

The simple beauty of thin black lines and blurry white surfaces

Sarah Teasley / Royal College of Art

Young Tokyo design firms are rarely known for their adherence to tradition. In Japan, it may remain possible to find enchantment in the unexpected discovery of small beauty within the quotidian—soft, brilliantly emerald moss between the crevices of flagstones outside a door, the wood grain of a doorpost, or the surprisingly perfect weight in the hand of a teacup passed to a friend on an afternoon visit. But contemporary design as presented in the showrooms of Tokyo's Aoyama design district or in the pages of *AXIS* often refers to the high-gloss sheen of Naoto Fukasawa's Plus/Minus Zero resins, MUJI's matte beige minimalism, or the high-tech precision of mobile phone handsets or automotive design. Meanwhile, images of Japanese packaging and graphic design often elide these areas with the bright pop visuals common to television game shows, J-pop promotional graphics and even anime, and time spent in Tokyo's design community, particularly during the creative celebration that is Tokyo Designers Week, reveals a closely-knit community who combine perfectionist long hours with the ability to throw a very good party—a skill exercised frequently, often until early morning amongst a truly international group of friends.

Given their position within both the next generation of top-flight international design firms and the Tokyo design community, nendo and the firm's founder Oki Sato are at first glance unlikely candidates for interpretation through the often-hoary frame of Japanese tradition. If anything, nendo are most akin to architects like SANAA, Toyo Ito and Sou Fujimoto who operate from a base in Tokyo, but within the global economy for spatial innovation. Nendo's work is unapologetically of today, constructed with a curiosity about emerging technologies and materials, crafted within a softly minimal aesthetic, and suited for modern metropolitan life in the small spaces found as often in New York, Shanghai and London as in Tokyo. And, as one soon learns through correspondence with them, Sato and his team seem to float free of time zones in a space located somewhere between Milan, London and Japan but always in daytime.

Invited for lunch with nendo in Tokyo several years ago, then, it was a useful surprise to learn that Sato had booked not a table in a sleek interior specializing in foam and fusion for the Tokyo design and fashion elite, but a small room in a ryotei, an older form of sophisticated dining that offers multi-course small dish kaiseki meals and sake as an accompaniment to conversation amidst the quiet grandeur of sukiya architecture, now most often (or so popular understanding would have it) to politicians and leaders of industry. Our lunch lasted several hours, punctuated by the arrivals of our elegant server, and by moments of silence as we admired the food, the ceramics and lacquerware, the materials used for the room's surfaces and the enclosed pocket garden we could just see through sliding paper shoji. We finished with powdered green tea and a modest discussion of the teabowls in which it was presented, then re-emerged into the concrete, overhead cables and exhaust fumes of contemporary life.

Lunch that day was a respite from the world, but it was only much later, when viewing the pieces collected for this show, that the true import of Sato's choice of venues became clear. Nendo's work is unapologetically of today, yes, but there is something in Sato and his team's approach to creating that work—the quietly agile intellect, subtle humour, unspoken understanding of materials and function, thoughtful attention to context and above all the small beauty of the objects and spaces created—that do recall, intentionally or otherwise, approaches to beauty in daily life valued within earlier Japanese aesthetic practices. It would be misleading to categorize nendo as a 'Japanese design firm', or their work as 'Japanese design': Nendo is a global design firm, and its work is design, pure and simple. But like the aesthetics valued in tea culture, it is what Sato calls 'the small " ! " moments hidden in our everyday' that give

nendo's work its specificity, its compelling nature, and its strength.

Born in Toronto in 1977, Sato Oki studied architecture at Waseda University in Tokyo, receiving his MA in 2002. Rather than joining an existing architectural practice, Sato chose to found a new firm, and to specialize in the objects and spaces with which we interact most intimately: interiors, products and furniture. (Nendo's early work did include several houses, including the Drawer House (2003), recipient of SD Review and Good Design Award prizes for its innovative approach to storage within a limited floorplan, and the Book House (2005), a clever reinterpretation of the bookshelves that most commonly line interior walls as the exterior, providing privacy while inviting visitors into the home). Nendo soon entered the market for new design, exhibiting work at Tokyo Designers Week and the Milano Salone from 2003.

From its inception, the firm has consistently gained accolades for its work; perhaps not surprisingly, museum and gallery exhibitions and commissions have followed. Amongst major awards, furnishings like Yuki (2006), a modular screen composed of snowflake-shaped blocks designed for Cappellini, have received a Red Dot Award for their combination of technical ingenuity, quiet wit and implicit practicality; in 2009, *Wallpaper** awarded nendo Designer of the Year for the firm's general output. In 2007, curator Yuko Hasegawa included a prototype of Kazadokei (2008), a bone-thin, two metre-tall analog clock whose height sweeping hands link time-telling, our own spatial experience, and the physical sense of time passing cast by windmills in *Space for Your Future*, an exhibition exploring radical re-orientations of quotidian space at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. Further recognition came in 2008, after Museum of Modern Art design curator Paola Antonelli selected nendo's N702i mobile phone handset for NTT DoCoMo for the influential *Design and the Elastic Mind* exhibition, and in 2009, with the ghost stories 2nd chapter installation at the Museum of Art and Design in New York. Museums with nendo work in the permanent collection include MoMA, the Musée des arts decoratifs, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and the Holon Museum of Design.

In 2006, Sato was named one of *Newsweek's* 'Top 100 Respected Japanese'; nendo itself made *Newsweek's* 2007 list of 'Top 100 Small Global Companies'. As inclusion in these list suggest, Sato and the nendo team are known for their work ethic and design philosophy. A visit to nendo's office in a quiet Meguro backstreet proves this well. Completed in 2007, one floor in a conventional small office building is divided entirely by wave-like light pine walls, reaching at their highest point to the waist, into tranches for smaller spaces for separate functions or working teams. Flooded with diffused light, the anti-hierarchically divided spaces both offer privacy and encourage teamwork, and create an oddly playful yet functional working environment. The office's physical location in an unassuming valley of anonymous buildings between the twin hubs of Aoyama, home to Tokyo's own *Idée* as well as the Milanese, and Naka-Meguro, Tokyo's centre for young homegrown design and craft, well reflects nendo's own position, operating simultaneously within Japan and on the international stage—indeed, nendo has operated its Milan office since 2005. Sato's unassuming stance, international success and ethos of quiet hard work have made him a role model amongst a younger generation of Tokyo-based designers, and brought international respect from his peers. And it enables collaborations with artisanal manufacturers such as Maruni Wood Industry, with whom nendo created the whippet-thin, impossibly beautiful Cord Chair (2009).

The subtitle of the 2008 *Space for Your Future* exhibition, 'Recombining the DNA of Art and Design' aptly describes nendo's production. In Europe and North America, they are perhaps best known for softly elegant, technically playful furnishings like the Cabbage Chair (2008), a commission for the Issey Miyake-curated XX1st Century Man exhibition at Tokyo's 21_21 Design Sight, or the Ribbon Stool for Cappellini (2007), a sinuously structural stool also

recognized with a Red Dot Award. Both the 'blurry white' pieces from nendo's recent work and the 'thin black' pieces newly commissioned for the exhibition emerge from this side of nendo's production. Premiered at Milan or in solo exhibitions, this type of work comfortably marks nendo as a quickly-rising presence in the elite world of contemporary design populated by figures such as Ron Arad, Marc Newson and Thomas Heatherwick. Abstract and formally experimental without forsaking function, this work reinterprets mundane objects for aesthetic and intellectual exploration and pleasure; it is intuitively practical, but retains the delight that comes from pushing aesthetic boundaries. It is 'zokei', the Japanese word that literally means 'creating form', and is used to describe the transformation of the creative impulse into concrete form that is 'art and design'. Nendo's work is pure design, often formally similar to the work of artist-designers like Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt who too celebrated formal exploration unbounded by disciplinary anxieties and experimented with demarcating volume in space, but fundamentally the obverse of these predecessors.

Indeed, nendo have precedents too in the industrial design offices of the mid-twentieth century—to put it simply, they are multidisciplinary in the sense of the classical commercial design practice. Like Tokyo's own Sori Yanagi or New York's Raymond Loewy, known for his proclamation 'from lipstick to locomotives', nendo work catholically across a range of areas, producing also shop interiors for luxury brands, museum installations, signage systems, chewing gum packaging and electronic air fresheners, as well as café and fitness gym interiors along the way. Similar to the offices of Tokyo designers a generation ahead—Tokujin Yoshioka, Taku Sato, Kenya Hara—nendo work with surface as well as volume, the visual as well as the tactile, applying their wit, attention to materials and aesthetic sensibility without prejudice. Clients include Cappellini and Moroso but also Issey Miyake and Kenzo; Swarovski, Cartier and Lexus as well as Sony, NTT DoCoMo and the Chichu Art Museum. Like Fukasawa, another versatile Tokyo-based designer with clients in Japan and Milan, nendo's production crosses industrial and furniture, the limited edition and the mass-produced, and embeds a sly wit in eminently practical objects—here Fukasawa's Solebag and nendo's Brand-Destroyer (2006), a Mexican wrestling mask for luxury handbags, come to mind.

Nendo pairs these gentle punctures in the fabric of daily life with small-but-big creativity. Designs such as the Cabbage Chair appear to stem effortlessly from an idea so simple and obvious that ordinarily, no one would notice it. Produced as a solution for reusing the paper necessary to create Miyake's famed Pleats Please collection, the Cabbage Chair offers such a creative solution to an issue of sustainability. But its novel approach to seating is also sheer simple intellectual pleasure: sheets of paper are simply sliced and split open to create a seat, backrest and armrests. Such recent icons as Yoshioka's Honeycomb Chair and the cardboard chairs of Frank Gehry and Ron Arad too explore the structural strength and springiness of multiple sheets of paper. And crafts in Japan long considered paper fair game for everyday goods from raincoats and dishware to windows. Like these earlier experiments in paper, the Cabbage Chair is thoughtfully engages the properties of materials and production methods, and can be seen in MoMA's permanent collection as an exemplar of such. But by activating an erstwhile waste material, it aligns innovation with environmental responsibility, demonstrating how the two need not be mutually exclusive.

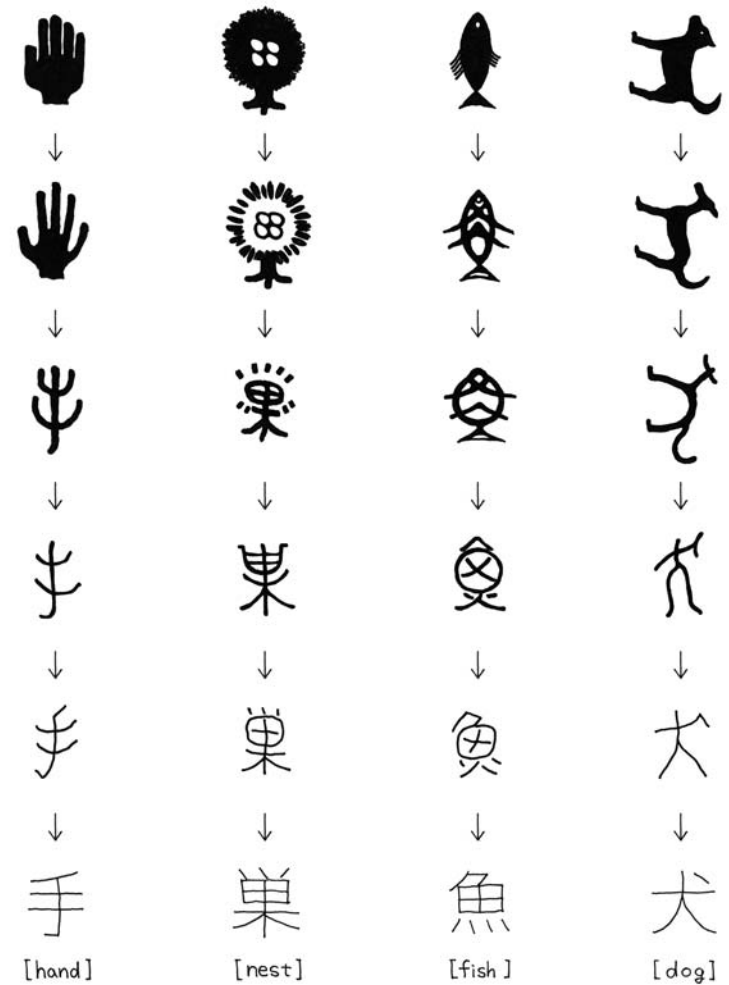
As the Cabbage Chair suggests, nendo's practice embraces technological developments within a more complex inquiry into form, thought and material. The firm's experiments with rapid manufacturing coincided with curiosity about the molecular structure of materials made visible through electronic microscopes, resulting in the Diamond Chair, a sintered, three-dimensional re-materialization of the structure of a diamond crystal (and nod to the Harry Bertoia classic) produced for Lexus' display at the 2008 Milan Salone. Blown-

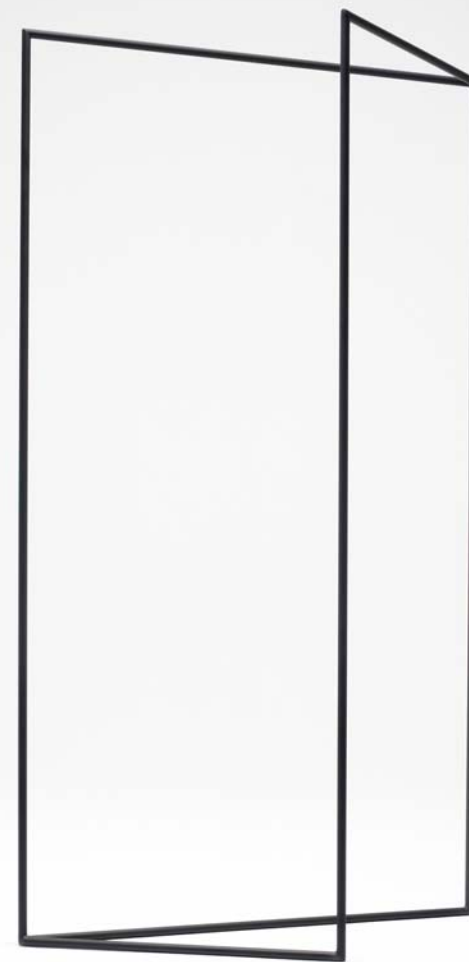
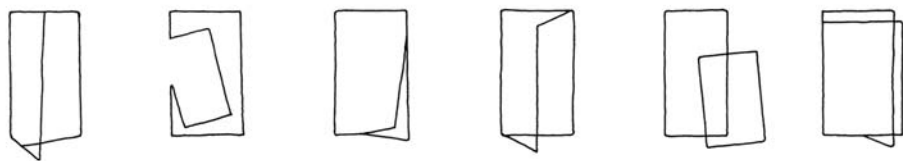
Fabric (2009), a lighting fixture created for the Tokyo Fiber '09 Senseware show, explores the material properties of Smash, a new thermo-plastic synthetic fibre. Blowing warm air into the fixtures shapes each light into a unique form, a process and result reminiscent of chochin paper lanterns and Akari, Isamu Noguchi's haunting reinterpretation of these a half-century ago, but also of glassware and biomorphic organisms.

While products like Blown-Fabric and the earlier Hanabi (2006), a shape-memory alloy lamp whose 'petals' open when the light is switched on, take advantage of new materials and technologies, the concern for innovative uses of technology and materials is hardly limited to the new. Nendo's work stands out amongst contemporary furniture design for its respect of craft and the beauty and aptitude of materials used. Projects like the deceptively minimalist Cord Chair (2009) challenge master artisans to bend the materials' will to create nendo's desired forms, not through unnatural transformation or the application of cutting-edge technology, but by drawing on the artisans' intimate knowledge of the materials' limits—how finely they might be milled, and how, precisely, to accomplish this quiet feat. Part of a broader trend within contemporary design in Japan to partner with artisanal local industries, nendo's collaborations with manufacturers like Maruni reconfigure older technologies and knowledge for use in contemporary situations, and circulation within a global economy.

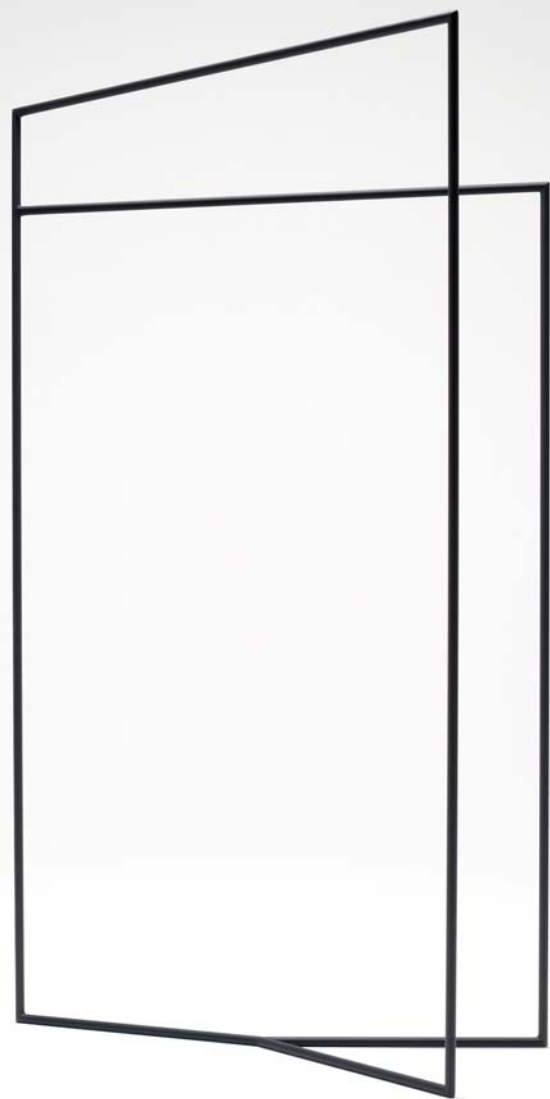
The two sets of work presented in this exhibition—the blurry white surfaces and thin black lines—represent recent and further developments in nendo's spatial, aesthetic and technical explorations. Blurry white surfaces assembles key pieces from nendo's recent work. In addition to sharing the eponymous physical characteristics, these pieces combine wit and quiet, functional beauty to subtly destabilize the familiar spaces of home. Like the Fadeout-Chair (2009), whose wooden legs transform into clear Perspex, creating the illusion of floating, these pieces query the relationship of designer and user to the weight, volume and other material properties of objects, and create a link between technical ingenuity, craft, and the unexpected. These properties and investigations are only amplified in the new work. In these pieces, constructed as though drawn with the thin black lines of the title to represent three dimensions against a white sheet of paper, the familiar forms of objects are only suggested by lines, and it is up to us to complete the image, visually and through use, as we sit, lean, or hang our jacket on them. Formally reminiscent of Minimalism or, more recently, the New York artist and designer Ron Gilad's reinterpretations of canonical modernist questions as coffee tables, conceptually these works are perhaps closer to architect Peter Eisenman's spatial investigations as line drawings: they are demarcations of space, taking advantage of our unconscious desire to complete forms half-seen to suggest a chair or a table, paradoxically denying material presence through the material. Clothing racks could be mistaken for Minimalist objets, only to be transformed into a useful object; cubes float within cubes, only to become tables and mirrors through physical contact, and our knowledge that, unlike sculpture, it is not transgressive but expected to do so. Chairs formed as though scribbled block out chairlike space, momentarily hiding the feats of engineering and translation between drawing and computer-aided manufacturing that afforded their appearance. This is the combination of respect for craft and collaboration, concern for material properties, technical curiosity, quiet beauty, and above all desire to create ruptures in the fabric of the ordinary—to find the 'small "!" moments', that make nendo's work so compelling, and quietly magical in its own right.

'Outlines' were the theme of this collection. Slight black lines like the traces of sketches drawn in the air made transparent surfaces and volumes appear, which we assigned practical functions. They are expressions of condensed meaning, similar to Japanese calligraphy, with its simplification of images of plants and animals into outline alone. The designs gently break the relationship of before and behind, and traverse at times the space between two and three dimensions. Multi-faceted and constantly morphing, they move alternately between the becoming and collapse of form.

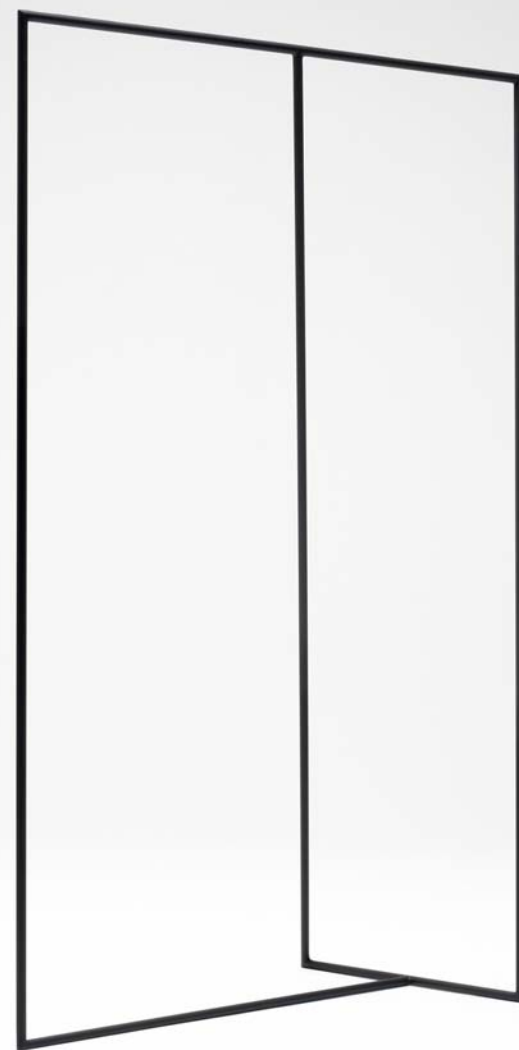




7200mm-hanger rack, Steel, W85×D35×H150cm



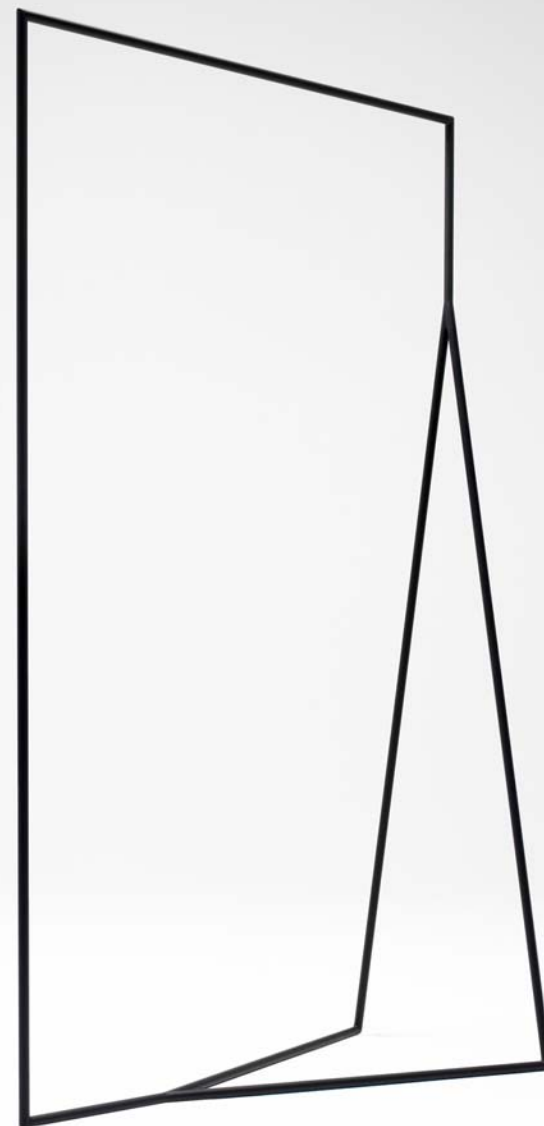
730mm-hanger rack, Steel, W85×D41×H150cm



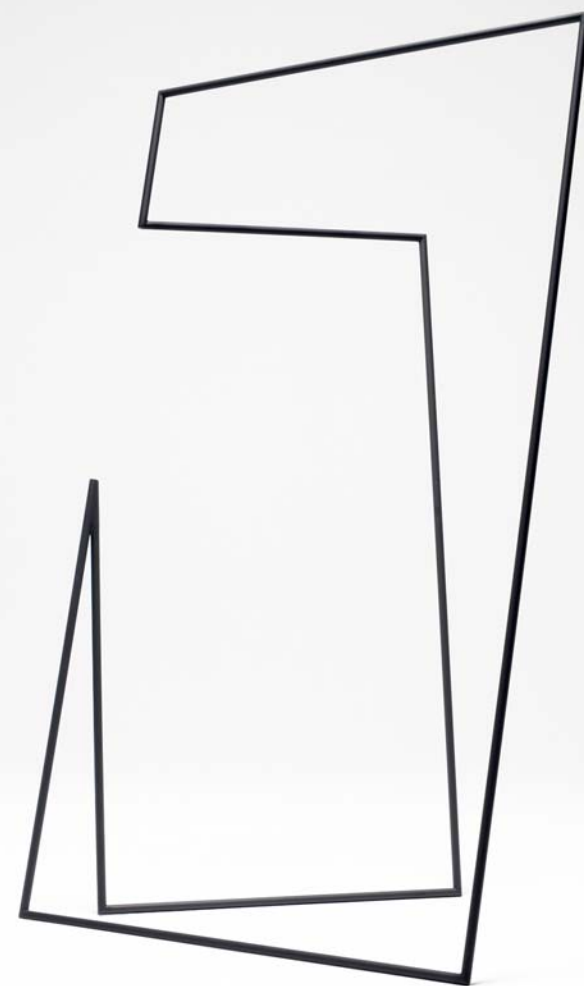
660mm-hanger rack, Steel, W85×D49×H150cm



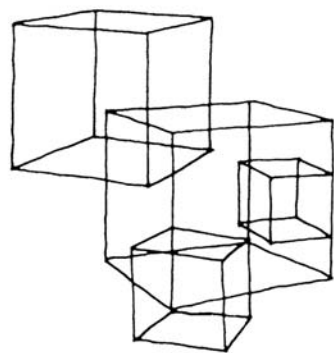
8000mm-hanger rack, Steel, W113×D54×H150cm



6500mm-hanger rack, Steel, W85×D43×H150cm



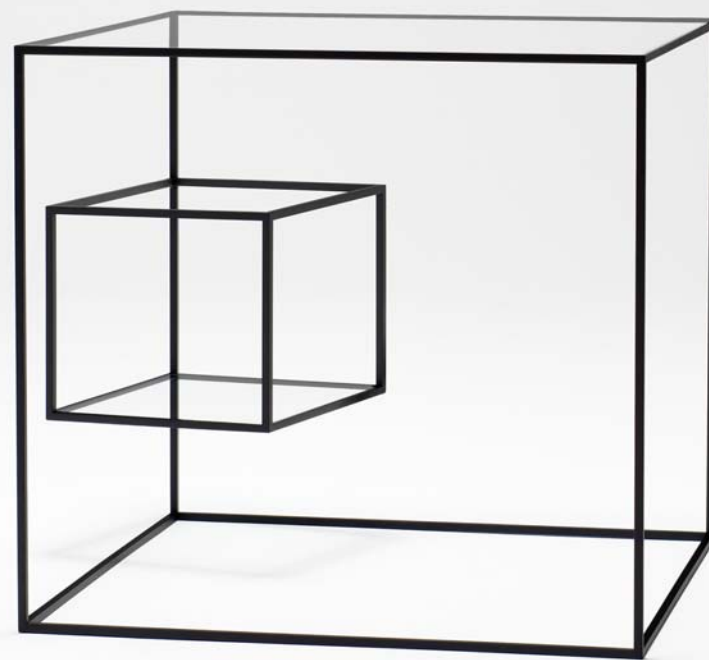
7000mm-hanger rack, Steel, W85×D77×H142cm



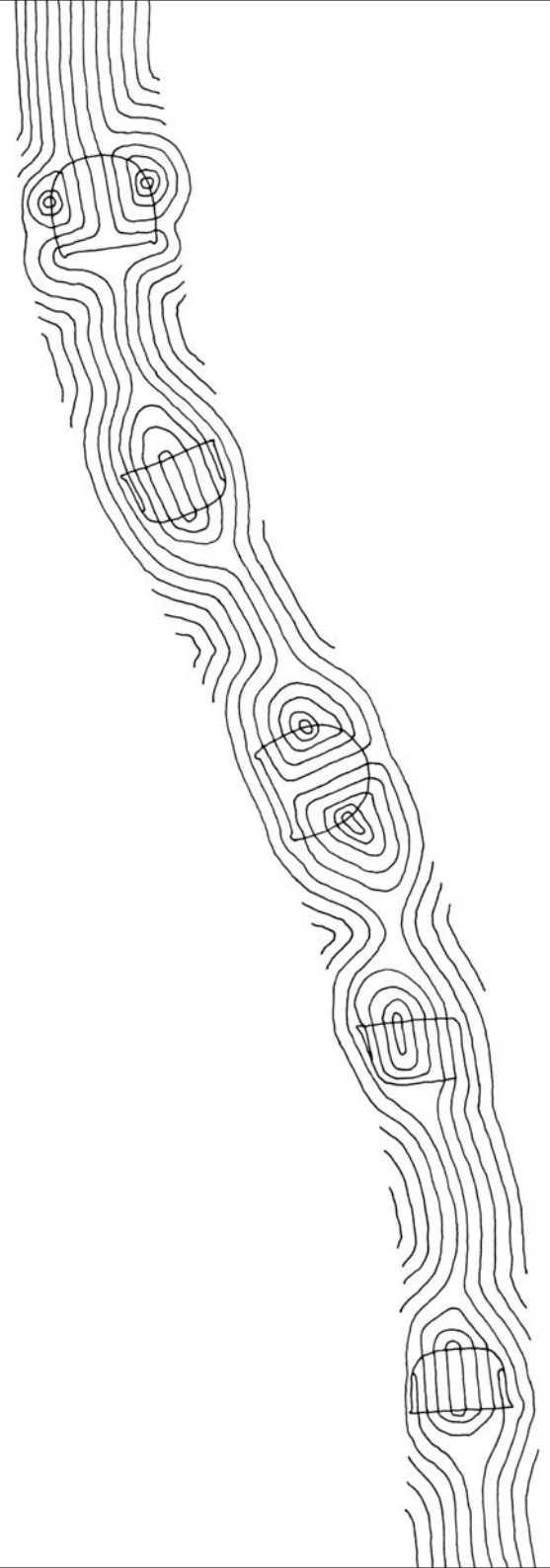
10300mm-table, Steel, W60×D60×H64 cm



11300mm-table, Steel, W50×D50×H72 cm

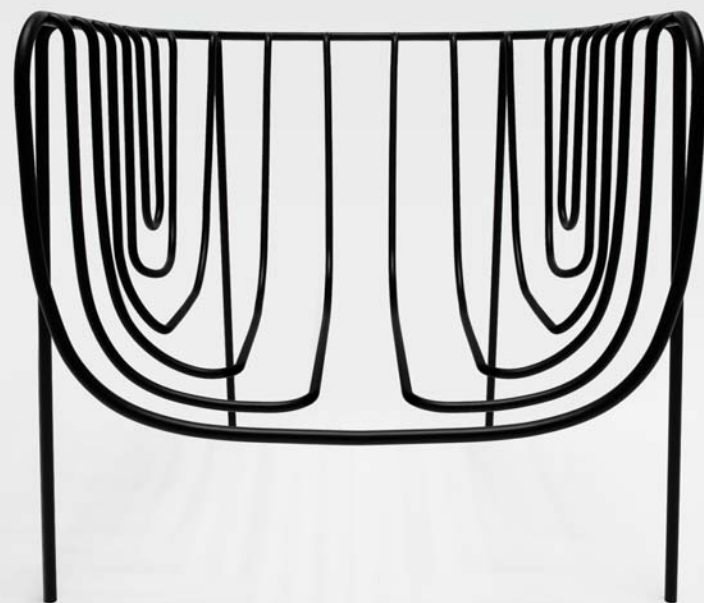
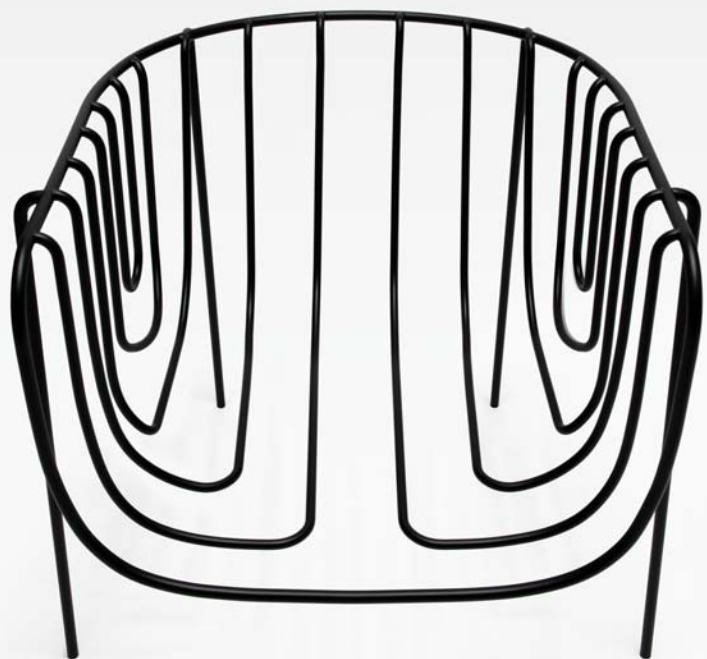


10700mm-table, Steel, W64×D64×H60 cm



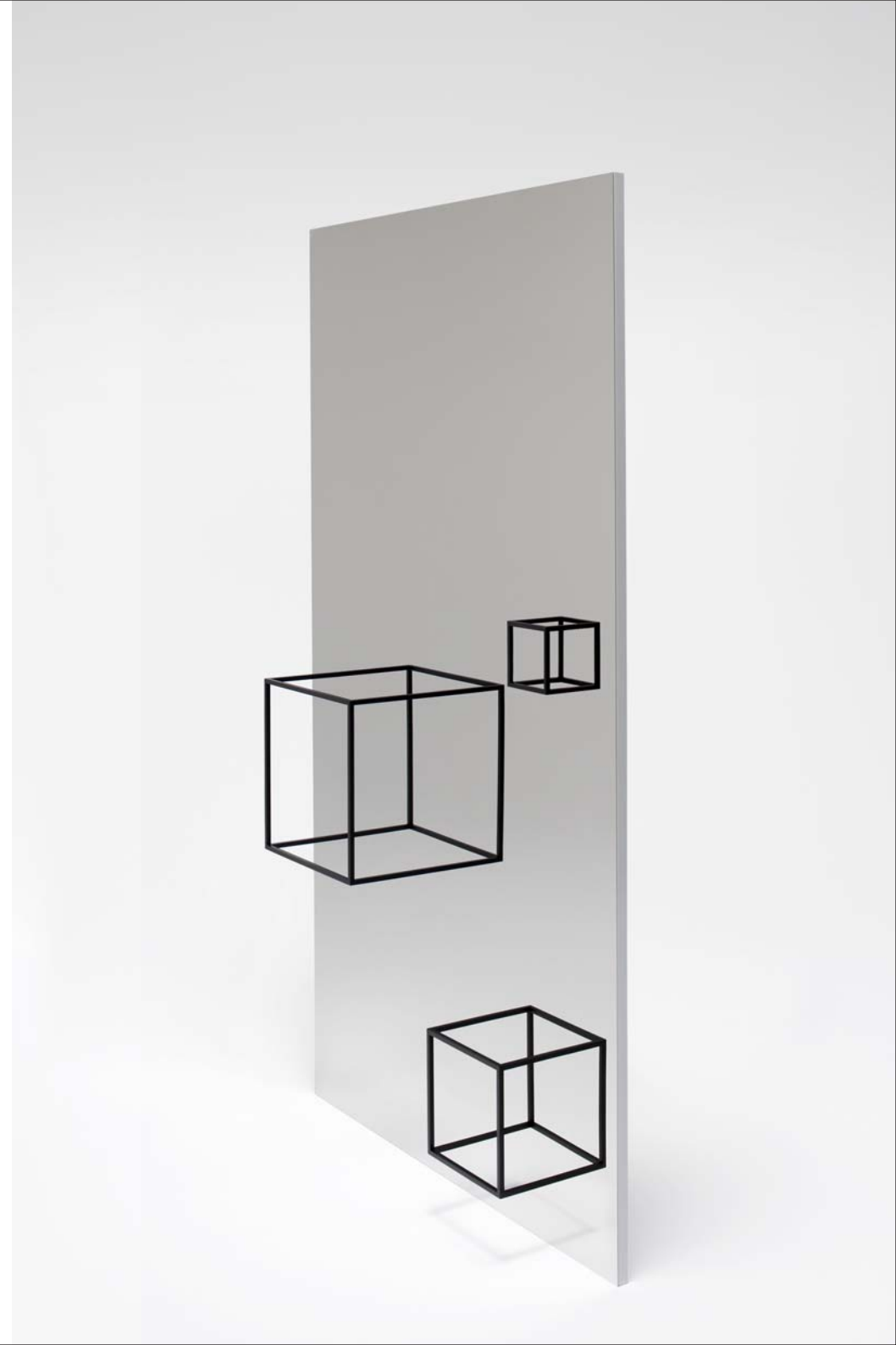


13600mm-chair, Steel, W60×D62×H55cm



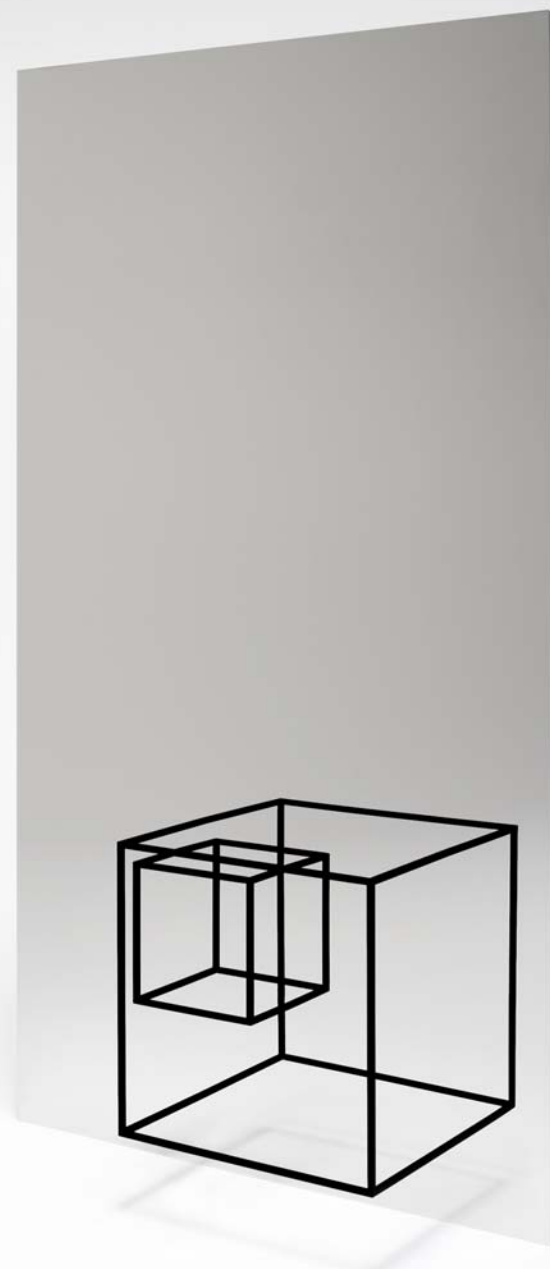


3450mm-mirror, Stainless Steel, Steel, W90×D18×H160cm

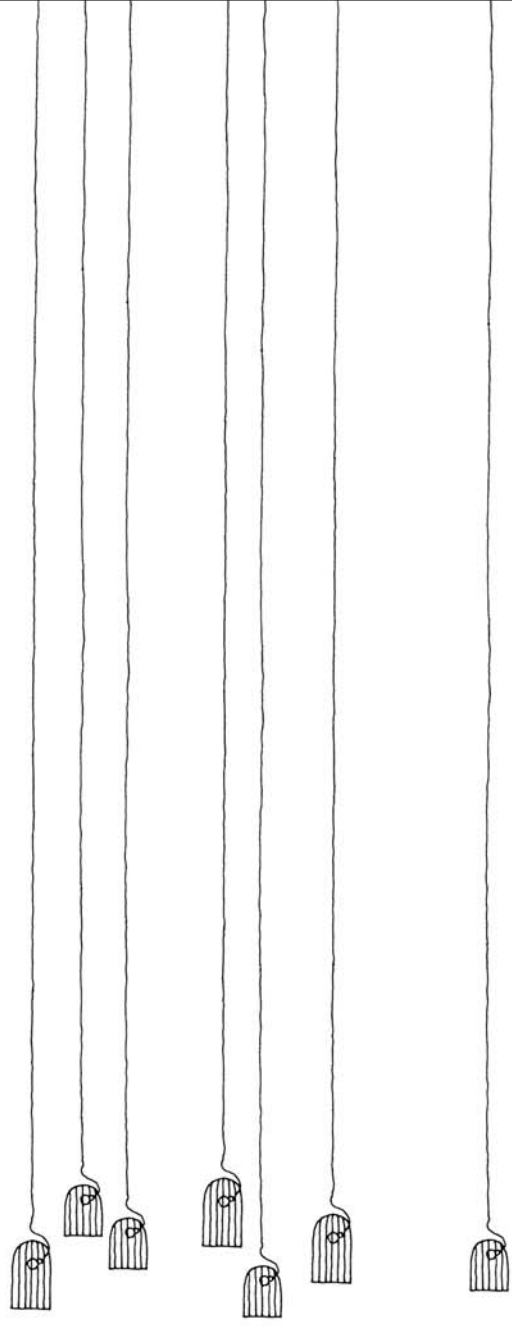




3200mm-mirror, Stainless Steel, Steel, W90×D18×H160cm

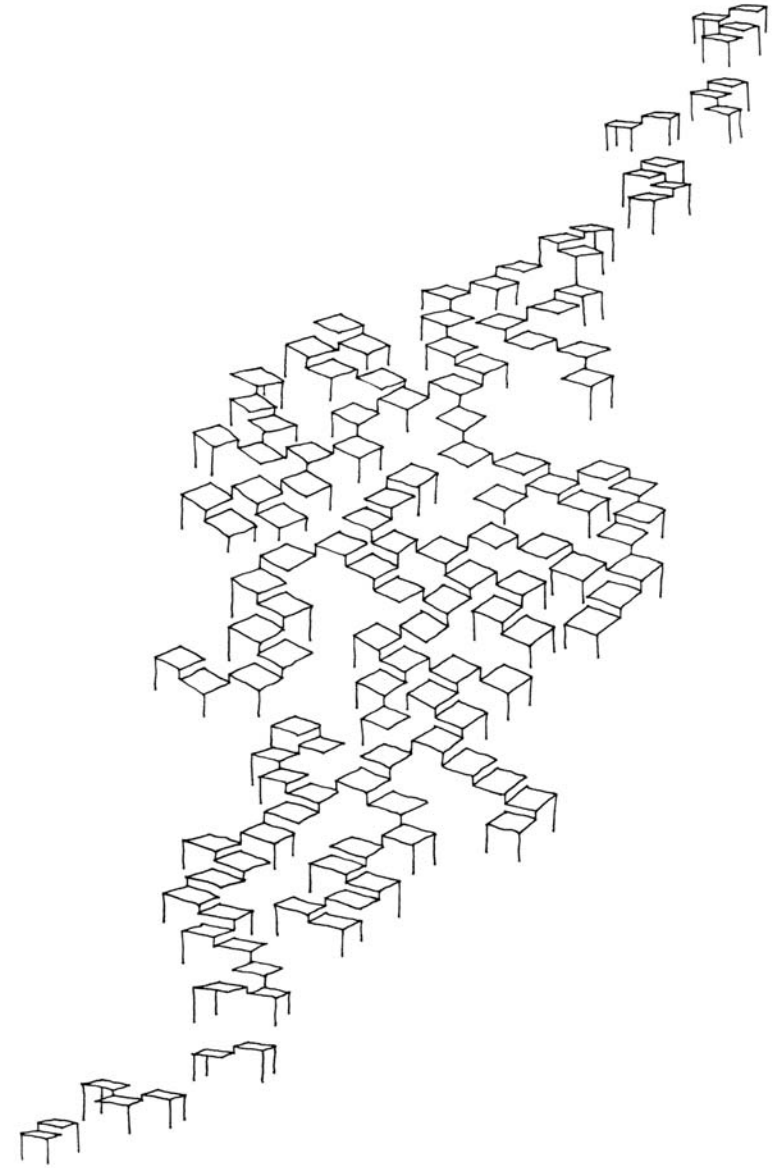


3500mm-mirror, Stainless Steel, Steel, W90×D18×H160cm





20200mm-lamp, Steel, W50×D50×H90cm(Left)
12200mm-lamp, Steel, W37×D37×H50cm(Right)





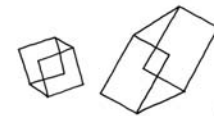
5000mm-table, Steel, W89×D89×H40cm



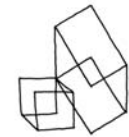
7400mm-table, Steel, W89×D80×H50cm



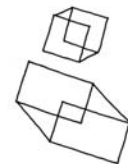
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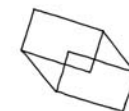
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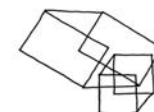
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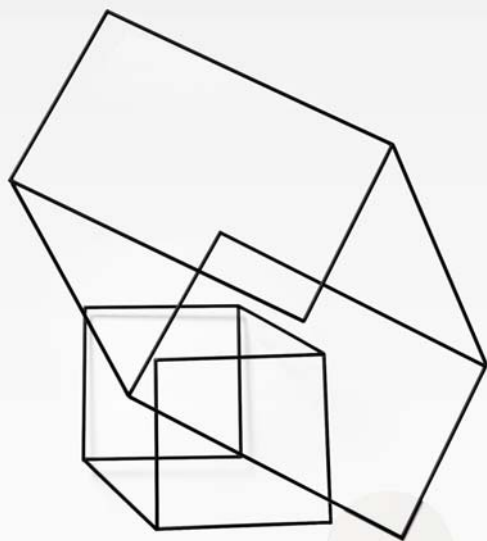
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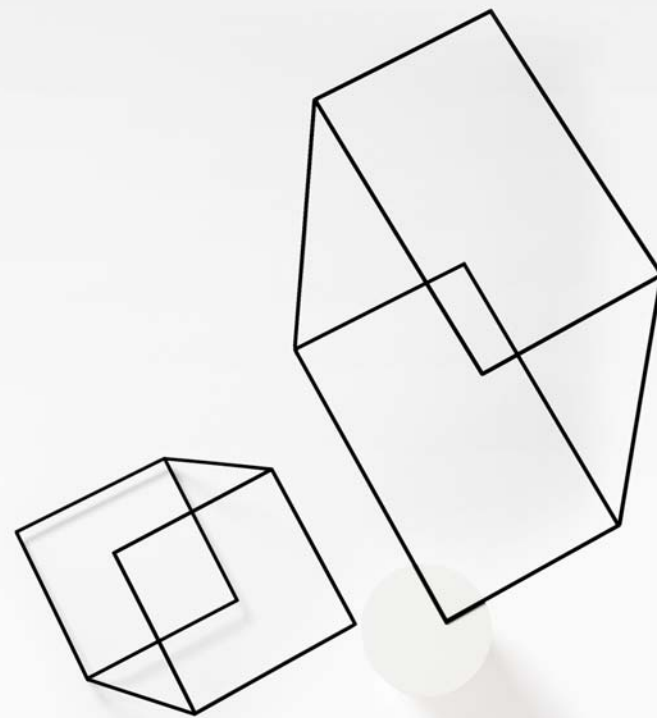
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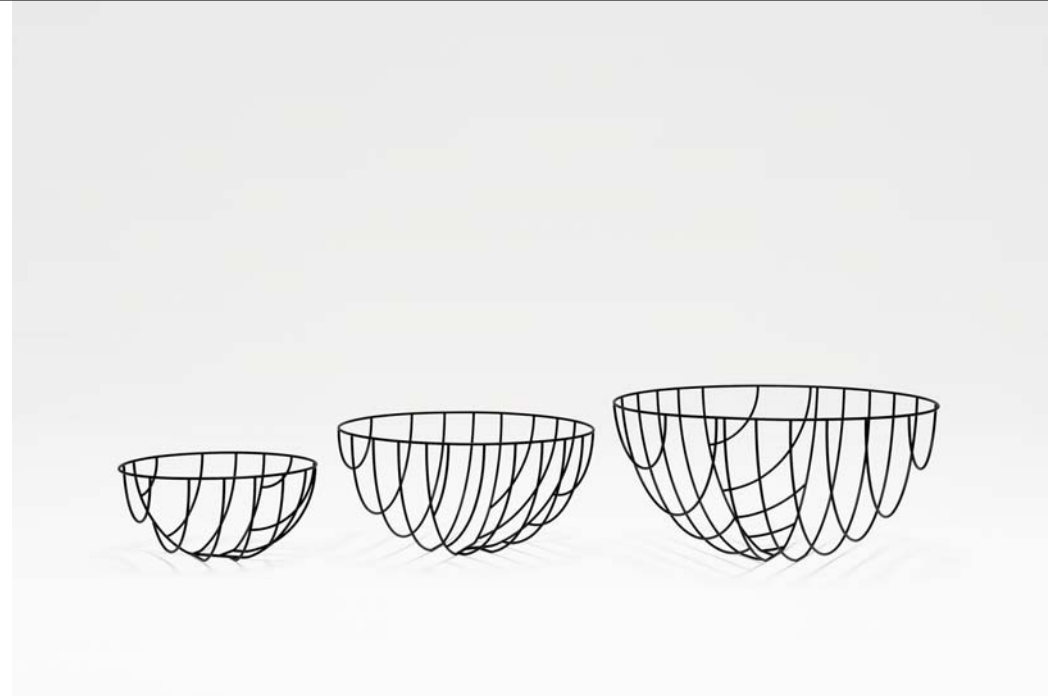
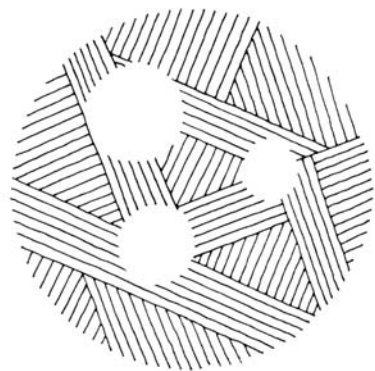


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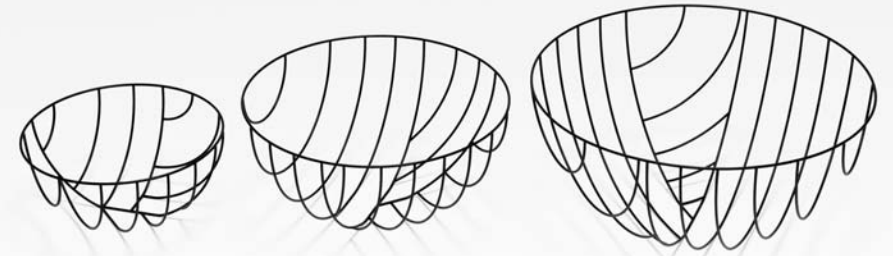


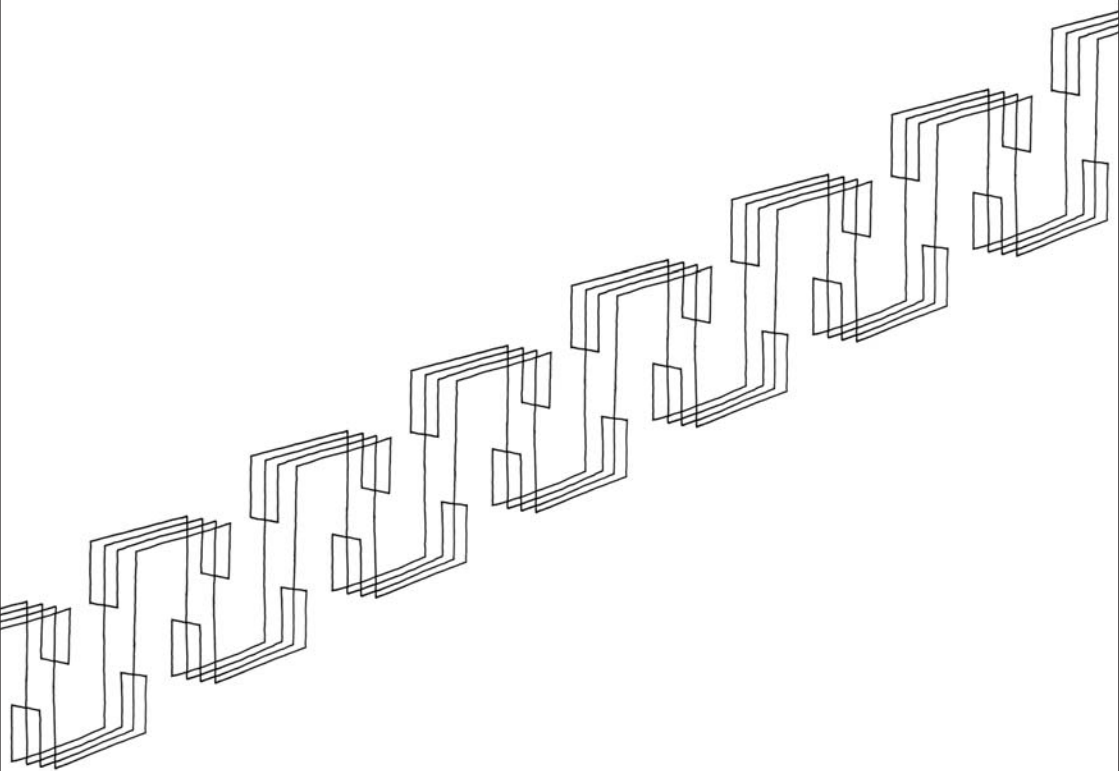
3100mm-clock, Aluminium, Steel, W75×D75×H23cm



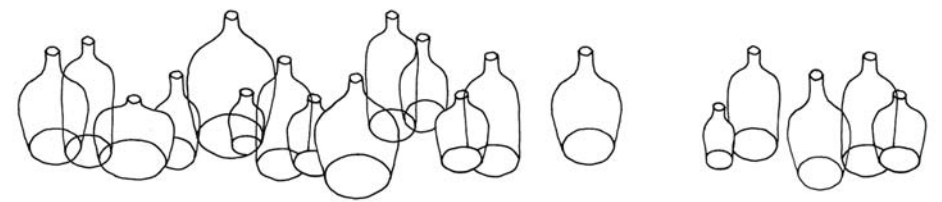


Left to Right
 3800mm-bowl, Steel, W30×D30×H14 cm
 6200mm-bowl, Steel, W40×D40×H20 cm
 8600mm-bowl, Steel, W50×D50×H25 cm





5200mm-stool, Steel, W60×D26×H35cm







Left to Right

770mm-vase, Steel, W20×D15×H30cm

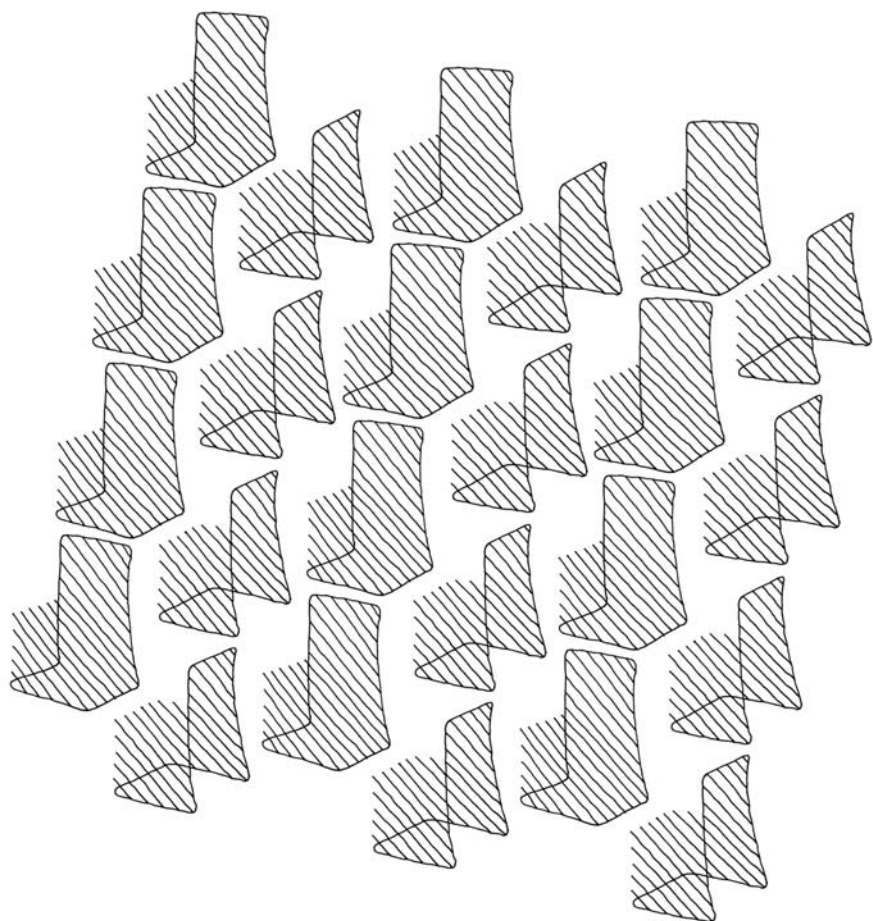
850mm-vase, Steel, W15×D13×H35cm

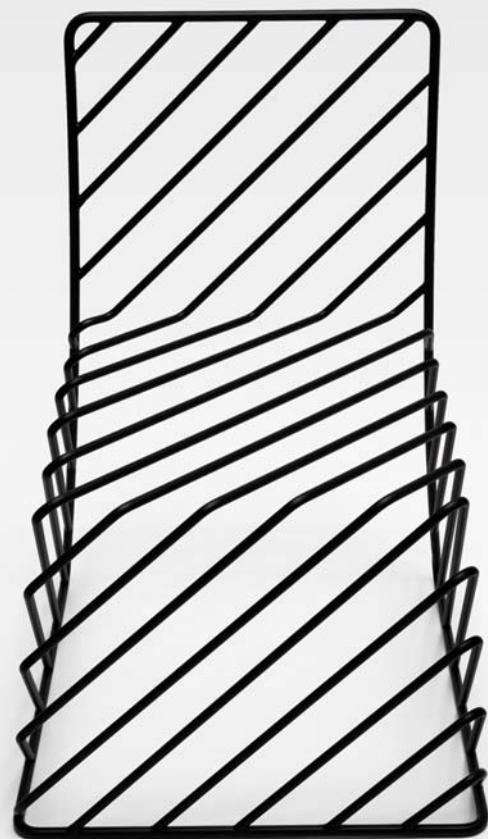
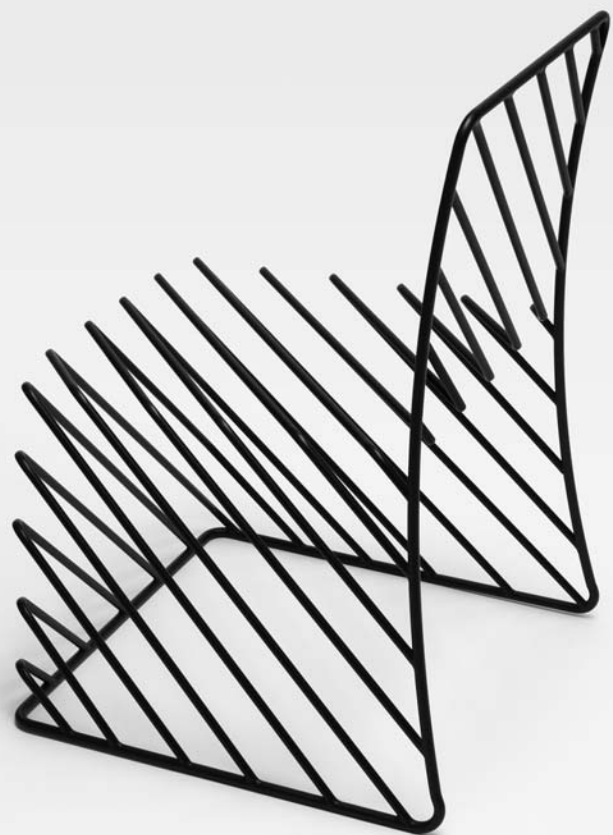
610mm-vase, Steel, W22×D20×H20cm

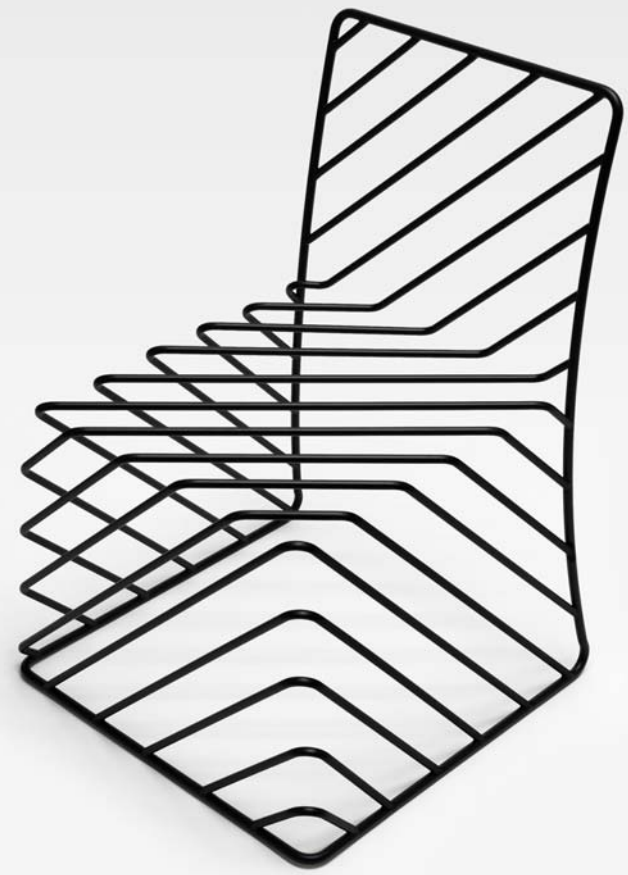
630mm-vase, Steel, W14×D13×H24cm

1320mm-vase, Steel, W25×D20×H36cm

1370mm-vase, Steel, W24×D15×H32cm







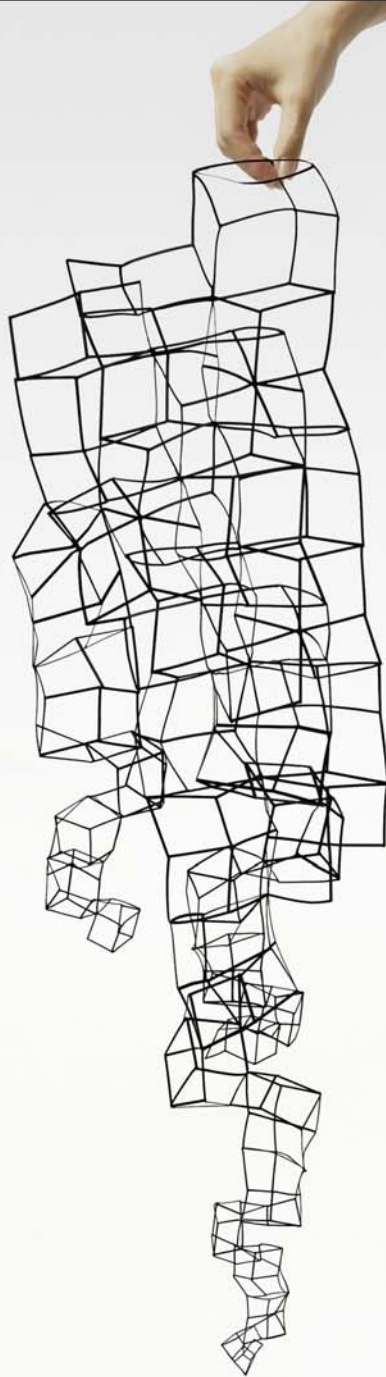


Image of Exhibition Space

