

"O day and night, but this is wondrous strange"



"Fie, fie, how frantically I square my talk!"

FLATLAND

A ROMANCE OF MANY DIMENSIONS

DEREK BEAULIEU

With an afterword by MARJORIE PERLOFF

INFORMATION AS MATERIAL

YORK, ENGLAND

Acknowledgments

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For Nan,
1915-2007.

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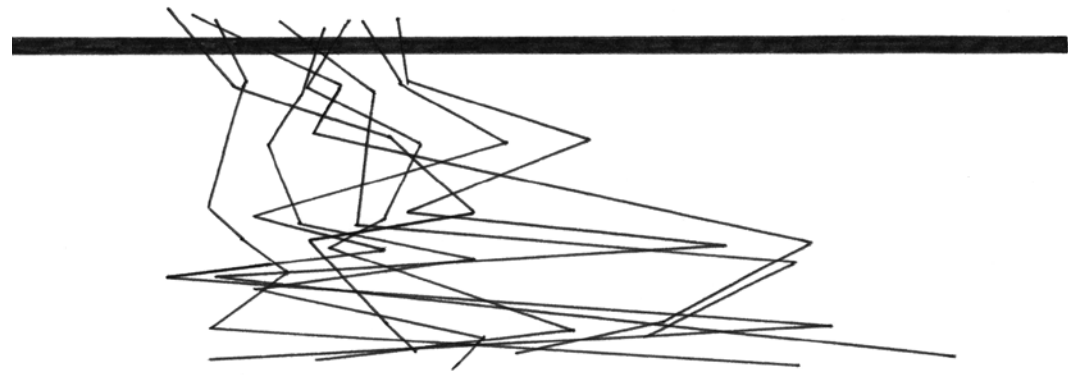
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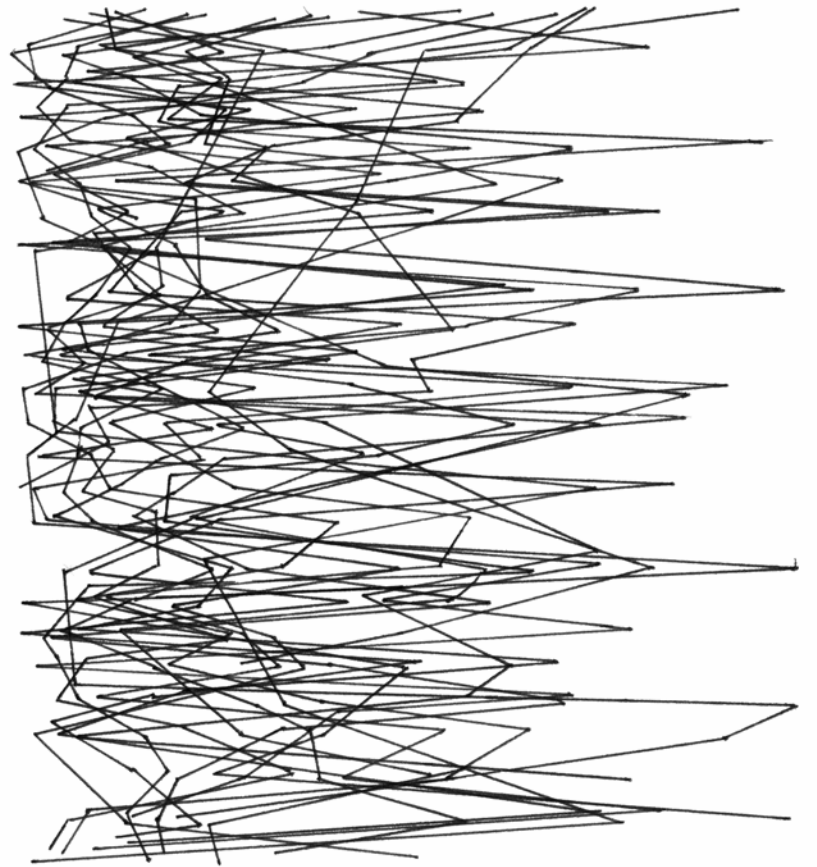
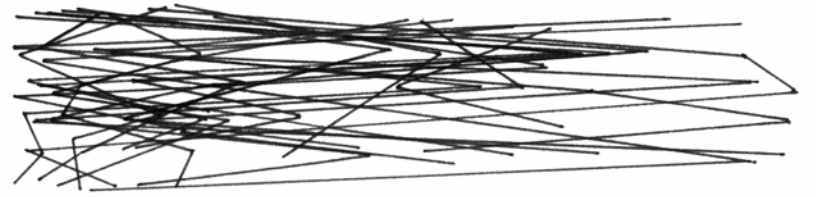
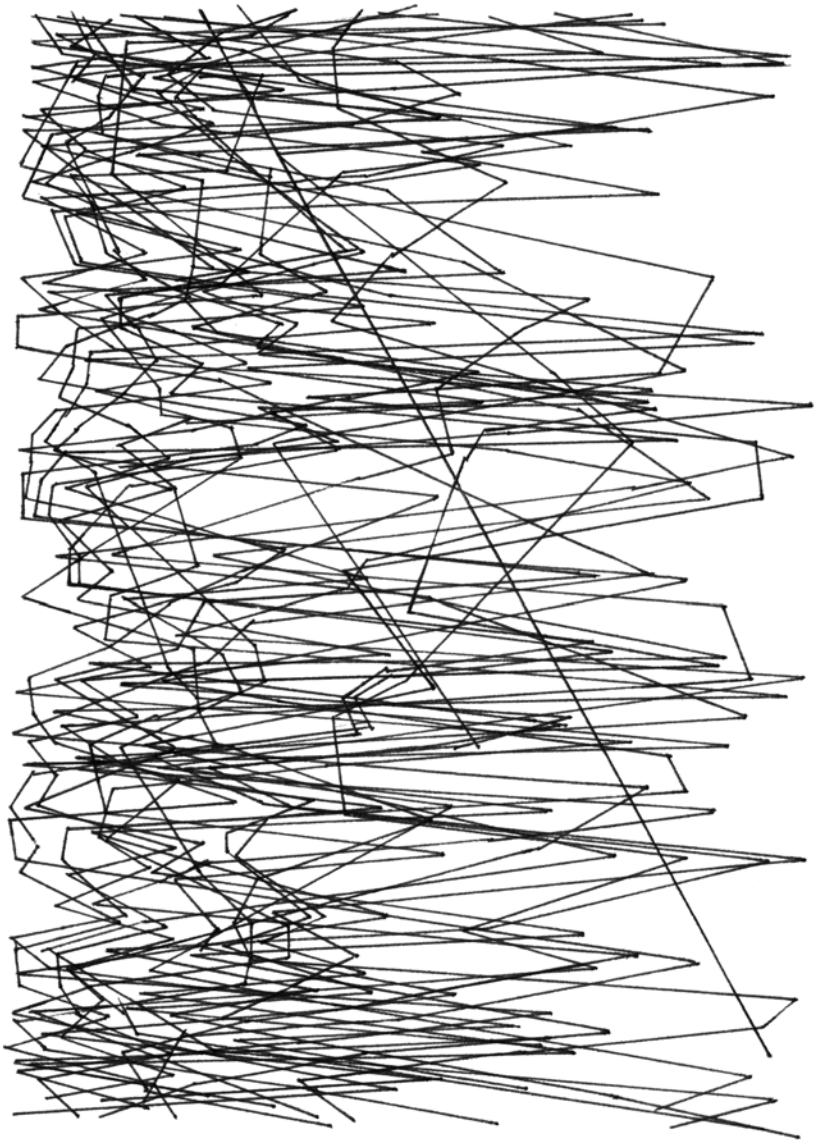
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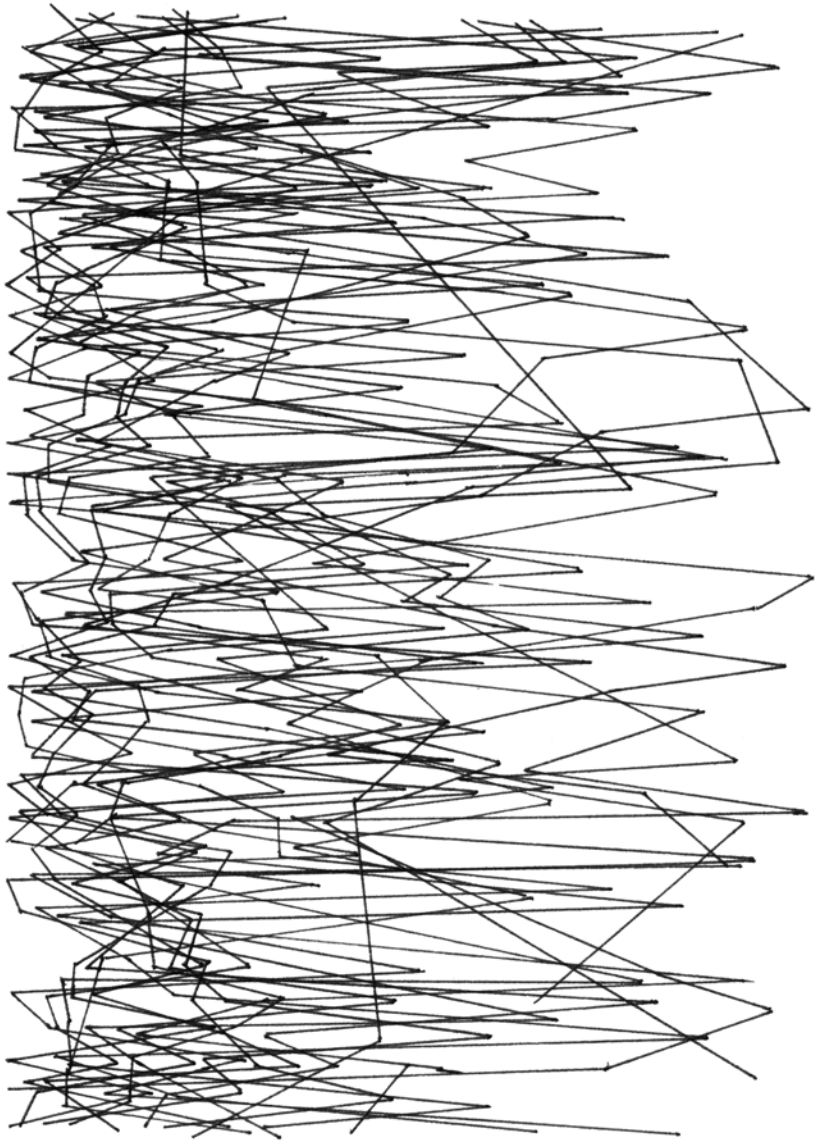
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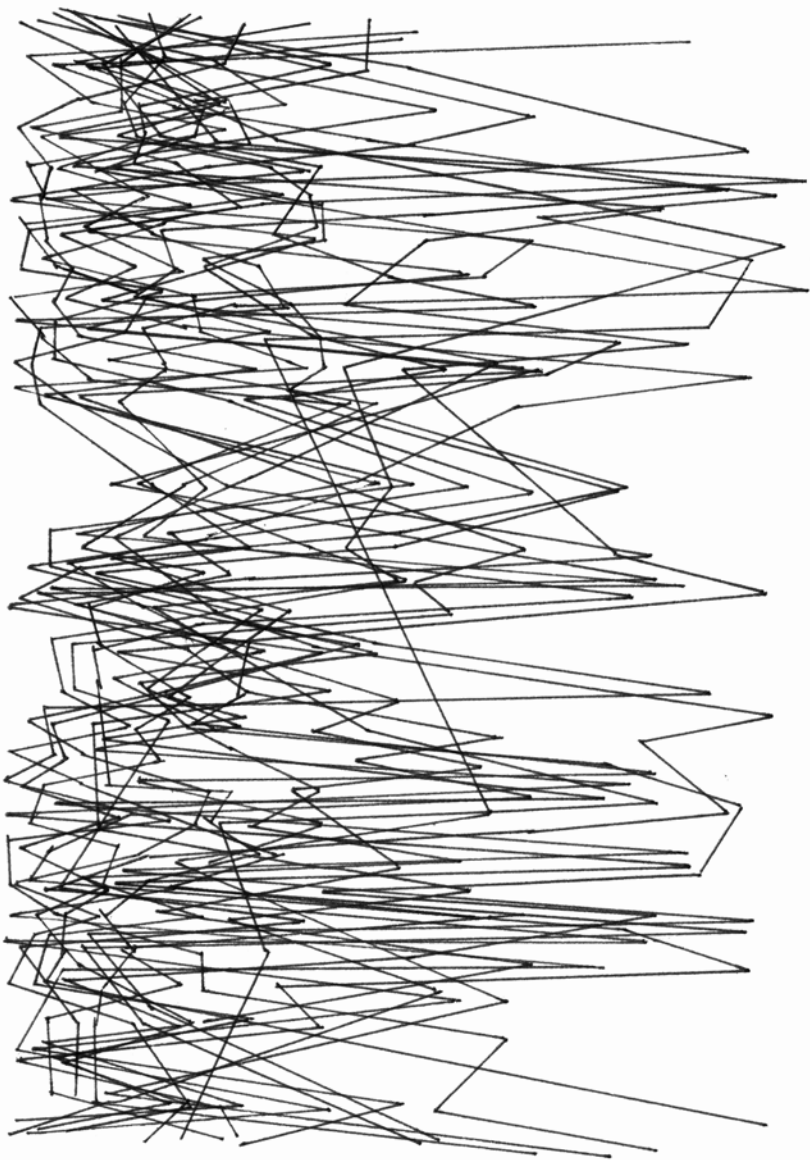
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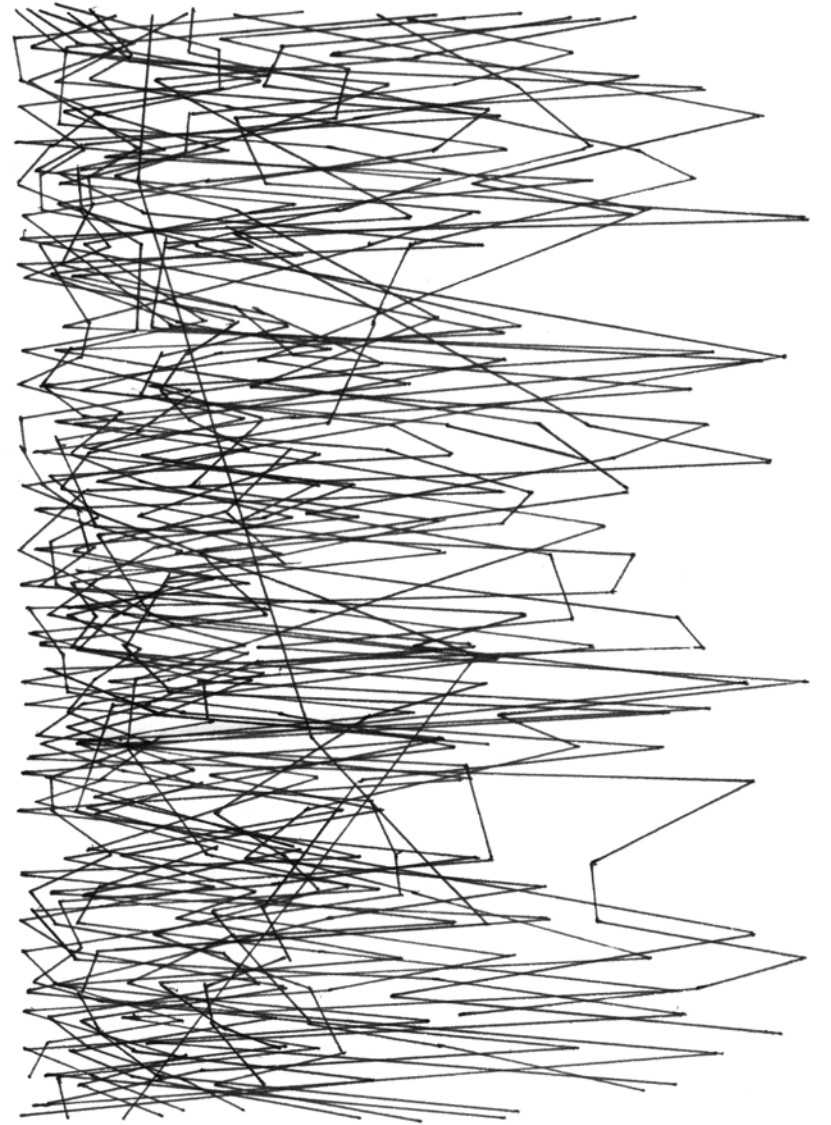
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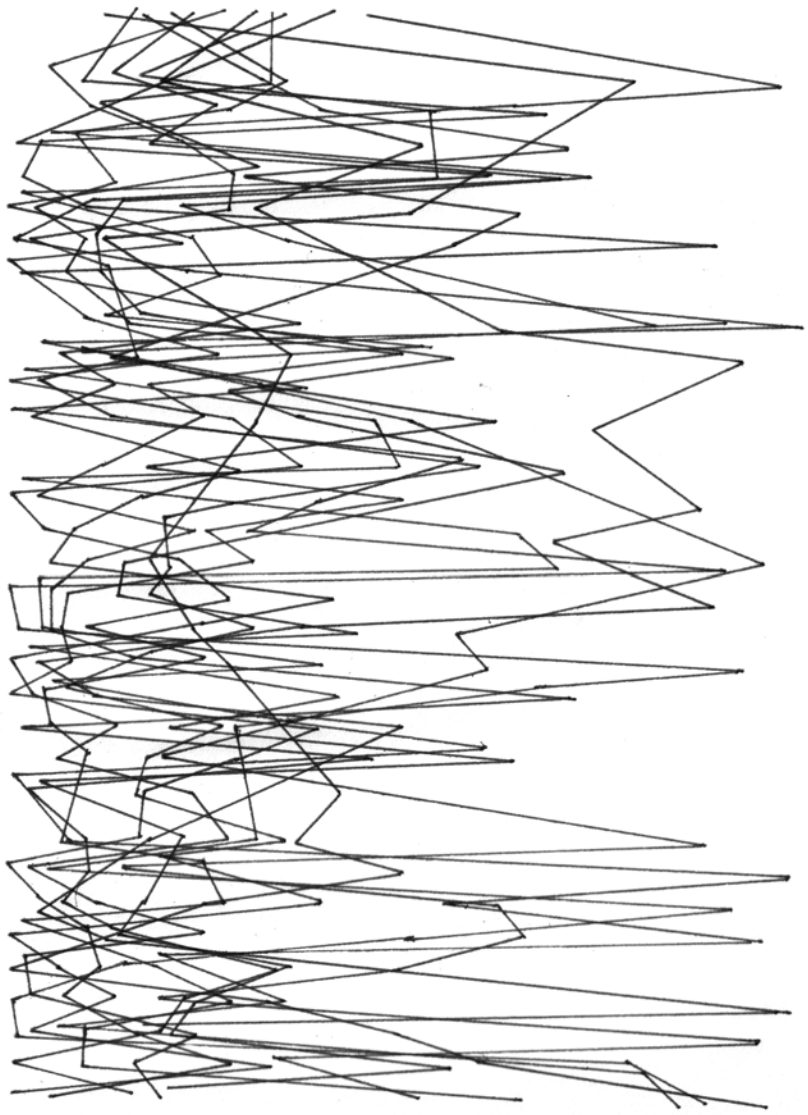


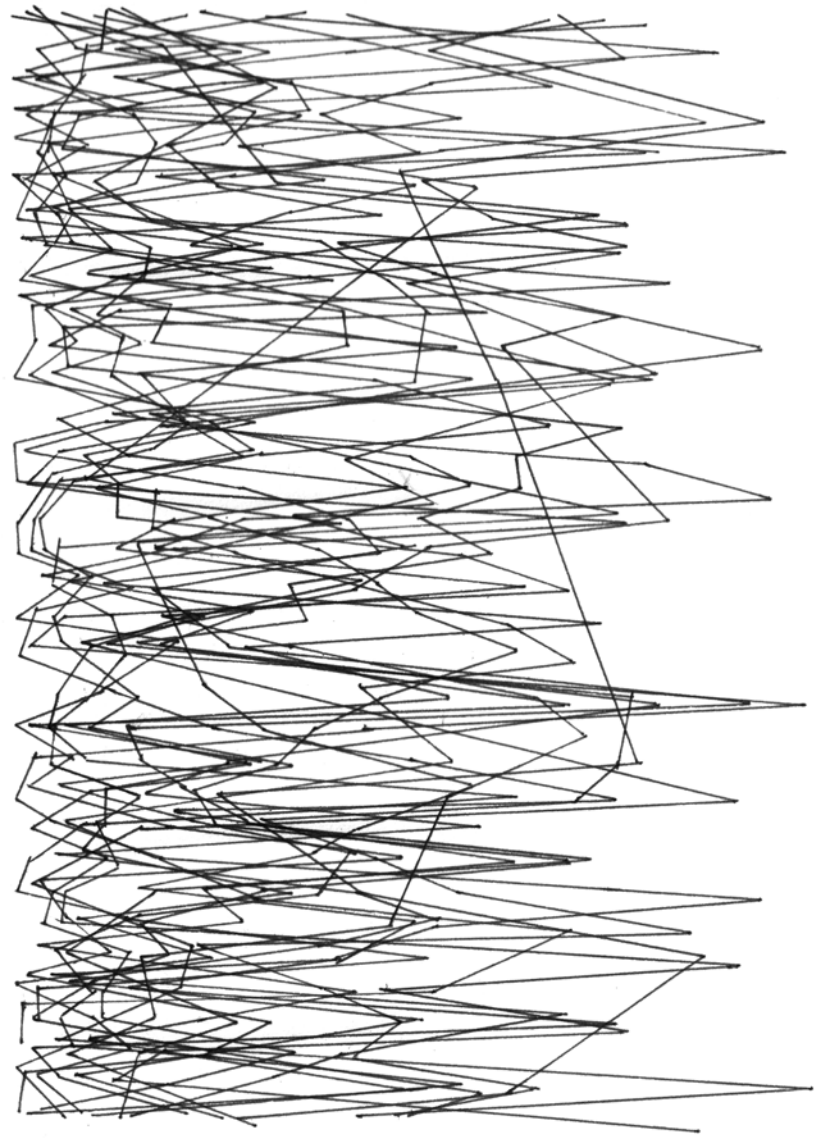
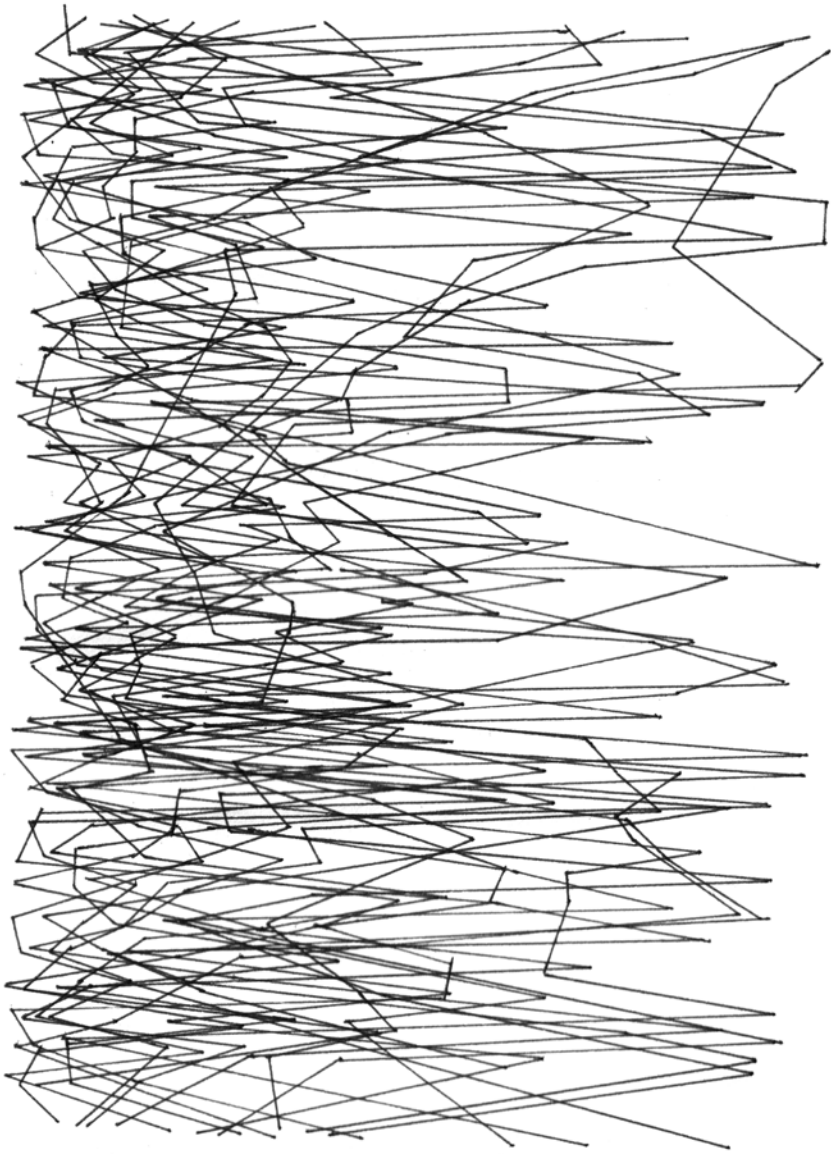


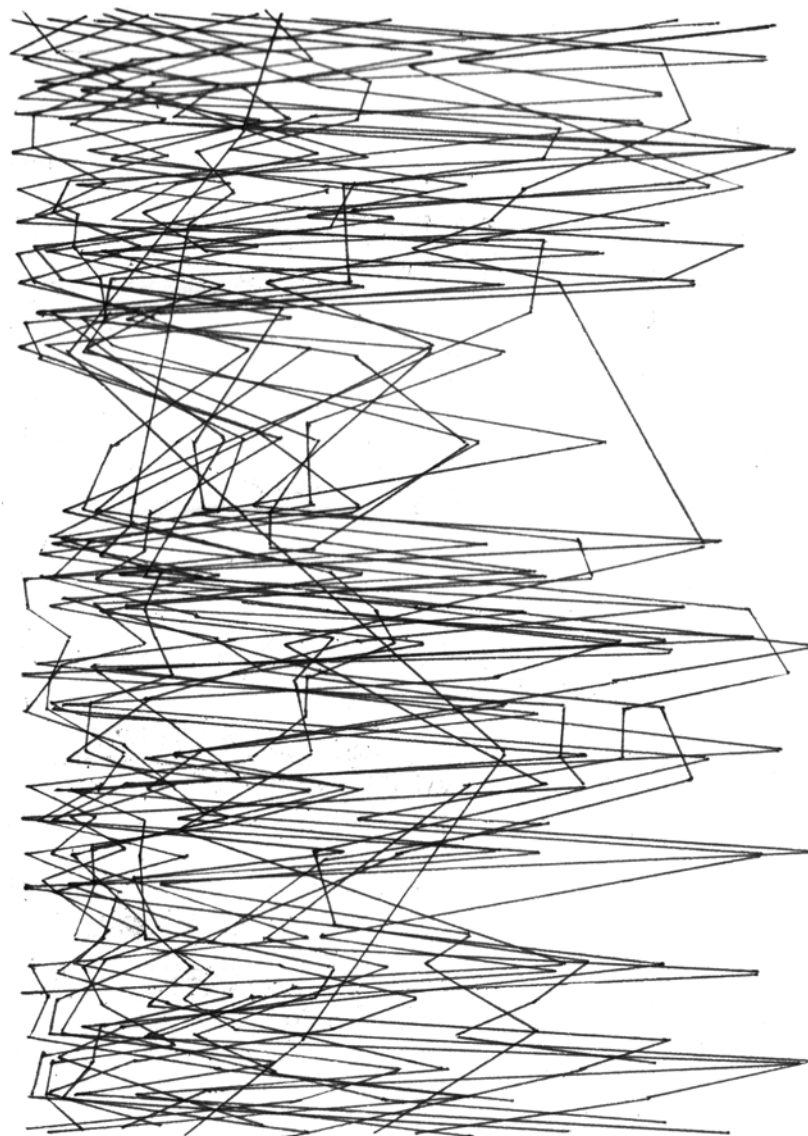
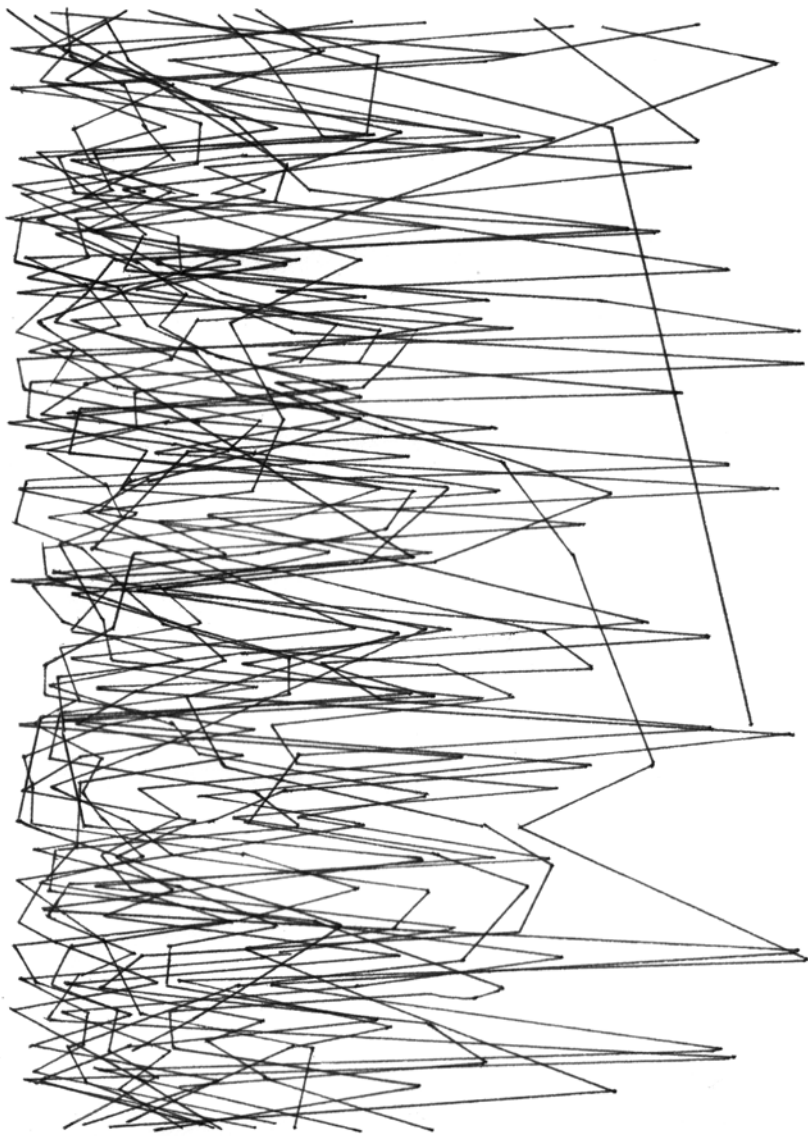


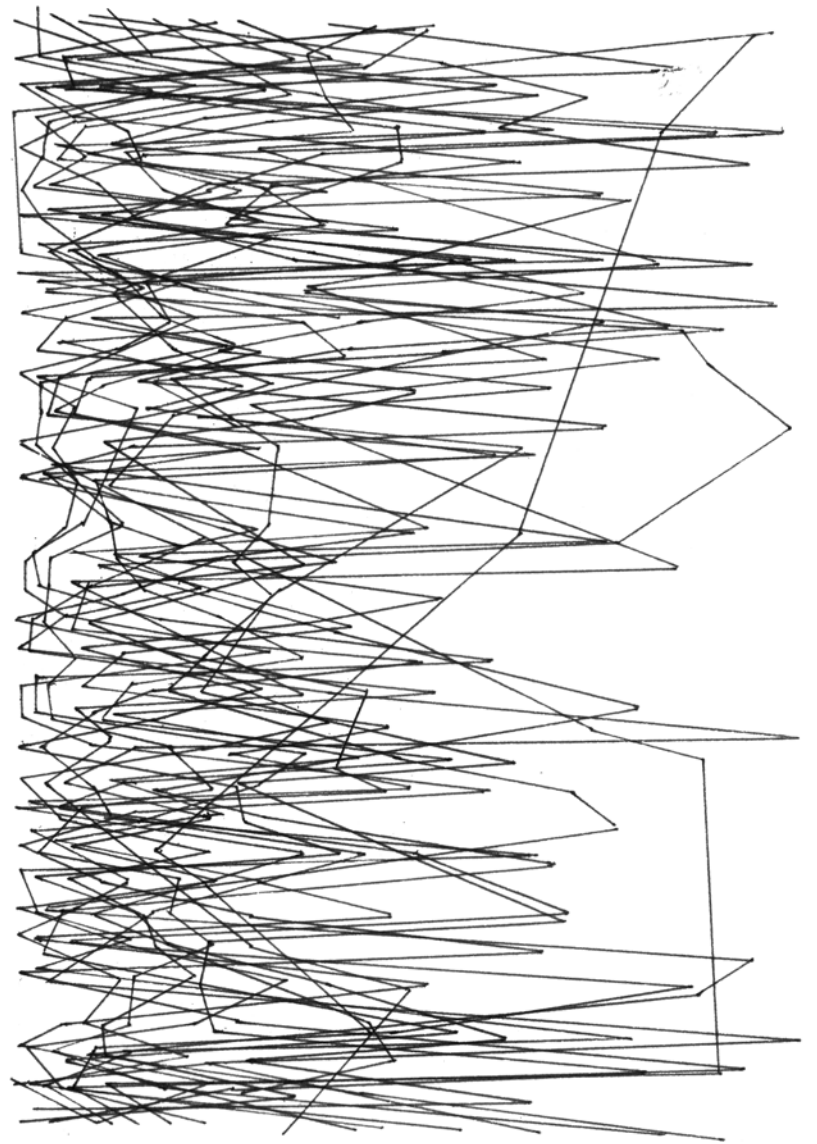
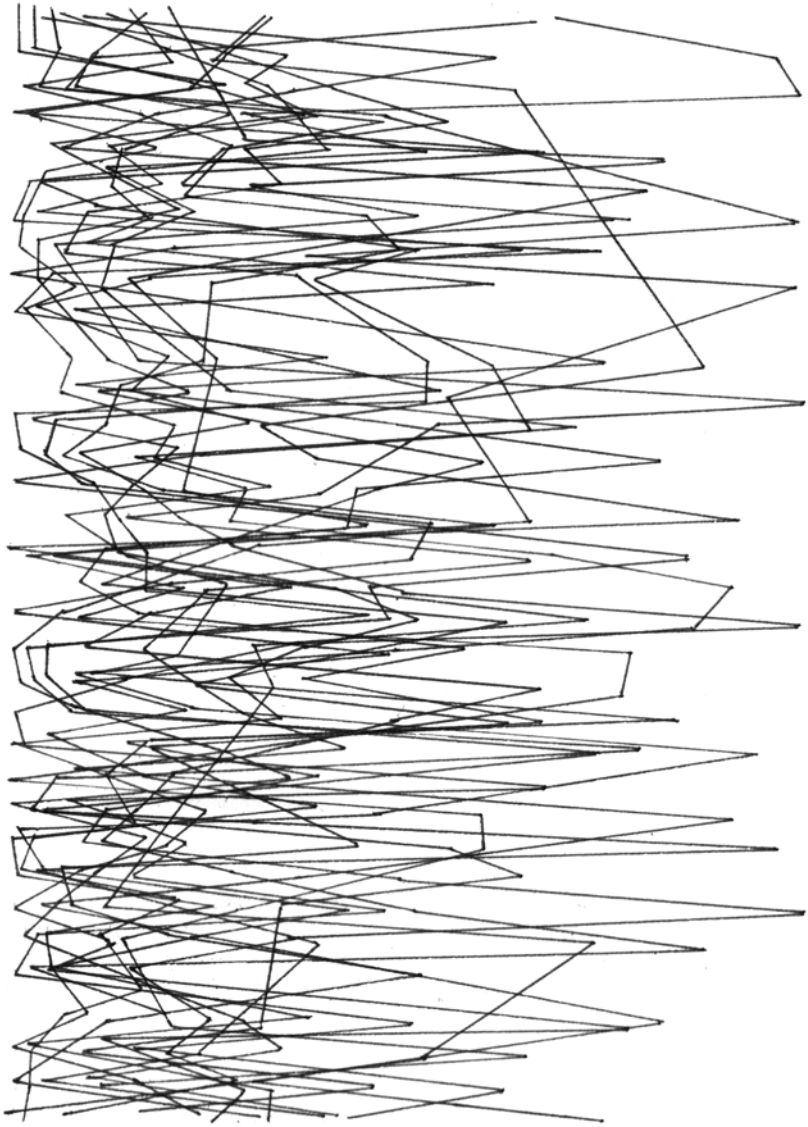


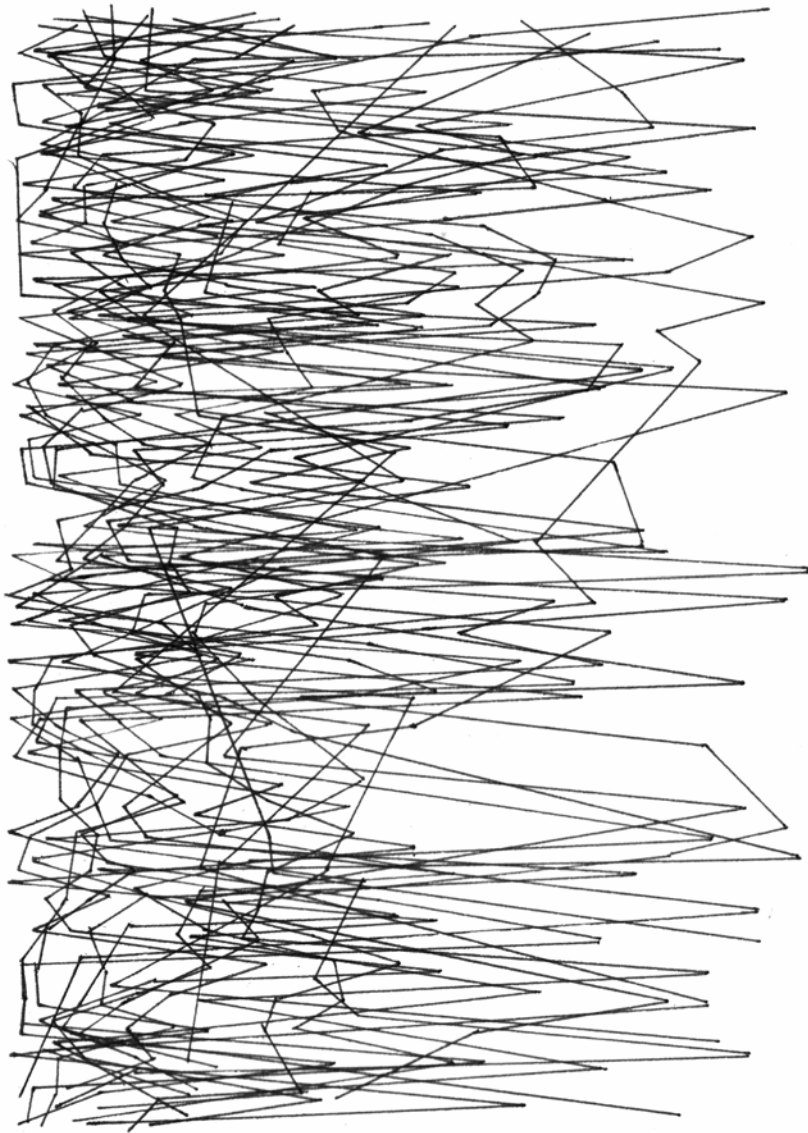


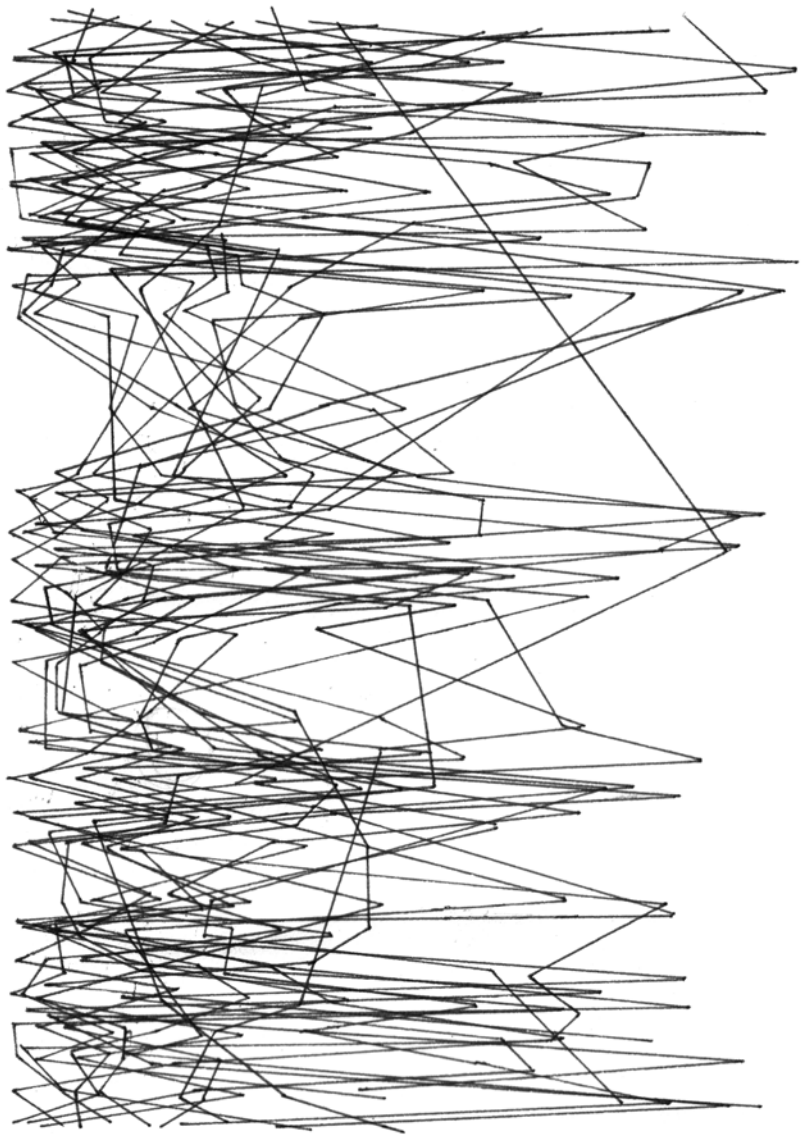


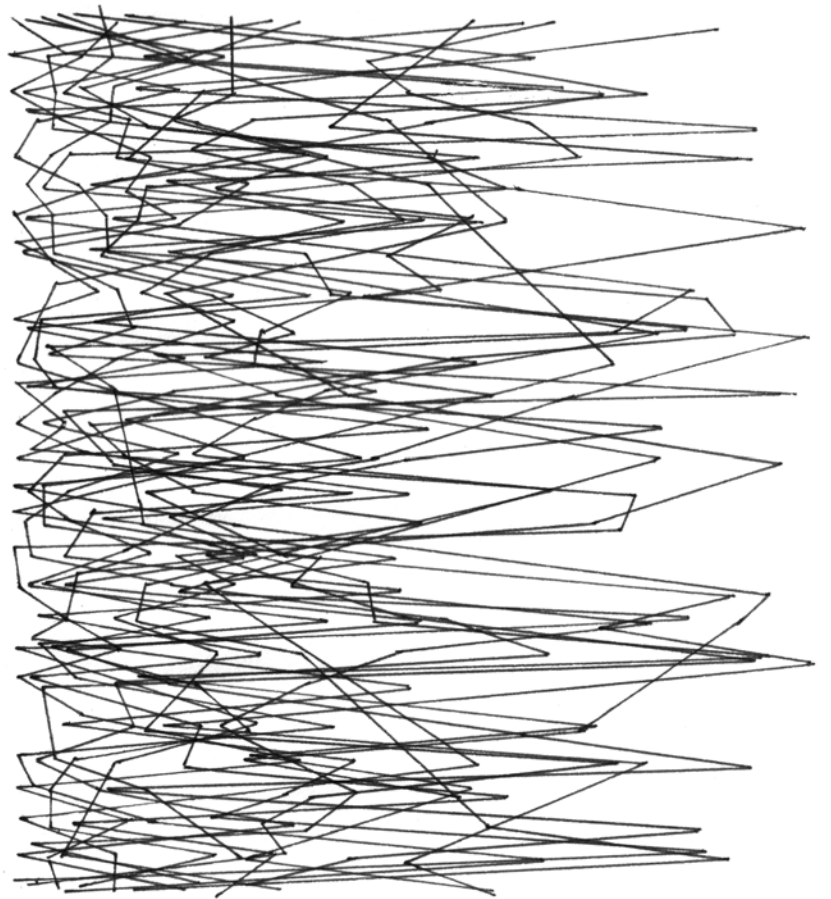
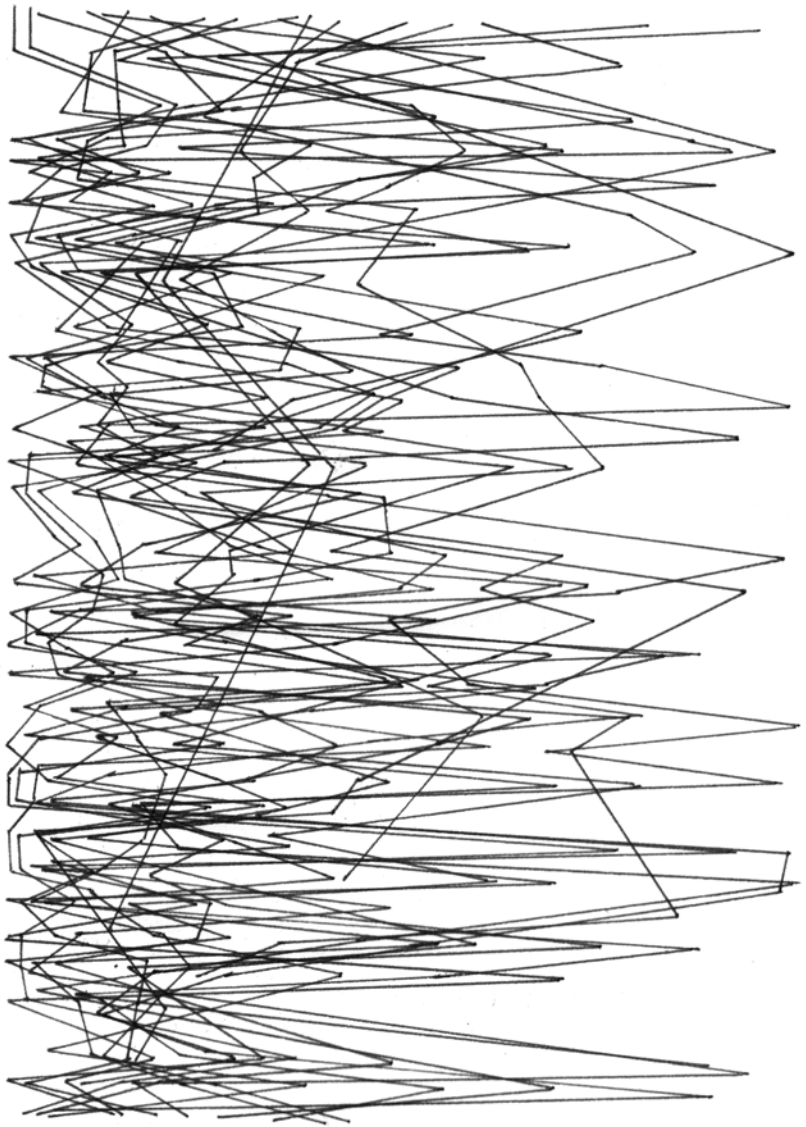


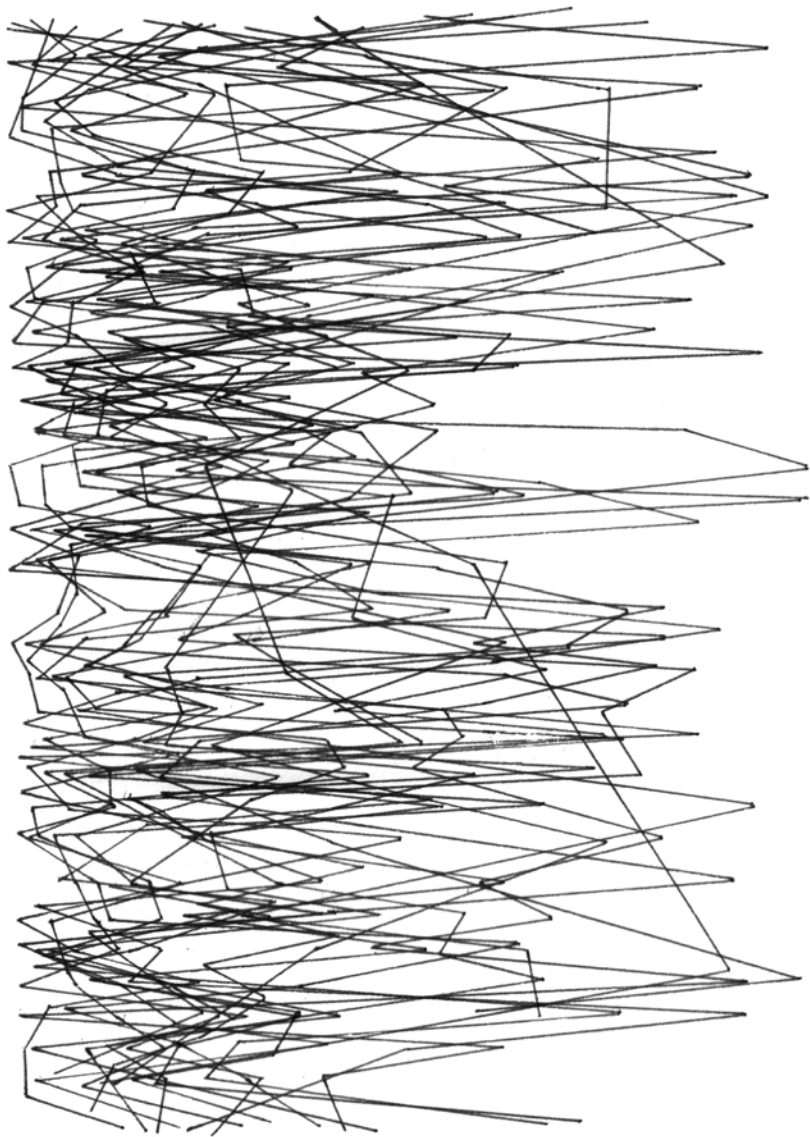


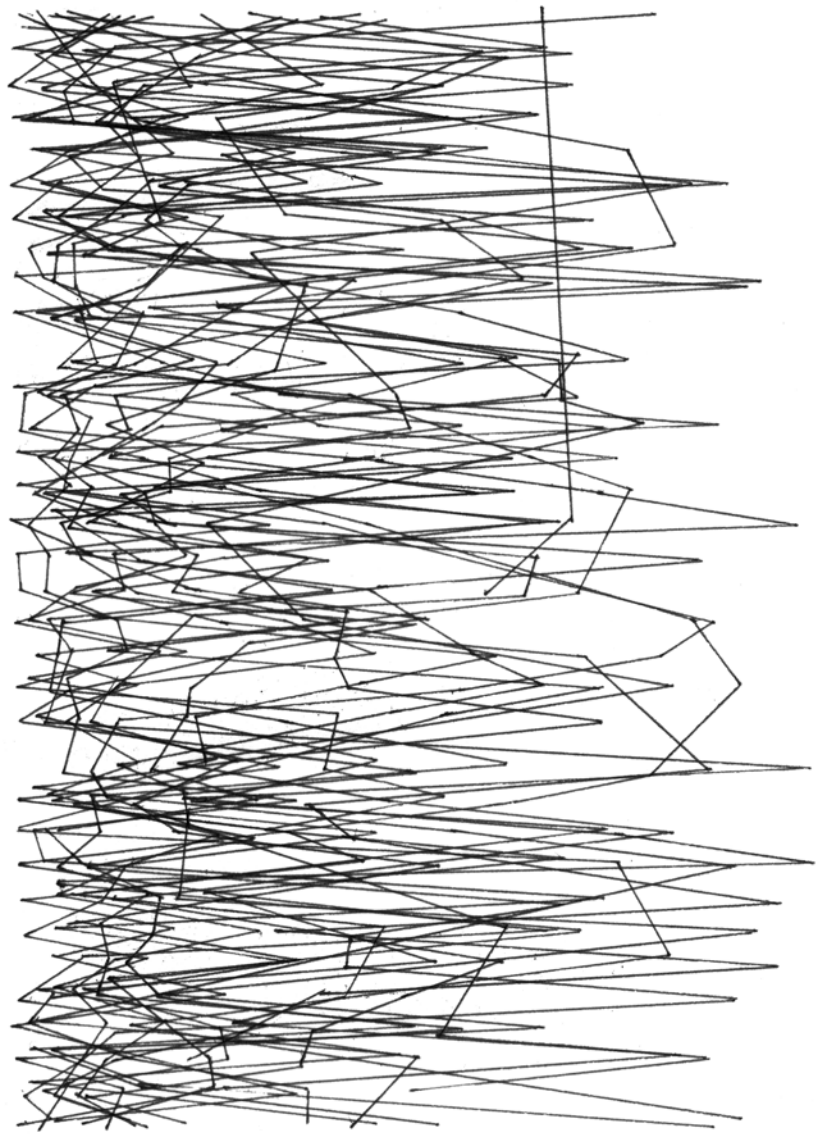
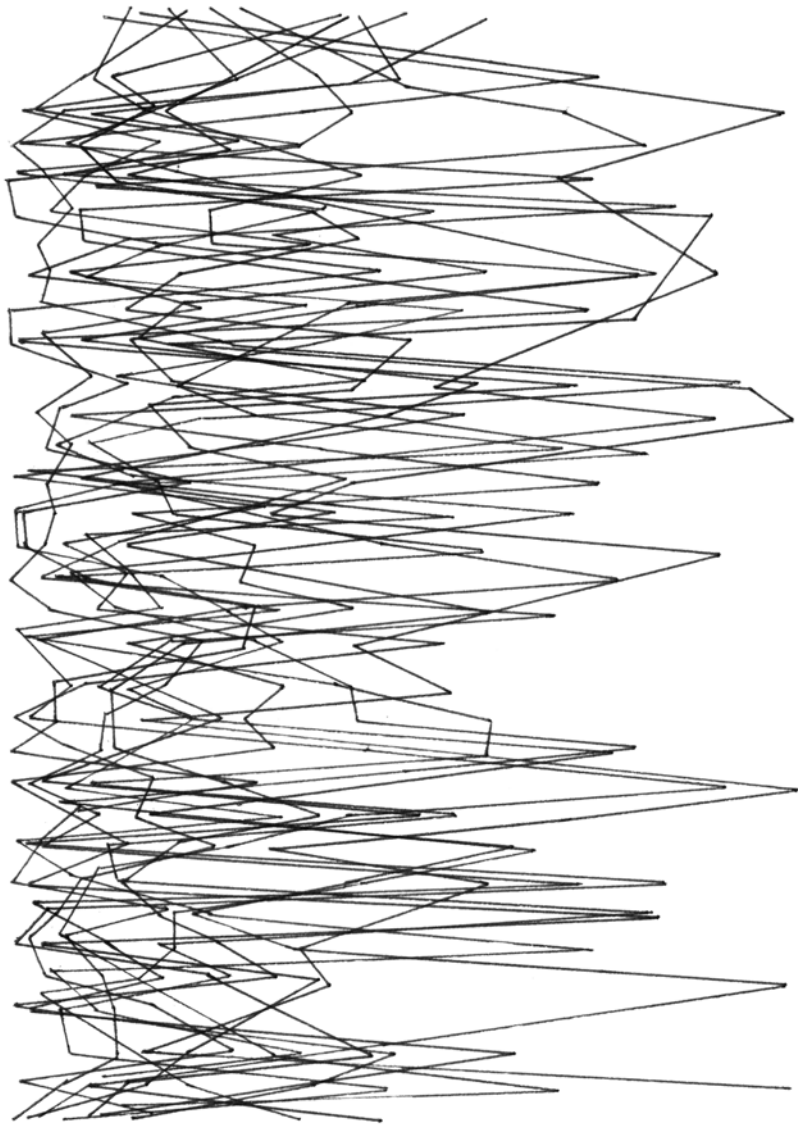


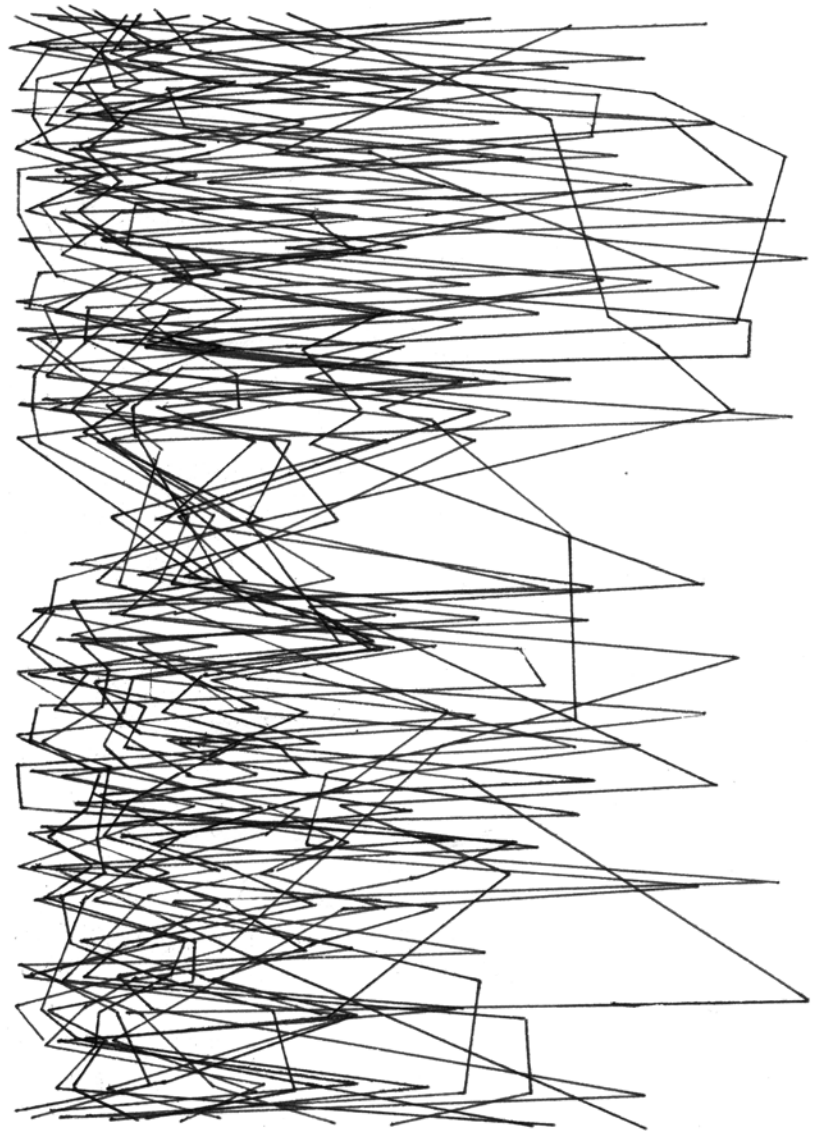
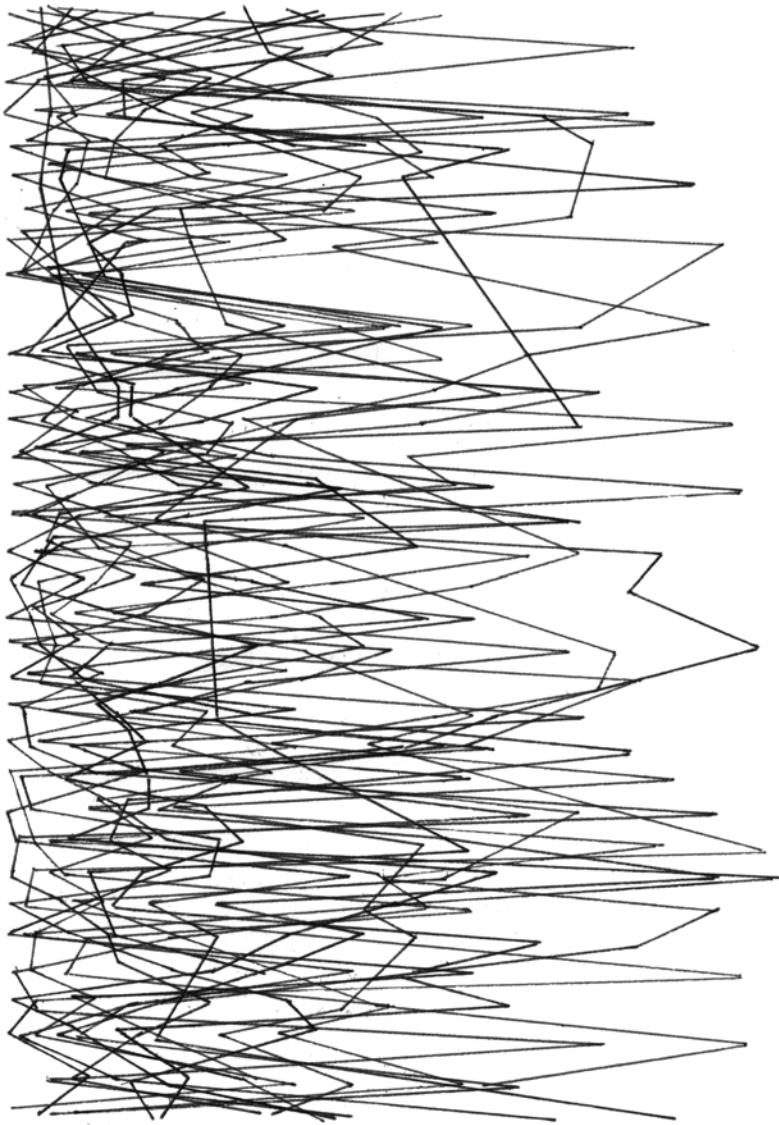


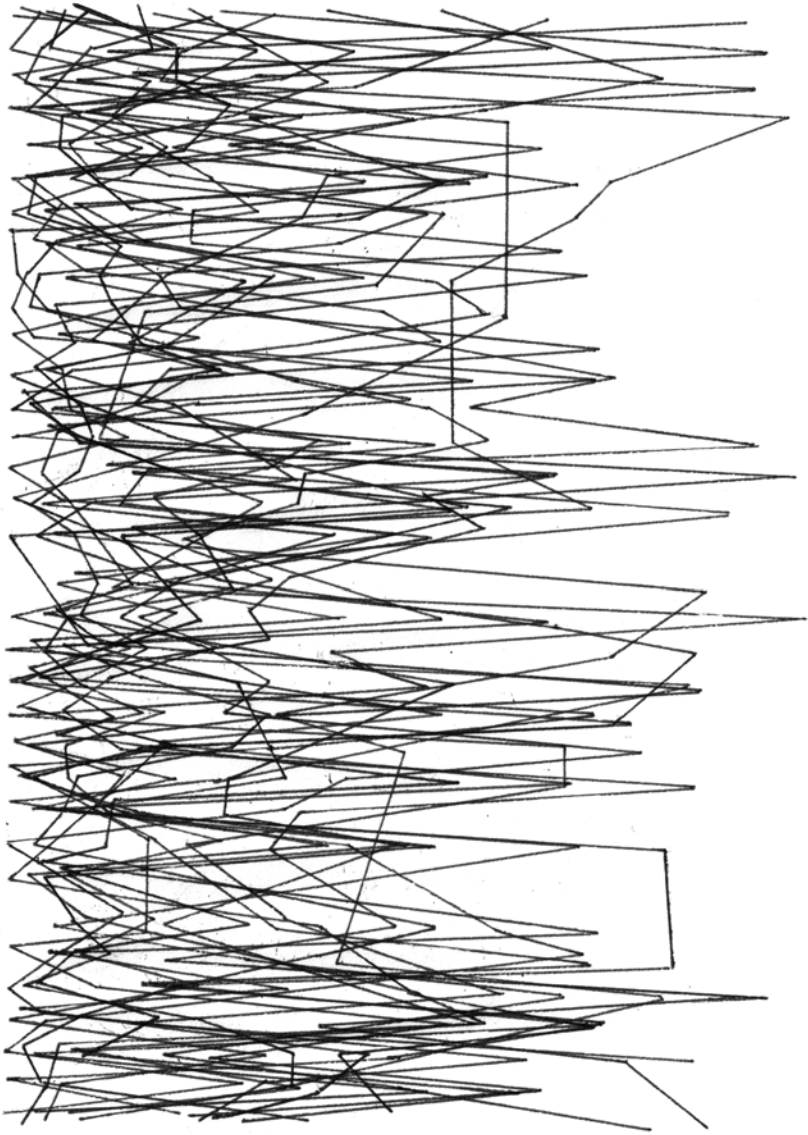


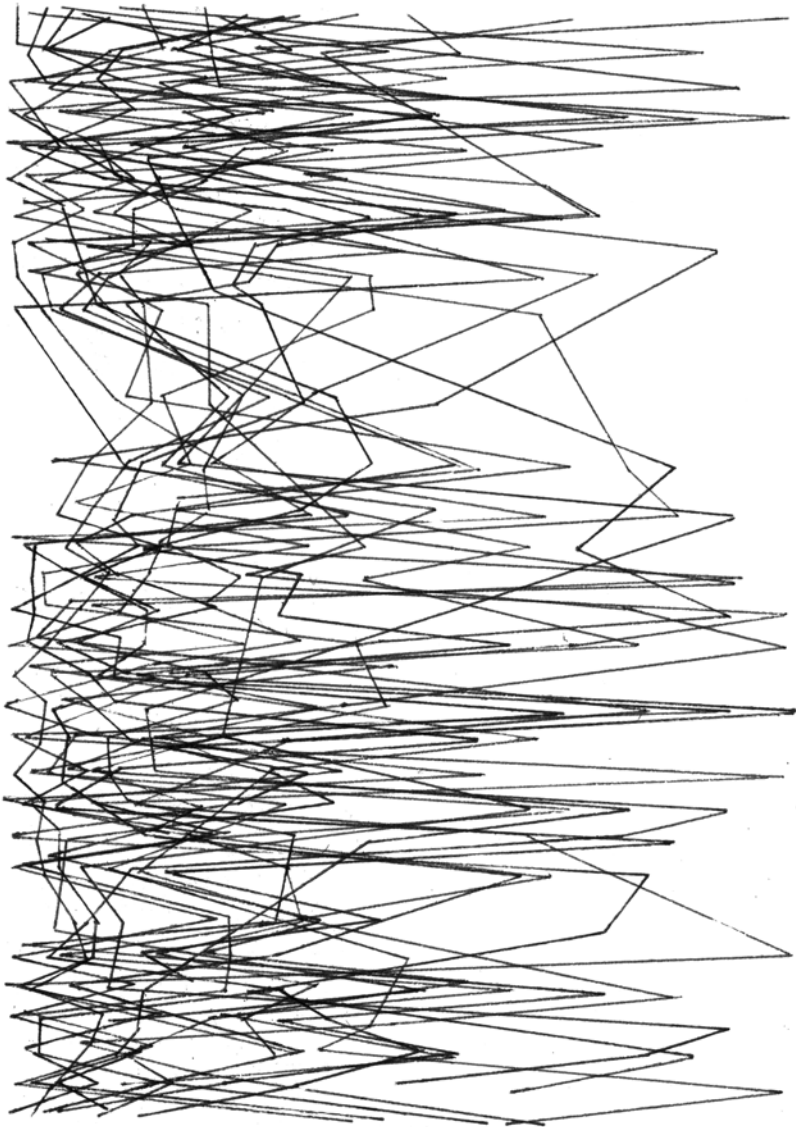


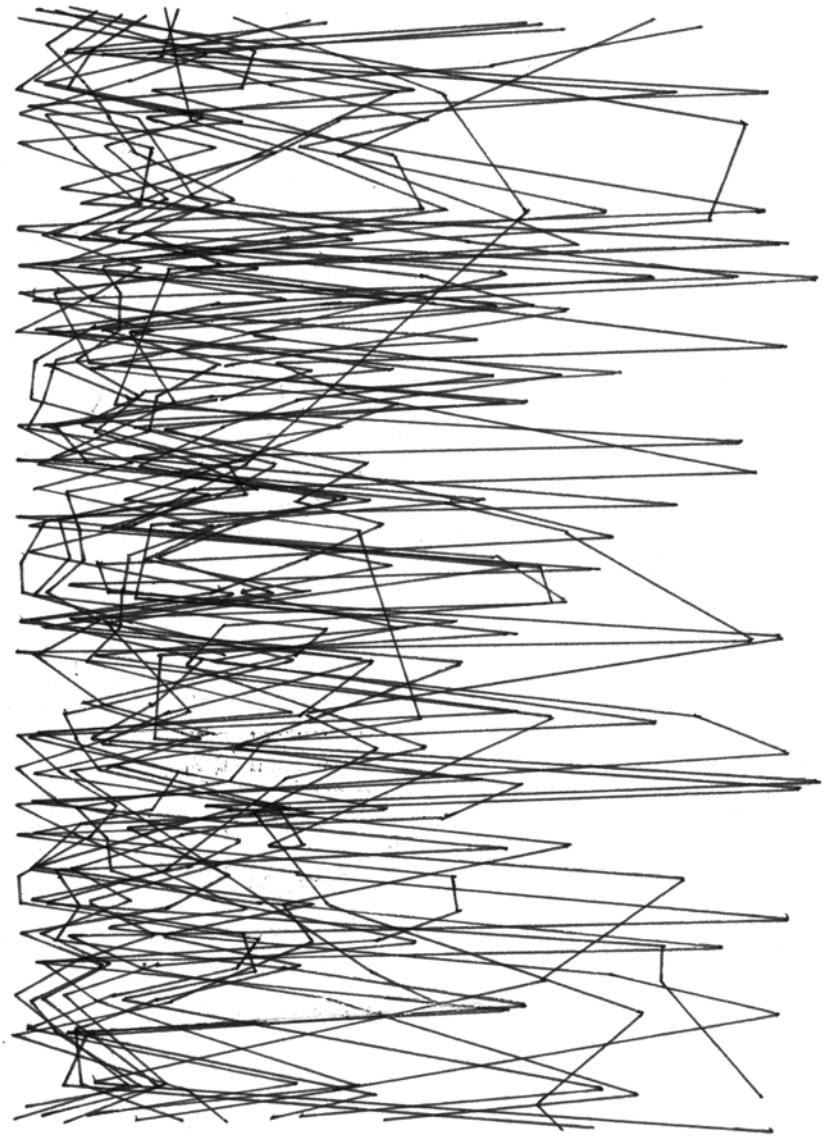
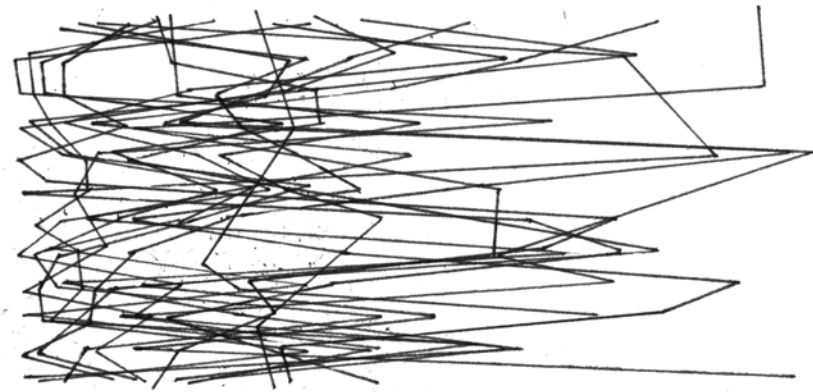


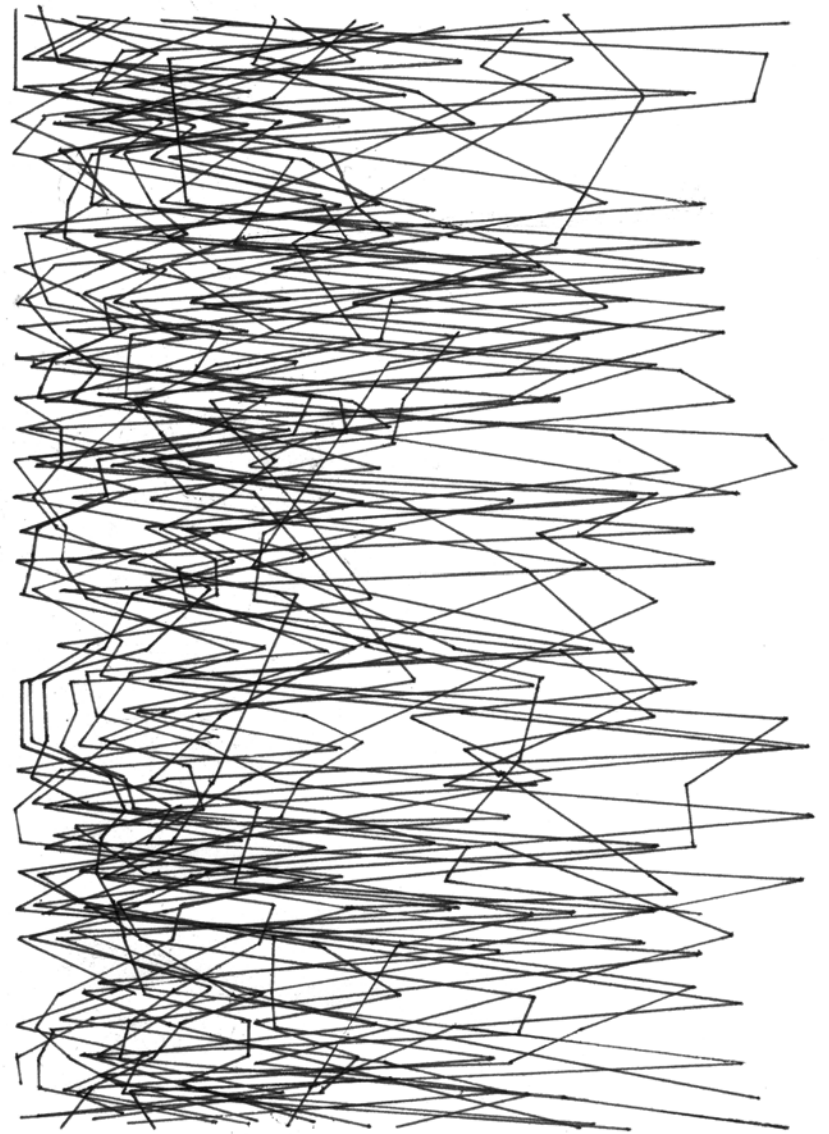
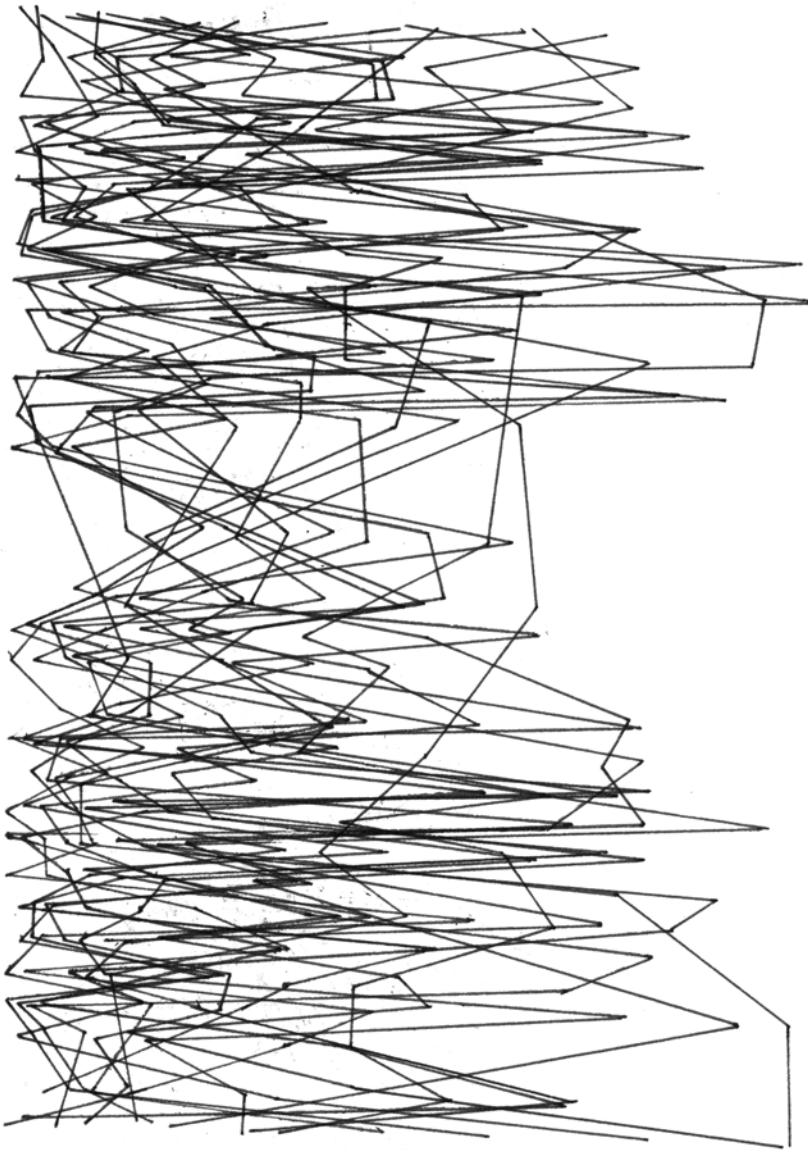


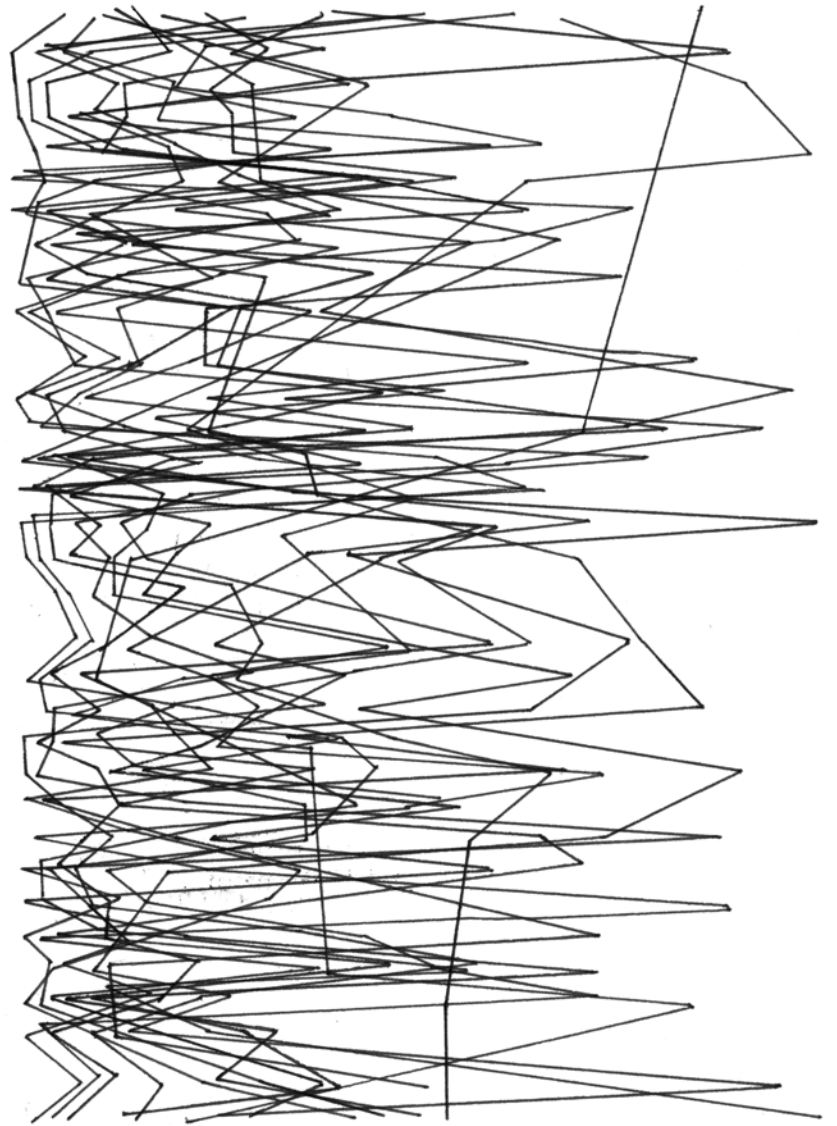
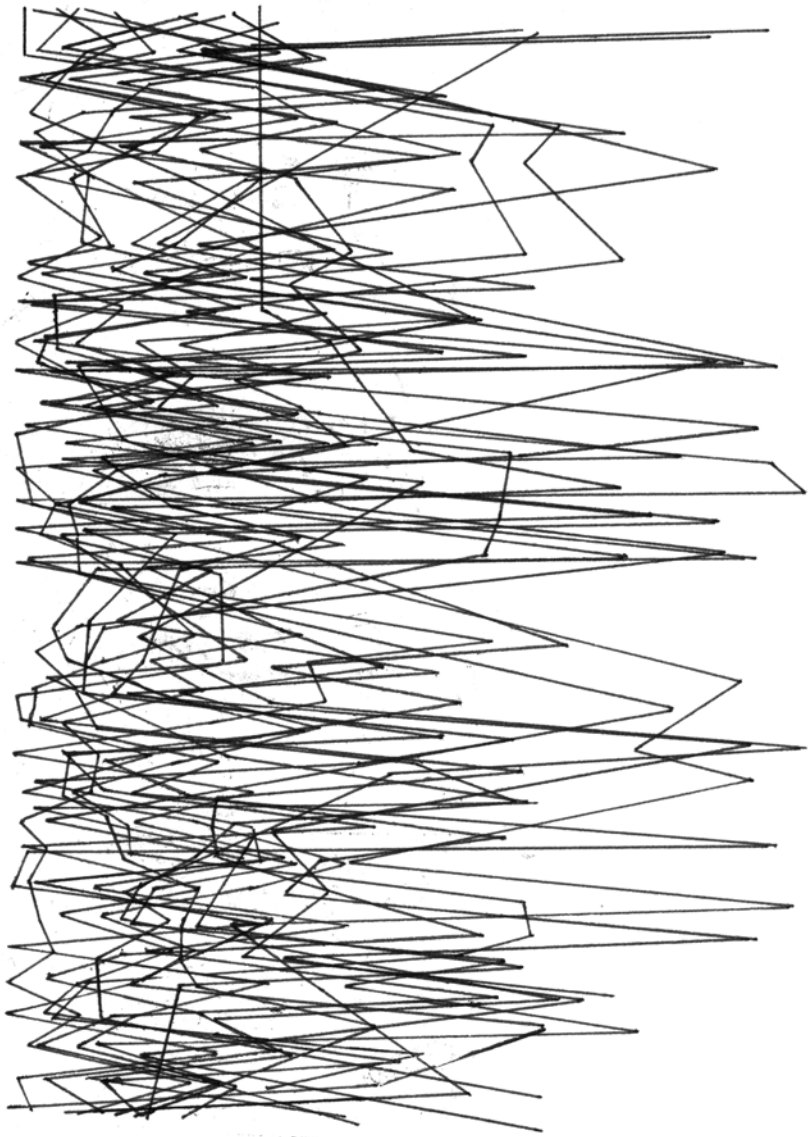


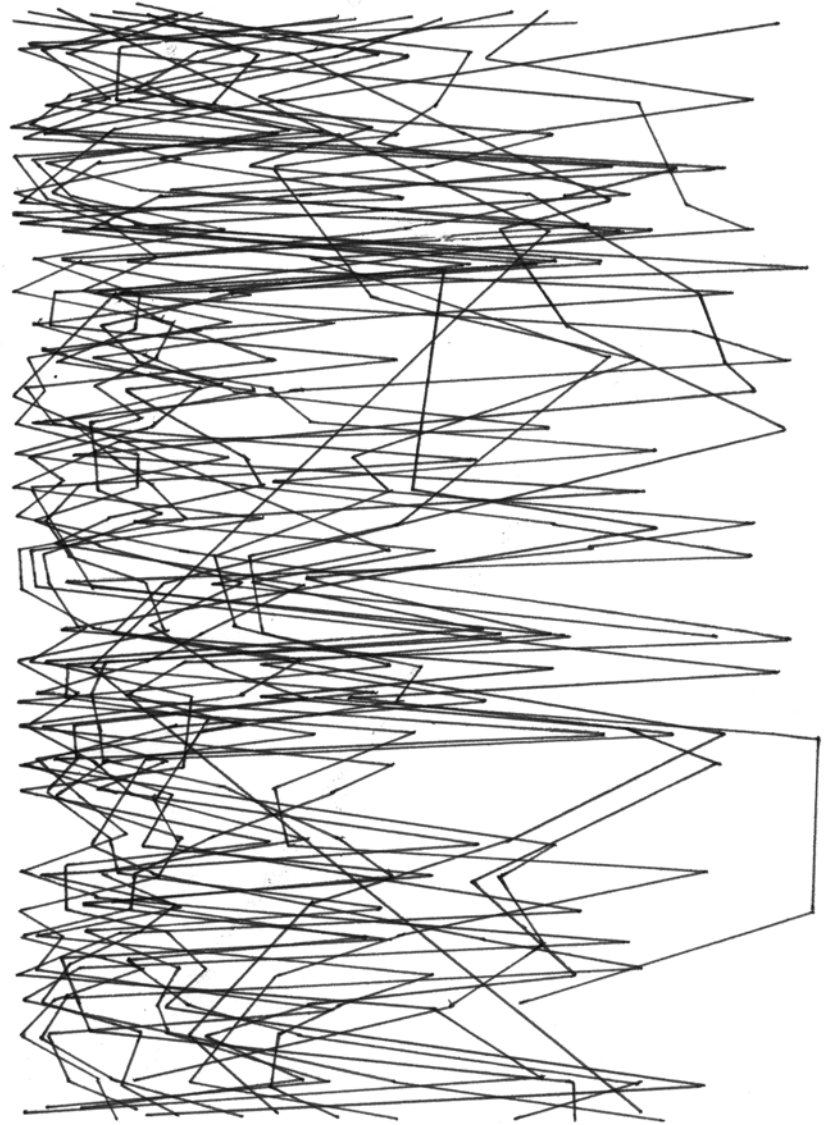
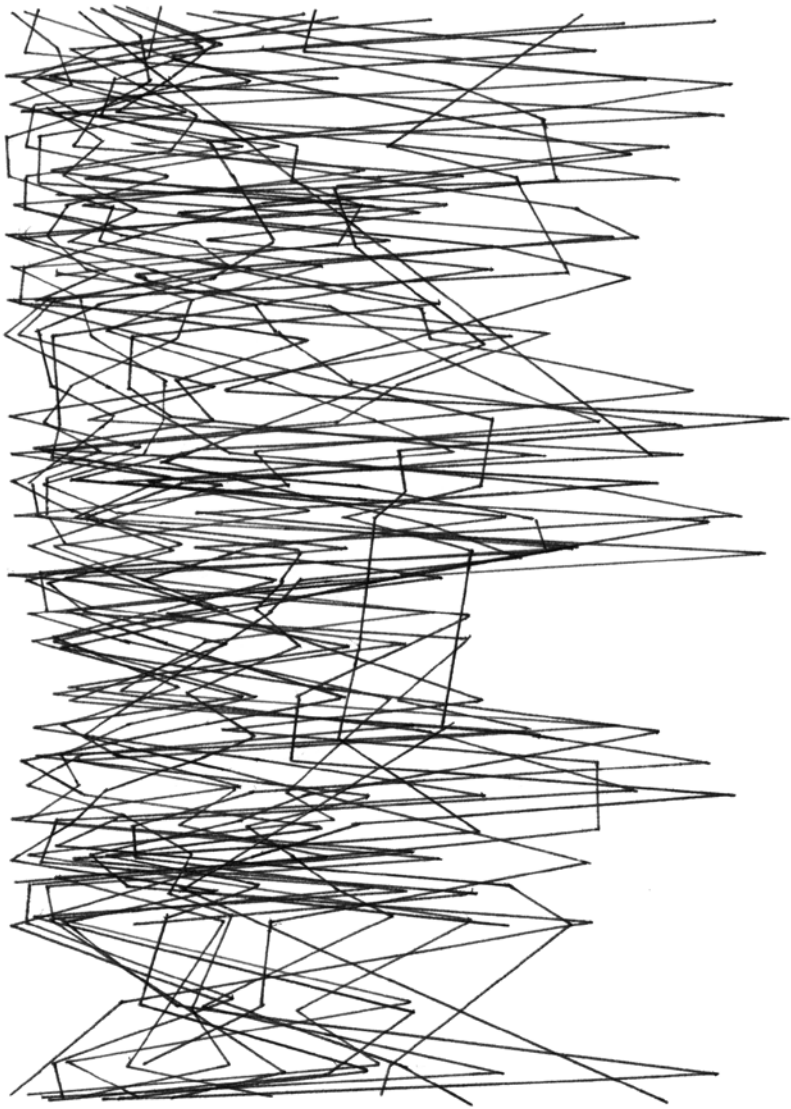


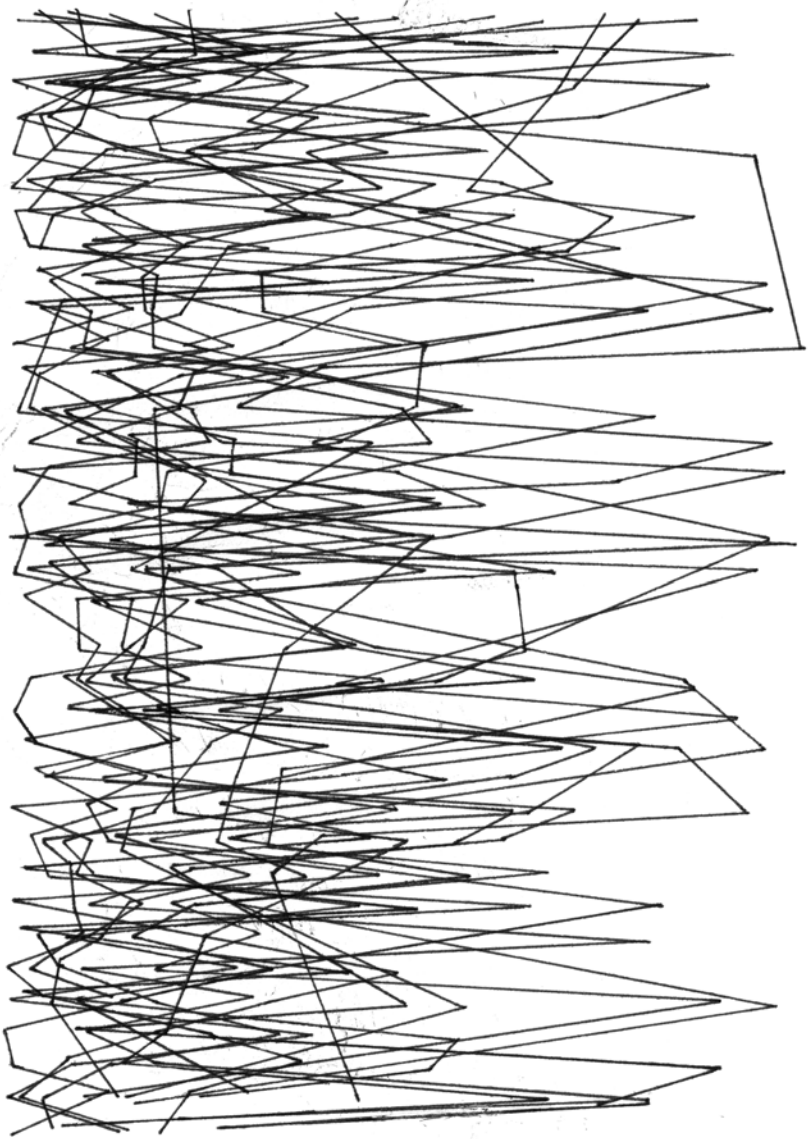


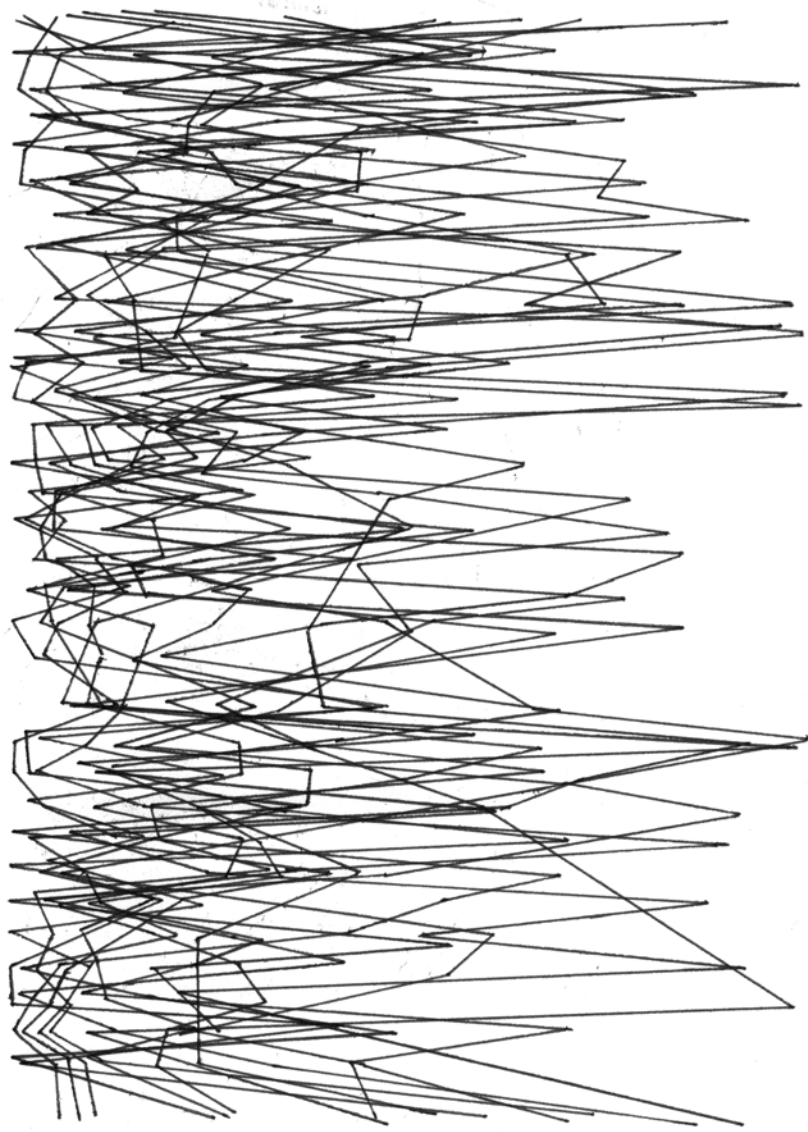


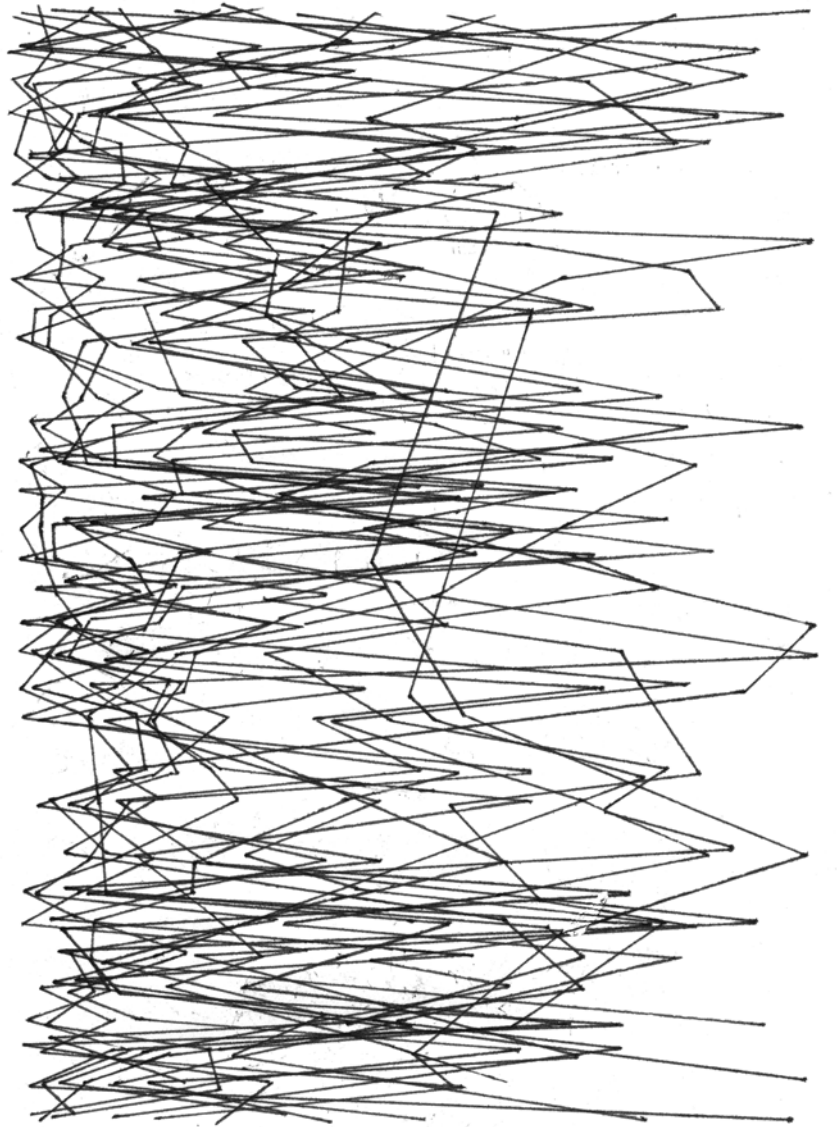
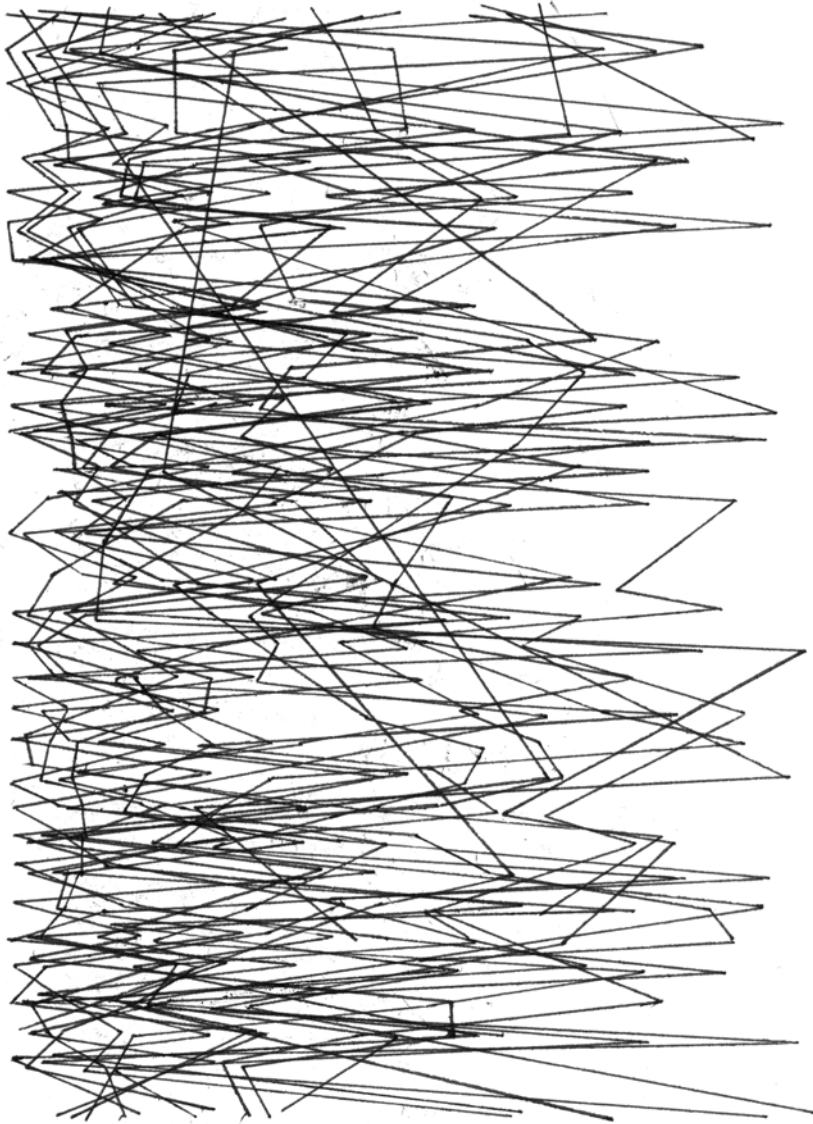


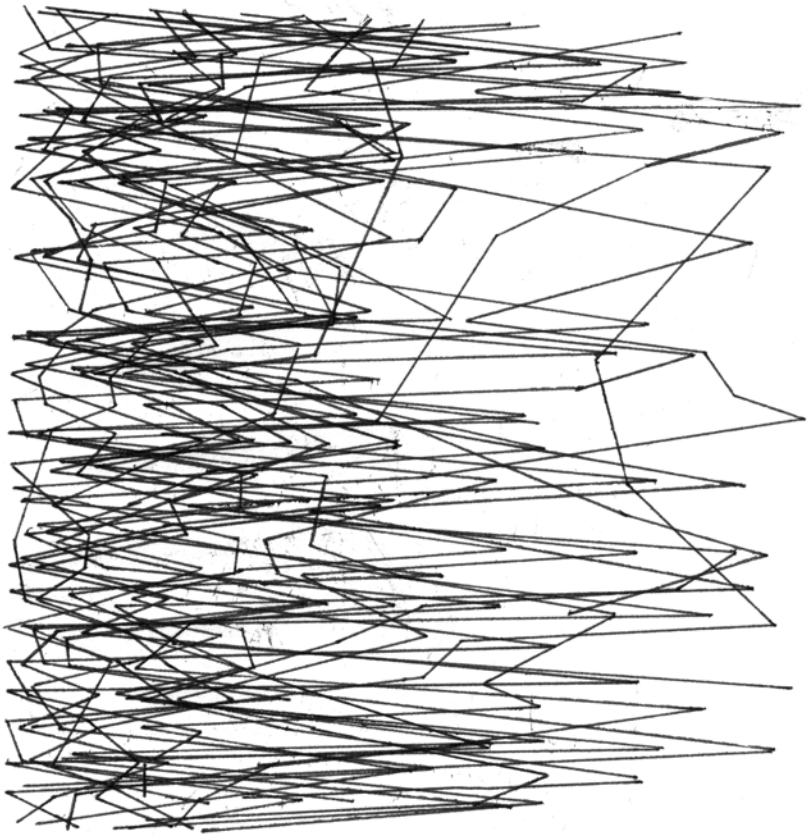




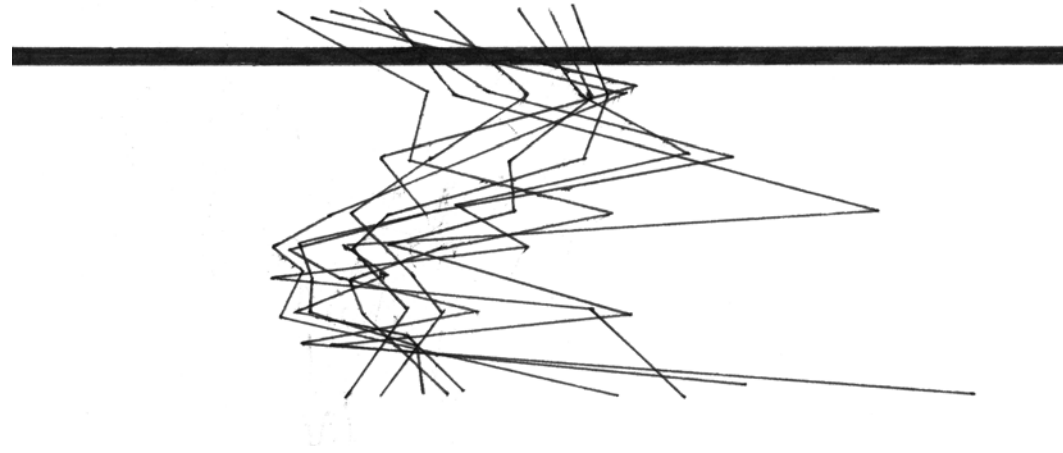


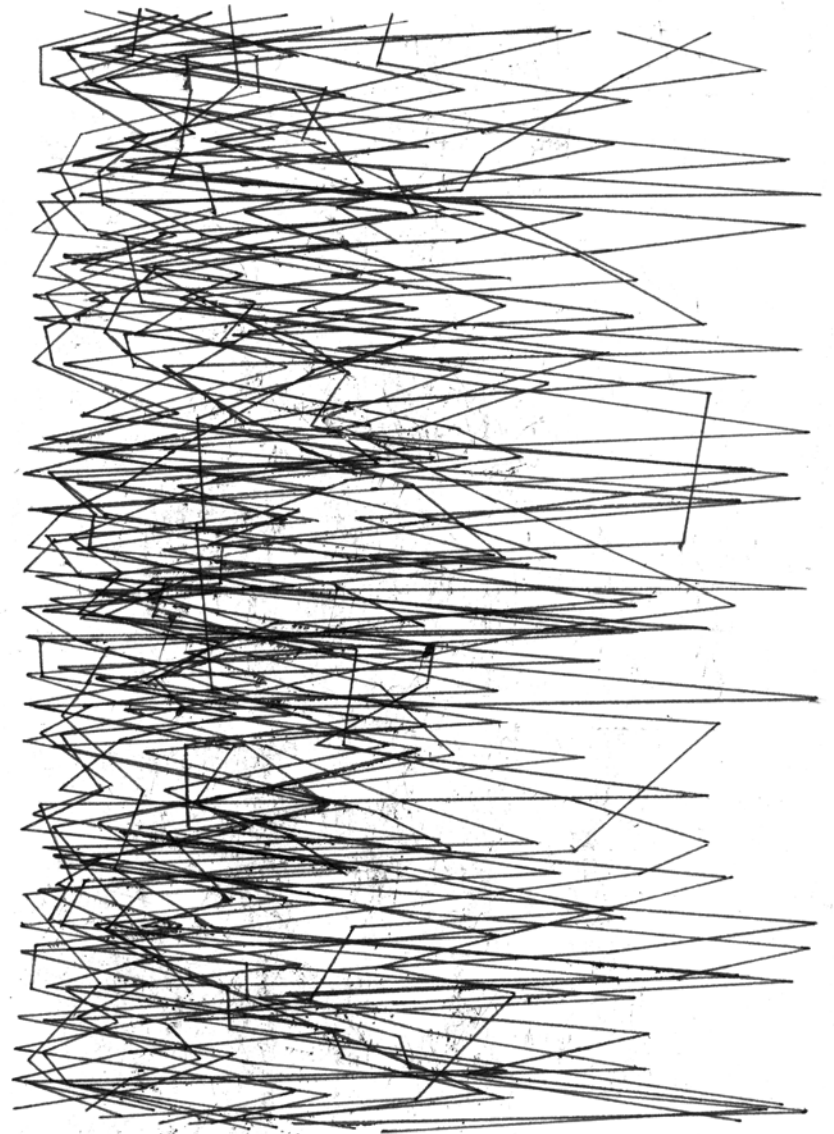
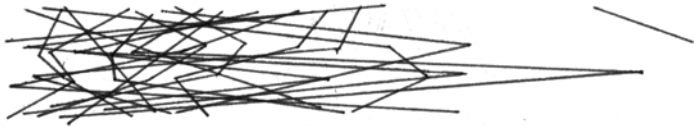


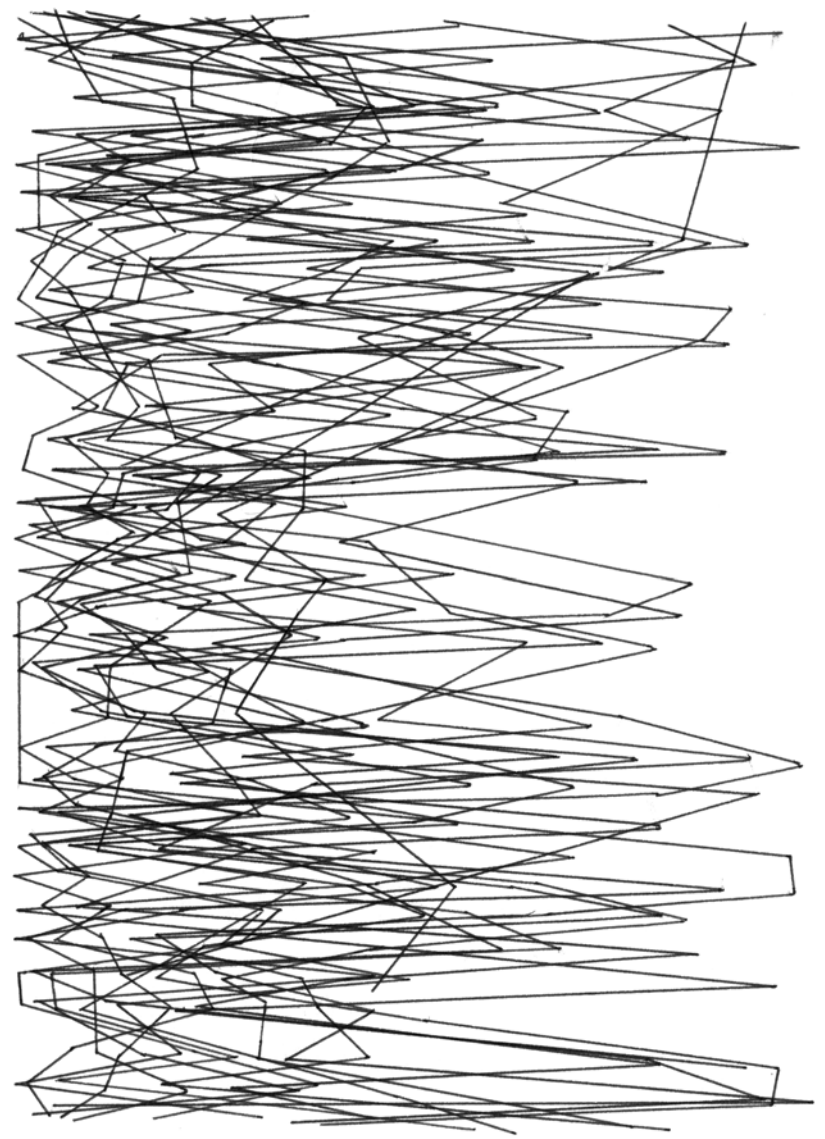
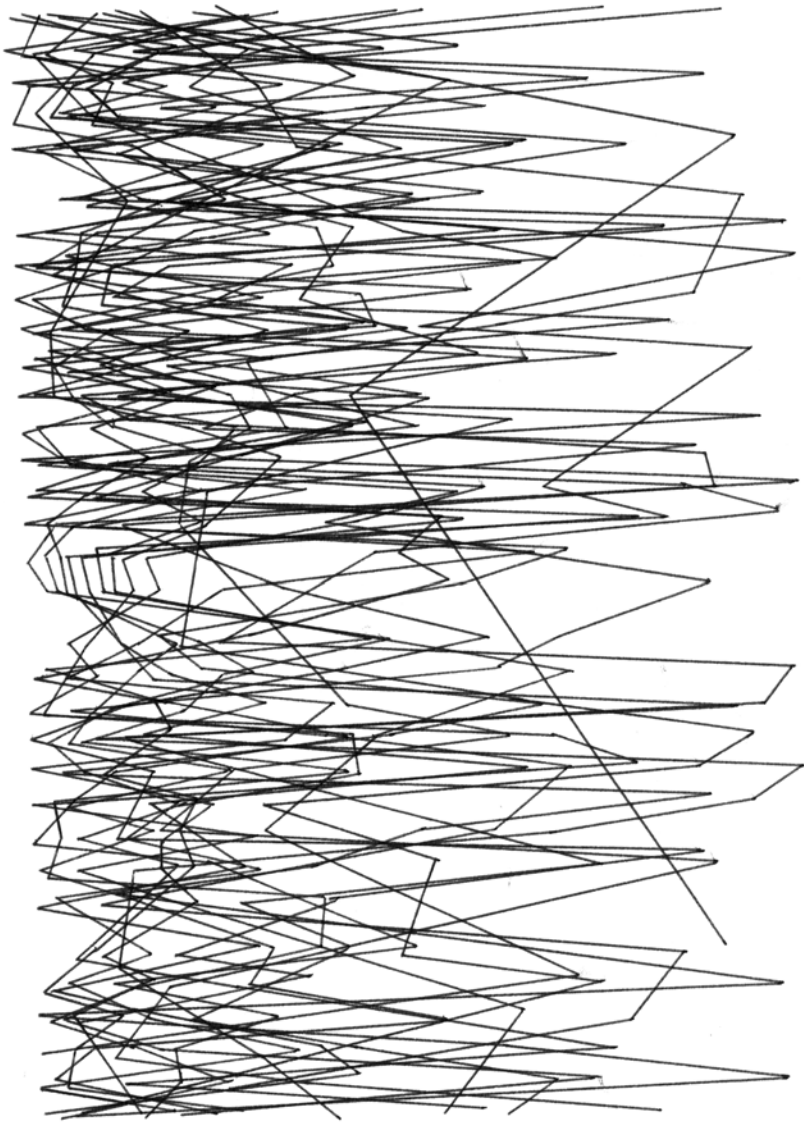


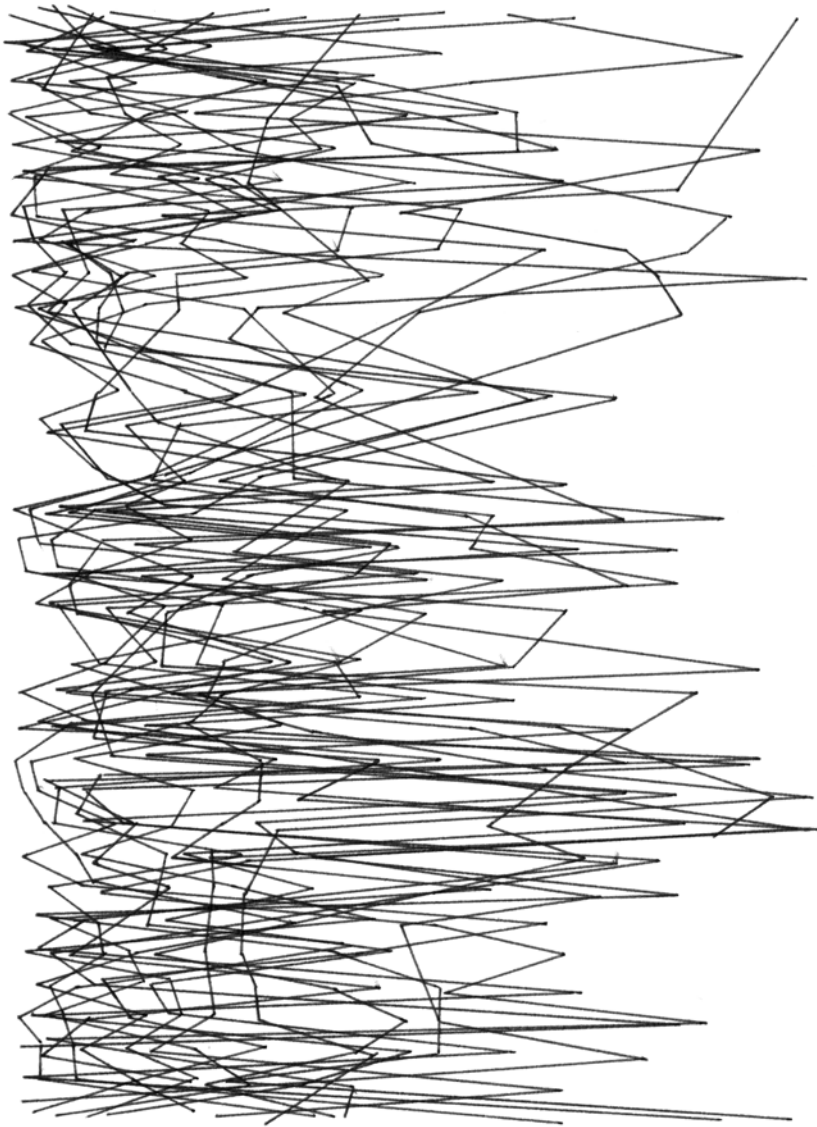


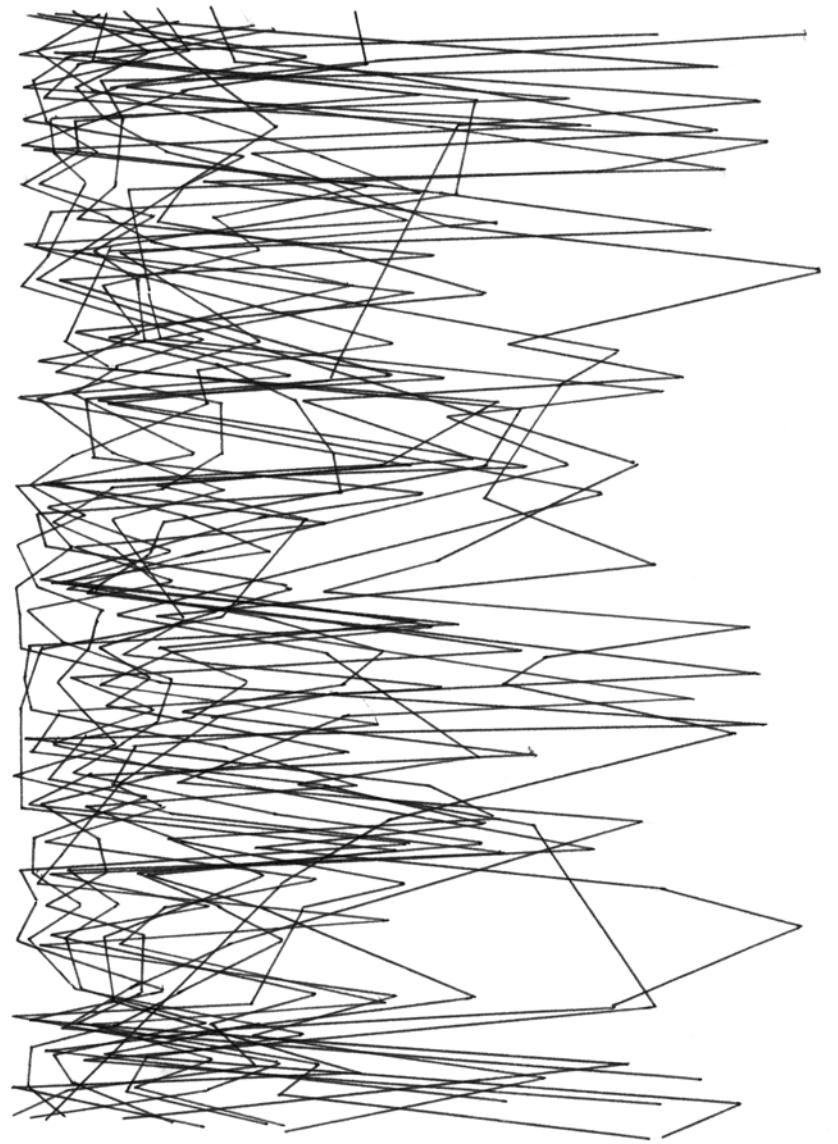
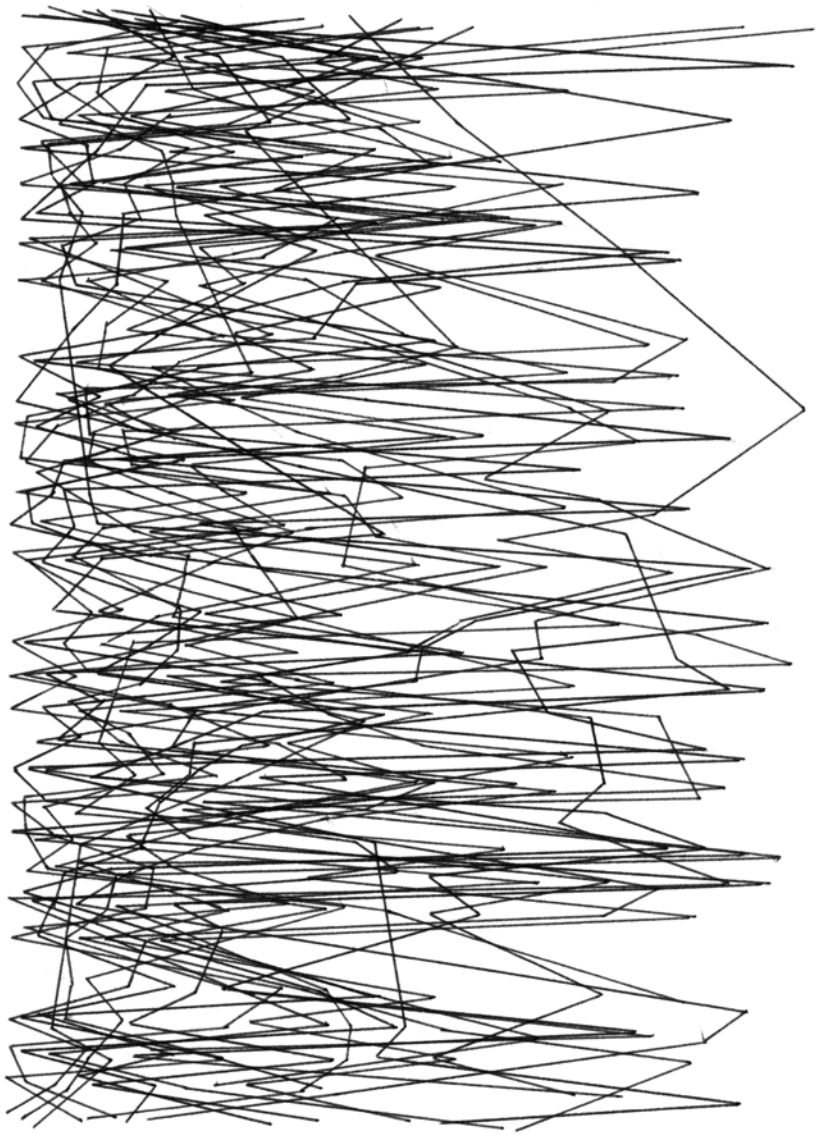
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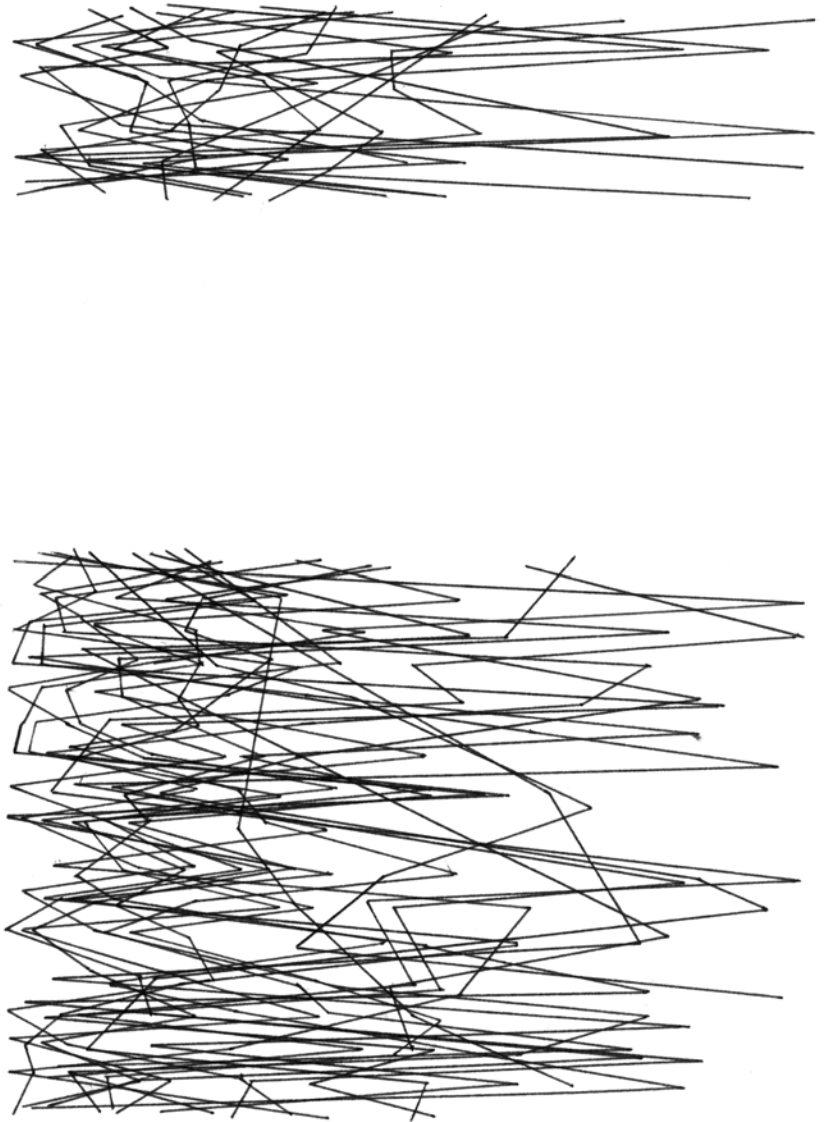
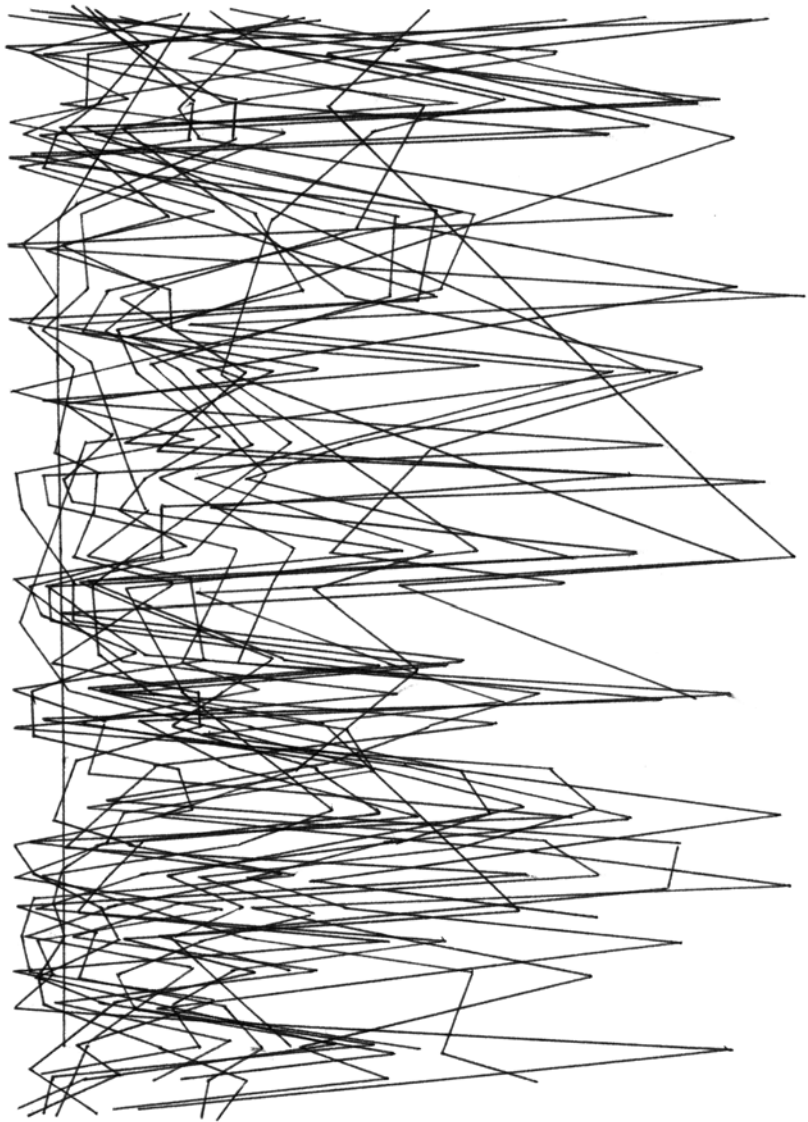


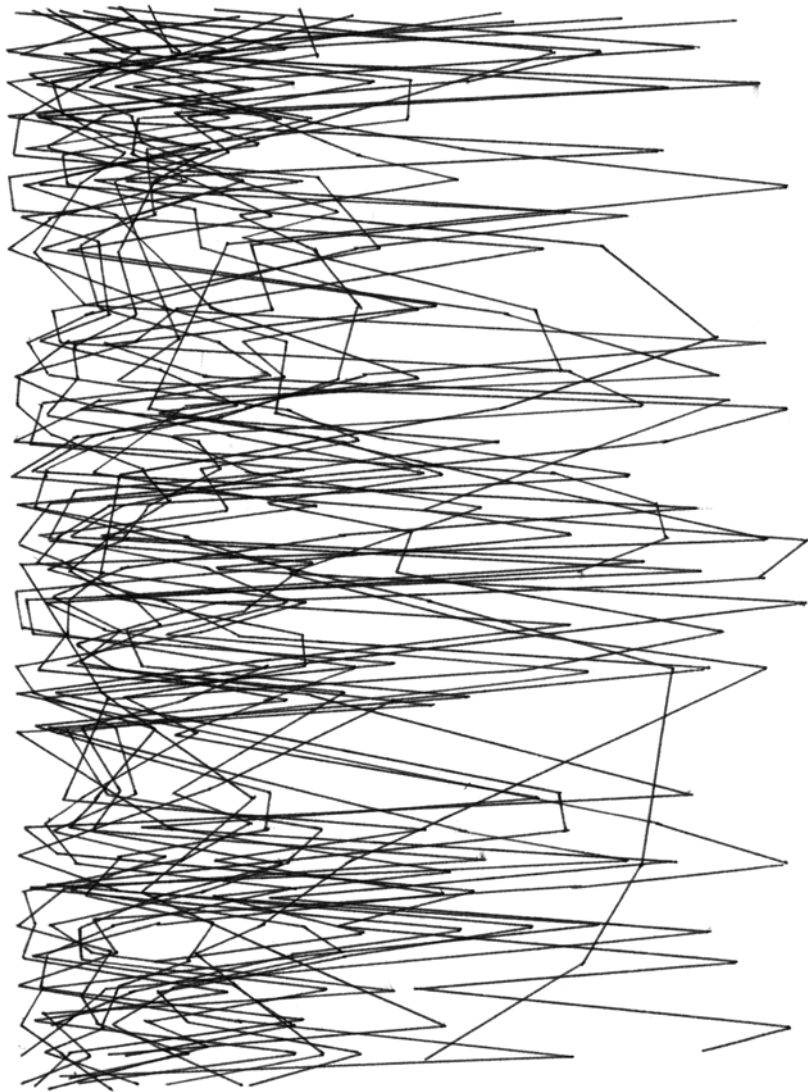


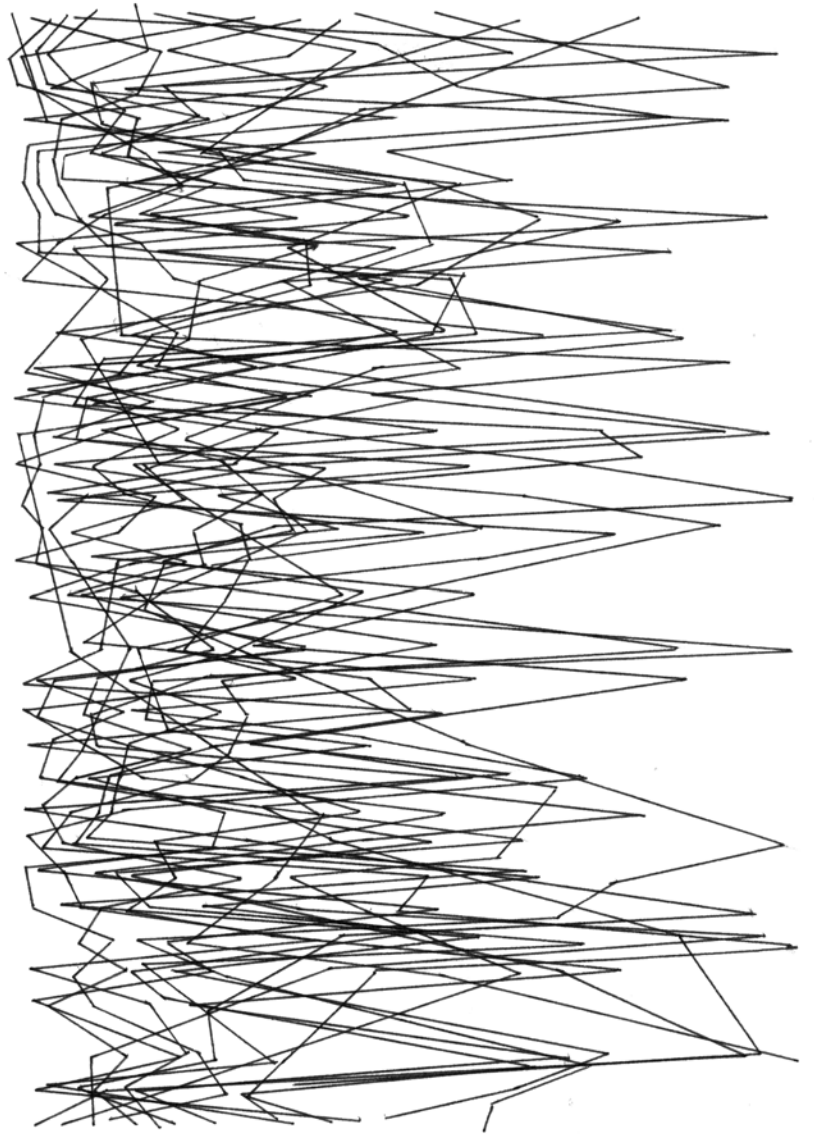
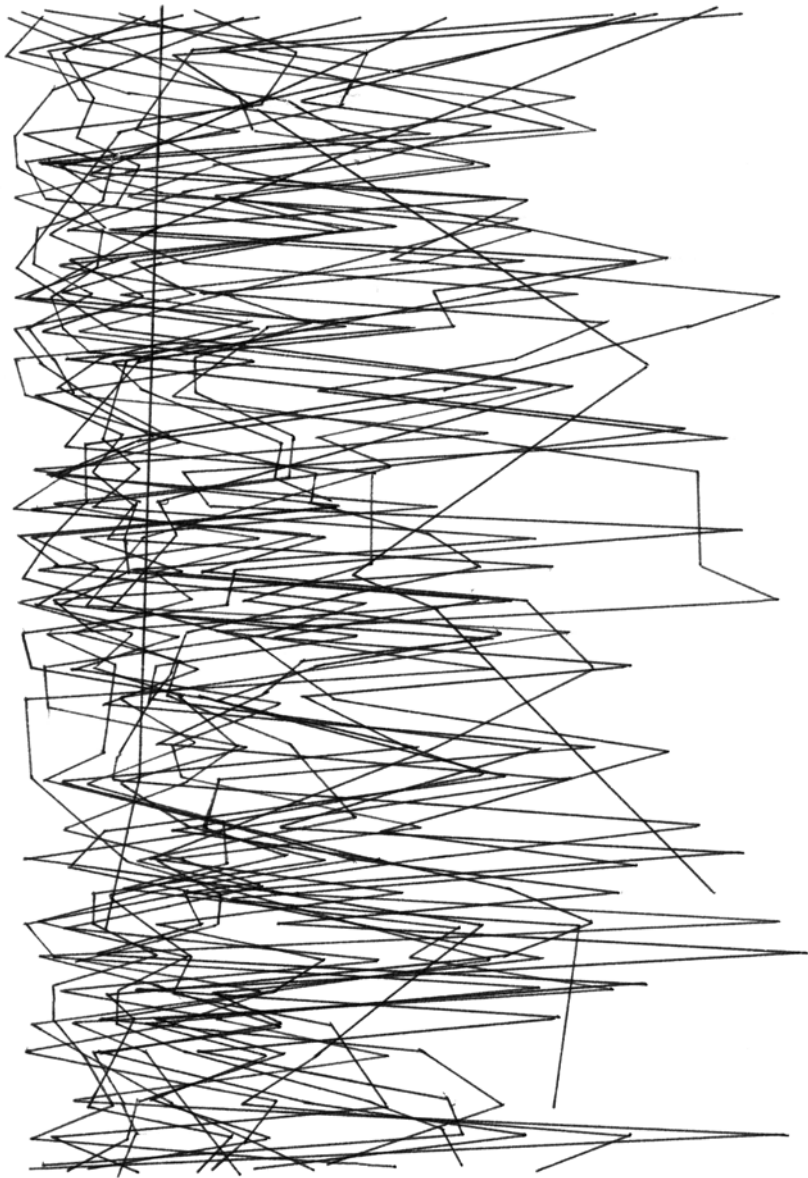


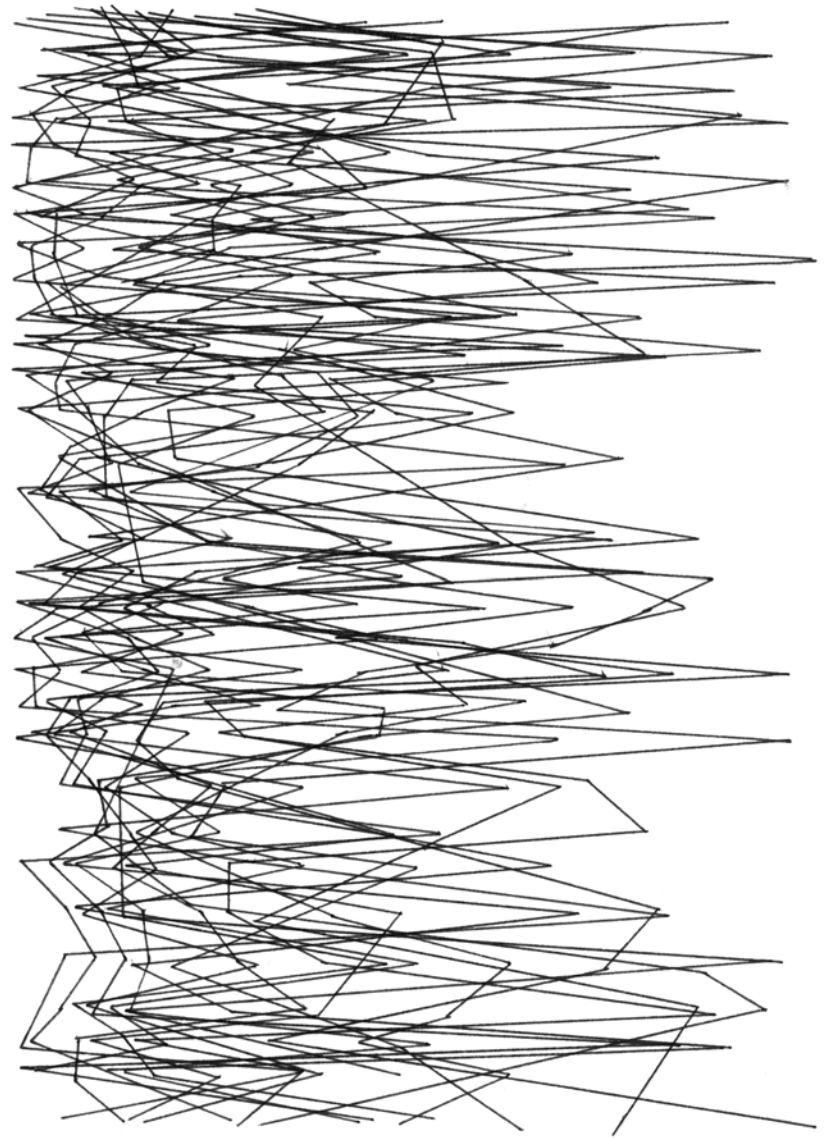
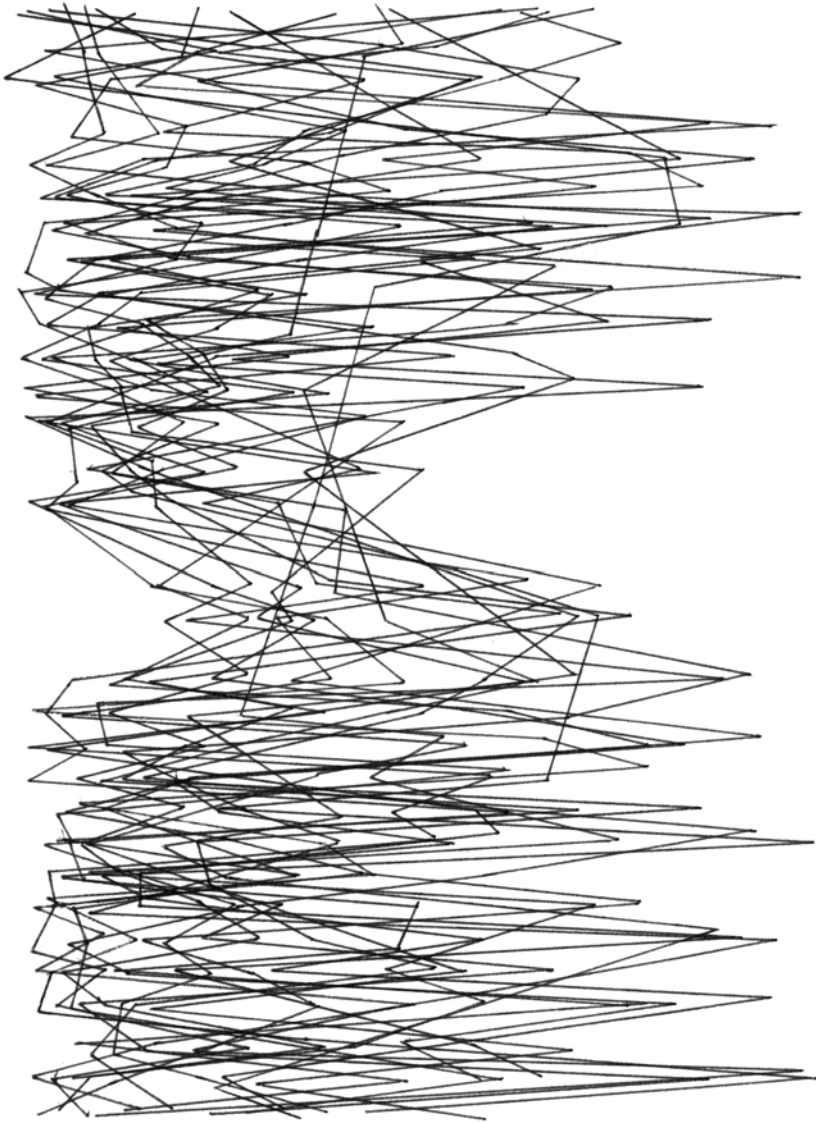


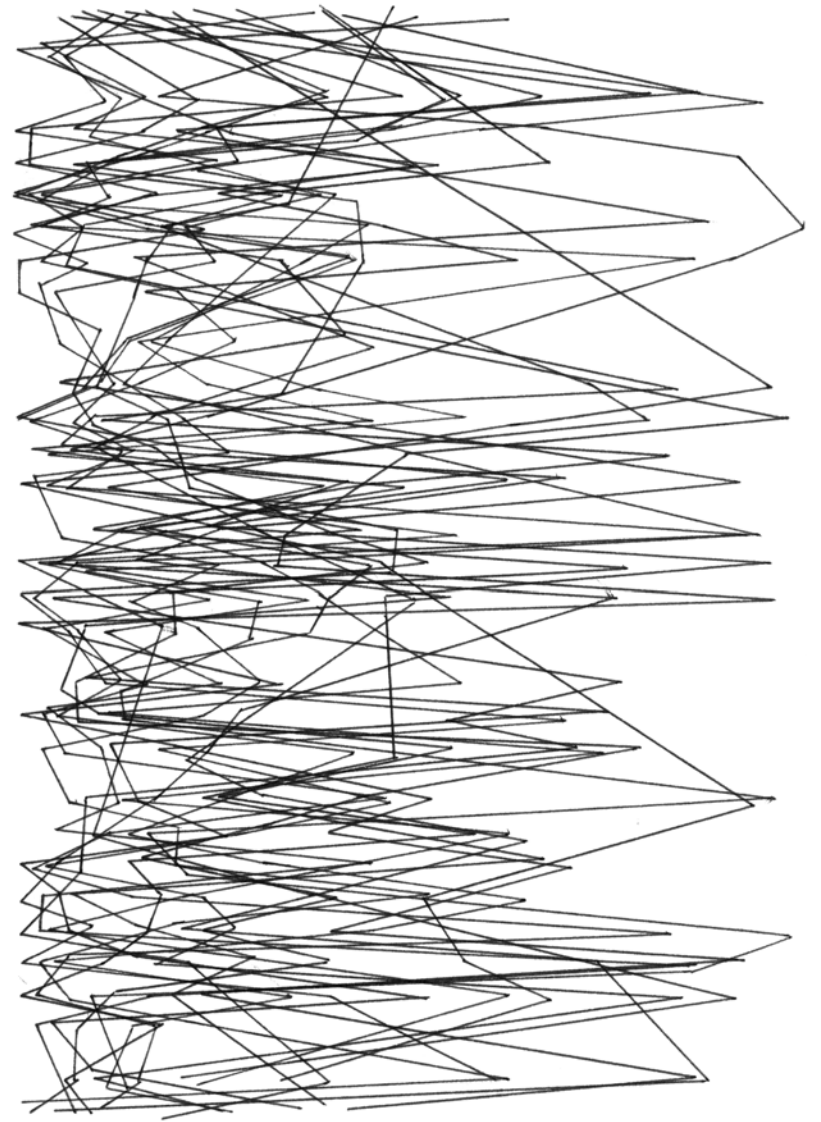
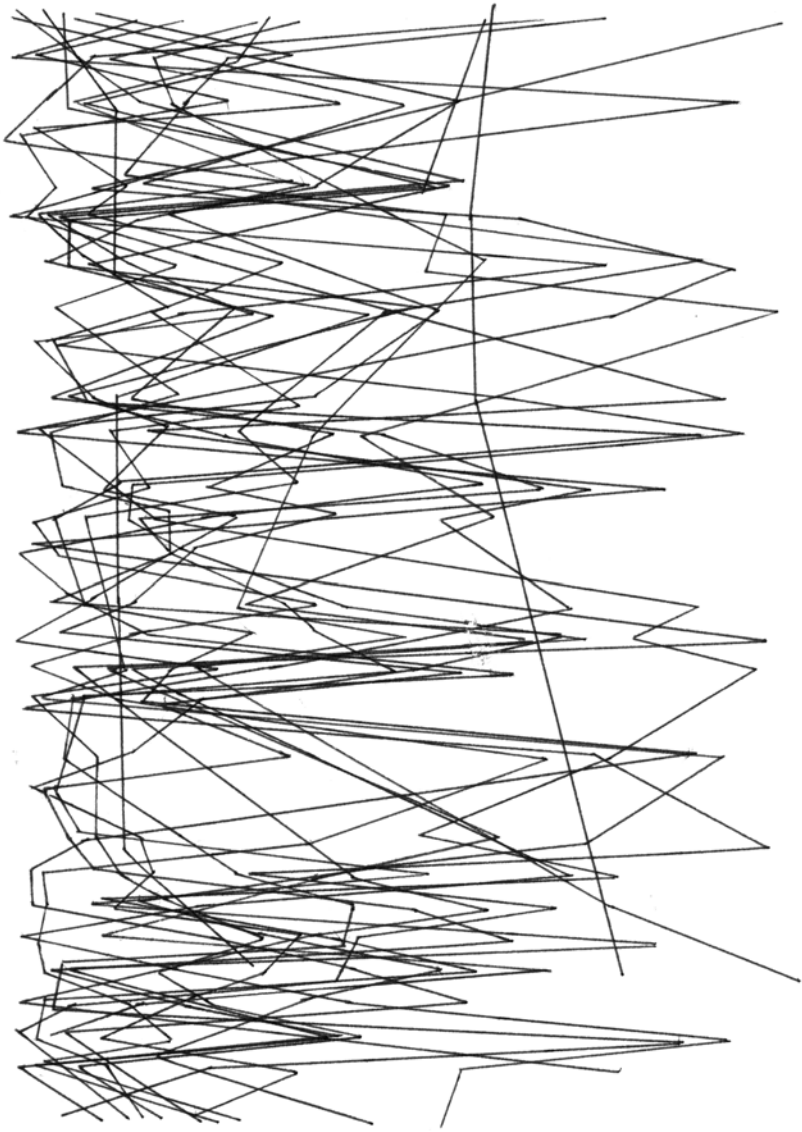


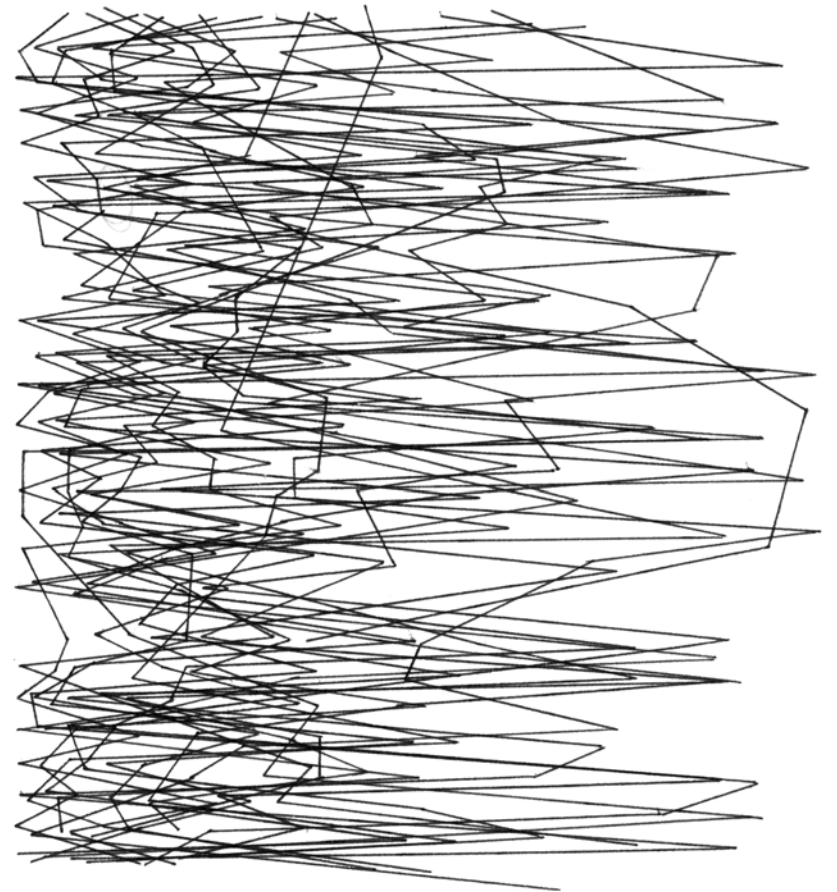
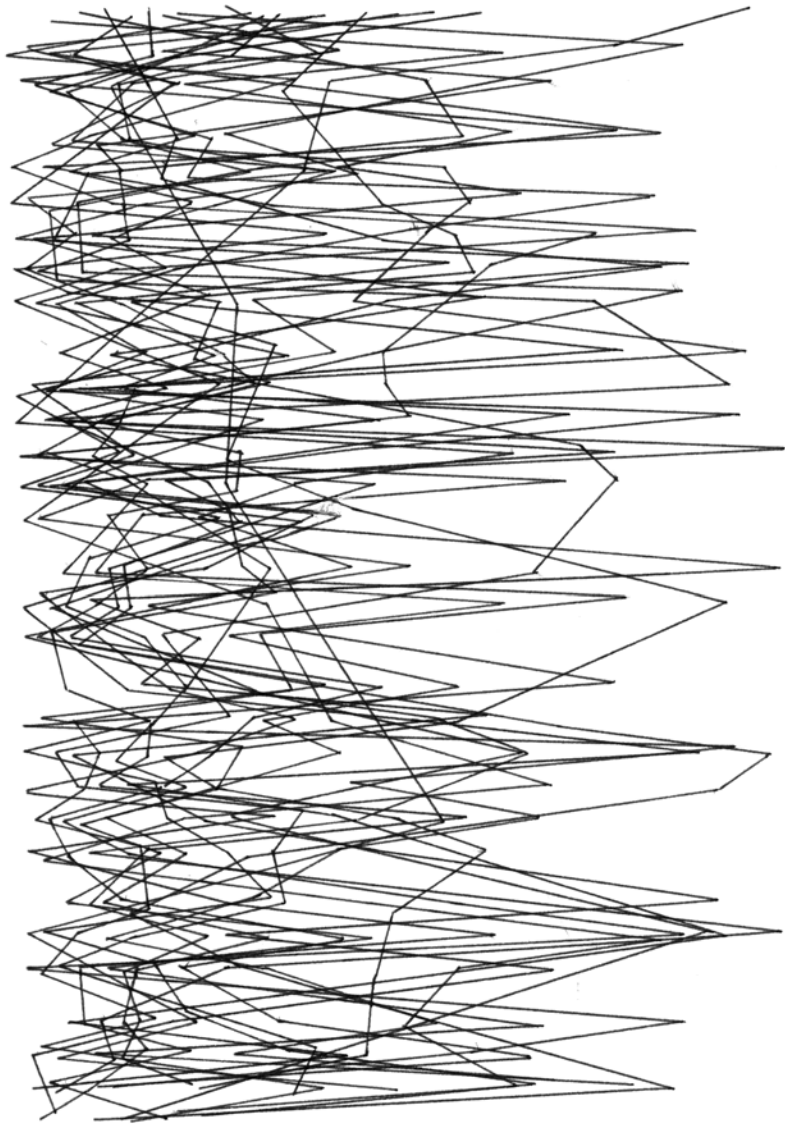


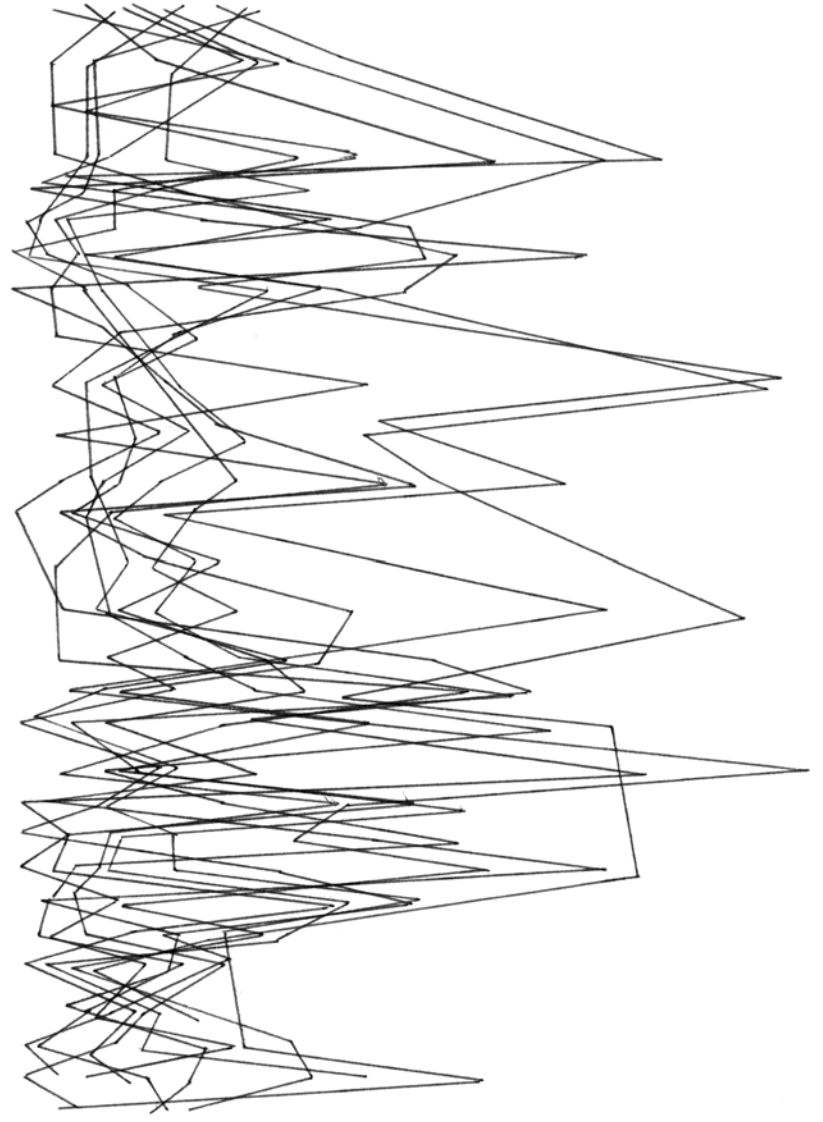
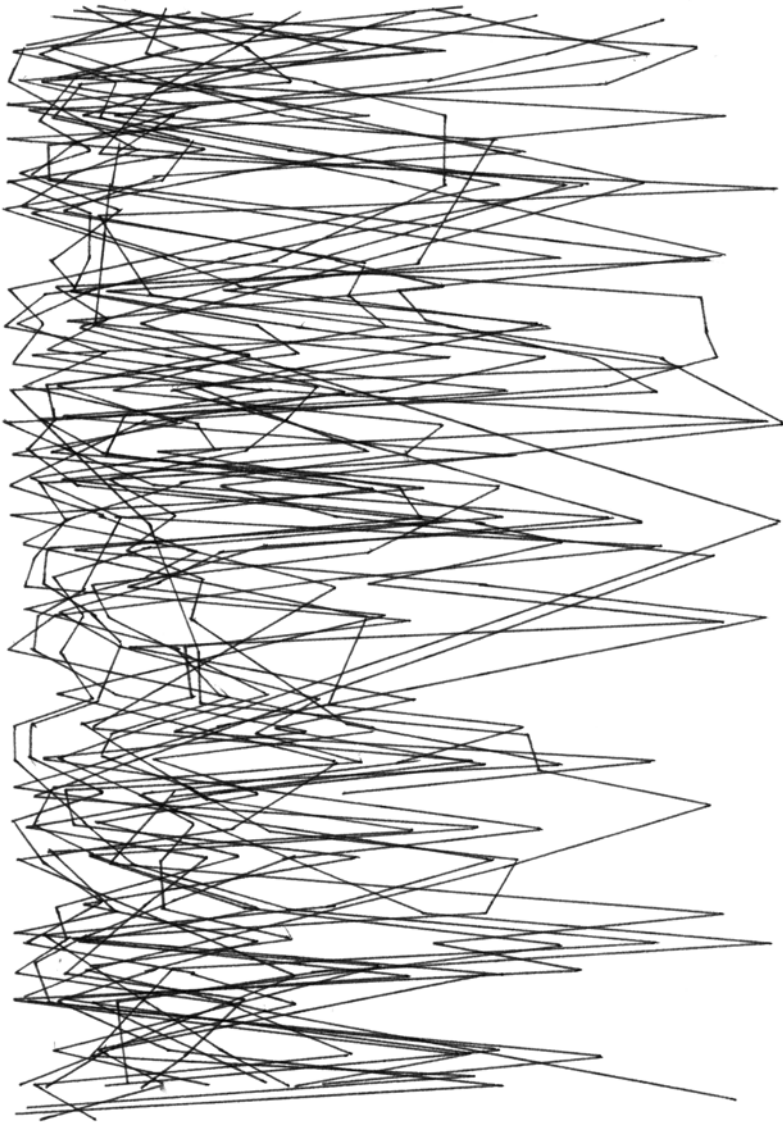


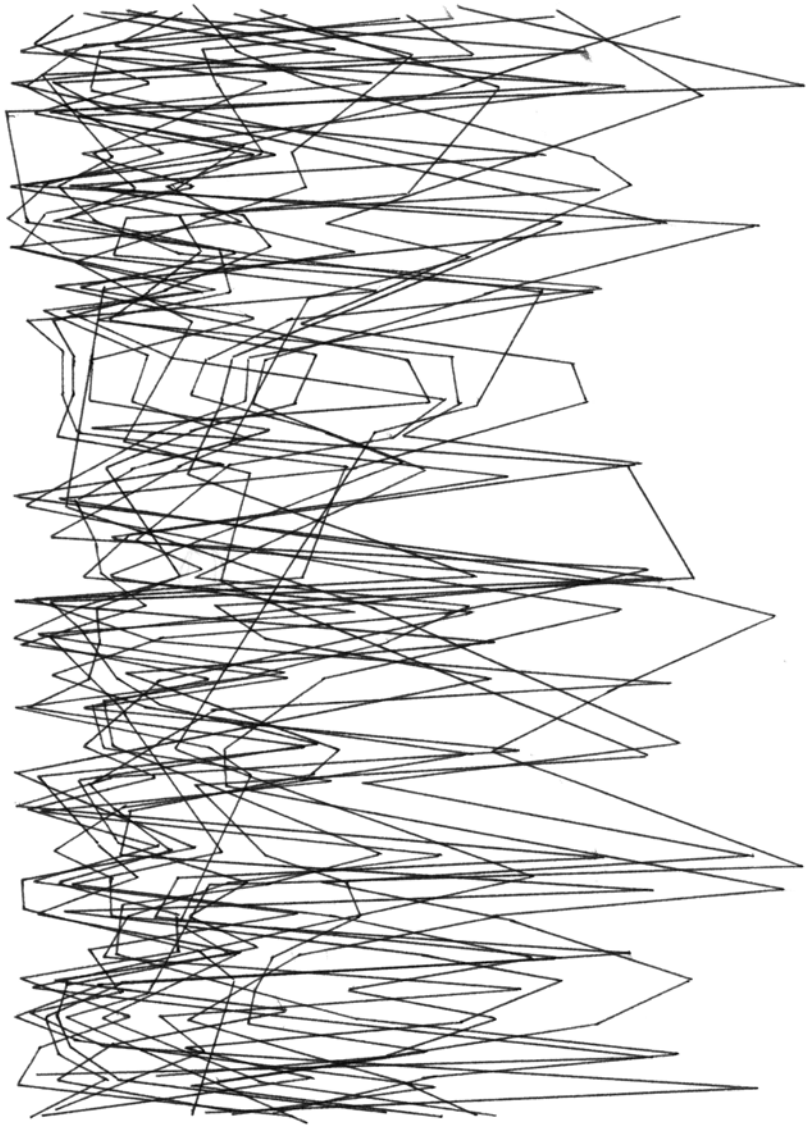


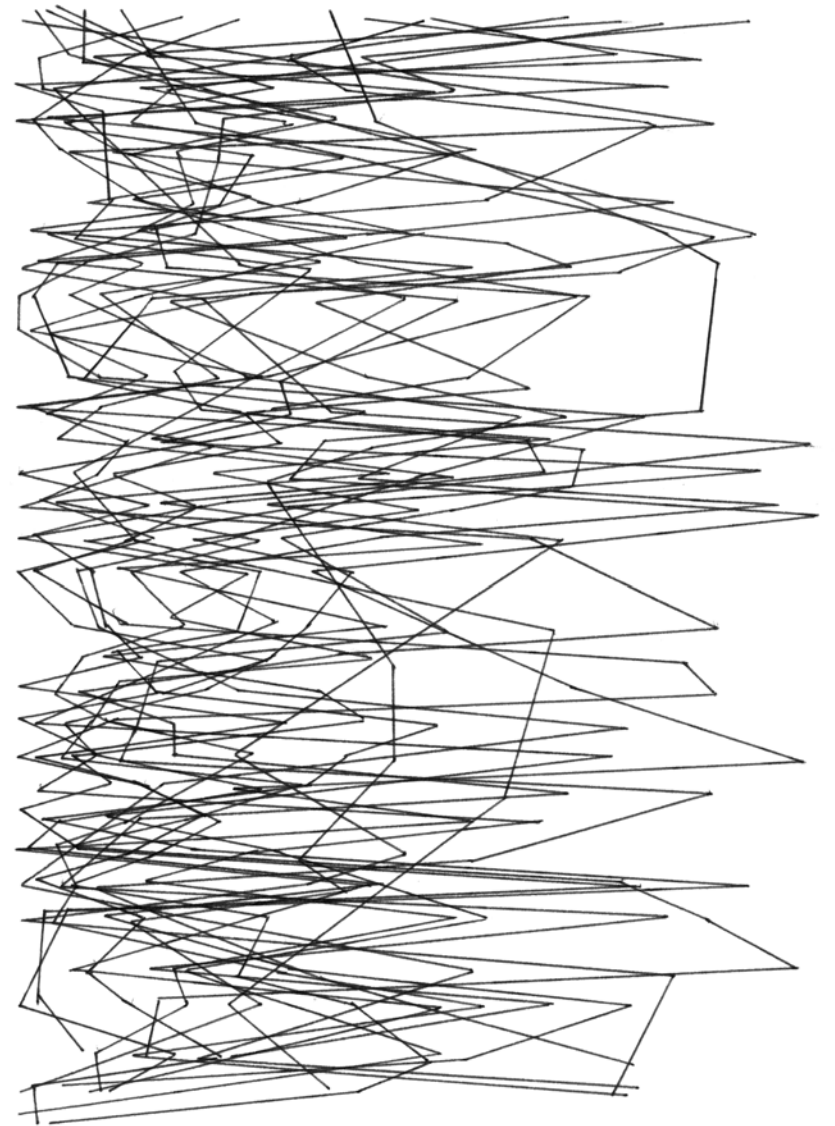
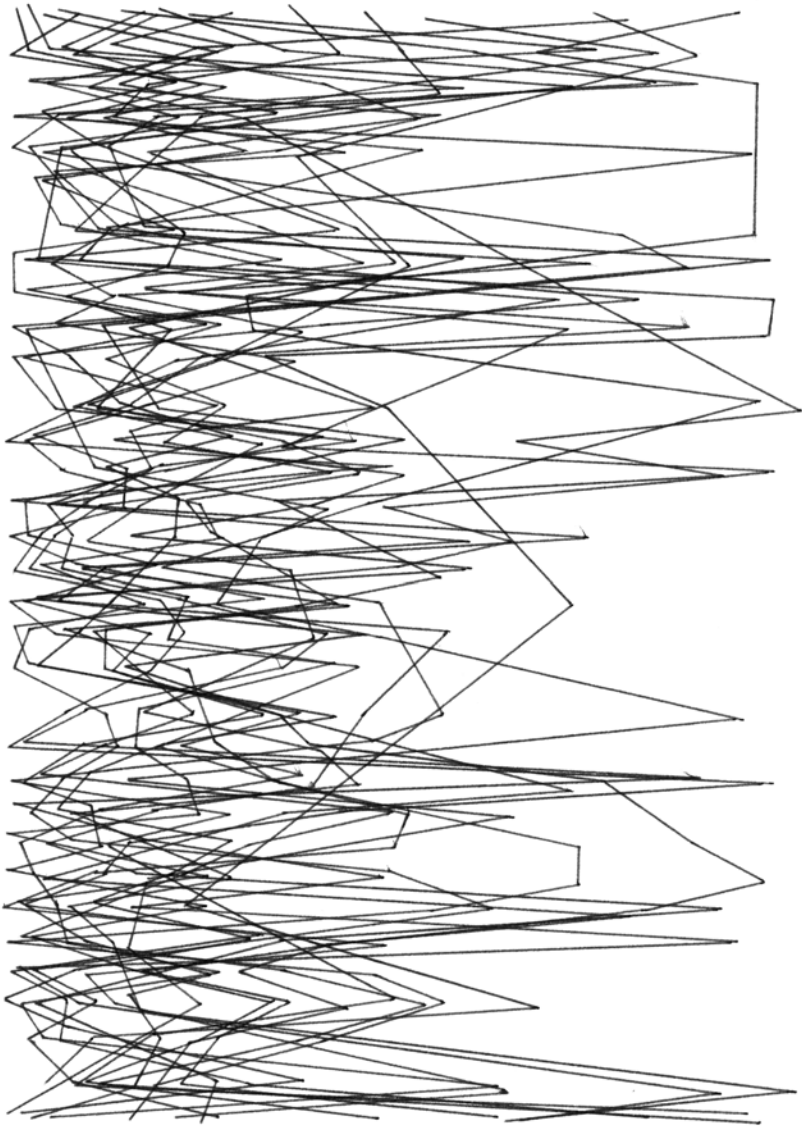


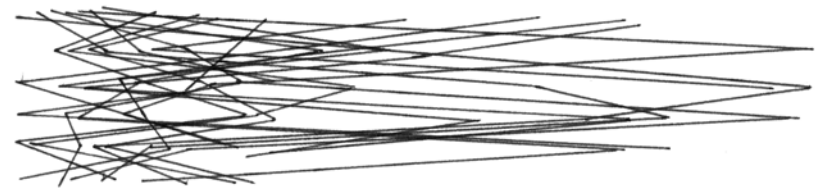
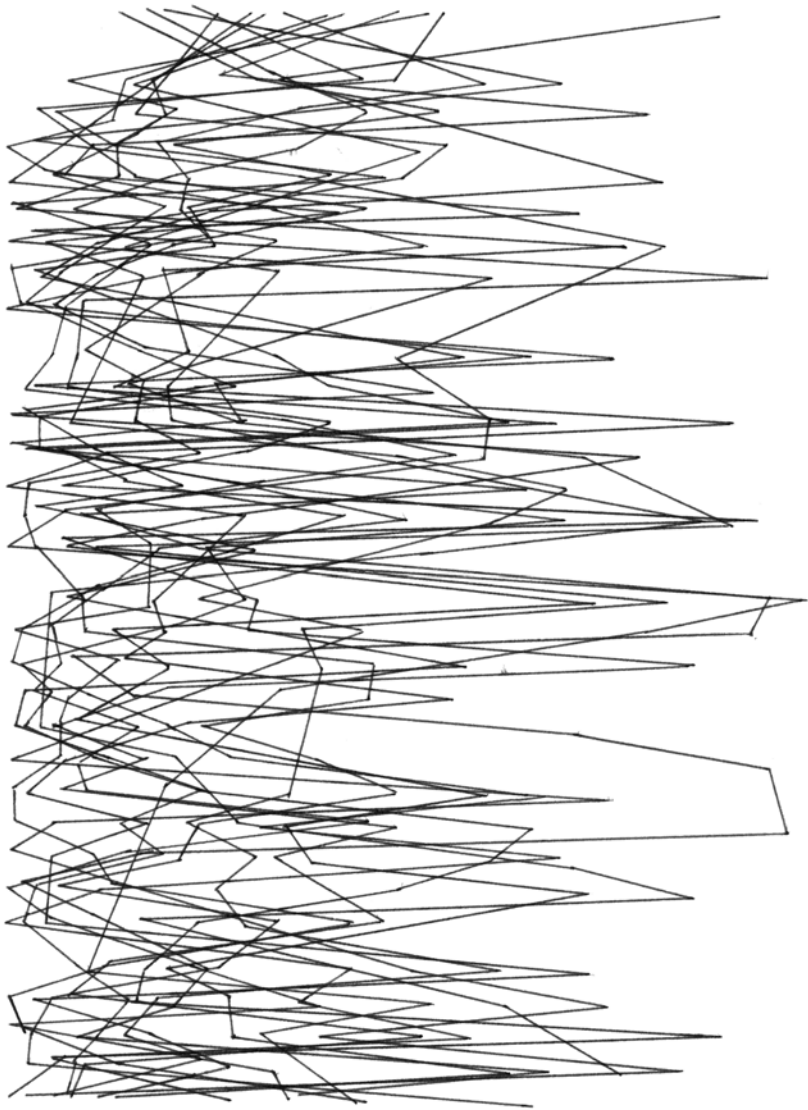


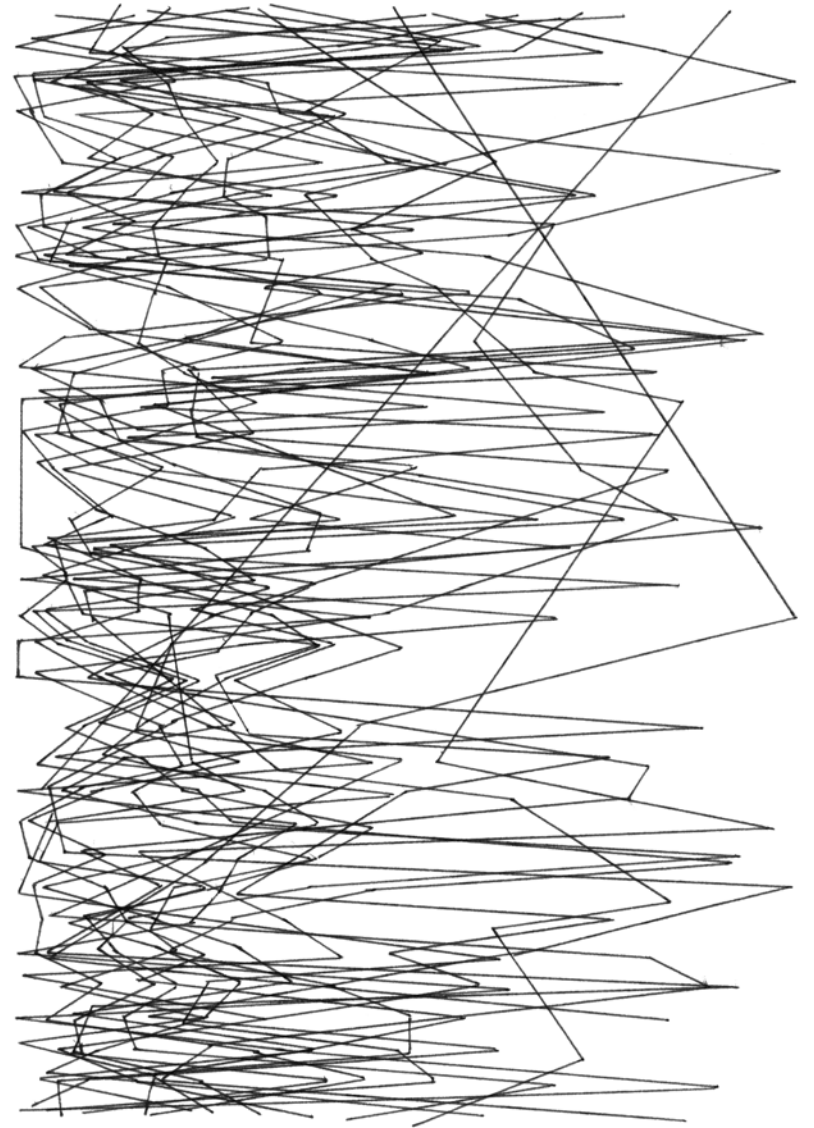
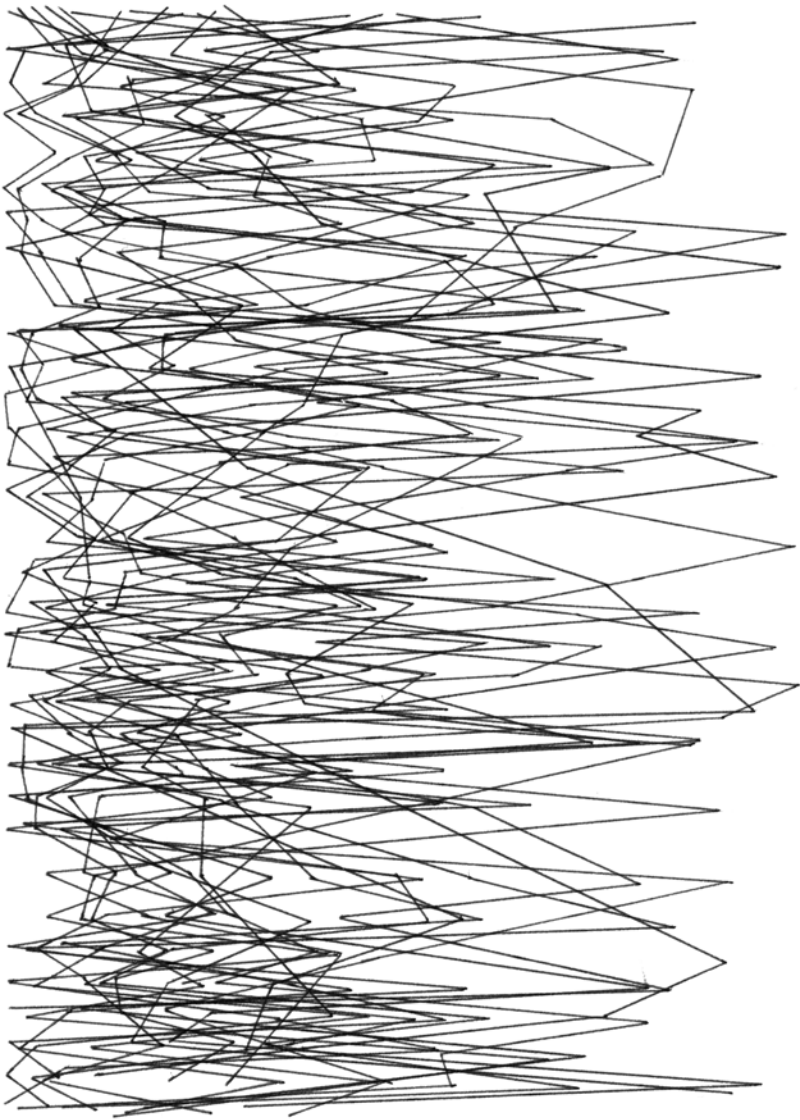


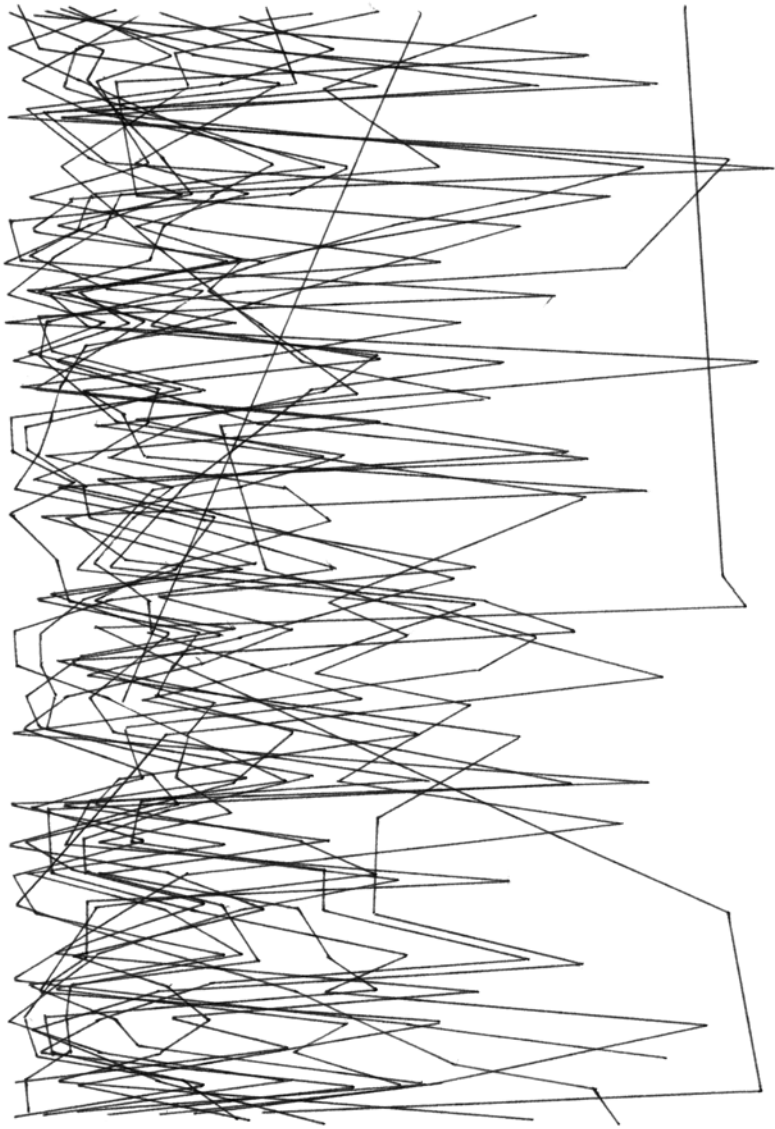


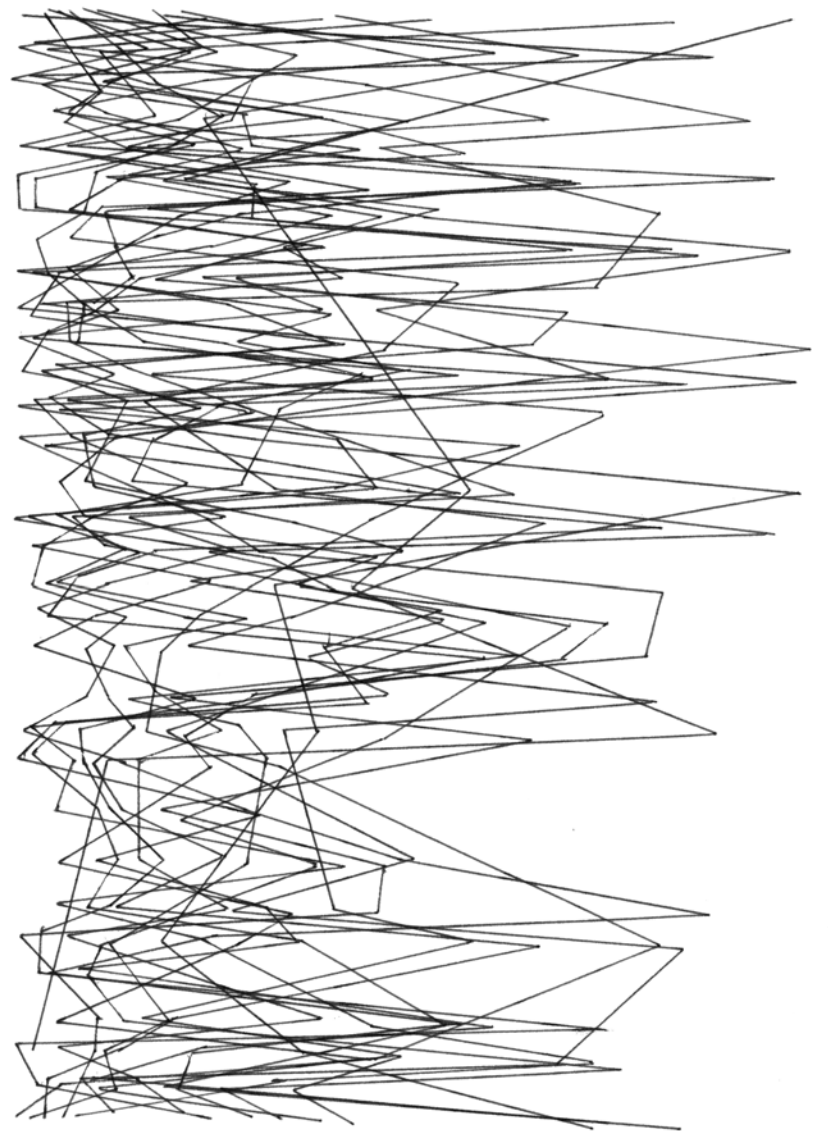
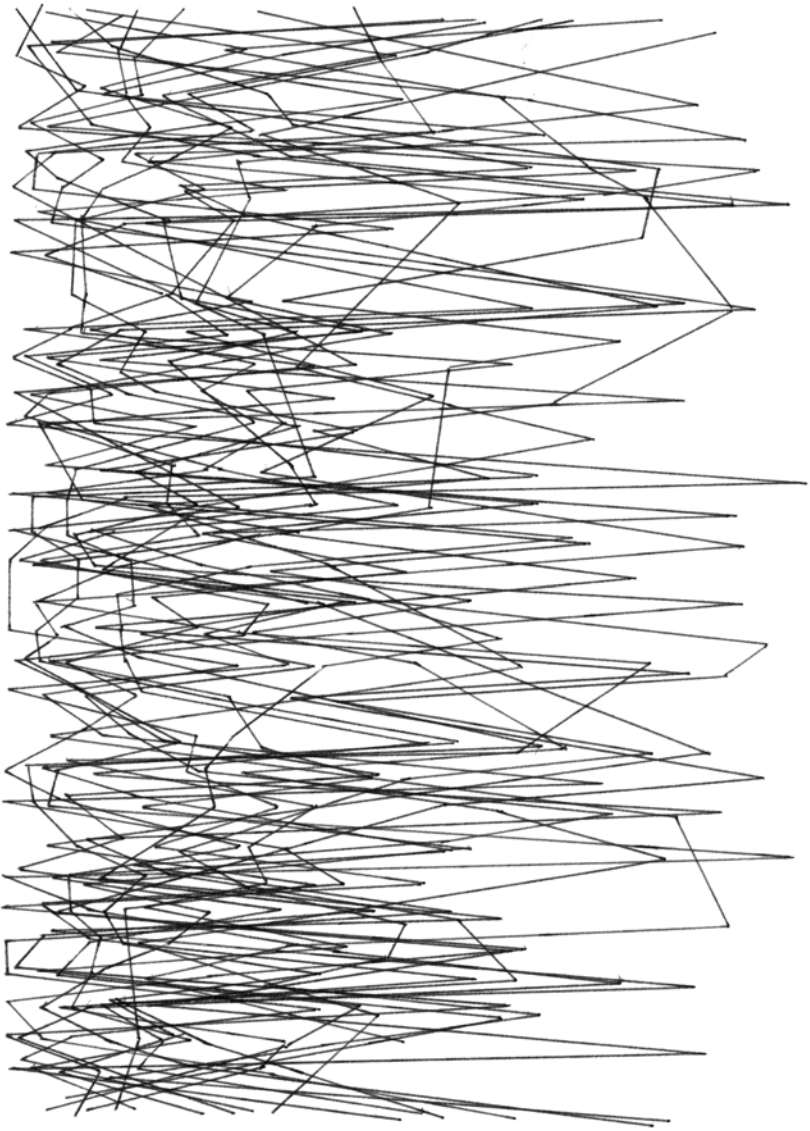


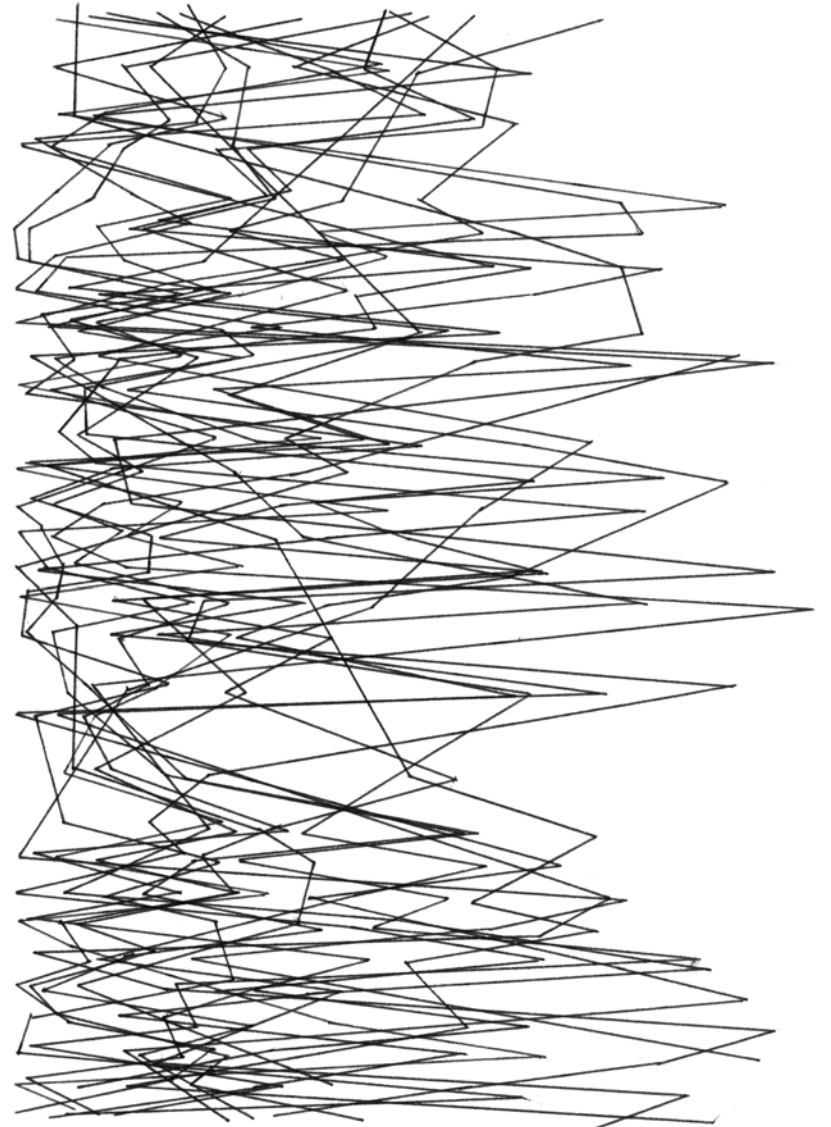
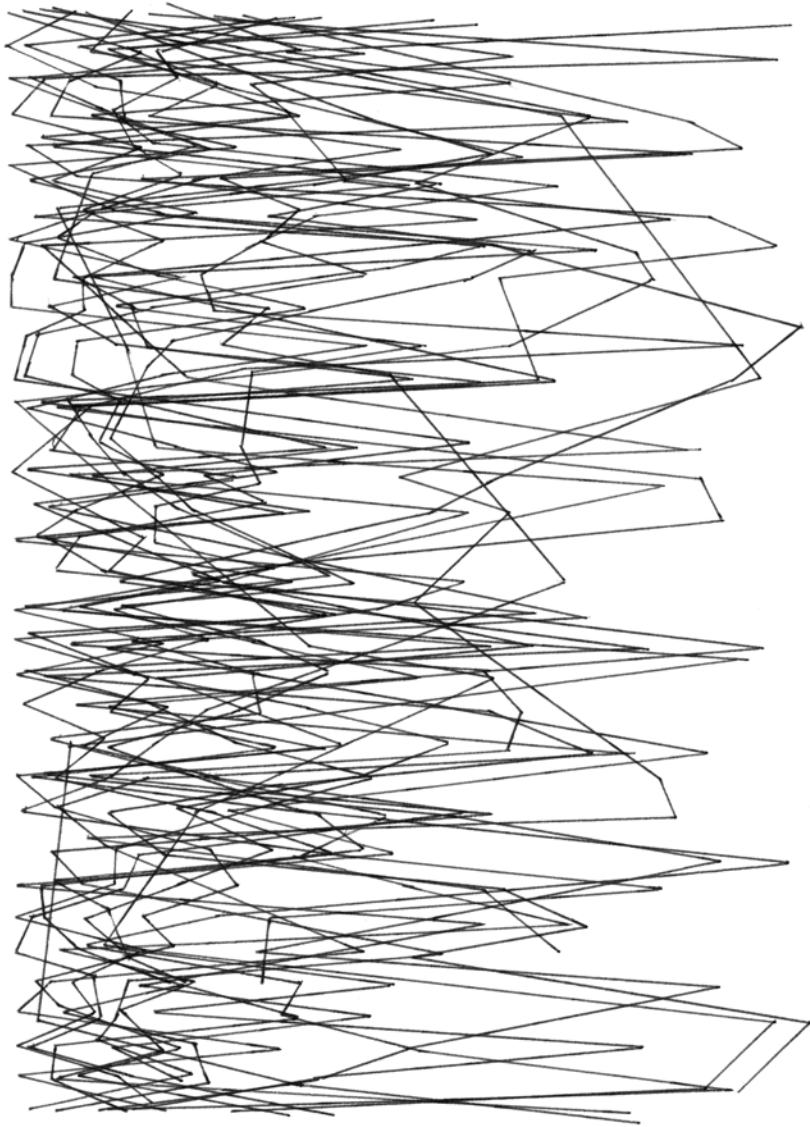


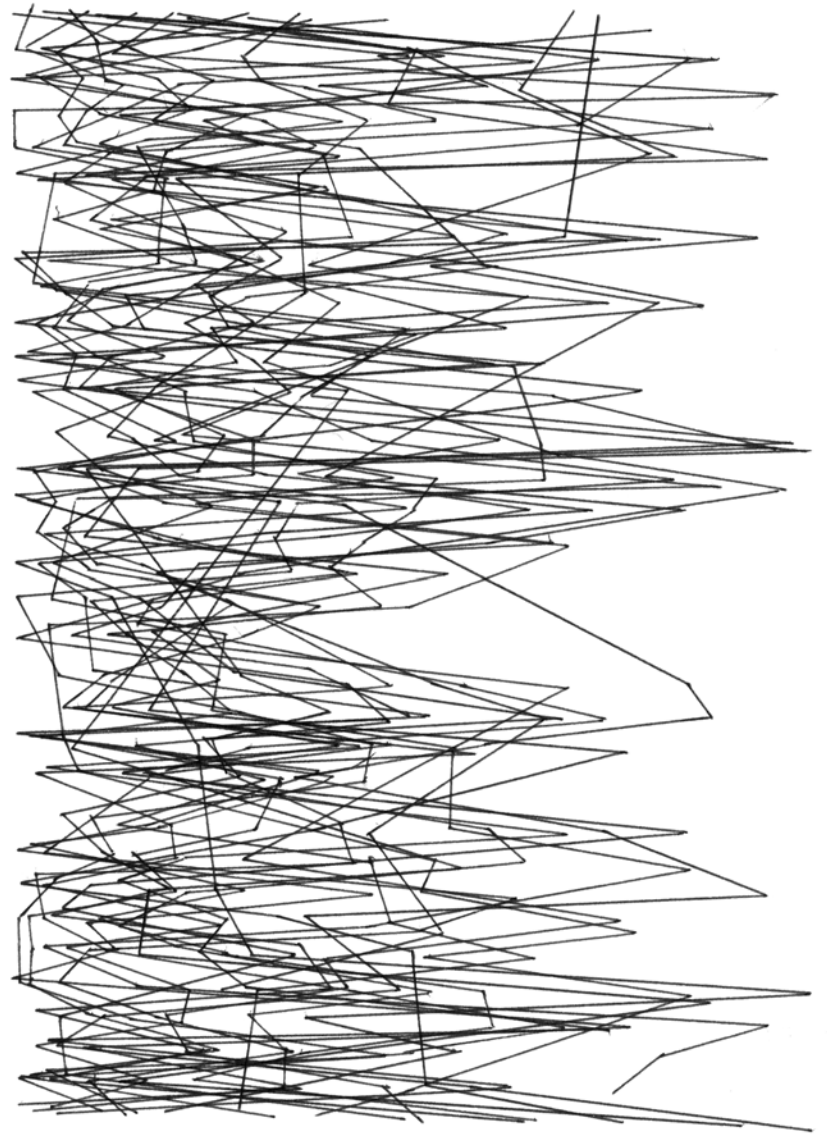
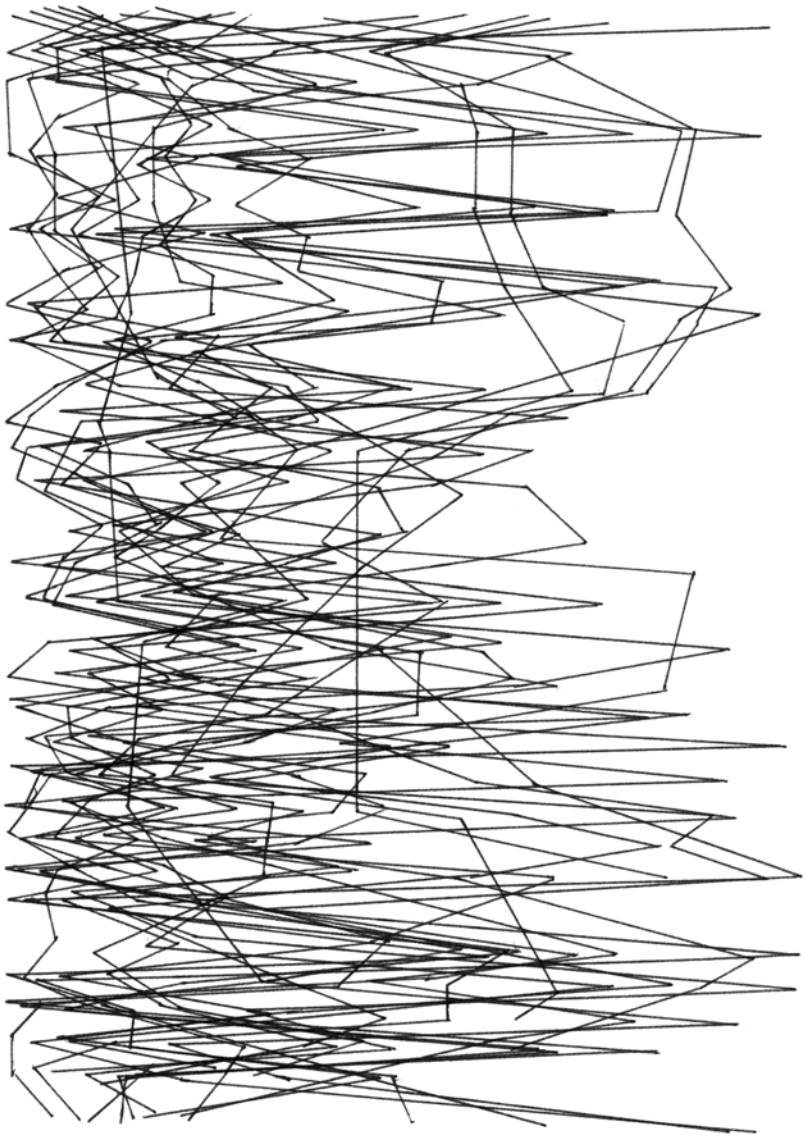


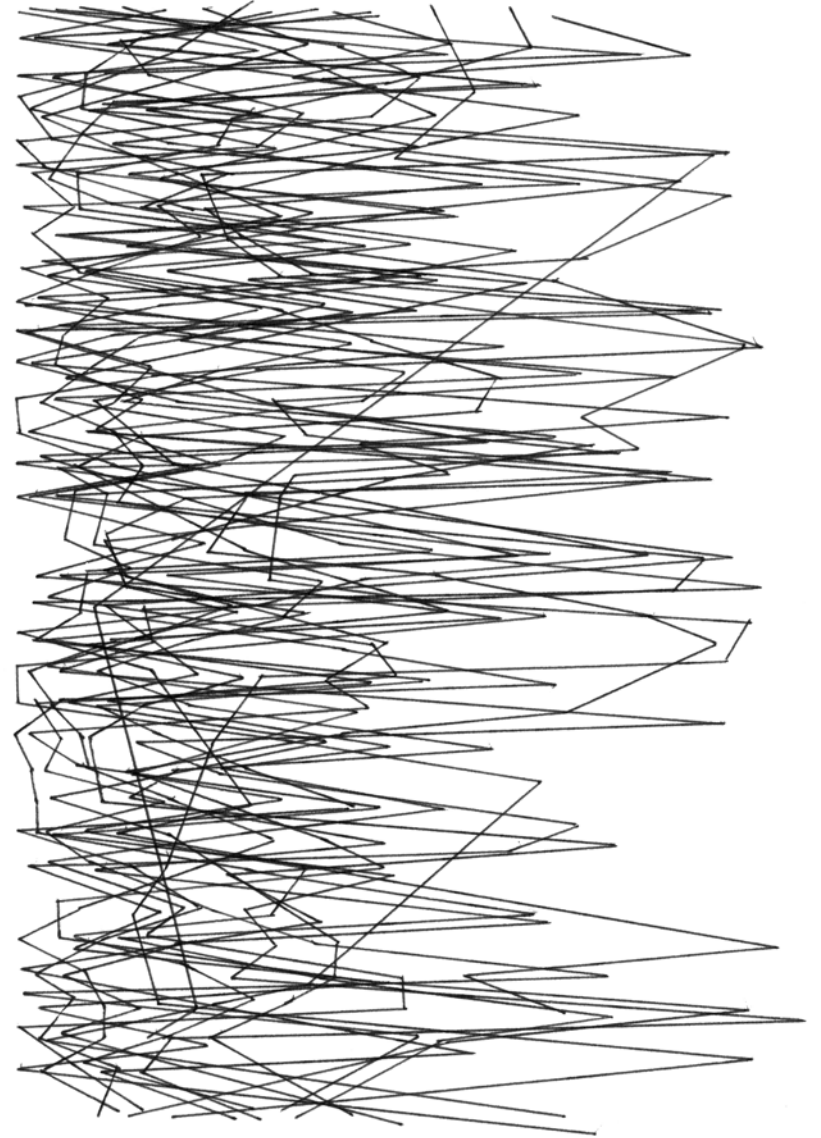


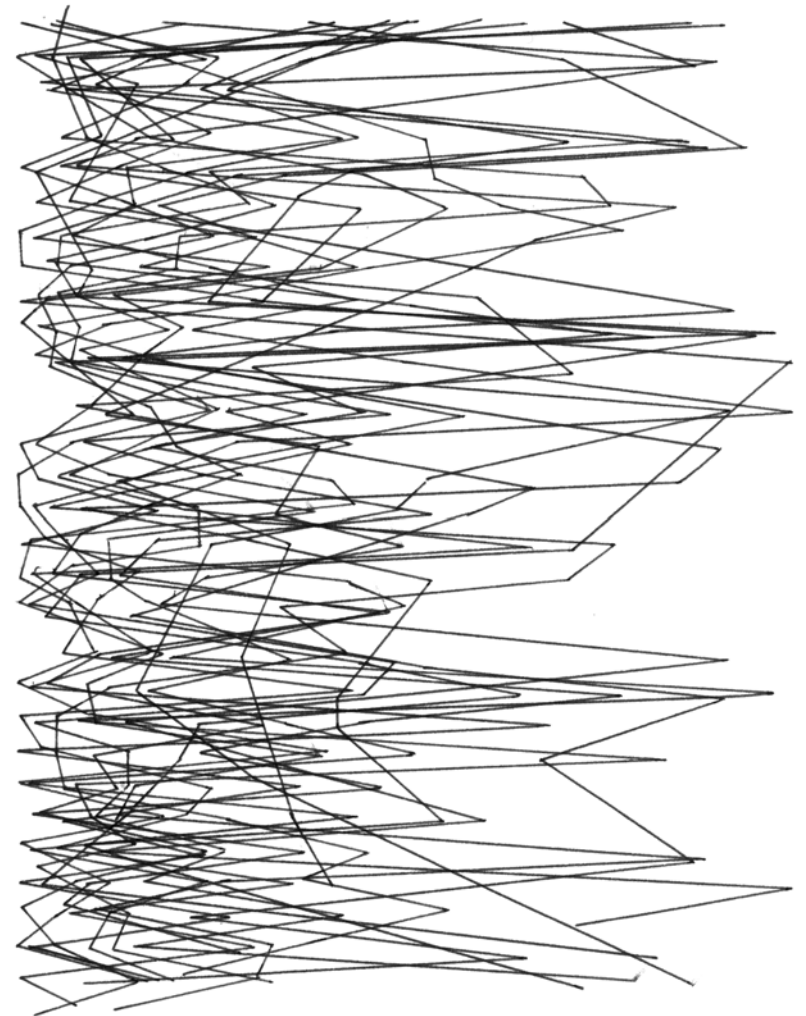
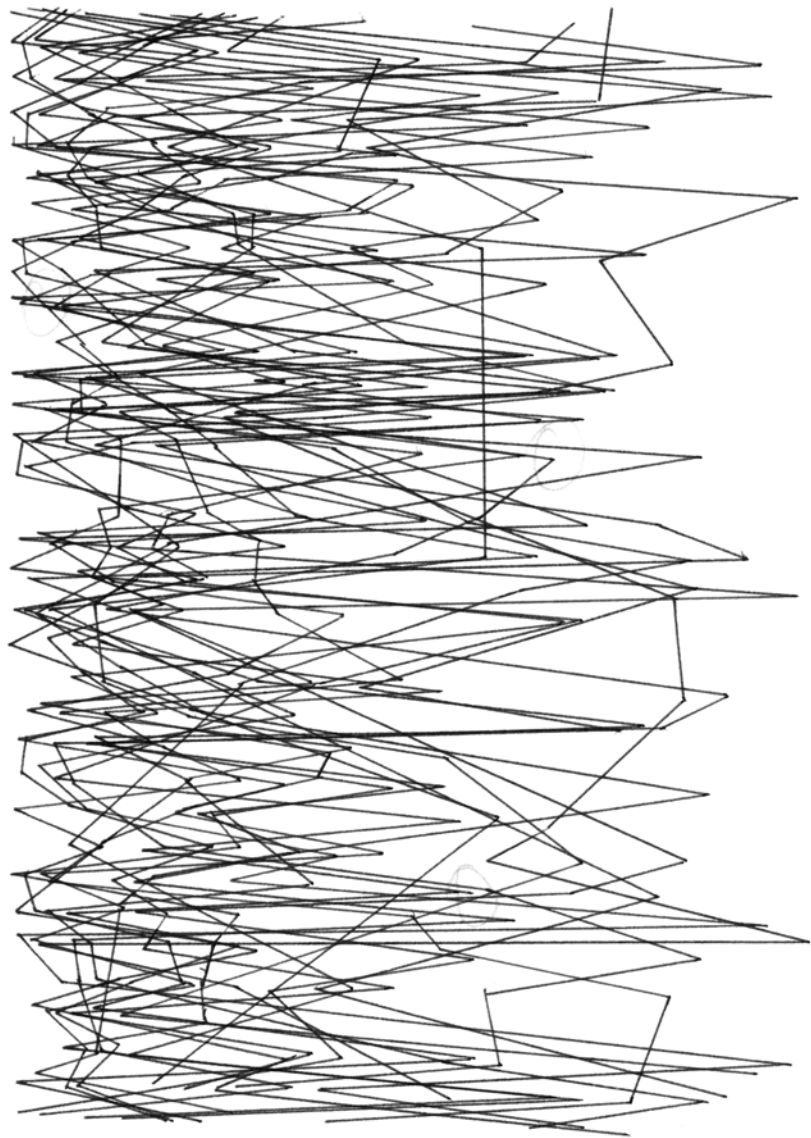


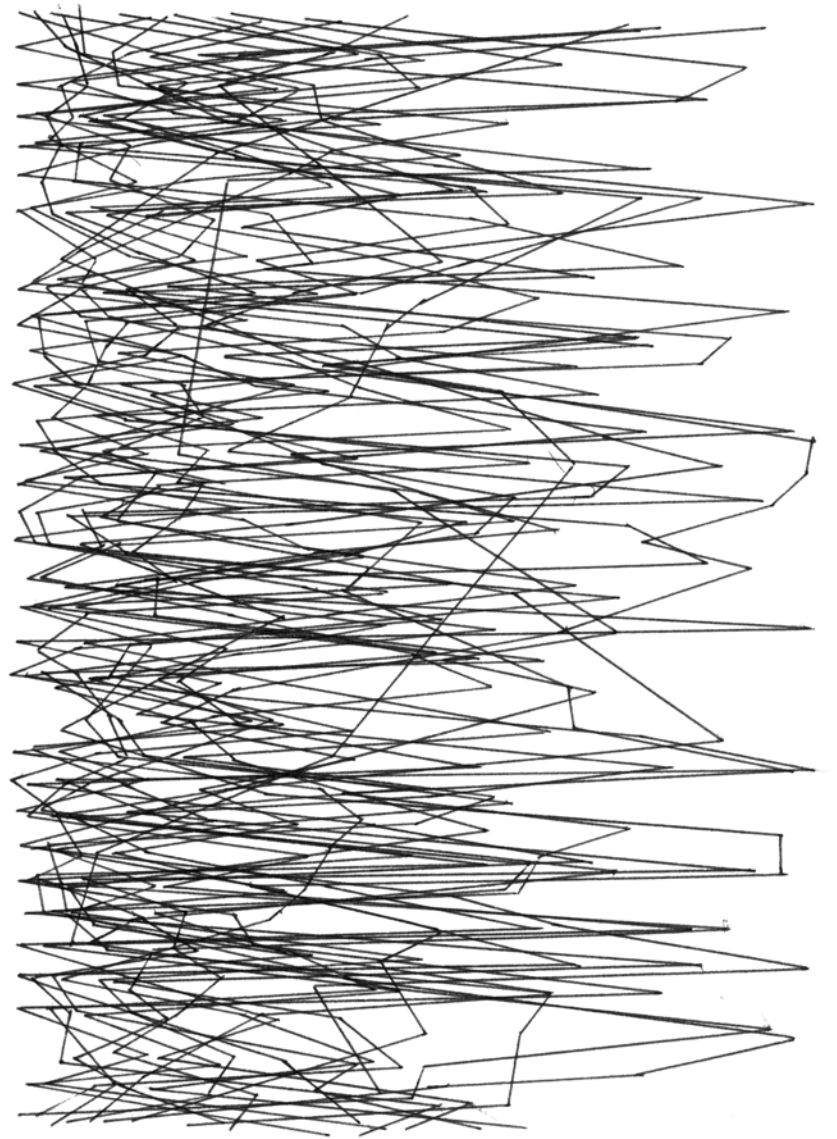
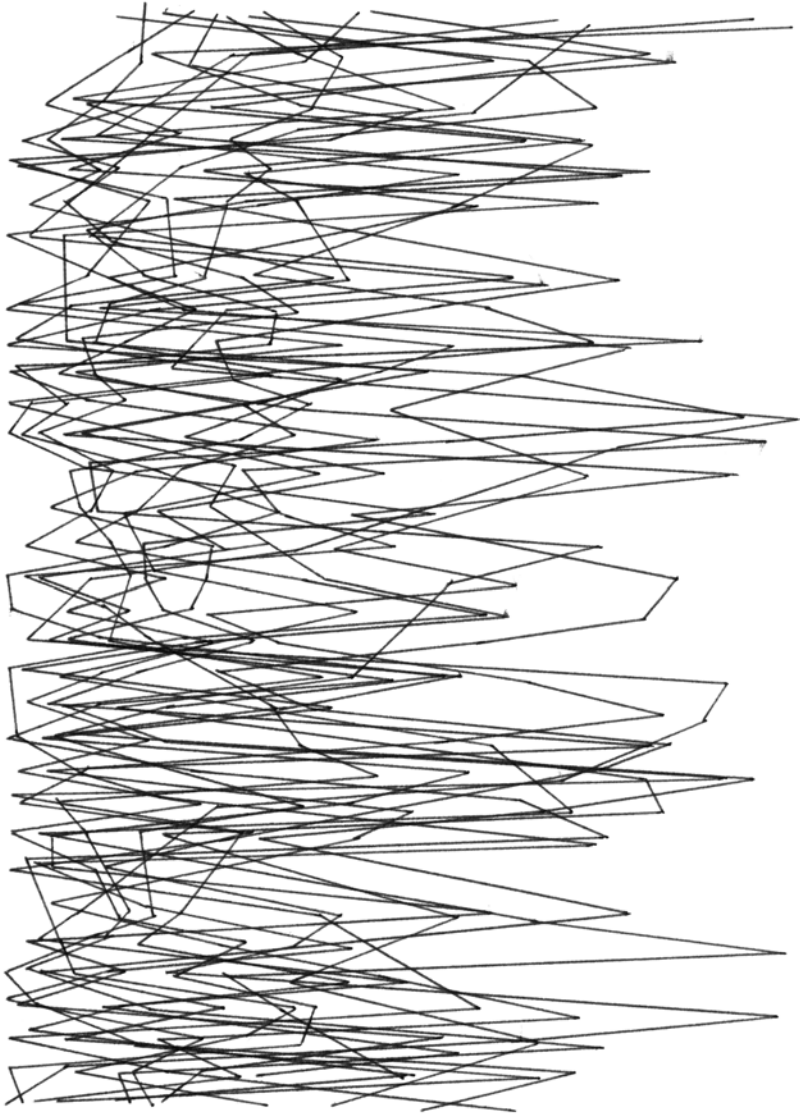


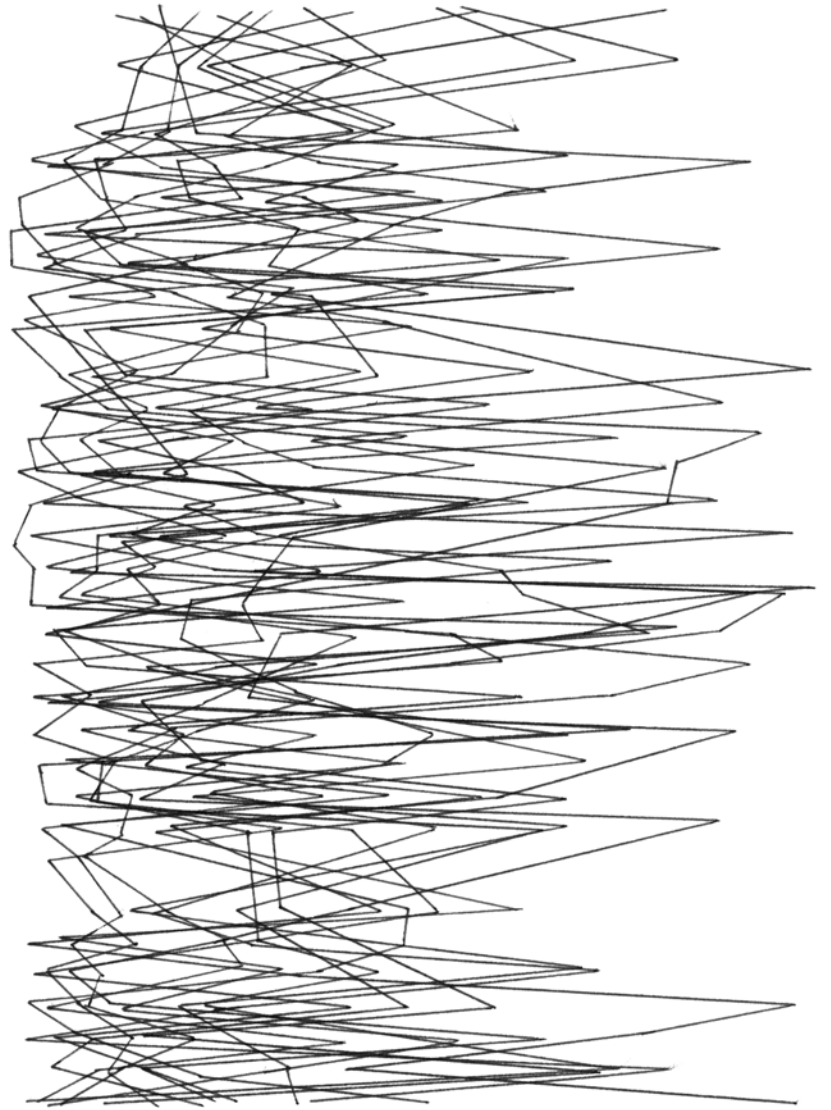
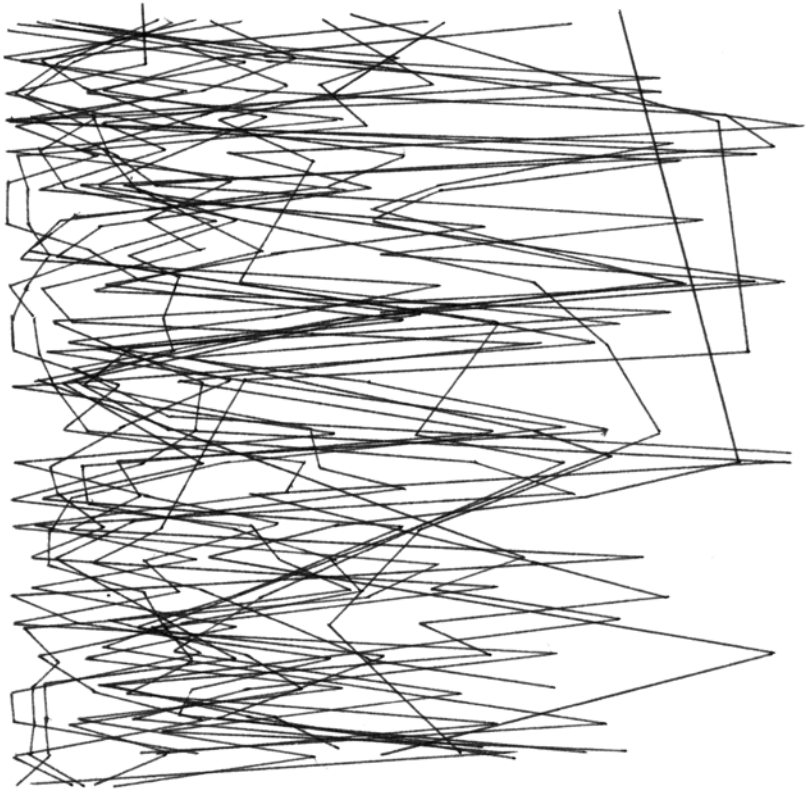


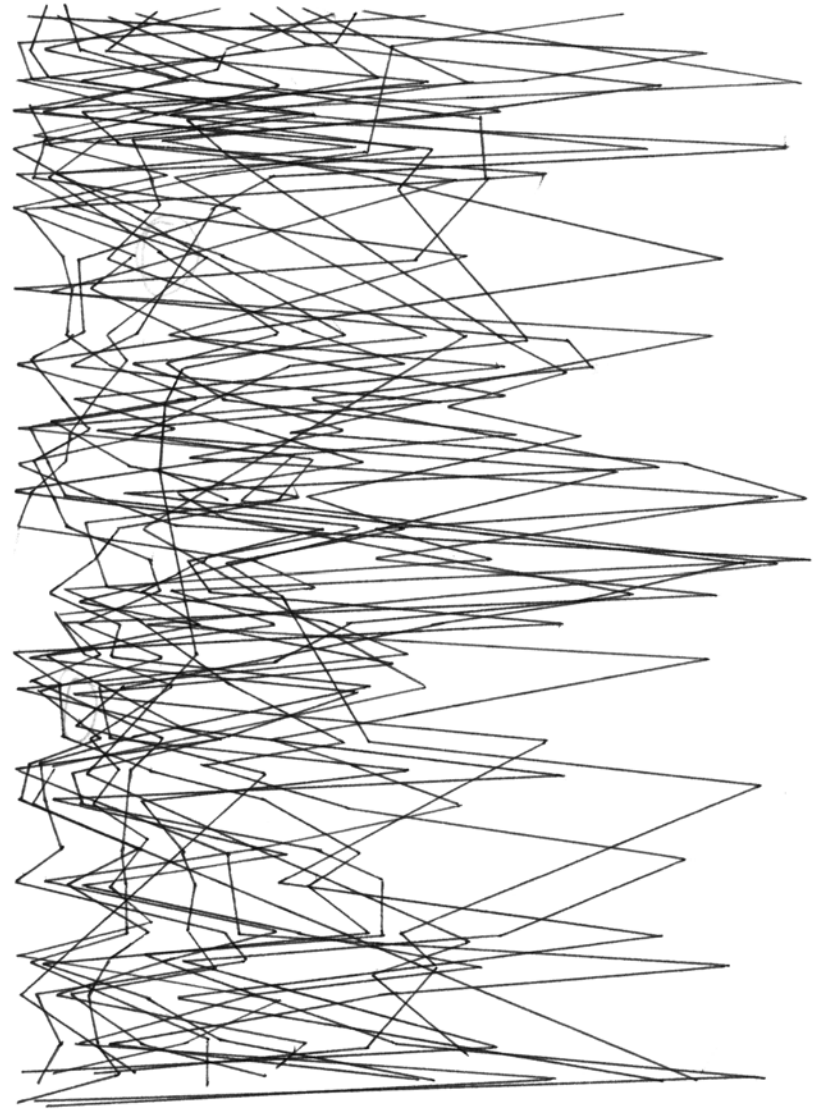
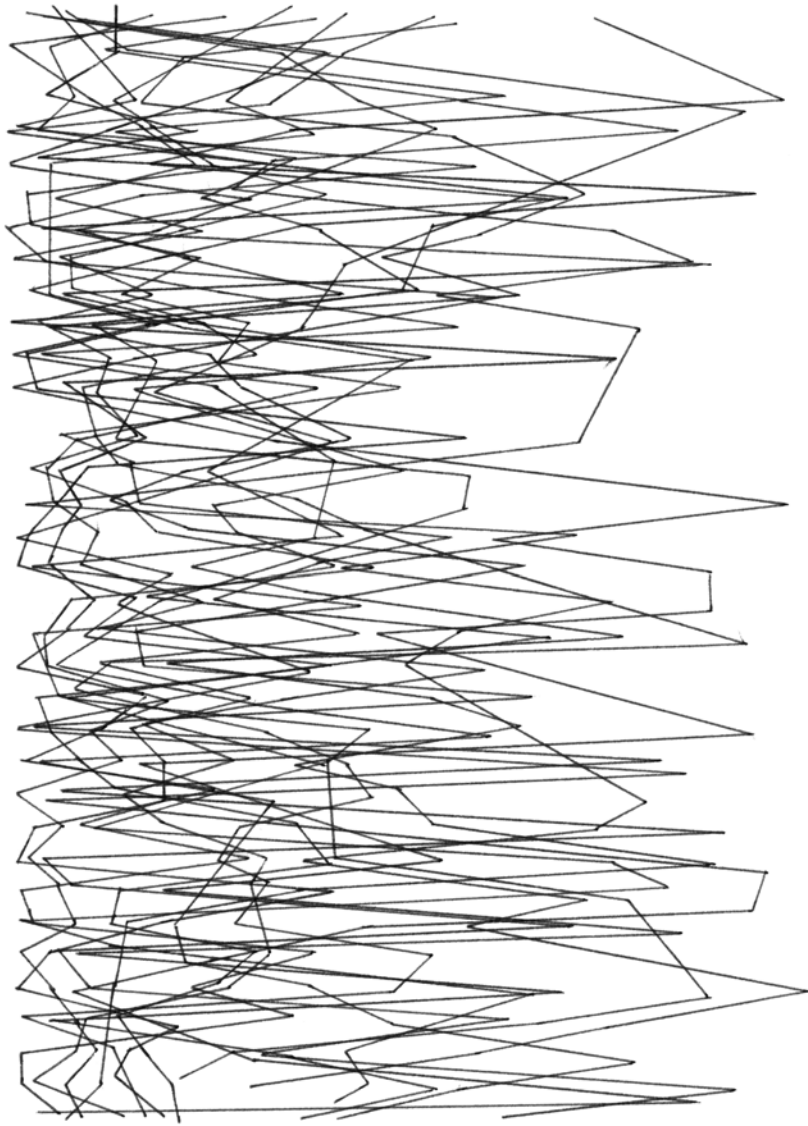


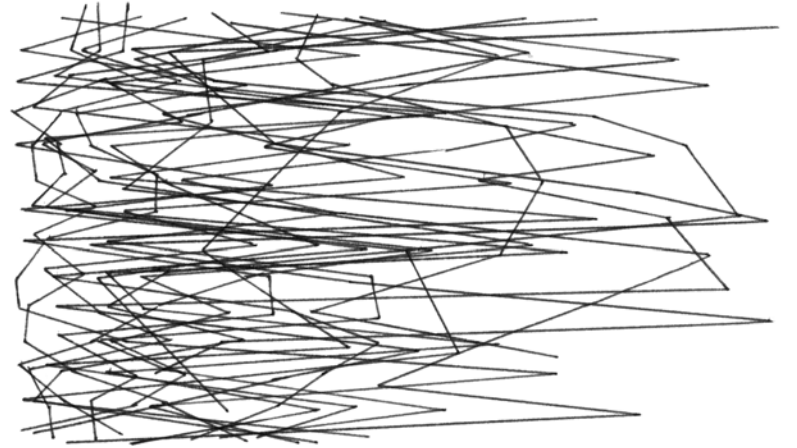
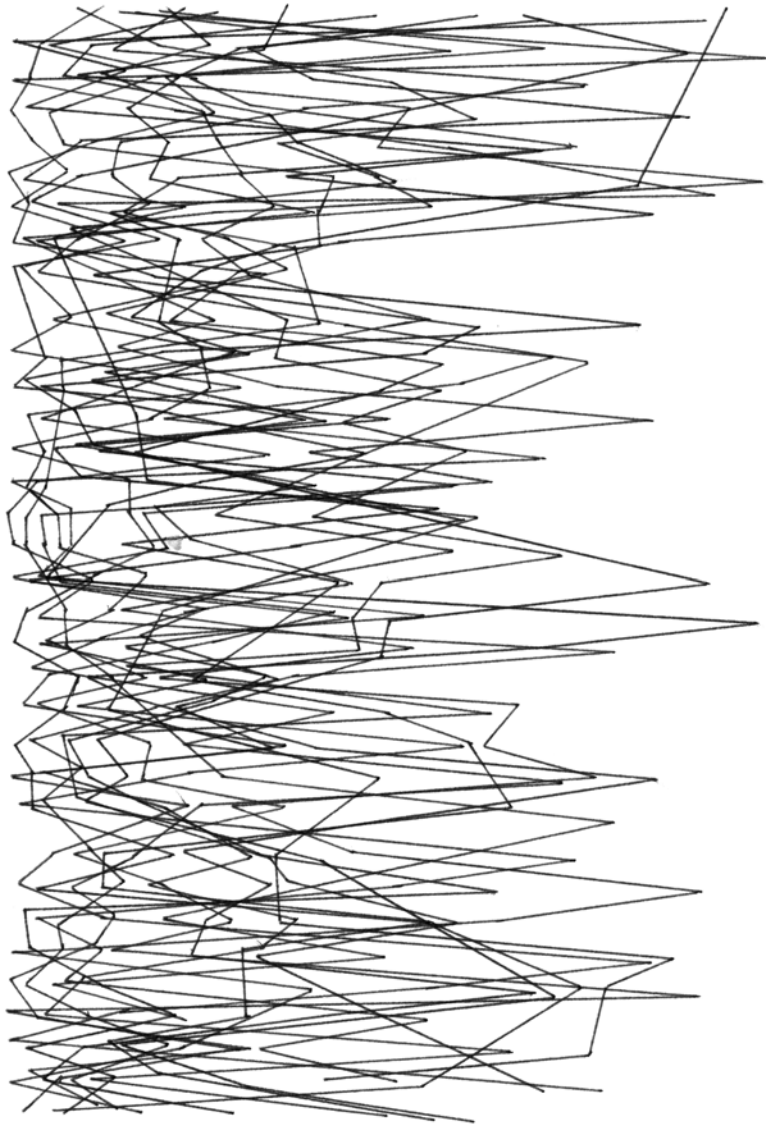












THE END
The baseless fabric of ^{my} vision OF ^{Melted into air into thin air}
FLATLAND
^{Such stuff as dreams? made on}

AFTERWORD

Marjorie Perloff

In our time, what goes by the name of “poetry” is more accurately defined as a form of short prose. True, our poems are usually lineated, but lineation, as becomes apparent when we hear the poems in question read aloud, does not really play a formal or structural role: the poet’s voice takes no notice of the line break, pressing on to complete the “thought” in question. What does matter in such poetry is not “form,” however we define that term, but the expression of particular emotions, the communication of this or that “original” insight. The psychological, it seems, is once again all.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to what the Oulipo poet-theorist Jacques Roubaud has dubbed *VIL* (*vers international libre*). In his delightful book *J & I: les deux combineurs et la totalité* (Paris: Plein Chant, 2002), another Oulipo poet, Paul Braffort writes:

...ce qui rend possible la tentative de poésie, comme celle de mathématique c'est évidemment notre capacité d'abstraire, de formaliser, bref de représenter choses et événements de façon concentrée en chaînes ou arrangements de signes, caractères, symboles, glyphes; phrases, formules, déductions, schémas ou sonnets (en n'ignorant pas que de telles réductions—ou sublimes—entraînent des pertes d'information).

...what makes possible the poetic enterprise, like the mathematical one, is evidently our capacity to abstract, to formalize, in short, to represent things and events in a concentrated way, as chains or arrangements of signs, characters, symbols, glyphs, phrases, formulas, deductions, schema, or sonnets (while not forgetting that these reductions—or sublimes—lead to the loss of information).

And there's the rub. "Do not forget," said Wittgenstein, "that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."

derek beaulieu is a young poet who has demonstrated, again and again, his awareness of this distinction. In his own visual poetry, most recently collected in *fractal economies* (2006), in his work as an editor of such little magazines as *filling Station* (1998–2001, 2003–2007), *dANDelion* (2001–2003) and *endNote* (2000–2001), as founder of *housepress*, which published a variety of valuable editions of poetry, prose, and critical work, and as co-editor, with angela rawlings and Jason Christie, of the anthology *Shift & Switch: new Canadian poetry* (2005), beaulieu has taken a stand

against the lyric in which, as he puts it, "confession and reflection" have become "flattened into a sameness." Rather, he argues, it's *how* you write that will affect *what you write*. And *how* is here taken quite literally: does the poet-artist use quill pen or linotype or computer graphics? And how, in these cases, does the medium become the message?

Flatland provides the reader with a radical—we might say pataphysical—solution to this question. Its source text is E.A. Abbott's science-fiction novella *Flatland*, originally published in 1884 and reprinted by Princeton University Press in 1991. The Victorian Abbot invents a two-dimensional universe inhabited entirely by polygons. beaulieu's writing-through of this whimsical tale immediately brings to mind Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, but there is, in fact, little similarity between the two texts. For whereas Phillips's treated book foregrounds and reframes particular passages in his source text, W.H. Mallock's *A Human Document*, producing delicious parodies, cartoon narratives, double entendres and sexual punning, beaulieu's *Flatland* contains *no words whatsoever*—indeed, not even the letters of the alphabet, much less ideograms or symbols.

So what *is Flatland* all about? The poet-artist explains:

I began by photocopying each page I then identified each unique letter on the 1st line of each page, and traced a line—using a light-table, ink and a ruler—from the first occurrence of each letter on the 1st line through the 1st appearance of each of those same letters on each subsequent line.

How does this work in practice? In an email to me (1 June 2007), beaulieu gives the following example. On the very last page of the novella, the original reads,

That is the hope of my brighter moments. Alas, it is not always

Deleting the repeated letters results in:

Tha is e op fmybr g n l w

beaulieu then draws a line from the 1st appearance of the *T* on the 1st line of text to its appearance on the second line, the third line, and so on to the end of the textblock. And so on, following that initial *b*, *a*, and so on. It is, undoubtedly, a labour-intensive exercise and one that took, in fact, almost a year.

But what, a skeptical reader might ask, is the point? beaulieu himself describes the process this way:

The generated result appears in a series of superimposed seismographic images which reduce *Flatland* to a two-dimensional schematic reminiscent of EKG results or stock reports....each page of my graphically-realized *Flatland* is a diagrammatic representation of the occurrences of letters. By reducing reading and language into paragrammatical statistical analysis, content is subsumed into graphical representation of how language covers a page.

beaulieu's "rhizomatic map of possibility" is, in short, a conceptual text, one that concerns itself, not with conveying information or making meanings in the usual ways, but with the relationship of an Oulippean constraint to *difference*—to the non-identity of nominals that Duchamp called the *infra-thin*.

Thus, no two pages in this book look alike: even at the micro-level of a half or quarter-inch of text, there is *no repetition*. Since the unique letters do not, of course, appear in the same order in subsequent lines, each page yields an entirely different figure. There may be a diagonal going all the way through from beginning to end or a triangle shape in the middle of a page, or an embedded rectangle or hexagon. Or just lines crissing and crossing. Whereas the source text talks about polygons and their mode of being, beaulieu gives us actual polygons in action. True, there are only straight black lines in the white space of the text—and the lines refuse to cohere into letter shapes or any other concrete forms—but the resulting forms are fascinating in their very

absence, their refusal to point to anything outside themselves. Every seeming repeat contains a difference. I find myself therefore looking closely at particular sections of a given page, comparing that section to the previous and following pages. Some pages are more crowded than others; some look downright cluttered. Each uses unique letters to generate unique constellations—constellations that have left their origins far behind.

The *Flatland* page may thus be an EKG that gives us no information about heart rhythm, a stock report that gives us no information about value, a computer scan that gives us no information about code. And this is surely intentional: beaulieu has designed the book as an exercise in sameness and difference—those basic aesthetic properties of any verbal, visual, or sonic text. *Reading*, in this context, means to look very closely at what is in front of you, so that you become familiar with the circuit of differentials presented. It is an effect that takes us back to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. And Stein's aphoristic sentence, "The difference is spreading," might be beaulieu's epigraph.

Caveat lector! Making sense of this book, you have nothing to lose but those "known habits of association," Wordsworth spoke of so movingly, those "eyes that see not." Reading *Flatland* is, quite literally, a trip.

