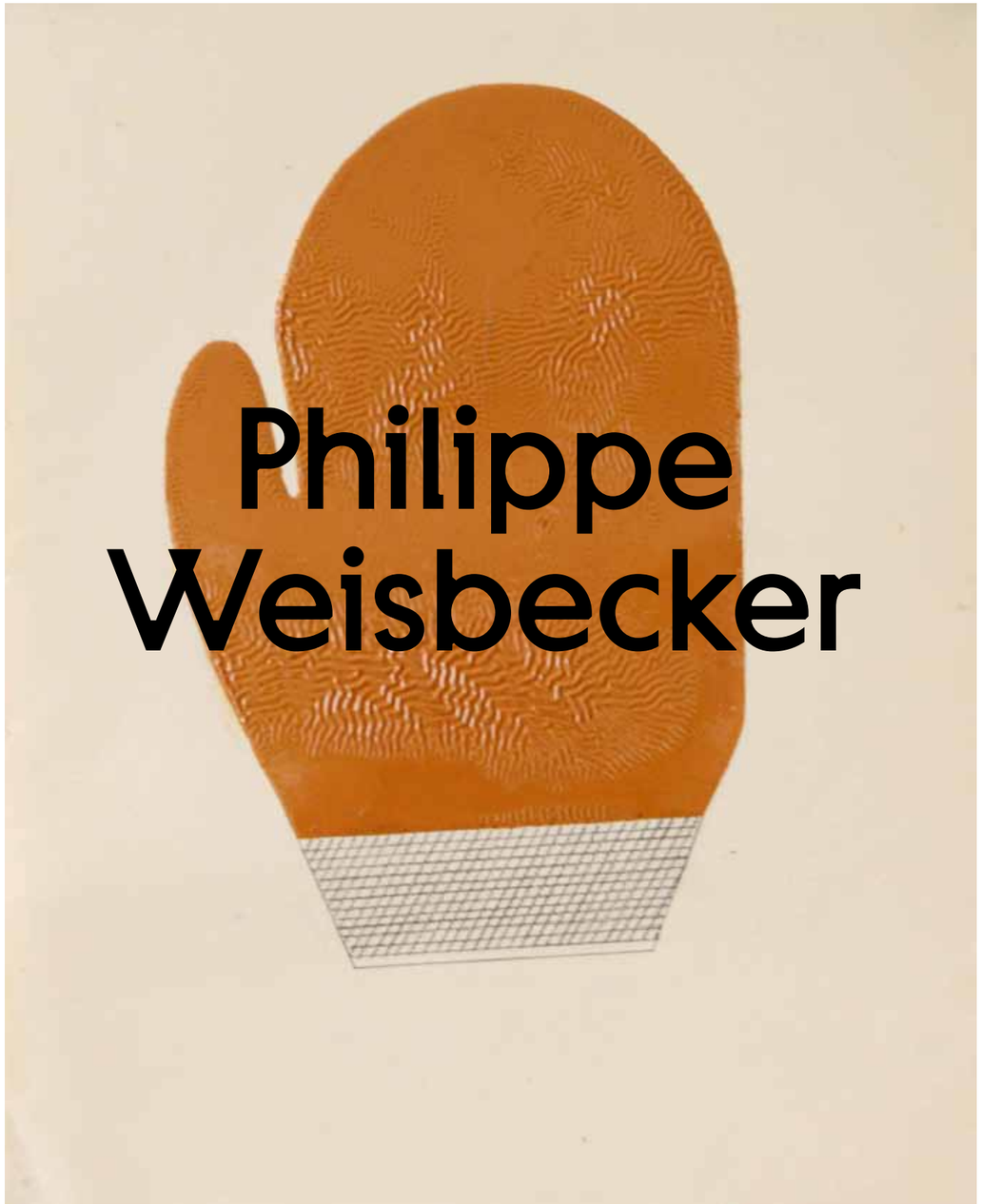
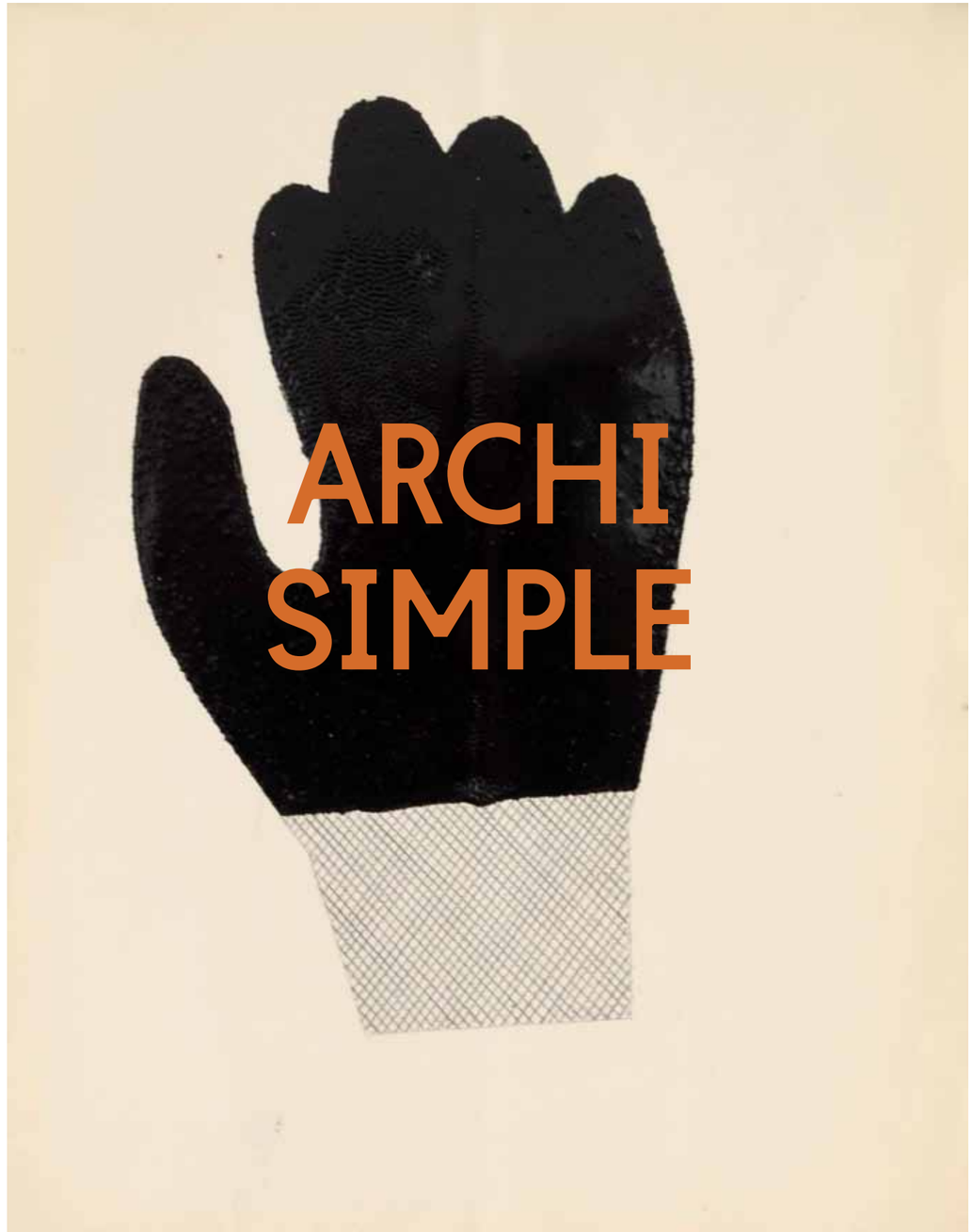
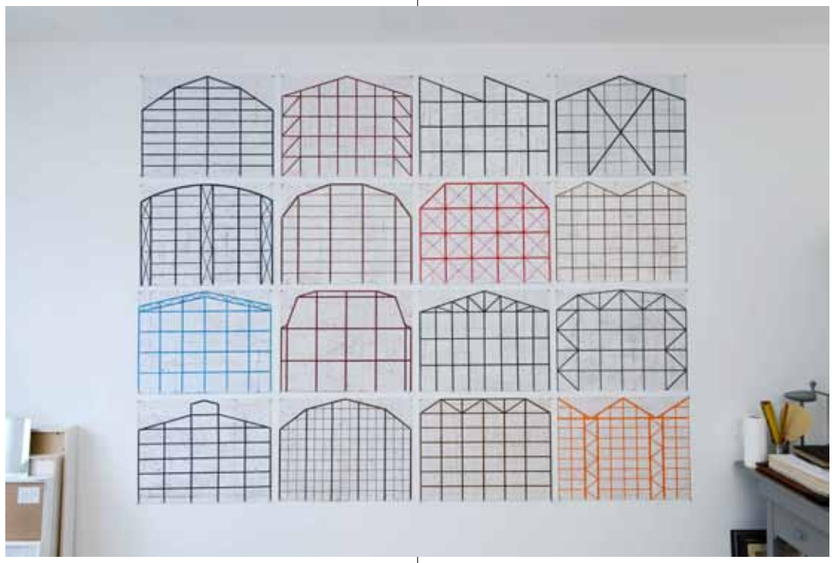




Text by XXX
Portrait by XXX

Take a moment to look at his pared-down illustrations and you won't be surprised to hear that Philippe Weisbecker is big in Japan. When the French artist translates three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional forms on paper, a process of Zen-like purification takes place. He was born in 1942 and spent the final quarter of the twentieth century in the US, where he drew covers for *The New Yorker* and contributed to the *New York Times* Op-Ed page. His evolution into an artist working on self-initiated projects has only been consolidated in the past decade, since his return to Europe. He rarely does editorial work these days. His Japanese clients have liberated his practice. 'They don't distinguish there between art and applied art, which is wonderful,' he tells Robert Shore.



His street front Paris studio, hidden away behind frosted glass, used to be an estate agent's. Weisbecker isn't very interested in the kind of elaborations that usually excite realtors, however. The furniture was made by Weisbecker himself, and is, as you would expect and as the French would say, *archi-simple*. 'I don't like design for design's sake,' he comments.

He has a computer – he says he likes the functionality of the design – but doesn't use it to draw with. Much of his work is executed directly on the pages of classic French *cahiers* or notebooks with lined paper. He likes the sense of time that the quality of the paper confers on the drawings.

The walls of the studio are packed with tall cabinets full of his work, vast amounts of it. His remarkable productivity is indexed to his no less extraordinary dedication to his task. 'I work every day. I'm very solitary.' He's very attached to his labours, yet he's far from obsessive in cataloguing their individual fruits. When he sells an original, he doesn't always keep a copy or a reproduction.

The evolution of Weisbecker's style and career in the last decade certainly qualify him as a late bloomer, but it's hardly the first fresh departure he's made in the course of his long and successful career. He remembers at an early stage of his career going to show his work to the Swiss photographer Peter Knapp at *Elle* in Paris. 'You'll never make it as an illustrator,' Knapp told him, despite the fact Weisbecker already had a burgeoning career in New York. He was upset by the response, but determined to succeed. 'No, I will!' was his response. 'My whole life has been made up of new starts,' he says now.

'Philip Guston only really discovered himself at the age of 60. Hokusai did his best work between the ages of 70 and 80. The opportunity for me hasn't passed then! What good fortune!'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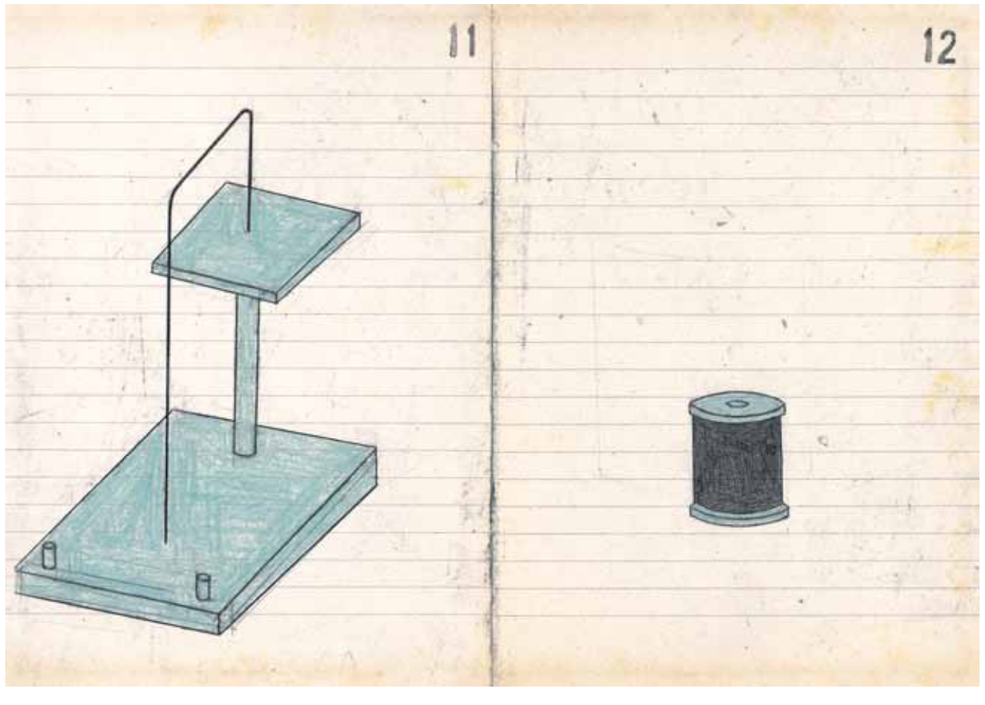
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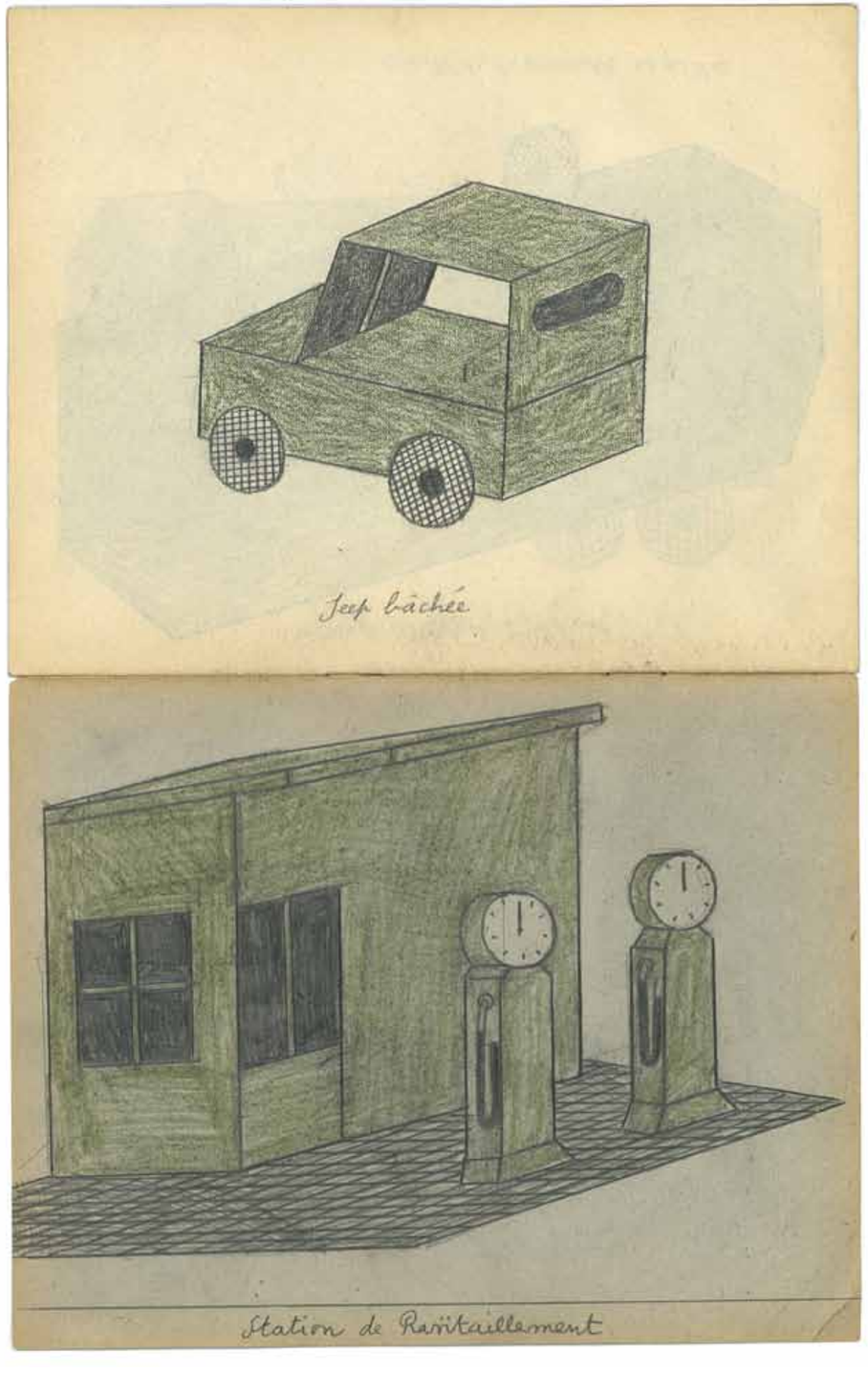
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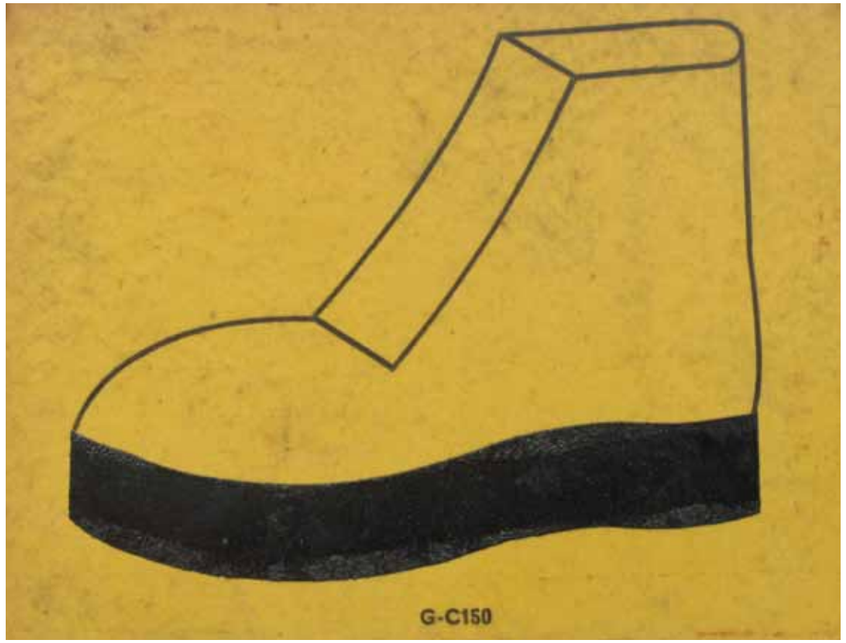


My whole life has been made up of new starts

1968 and All That

Weisbecker's German-sounding name is actually Alsatian, reflecting his paternal grandparents' birthplace. Thanks to his father's profession —he was a soldier in the French colonial army— he was born in Senegal in 1942, but went to school in Paris before enrolling in the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, where he studied graphic design. On graduation he dipped a toe into graphic design but then joined fashion magazine *Jardin des Modes* as assistant art director.

This was just prior to the student riots of Mai Soixante-Huit [May 1968]. The Parisian revolutionary fervour didn't really capture Weisbecker's imagination and he set out for New York. His intention at this stage was still very much to become an art director rather than an artist.

He arrived in the US without the necessary papers but managed to get himself a social security number (things were easier in those days) and some employment. Had he stayed in Paris and his artistic evolution had taken place there, he probably would have become involved in drawing *bandes dessinées*, one of the major expressive vehicles adopted by the Soixante-Huitards [the May 1968 activists]. There was a flourishing youth culture in New York, too, of course, and he was exposed to the work of Milton Glaser and Push Pin.

The first assignment he was offered in America was in Greenwich Village working as a designer on underground fashion magazine *Eye*, though when he let slip that he didn't have a visa, the position fell through. Fortunately, another New York company, which did architectural and display projects for department stores in France, came to his assistance, sponsoring his stay in the US and offering full-time employment.

But a chance encounter at a party led to him being commissioned to do a conceptual illustration for a banking magazine and to quitting his job and devoting himself full time to his drawing work. 'My work really caught on,' Weisbecker told Steven Heller in an in-depth interview published in *Print* magazine in early 1987. 'But not in the way I was hoping.'

The problem had to do with style and sweat. 'I had the feeling that giving clients their money's worth meant putting a great amount of physical effort into a drawing. It was a guilt feeling that held sway over me for many years.' The effort evident in his work now is more conceptual than physical; more to do with a way of seeing than a means of doing.

He was about to undergo his first significant evolution as an illustrator, thanks to a friend at *Esquire* magazine who recommended him to do a drawing for an underground sex tabloid entitled—with becoming frankness—*Screw*. The magazine wanted make-you-think illustrations, rather than explicit, let's-get-right-down-to-it photographs, for its cover. Weisbecker responded with a simple pen-and-ink drawing of a woman's twisted torso turning into a man and making love to itself. It was clever and not a little surreal. Further *Screw* cover commissions followed: Weisbecker drew pictures of chairs making love, seemingly inspired by the furniture in his West Village apartment.

The (R)evolution Will Be Illustrated

'I was aware of style, but I wanted my style to disappear behind the image. Mine was ultimately an intellectual pursuit. The best of me wasn't to come out until much later, when I could draw unselfconsciously without being tied to the idea.'

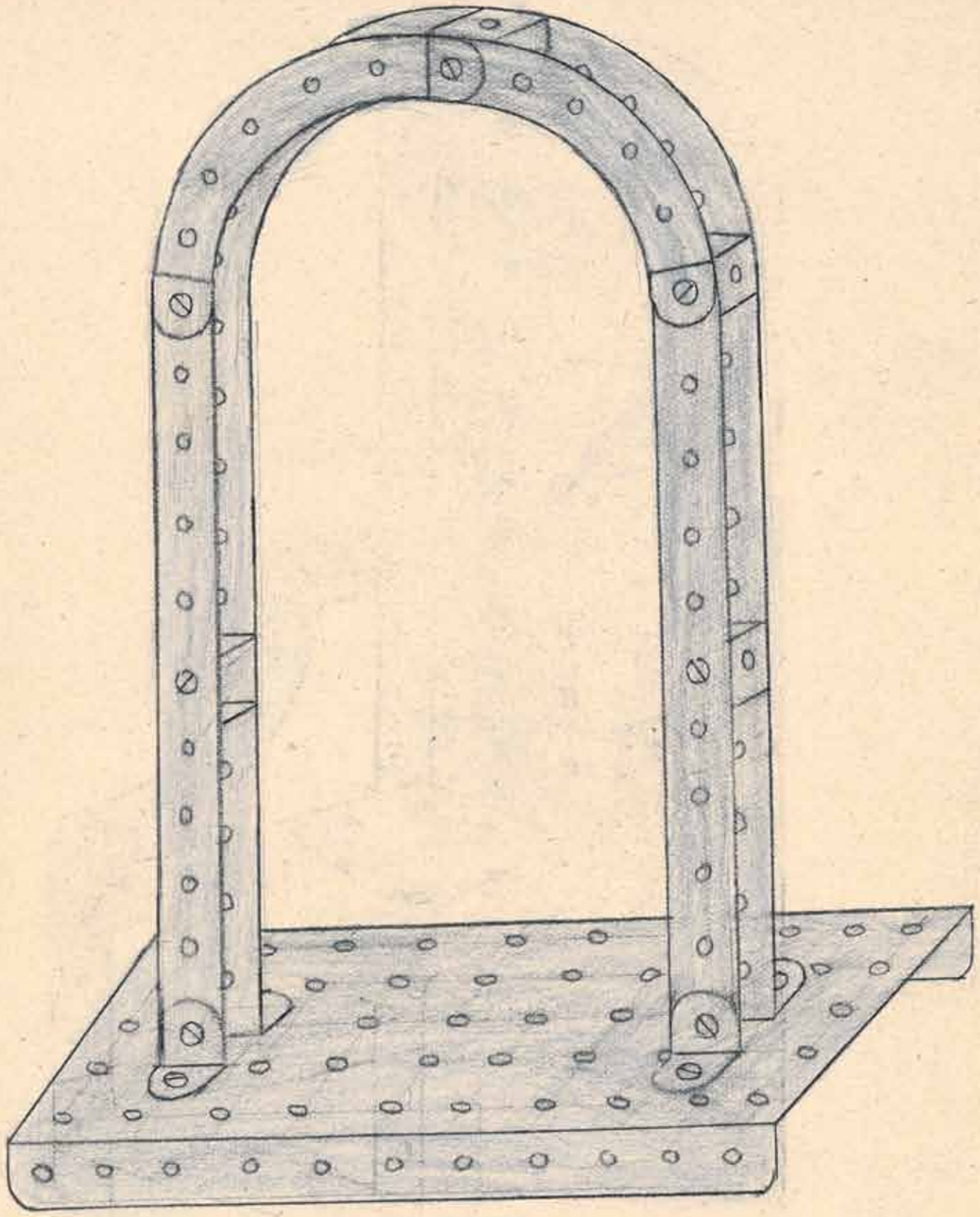
Around the time of his fortieth birthday, Weisbecker suffered an artistic crisis. He had been painting and sculpting in his spare time while making a living as an editorial illustrator, and decided to exile himself to the South of France to give himself space to develop his true voice. 'That's when I really discovered my style,' he says today.

'I decided to draw what was around me and, more important, I decided that everything I did was going to fit on one single sheet of paper, regardless of size – therefore I wouldn't have any sense of proportion or scale in the drawing. I just wanted to record whatever there was in my vision area, in any way possible,' he told Steven Heller shortly afterwards.

'I was amazed that the objects I drew didn't have to conform exactly to reality as long as they could be somehow identified. That's when I realized what drawing is for me. It's not reproducing what I see, but what I can record. And whatever the manner, realistic or abstract, doesn't matter, because it's merely an image. Nobody sees what I see anyway, they just see the image I make.'

It was a crucial breakthrough. When he got back to New York afterwards, he was rewarded with a biweekly spot on the back page of the *Village Voice*, where he offered visual reports on city life.

'I'm a reporter, not a creator,' he says today.



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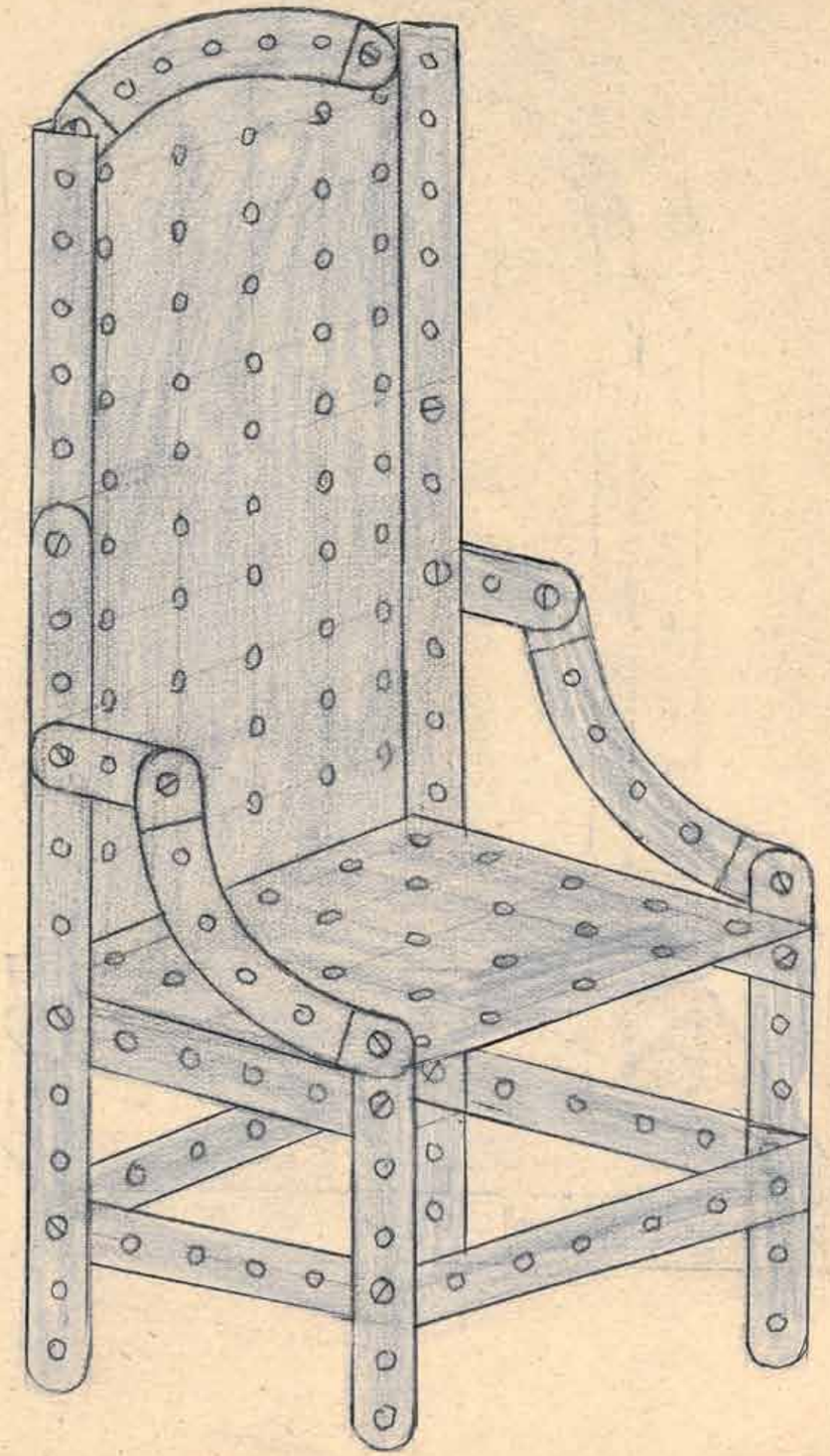

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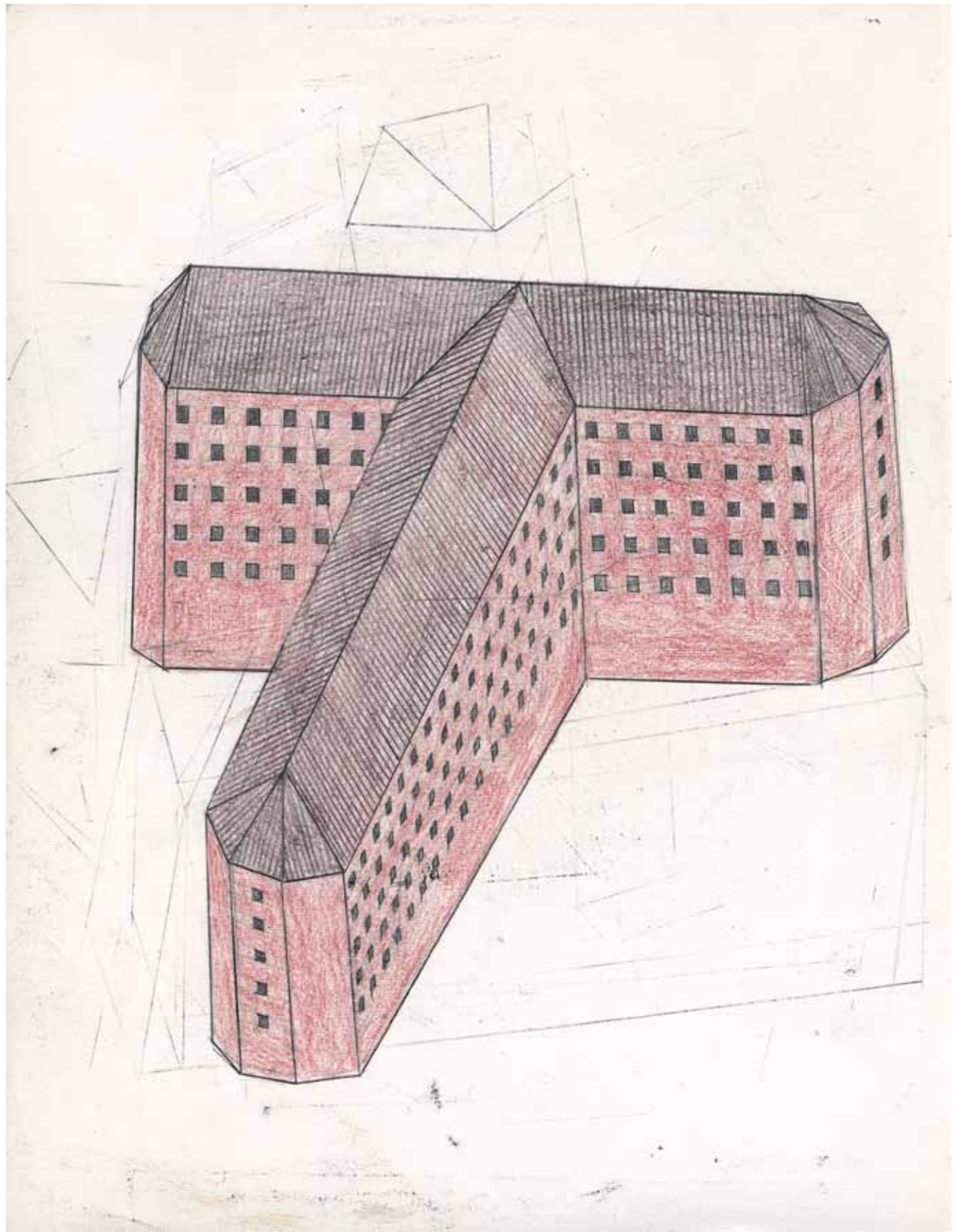

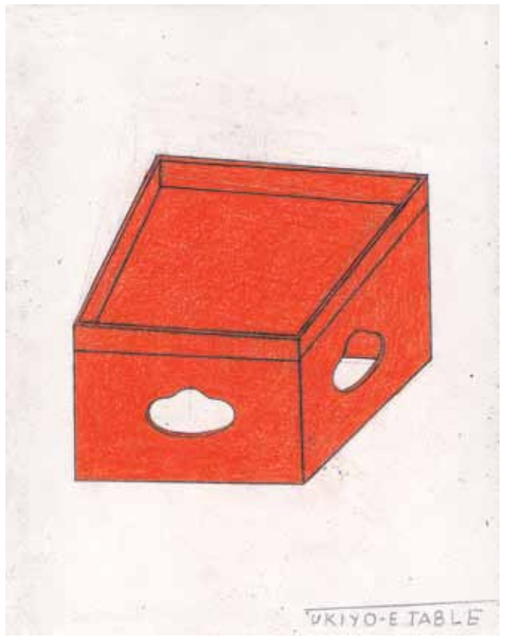
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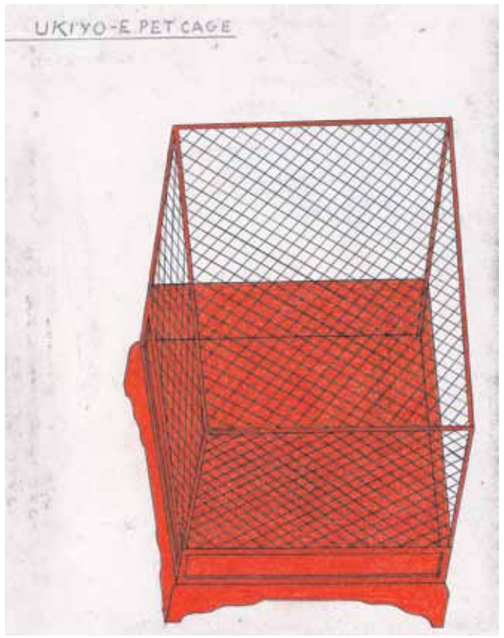
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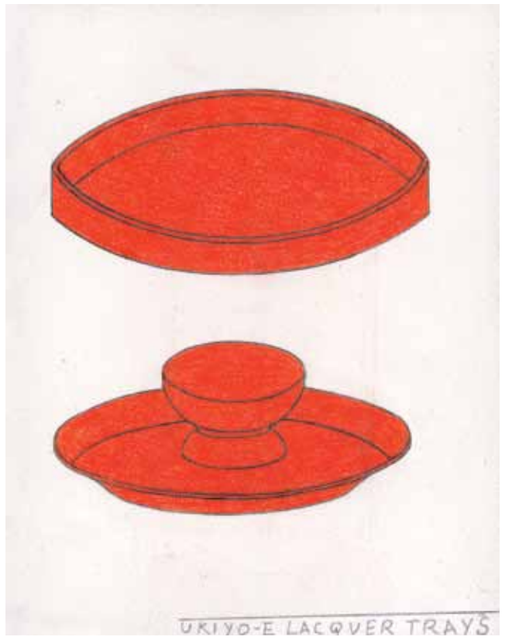
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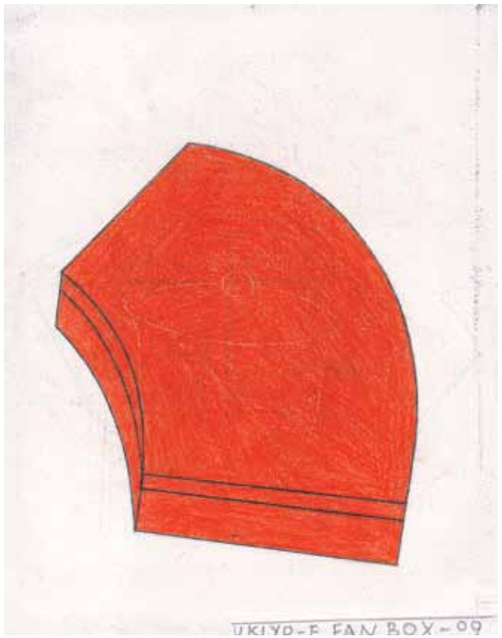
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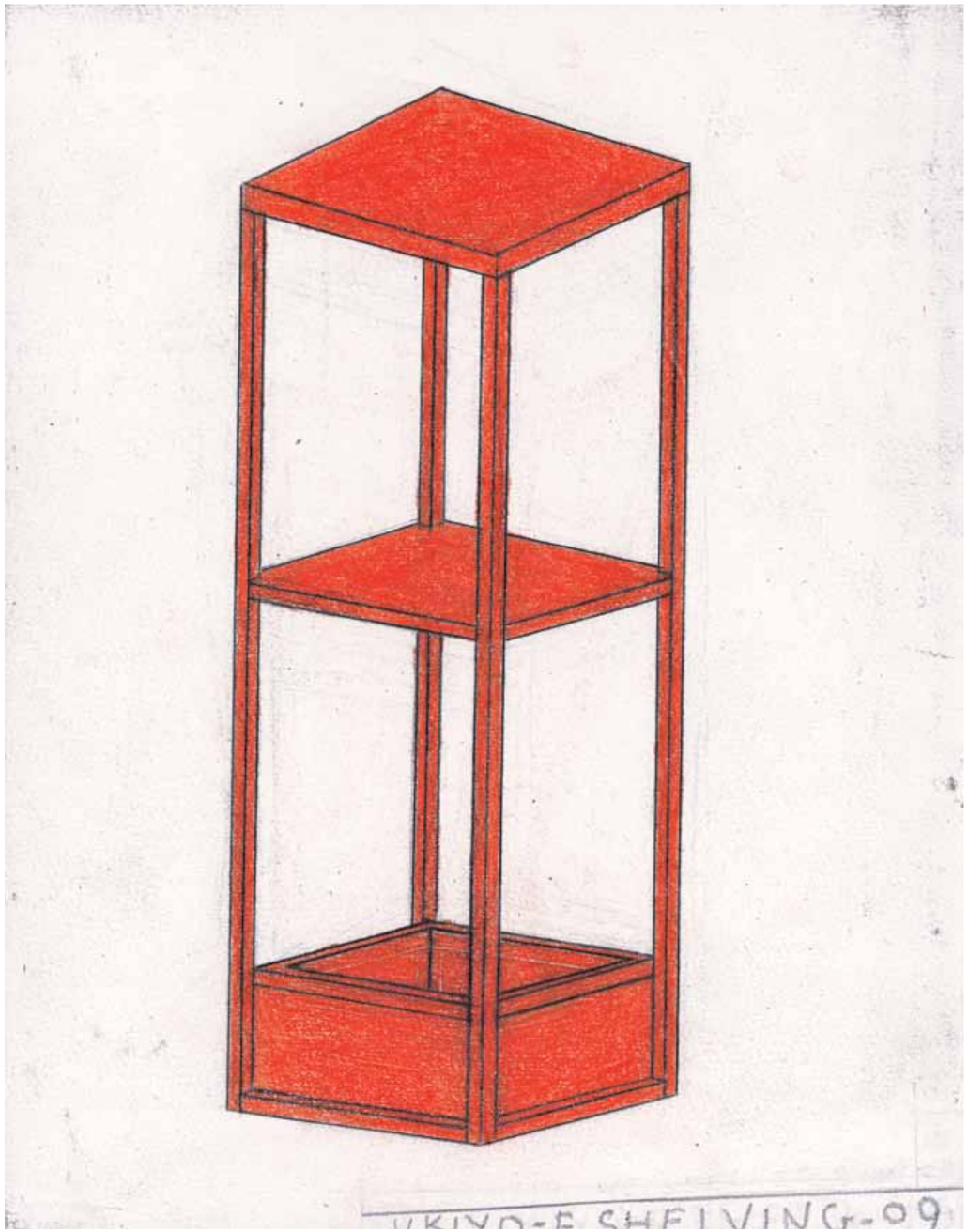

The best of me wasn't to come out until much later, when I could draw unselfconsciously without being tied to the idea

Object Love

Throughout his career, Weisbecker has nurtured a very particular and poignant relationship to inanimate objects. Those *Screw* covers featuring his chairs engaged in coitus were just the beginning. As one commentator has noted: 'His relationship with design is an interesting one – drawing is a 'messy' business whereas design is the business of tidying things and his work is somehow in the middle ground.' He has made extensive architectural studies – there's a fine book of drawings of greenhouses, for instance. Then there are the innumerable drawings of tools. 'When I go to a new town,' he says today, 'I don't go to the art museum, I go to the hardware store.' Tools don't change very much, and it's the timeless, essential quality of their design that appeals to him.

'The objects I like to draw now are increasingly simple ones. They invite me to envisage a universe of ever more refined minimalism, a universe where the line is itself an object.'

The way he translates 3D objects into 2D forms is very personal and utterly unmistakable. 'I like to destroy perspective because I like to flatten things,' he explains of his particular brand of minimalism. 'I use paper which is flat, so I thinking drawing things flat is better.' He likens the surface of the paper to a wall, not a window.

'Every time I start on a new drawing, I can't help but flatten the selected object on its support. I like the way that the object thus passes from three to two dimensions, the dimensions of the support. The object no longer has any protruding angles or sides to allow my mind to apprehend or examine it. In the space between its carapace which offers itself to the view and its support from which it is now indissociable resides all its mystery.'

He mentions various influences—Art Brut, Sol LeWitt—and says he doesn't mind if you can spot them in his work. 'In France, they worry about influences. In America, they don't,' he says. 'There, if you can use it, fine.' His attitude has clearly been shaped by his lengthy US sojourn. Engaging directly with the work of others has always provided him with the way forward, artistically speaking. And yet, looking at his work today, it's hard to think that it could have been created by anyone other than Philippe Weisbecker.