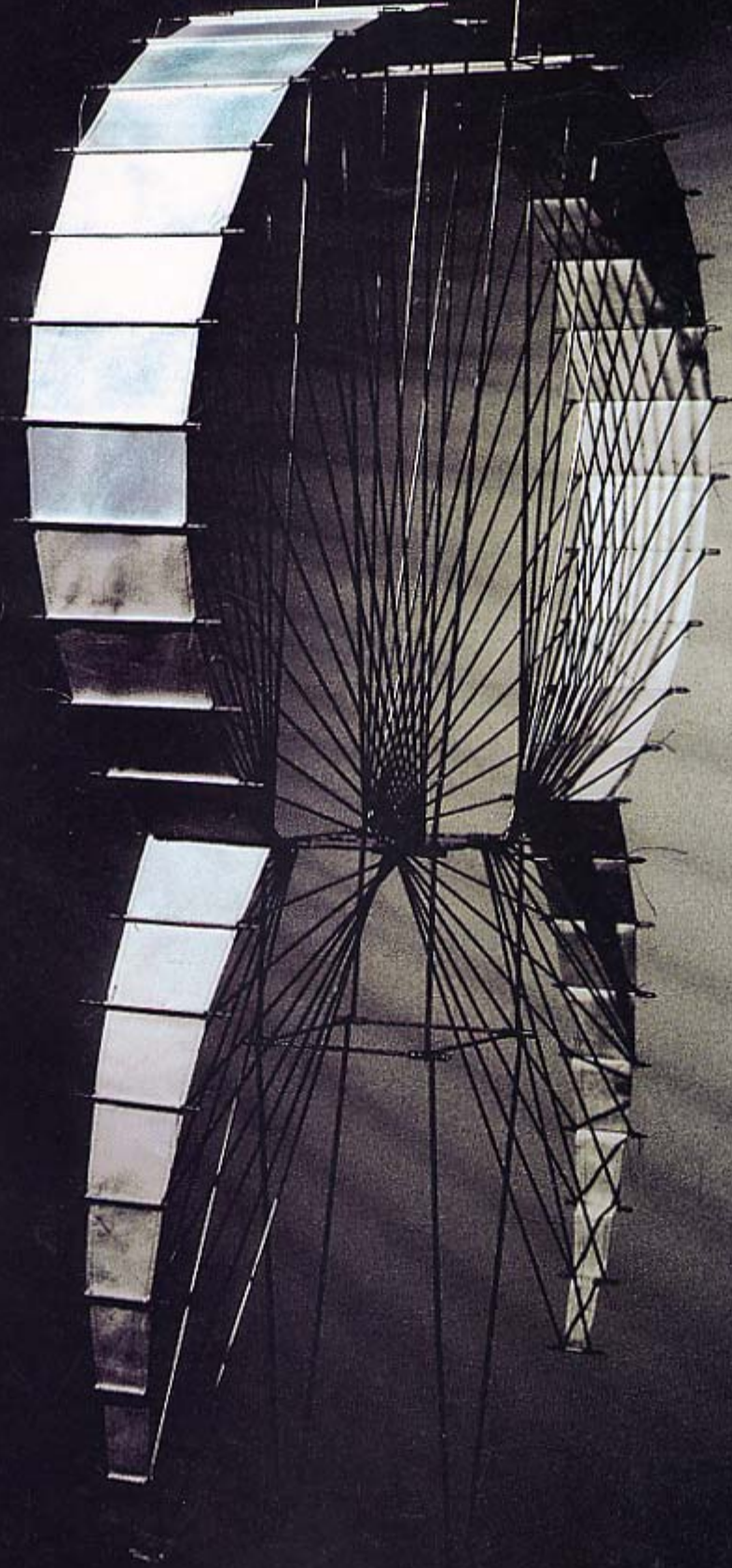
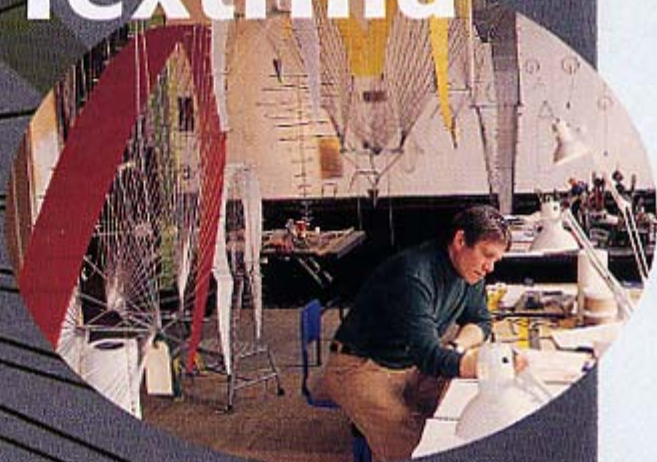


AmericanCraft



Machina Textrina



Over the past two decades, Warren Seelig has occupied a key position in contemporary textile in North America. He is distinguished professor in the crafts department at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, and maintains a studio in Rockland, Maine. Philip Beesley practices architecture in Toronto, Ontario, and teaches at the University of Toronto and University of Waterloo. Beesley collaborates frequently with artists and performers. He was awarded the Prix de Rome in Architecture for Canada in 1996.

In the 1980s Seelig shifted from loom-based textiles to three-dimensional constructions using combinations of colored fabric membranes stretched on metal spoke skeletons of hand-wrought stainless steel. The latest generation of this work and a new group of wall-mounted work were shown in "Warren Seelig Machina Textrina" at the Museum for Textiles Contemporary Gallery, Toronto (October 5, 1996-March 30). During the development of this exhibition, a collaborative relationship emerged between Seelig and Beesley, who was the guest curator. The observations that follow are adapted from a conversation between the two earlier this year.

A 25-page paperback catalogue, with texts by Philip Beesley, Sarah Bodine and Michael Dunas, and 24 black-and-white photographs, is available for \$20 from the Museum for Textiles Contemporary Gallery, 55 Centre Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5G 2H5.

Photographs by PHILIP BEESLEY

BEESLEY: I was immediately struck by the atmosphere of Seelig's studio. Several huge, raw rooms, with high windows piercing thick stone walls, making one of the most memorable spaces I have experienced—above, aerial lattices and nets, fluorescent-pigmented meshes and glistening nylon ribbons, hangings of cotton double cloths, lustrous ribbons of gros-grain. Lying around, a thicket of wire trusses, sleds and spoke

On these pages and following details of Warren Seelig's recent exhibition/installation at the Museum for Textiles Contemporary Gallery, Toronto, which included 16 suspended constructions, composed of colored fabric membranes held in tension by stainless steel

structures, and wall-mounted works—fields of metal rings and eccentric shapes. **BELOW:** *Iris*, 1996, suspended construction, nylon net, stainless steel spokes and axle, 46 by 38 by 6 inches. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Seelig in his Rockland, Maine, studio, 1996.

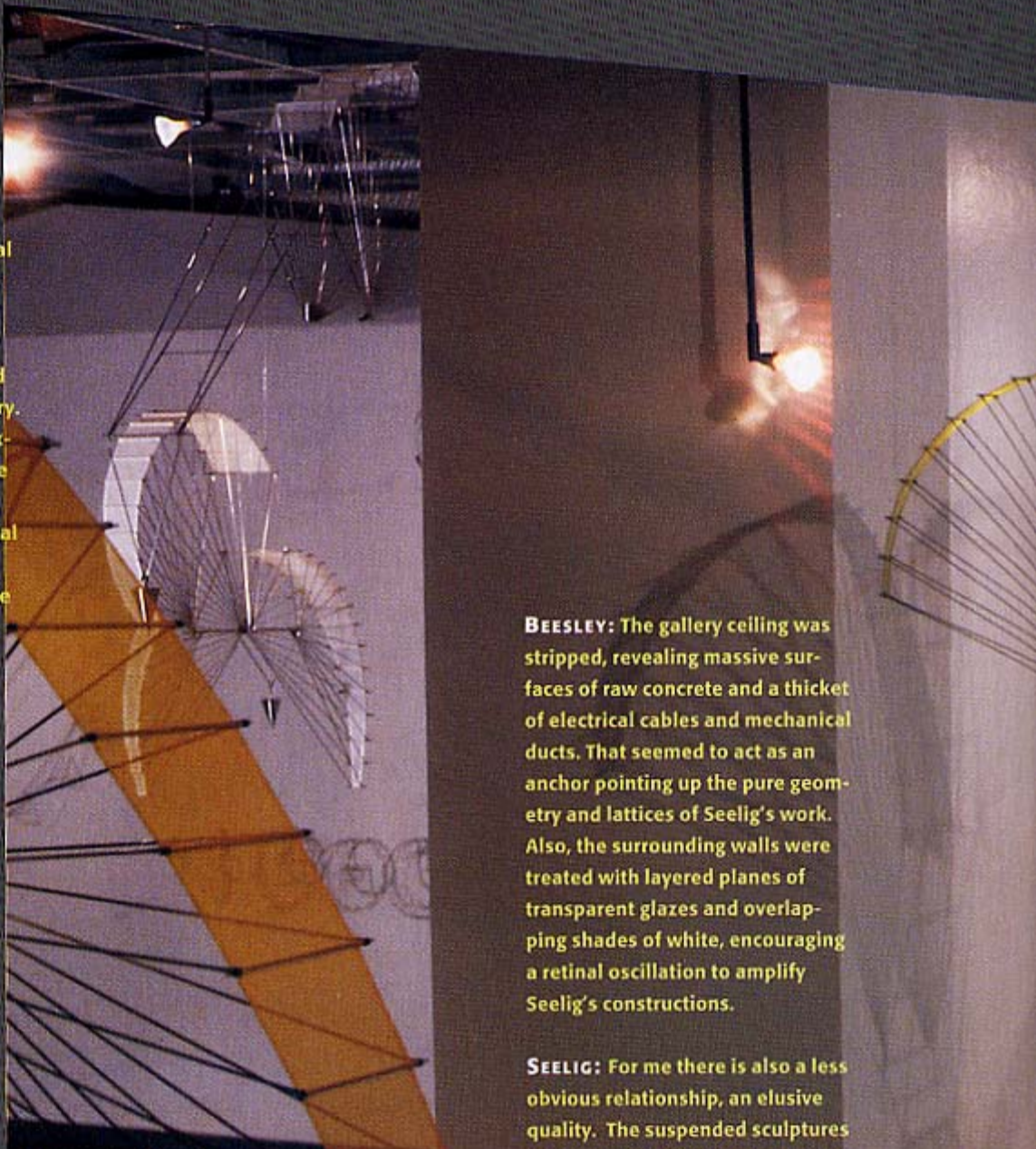
arrays; fields of templates, fabric samples and pigment trials, multiple bench and floor machine rigs, two more long halls storing old power looms, maintenance parts, a huge warping mill. The walls were covered with Kraft paper layout drafts. There was something more underneath this Piranesian space. I remember being struck by a peculiar quiet. Instead of a carnival, amidst the profusion there were notes of stillness and clarity.

SEELIG: I was encouraged by Beesley's ability to see my forms as textiles. He understood the dependency these works have on gravity and a delicate counterbalance of tension and compression. I remember that we spoke of textile as a force field, as a dynamic space.

BEESLEY: That first meeting we talked about how to make the dynamics of textile visible—treating warp and weft not as invisible forces, but as a tangible network surrounding the viewer. Tyvek and synthetic mesh ribbons stretched in space, acting as warp; stainless steel spoke arrays pushed and pulled against the ribbons like wefts.

SEELIG: The idea I had of showing the work as a collective of layered and overlapping images floating at various levels in space was confirmed when Beesley sent me a collage of the photographic images he had taken on his first visit to my studio. Although I thrive on the clarity and simplicity of isolated forms, he motivated me to see my works as an atmosphere of chaotic energy.

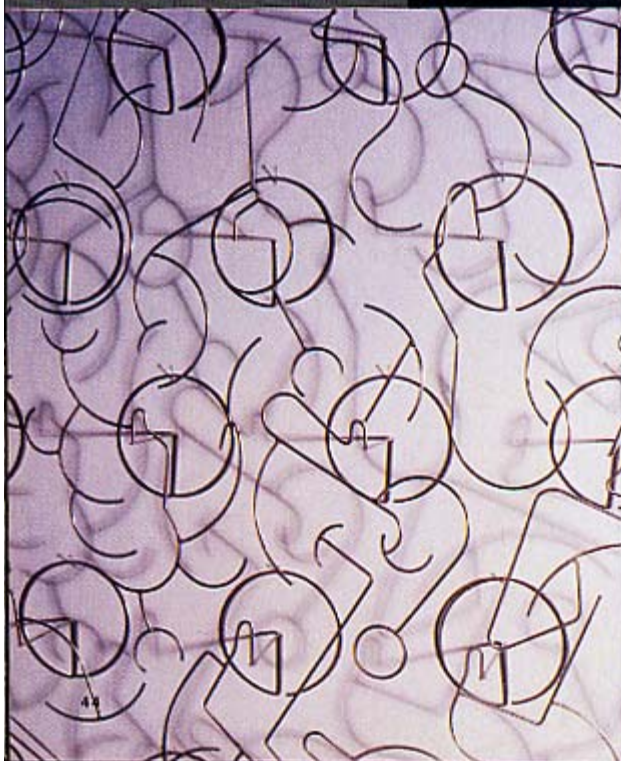




SEELIG: Beesley's original challenge to me was the idea of a canopy constructed overhead in a strategic location beyond the entrance to the gallery. I envisioned a dense "textile" of many layers made of a myriad of floating, balancing, reflective metal parts defining the overhead space. As this fictive textile grew in my mind, the idea evolved into a wall composition surrounding the viewer.

BEESELY: The gallery ceiling was stripped, revealing massive surfaces of raw concrete and a thicket of electrical cables and mechanical ducts. That seemed to act as an anchor pointing up the pure geometry and lattices of Seelig's work. Also, the surrounding walls were treated with layered planes of transparent glazes and overlapping shades of white, encouraging a retinal oscillation to amplify Seelig's constructions.

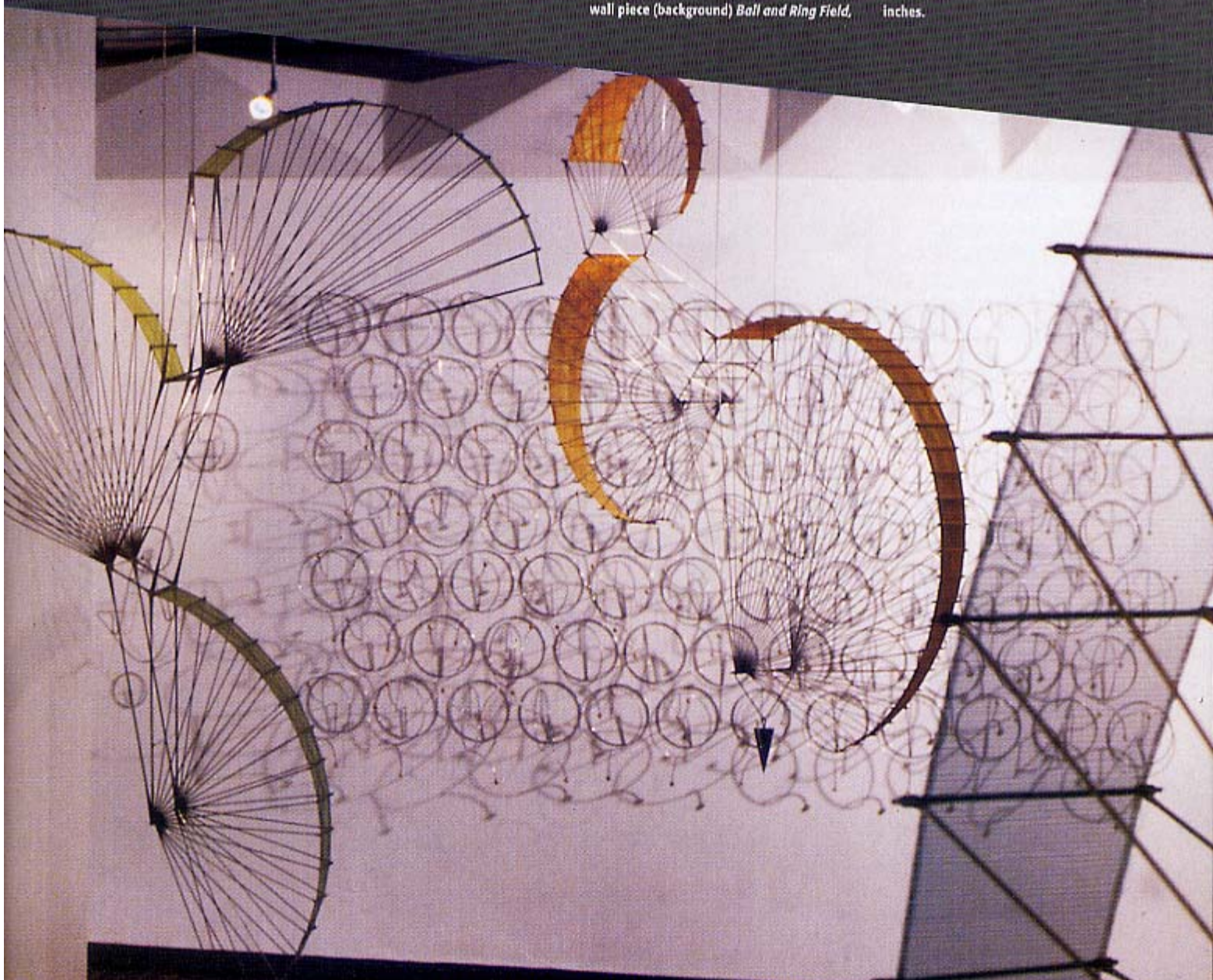
SEELIG: For me there is also a less obvious relationship, an elusive quality. The suspended sculptures are pushed to the brink of structural stability. The tension and compression placed on every pair of spikes exert a physical energy. They appear buoyant, a kind of suspended animation.



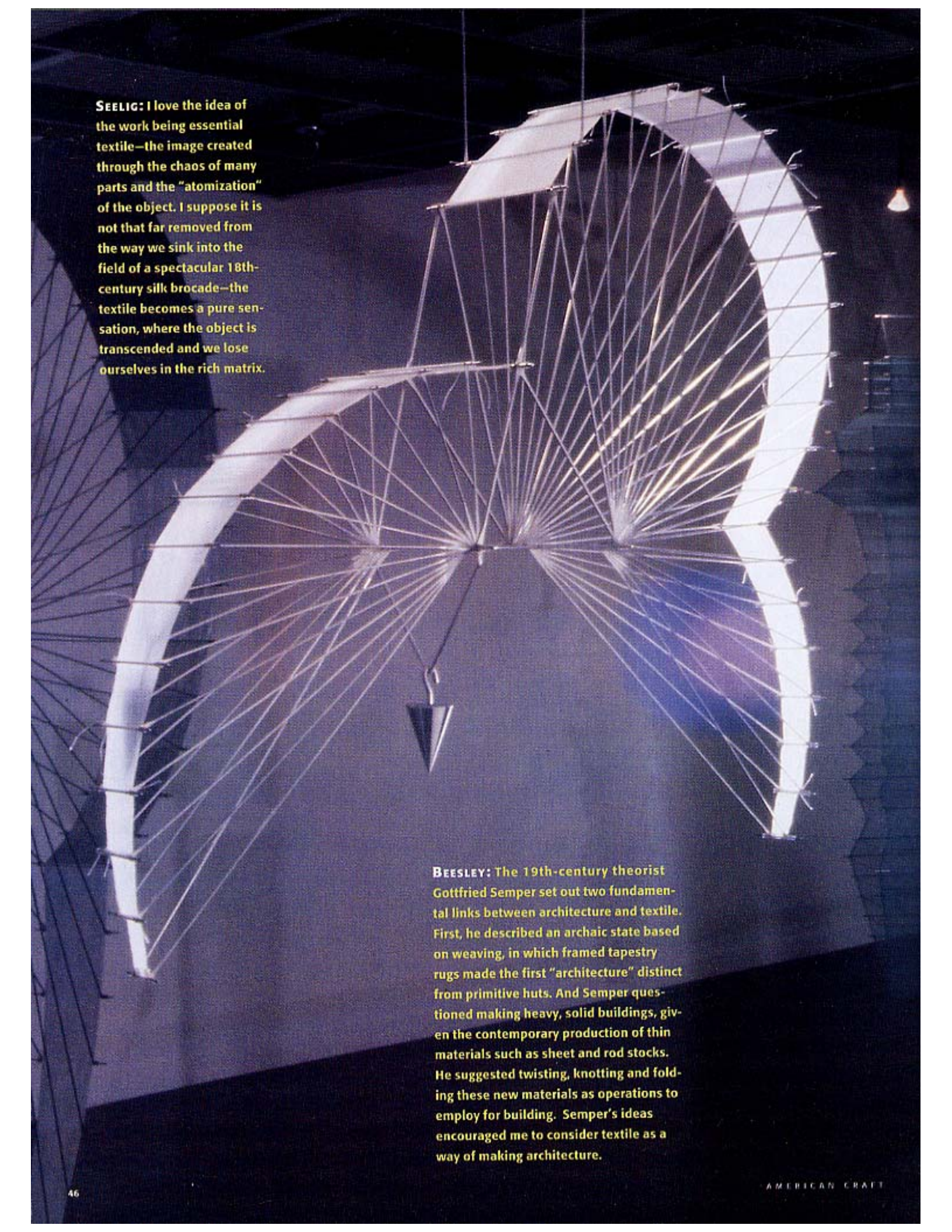
BEESELY: The wall-mounted reliefs are fresh from Seelig's studio, beginning ideas. The color-field painter Jules Olitski suggested his ideal painting would be one in which atomized color particles floated in space free from the canvas—a pure cloud of hue in light. Seelig seems to be pursuing something similar for textile: the physical elements that remain are what is left after obvious surfaces have dissolved. The parts are all separate, an assembly of counterbalanced wire forms that make up a hovering, gesturing surface.

BELOW: Installation view including the suspended constructions (left to right) *Double-Ended Model*, *Iris* and *Fan Dance*, all 1996, and wall piece (background) *Ball and Ring Field*,

1996. OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: *Kuba*, 1996, detail, wall piece, ring-turned and bent stainless steel, silver brazed, overall 58½ by 54½ by 5½ inches.

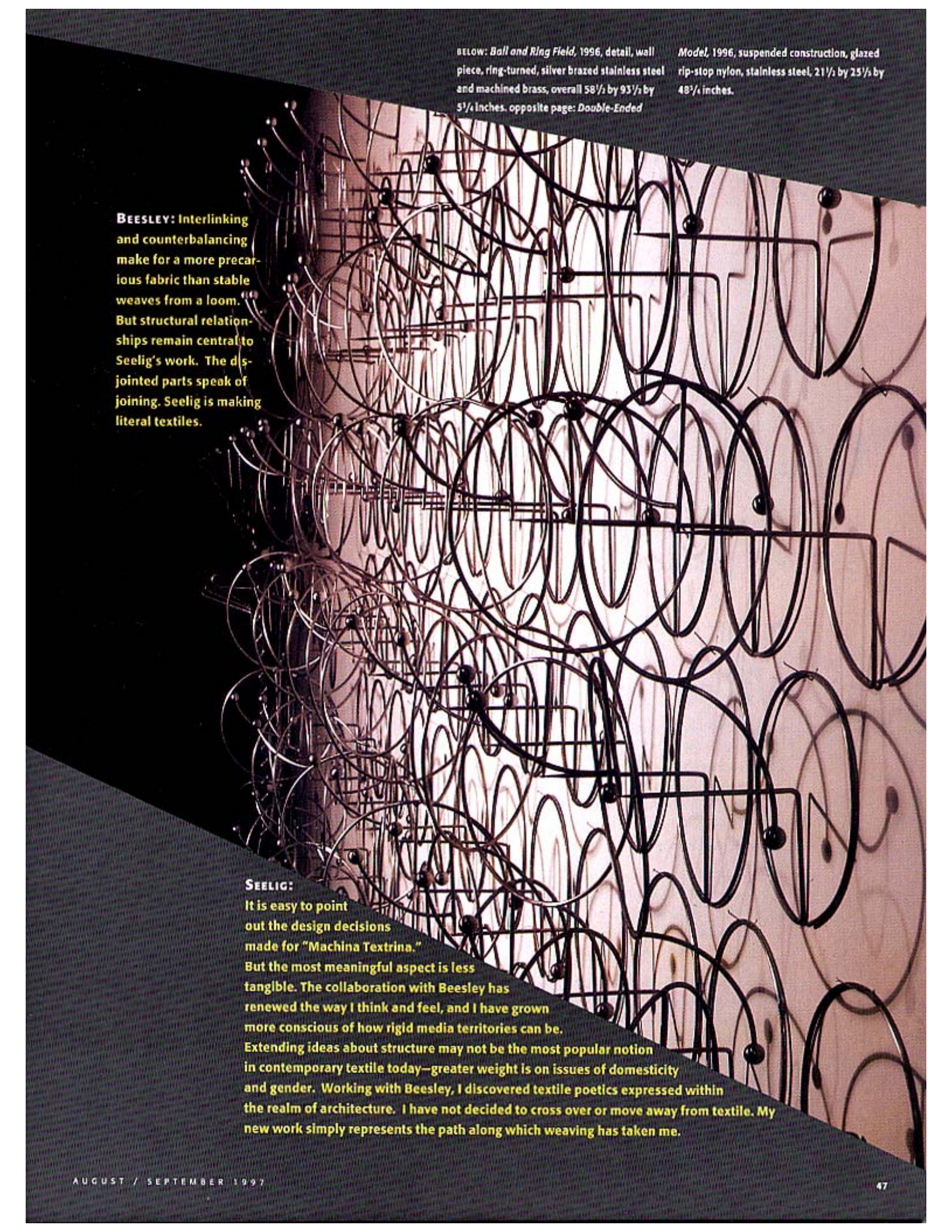


BEESELY: At first there was uncertainty about creating a densely layered installation of large and small suspended forms. What would this do to the individual works? There is an emphasis on translucency and reflection in the surfaces of the work. The structures act as optical filters and projection screens—the mesh surfaces are scrims catching shadows and glowing with light coming from behind. The spoke arrays give filtered views and cast latticelike patterns on surrounding surfaces. By building up layered views throughout the museum gallery, Seelig was making a new fabric filling the space.



SEELIG: I love the idea of the work being essential textile—the image created through the chaos of many parts and the “atomization” of the object. I suppose it is not that far removed from the way we sink into the field of a spectacular 18th-century silk brocade—the textile becomes a pure sensation, where the object is transcended and we lose ourselves in the rich matrix.

BEESLEY: The 19th-century theorist Gottfried Semper set out two fundamental links between architecture and textile. First, he described an archaic state based on weaving, in which framed tapestry rugs made the first “architecture” distinct from primitive huts. And Semper questioned making heavy, solid buildings, given the contemporary production of thin materials such as sheet and rod stocks. He suggested twisting, knotting and folding these new materials as operations to employ for building. Semper’s ideas encouraged me to consider textile as a way of making architecture.



BELOW: *Ball and Ring Field*, 1996, detail, wall piece, ring-turned, silver brazed stainless steel and machined brass, overall 58 1/2 by 93 1/2 by 5 1/4 inches. opposite page: *Double-Ended*

Model, 1996, suspended construction, glazed rip-stop nylon, stainless steel, 21 1/2 by 25 1/2 by 48 3/4 inches.

BEESLEY: Interlinking and counterbalancing make for a more precarious fabric than stable weaves from a loom. But structural relationships remain central to Seelig's work. The disjointed parts speak of joining. Seelig is making literal textiles.

SEELIG:

It is easy to point out the design decisions made for "Machina Textrina."

But the most meaningful aspect is less tangible. The collaboration with Beesley has renewed the way I think and feel, and I have grown more conscious of how rigid media territories can be.

Extending ideas about structure may not be the most popular notion in contemporary textile today—greater weight is on issues of domesticity and gender. Working with Beesley, I discovered textile poetics expressed within the realm of architecture. I have not decided to cross over or move away from textile. My new work simply represents the path along which weaving has taken me.