

Geoffrey Smedley / NOTES ON PIERO'S HEAD

Piero della Francesca is for us what Botticelli was for the nineteenth century. More than anyone from the past, Piero has proved to be an artist of our time. One can legitimately speak of the power and the authority of his compassion. Piero's moral stature rests on his achievement to generalize this essentially human characteristic. Nowhere in Piero is there a hint of false feeling; he is entirely without pretence. His understanding is underpinned by the rationale of classicism. For complaint and blame he substitutes endurance and grace.

The authority of Piero's insight rests upon the formal inevitability that he brings to bear. Timeless is an adjective often used in a description of his work. It is justified both by his enduring essay on man and by his use of mathematics which, according to the classical world, is a study of relationships situated beyond time — in that mysterious place the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan later called eternity.

This exhibition has as its point of origin a small drawing of the human head that appears in Piero's manuscript *De prospectiva pingendi*, a treatise in which he validated the geometric truth of central perspective. The drawing consists of two elevations of a head connected by trace lines to eight sections (in two groups of four), using the recently invented convention of architectural drawing to coordinate the elevations and sections. In this case the sections have been taken horizontally, so in effect, there are a series of plan views stacked one above the other. The shape and distribution of these sections represent the prime data used in the various sculptural studies made for the exhibition.

I was a student in 1951 when Kenneth Clark published his monograph on Piero, which he dedicated to Henry Moore. Perhaps it was the coherence of the information in the drawing that prompted Clark to write "no doubt a mathematically-minded sculptor could carry out this model [of the head] almost exactly." I

bought Clark's book in the year it was published and so I can date my first acquaintance with the head from then. It would be hindsight to say now exactly why I acquired the book, but it is true to say that in common with many others at that time I saw, along with the poetry, a strangeness, and an irreducible essentiality in the images. I was already in love with Piero's paintings in the National Gallery in London, and visited them many times once they had been reinstalled after the war. My eyes had largely been educated by Aldous Huxley's brief panegyric *The Best Picture* (1925), in which he made a connection between Piero's figures and Egyptian sculpture.

Later, due to the courtesy of the librarian at the Palatine Library in Parma, I was fortunate enough to be able to study the original small bistre drawing. The question I asked of it became: what, then, is this thing, the drawing of the head? Etymologically, a thing is a gathering, thus I was asking myself: what is it that Piero has gathered into this graphic assembly? How do the various aspects relate, talk to one another? And what finally has he legislated?

The philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote that the exploration of a thing required a "path." The decision to reconstruct the head as a solid seemed to be such a path. I am not alone in thinking that one can only know, understand, and take possession of that which one has oneself made. To know the drawing I decided to remake it as a sculpture.

One unusual feature of the drawing is the array of numbers that are associated with the lines, marking coordinate points on the surface. The coordinated points aid the problem of making a model from the drawing but, more significantly, they are important to the process of plotting the drawing in the first place. Ascribing a number to each salient point of a spatial structure is to make an abstract of it so that the whole figure can then be represented purely as numerals. Leon Battista Alberti was fully aware of the philosophical implications of such an act. The numerical abstract is, in a sense, more durable than the pyramids. Alberti, writing in a Pythagorean vein in *De Statua*, said:

The man who possesses them [the numbers] can so record the outlines and position and arrangement of the parts of any given

body in accurate and absolutely reliably written forms that not merely a day later, but even after a whole cycle of the heavens, he can again at will situate and arrange that same body . . . in such a way that no part of it, not even the smallest, is not placed exactly in the space where it originally stood.

Alberti's method is a memory system. To test it, to see how total the recall might be, I began by tracing all the sections and elevations, cutting them from card, and then fitting them together to make a rudimentary figure. The next step was to fill the interstices with plasticene, to move backwards in time from constructivist space to the solid substance of classicism. It was at this stage that the real problem of modelling appeared. Between each section lay an uncharted wilderness. After successive attempts, the terra incognita between each section was mapped through a process of trial and error, the aim being to render surfaces that made anatomical and architectonic sense. I do not mean literal anatomy or functional architecture. There is nothing literal in Piero's diagrammatic drawing or in the painted heads of the Arezzo fresco cycle to which Huxley called attention. The closest I can get to describing the anatomy is to reflect on the Egyptian sculptural aspect that Huxley saw. It is an art based on the mummy form where the naturalism of life has given way, in death, to the stillness of the unmoving reality, requiring the anatomy of the stilled life: that is to say, the unmoving life of *nature morte*.

Put another way, the anatomy of an Egyptian head is sculptural, not natural, and the architecture of Piero's head is connected to the vault of heaven and the earth beneath. This last observation is meant as a technical statement. The sculpture is based on a careful investigation of Piero's formal means: the geometry underlying the drawing. But it is beyond question that the geometrical procedures themselves play a figurative role in Piero's design, for they derive from identifiable classical sources connected to cosmology and cosmography. Piero made an image that refers both to the human head and the world, which surrounds it.

Piero used geometry both morphologically and analogically. It is natural, given his preoccupations, that the geometry he used in this

drawing of an ideal head is closely connected to notions found in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the form of the human head is likened to that of the world. To make an image of a head enjoying an analogical connection to the macrocosm indicated that Piero needed to gather the various strands of understanding available to him into one *thing*. He had to reconcile Plato's philosophical account with the geometry of Ptolemy, which was the theoretical basis of Renaissance astronomy. Piero connects the various geometrical ideas by employing a common centre point. The location of this point I shall describe later.

The astrological implication of all this is inescapable. Man, the crown and roof of things, is made and moves according to the same geometrical laws that permeate the universe. Geometrical relationships described both in antiquity and by Ptolemy were woven into a seamless whole.

I was drawn into this strange intellectual world, gradually, by asking the question: why did Piero place the horizontal sections with which he divided the head where he did? The answer was that the sections fell at the lowest level of the jaw, at the indentation of the chin, at the parting of the lips, at the underside of the nose, at the hump of the nose, and so on. Bearing in mind Piero's passion for mathematical order, the next question was: does the vertical distribution of the sections have any geometric significance? That is to say, is there some propositional scheme underlying the composition of the head? My instinct was clearly affirmative, based on the fact that the drawing appeared in a textbook that treated optical questions geometrically, which had been written by an artist of the greatest subtlety of mind, who was an accomplished geometer. In the event, the judgment made in advance of the evidence proved to be justified.

Beneath the side elevation the drawing shows two sets of four sections of the head. The trace lines ascend from these sections to intersect the elevation and are then projected horizontally to show the levels at which the sections occur. The sections themselves have sixteen radial lines stemming from a centre point. The intersection of the radii with the respective perimeters of the sections are

numbered in sequence running counterclockwise from 1 to 16. From each of these points trace lines have been drawn to the elevation, but with one significant exception: *the trace line from the centre point has been omitted*. Yet the points at which it would have intersected the various levels of the sections on the side elevation have been labelled with pairs of numbers (reading downwards, 5/13 — 5/13 — 8/16 — 7/15 — 7/15 — 6/14 — 5/13 — 5/13). It is the only trace line that Piero has not drawn.

There is a further omission. From the extreme back of the head shown in section he has drawn a trace line to meet the side elevation at the appropriate location. But in this case he has not drawn the horizontal line that would indicate the level at which this now missing section should fall.

Negative evidence, the absence of necessary facts, is just as important to an enquiry as positive clues. The visual arts require skill not only in revealing but also in concealing. Artists have always been marshalled into the camouflage corps. If these two missing lines are added to the drawing they cross at right angles and their point of intersection proves to be a centre from which the vertical distribution of the various levels can be found by a system of circles fitting exactly within squares. The geometry of doubling the area of a given square that underlies this system was described by Plato in his dialogue *Meno* to illustrate the theory of reminiscence, which purports to show how the mind, guided by a questioner as nimble as Socrates, can recall things that occurred in a previous life. That is to say it was used as an emblem of resurrection.

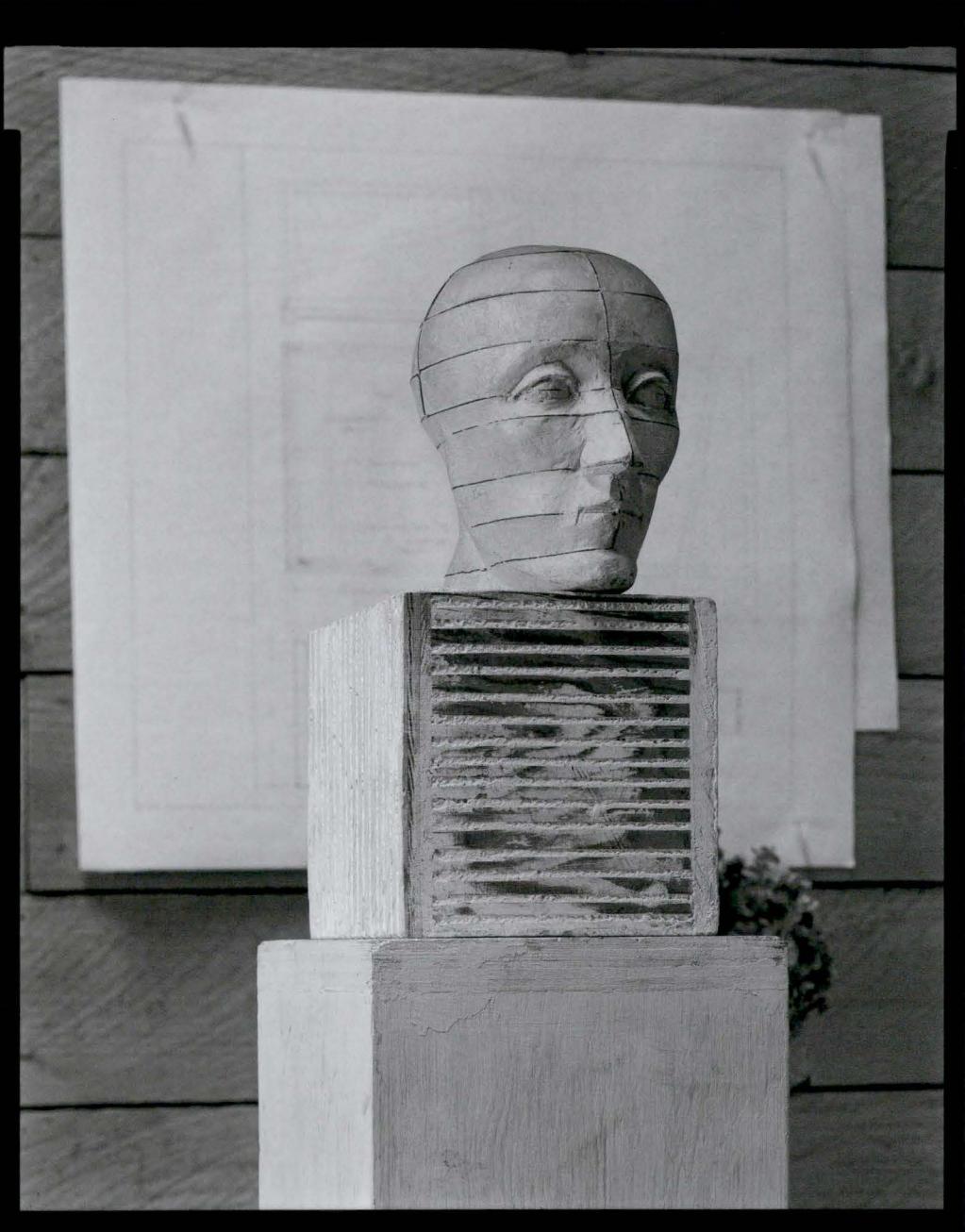
Italian intellectuals of the fifteenth century reckoned that, on some matters, silence is power. The cryptographic interests of earlier times were revived and improved. Alberti wrote a treatise on ciphers and Piero della Francesca hid the geometric construction for his drawing of the head by omitting a central point necessary to unravel its morphology. In fact it is located at the centre of the cranium, which thus serves as a physiological and cosmological centre.

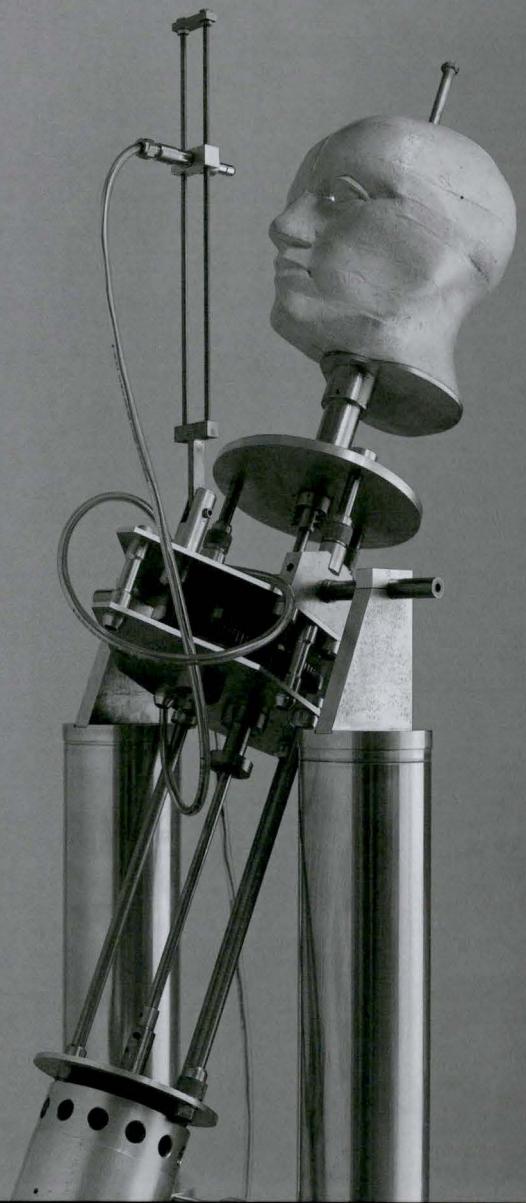
The nexus of thought, speculation, and observation that constituted the intellectual world of the fifteenth century was condensed by Piero della Francesca into his androgynous image of

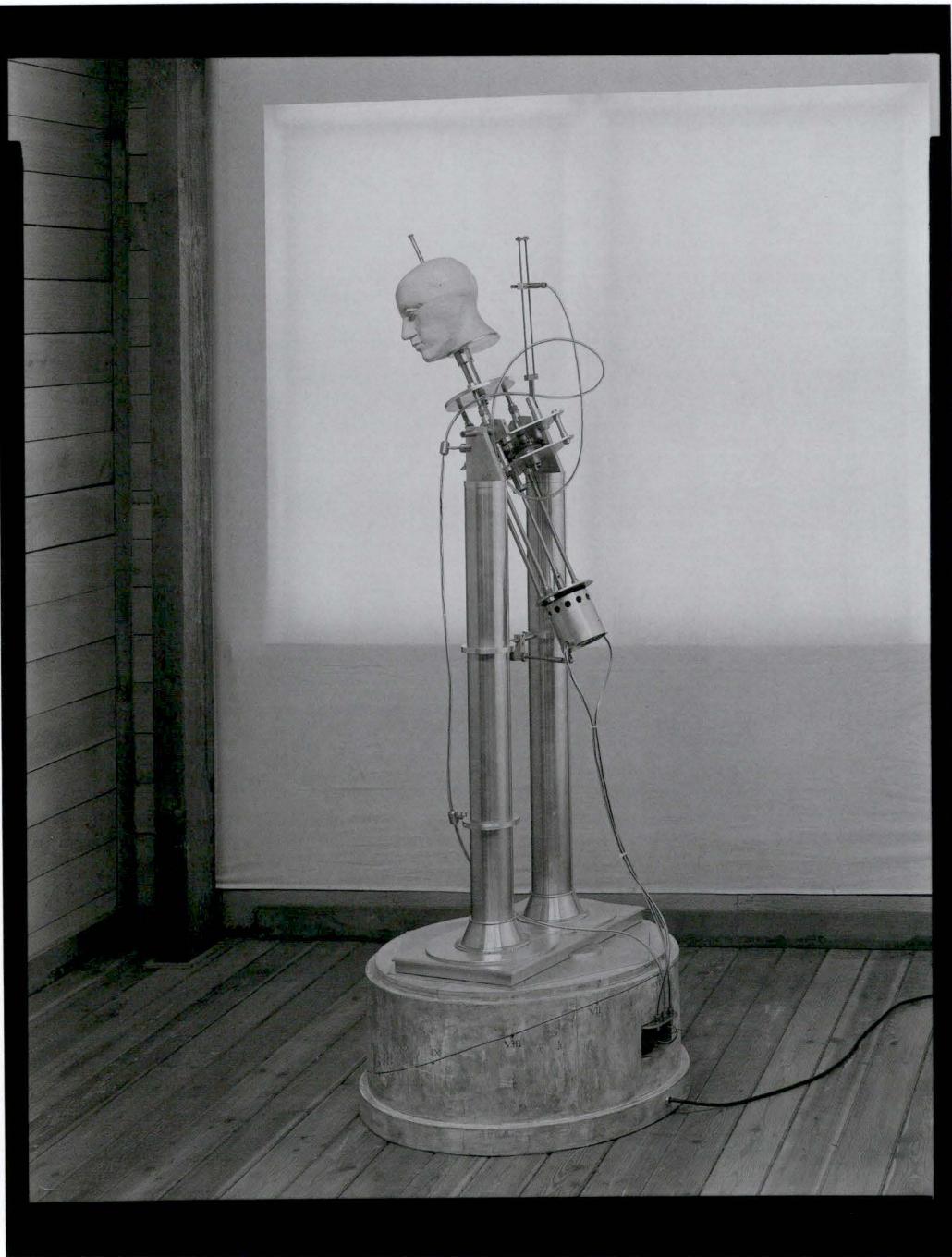
the head. Like the celebrated Vitruvian figure of Leonardo da Vinci, Piero's head is the image of man as the measure of all. Far from advocating a brash control of nature and life, it stands as a dispassionate icon of civilization and civility. My hope is that in spite of the appalling history of the twentieth century, which so deliberately failed to learn from the past, we can quit the age of amnesia and regain a measure of confidence in our own species.

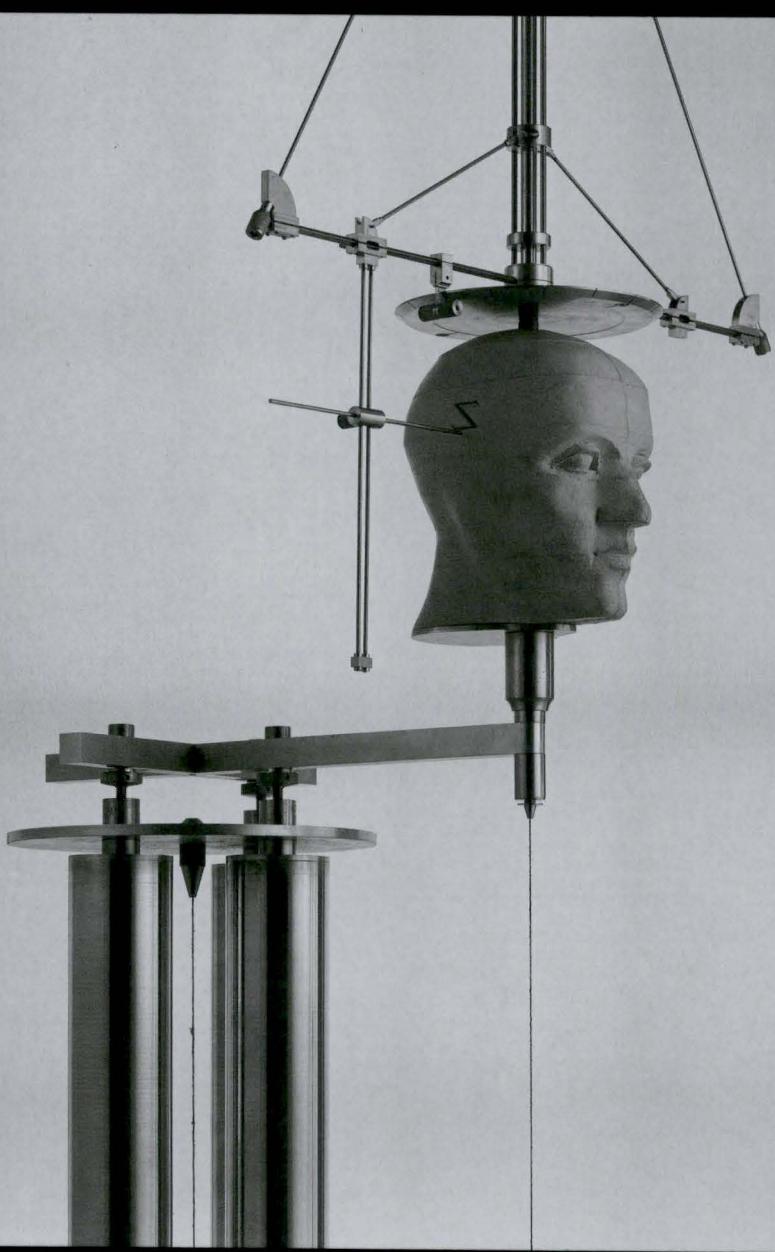
Editor's Note

Geoffrey Smedley's large scale sculpture "The Numbers" based on Piero della Francesca's drawings of the human head was lost to the fire that destroyed the Smedley home on Gambier Island, November 21, 2004.



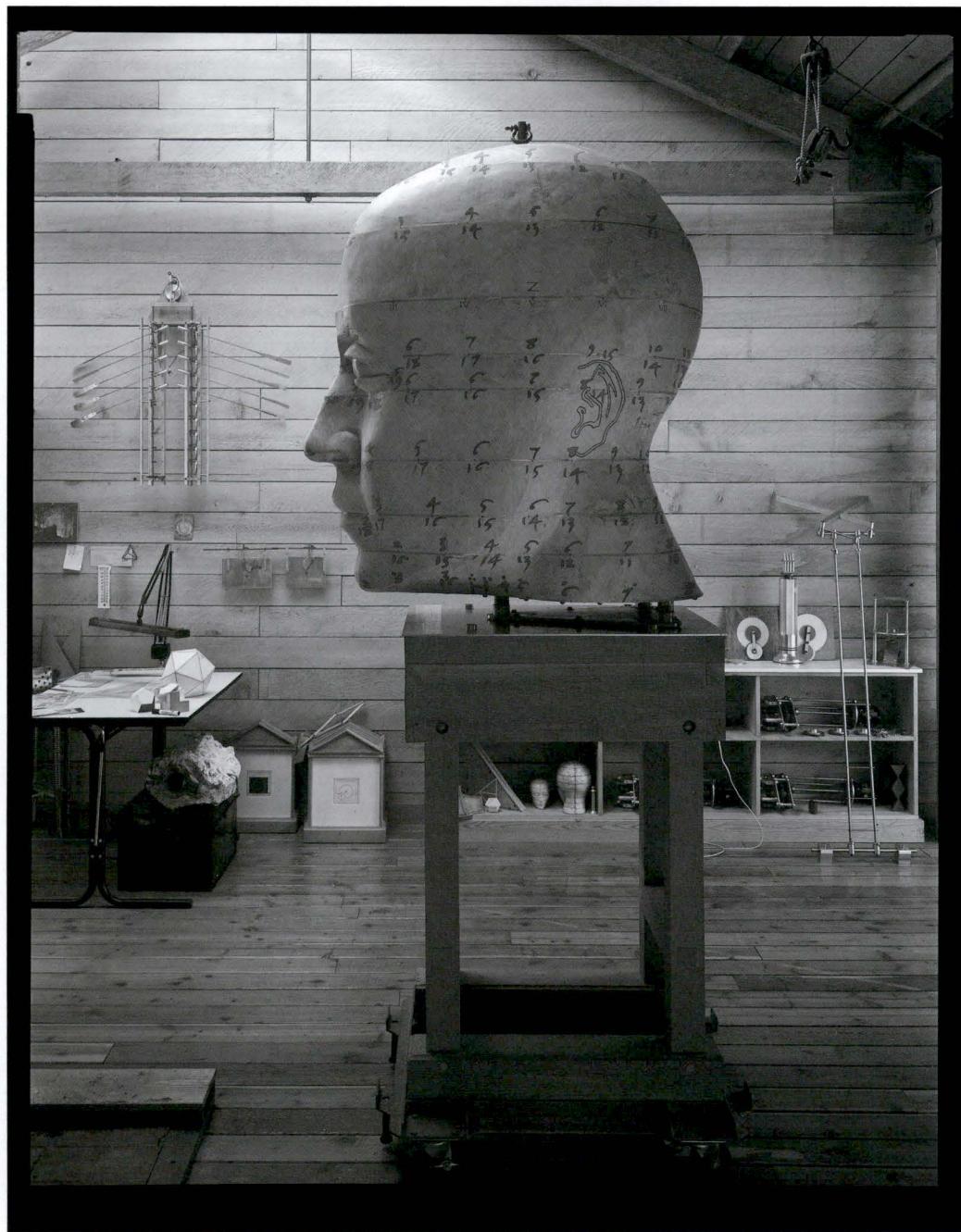














LIST OF WORKS

1. Distance Herm
2. Numbered Head
3. Numbered Head (rear view)
4. Recalled Head
5. Recalled Head (detail)
6. Inclined Head
7. Inclined Head (detail)
8. Head of the Distant Herm — Study III