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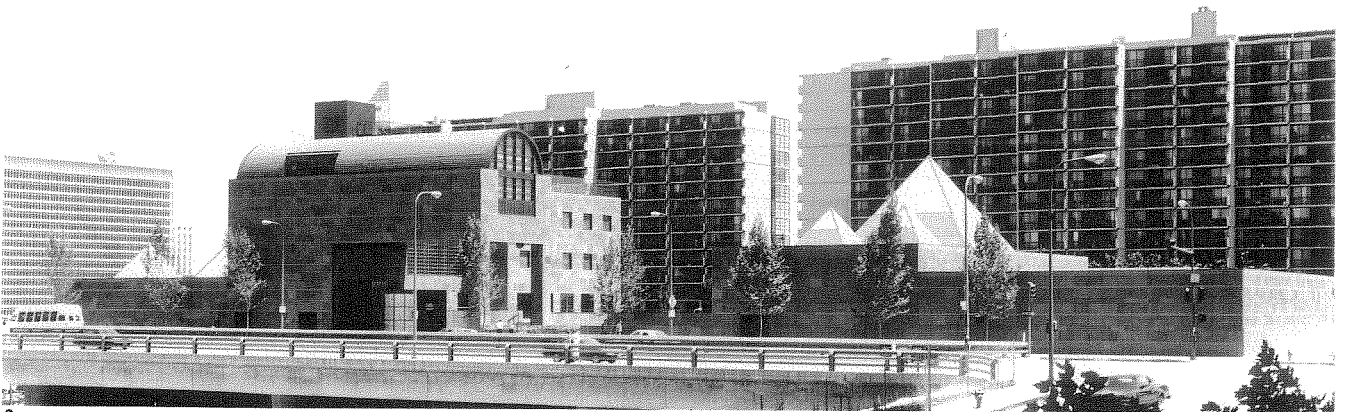
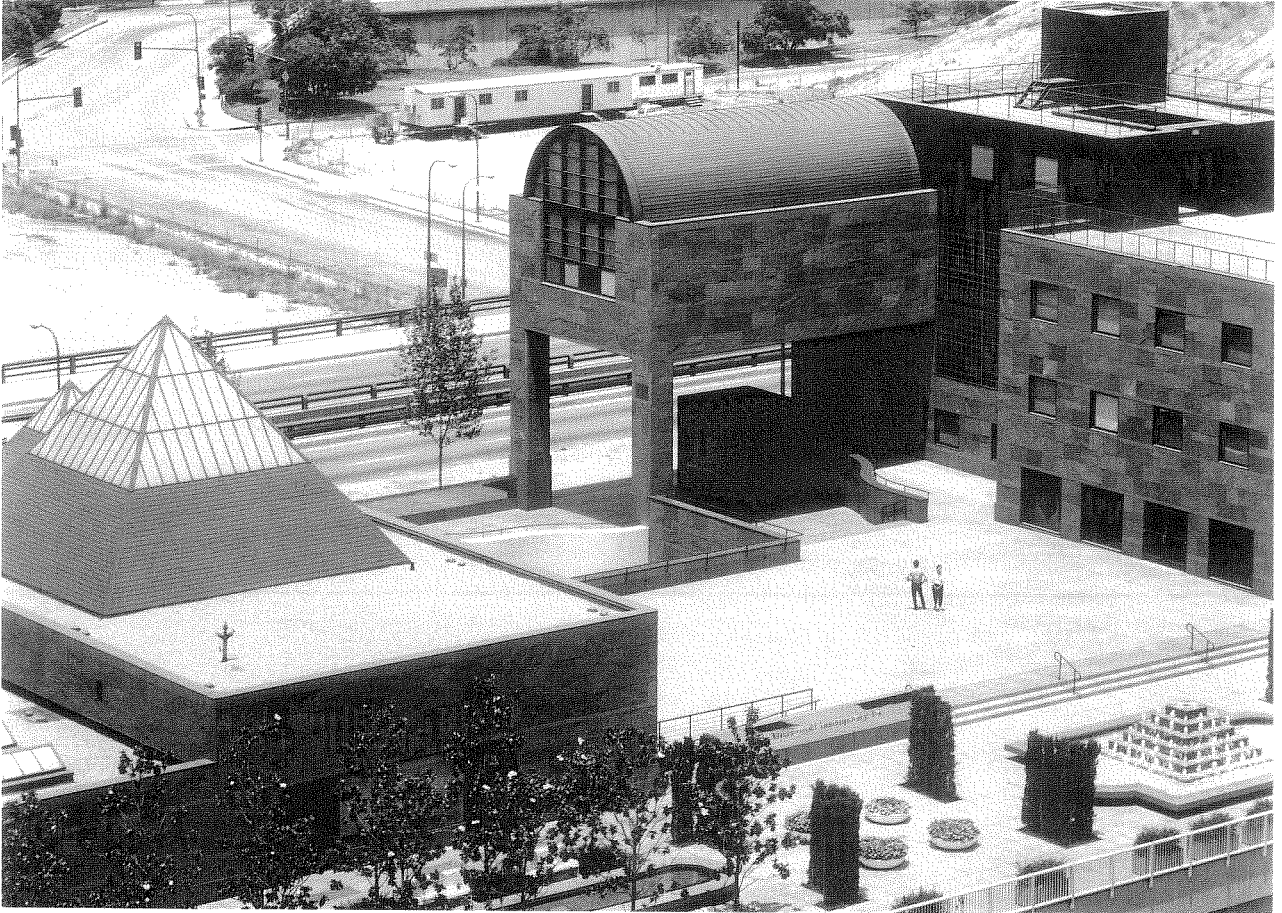
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Isozaki's MOCA

Katie Traeger

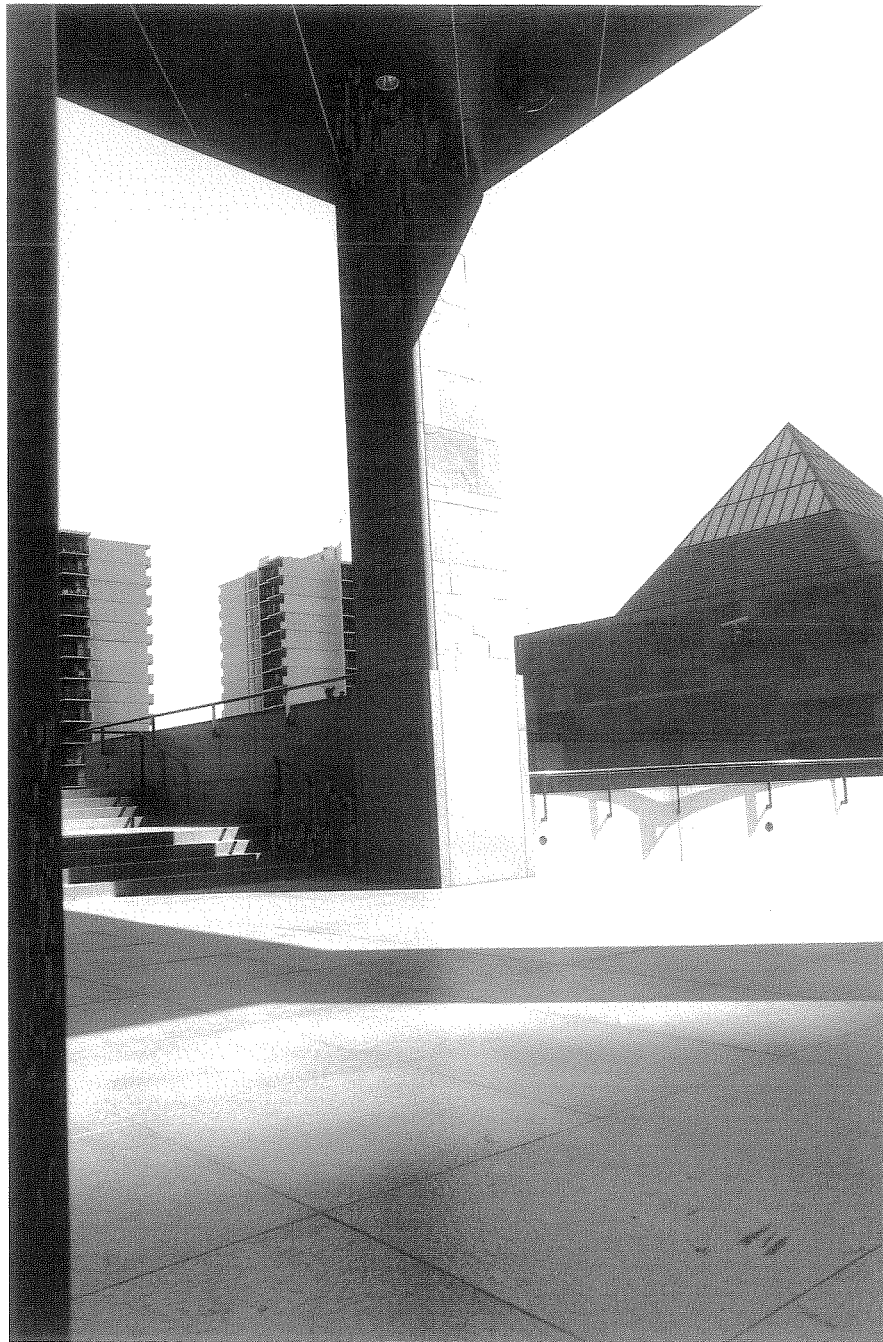


We always enter a new place intent upon a certain kind of silence. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, briefly pinned by the rotating shadow of the vault, we follow the silence up steps onto a courtyard while the building happens all peripheral.

A ledge of light, while the building happens all peripheral. Closed up on two sides by the dreamlike surface stare of the museum and the blankly mirrored towers, the ledge drops off quietly in between. At the point of entrance it attaches itself to the street, dropping away multiple times and returning, now as the distant elevated ledges of the free-ways, far into the distance. We are in the midst of two valleys, closing infinitely wider. An intense little microcosm. Guarded and revealed. Taut emptiness. Calm anxiety. Very LA. At home in the angst. Closed openness. Deep surfaces. Imperturbable motion. Density unfolded.

It is a pristine platform, yet through its gates washes a mass of the city. We cut open the exquisite sense of being entirely removed, of holding it all at bay, while simultaneously letting it all in. Our grasp of both removal and acceptance slides around in a supple space we cannot quite formulate. It is a tension in perspective, in feeling, toward which we must adopt one posture, then another.

We are unsure, in this dreamscape, whether we are indeed removed, inside a framed space, the walled-in contemplative garden, near the mystical center of emptiness, or somewhere outside in the neutral

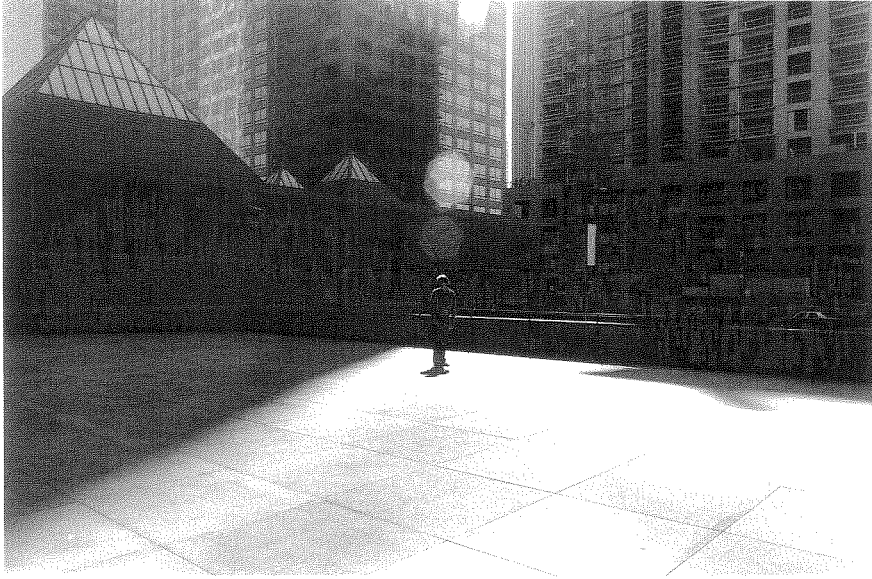


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1 MOCA, view from the east. Courtyard in the center, garden in foreground, galleries to the left. Photograph: copyright Tim Street-Porter, courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

2 MOCA, view from the west. Photograph: Michael Moran, courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

3 Briefly pinned by the shadow of the rotating vault . . . Photograph by the author. All photographs not otherwise credited are by the author.



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world. Dense transparencies connect the framed and unframed in position, time, and space.

The stone floor flares like sand against the earth-tone walls. Leaves twist against the sky. An alabaster vault glances sunward. Water pours forth over liquid pools of granite. A huge dark wall of apartments presses in on our front. It comes forward, attempting to close up the complex, forming the “third side.” Yet it floats eternally out of reach, across the abyss of the parking lot, part of the world against which this one is measured. What is screened out becomes the screen.

Slices, whole dimensions of steamy vastness, long views of dust, dirt, and noise. The “outer world,” farthest point against which this one is measured, come transparently through to its center.

They participate in the inner atmosphere. The empty places between alternately find and lose their power.

The ground underfoot communicates ambiguously. We enter part of the continuous city floor, then reach a plateau and begin to look out, to contemplate. But the farthest parts participate in our structure. We start using them, arranging them, bringing them in. They tower over us. Surrounded, external plateau is sunken garden.

We cannot pass in, through, and out along a simple perspective. Our path is suspended at the edge of the garden, stopped at its side, only to flow around the edge of the museum at the other, back to the street. Our sense is one of shifting sides, angles, edges, walls. Space itself ranges before us in a series of interpenetrating planes: freeways extend onto the floor, the plane of apartments closes in the front. We slip in and around two-dimensional space, providing, ourselves, the ever-changing point of third dimension.

Dense volumes surround us: cube, cylinder, pyramid. Self-contained, geometrically perfect, they stand mute, blank-faced. What are these deep, unknowable volumes? With what do they resonate?

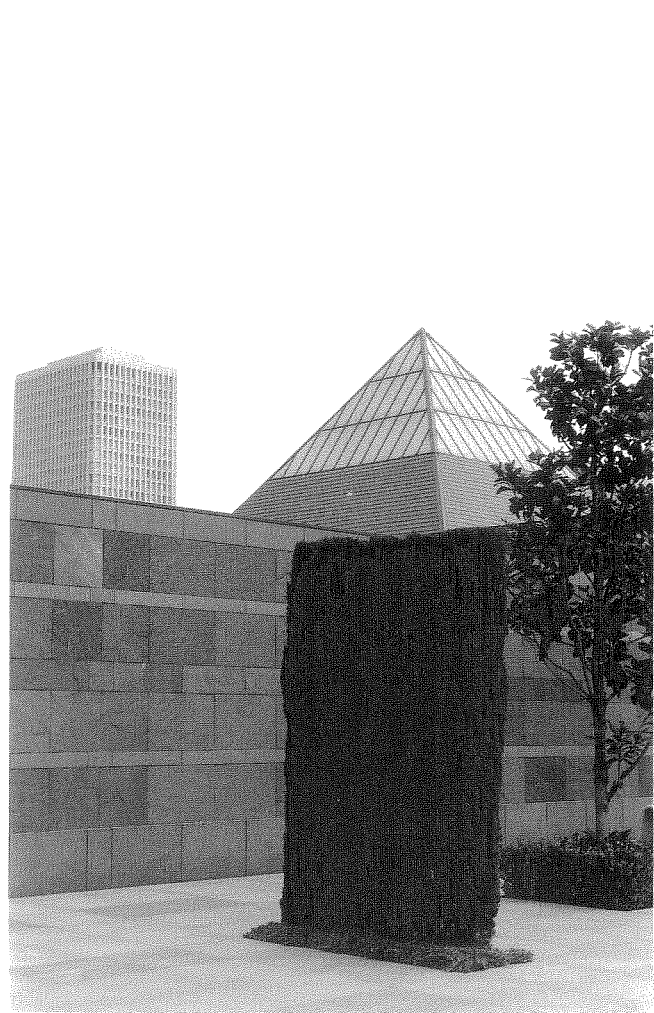
Their density, though, is a density of surface. They cast out layers of transparency. Surfaces glide out from them, bands, gridded colors, ratios of texture float into the space beyond. These acts of transparency—volumes becom-



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ing surfaces; settings, horizons, becoming objects in the midst of closer settings—this silent interpenetration of object and setting, surface and volume, reveals to us, momentarily, something arbitrary and eternal about our Being. It is a transparency that tracks in a space of both order and chaos, of emptiness and fullness.

It is a transparency that extends both outward and inward. It yields an abstract remnant of a sacred garden, patched with great looming pieces of city, threatening apocalypse. And yet it seems about to magnetize everything in its visual path, irradiating unlikely depths of the city, revealing that place, enclosure, beauty are really qualities of arrangement, perspective, wider and more transparent than we had thought. It is a deep trans-



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parency, shadowing “Presence,” and a hollow one—threatening disappearance. We cannot quite resolve the contradiction here. Loss, absence, hierophany, presence, shift equally before us.

It is the strength of the place that it keeps us on the edge of this double-sided transparency—a credit to its silence, its balance, and its poetry.

Being is transparent. In those other places, at the top of some open roof, in the midst of some dark alley constellation, at a momentary break in the road, we will suddenly recognize it—a horizon, a vision, a condition.

The image of a place that can no longer hold us, a court that can no longer locate us, will haunt us in all of our secret gardens henceforth.

5 Closed up on two sides by the dreamlike surface stare . . .

6 Dense transparencies connect the framed and unframed . . .



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Conversely, through all our wanderings among smoldering pockets of fading cities, it is for clues, flashes, sounds of the silent tracking we have felt here that we will look. It is the spatial shadow of this shifting garden that will tempt us.

Exactly where we are, and how we are, remains here a problem of contemplation, of perspective, of being. In this half-open setting, we feel the question peculiarly modern in its circularity and fluctuations, rare and richly alive. We come back to feed on it.

* * *

The silence spreads out. The taut emptiness of the courtyard gives way to a ripple of white porcelain.

Inside, the earth reds give way to something else, white, going on. Something recognizable from above, an edgy quality, silence, stretched calm. The inside of the building has retired to its edges. It waits for something.

Light comes in and through a huge pyramidal skylight. But space comes down, locked in by the tiny steel point. We progress from room to room, along a path whose meaning is almost, but never clear. The rooms are perfectly proportioned: at once rooms of the mind, and scaleless universes. The paintings hang in these microcosms of supercharged calm—extending infinitely beyond their borders. Scale and boundary become creatures of mood.

The silent music of the spaces is deafening. There is only a thin

space around the edge where one can escape for breath. "Painting" has become object, hung on the periphery, to be meditated upon, considered, from the center. The paintings are seen too close or too far. Thoughts are of inches of canvas, or of painting in general, and they come across huge distances.

Colors take on a life of their own, apart from painting. A look around and a woman's sweater grates audibly. A red canvas strikes in and around the space, making intervals. Yellows, reds, blues, in concert for a fantastic instant. It is dance, music, meditation, theater.

These are spaces with their own time and perspective. Art has to come through an extra dimension here—the thickness of the fragmented dramas. And we are caught, netted, somewhere here in this thickness, the thickness of viewing, not of what is viewed.

The space suspends us in some great eternal gaze, which both overwhelms and ignores the art. But sending off flashes and threatening to ignite our seeing is the more compelling possibility of some huge other depth that threatens to do in the art. We do not know whether it is merely some shadow passing across the opening overhead, or some darker counterpart of the dying garden above, some metaphysical darkness behind the thick light which reveals that art, too, is hung in a space of fragile constructs.

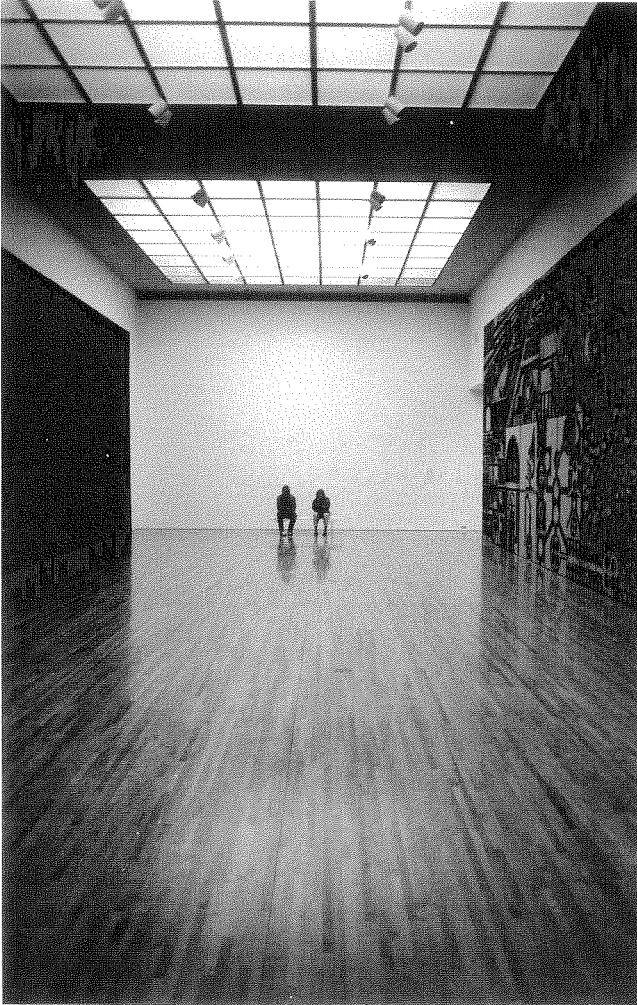
We search for the origin of the strings we see here only darkly,



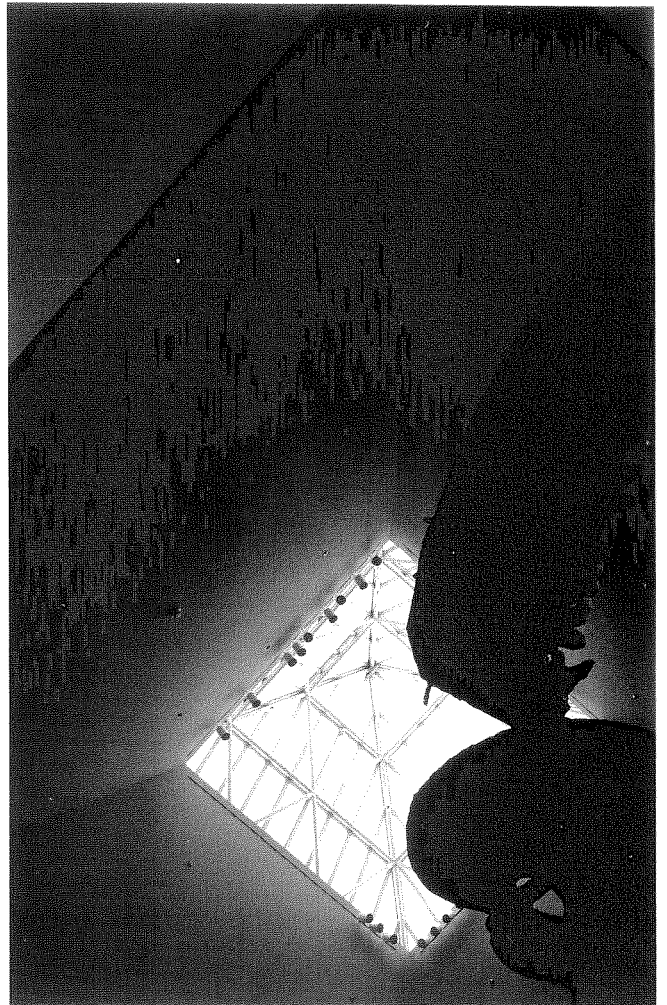
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9 The image of a place that can no longer hold us . . .

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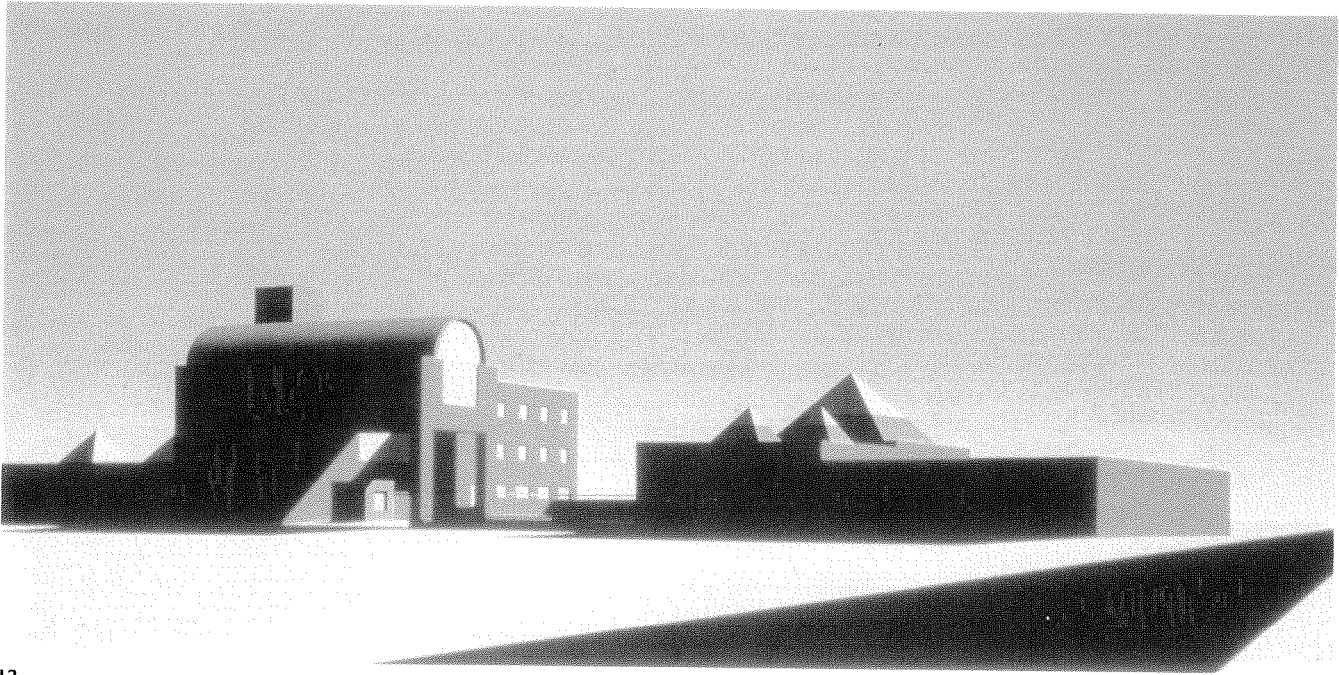
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10 Scaleless universes . . .

11 We search for the origin of the strings
we see here only darkly . . .



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some reason for the contingency, something in the culture, in our seeing, in the space. The art burns with a kind of strange intensity. We gasp at the sparks.

But the conflagration does not occur. It is held in, like the light, and the space, by the steely point of the pyramid. There is a ring of hollowness to the silence, which sooner or later we have to escape.

We take what we have seen back up to the courtyard to see how its nets have been recast by our new knowledge. But we find no single revelation, no connection, only a magnification and a complication of the fragmentary drama. We are about to lose ourselves upon the endless possibilities of our own seeing.

Momentarily, we glimpse an unexpected resolution: an architecture more self-sufficient and *unseeing* than we had thought. Does it form no secret ally to our anxiety, that happening unseen and unacknowledged? Perhaps anxiety is inappropriate. It deepens.

We look again to see whether it is not in fact some technological

abstraction at the core of this blankness that, in other lights, seemed so metaphysical a foil for the fragile, wild civilization going on around it. Whether, were we to inhabit the stark, silkscreen image used to represent the museum, we might not fall somewhere closer to the computer than to De Chirico. Whether our whole dense revolution of perceptions does not threaten to collapse—to drop out somewhere like irrelevant data during the wheel of contemplation that turned suspiciously outside our grasp anyway.

But the place gains final victory. It has shifted the floor of our questions. Space and time, still densely faceted, unfold with endless lights. We take our questions out with us, but they remain, partly in light and partly in shadow, to be taken up, reconnected, later, in the silence.

12 **Silkscreen**, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Silkscreen, by Arata Isozaki. Copyright by, and courtesy of, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.