

Gera Woltjer - GR#D

The Collector and Her Order

In October 2022, Gera Woltjer's airy warehouse studio on Queen Victoria Street, Fremantle, is prolifically but neatly crowded with materials. Smooth folds of printed PVC obscure every tabletop. The floor is ensconced, apart from narrow clearways, in piles of textiles, building materials, tiles and plastics. Bolts and rolls of mesh, fencing and sheeting are propped against expansive collaged panels which are pinned to the wall. These materials are both industrial and domestic; familiar and obscure. There is red mesh from a bag of supermarket oranges, a checked souvenir tea towel, fly screen, vintage swatches from the fabric market in Utrecht, a roll of woven silver building insulation, glazed ceramic tiles, laminated insulation sheeting, construction fencing and a woollen blanket.

This is Woltjer's laboratory. The place where she brings grid-patterned materials that she finds outside the studio, to cross-react them with other foraged grid-like materials. The results of previous experiments and exhibitions are pinned to the walls: photographs of grids layered and arranged with a painstaking ikebana-like focus. In some, the gridlines warp into Moiré optical illusions; in others, they form patterns that at first seem regular and crisp, but on closer inspection prove to be laced with subtle imperfections. Everything in this space is about grids, but somehow nothing in the room is formal, straight or minimalist.

Woltjer spends a lot of time among her materials, developing familiarity with their properties. She has an endearing devotion to Tyvek, despite the difficulty of procuring it and of printing onto its dimpled surface, halfway between paper and textile. She points out a beloved treasure of her studio: a roll of discontinued silvery-white flyscreen, bought in the Netherlands many years ago and now totally irreplaceable. Such materials are heavily researched, and Woltjer pays a premium to work with them. Others have a more modest, serendipitous provenance. Much is salvaged: the debris of construction sites, layaways, parking garages, verge-side collections and city laneways. In such places, most of us remain mere passers-by, moving through without pause or awareness. Woltjer, conversely, is in noticing mode. At all times she's scanning for grids, hunting for them with her camera and claiming abandoned grid-shaped detritus.

She always finds it, too. Grids are ubiquitous, fundamental to how we stack, surface, build and mark things out. The everyday world around Woltjer bubbles over with relevant materials and patterns, turning even a simple walk with the dog into a studio-provisioning exercise. She has learned to be highly selective, having developed a sense of fidelity to grids in their purest form. She favours grids that are squarish, open weave, or in her favourite colour of orange.

Though to some, grids may seem inorganic and delimiting, Woltjer has developed a warm affection for them. To her they represent welcome order, a demonstration in two dimensions that all things have a way of reverting to a state of controlled simplicity: vertical and horizontal, warp and weft, longitude and latitude, the world arranged along X and Y axes. She reflects on her upbringing in the Netherlands, her shifting relationship with Protestantism, the aspirational non-fiction books she reads and the intuitive way she collects materials, and wonders whether there is not something grid-like about each of these things, whether grids aren't a fitting way to put all this in order.

Though there is a fine finish to Woltjer's prints and sample books, every work is the result of play and experimentation. Woltjer trusts that that given time in the studio, each arrangement of materials will eventually declare itself. Either by clicking into a satisfying assemblage, or in gently rebelling against the perfect lines of the grid, her piles of materials slowly reach a state of completeness and correctness which the artist locks in place with photography. When photographed, Woltjer is free to

manipulate the scale and cropping of her grids. These recompositions are often expressive: some are dramatically large, fresh in colour, even moody. In this way, the casual simplicity of Woltjer's prints are in fact highly laboured, arrived at via a long series of iterations and micro-judgements about what looks good.

At times, Woltjer's equivocation over her grids approaches mysticism. Where a taped grid on clear plastic was once accidentally knocked out of place on the studio floor, the artist has tenderly enshrined the pleasingly off-kilter result in photography, and has preserved the wonky version in her studio ever since. Elsewhere, in tidying up the studio to make space to walk past, she has unthinkingly placed rolls of temporary fencing beside a large-scale printed grid just so, and found to her pleasure that this completed the arrangement.

Like many artists who repeatedly work with the same motif or model, Woltjer has had to wrestle with how to define grids. The artist senses that some grids or materials are either faithful to her project or not. This has prompted philosophising: she confers with fellow artists whether a non-rectangular, diamond-hatched grid could be acceptable in the schema of her practice; whether certain shades of deep emerald or lime might take her work in the wrong direction. In part, this desire for correctness reflects the long shadow of university critique culture (in which all aspects of an artwork must be drily explicable). Yet more keenly, Woltjer's judgements emanate from the strength of her faith in the grid as an ancient organising principle.

The history and definition of the grid preoccupies Woltjer. She researches grids in the form of Roman city plans, traffic grids, military camp layouts, the portcullis, Spanish tiles, chessboards and the paintings of Mondrian ("which are so Dutch, so straightforward," laughs Woltjer). She values these histories because they help to demonstrate why this structure of interlocking lines recurs so persistently and naturally all throughout human manufacture, architecture, philosophy and history. While these histories are not explicitly referred to in her work, they underpin her sense of the power of the grid structure to contain and locate everything, reaching outward in an infinity of lines.

The antecedent of GR#D at Perth Centre For Photography is a series of exhibitions Woltjer created about the grids made by swimming pool tiles, their lane markings and the way they appear to eddy in and out of formation with through the lens of the water and shadows above. From his specific and recognisable kind of linework, Woltjer's work has expanded to become more symbolic, personal, and less literal. In this moment, Woltjer's practice is in possession of something radical in the art world: it proceeds without any explanatory structure. "I've had an obsession with grids from early on," she says "I don't know why. My work is quite organic and sensitive." It's that simple. It's a bit like flavour: highly subjective, but definitive. If you don't like liquorice, you can't be talked into tasting it differently. It's simply not right to you. For Woltjer, arrangements and layers of grids sometimes taste wonderful, other times she has to spit them out and start again. It's hard to explain, but it's black and white to Woltjer. The question she asks along the way, as she orders mesh, salvages fencing or stacks up printed tiles, is not so much 'what does this mean?' but 'does this work?'. At each turn she stops to think about what the grid means to her, whether it feels right, and proceeds accordingly.

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