

Jondi Keane

PERCEPTION LOOKOUT:

The east and west of self-organisation

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IMA
Institute of
Modern Art



The Art of Finding Yourself

PETER WISE

In fact, only one direction is required for orientation. The word insists that knowing where you are is a relationship to the east. Any other point of the compass falls into line with finding the east. And we acknowledge its importance. We bury the dead facing east so the sun cannot set on them. Churches, too, face east, responding not to landscape or surroundings but direction. It is not environment that tells us where we are but light itself, the rising sun.

But there is a medallion, a compass providing, as Jondi Keane puts it, orientation to the landscape,¹ and if light positions us it does so within a space, a landscape. Is it immediately obvious which one? The IMA, the exhibition space, *PERCEPTION LOOKOUT*, these are already within a landscape. The work does not represent a site, an absent scene, a somewhere else, but asserts a continuity with its own terrain. The video projections are a pragmatic means of rendering space and time, attempting to overcome the restrictions of a space which carries a memory of art as representational and not open to the world in which it finds itself. (A gallery, we might remember, was originally a structure facing *outwards*). So we need to orient ourselves not in an exhibited landscape but in the landscape of the exhibition.

Our only resource for the time being is vision. This is a *lookout*, after all. The video projections draw our view to the horizons (temporal horizons as well as spatial: dawn and dusk, east and west) and thus cast us at the centre of a vertiginous openness. So what comes to rescue us? Perspective? That old trick of the artwork that invents the viewer as individual, as *point* of view, as a centre of vision, allowing us to measure one thing against another. But here, at something like a centre, there are not so much things as shapes, outlines, and perspective only seems to occur in multiple possibilities, in fragments.

What might be needed is another concept of perception which is not simply a way of seeing. If the exhibition is already located, is oriented to its own landscape, so too is the viewer. It is less a matter of looking as responding, and finding oneself in that response. Conventional viewing organises the artwork (and according to particular aesthetic conventions). Response is something else, there are no rules yet and it struggles with its own terms of organisation, it has at best cues. Organising the scene, delineating it, orienting oneself, these occur in different dimensions: the viewer collects fragments of the scene itself, but collects together, too, fragments of the various acts of perception. Self-organisation.

And in this place, which is also a time, we must do it aided by lights shining in several directions, onto walls marked with only anonymous patterns. Light falling other than at dawn or dusk is less assertive about direction, more susceptible to interruptions by accidents of the environment: walls, laneways, satellite dishes. The viewer can be left without referents, without mirrors, shadows, the certainty of light's direction. And stripped of those tricks that point of view uses to see a world from its own centrality, the viewer is exposed: within a ground cluttered by its own openness, within light, within the protocols of orientation itself. We see ourselves as effects of the engagement with vision, as a *response* and not, finally, viewers at all. In this mode (or mood) there is only circulation, movement through those visual and other sensory elements. Any point of view becomes nomadic, looking for a place to stand when all places are entirely equal, unmarked (not even the gazebo rests on the ground, and is all in bits). The viewer only has movement to rely on, a position defined by its flux ... light usually carries away what is seen, fixity exists only in another kind of moment, when the viewer is assured of his or her looking, when what is seen does not look back but remains an unseeing collection of objects.

But light here does not mediate, it does not function simply on the viewer's behalf, assisting vision to fall upon the work of art, producing its elements, those painted sections of wall, for example, as visible. Light is marked in its differences: in its intensities, its shadows, its falling on walls, viewers, objects; as illumination and transmission. It is light that we must negotiate with, light itself which draws back from the surface of the walls. Light looks at us from the conditions of its visibility, looks at us as visibility. Light becomes, in that sense, illuminated; even as its manifold sources project in their own directions, in patterns of incoherence, suggesting that any simple negotiation is impossible. We do not so much see our own seeing but see the conditions, the possibility of seeing: the moment of connection between body/light/scene.

Since the work is already within a landscape, and since we recognise that our seeing is not cut off from the world beyond but is contiguous and continuous with that landscape, we are invited to view the world from *within* the artwork. This is (again) no question of representation, of portraying some elsewhere, but of discovering the connections, relays, resonances that are possible with the world 'outside' (it being outside only insofar as it is also inside, as it also *begins* inside).

Of course, the space is also orchestrated; it asserts itself as art. Heidegger might help to orient us given his interest in a nexus between world and artwork. For him, there is *earth*, and there is *world*, and there is the work of art. The work of art sets up a world and, in doing so, *sets forth* the earth.² The earth is an undifferentiated territory, identified but not explained as the necessary place for the taking place of the work of art. But *world* is something human, it is the relationship of human being to the earth, how we find and understand ourselves, our being. And the work of art produces *world*, relates us to the earth, *orients* us. Art is a relatedness to whatever we find ourselves in the midst of, not the simulation of it, not a substitution or surrogate or copy. It positions us. It is not so much a looking at as a looking from.

The work of art is, then, always already a *perception lookout*. It orients us in and in relation to the world, though to the world that the work of art brings about. But this is no longer separate from the 'real' world. It is, rather, continuous with that world, makes it evident to us (sets it forth) as not yet differentiated, not yet localised, as the provocation for another work, another orientation. For the continuation of art as movement itself.

Even so, Keane's work is subtitled *the east and west of self-organisation*, while the viewer of the ordinary work of art is already organised. Heidegger says that the very concept of aesthetics recognises the work as an object, a thing presented to the senses as a harmonising of sensory perceptions.³ The viewer is the point of convergence, and aesthetic pleasure is an effect of sensory coordination. Nothing in *PERCEPTION LOOKOUT* seems at first to disrupt this expectation. But sensory coordination makes the process internal, an organising underwritten by a self already taken for granted. A self organised on the model of *orientation* is a matter of relation, of response and connection to the vectors of a situation, a landscape. And there are always too many such vectors, too many directions in which light shines, too many planes at too many odd angles for space to be concluded, for any harmony of the senses, for any simple aesthetics to affirm the completion of perception. New organisations of the self are possible, indeed necessary, with each new line of sight and the connections it opens.



NOTES

1. Jondi Keane, *PERCEPTION LOOKOUT: Project Description*, Unpublished, 2002.
2. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Basic Writings* (ed. David Farrell Krell). Routledge, London, 1993, p. 172.
3. See Heidegger, *op.cit.*, especially pp. 151 & 204.

FRONT COVER: *Horizons & Aphorisms, 2001*. (detail)
Installation. Photo: Richard Stringer.

LEFT: *Horizons & Aphorisms, 2001*. (detail)
Installation. Photo: Richard Stringer.

INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
420 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley QLD 4006
PO Box 2176 Fortitude Valley BC QLD 4006
Brisbane Australia
Tel +61 7 3252 5750 Fax +61 7 3252 5072
im@ima.org.au www.ima.org.au

MICHAEL SNELLING, DIRECTOR
DAVID BROKER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
WENDY MANSELL, GENERAL MANAGER
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Interview: Arakawa and Gins with Jondi Keane

The aim of this short interview is to introduce a range of issues involved in current investigations, and provide a context for ecological approaches across the arts and sciences in regard to the study of the organism in its environment.

Arakawa and Gins have been working together for over 35 years. Each from their own orientation, Arakawa (painting) and Gins (poetry), has left behind their singular efforts to pursue a collaborative practice comprised of many processes and approaches. Through the precise differences between writing, image making, installation, built environment, architectural structures, large-scale sites, housing developments and small cities, they investigate ways in which each process activates different awareness and acuity. These efforts have cumulatively led to developing what Arakawa and Gins call 'procedural architecture' which is a practice of building, inhabiting and engaging that facilitates observation and learning. Ultimately, this leads to the coordination of human activities and the possibility of new configurations.

The main concern is assessing how we function as organisms and how organisms interact with the surrounding environment. Arakawa and Gins suggest that the site of negotiation between the organism and the surroundings, which we call 'person' is more accurately described as the 'organism that persons'. Historically, built surroundings prescribe the activities of an organism and how it will invest in cultural values emphasised by the built environment. The first thing to do is learn what an 'organism that persons' can do. The purpose of Arakawa and Gins' 'Procedural Architecture' is to pinpoint the areas where the relationship of 'organism-person-environment' has been over-determined, and to allow the identification and practice of other interactions. This expanded notion of the relationship of organism to surround becomes what they have called the 'architectural body'.

Arakawa and Gins are uniquely positioned to discuss the particular importance of creative research. Their experimental and heuristic approach to observation and their procedural approach to practice raise key questions about how to go about the study of ourselves, which involves studying ourselves in situ, in all complexity, as thoroughgoing researchers with vested interest in the findings.

Jondi Keane:

At the time when you first began your collaboration others were catalysed by the political dimension of May '68. Was there a specific decision that led you to frame the problem on a different scale and pursue research on the relationship of organism to the environment beginning with your work: 'the mechanism of meaning'?

Arakawa and Gins:

One of us was a red diaper baby and the other had been an activist on the streets of Tokyo. By the time we were in our twenties (the period of May '68), it had become clear to each of us that no act can have a longer-lasting political effect other than the figuring out of what it is that comes to exist as a 'person', the basis of action, always political. Inventive moves, such as those exhibited in/as artworks, are combinations of the same tendencies and capabilities that underlie and prefigure all

thought and behavior. Attempting to isolate the implicit functions upon which a person draws when she invents a move, we lined up artworks and gestures that favored one tendency or capability underpinning thought and behavior over all the rest and placed them under headings naming that predominant tendency, that lead capability. We freed ourselves of expressivity by getting to the bottom of it. The first enslaved artists we freed were ourselves.

JK:

Procedural architecture has both an individual and a collective (coevolving, co-constructing) aspect to its activity. Will not the architectural body require a large-scale collective commitment (in the way cyclotrons require space, material and finance)? And what of research, critical thinking and practice on a smaller scale of action, how effective do you think these could be for the bringing about of an architectural body? And have you not said all along that your architectural practice addresses many scales of actions at once?

A & G:

We will begin with the last of your questions in this query-cluster. Each person demonstrably operates and lives on many scales of actions at once. Eliminating scales or dimensions from the picture, 'the moving picture', gives only a limited reduced version of it. Viable organisms have all the coordinating skills needed to keep the entire world in the picture, all scales of action welcome. Finding what the unique contribution of each scale of action is remains quite another matter. As well as being a way to keep everything in play, procedural architecture, a juxtaposing of tactically posed surrounds, would give each scale of action its due while insuring that all are kept appropriately operative. These many scales of action taken together make up the whole of the medium plus environment from which organisms are inseparable. Within towns that provide organisms with procedures through which to investigate what it is that they are coordinating and how they ever manage to be 'organisms that person' across environments/atmospheres, architectural bodies will come to exist for real. And so, yes, a large-scale commitment is required -- something on the order of the space program, perhaps to be called the puzzling-out (of individual space) program. Of course the smaller scales of action you list are crucial to the effort. All works of procedural architecture are delivered with their own set of Directions for Use, for example, and these directions will more and more come to be produced by teams of researchers.

JK:

Convergence across the arts and sciences is made possible by framing the question of human development in terms of the relationship of organism to its environment. What would you suggest as good point of departure for those wishing to become more familiar with the notion of an architectural body, for those wishing to live as an architectural body.

A & G:

- a) Step into a work of procedural architecture with its Directions for Use in hand, keeping in mind the architectural body equals the body proper + the architectural surround.
- b) Read our books, particularly the most recent one, *Architectural Body* (University of Alabama Press, Poetics Series, 2002).