolis also appears prolifically in paintings, photographs, and so on.

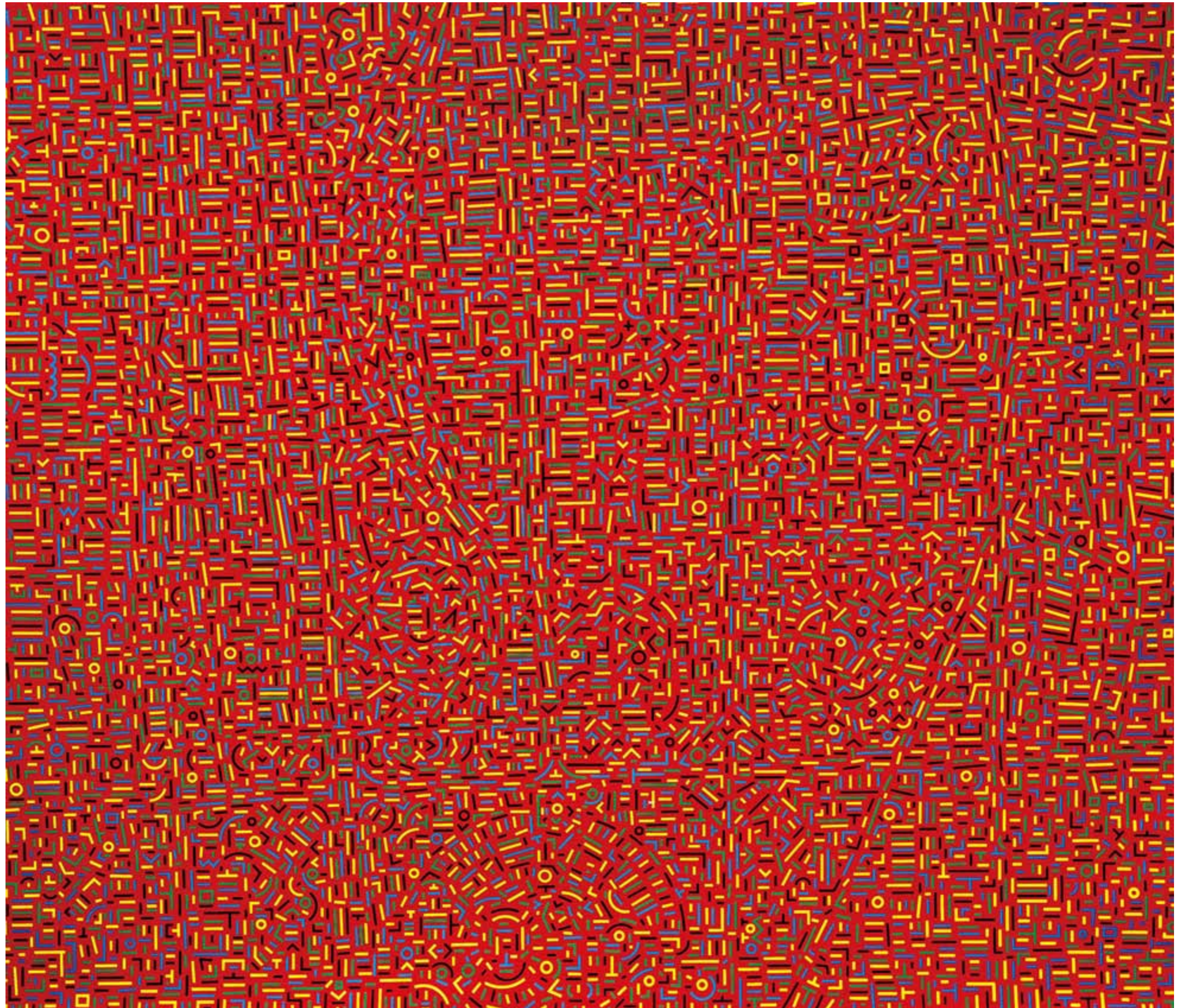
In this context, the City DNA series makes perfect sense as a distinctive contribution to a larger artistic sensibility. That all the cities it depicts in individual paintings seem indistinguishable within the series makes sense. The dizzying effect of the dense and discontinuous and anti-symmetrical lines makes sense. The DNA metaphor makes sense with the latter two of the three bullet-pointed shades described above. The retreat into the artistic integrity of abstract principles of colouration and framing and design, which liberate city paintings from the cartography and brands of specific cities – that makes sense too.

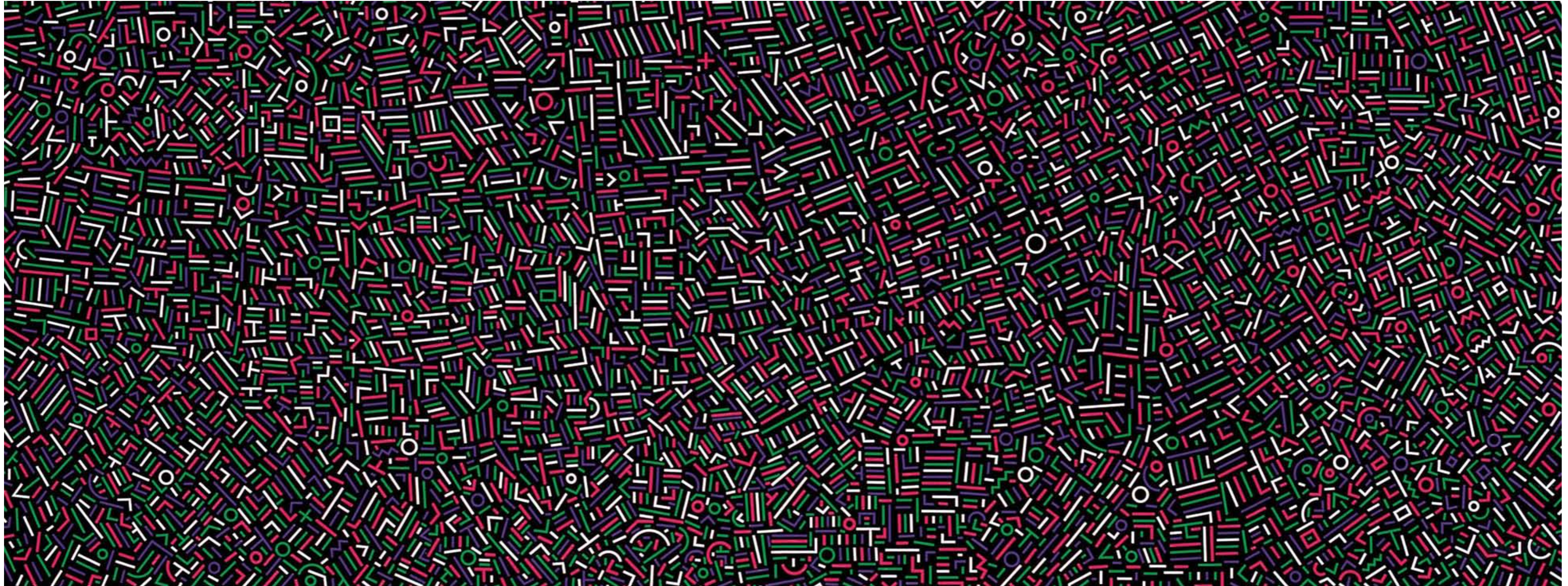
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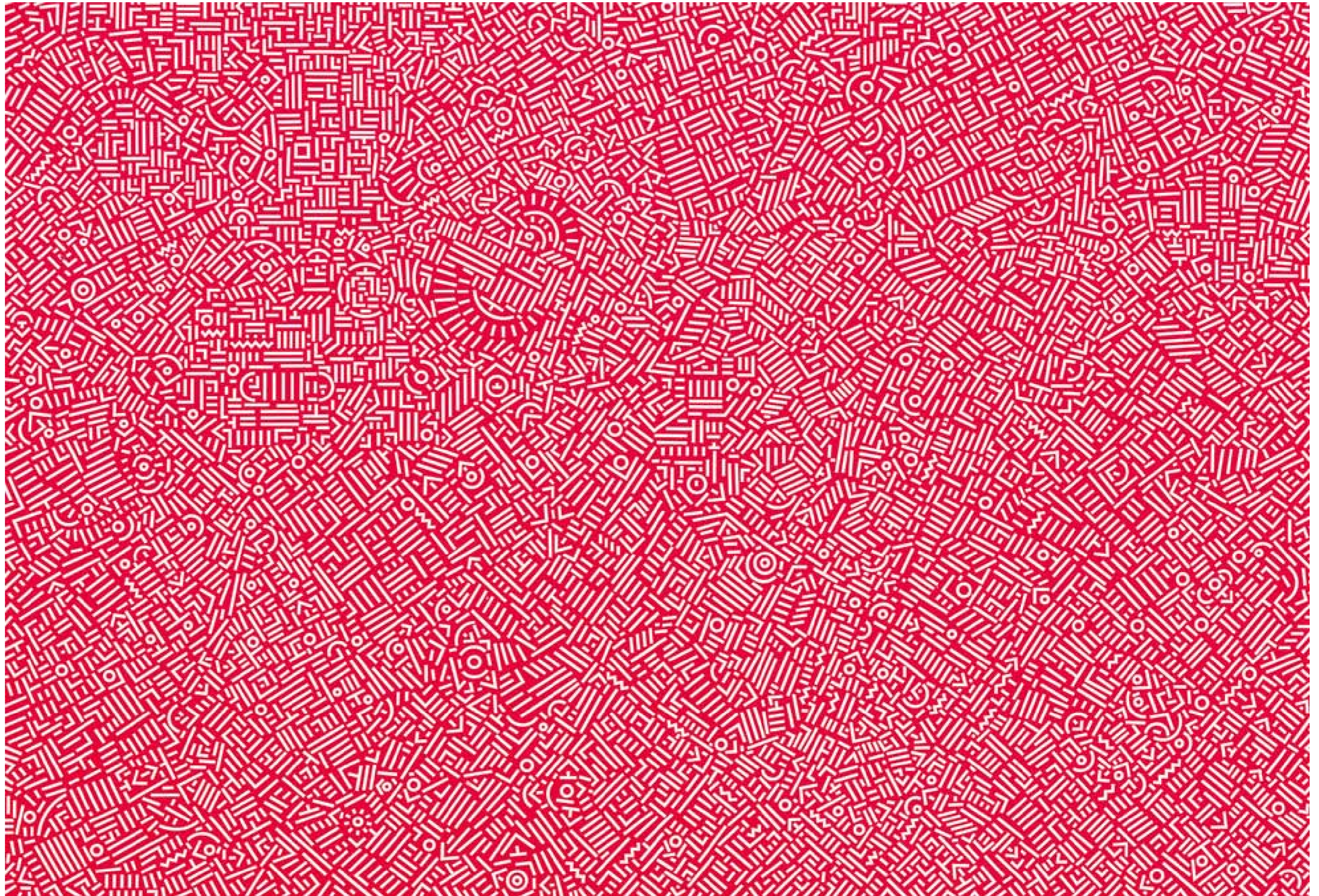


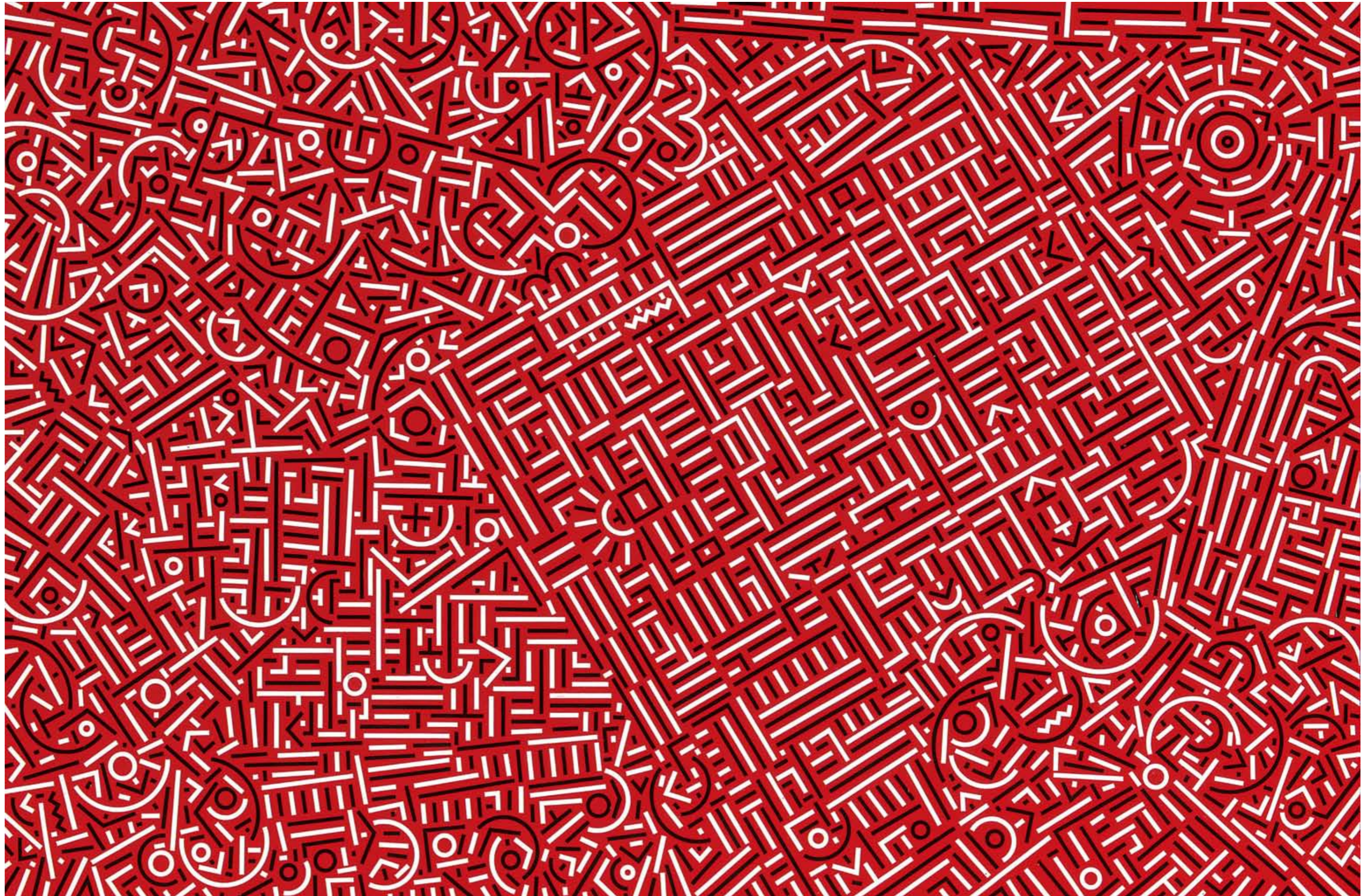
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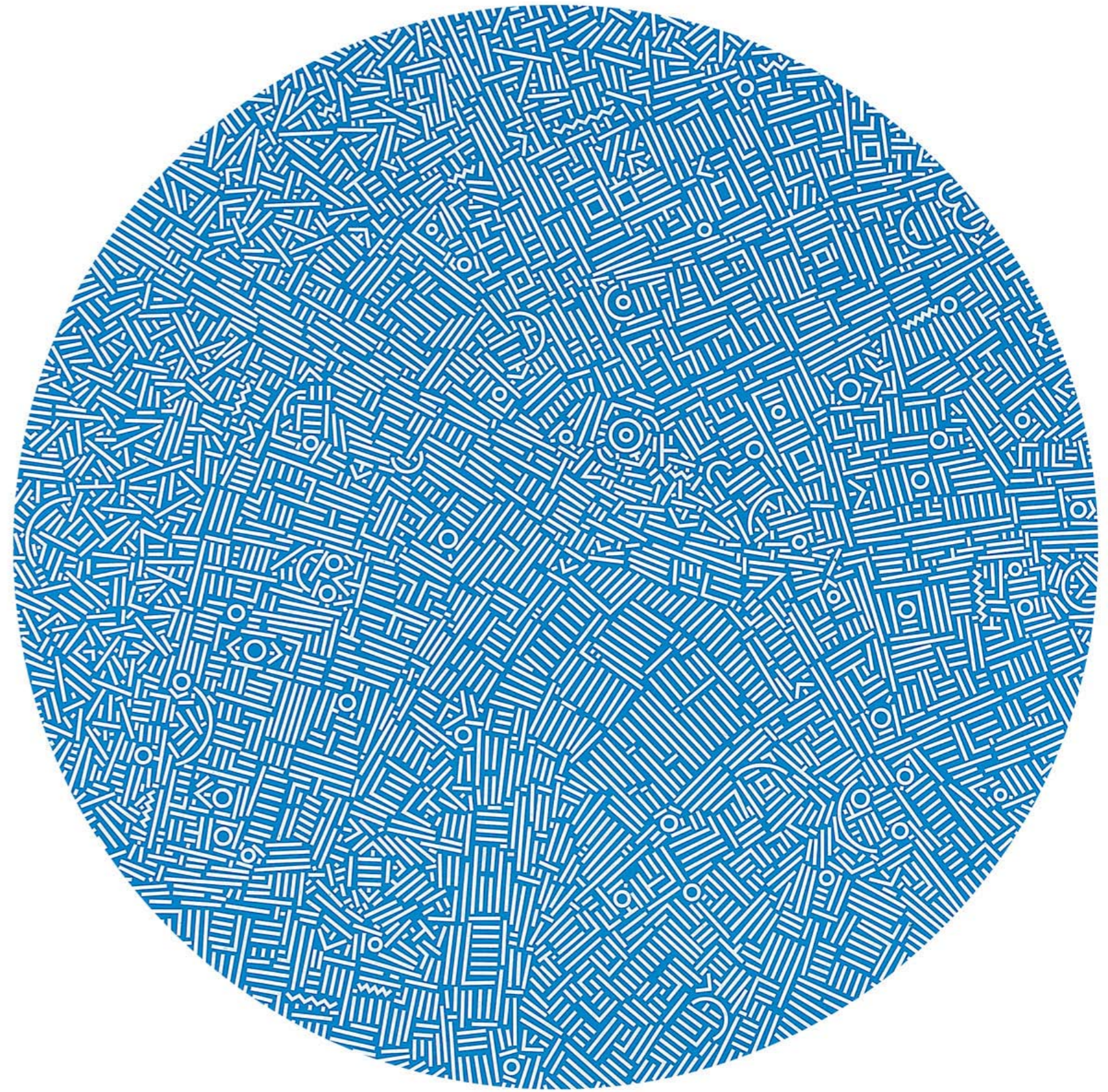


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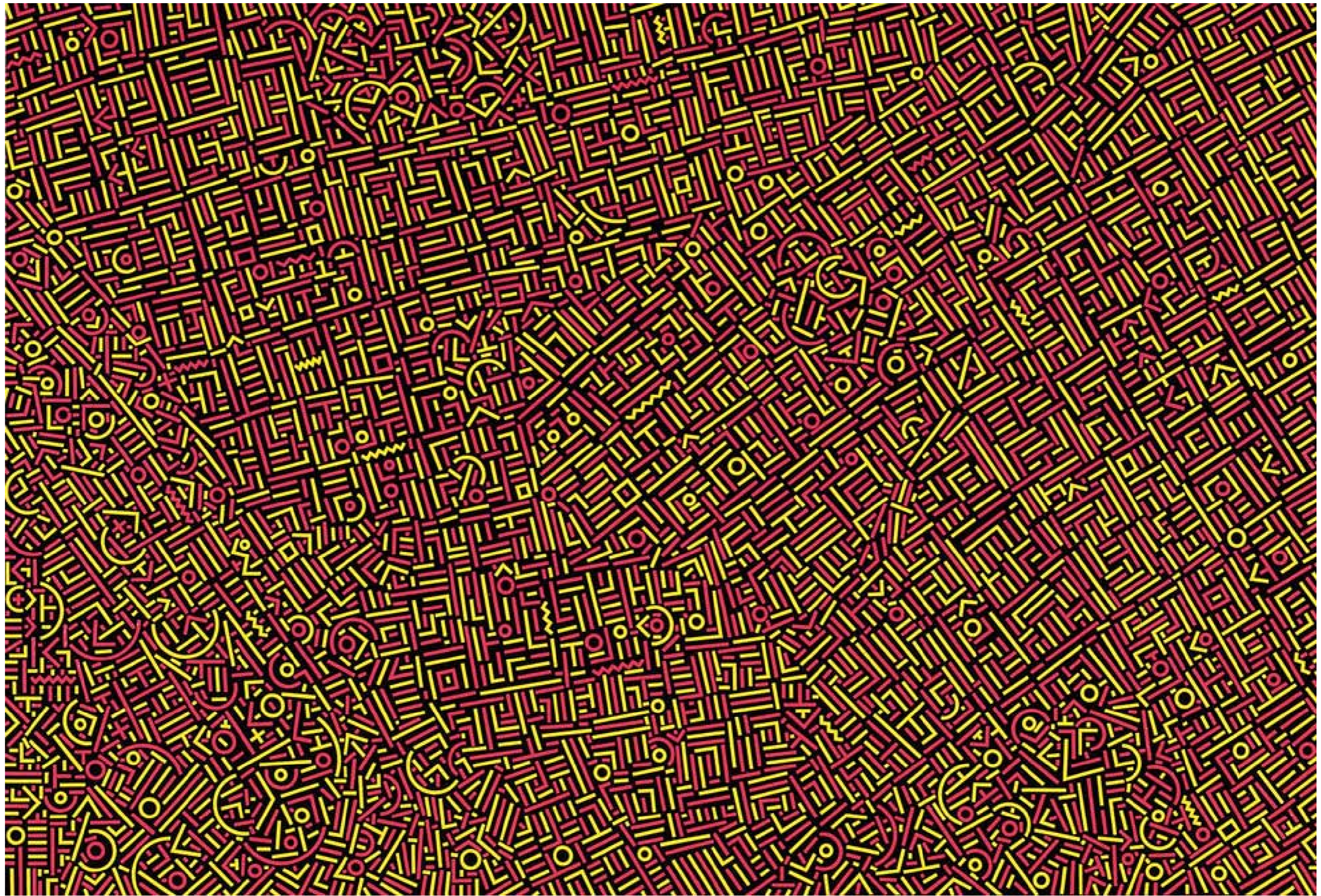


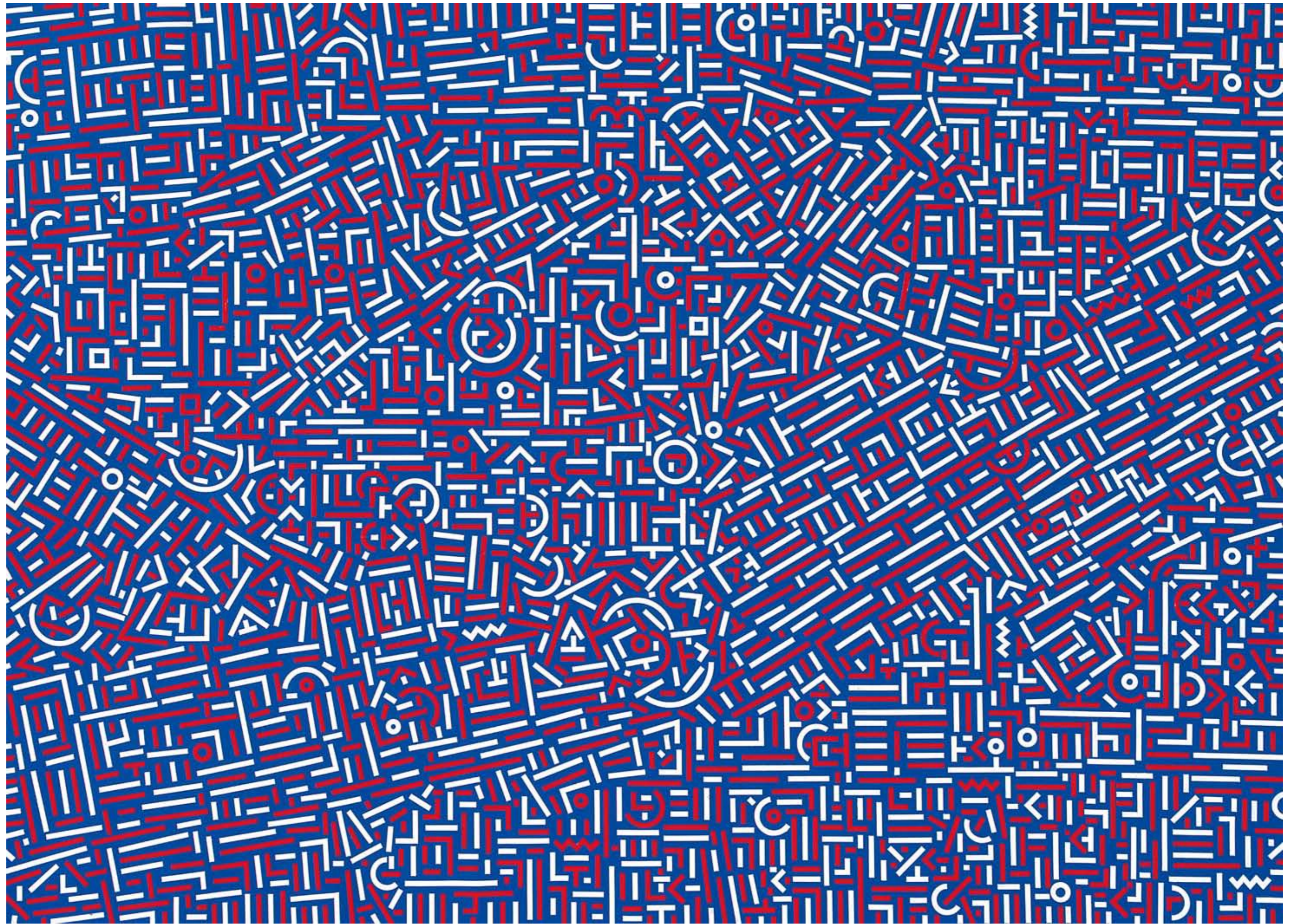


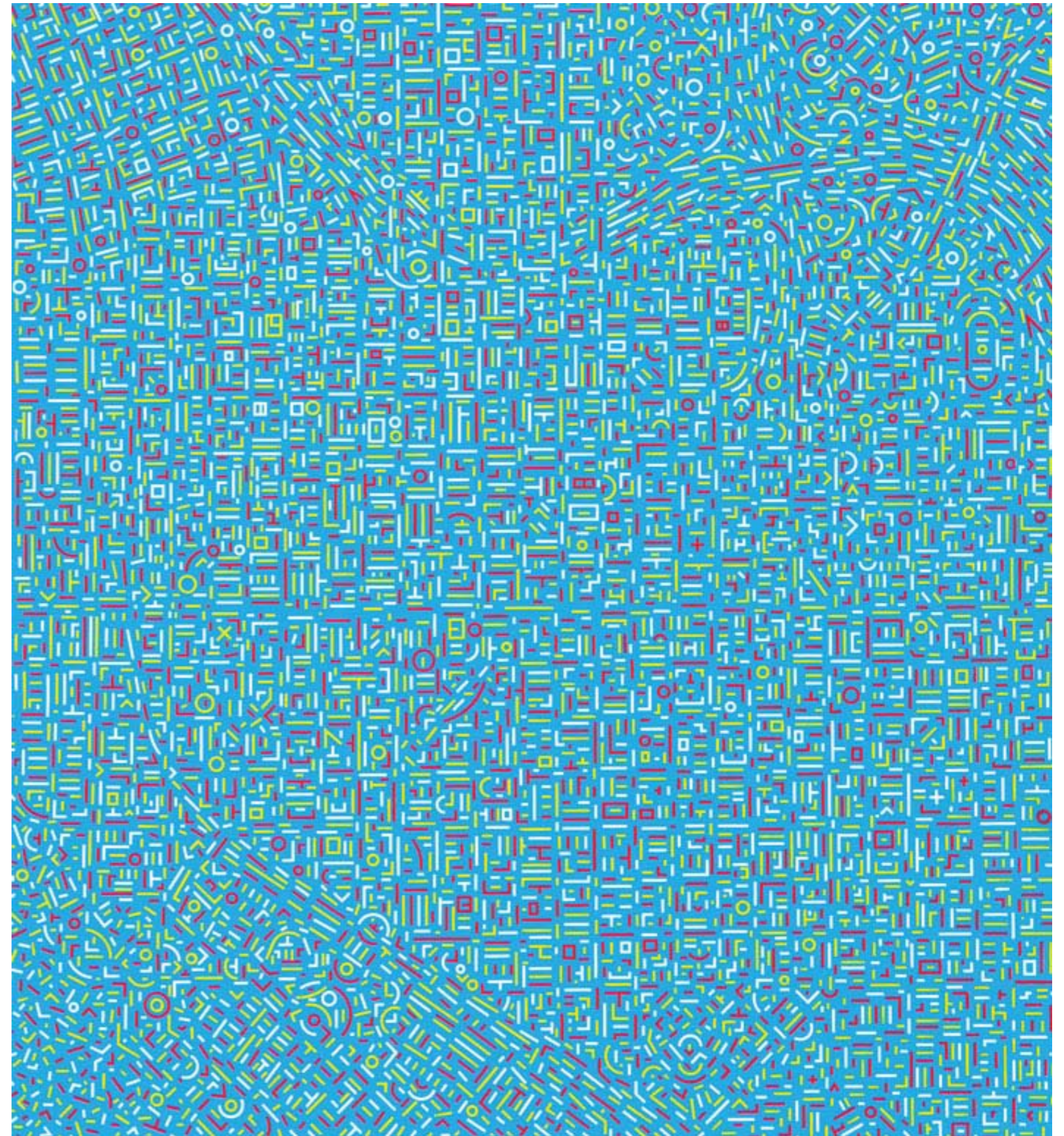
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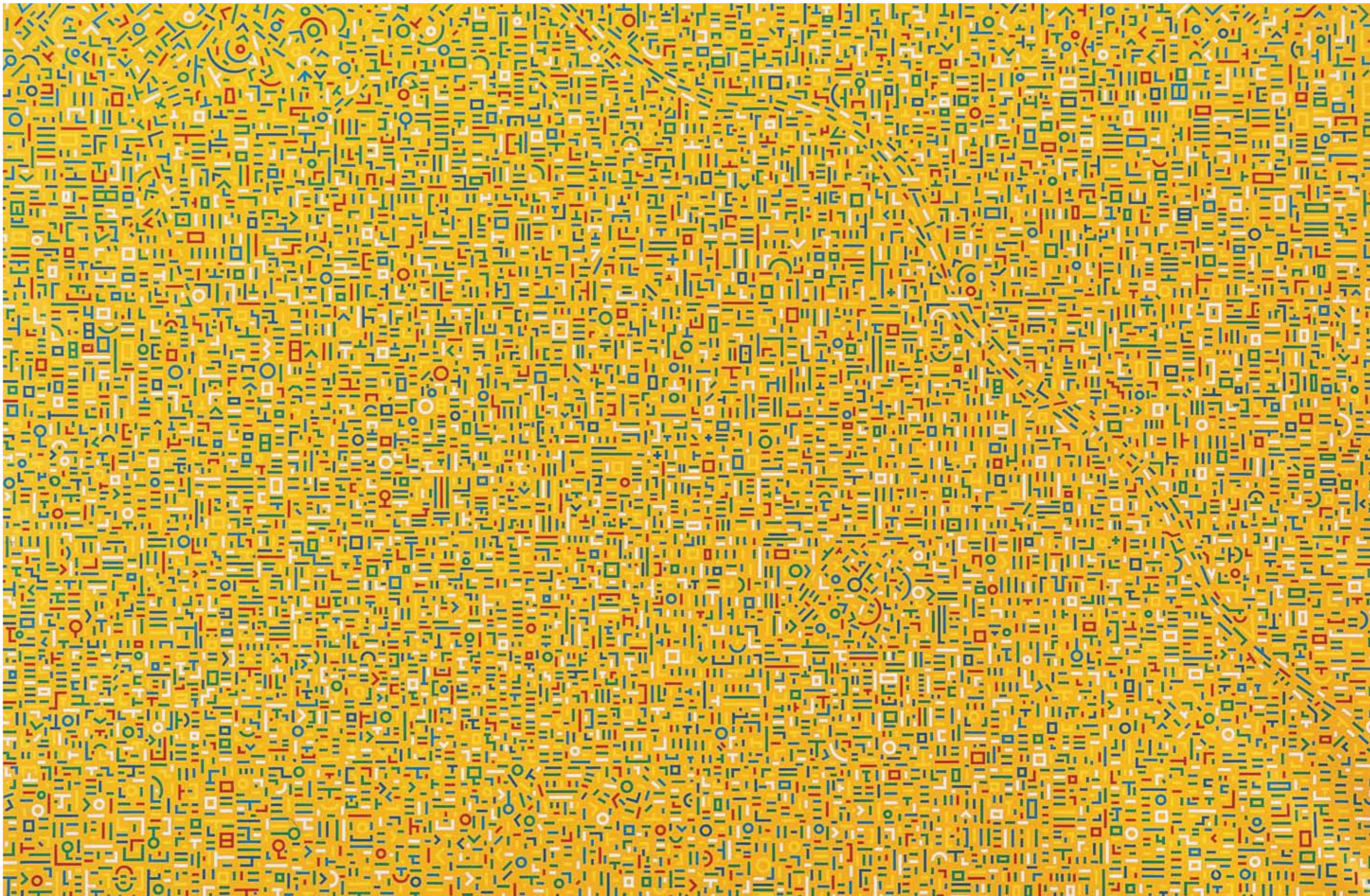




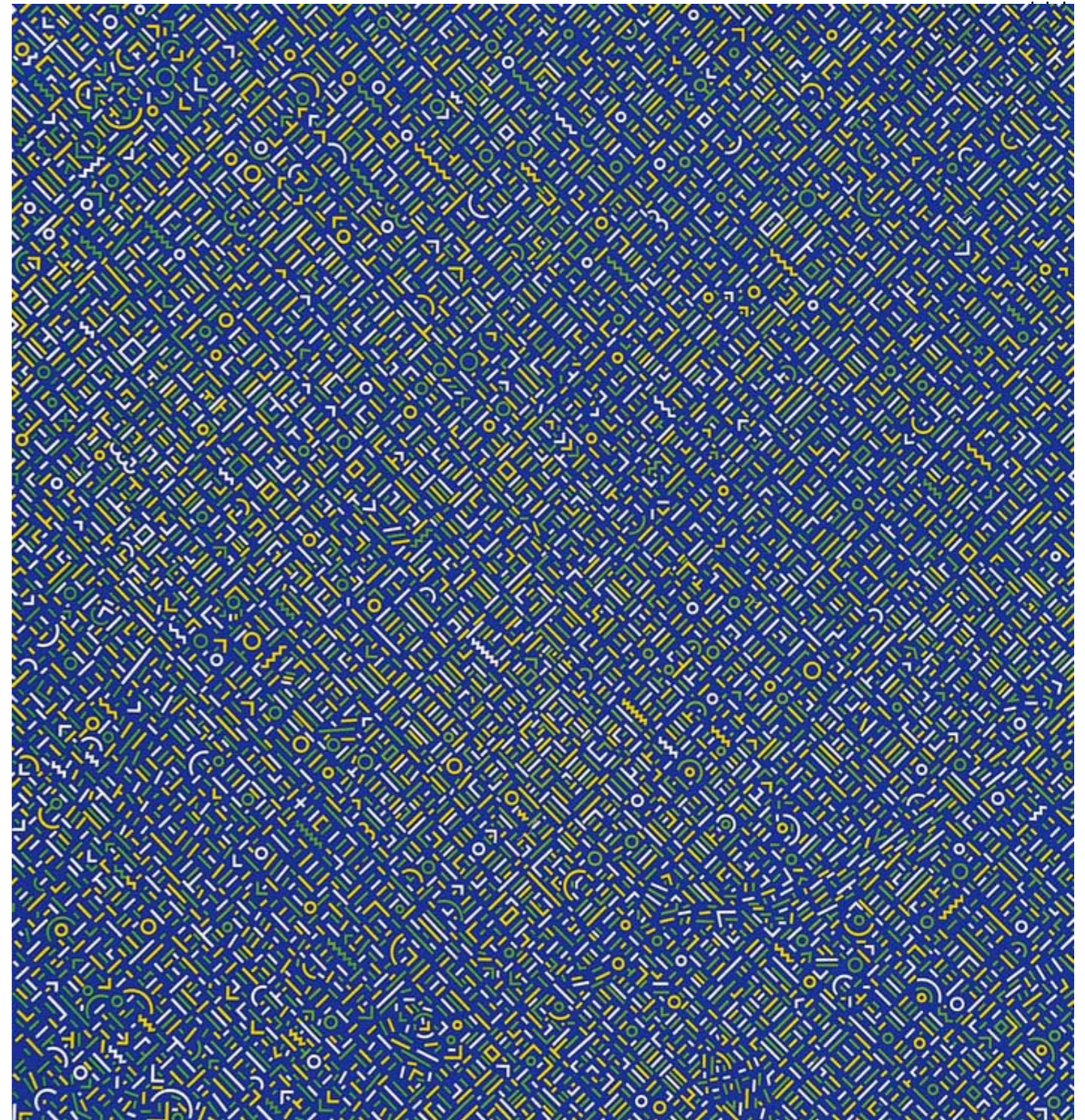


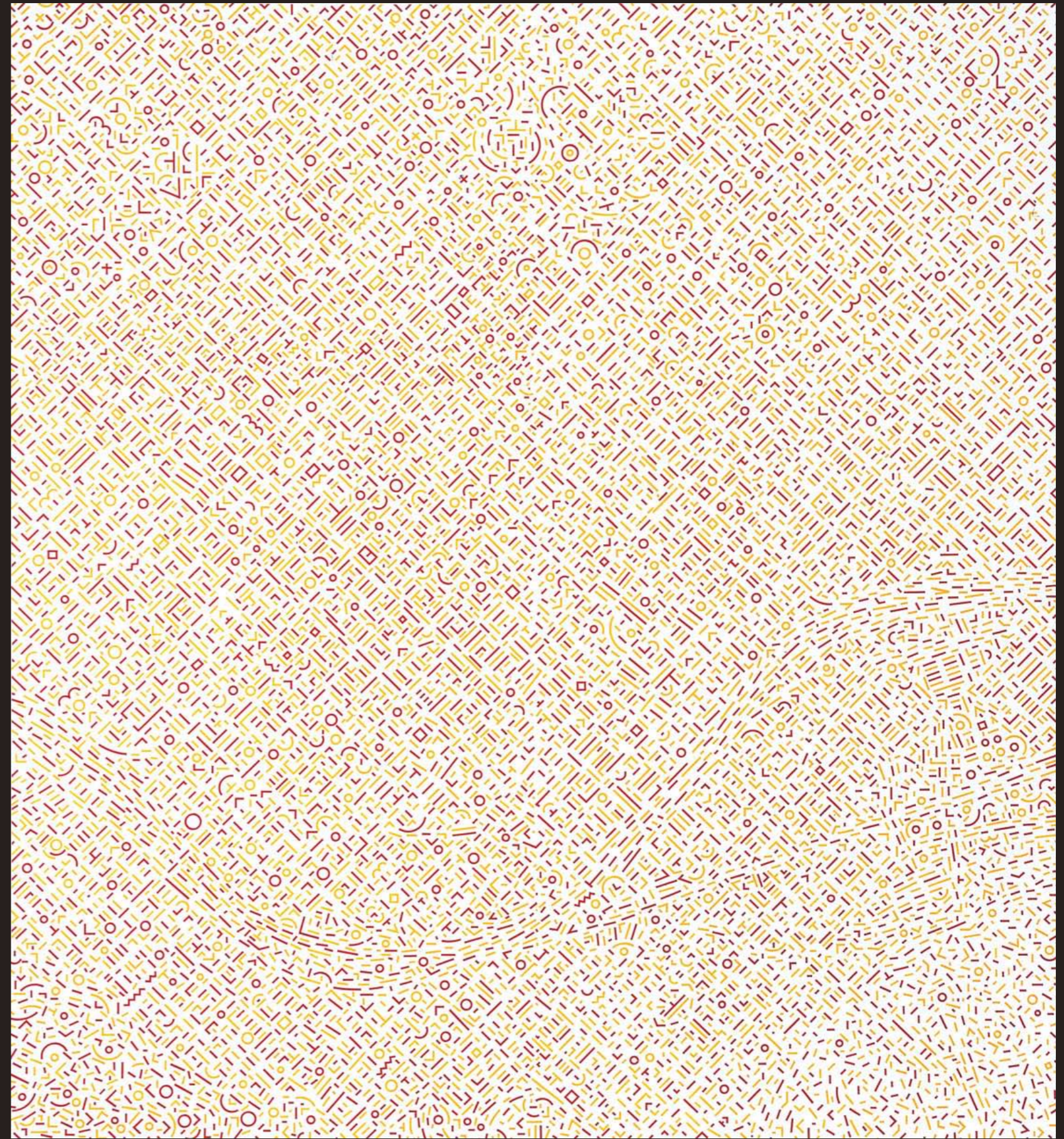


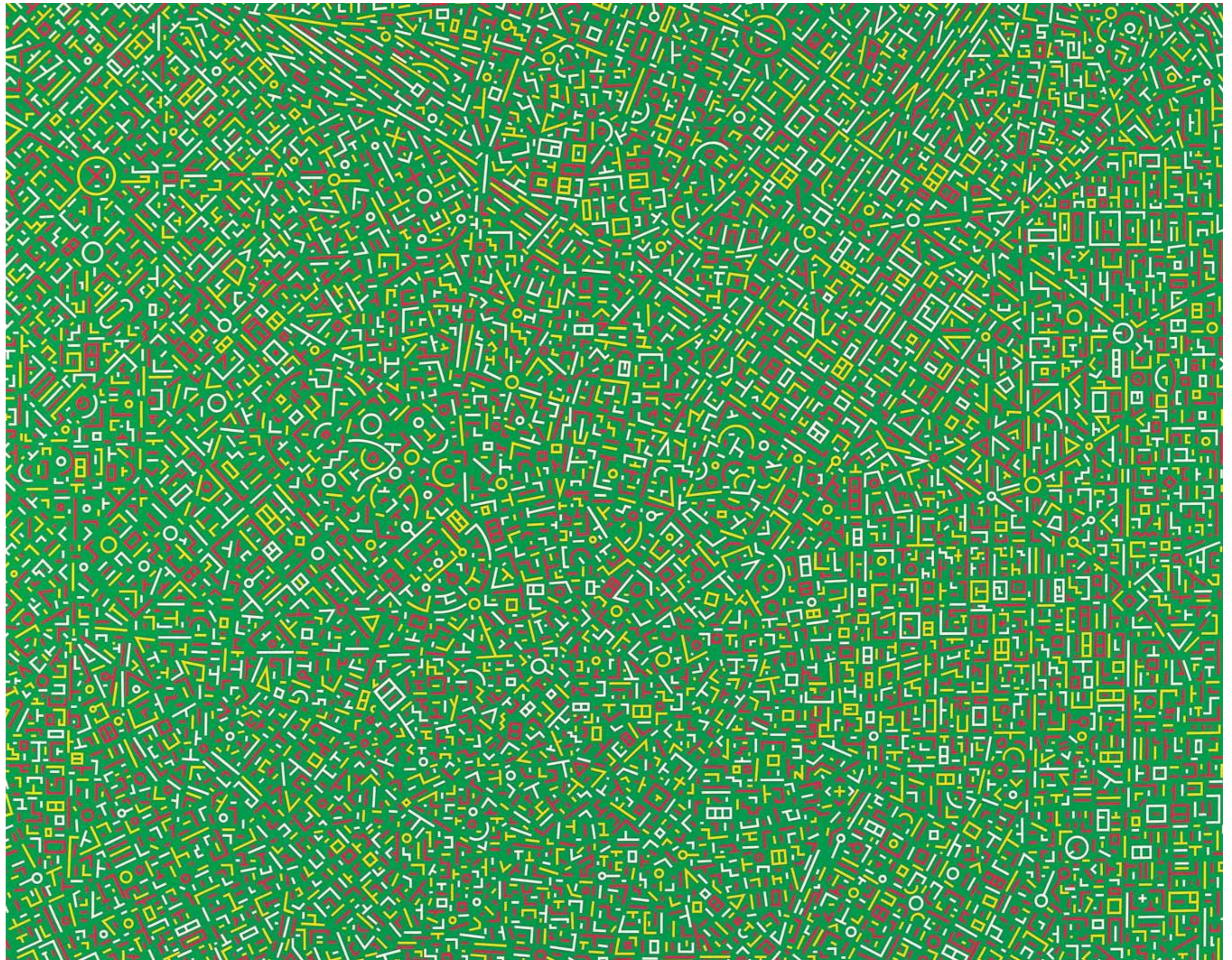
Hollywood



Santa Monica











Lu Xinjian  
 1977 Born in China  
 Currently lives and works in Shanghai, China

#### Education:

2006 MFA, Interactive Media and Environments at the Frank Mohr Institute, Hanze University, the Netherlands  
 2005 IM Postgraduate Department, Design Academy Eindhoven, the Netherlands  
 2000 Computer Graphic Design Department of Nanjing Arts Institute, China

#### Solo Exhibitions:

2014 City DNA IV, Hua Gallery, London, UK  
 2014 Lu Xinjian: Beautiful Encounters - Cities and Poems, 117 Contemporary Art Center, Ningbo, China  
 2014 Wired Space, Art Labor Shanghai, China  
 2013 Between Abstraction and Reality, Lu Xinjian's City DNA, ArtShare  
 2012 Invisible Poem II, F2 Gallery, Beijing, China  
 2012 Invisible Poem, Art Labor Shanghai, China  
 2011 City DNA III, Fabien Fryns Fine Art, Los Angeles, USA  
 2011 City DNA II, CIGE 2011, Beijing, China  
 2011 City DNA II, F2 Gallery, Beijing, China  
 2010 City DNA, Art Labor Shanghai, China

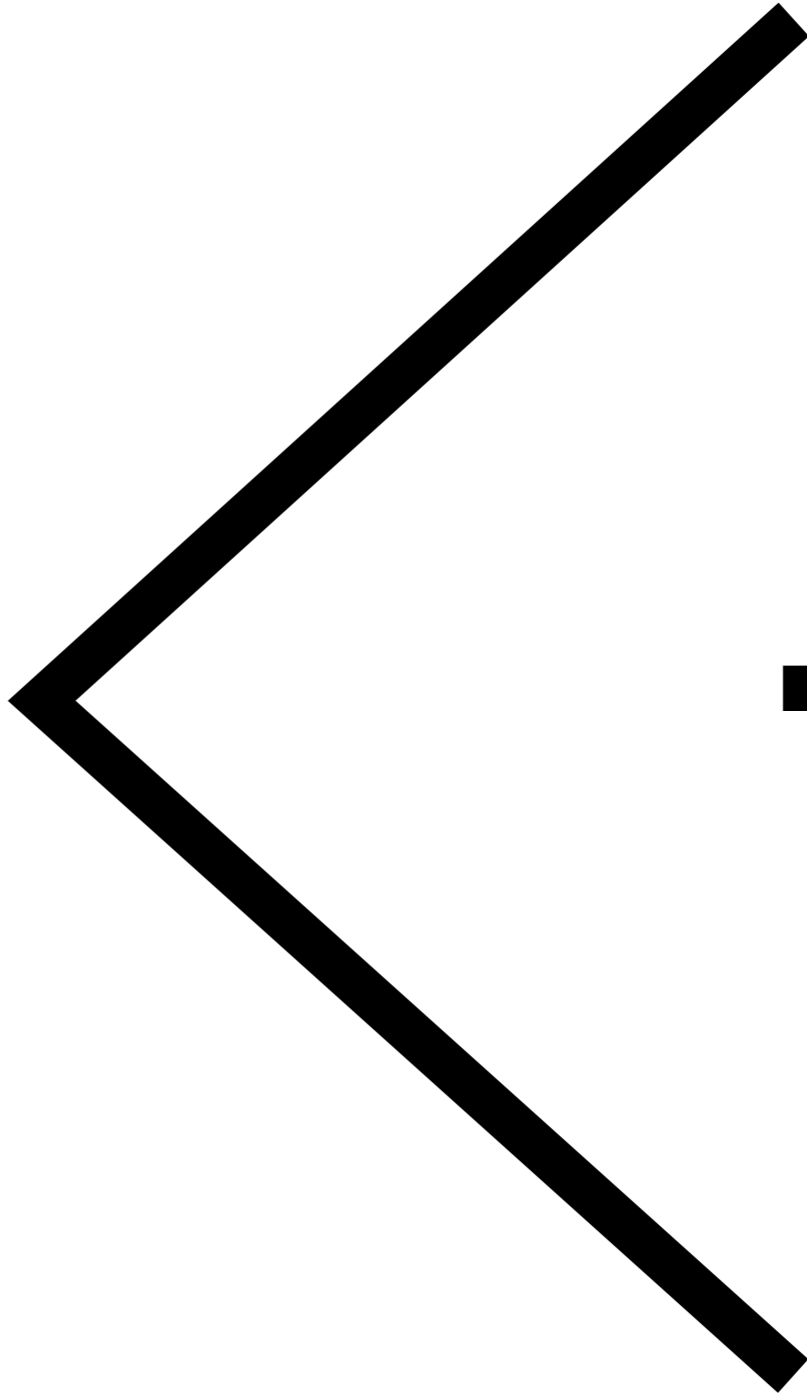
#### Group Exhibitions:

2014 London Art 14, Fabien Fryns Fine Art  
 2013 I Love Shanghai, Art Labor, Shanghai, China  
 2013 FILTER THE PUBLIC, SWFC, Shanghai, China  
 2013 Expressions Of My City, Lane Crawford, Shanghai  
 2012 Distance and Dimension, Fernando Bordoni & Lu Xinjian, Art Labor, Shanghai, China  
 2012 Re-animators, Meulensteen Gallery, NYC, USA  
 2012 The Year of Dragon, Chen Hangfeng & Lu Xinjian, Gallery Jones, Vancouver, Canada  
 2012 F2 Gallery, Art Stage, Singapore

2011 Art Labor Gallery, SH Contemporary 2011, Shanghai, China  
 2011 High 5, Art Labor Gallery, Shanghai, China  
 2010 F2 Gallery, Art Stage, Singapore  
 2010 Art Labor Gallery, SH Contemporary 2010, Shanghai, China  
 2010 Basic Forms by Stella Art Foundation, 2nd Moscow International Biennale for Young Art, Russia  
 2009 Resemblance & Difference, Daegue Art Center, Korea

#### Art Event:

2011 Absolut Blank, Absolut Vodka, Shanghai, China  
 2010 City DNA, Maison Pourcel by Jacques & Laurent Pourcel, Shanghai, China



Lu Xinjian  
City DNA IV  
03.06 - 20.10, 2014

Design: Lu Xinjian

Essay: Paul Gladston & Lynne Howarth-Gladston  
Suman Gupta

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