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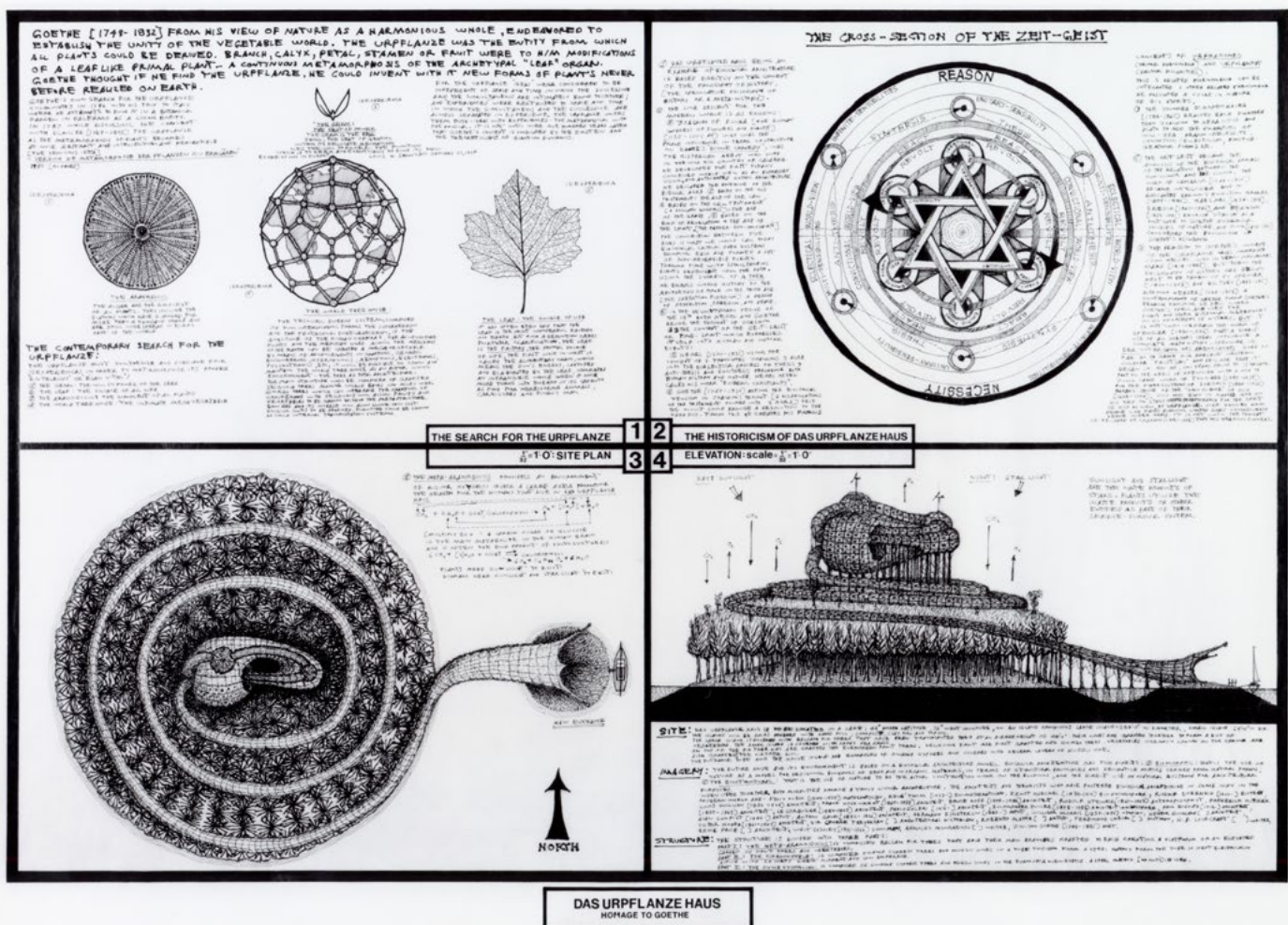


“Even More Alive”: Phenomenology of Dimensionality in Paul Laffoley’s Theory/Practice

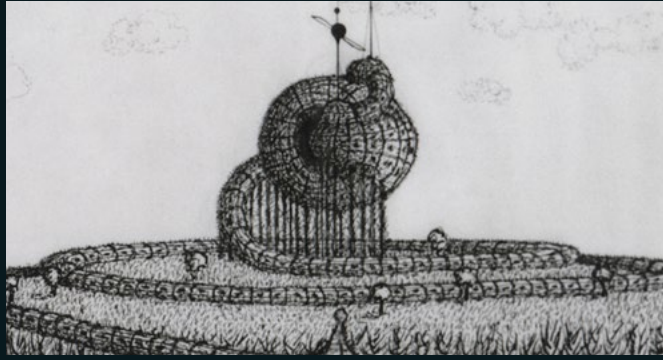
• Samuel Stoeltje •

“Prometheus up in Spaceland was bound for bringing down fire for mortals, but I – poor Flatland Prometheus – lie here in prison for bringing down nothing to my countrymen. Yet I exist in the hope that these memoirs, in some manner, I know not how, may find their way to the minds of humanity in Some Dimension, and may stir up a race of rebels who shall refuse to be confined to limited Dimensionality.”¹

-Edwin A. Abbott, Flatland



Paul Laffoley, DAS URPLANZE HAUS PART B, 1968, The Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent Fine Art



Paul Laffoley, DAS URPFPLANZE
HAUS PART A (detail), 1968, The
Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent
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Introduction

This paper intends to circle around a word, “dimensionality,” and concerns itself with the way in which it was used by American artist and contactee Paul Laffoley in his artwork and writings. Laffoley also circled around the word “dimensionality” and its associated concepts (which are many); and so, in a way, dimensionality serves as a center for the both of us. His work, over the course of his life, described a circle around this central concept, and a circle moving through the dimension of time creates a spiral. Now, in this time, not quite three years after Laffoley’s death, I will follow the discrete points along the spiral that constitute certain of his artworks and writings, and so together, we will produce a double-helical structure of two ribbons, critical and creative, both attempting to wind their way toward revelation.

Perhaps this is a little grandiose. And yet I’m not sure how else to proceed, in dealing with an artist whose work includes a blueprint for a supposedly functional time machine.¹ The best place to begin may be with the word itself, for which the Oxford English Dictionary gives us the following two early usages:

1875 Cayley in Philos. Trans. (Royal Soc.) 165 675 The notion of density is dependent on the dimensionality of the element of volume $d\omega$.

1884 E. A. Abbott Flatland ii. xxii. 100 A race of rebels who shall refuse to be confined to limited Dimensionality. (OED “dimensionality”)²

Here we have, encapsulated in these two instances of our central word, two deviating concepts – or do we? Cayley means it in a technical sense, while Abbott seems to mean something more ethereal. His novel, Flatland, to which I will come back, signals the entrance of “dimensionality” as a word with an associated phenomenological concept, a quale or feeling, into the popular imagination. As White charts in the first two chapters of his terrific *Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions*, it would be followed in the late 19th century by the writing and thoughts of Hinton, Leadbetter, Blavatsky and many others, who were concerned to a greater or lesser extent with “dimensionality.”³

As opposed to the technical meaning, this esoteric meaning of “dimensionality” would find its way through a genealogy of mystics and the mystically inclined and into the work of self-described “visionary painter” Paul Laffoley. Laffoley, as will be clear, was well aware of this genealogy, and was directly and explicitly

1 See, for example, The Atlantean Time Machine: First Design Phase, 1976 in The Essential Paul Laffoley: Works from the Boston Visionary Cell, Ed. Douglas Walla (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 146. This book is the most complete resource for Laffoley’s lifelong painting career.

2 “Dimensional, adj.” Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

3 Christopher G. White, *Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 15-68.

engaged with many of the aforementioned thinkers (among many, many others). His usage and elaboration of “dimensionality” serves both as a distillation of the word’s many acquired meanings, as well as an unmistakably novel and radical attempt to introduce a systematic, syncretic redefinition of it, one that would (I hope to show) point the way toward an alchemical reconciliation between its long-feuding progenitors, the sciences and the humanities.⁴

Crash Course with Klaatu

From where did Laffoley derive such an impossible ambition? His adolescent environment may have been to some extent responsible. He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1935, to a somewhat unusual family; as Henderson explains,

Laffoley’s father was a Cambridge banker who, as a teenager, had met William James, and subsequently embraced the “mind physics” of Leonard Troland of the Parapsychology Laboratory at Harvard. A member of a Spiritualist church in Boston and a practicing trance medium, his father also firmly rejected the existence of gravity.⁵

Laffoley was thus surrounded from a young age by esoteric cultures of many varieties, and cultivated an interest in the paranormal, the occult, Spiritualism, and ultimately, yogic and Taoist traditions as well, one which would last his entire lifetime. His artwork and writings are filled with an encyclopedic cross-section of mystical texts and divinatory systems, to the extent that they may produce the vertiginous sensation of being overwhelmed with information.

Then there is the strange object in his brain. In 1992, in preparation for dental surgery, Laffoley was given a CAT scan that resulted in an unusual finding. As he relates it:

And so the [doctor] is putting me through there, and he starts asking me questions, like, “Did you ever have your neck broken?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “Have you ever been shot?” And I said, “Why are you asking me these questions?” He said, “Well, there’s something in your head.” And I said “What’s in my head? [...] I hope it’s brains.” And then he said, “No, there’s something else besides brains[...] there’s a thing that looks like a bullet in your head.” And I said, “What do you mean, what is it?” “About three-eighths of an inch long, a sixteenth of an inch in diameter, and rounded at both ends.”⁶

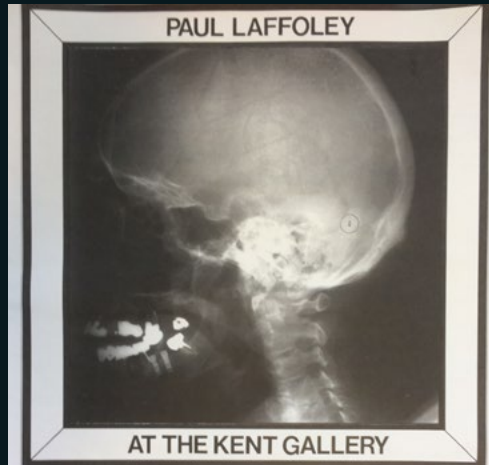
Without publicly speculating as to the origin or the purpose of this mysterious object, Laffoley eagerly incorporated it into his self-image, for instance, by incorporating the CAT scan image into a promotional poster.

4 For a deep treatment of the technical and esoteric history of the concept of dimensions, predating the science/humanities division, see Christopher A. Plaisance, “Occult Spheres, Planes, and Dimensions: Geometric Terminology and Analogy in Modern Esoteric Discourse.” *Journal of Religious History*

Vol. 40, No. 3, pp 385-404.

5 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Paul Laffoley and Dimensionality: Visionary Painting as a System of Knowledge” in *The Essential Paul Laffoley*, 33. Henderson’s topic is close to my own, though as her title suggests, she is more concerned with epistemology than phenomenology. It is true that the two may be more intertwined than we often suppose in the case of Laffoley.

6 Transcribed from: *The Mad One*, Dir. Jean-Pierre Larroque (Doublethink Productions, 2005). This low-budget but terrific documentary is available for streaming in four parts on Youtube.



Detail from the poster, advertising a 2004 event.

This detail is from a copy of the poster that I own. I have not found it reproduced elsewhere, although in *The Mad One Laffoley* can be seen working on it.

Laffoley's interest in the materiality of his brain and the role it might be playing in his visionary experience places him in the company of the similarly eccentric creative Philip K. Dick, whose *Exegesis* is rich with constant speculation about the role of brain architecture and chemistry in his mystical experience. Could this preoccupation with cerebral materiality signal a unique quality specific to American visionaries of a certain mind?

In *Disco Volante* ("Flying Saucer"), a brief timeline that he published on his website, Laffoley writes that following the discovery of the object, "I [came] to believe that the 'implant' is extraterrestrial in origin and is the main motivation of my ideas and theories."⁷ In that same timeline, he includes a note about his contribution to Brad Steiger's UFO study *Gods of Aquarius* (1976); the passage he wrote for Steiger compiles a similar history of Laffoley's UFO "encounters," although these encounters refer to cultural experiences such as seeing *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (his favorite movie) rather than actual UFO sightings.⁸

To learn of his contact experiences, we must turn to Laffoley's artwork *The Thanaton III* (1989), about which an entire essay itself could be written. While Laffoley (in my research) does not discuss his encounters with alien beings anywhere else in his corpus, the written "thought-form" accompanying *Thanaton III* indicates that on New Year's Eve of 1988, he experienced "the third visitation of Quazgaa Klaatu" ("Klaatu" is also the name of the alien in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*).⁹ In the previous two visitations, of 1951 and 1967, the entity had "appeared in a humanoid mode, as a one-meter-high reptilian-featured hermaphrodite who communicated telepathically."¹⁰ He continues: "On its third arrival, Quazgaa Klaatu communicated with me by making direct contact with my chakra system."¹¹ Quazgaa Klaatu instructed Laffoley in the design of *Thanaton III*, an artwork that is meant to convey visionary knowledge to viewers, who are meant to place their hands on its surface and stare into "the eye of the present." While Laffoley's work is rife with UFO imagery and theories, it is intriguing that *Thanaton III* appears to be his only direct discussion of his multiple personal encounters.

In addition to these encounters with Quazgaa Klaatu, Laffoley's work seems to have been motivated by another major "visionary" experience, a lucid dream he experienced in the wake of his ECT therapy. As he recalls, in July of 1961, he had been recovering for about two months from the treatment when he had a strange dream in which he was visiting a Boston art gallery. He writes at length about it in the chapter "The Dream as Initiation" of his book *The Phenomenology of Revelation*:

7 Paul Laffoley, "Disco Volante" (<http://paullaffoley.net/writings-2/disco-volante/>). Many of Laffoley's writings can be found exclusively on his personal website.

8 Brad Steiger, *Gods of Aquarius: UFOs and the Transformation of Man* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 240-245.

9 The Essential Paul Laffoley, 192.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

As I looked around I realized that this was an exhibit of sculpture – but not ordinary sculpture. What I was looking at appeared to be physically alive[...]Here were things that were vibrant, and even more alive – if that is possible to imagine – than the people who were wondering around looking at them.¹²

His initial reaction to the sculptures is jealousy (at the talent of whatever artist produced them) followed by horror:

The sculptures were horrible – not because they looked like something out of a horror film, but because they were inexorably alive. We all develop a vision of aliveness when we observe or interact with the organic world[...]To talk of something beyond the limits of those visions sounds paradoxical, and yet this is the only way I can describe what I sensed in the sculptures. They seemed even more alive than my vision of aliveness, and compared with my vision of maturity they had, if you can imagine it, a super-maturity. It seemed possible that they were not life forms at all, but some other modality of being.¹³

Laffoley goes on to suggest that it was this particular dream, which he had at the age of twenty-six, that proceeded to unfold in his work in the following decades: “Over the years I have tried to return to this dream armed with new insights and resources[...]That my art began to develop into what it is today was one of the dream’s positive effects.”¹⁴ This is to say that for Laffoley, the dream served as a kind of entelechy, the seed that would grow into all his later practice and theory, which in his work are hopelessly entangled with each other. One of my contentions here is that Laffoley’s concept of dimensionality was deeply shaped by his memory of that dream in 1961, particularly his sense of the “aliveness” of the sculptures, an aliveness that, for him, transcended any preconceived human idea of “being alive.” Were the sculptures organisms? Were they a hybridized form of life/non-life? Did they exist in some higher-dimensional space?

As I turn to the concept of “dimensionality” and its theorists, I would like to keep in mind these “living sculptures” of Laffoley’s dream, and also the mixed



Paul Laffoley, I ROBUR MASTER OF THE WORLD, 1968, The Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent Fine Art

12 Paul Laffoley, *The Phenomenology of Revelation* (New York: Kent Fine Art, Inc., 1989), 17.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

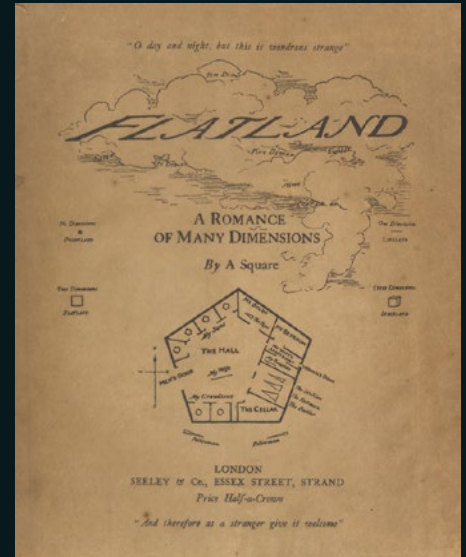
emotional content of his reaction to their phenomenal presence. They were, as he tells us, “horrible,” and yet he admired them as works of art, and seems to have spent his career attempting to recapture their ineffable qualities – I would suggest that his practice became in part a method for processing that initially traumatic encounter, trying to see past the horror to whatever lesson may have been being taught to him.

Origins of Dimensionality

Edwin A. Abbott (A. for Abbott, that is to say, A2 or “A Square” as he credits himself) wrote *Flatland* at a time when higher-dimensional mathematics was becoming a major area of academic interest.¹⁵ The book can be read as an attempt to introduce the concept of dimensionality to a lay public, or as a careful satire of the cultural mores of Victorian England. What it is actually about, however, more than anything, is the perennial emergence of mysticism and the modern repression of

mystical experience and knowledge.¹⁶

A brief(ish) summary: the anonymous protagonist is a square living in a rather bleak two-dimensional world he calls Flatland. Flatland is a strange place, and yet strangely familiar, with rigid social hierarchies, oppression of women, and an elite priestly class of “circles” (in fact, many-sided polygons) that rigidly prescribe the rules and doctrines maintaining the Flatland status quo. The protagonist is a more or less contented middle-class bureaucrat who is alarmed one evening to discover the spontaneous materialization of a circle in his living room. The circle, it turns out, is a two-dimensional slice of a sphere that has intersected Flatland precisely in order to communicate with the square. The sphere demonstrates his higher dimensionality by dipping in and out of Flatland and by observing the contents of a locked safe in another room; in other words, by performing feats of teleportation and clairvoyance. Yet the square remains unconvinced, reacting violently to his intruder. Only when the sphere carries the square up and out of Flatland, and into three-dimensional “Spaceland,” does the square come to accept the existence of a higher dimension. Or rather, dimensions; he quickly deduces that there must exist yet higher dimensions even than Spaceland, and falls out of favor with the sphere when asking to be shown these higher dimensions.



Flatland Cover, Edwin A. Abbott

15 William F. Lindgren and Thomas F. Banchoff, “Introduction” in *Flatland*, 3.

16 Critics seem to have missed this dimension of the text, with the exception of Jeffrey Kripal, who makes periodic reference to “flatland materialism.” See, for example, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Penguin, 2016) 11.

[The Square:] I ask therefore, is it, or is it not, the fact, that ere now your countrymen also have witnessed the descent of Beings of a higher order than their own, entering closed rooms, even as your Lordship entered mine, without the opening of doors or windows, and appearing and vanishing at will?

Sphere (after a pause). It is reported so. But men are divided in opinion as to the facts. And even granting the facts, they explain them in different ways.¹⁷

The Sphere will go on to speculate that “these visions” of a higher dimension result from the “perturbed angularity of the Seer,” his attempt to euphemize mental illness in Flatland terms.¹⁸ The remainder of the book is tragic; the square, attempting to preach the “gospel of the three dimensions” is thrown in prison for “perverting the minds of the people by delusions.”¹⁹

For our purposes here, it is important to note a few things: There is the use of analogy, central to the text, that encourages speculation about higher dimensions; given that the book is addressed to readers “who are privileged to live in Space,” the human reader is indirectly challenged to speculate about the existence of higher dimensional worlds and entities.²⁰ Furthermore, the phenomenal quality of the sphere’s appearance obviously resembles some of the hallmark features of supernatural and paranormal encounters; the sphere performs apparent miracles, shimmers in and out of existence, and carries the protagonist up into a higher realm. What then of Abbott’s “phenomenology of dimensionality?” How does the author portray the feeling or unique quality of perception in a higher dimension?

Upon entering Spaceland, the square is first seized by an “unspeakable horror,” saying “Either this is madness or it is Hell.” The sphere replies, “It is neither[...]it is Knowledge; it is Three Dimensions: open your eye once again and try to look steadily.”²¹ With this encouragement, the square is able to truly see the sphere for the first time: “I looked, and, behold, a new world! There stood before me, visibly incorporate, all that I had before inferred, conjectured, dreamed, of perfect Circular beauty.”²² And for the remainder of his time in the third dimension, the square will characterize its phenomena in the rhetoric and even vernacular of an awed Biblical prophet, calling the sphere the “divine ideal of consummate loveliness” and referring to Spaceland as “Paradise.”²³ Of course, he quickly becomes greedy for “some more dimensionable Dimensionality” which, he posits provocatively, the sphere must be able to perceive with the “inner eye of thought.”²⁴

Thus Abbott provides us with a concept of dimensionality that has a distinct affective quality, one that may be “horrifying” to the unprepared experiencer, yet offers unparalleled pleasures to one who can withstand them. The pleasures of dimensionality are (it is suggested) progressive; the higher dimensional space one is in, the more pleasure can be derived. As Plaisance suggests in “Occult Spheres, Planes, and Dimensions”, the idea of divine emanation increasing as one proceeds up through dimensions has its origins in the 19th century, and is in fact an inversion of the way dimensionality had been traditionally thought (with divinity increasing at lower

17 Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland*, 193

18 *Ibid.*, 194.

19 *Ibid.*, 204.

20 *Ibid.*, 16.

21 *Ibid.*, 170.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, 184.

24 Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland*, 186, 190.

dimensions, and God thought as a one-dimensional point).²⁵ Finally, this increasing pleasure/divinity appears in Flatland to extend infinitely, and Abbott invests his square with an almost addictive relationship to dimensionality, an insatiable hunger for the “fix” of the next dimension.

I have considered *Flatland* at such length here for a few reasons: firstly, Abbott, of all writers and theorists of dimensionality, deserves credit for being the first (with the possible exception of Swedenborg) to engage with the concept imaginatively. Secondly, there are interesting points of consonance and dissonance between Abbott’s and Laffoley’s respective systems and their associated phenomenologies. And finally, Laffoley explicitly acknowledges Abbott as an influence. This occurs in the 1999 iteration of his thought-form *Dimensionality: Manifestation of Fate*:

Abbott’s strategy (and he was the first to use it) concerning the existence and perception of the fourth dimension, was to write about what life would be like in a less comprehensive dimension than the one that engulfs our existence; he presented by a combination of reason, analogy, and metaphor what it would be like to exist in the second dimension of spatiality and the suddenly realize there was another dimension – the third; by doing this, the hope is to convince the reader that there might be other dimensions that someday will be perceived[.]²⁶

Yet as I have suggested, Laffoley’s concept of dimensionality makes key departures from Abbott’s. In this text, considered in further detail below, Laffoley situates his own thought with respect to Abbott, Hinton, Leadbeater, Bragdon, Blavatsky, Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, demonstrating the depth of his familiarity with the genealogy of dimensionality, while also making the implicit claim that he has contributed to it. Written in 1999, the essay signifies a culmination of Laffoley’s interdimensional explorations, but in order to engage with it, we must first follow how dimensionality developed over the course of several decades in Laffoley’s visual and written output.

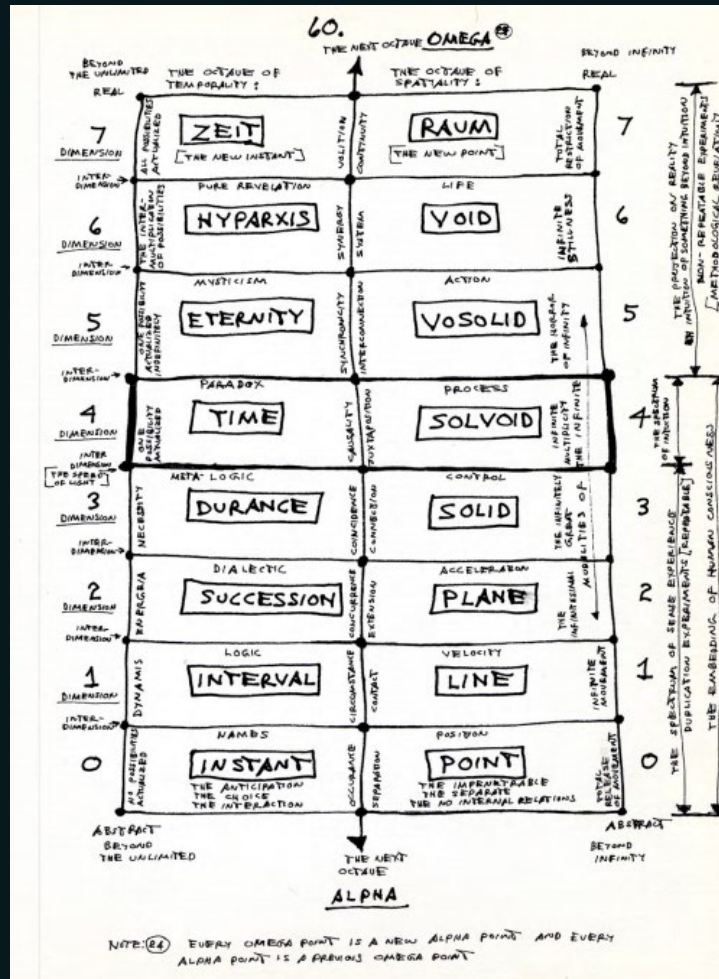
Spaceland Prometheus

An invaluable resource in tracing the evolution of Laffoley’s concept of dimensionality through his various works is Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s “Paul Laffoley and Dimensionality: Visionary Painting as a System of Knowledge.”²⁷ She locates the beginning of his interest in “spatial dimensionality” in the artist’s “Visions of History” (1975), a handwritten manuscript that synthesizes many of his interests into one ostensibly coherent system. A truly bizarre document, *Visions of History* is 84 pages of scribbled diagrams and huge blocks of apparently unedited text, generally relating to the topic of the new discipline of “meta-history.” Page 60 features the first appearance of the finalized dimensional concept:

25 Christopher A. Plaisance, “Occult Spheres, Planes, and Dimensions”, 391.

26 Paul Laffoley, “Dimensionality: The Manifestation of Fate” (<http://paullaffoley.net/writings-2/dimensionality-the-manifestation-of-fate/>)

27 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Paul Laffoley and Dimensionality: Visionary Painting as a System of Knowledge” in *The Essential Paul Laffoley*, 30-48.



from Paul Laffoley, *Visions of History*, The Estate of Paul Laffoley
courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York,

The diagram borrows some of its formal features from the western esoteric genre of the “table of correspondences,” and as Laffoley would note elsewhere, the structuring principle of the musical octave is borrowed from Pythagoras.²⁸ He no doubt took influence from the esoteric Pythagorean concept of the “harmony of the spheres,” in which the ancient mathematician theorized a correspondence between the intervals of a musical scale and the bodies of the solar system.²⁹ It is interesting to consider whether Laffoley meant to inherit some sense of worlding from the Pythagorean system; that is, whether he meant us to think of “dimensions” as worlds that could be visited, in the same way that heavenly bodies would, at least as early as the 18th century, be thought.³⁰

What, then, is this diagram trying to communicate? It is a dimensional progression, divided into spatial and temporal halves, featuring a progression of eight phases, each with a host of correspondences relating to geometry and physics, but also something like consciousness, mind, or meaning. Some of the terms are familiar;

28 Paul Laffoley, “The Dimensional Spissitude of the Universe” in *Phenomenology of Revelation*, 33. The diagram is from Paul Laffoley, *The Visions of History* (Paul Laffoley, 1977), 60. Available online at: (http://paulaffoley.net/wp-content/uploads/1977_Laffoley_The-Visions-of-History-copy.pdf)

29 Barbara R. Gaizauskas, “The Harmony of the Spheres,” *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, Vol. 68, pp 146-151.

30 In fact, earlier; see Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Originally published in 1686, Fontenelle’s text has been overlooked for its effect on the way in which interplanetary travel took shape in the European imagination.

others, such as void and hyparxis, hint at esoteric meanings; some are Laffoley's neologisms (e.g. the anagrammatical "solvoid" and "vosolid"). All the opposite page offers is that "the human mind as a definition of the experience of consciousness is embedded at the fourth dimensional level of reality, whereby time and solvoid converges [sic] the lower energy levels to themselves[,] followed by speculation as to the non-repeatability of paranormal "counter-facts."³¹ (À la *Flatland*, experiences of these counter-facts can be misinterpreted as "hallucinations.")³²

If *The Visions of History* is a preparatory draft, Laffoley's concept of dimensionality finds its first complete articulation in "The Dimensional Spissitude of the Universe" a chapter in his art-book-cum-memoir *Phenomenology of Revelation* (1989).³³ Impossible to summarize, the chapter begins with the intractable dispute between fate and free will, or determinism and indeterminism. "The encounter between fate and free will," Laffoley insists, "is much richer than analytical philosophers, who reduce it simply to the conflict of determinism versus indeterminism, would have us believe."³⁴ He gestures toward the possibility that there exists some *tertium quid* between these two seemingly irreconcilable positions, and that dimensionality is the key to theorizing it:

An adequate dimensional system[...] must be a transdisciplinary effort that takes into account the nature of the universe in both its physical and metaphysical aspects [...] [L]ike the ancient concept of fate (which I believe dimensionality replaces), dimensionality is literally the ultimate context of the universe and allows meaning to manifest itself, whether that meaning is divine or natural.³⁵

While I am not qualified to evaluate Laffoley's dimensional theory of everything (is anyone?), I would like to draw attention to his notion of a "transdisciplinary" perspective that is necessary for thinking dimensionality. The opposition of fate and free will (which, in later writing, will be compared to the opposition between the sciences and the humanities) occludes a higher-dimensional aspect of reality. In addition to transdisciplinarity, Laffoley offers that "Pythagorean ideas of acoustic space and the concept of flowing space of many non-Western cultures" may also be helpful.³⁶ Pythagoras' system is emphasized due to its privileging of sound: "[A]pprehending space through sound[...] offers a better understanding of space for what it is: the anonymous, energy-filled, inhuman matrix of the extent of the universe."³⁷

Laffoley then introduces his table of dimensions, or as it will henceforth be described, his "Octave of Dimensional Spissitude."³⁸ It looks more or less the same, except that an additional ninth note has been added ("Metatime/Metaspace") which is meant to be interpreted as coincident with note 0 (Instant/Point) thereby preserving the octaval structure. Then, a key phenomenological elaboration: "There is a sense of increasing aliveness and ontological richness as you move up the dimensional realms."³⁹ Humans, he asserts, are more or less confined to the lower four dimensional realms, although the mystical experience allows penetration into the fifth realm (Eternity/Vosolid, later illustrated by the hypercube or tesseract).

31 Paul Laffoley, "The Visions of History," 61.

32 Ibid.

33 Paul Laffoley, *The Phenomenology of Revelation*, 31-39.

34 Ibid., 31-32.

35 Ibid., 33.

36 Paul Laffoley, *The Phenomenology of Revelation*, 33. By "flowing space," I interpret him to mean something like what anthropologist Arturo Escobar describes as "relational worlds" in his "Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles

and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South," *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 16-19.

37 Paul Laffoley, *The Phenomenology of Revelation*, 33.

38 Ibid., 34.

39 Ibid.

In a section on a “New Model of Consciousness,” Laffoley offers more about this “increasing aliveness and ontological richness”:

My position is that the universe is always ontologically richer or internally more complex than consciousness, which is a particular aspect of the universe. Many philosophies or religions assume that consciousness, even as humans experience it, is the most alive aspect of the universe, or even that it is the very nature of the universe. Yet to define aliveness in this manner is to subtly anthropomorphize[...] The experience of increasing degrees of aliveness, although part of all great traditions, is vitiated if it is not acknowledged that aliveness can take forms that transcend consciousness itself. By consciousness I mean not only the waking state of the ego but also “unconscious” phenomena like dreams and the traditionally defined transcendent states of “hyper-consciousness” like the mystical experience and revelation.⁴⁰

In this dazzling passage, Laffoley argues that the anthropocentric privileging of human consciousness around which religions and philosophies tend to organize themselves has impoverished our very concept of being alive. He seems to suggest that the limit of being human is a limit of aliveness; perhaps, an irrevocable Heideggerian being-toward-death. That limit can be surpassed through the transcendental step into the fifth dimension (speaking temporally outside of time, into eternity), but there, we meet a brick wall. In his theorization of the limitations of human qua human, Laffoley deviates from one of his major inspirations, Jesuit priest and thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who posited that the human would become the “omega point” in the evolution of the universe; for Laffoley, we are stuck at the threshold of the fifth dimension.⁴¹

Phenomenologically, the take-away here is that higher dimensionality corresponds to ontological richness and aliveness. Beyond the fourth dimension, “aliveness can take forms” that we do not experience here in Spaceland, and now I would like to gesture both toward the divine plenitude of the Sphere as encountered by Abbot’s square, and also to Laffoley’s life-altering dream, in which he beheld those “living sculptures” that were “even more alive” than the observers that gathered around them in the art gallery. Higher dimensionality is in some sense synonymous with “aliveness” and “ontological richness”; and at the same time, it is suggested, with the flowing, the musical, and the inhuman.

Putting Dimensionality in Practice

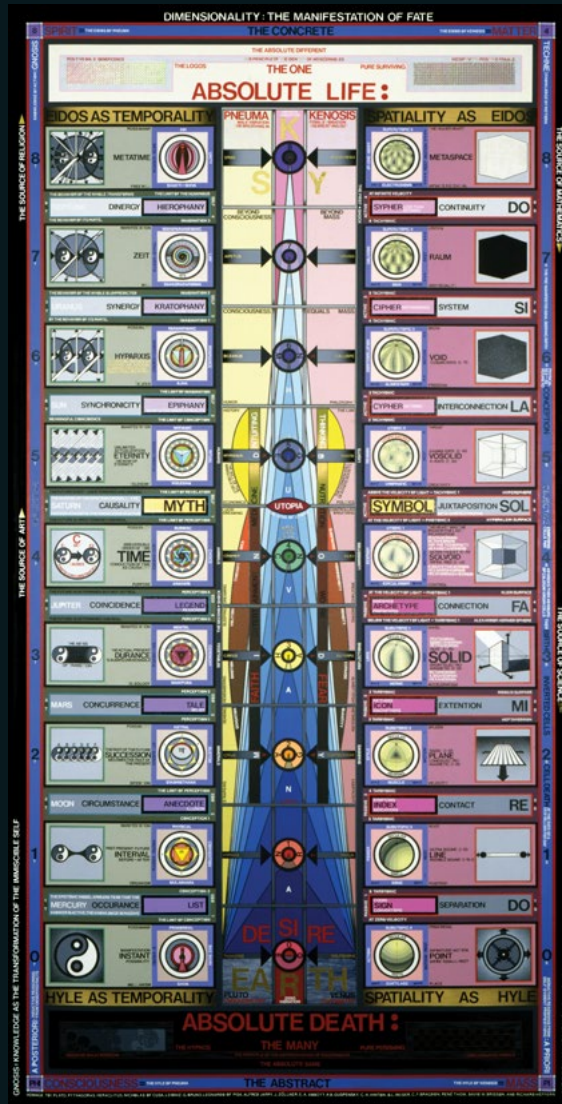
Three years after “The Dimensional Spissitude of the Universe” appeared, Laffoley presented what may be the centerpiece of his concept of dimensionality, the artwork *Dimensionality: The Manifestation of Fate*. I would like to consider this piece in conjunction with a particular text by Laffoley, of the same title. By way of explanation: Laffoley’s artworks are frequently accompanied by his “thought-forms,” efforts at exegesis of their dense symbolism. Yet in the course of his work, he would freely revise these thought-forms, and in my research I have

40 Paul Laffoley, *The Phenomenology of Revelation*, 36.

41 Chardin was hugely influential on Laffoley, particularly his concepts of the noosphere and the “omega point”: “Because it contains and engenders consciousness, spacetime is necessarily of a convergent nature. Accordingly its enormous layers, followed in the right direction, must somewhere ahead become involuted to a point which we might call Omega, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself.” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 59.

been able to identify three iterations, from 1992, 1999, and 2009. The 1992 iteration is a condensed form of the chapter “Dimensional Spissitude,” which we have already considered. The 2009 iteration is a condensed form of the 1999 iteration. Therefore, my focus below will be on *DMF 1999*, published on Laffoley’s website, although interestingly, never formally exhibited with the artwork.

Dimensionality is both a typical Laffoley and, even by his standards, absurdly dense with information.⁴² This quality of abundance of information, which is so characteristic of Laffoley's crowded, diagrammatic work, is perhaps meant to convey precisely the experience of "ontological richness" that accompanies higher-dimensionality. This is



Paul Laffoley, *DIMENSIONALITY*
- *THE MANIFESTATION OF FATE*
1992, The Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York,

to say that, with his visual work, Laffoley attempts to offer the viewer not just information about, but *phenomenal experience of* a higher-dimensional realm. The pieces can thus operate in themselves as pieces of technology affording transcendence – as transdimensional portals.⁴³ Dimensionality is a particularly dramatic example of this. The channel in the middle, resembling both an elevator shaft and a psychedelic church steeple, guides the eye upward

42 A reproduction can be found in *The Essential Paul Laffoley*, 207.

43 Though the piece that most fully realizes this objective is certainly *The Thanaton III* (1989)

along the table of correspondences (or “epistemic ladder”), carrying the viewer higher and higher into “more dimensionable Dimensionality,” and, we will note, toward the (regrettably whiteness-coded) pinnacle of “Absolute Life.”⁴⁴

As a piece of visual art, *Dimensionality* offers visualizations of its central concept in ways that Laffoley had not previously attempted. On the left (temporal) half of the work, dimensions of time are depicted using the yin yang symbol from Taoist tradition. What is actually being depicted predictably becomes more challenging to interpret as we move into the fifth dimension; “eternity” as a “spacetime-worm-like” tube of yin yangs, perhaps meant to suggest the way objects might appear to a viewer unstuck from time. The temporal dimensions 6-8 (“hyparxis,” “zeit,” “meta-time”) are variations on this theme, with additional axes intersecting the tube to indicate the accreting dimensions. The right quadrant of the left half contains visualizations of temporally bound representational genres; the images themselves are drawn in part from the vedic chakras.⁴⁵ On the right or “spatial” half of the work, there are geometric and “utopic” visualizations. As we might expect, the passage from the fourth to the fifth dimension is geometrically represented by a cube and a tesseract, respectively. The higher dimensions are variations on this theme: a transparent tesseract, a cube that resembles a starry patch of space, a completely opaque black cube, and finally a completely opaque white cube.

In *DMF 99*, we find the most extensive and careful theorization of dimensionality provided by the artist, which nevertheless becomes at points almost impenetrably abstract and dense.⁴⁶ To read *DMF 99* is to take a tour through a radically unconventional and yet (perhaps) weirdly convincing history of western intellectual culture. Laffoley’s main thesis is that, since the classical period, western thought has been organized around the opposition of fate and will, with the natural sciences and humanities emerging, respectively, to carry on this opposition in the modern period. Science thus becomes a means of understanding and predicting the operations of fate, while the humanities insist on the centrality of the will. Laffoley will position dimensionality as a way of transcending this opposition.



Paul Laffoley, *THE OMEGA POINT*, 1970, The Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York,

44 Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland*, 186.

45 As Laffoley will explain in *DMF 99*.

46 Paul Laffoley, “Dimensionality: The Manifestation of Fate.” (1999)

He goes on to indicate the crucial formative influence of Plato and Pythagoras on his dimensional system: “[T]he mathematics that Plato subscribed to was Pythagorean and, therefore, involved the quality of numbers as well as quantity. This meant the identification of numbers with the nature of reality.”⁴⁷ Here we discover the origin point of what makes Laffoley’s dimensionality unique: by incorporating the classical Pythagorean concept of the *quality* of numbers themselves (as is found in, for example, the synaesthetic experience), Laffoley is able to conceive of dimensionality as something that has qualities, or in other words, that has a phenomenology.

By way of an example of what I mean: Laffoley goes on to argue that the “quality” of the dimension of time can be related to the experience of a “mild electric shock” and suggests that it was this experience of time (feeling the “abyss of transition” between two different states), presumably enabled by the popularization of electric power, that led to the emergence of romanticism in the 19th century.⁴⁸ (He cites the writing of, among others, Mary Shelley as an example.) The next rung up the epistemic ladder involves the experience of eternity:

In like manner, the half-note of eternity has its own characteristic energy, and that energy is efficacious without motion because the other half-note is *vosolid* and is defined as rest. This transcendent energy has had many names over human history, such as: Chi, Tumo, Violet Flame, the Holy Spirit, the force of the ring-pass-not, Kundalini, the central stillness, Orgone, etc.⁴⁹

Thus an analogy emerges, in which Laffoley’s comparative umbrella relates a host of specific mystical states as corresponding to the experience of electric shock, but at a higher-dimensional level; the kundalini awakening, for example, can be thought of as an experience of something like electricity, but, presumably, with greater ontological richness and aliveness. I will leave it for the practitioners to decide whether the analogy holds.

Artist of the Impossible

With my analysis of *Dimensionality: The Manifestation of Fate*, I have just barely scratched the surface of Laffoley’s theory of dimensionality, yet I hope to have arrived at a working idea of the phenomenology that unfolded throughout his career. And it is precisely an unfolding, if we take the artist at his word that throughout his many productive decades he was, to a certain extent, attempting to recapture the sensation of witnessing those “living sculptures” in his dream-vision at the age of 26. We should not be entirely surprised, then, to learn that much of Laffoley’s art is concerned with the intersection of art (or more broadly, *techne*) and the organic, whether in the form of orgone-powered time machines, self-repairing space bridges, or vegetal houses.

What does this transdisciplinary focus look like? After studying philosophy, classics and art history as an undergrad at Brown, Laffoley was admitted to the architecture program at the Harvard School of Design, only to be

47 Paul Laffoley, “Dimensionality: The Manifestation of Fate.” (1999)

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

kicked out for (according to him) “over-involvement” in his work.⁵⁰ He then moved to New York City and worked briefly for Andy Warhol before scoring an assistantship with his idol, architect Frederick Kiesler.⁵¹ He was then hired at the firm Emery Roth and Sons, during which time he developed a proposal for the World Trade Center that would involve adding “bridges across, every fifth level, seventeen bridges;” due no doubt to the ambition and unorthodoxy of this idea, he was fired from the project, which would be the closest he came to practicing real-world architecture.⁵²

Perhaps as much as the concept of dimensionality, the World Trade Center seems to occupy a central place in the life and imagination of Paul Laffoley. In 1962, he produced his work *The City Can Change Your Life*, a triptych that features a plane “thudding” into a city in its left panel, and in the following two, seeming to travel in reverse out of the frame.⁵³



Paul Laffoley, *THE CITY CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE*, 1962, The Estate of Paul Laffoley courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York,

As the painter notes in his accompanying thought-form, “I believe the subject did obviously refer, in some future tense, to the terrorist attack by planes on New York’s World Trade Center (the Twin Towers) on September 11, 2001.”⁵⁴ Laffoley’s conviction that his work was somehow prophetic becomes harder to dismiss when one notes that the time on the clock in the right panel reads three minutes past nine, or the precise time when the second plane struck the South Tower.

Though Laffoley would shift focus from architecture to visual art as his livelihood, eventually attaining some celebrity when his work curried the favor of art world influencers, he continued to revisit architectural and technological themes. The spirit of his work is design, although the designs themselves are so far out of reach of practicality that one could be forgiven for assuming he is joking (and he may be, but not completely).⁵⁵ “Plans” such as a proposed bridge connecting the earth to the moon, while inherently speculative, nevertheless challenge artists and

50 The Mad One, Dir. Jean-Pierre Larroque

51 Douglas Walla, “The Navigator” in *The Essential Paul Laffoley*, 4.

52 The Mad One, Dir. Jean-Pierre Larroque

53 A reproduction can be found in *The Essential Paul Laffoley*, 51.

54 Ibid., 50.

55 Laffoley often recounts with mild annoyance the time Timothy Leary congratulated him for his “sense of humor.”

architects to think more wildly and more adventurously; they are conceptual provocations. One such plan, which Laffoley worked on for 16 years, is *Das Urpflanze Haus* or “the Primordial Plant House,” a model for a house that consists entirely of genetically modified plants, including ginkgo biloba and swamp cypress.⁵⁶

Das Urpflanze Haus, however utopian its premises, would prepare the way for another manifestation of Laffoley’s dimensional practice. After the 9/11 attacks, in 2002, the artist prepared a proposal for ground zero to build the Excelsior, a grand hotel originally drafted by Antonio Gaudi in 1906 for construction on what would become the future site of the World Trade Center.⁵⁷ (Gaudi’s plan was abandoned, for reasons unknown.) This work of “posthumous architecture,” mostly derived from Gaudi’s original blueprints, included a few characteristic Laffoleyan touches, such as the use of materials that would become progressively “more alive” as the apex was approached; first calcium bicarbonate “shells,” followed by “vegetative grafting techniques” terminating in an enormous “philodendron.”⁵⁸ At the center of this vegetal orb, visitors would be able to view the damaged metal sculpture, “The Sphere,” that had once stood in the plaza of the World Trade Center.⁵⁹ This is to say that Laffoley’s interpretation of the Gaudi hotel would effectively serve as an architectural analogue for the dimensional ascension of his epistemic ladder, literally becoming “more alive” as one ascended it in, for instance, an elevator, emerging at the top into the space of a living sculpture. Laffoley’s proposal, however, was not accepted.

Conclusion

“But what a spiral man’s being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral!”

- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*⁶⁰

In his *The Poetics of Space*, French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard theorizes the phenomenal qualities of different kinds of space, exploring how human and non-human dwellings are invested with specific feelings, emotions, and energies. Beginning with houses, Bachelard works his way through huts, nests, and shells, before arriving at the phenomenal qualities of the most abstract kinds of space, and ultimately, the primordial delineation of inside and outside. His premise is that humans and other entities are not merely thrown into an affectively neutral, unfeeling Cartesian grid, but are engaged in a constant imagining/feeling relationship with their environment. One thing I have attempted to do here is to explore the notion that, not just our familiar three-dimensional Spaceland, but higher dimensions of space and time might have qualities that can be explored phenomenologically. This could be interpreted in a *hard sense* (that Laffoley, and before him, Hinton and Abbott, were actually somehow making phenomenal access to higher dimensionality, even if through their imaginative faculties) or in a softer sense (their impressions were based purely on a kind of creative speculation about what such dimensionality could be like). This distinction hinges on the ability of the imagination to access a kind of reality, a deeply important question that is beyond my

56 The Essential Paul Laffoley, 218-219.

57 Ibid., 246-249.

58 This aspect of his vision does not appear in the original plan, but he discusses it in *The Mad One*, Dir. Jean-Pierre Larroque.

59 Ibid.

60 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 214.

scope here.⁶¹

Paul Laffoley's notion of this quality of higher dimensionality is remarkably consistent throughout what I am calling his theory/practice. He experienced a life-changing lucid dream about sculptures that seemed to be "even more alive" than his preexisting concept of aliveness. He then proceeded to develop a highly systematic, if somewhat bizarre, concept of higher dimensionality, intimately connected with this sense of aliveness. Influenced by late-nineteenth century esoteric explorations of this concept, he developed the notion that higher dimensionality would be equivalent to more mystical or divine states of being, substituting instead his ideas of "ontological richness" and "aliveness." This syncretic system was most fully articulated in the visual and theoretical piece *Dimensionality: Manifestation of Fate*, but it can be seen influencing his practice in surprising ways throughout the rest of his career. The resemblance between DMF's "epistemic ladder" and his reinterpretation of Gaudi's grand hotel plan for the World Trade Center site indicates that his dimensional system was at the center of his work, and that he was indeed spiraling around it, as much as he seems also to have spiraled around the physical location of the site itself.

Of course, we are all spiraling around something. From a higher dimensional perspective outside of time, in which the human body might appear as one of those famous "spacetime-worms," our lives are spent winding spirals around the sun as the earth carries us along on its orbit. And those spirals, the fleshy phone cords we wrap around the solar system, themselves shift, if only slightly, as the sun orbits around the center of the Milky Way.⁶² Laffoley's work, among its many staggering accomplishments and feats of imagination, makes it possible to think such weird phenomenologies of space and time, and to do so is to feel, if only for a little while, even more alive.⁶³



Paul Laffoley, *THE THANATHON III*, 1989, The Estate of Paul Laffoley
courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York,

61 I am, however, sympathetic to the hard reading, following Henry Corbin's concept of the "imaginal," itself derived from his study of Persian culture. See, e.g., Ali Shariat, "Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A Look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy," *Diogenes*, No. 156, Winter 1991, pp 83-114.

62 Thanks to Timothy Grieve-Carlson for contributing this nuance.

63 Thanks also to Professor Jeffrey Kripal, for whom this paper was originally developed, and whose work bore no small influence upon it.

Hermetic Messianism: on Rammellzee

• Max Razdow •

Given the popular, accelerationist inertia of the concept of virtuality, it may not be surprising that an intriguing world builder and hermetic artist, The Ramellzee, was given a significant survey exhibition this year at an art space that is supported by an energy drink. The Rammellzee (1960-2010) had a broad artistic production that he developed over decades into a devotional discourse and transdimensional mythos, one which presupposes the value of authorship within a hermetic plane. His work included printed ephemera, painting, drawing, sculpture, elaborate costume, performance, recorded music and spoken word (all of which were present at Red Bull Arts), and through these mediums and activities Rammellzee created and investigated an alternate universe. He involved himself closely and performatively there, as the interstellar equation Rammellzee, and in this work it is possible to glimpse the reflection of the artist as a figure who joins poetic rapture with hermetic structure, and believes deeply in the value found therein.



Rammellzee, "Shun U", from Racing for Thunder at Red Bull Arts, NYC, 2018

Rammellzee's universe prosthetized its own modes of creation. He was conscious of his presence in contemporaneous artistic movements, allied with the NYC downtown scene and grandiose about his vision for hip-hop and graffiti, but the particularities of his exegetical philosophy were then, and still are now, deeply hidden in the folds of his work. There is little literature to read which addresses the content of his mythos; according to attendants at the show, only one serious book was printed of his work, a massive out, of print Japanese tome, which goes for several hundred dollars on eBay. Video productions and interviews can be found on Youtube, and these are informative. In fishing through the churning elements of the multi-modal productions that were collected at Red Bull Arts, it seemed most possible to find purchase upon his cosmology by observing his treatment of the concept of letters.

Within Rammellzee's universe letters have a pseudo-magical quality that operates on a macrocosmic scale. This is not an unheard of position. Kabbalah understands letters as uniquely magical

and involved in both the construction and interpretation of God's universe, and Germanic runes and their related forms are also considered to hold folk-magic capabilities. In fantasy literature, letters retain this potential, such as in Tolkien, where elven or dwarven glyphs can supply magical outcomes. Rammellzee occupies territory along with these ideals, but engenders instead a science fictive space for them, perhaps aligned with Afrofuturism as well as his own performative interest in tying fantastical narrative into unfolding contemporary situations.

Rammellzee's letters were primarily weapons against an enemy which is difficult to pin down. In keeping with the multivalent complexity of his mythology, he speaks of antagonists frequently and with a high degree of variance as to their personae or locus. Broadly observed, however, the mission of letters in his cosmos is to elicit the possibility of meaning in the face of many instantiations of overbearing order or entropic chaos (which seem to have a common aspect to Ramm). His antagonists were represented in part by the Garbage Gods: deities that were esoteric and self-specific, yet also engaged with what he saw as dire issues in the here-and-now. Rammellzee considered himself (as the infinite time-scale equation) to be at the defensive vanguard against these foes, and to arm himself and his many God-forms, he theorized Iconic Panzerism: the cloaking of letters in tank-like forms, ornate enough to act as weapons against the oblique quality of entropic space and culture.

His "Letter Racers" are telling of this power. They are a vast series of small scale sculptures, glyphic vehicles established upon the iconic substrates of skateboards, haphazard and forceful compared to the elaborate, obsessively symmetric costumes he made for himself. The *Letter Racers'* graphemes (A through Z) are formed by juxtapositions of found objects that vaguely represent Latin letters' familiar forms. They are made of box fans, bottles, and bricks, and his emphasis in building the Racers is more in favor of making deadly looking spacecraft than faithfully representing alphabetic symbols. Red Bull Arts bravely displayed the *Letter Racers* in a squadron format, suspended from the ceiling above the viewer, not as a taxonomy of formal objects but as the fleet of trans-dimensional war machines that Rammellzee considered them to be.

For Rammellzee, the enemy's anti-linguistic plenum was sometimes illustrated with a close at hand, catch-all term for decay: Garbage. Yet, he would typically elaborate further, noting various ongoing catastrophes, such as that we are caught inside an "expansion contraction unit (womb)" or are controlled by the dictionary. Rammellzee presented myriad, often deeply esoteric complaints, but for us, should we consider ourselves participant beings in his futurological narrative, anti-linguistic frameworks clearly *are* arriving in many nefariously specific formats: arrays, matrices, databases and algorithms as well as the perceptual presentations of digital *prima materia* that we encounter every day. Language, as Rammellzee imagined it, was a specifically humanist capability that needed to be recovered and updated to continue to enable its' wielders ability to *remain human*, as well as ethical and hopeful in the face of generalized decay. He considered the contemporary resurrection of floridity in characters, particularly that found in graffiti, to have precedent in the quills of imagined monks of ancient times, who he claimed untethered language from its controlling vectors

through the creation of illuminated manuscripts, only to lose it again when God protested. It had flowered in our time, he would say, in the subway lines, unveiling its anachronistic inertia once again.

* * *

Alejandro Jodorowsky opens his interviews in *Psychomagic* by discussing five Chilean poets that were influential on his thinking. He considers them to have been an “alchemist mandala: Neruda was water, Parra air, de Rokha fire, Mistral earth, and Huidobro .. quintessence.” Jodorowsky, like Rammellzee, established working modes that catalyzed the interplay between interpretive poetics, such as those mentioned above, and psycho-archetypal systems like astrology and alchemy, and sought ways to make these accessible and visually rich to his audience.

Like Rammellzee, Jodorowsky was (and remains) interested in rescuing the human ability to apprehend experience, and create new frameworks for experience as well, under a poetic, hermetic ideal, utilizing what are essentially theurgist systems to uncover new codes of ethics. Both Rammellzee and Jodorowsky walk a line between poetics and taxonomy in their works, and naming becomes a primary consideration for them both. Rammellzee was verifiably obsessed with naming (an artistic urge I can relate to). A poster from his show at Red Bull Arts, like many of the zine like catalogs he produced, lists attributes and backstories for a wide range of Garbage Gods, as remembered by the Trashers and benevolent Recyclers: *Reaper Grimm 2*, *Vocal Well's God*, *Rip Cord Rex*, *Wind*. Jodorowsky, perhaps more intrigued by the historical hermetic corpus, didn't always name his characters as specifically, instead letting them bleed into the archetypal qualities they represented (like those in *El Topo*).

Speaking broadly, and including my own experience, hermetic artists seem to work in among three qualities of productive action, in varied orders of precedence and weight:

to manifest,
to consider and name,
to classify and locate relationships,
(and hope this leads to space for further manifesting).




















Rammellzee was extremely cognizant of his position performing a vital *gesamkunstwerk*. When interviewed, he often appeared in character, suited up as a deified persona, so as to keep the focus on the work's narrative layers, rather than himself. The political turn he proposes through the reintegration of gothic floridity (perhaps an aesthetic plea for a lost sense of Spiritism) with the contemporaneous or futurological (his own term was gothic futurism), seems informed by his deep sense of the value of his stance. When he implores the power of letters as a force of revision he is intoning urgency around the ability to experience, produce or feel a form of rapture. The Equation Rammellzee's language-based, thaumaturgic system is intended to be a map and an example, giving us a chance to emerge from the clutch of the Garbage Gods and all other antipodes of our potential survival. Alejandro Jodorowsky would seemingly agree that the turn into hermeneutic thinking is our sole salvation. As he notes in *Psychomagic*: “Only the discovery of our interior God can heal us forever.”

On the Occult

• Thom Donovan •

—for The Dictionary of the Possible

Karl Marx writes in his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1848,” that the “senses therefore become theoreticians in their immediate practice.” While it is a phrase that has been repeated countless times, is it worth dwelling with again. What, I wonder, becomes the sense of theory (or a theory of the senses) when one becomes synaestheliac in the wake of the disaster; when what we see also makes us hear (or touch, or smell, or taste)? Where hearing in fact supersedes seeing, overcoming the hegemony of the ocular? I think of Marx’s proposition as an essentially aesthetic one—one of the few in his work. Likewise, we may think of latter Marxists (Antonio Gramsci in particular) for problematizing a discourse of the senses through his privileging of “common sense” as the basis for revolutionary practice. What, too, if our common sense involves a negation of the senses? A withdrawal into the eidetic, the subtle; into non-representational modes of meaning-making (such are sound and gesture and movement)? At what point does language, as that upon which our common sense largely depends, become non-meaningful, does it refuse the reduction of “nonmeaning” and “phonic substance” for a “universal grammar” (to quote some key phrases from Fred Moten’s *In the Break*). Music and sound performance, in Moten’s

A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
a  sun A sun  a  blue a  red a  blue
a blue yellow sun a yellow red sun a blue green sun a
a yellow boat a yellow sun a  red a  red blue and yellow
a yellow morning on a green sun a flower flower on a blue blue but
a yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
a  yellow A sun  a small craft  a boat  a  red blue
a quiet blue sun on a card table a red which is blue and a wheel
A solar sun a lunar sun a starry sun a nebular sun
A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun Qorraich runner ran running
A blue sun before a red sun a green sun before a lunar sun
A floral sun  a small craft as round as a round sun  A solar moon
Another sun jealous of Yellow enamoured of Red terrified by Blue horizontal
A sun romantic as Yellow jealous as Blue amorous as a cloud 
A frail sun a timid sun  vain sorrowful and bellicose sun
A Pharaonic  boat an Egyptian sun a solar universe and a universal sun
A solar arrow crosses the sky An eye dreads the sun the sun is an eye
A tubular sun haunted by the tubes of the sea  a sun pernicious and vain
A  Hopi a Red Indian sun an Arab Black Sun a sun yellow and blue

Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*

book, examine the ways that meaning-making becomes irreducible to forms of life marked by the struggle for autonomy and impropriety. That which is musical and/or sonorous (i.e., noisy) in the visual mark the place where the visual is “cut” (another Moten term) in order to mark a differentiation within the otherwise present and self-same (*ipseity*), a differentiation (*alterity*) which, after Derrida, Moten poses as a necessary condition of possibility for a universalism, a universal freedom to which the Black Radical (Aesthetic) Tradition in particular strives. In the passage I chose to look at today, Moten bears witness to the occlusion of the visual faced with the photograph of Emmett Till’s casket. The visual is occluded not just because one must look away, but because the face ruptured

and wounded withdraws its essence (or pictorial sense?) from the looker. In its excess of materiality, in its excess of nonmeaningful significance, the onlooker is silenced, and in that silence hears something else: the call to revolutionary action which led to the decisive events of the Civil Rights Era/emergence of Black Nationalism; the call to triumph over death; the call, too, of a lost maternity upon which African-American culture is forged after the Middle Passage, “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion,” to quote Moten quoting Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*. Similarly, in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), the filmmaker chooses to represent survivors of the camps through extreme close-ups of the face. I believe he does so to privilege an aural-affective content of the face that is in excruciating excess to the stories the survivors attempt to, but often cannot, tell. The face withdraws, in this case, because it is *too present*, because it says (or remembers) too much; in this way it embodies the concept of “trace” in Derrida’s and Levinas’ thought. As Jalal Toufic has written of the face in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, the extreme close-up makes present the “over”; that which is in the diegetic image-track that would seem occulted, occluded, as though of another world. The otherworldly, in Toufic, is constituted through trauma; the breakdown of cultural production, and of empirical and historical reality, in the face of an incalculable collective trauma. There is a passage in Toufic’s *Vampires (2nd Edition)* sublime because it articulates concisely the status of haunting in relation to trauma; that in the throes of such deep trauma, the ghosts do not yet haunt a place because they have yet to even return. The point of much of Toufic’s work, as he says in *Vampires*, is to recall those ghosts, to provide for them (as he puns on the plight of Palestinians)

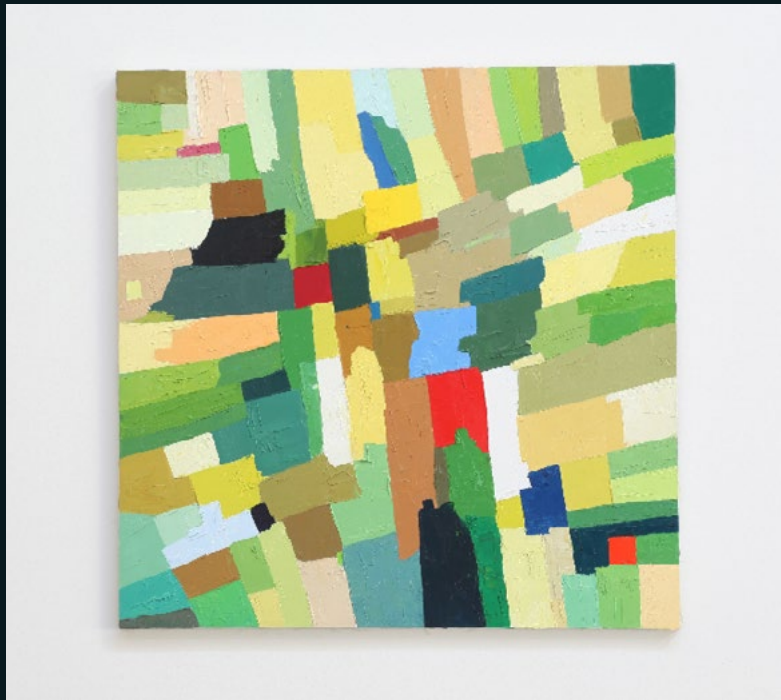
a “right of return” through literature, art, and other modes of cultural production. The other text that I chose to look at today, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, collects a number of texts from across Toufic’s many books, as well as from uncollected texts such as Toufic’s introduction to Etel Adnan’s *The Arab Apocalypse*. In brief, a surpassing disaster marks a cultural trauma so intensive that the traditions of that culture can no longer be sustained. Among his many examples, Toufic sites the Jewish Frankists of 18th Century Poland/Eastern Europe who, faced with extreme persecution, declared a practice of “redemption through sin,” a negative messianic condition in which Jacob Frank and his followers enacted their belief that the messiah’s coming could be expedited through transgression. In other poignant examples, Jewish students kick-down and deface tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Berlin; and Native Americans prohibit that



Etel Adnan

a traditional dance any longer be performed. The “occult” here marks a withdrawal of the objects and practices of a culture—their subtilization—after disaster. Withdrawal necessitates negation—negation through occultation—but also an affirmation through innovation—new forms of cultural production. By addressing a negative condition of one’s senses, that a culture’s common sense can no longer access or invest belief in an object or ritual—Toufic calls upon his contemporaries to “deserve” their culture (and I am thinking here of the eponymous essay in his book *Deserving Lebanon*). Which is to say, make culture in the rubble that will tarry with the event in order to transcend it, a dice throw within eternal recurrence that inaugurates new life, or a resurrection of

those withdrawn cultural traditions that would not be “counterfeit” (a demonic doubling; a return only in appearance). The problem of the surpassing disaster is to know that we are in the era of one. It is the artist who discerns this through their work. The senses therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis, yet through the withdrawal of the senses—in the turn of the senses towards the subtle, virtual, eternally recurrent, eidetic—one grasps a crucial spiritual response to collective trauma. One of Toufic’s principal examples of surpassing disaster is the book-length poem by Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), regarding the oppression and genocide of itinerant Palestinians during the first days of the Lebanese Civil War. One of the most curious aspects of Adnan’s poem, much of which otherwise reads like an Expressionist hymn à la Aimé Césaire’s “Notebook of return to my native land” or Allen Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” is her inclusion of drawings, many which resemble a kind of writing—hieroglyphs, petroglyphs, calligraphy—as they disrupt the poem’s lines. Cultural trauma is registered here by a writing the status of which is neither image, sound, gesture, or text, but all and none of the above. Drawing as writing and writing as drawing; writing-drawing-writing as intense aural-acoustic gesture *saying saying saying* (Emmanuel Levinas). Similarly, Adnan’s insistent naming of colors throughout the poem marks the beginning of a world-forming, the names for the colors being possibly the closest one can come to the non-discursive (or non-existent) through the nominal-descriptive—a Peircian “firstness” before relation. I have called the colors in Adnan’s paintings “angel colors” because they seem to erupt from a realm of non-being, a plenum of pure potential—and physically this may be attributed to Adnan’s painting with tubes of paint directly onto canvases with a palette knife. The result of this unique practice are overtones that affect one much less visually than aurally, acting directly—like sound vibrations—on the central nervous system.



Etel Adnan

Interview with Domenico Zindato

• Alessandro Keegan •

Domenico Zindato, an Italian-born painter currently living in Cuernavaca, Mexico, creates works that dazzle the eye with intricately rendered detail and irradiated colors. On closer inspection the glowing surfaces of gauche, ink and pastel reveal human figures, animals, disembodied eyes and hands and occasionally hieroglyphic-looking writings. One senses a mystical vision lays at the source of Zindato's endless stream of miniature imagery, a vision that I have gathered hints of through conversations I have had with the artist over the years of knowing him.

In this interview I hoped to tease out a few clues to the sources of his inspiration and to gather some sense of the mind-set the artist enters into when working. In a few of his words presented here, and at other times when we have talked, I gathered that there are traces of influence in Zindato's work that stem from the artist's practice of Qigong, the traditional Chinese holistic practice of movement and meditation that emphasizes breathing, rhythm and the focusing of mind and body on the flow of Qi, or the life force that permeates all of nature. A number of other points of reference are scattered throughout our conversation here, including travel, music, tarot divination and literature.

* * * * *

AK (Alessandro Keegan): Early in your life you studied law in Rome, lived in Berlin before the reunification, traveled through Europe, India and Morocco, and currently you live in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Over the years you've traveled a great deal to further places around the globe. Have the experiences of traveling and living throughout the world helped to shape your art? Do you see the experiences of travel finding their way into your work? Has there been one place, in all of your travels, that has effected you most deeply?

DZ (Domenico Zindato): I do certainly feel that, in my case, moving around this world and making art is deeply intertwined, mostly not because of any planning or intentions but as the movement of two legs that are making one step after the other. One leg is art, and it has stepped first at times, and the other leg is the "wanderlust" that stepped first, at some other moments. Both have been moving me through "lines of forces", but never obvious or predictable paths, always strongly connected to my inner energy, seeking grounds where I can thrive, like immaterial seeds in energetic fields. In retrospect, through hard and happier moments, I can't say what place has affected me most until now, since all has been lived with a great intensity. Though of course I do have plenty of illuminating peak moments that

happened in different places, ancient sites, natural environment, even modern-contemporary architecture, it is there that I return in my mind, at times.

AK: What is the place you go to most in your mind for inspiration?

DZ: It isn't just one place. When I first traveled to India it was an overwhelming influx of new and different experiences. Likewise, when I went to Haiti and Peru, or definitely when I first arrived and traveled through Mexico for my first six months here, the experience was impactful.

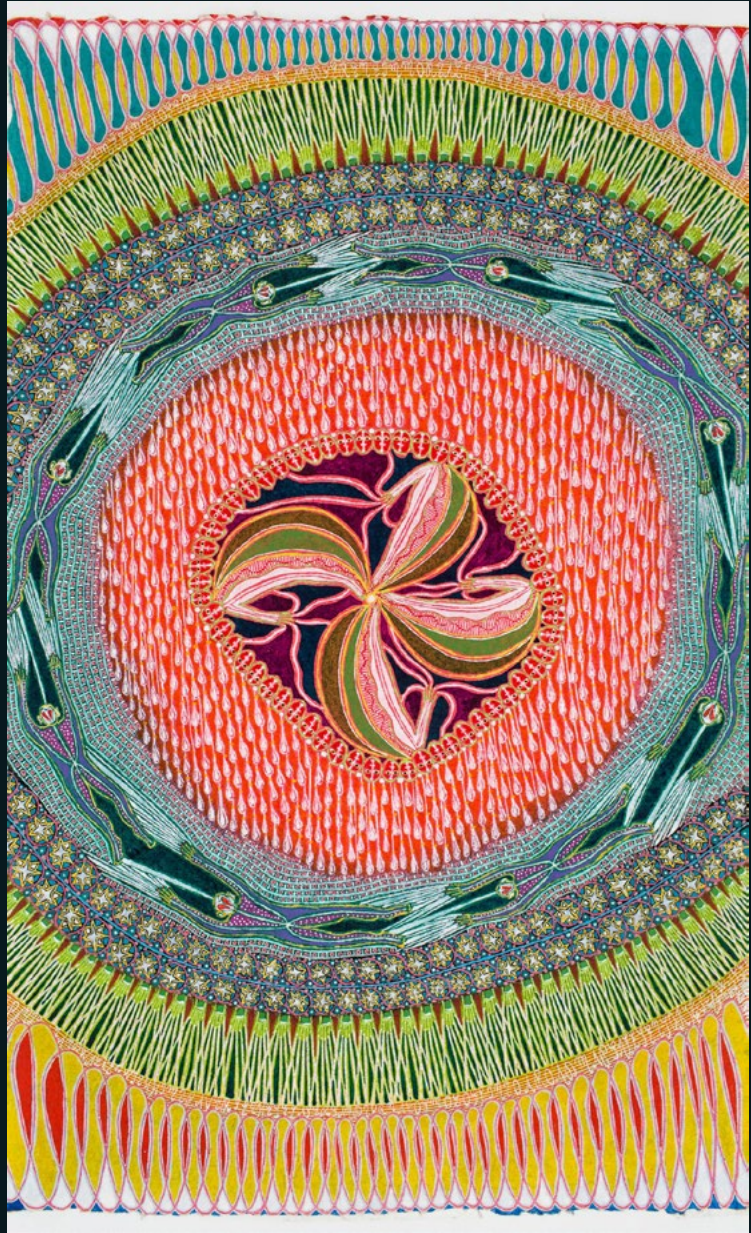
If there is one sort of special place that has effected me, which I have experienced only a couple of times in different countries, it is the hidden waterfalls that are found in dense jungles. These are the places that I respond to completely.

AK: Looking at your paintings I see rays, waves and swirls of energy that emanate from the body, hands and eyes. Sometimes there is the suggestion of energy emanating from plants and animals. This all makes me think of the invisible world around us in nature, light and magnetic fields and worlds beyond. Are you interested in this invisible side of reality?

DZ: Hints of everything are here, I am interested in expanding or activating more of my perception of the whole of reality exceeding the physical senses.

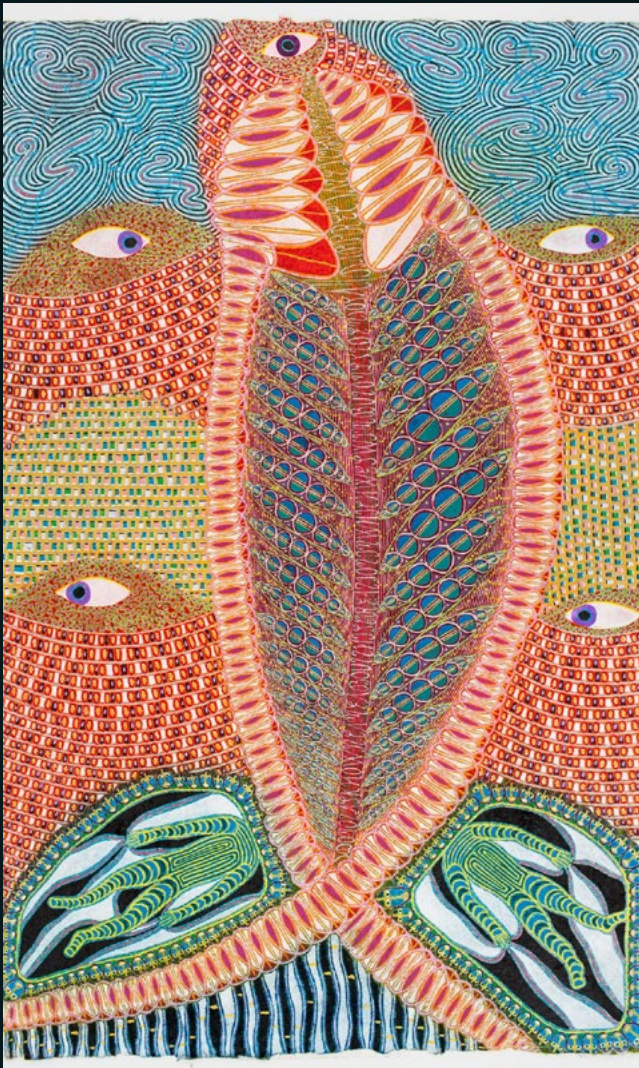
I have always been interested, so far as I can remember, in the romantic, the mystic, the esoteric, the mysteries, the hidden and the illuminating. They are all those aspects that escape, at first, any conclusive explanation. My work has reflected this, at different heights, throughout all my production. Anything about an energetic continuous pulsation has taken the stage, I would say in the last twenty years, in the making of a work and in what the work itself transmits.

AK: Is there a spiritual philosophy behind your art?



DZ: There is a sort of internal energy circulation that has been and still is at the core of my creative process and of what the viewer should make of it. The forms, colors and themes inside my work spring from an extremely relaxed state where this energy constantly circulates within me and expands to the surface where I am working, almost becoming one.

The sheer amount of this creative energetic field is enormous in its displaying possibilities, and brings me in a state of joyful contemplative meditative situation, all is solved immediately no questioning about what line, color or shape has to be made. I hope it brings the viewer to a similar state of mind.



The flux and flow of the energy circulating, as I feel it, doesn't have intention or will. Everything is solved and is realized in there. When you are entering or participating in, you become it and no distinctions exist between you and that flow. You have become that circulating energy, and my work has become that energy too. It is like practicing a magical art or spiritual practice that aims to bring you to the highest level of energy. My work is indeed a "training". Just do it and do it again with the least effort involved, until eventually you activate that blissful continuum.

AK: Some of your titles have a wonderful poetic quality, "We are Returned to Ourselves Through the River of Life" or "Purposes and Prayers of the Colored Mind Pouring Drops of Love Over the Feelings of Woven Worlds of Intuitions". Where do these titles come from? Are you inspired by any writers or poets?

DZ: For the titles, I start writing down words that suddenly comes up, while I am working or reading, and catch my attention as though they want to suggest something to me that I don't yet know. Later on, I combine them, like those stone constructions that can stand balancing one next or over the other, in an harmonious, poetic but still meaningful way.

Writers and poets, books in general, have always had a strong presence in my mind life. Myths, fairy tales, the fantastic, the great novels, encyclopedias, poetry, the dreams realm, the alternative sciences, the psychic and psychological, have always been at the forefront. Currently I just finished reading *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf, and *The Golden Bough*, by James Frazer and am now reading Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* and *Confessions of a Born Again Pagan* by Anthony T. Kronman.

AK: I imagine your work, which is filled with painstaking detail, must take so much time. How do you feel about the experience of time when making your art? Do you notice the passage of time while you work?

DZ: I often listen to music while working and that makes time into more of a rhythmic sequence than a mere succession of minutes ticking by. Also, given the mantra-like quality of the details in many of my works, iterations of signs-figures-lines-dots, time reaches a total slowing down in my perception, getting to a "time zero" point, a feeling of almost absolute focus and presence in the moment.



AK: When we first met you shared an early project of yours, a reimagining of the tarot which combined your painting and photography. You had incorporated these images with a website where the various arcana were accompanied by audio contributions from some very talented musicians. I think this is a very interesting project and I am curious about how it came about and how you feel about the project today.

DZ: In the early '90s I was very interested in G.I. Gurdjieff's work. I had arrived at him after having read widely the works of Aleister Crowley, about the Golden Dawn, Blavatsky and other streams of early 20th century esoteric-spiritualist tradition. From Gurdjieff I moved on to P. D. Ouspensky a former student and collaborator of him. And I found out about the Fourth Way which intrigued me deeply.

Reading his works I came across a brief description of tarot arcana, which I remember impressed me because of its mythical, poetic style. That was 1994 and that same year I had spent a couple of months in Paris and had the chance to meet and receive tarot reading from Alejandro Jodorowsky. He was giving free tarot readings at a bar as part of a weekly event called “Cabaret Mystique”, very close to the apartment where I was staying. I had admired Jodorowsky as a movie director since long time. At this public reading I remember him telling me to “open my heart” and that I was a “mysterious man”, which he said with a hint of irony. When I got back to Berlin I started researching anything about tarots arcana and I wanted to make a tarot deck of my own.

More than recreating a divinatory deck of cards, I took it as a personal investigation of the deepest imagery at the center of my “heart” and see what I had to open. At the time I was working as well with photography, beside drawing and painting, and I had used since 10 years an infrared film, which allowed me to work in the way I wanted, giving a strange color patina and intense dreamy color to the staged sets that I was building and then photographing. This time I took as the starting point the Visconti-Sforza tarot’s deck because I felt it was the most minimal of all the decks and I could develop it with my imagination.

Almost two years later I finished photographing the twenty-two arcana. Then I thought to add a sort of electronic “score” to each of the cards, so I arranged a loop based on an arrangements of the seven notes and asked my musicians friends to choose a few cards each to make the music for. Once completed, the entire project was called “Trigger Vision”. It included the tarot arcana I photographed, the corresponding musical loops and these koan-sort of texts for each card. It was not meant for a classic divination purpose but as an imaginative exploration of what this combination of music text and pictures would be able to trigger in the viewer. The pictures have rather dark undertones, like those scary temples guardians protecting the inner core where you wish entering to find a blissful dimension. The music is quite abstract, and the texts are poetically open to interpretation.

The project never saw the light of day as a cd, which is what I originally planned to do, but 4 years later I turned it into a web site which I worked on with a friend at distance, since I had moved to Mexico by that time. That was in 2000, still early times for internet art. By then I had revisited the photos I had taken years before and I had retouched them with hand painted elements.

AK: Do you still have an interest in the tarot or other forms of divination?

DZ: I still love to look at various sets of tarot’s card and many are beautiful, though I rarely do readings by myself or go to sessions to have a reading done for me. I do look at mine own arcana sometimes for a feeling or an intuitive activation. Rarely I do I-Ching throwing anymore either.

It Seems to Be a Period Piece (An Essay)

• Brian Chidester •

As in so much of life the axis of meaning turns upon the smallest of details. In the case of *Hawaii*, the 29-song concept album by UK band the High Llamas from 1996, a word as insignificant as “seems” can mean the difference between artistic commentary and mere pastiche. “It *seems* to be a period piece,” but it isn’t.

The line comes from the song “Nomads,” itself an homage to the mid-sixties Beach Boys sound (i.e. the period in mention)—particularly that of “Cabinessence,” Brian Wilson’s vernacular ode to the Old West, replete with banjos, plucked cello triplets, and lyrics about the construction of the East-West railroad system. Despite their structural similarities, however, the two songs could not be more different. Wilson’s intention was clearly to depict, to conjure imagery through sound, whereas High Llamas composer Sean O’Hagan was more or less concerned with making a point. Indeed, despite its title, “Nomads” is not actually about primitive culture at all, just as the album itself isn’t about the state of Hawaii. Nay, if a concept is to be sussed out here at all, I believe it has something to do with how our minds construct reality.



By rooting his music and words in recognizable motifs, in fact, O’Hagan’s evocation can be largely completed by the listener, i.e. we make sense of it from our own sense about his topics. An opening line in the piece is germane of this point; it reads: “Standing in the lightweight suit/Reports from the location shoot.” The first thought that comes to my mind is that this is a song about being on a film set. And what’s the film about exactly? “It seems to be a period piece/It could be Spain/It could be Greece.” Antiquity and remoteness. Yet the overall concern is again not about authenticity but rather appearances. Hence the tongue-in-cheek chorus: “This is what the nomads did/And this is how they fed their kids.”

This one basic theme, embedded in the opening lines of “Nomads,” carries over to the entirety of the LP—such that we are not so much dealing with an actual location, but a mentally constructed one. Indeed, from the outset we get the sense that truth and illusion endlessly shift. Lyrics such as “Is there much appeal/When you can’t believe it’s real?” (from “Theatreland”) and “The gothic stadium/Built in half a day” (from “Cuckoo’s Out”) are typically paradoxical within O’Hagan’s musical landscape. Fiction is captured spontaneously; it unfolds without forethought of narrative or ideology. Anything can be added to anything else because the final outcome is purposefully unclear.

One might be inclined to think of this as a type of musical deconstructionism; and in fact there are numerous references to the colonial mindset in lyrics like “With good book in hand/They will settle the land” (from “Ill-Fitting Suits”) and “The island awaits the quarryman’s whim” (from “Island People”). This of course is the state the Hawaiian Islands find themselves in today—overshadowed by their own colonialized past; never constant in form; inaccurate in the array of fantasies and pastiches which have generated since their “discovery” by Europeans in the late 18th century. Yet if these are the loosely-knit subjects of O’Hagan’s acerbic wit, the conclusion he leaves at the end of the LP is one of ambiguity, not accusation.

In fact while *Hawaii* seemingly takes on everything from cultural appropriation (“Recent Orienteering”) to cultural relativism (“As the sands will shift/Theatreland is on the drift”) it never holds upon one subject long enough to become invective. Neo-conservatism may be the subject of “Peppy,” a song which points to the more fringe element of the Pro-Life movement in lyrics like “Doctor’s got a roadside manner/Handing the prescriptions round/And this is what they ask for/When they burn the surgery down”; yet it could just as easily be about British etiquette and the unlive dreams which the far-off tropical outpost invites one to consider (“Never really been too happy/Never really been too sad.”). That the song doesn’t fully cross into topicality points to a broader, more direct idea: that flaws—in the system, in one’s own self—are the inevitable byproduct of growth. Without them we remain stagnant; yet to take the first step, one needs create a mental picture, even if it is a flawed, politically incorrect one.

Further evidence of O’Hagan’s non-partisan worldview shows up in songs such as “Literature Is Fluff” where ivory tower elitism is poked at in lines like “Take care to avoid the heavy stuff” and “Now the world can enjoy your savvy sense.” Neither are as direct as “We don’t need no education”; but then the point of *Hawaii* is not to persuade, to beat one over the head, but rather to relate, to laugh at one’s own folly. If it also happens to be overly-subtle, even a bit hoity-toity, so be it. O’Hagan draws no moral line between himself as narrator and the characters he describes in his work. All have their inevitable blind spots and all need their illusions to survive.

If, in fact, daftness and illusion are the lies we tell ourselves in order to be transformed, then a cursory scan of the album’s song titles all but confirms this central theme. “Cuckoo Casino,” “Snapshot Pioneer,” “The Phoney Racehorse,” “Dressing Up the Old Dakota,” “Theatreland,” “The Hokey Curator,” “Folly Time”—these serve as riddles and references which language alone can conjure. In *Hawaii*, truth is never the whole truth, but rather a verbal suggestion, with illusion revealing as much as it hides. This tension also exists in the compositions themselves and especially their arrangements.

Once again, the most obvious influence, i.e. the superficial element most critics have caught onto, is *Hawaii*’s basis in Brian Wilson’s mid-sixties psych-pop albums: *Pet Sounds* and *Smile*. Ham-fisted block chords played on piano, counter-melodies tapped out on vibraphone, moonlit organs and plodding basslines, off-rhythm drum patterns, sleigh bells, and single-note brass accents—these are the signature elements of Wilson’s sixties production breakthroughs on songs like “God Only Knows” and “Good Vibrations.” Yet when the critics denounce O’Hagan for his lack of originality, for stealing Wilson’s technique whole cloth, they seem to’ve missed the point. The artist makes no bones, in fact, about the original pedigree of his arrangements on *Hawaii*. To

the contrary: the superficial element of “Beach Boys-esque” serves more or less as a point of entry for listeners. That it is also one of the more dream-filled and aspirational sounds in all of modern music is something O’Hagan uses conceptually—not to create a similar illusion for the listener; but to draw back the curtain and expose the actual process of illusion-making.

“Incidentally N.E.O.,” a link track from the second half of the LP, features liquid guitar, an organ, bouncy keyboards, and a shaker, each played in a call-and-response pattern, each ending the musical phrase begun by the other. The title is suggestive of the song’s basis in retro formulae (or “neo”); and in fact the melody is stolen lock, stock, and barrel from an older song by the Italian composer Ennio Morricone titled “Invenzione per John” (from his *Gui’ la testa* soundtrack of 1971). A variation on Morricone’s “Scherzi a parti,” from the same soundtrack, also pops up on O’Hagan’s “Over the River” (from the next High Llamas album *Cold and Bouncy*); and “Personale” by Alessandro Alessandrini (a protege of Morricone) is repeated in the Llamas’ song “Monnie” from their *Beet Maize and Corn* LP of 2003. Rather than attempt to cloak his plagiarism, however, O’Hagan seems almost to invite the listener to reveal his source; and in the case of “Incidentally N.E.O.” the key was staring us in the face all along. Say the title out loud and N.E.O. becomes more than just a clever retro-ism; it actually reads: “Incidentally Ennio.”

There are other obvious influences here as well. The moody horns on “Sparkle Up,” the album’s five-minute opener, are reminiscent of Steely Dan’s arrangements of the mid-seventies. On “The Hot Revivalist” the same horn section minimizes then integrates, ala Steve Reich or Philip Glass; and at the close of “Theatreland” the horns separate into distinct, punctuated textures, as in the works of Carla Bley and free-jazz guru Pharoah Sanders. These “colors” (let’s call them that) are less obvious than, say, the Beach Boys influence, yet they underline the album’s bigger sense of constructed reality which it requires to deliver its core message—a message determined not by originality of form but rather by its subtle meditation on authenticity and illusion.

The song “Folly Time,” a two-minute instrumental near the end of the LP, is exemplary of this point. It is also the song, for me, which is most suggestive of narrative, despite the fact that it has no lyrics. A plodding guitar/banjo duet sets the piece in familiar territory—a mood where the characters can succumb easily to the contemplation of their own folly. Yet just as one settles in to this campy bit of audio cheese, the arrangement modulates into a passage where the artist seems truly to’ve enjoyed his work. A lazy trumpet, augmented by ethereal vibraphones and layers of melancholic strings, lifts both the characters (and listener) from the mundane of their own folly into the realm of pure fantasy.



It should be noted that any suggestion of straight narrative on *Hawaii* is never clearly demarcated before this point. Figures such as Peppy, Ratty, and the Friendly Pioneer are referred to in titles and lyrics throughout yet are mostly distorted in terms of storyline and actual character development. Cuckoo seems to be a character also, showing up in two songs (“Cuckoo Casino” and “Cuckoo’s Out”), though it could just as easily be an adjective in the former and a symbol in the latter.

The Hot Revivalist gets his own song title, then appears in the lyrics to “Cuckoo’s Out,” the most vignette song on the LP, in the line: “Took the convention trail/The hot revivalist/Tagged along on the tail.” There are also the unnamed figures of the actual film set, as mentioned in the songs “Nomads,” “Dressing Up the Old Dakota,” and “Pilgrims.” None of them points to a straight dramatic arc either; they more or less weave in and out of this tapestry of sounds, witticisms, and wordplay as characters in a sort of topsy-turvy theater or movie production—their blind spots in terms of colonial attitudes, political incorrectness, and general stuffiness are of a kind we can all relate to, provided we have a sense of humor. (This uncalculating moderation of judgment is what earns O’Hagan, in my opinion, the right to live at peace amongst our prickly race.)

If I were to make a feature film based on *Hawaii*, and the thought has crossed my mind before writing this article, here is how I would structure it: British film crew and established actors arrive on an island which they are told is teeming with native fauna and a population untouched by modern technology. The characters, self-serious and of strong intellectual opinion, set out to capture the inimitable beauty and primitive passion of this veritable Garden of Eden, only to find themselves ensnared by their own well-worn prejudices and old habits. Some are conceited; others patronizing; one requires constant fanning as it’s far too hot out here; another must have his tea at a certain time each day.



As filming begins the members of the production soon find themselves getting carried away with the role-play of nomadic people living primally and essentially make asses of themselves without knowing it. They also fail to notice the cracks in their set pieces; and that their island has suddenly begun to drift out to sea. As the ballyhoo continues apace, some grow self-conscious and feel a sense of guilt, which is eventually passed on to the rest of the cast and crew, until finally, as the song “Folly Time” plays, the entire group, now silent and facing we “the viewer,” have come to understand their culturally determined blind spots and are mortified.

Down the river they go, drifting away on an island which was never more than a film set to begin with, and which may’ve been no more than a dressed up barge plopped down in some European body of water. “Could be Spain, it could be Greece.” Or it could just be their own backyard.

There’s the overweight gentleman with round spectacles and rosy cheeks; he’s standing next to a blowhard snob in bowtie who corrects everyone’s grammar on set. There’s also the woman in her big red hat who complains about every meal; and the film director, stressed and given to fits of artistic rage; and the por-

ter as well—the bell-boy who has watched it all in silence (as have we). These and others glide past us as the sound of dreamy, melancholic music captures their inner-turmoil one and all—their madness, desperation, and humiliation, as well as their hopes and dreams. For none of them ever set out to be snobs, or to act in racist ways, despite the fact that they inevitably did. They came to make a movie—one about nomadic people. And what could be more noble than to capture in art something of the far away and exotic?

Yet as the languorous, perfumed trumpet drifts through our scene for the third and final time (like salty air on the sea), we come to understand its deeper message, its application not just to them, but to ourselves as well. We mistake the illusion for the real thing when we insist the real thing is knowable in its totality. Sure, our image of Hawaii may derive from an actual place, yet its reality for us is never more than a mental construction.

What's more, one can think of ignorance and failure in the same way as Hericlitus thought of fire, or German philosopher Friedrich Engels of his "universal equivalent"—as a self-regulating cycle of opposition which maintains the world in being. Hegel and Marx called it "dialectic" and proposed a wide-scope synthesis happening at the root of all things. James Madison referred to it as the balance of power and thought opposites essential to the maintenance of democracy; Darwin had his theory of evolution. If in fact O'Hagan's fictional ecosystem is a similarly grand constellation, he treats it with less awesomeness than those mentioned above, more campiness by far.



The ribald humor and post-modern eye of *Hawaii*, in fact, established the approach which ultimately came to define (and sustain) the group over the next two decades. *Cold and Bouncy*, the High Llamas' aforementioned follow-up, by its very title reinforces this notion of unity in the seeming contradiction between observation ("cold") and active engagement ("bouncy"). These two aspects provide the underlying tension the group needs in order to transcend its source material and offer something wider in scope.

In the end, if O'Hagan's words and sounds are concerned with the truth of things, they approach it indirectly—through riddles, impressions, and musical pastiche. Not because the truth is so overwhelming; just that it's so elusive you can't grasp it all at once. It's something to be worked through, and risks must inevitably be taken to get there—the risk of failure, to be tricked, to be led down the path of illusion. The only way to get at the source is to first experience it as a shadow. Or as O'Hagan writes in "Dressing Up the Old Dakota": "What's that cymbal sound?/Old Dakota's still around."

**The Blissful Company of Demons: The Dynamics of Occult Performance
in the Art of Barry William Hale**

• Amy Hale •

I first encountered the multi-media performance work of Barry William Hale in Seattle in 2010, where he was performing with his group, NOKO210, on the Saturday evening show of the Esoteric Book Conference. The stage was set very sparsely that night, with three elevated screens and a station on the side for programming sound, light and images. Hale took to the stage and walked around a circle on the floor containing a sigil or group of sigils, then quietly sat down and began a low, rhythmic droning with his voice, reminiscent of Tuvan throat singing. Suddenly, images and colors were projected rapid-fire on screens to the left, right, and behind him. It was clear to me that the placement of each image was designed to hit the same central point on each screen so the viewer was being brought to the same visual point repeatedly. I can barely recall most of the images, but I absolutely noted the recurrence of Enochian tablets and the “angelic language” allegedly revealed to John Dee and Edward Kelley in the 16th century. His Hypercube 210 is a complex work about the linguistics of the Enochian alphabet but his images blow right past the conscious apprehension of Enochian theory and burn straight into the subconscious. Hale was on his knees, rocking back and forth to his own droning voice as the images on the screen flashed quickly. I looked around and the audience was transfixed. Paralyzed.

* * *

In both France and Britain, the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the use of traditional theatre spaces and theatrical conventions to promote the introduction of occult ideas to a wider audience ¹. Art and occult ritual shared audiences, venues, and techniques that were interchangeable, and in the 1890s, a tradition of occult performance developed that was much more art than religion. It was performed in secular contexts, yet not secular by design. Occultists were promoting the idea that mainstream theatre could be a useful vehicle in bringing occult matter to a wider audience as part of a broader cultural shift focusing on spiritual development. Very likely, this perspective was not only the result of the public interest in theatrical séances, it was also due to the wider impact of the Cambridge Ritualists and the publication of James Frazer’s *The Gold-*

1 For a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the role of theatre in 20th century occult ritual and spectacle, see Edmund B. Ligan, 2014. *The Theatre of the Occult Revival: Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present.*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian).

en Bough in 1890, which should not be underestimated in inspiring this early generation of ritual performance. Frazer argued that myth emerged from the earliest religious ritual expressions, and theater later developed from myth. In that vein, many of these early ritual performers intended to give the audience a primordially religious experience. They believed that, through combining symbol and theatrical techniques, they would cause an altered state of consciousness and provide the audience with a “primitive” religious experience that transcended time and history, possibly resulting in a wider societal moral uplifting.

In France, The Symbolist performances within the late Salons de Rose Croix organized by Joseph Peladán from 1892 were other early examples of transformative occult theater practice. Symbolist theatre was designed to inspire the experience of eternal truths in the audience through the use of heavy handed imagery, metaphor, color and sound, a sort of spiritual technology of theater. Peladán’s Salons were meant to be reforming efforts which would redirect the attention of the participants away from the material and towards the perennial and spiritual. These spaces were meant to intentionally cultivate the liminal for the viewer and to be spiritually transformative in addition to creating an atmosphere of sensory immersion.

Similarly, from about 1890 onward, members of the Golden Dawn employed similar technologies and techniques to augment their traditional performance skills in private ritual, as well as in the development of theatrical productions outside of the context of the Golden Dawn. Florence Farr may have been one of the most innovative Golden Dawn members in this respect. Farr was a ritual theater pioneer and leading member of the Golden Dawn who not only wrote, acted, and directed, but she also developed somatic techniques for theatrical and ritual use both inside and outside of the Golden Dawn context. Her “cantillated poetry”, which she also called “the music of speech”, was inspired by Irish and Homeric oral poetry techniques. It involved a musical reading of poetry accompanied by a psaltery, the techniques of which she later detailed in her 1909 book *The Music of Speech*. The technique seemed to evoke a trancelike state in the audience, and she applied it in her role as Aleel in William Butler Yeats’ 1898 production *The Countess Cathleen*. While there has been a great deal of scholarly focus on her collaborations with Yeats, she should also be recognized in her own right for the development of ritual theatrical techniques and her own productions with Olivia Shakespeare, *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk* and *The Beloved of Hathor*, both of which were designed to communicate eternal truths through mythic theater.

Later, Aleister Crowley’s 1910 Rites of Eleusis was a series of seven publicly-performed rituals designed to invoke the “energies” of each of the seven classical planets. While Crowley was building on the idea of producing a transhistorical spiritual experience for participants, he very deliberately and explicitly employed ecstatic techniques in the performanc-



DARK MOFO, INVISIBLE HOUSE, Barry William Hale + NOKO, Salamanca House, Tasmania, Australia - 2018

es, including drumming, dancing, and chanting, all of which were designed to produce altered states of consciousness in the audience. This was a deliberate attempt to cultivate what Crowley considered to be “exotic” and “primitive” elements within Western occult ritual. He believed that the religious rituals of non-Western cultures were more liberating and that these ecstatic elements would provide participants with an atavistic religious experience. While Farr was incorporating techniques that might be considered somatic and inspire trance-like states, Crowley was attempting to bring his audience, and even more so the participants, into a more active state of religious ecstasy. Crowley’s promotion and use of these techniques ultimately impacted the general trajectory of ritual construction among modern occultists and Pagans. Gerald Gardner, inspired by Crowley, also incorporated ecstatic elements into Wiccan rites with the same aim of reconstructing a “primitive” ritual experience for participants.

This is Hale’s artistic lineage, though his form is uniquely modern and feels a long way off from our imaginings of early occult theater with exotic costumes and gloriously symbol-laden oration. The heart of Hale’s ideas, about the process and efficacy of his work, resonate with the theories of ritual, transformation and efficacy that drove early occult ritual theatre. Hale’s description of his process harkens back to Crowley’s characterization of the timeless elements of creating altered states of consciousness in performance:

“I think that the somatic qualit[ies]... are essentially the product of the process which the sonic components and their construction, in combination with the magical incantations, ritual props, projection/video or light which [come together] in the art/magical performance. These elements blended together are for me a trance induction. It is worth mentioning that the essential elements inherent to our ritual performance partake of some of the earliest articulations of spiritual technology associated with shamanism - Which include voice, sound and light. Although we used technology contemporary to our age essentially I believe there is little or no difference.”



ESOTERIC BOOK CONFERENCE - NOKO 210, Seattle, USA - 2010

Hale’s collaborator in NOKO210, Scott Barnes, noted that they are using the tools at hand to achieve the same ends as earlier ritualists in the Western tradition:

“Just as strict protocols and preparation are often required for the successful performance of a Magical Rite, the correct construction of a magical circle, making and consecration of ritual tools, the preparation of talismans, so too the meticulous integration of associated data specific to the magical operation in the pre-production and production of the sound materials. For example; magical formulas, names, codes, numbers and permutations that relate to the specific Magical Operation are greatly considered and integrated into the very sound production itself...[T]he data feeds into parametric aspects of the sound production which is data sonification”.

Do Hale’s rituals fall primarily in the category of religion, or are they more comfortably defined as performance art? They are both. Although Hale’s story focuses on his lineage of occult performance rather than secular perfor-

mance art, his work also sits within the wider tradition of secular performance art and installation which draws on elements of ritual and religious themes. These are typically read firmly as “art” and not “religion.” However, what distinguishes Hale from most other artists in this vein is that, unlike Hale, many of these artists are not performing within a religious context as adherents of particular practices. These artists may instead be providing a commentary on religious behavior or iconography, even when they employ elements of ritual or religiosity to cause a change of consciousness or awareness in the audience, such as drumming or dance.

One might conclude that the very liminal nature of occult art creates a separate set of conditions for what is essentially a religious performance. We have no defined cultural context around occult ritual, but there is plenty of shared imagination and fantasy about what occult ritual must look like. While Hale draws on identifiable Western esoteric principles, images, and practices, his creative use of technology and media stretches the conception of “ritual.” Thus, he has the ability to crossover and intersect effectively with fine art spaces to the degree that some spectators might only experience the somatic impact or simply enjoy the aesthetic experience. Despite the creation of sacred space and the inclusion of widely recognizable religious expressions such as chanting, and symbol these pieces still do not entirely meet the visual expectation of what people would consider a religious ritual to look like, primarily because of the inclusion of multimedia, and because Hale does not wear any identifiable religious garments during his performance.

Although Hale does not intend to proselytize or convert he does want to make occult symbolism and ritual more accessible and understood. He feels that esoteric and occult traditions should be more readily acknowledged as part of the spectrum of world religions, and because occult symbols and rituals are frequently sensationalized and stripped of religious context, greater understanding of them would confer legitimacy and respect. In this he is not wrong, yet part of the raw power of Hale’s art is that it taps directly into the hidden and secret. It is intense, amazing, and, to be frank, kind of scary. Yet the audience is not forced into taking any sort of theological position on what they are experiencing.

Hale has noted that his art has impacted people from many different backgrounds and walks of life, and attributes this not to the performative qualities, but to the innate ability of esoteric material to move some people: “...it is always surprising who this type of art speaks to, more often than not it is people that you would not expect. I think that it has something to do with how esoteric content touches some cultural archetypal substrate or resonates some chord.” Others respond to the universal elements of his performances, those that impact the body and speak to the senses. Hale has theorized that people who have had experience with ecstatic religious traditions may more readily understand and appreciate the performances. Even if the audience does not fully apprehend the occult context and meaning of NOKO210s magical operations, the performances still grab people and the magic still works. The very best occult art is in some way dangerous and working its power from the margins, because it dares to be directly in conversation with the engines of the universe. Artists working in this tradition do not simply offer an experience of what an enchanted and magical life might be like in another time or place, they provide the possibility of joining them in work that might well shake the foundations of the cosmos.



WINDOWS to the SACRED - NOKO 210, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Melbourne, Australia - 2015

