Towards (Im) measurability of art and life

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Written and edited by Miya Yoshida
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Talking Back to the Light: Nameless Architecture and Its Critique of Epistemology
Estermann's drawing shows lines which supposedly depict how light moves inside the eye – thus questioning the existing popular belief and accepted scientific fact that light can only move in a straight line, as long as it is not de- or reflected. Light here assumes a kind of life of its own, or develops its own "will" – as it curls itself up into spiral forms that resemble the ideal of the dynamic lines that was so crucial in the aesthetics of progress in European and international modernities around the beginning of the 20th century. Here, invisible entities and their dynamic movements are measured not by ultra-waves, electrical signals, or X-rays, but by what the artist calls his "bio-imagination". This introspective method that the artist has invented for himself reflects, senses, and speculates about things that appear and take shape in the form of lines.
Spectacular Interferometry is a combination of two drawings - one is a series of collages made from car designs that the artist did as a teenager back in 1982, the other is a drawing from the more recent series Modern Beach Design - abstract line drawings on the theme of beach landscapes from 2008. In the early 1980s, Estermann was obsessed with the measurements of cars. He measured and wrote down even the time it took to draw the (unfinished) car drawings. The drawings are meant to be enlarged to their full scale - as "real life-size cars" - with a size of ca. 4-metres-high and ca. 9-metres-wide - which is actually bigger than a regular car. The work experiments with scales - combining scale in everyday life and the "(non-)scale of a modernist dream" into one picture plane. The artist's method of "bio-imagination" successfully captures the social imagination of the 1980s as well as the effect it has on measurement today - and makes both perceivable as one entity in the form of a collage drawing.
alphabet

by Inger Christensen

1 apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist

2 bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries; bromine exists; and hydrogen, hydrogen

3 cicadas exist; chicory, chromium, citrus trees: cicadas exist; cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum

4 doves exist, dreamers, and dolls; killers exist, and doves, and doves; haze, dioxin, and days; days exist, days and death; and poems exist; poems, days, death
Hwayeon Nam, *Dimensions Variable*,
2013–14, performance at Songwon Art Center, Seoul, and Palais de Tokyo, Paris,
photo Hwayeon Nam, courtesy the artist
Event-maps

Event-maps, ubiquitous site (within locally circumscribed areas), have distinct foregrounds, middle grounds, and backgrounds. Briefly coordinated engagements of landing site define (sculpt out) at least the following positions:

foreground, foremiddleground, foreforeground, middlebackground, backmiddleground, backforeground, foreground, forebackmiddleground, forebackforeground, foreforemiddleground, foreforeforeground, backforebackground, backforemiddleground, backforeforeground, middleforebackground, middleforemiddleground, middleforeforeground, middlebackground, middlebackmiddleground, middlebackforeground, foremiddleground, foremiddleground, foreforebackground.

Surprisingly, the logical geographies of most philosophers make no use of these positionings for describing events of the world. The above is only a partial list of critical positionings in the event-map.

By Arakawa and Madeline Gins
A labyrinth imposes direction on the body as narrowly and as pleasurable as does a regularly-contrived labyrinth. It impedes the body's passage to nearly the same degree; but, unlike an actual labyrinth, it does this not in the open but in the room.

Terrains, which utilize the sharpness of the unexpected, since the body can no longer only take its own measure. No longer is the body like a terrains of all others must become terrains.
What is this? A reversible site at a dangerous site on the verge of becoming a reversible one.
Talking Back to the Light: Nameless Architecture and Its Critique of Epistemology

“12. The feeling of meaning: Toward a demonstration of the affective role in cognition through an investigation of affective value as a measuring device; exercise for the movement of emotions in an attempt to set parameters for feeling through contortion, overlay, reversal and other disruptive systems: Assuming the validity of James Lange theory, if there is an internal sensory basis for feeling, what is the meaning of perception?”
—Arakawa & Gins

Shusaku Arakawa, who spent most of his working life in New York City, created a series of abstract paintings early in his career. His paintings, from the late 1950s, but mostly from the 1960s, employed a recognisable style that was emerging in New York at the time — minimalist large formats that felt like premonitions of conceptual art. As one of the preeminent foundations of his work, Arakawa quite early on examined semiotics and grammar, while remaining dedicated to painting on canvas. He amalgamated everyday objects, texts, spaces, events, et cetera so as to make them into signs. He took apples, tea cups, a living room, himself, his friends' birthdays, a short entry in the Webster's Dictionary, et cetera, reduced all of them to lines, dots, or arrows in his paintings, and presented them along with geometric shapes such as cylinders, squares, circles, and grids. He occasionally combined words such as “mistake”, “blank”, or “line”, or paradoxical aphorisms in the style of Samuel Beckett.

In his paintings, everything becomes a sign and is intended to become equivalent with everything else. It is laid out in an orderly manner on the blank space of the canvas. The paintings and other images often recall diagrams in scientific textbooks or exercises in mathematics, or adopt the format of a city map or part of an architectural plan. His conceptual aim was to have format accepted as paintings. In contrast to his geometric abstractions in two dimensions, the paintings hold their own with a strong sense of physical space — one may feel

visually entrapped by them as if in a labyrinth. That labyrinth is dimensionless, beyond scale, and depthless and/or bottomless, like the world of the early 20th-century philosophical novel *Flatland*, or of *Gulliver's Travels* or *Alice in Wonderland*. Once a person is drawn into the space of the paintings, s/he has to navigate the self on his/her own using all of his/her bodily senses. They remind us that apples on a table "are" simply a line. As the title of one of his paintings shouts, *'No! Says the Signified* (1971–72), Arakawa painted a world where all the signs are literally and conceptually framed, divided, twisted, and even erased, and words and texts are mirrored and arranged in a paradoxical way. The Japanese architect Arata Isozaki refers to the significance of arrows in Arakawa's painting. He understands that, for Arakawa, the arrow is "de-signified", devoid of function and meaning, with no capacity to direct or point anymore. The "arrow as signifier becomes the "arrow as it is" (= nothing), and becomes a stimulator that actively produces simulacra. Thereby, Isozaki understands Arakawa's paintings as models – as models of simulacra that, to him, seemed strongly reflective of New York City. It is a legendary contemporary space – from today's globalising point of view, rather a small space – where all semiotics are dysfunctional and tend to dissolve. The beholder is a protagonist inside his labyrinth, there to explore the world's imaginative possibilities.

Parallel to these on-going explorations in painting, Arakawa met Madeline Gins, a poet with a physics degree, who would become his partner as of 1962. They collaborated on a long-term artistic investigation elaborating their own syntax of science, poetics, and discursive thinking about life and death. The first outcome of their collaboration is *Mechanism of Meaning* (1963–88), published in the form of a sketchbook in three instalments (in 1971, 1979, 1988); it was also presented in the format of exhibitions. Later on, *Sites of Reversible Destiny* would mark their in-depth engagement with architecture. Both projects were pursued with a high level of intensity; they can be said to teem with inspiration from literature, philosophy, physics, biology, to linguistics, et cetera. The hyper-density and complexity of their works produced the gravitas and sometimes also the bulky feeling of a rather hard-to-digest avant-gardism. As quickly becomes clear, this happened for a reason: there is no digestif to help ameliorate difficulties in understanding many of their works. While his early paintings are understood as models of simulacra, here I would like to link one of Arakawa and Gins' later projects, *Sites of Reversible Destiny* to another, but different model of a generator of a ubiquity of measurement from *Survey/Mountain*. While Yoshida sees images as sign, Arakawa perceives not only the image but also everything as sign. With Madeline Gins, his life-long partner, they aim at creating a new format of life/death by devising architecture as an incubator of praxis, where measurement in the body can emerge and actively perform.

The NOTEBOOK, one of their early works and part of the second project, *Sites of Reversible Destiny*, is highlighted here, as it shows the complex of Arakawa and Gins' experimental praxis in a set of visuals with step-by-step instructions. From today's perspective, choosing an "ordinary room" as their formal starting point (as they do) might seem affirmative and indicative of a facile, surface-value critique of a post-Benjaminian, bourgeois interior space, but here the historical distance to a work that originated in the early 1990s needs to be taken into consideration. The sequence of digital architectural images of a "generic" American-style living room was produced with a then-current CAD software; Arakawa and Gins are actually treating new ground here aesthetically – although these aesthetics certainly already look very dated to us today. They are quite advanced artistically as well, since they apparently take up the language of architectural planning and analysis with very little aesthetic distance – in the consequentiality of their visual strategy, this was probably also seen as a bold move – from the "humanising" self-referentiality of 1980s computer art, which is still tangible in the earliest parts of this series – garish colours and cheap-looking textures included. But the aesthetic strategy soon begins to move on from this provocative outset: With increasing degrees of complexity, a great diversity of analytical layers and cuts is applied to the "ordinary room" – this does not stop with it being dissected and dissolved; it rather increasingly resembles an explosion that seems to propose a kind of "explosive architecture" or space. This is, by all appearances, not far removed from the deconstructive aesthetics being discussed around that time, but it does not stop there. The ordinary room explodes and becomes limitless, labyrinthine, immaterial. Marcel Duchamp once said: "If a shadow is a two-dimensional projection of the three-dimensional world, then the three-dimensional world as we know it is the projection of a four-dimensional universe." Partly sharing the understanding of space that becomes apparent in this quote, Arakawa and Gins further elaborate their notion of space from one to n-dimensions, by relating it to an architectural thinking that is based on a manifestation of events created by active engagement.

The NOTEBOOK now describes their original ideas regarding how to measure and materialise such a space based on the body. Like various other artists who were working in performance art, dance, and early conceptual art at the time, but unlike the vast majority of then-existing contexts of "fine arts" and architecture, their praxis re-centres the human being as an organism (instead of likening it to an algorithm), and presents a systematic artistic approach to
producing a new grammar of measuring time-space, one that understands itself as a stance that opposes the logic of efficiency and as countering forces of a doubled process of individualisation and personalisation, combined with an internalised intensification of geometry.

NOTEBOOK
In Architecture — Sites of Reversible Destiny 18

SUBJECT: Landing Sites

TITLE: Constructing the Perceiving (sic!) of an Ordinary Room!
Generating a Site of Reversible Destiny

AUTHOR: The Perceiver

NOTEBOOK presents a set of exercises with the intention of having readers/viewers fill the inevitable blank spaces with a series of imaginative, perceptual, and sensual praxes. As mentioned, the book begins with an image of an ordinary living room. It is furnished with two sofas, two chairs, a table on which there are two cups of coffee, a standing lamp, and two stylised windows. Over forty graphic renderings of this room, accompanied by short instructions at the bottom, provide navigational directions for following the adventure. Every image visualises how to abstract an ordinary room into a space consisting exclusively of geometrical signs. It also demonstrates how perceptions are formed and transform a blank space from three-dimensionality to n-dimensionality, and thus make it possible to provide a provisional construction plan, something the artists call “perceptual landing sites”.

In a first step, all of the objects are reduced to dots and lines of different lengths. The living room is turned into a skeleton-like assemblage. The lines are multiplied, superimposed on top of each other, shifted, and twisted. They gradually define the path for an imaginary walking movement, change views and shift prevalent modes of perception, for example into an X-ray depiction, and can be said to imag(in)ing and collect the perceptions of others. With the full impact of an unexpected force, the body loses its balance, its secure standing on the floor. The artists write, “No floor should be less than a terrain. All floors must become terrains.” Interestingly, some images also show what we usually do not desire to construct — namely: mistakes, or failures. It is clear that these steps do not occur in the name of harmony or perfection. Instead, they are about making things work based on the power of the will and the “real” encounter as part of an event. Here, it is noticeable how many conceptual elements in the NOTEBOOK are still similar to features of the early painting works from the 1960s, which intensively investigated the life-world using geometrical means and were part of Arakawa’s invention of his own aesthetic interpretation of symbols and signs. For example, the concept of blank space (as the arrow in other works) serves as a keyword that is crucial for understanding his painting. The blank becomes the pivotal motif, a compositional device, and an abstraction of the living room that very much resembles early specimens of his paintings, such as Alphabet Skin (1965–66), where the reduction of the object and the architectural components to mere lines and the representation of shadow as dots encounters the use of paradoxical aphorisms and “mistakes” as important components in the overall process. All this can be seen in the earlier works and was consistently applied in his work for nearly forty years.

The artistic practice behind the NOTEBOOK is a shared artistic attempt to simulate the world of Arakawa’s paintings and Arakawa and Gins’ experimentation as seen in the Mechanism of Meaning, but transposed to a different medium. In the world of lines and dots, the blank space becomes a site of “energy-matter” (Arakawa) and “structural parameter” (Isozaki) for constructing a tentative site. Arakawa regards architecture as a potential container and as a mental tool used to produce ubiquity of measurement beyond dimensionism, so that the prototype of the blank would become an experimental site of time-space. As their motto, “questioning in a 360-degree way”, elucidates, their exercise continues to explore multiple viewing directions as well: towards the north, south, west, and east. Distances begin to disintegrate and evaporate into ubiquitous space. The views from different distances — a close-up of coffee cups and sofas, and simultaneously the downtown cityscape and natural landscapes — are integrated into the spaces in between the lines, or compressed as colourful, thick lines to be inserted in the process of constructing a site. The spatial boundaries also lose their function, ultimately rendering the inside equivalent to the outside. Arakawa and Gins state that, for them personally, perceiving, believing to (have) perceive(d), and experiencing themselves as individuals (in the ubiquitous space of n-dimensions) are crucial aspects when it comes to being able to actively and simultaneously tentatively construct “perceptual landing sites”.

“A single step leads one either directly into or indirectly out of the complete world picture or total event-map,” they write. As they proceed further, the intensity of their images increases; they become covered with colourful lines and shapes that overlap each other. Short texts written in white letters are integrated

in the image, which makes them hard to read, because stronger layers and elements almost cancel them out — a strategy that is actually applied to all kinds of signs. Even the space of the living room starts to look like an organism – like a monstrous caterpillar! After the excess of lines in the totally deformed living room, Arakawa and Gins all of a sudden insert a miniature image of the "perceptual landing site" located at its centre, and ask: "What is this? A reversible site?" The question contains their feeling of surprise, or their emotion of being stunned by the perception of the image with the miniature inside, as if they had unexpectedly discovered something – nothing less than the possibility of reversible time (of life and death). They then continue with this statement on their conceptual space: "A ubiquitous site on the verge of becoming a reversible one." This particular page may lead us closer to what the important point of the NOTEBOOK is within our context of measurement.

The page suggests that the exercise conducted in the NOTEBOOK is not meant to be any sort of systematically or otherwise established training programme, as in a generic textbook. It is closer to the zigzag process and trajectory of perceptual exploration that Arakawa and Gins follow — the road to their own simulacra. Importantly, their confusions, mistakes, failures, excitements, and surprises are integrated and make their appearance there in order to affectively address the reader. It should also not be forgotten that the speculative experiment is not designed to augment space, but to augment a "person" in his/her "spontaneous coordinating of landing sites", a process of "being switched over to act". The protagonist in the labyrinth is the beholder. The fundamental core of the reversible site is located within the body – in the organism of that person. Their architecture is a device for allowing the miniature to be present in the body of the beholder. Thereby, the exercise in the NOTEBOOK sketches out the skeleton, a plan for beginning our praxis of constructing a reversible site in a ubiquitous space of n-dimensions. Significantly, Arakawa and Gins generate the idea of measurement based on what they see as the collective organism, instead of on single subjectivities, data collection, structures, and space emerging from algorithms.

Arakawa and Gins do not present work that offers concrete examples of measuring the world "from within". Rather, the NOTEBOOK can be seen as a book of nameless architectures (structures of situations) devised for actively measuring the world, which, paradoxically, merges three states of being – single work, meta-work, and generative work – into one. It thus unites two divergent statuses: It is a concrete work, but simultaneously also a model. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle writes that the consistent paradox in their works is the pathway used to decentralise time and to take up a position that reckons with a materialism of space. He continues by stating that their systematic defamiliarisation of sense should actually be read as "the story of self-creation of the human species in space" and as creating "the fourth dimension of proposition, which takes us out of doxa, i.e., out of meaning, good sense, and common sense, into a paradox as the site of truth". To seek accuracy in measurement, Lecercle's words suggest that Arakawa and Gins' aim of seeking and constructing landing sites in ubiquitous space is not just measurement, but rather the "Truth" of measurement, which "cannot be absorbed by automated repetition, or a set of operations", but has to be conducted in a performative way, and in events.

The appearance of "Truth", as it is encountered here (with a capital T), inevitably raises the question of what this is really all about. In devising their concept of "landing sites", Arakawa and Gins redefine ("nameless") architecture as the structure of a situation, as their reversible site within the process of a reconfiguration of self – the very self that initiates a space, rather than being controlled and governed by it or in it. Here, I understand the concept of "landing site" essentially as a critique of epistemology – epistemology that has been (mis)guided by the ideologies, norms, and common sense of each era, in a continuation of the progress and acceleration that has been brought about by more recent light-based technologies of perception and measurement. The NOTEBOOK comprises a valuable approach that facilitates an encounter with epistemology in "immanence, instead of progress", and makes it possible to re-direct thinking and doing in a plurality of world dimensions.

While Arakawa and Gins' Sites of Reversible Destiny project adopts architecture as a conceptual device of active measurement for elucidating the structure of situations in ubiquitous space, Dimensions Variable by Hwayeon Nam adopts the centrality of time and employs architecture as a medium for reconfiguring time-based parameters on the human body. Both projects are a departure from systematic structural understandings of a situation and from a praxis that generates events as essential parts of their respective works. In contrast to the powerful language game proposed and played by Arakawa and Gins, Nam's approach situates the void of language and fills up space (including linguistic space) only with ephemeral movements that tentatively appear and then disappear again.


19 Art historian Carlo Ginzburg studies a traditional technique of de-familiarisation (ostranienie) that leads to scrutinising the self and the devices of art in general. In Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflection on Distance, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

20 Ibid., p. 24.
*Dimensions Variable* is a series of performances based on a score written by the artist Hwayeon Nam that measures the time dimension inside a specific space. The score is composed of ten modules and consists of ten commands for actions, such as steps, vertices, planes, circles, and orbits, et cetera, with accompanying instructions. For example, one instruction in Module 2/Step says: “From one wall to another. Measure the distance between two walls by walking. Count the number of steps, and write down the number each time you arrive at different walls. Try to walk in as even strides as possible. Every wall can be used.” Five modules are selected in a specific arrangement and structured as what Nam calls “Phrases”. A set of “Phrases” is called a “Formulation” in the structure as a whole. Through creating every instruction as a “set”, Nam provides a platform for openness, where all possible movements (measurements of time) can potentially emerge. The instructions are written down in order to direct performers, with the choice of vocabulary seeming to be a mix of architectural and military terminologies. This aspect also has to do with the fact that it is partly an extension of a part of her previous performance, *Operational Play*, which she developed based on commands used in the United States military.

In each performance, the artist selects and arranges modules in a specific order, which are then activated by the performers based on the free interpretations they develop in relation to their individual bodies. Her score is quite simple with the minimal signs in a fullness of blank space. *Dimensions Variable* attempts to replace unit-structured time as a rigid mechanism with subjective perceptions of the situated body. With reference to the idealism of time, Lecercle elucidates three levels of the concept of time as follows: “The centrality of time holds at both the collective, cultural, and individual level. At the collective level, this involves the traditions of our community, our roots, our collective destiny as a nation, a class, a species: from the *lendemains qui chantent* to the manifest destiny of the chosen people, a destiny we must deserve and towards which we strive in teleological tensions, because time, or history, is on our side. At the individual level, this involves the construction of identity through memory, from Locke to Proust.”

*Dimensions Variable* temporally borrows the “module” structure and concept as a unit in order to measure time as a hybrid all three levels – to actively explore and perform time by following the actions of the performers’ bodies. It is a radical act to influence the function of time from a humble, but certain position of “individual”. The artist understands the body as “a three-dimensional tool for measuring the invisible”, and lets the body in space intra-act and eventuate as the structures of the module, of architecture. The openness of the work actually allows the body to be the medium for the three levels of time and allows the social to merge into one so as to improvise (create) an alternative measurement of time. This decentralises time at a collective level and at present, and recentralises it on an individual level in duration, instead of adopting the idealism of time. Each performer's body produces a measurement of time through reflecting memories in the body instead of the mind. Attention should be given to the fact that multiple performers (two or three depending on the project budget) are coordinated at times to enact the same score with different timings, though they occasionally enact different scores individually. This transforms the concept of the unit not only from a fixed (still) to a flexible state, but also from the idealism of a single construction to a materialism by means of plural inventions. Nam’s work concerns time both as a social construct and as something that is embedded in all kinds of forms and lives. Through renouncing any kind of "movement modules", *Dimensions Variable* generates the event of re-writing the “social contract” (Badiou, 1998/2006) of time with society.

*Dimensions Variable* includes a lot of blank space, especially in the score for the performance. It comprises minimal linguistic expression, or, more precisely, only signs that Nam has defined. The space around the score is simply white – no words, no signs, no drawings. – Despite the intensive thinking and determination by the artist that is behind the work, at first glance, there might seem to be a lack of intensity. However, the penetration of wordlessness and speechlessness in the work prioritises the bodies of the dancers and the moments of their actions of measuring out of their bodies – measurement in the body. While the blank portions of the score represent indeterminacy and inseparability from the body in space, accuracy of measuring time is actualised solely in the space, and the unit structure of time disappears when the action is completed. And, transcripts of time, which are probably able to remain on the level of the collective for a longer period of time, can only be fabricated out the moment when tentative constructing is happening at the site. In this way, Nam’s work is quite opposite to that of Arakawa and Gins. Both Nam and Gins and Arakawa pursue how measurement in the body can take charge of our ways of knowing, understanding and creating our lives. Through initiating a radical praxis of re-writing time and emancipating it from institutional and bureaucratic governance, *Dimensions Variable* gives rise to a modernistic structural view of time. That is, the work accepts the ephemeral nature of the organism (the subject) that measures time.

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21 Ibid., 20.