

OF THINGS DARK AND DISTANT

Mythic unknowing through installation practice

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the perceptual and imaginative implications of my practice of interior air-drawn sculpture gardens.

Neurologists, psychologists and philosophers suggest that we can only ever know the world by way of imagination and illusion – whether it's the illusion that the world is full of sprites and spirits, or that we know what the world is through accumulated 'facts' about it. But some illusions are more life-sustaining than others. I refer in the writing to Iain McGilchrist and David Abram who share a concern that the kinds of illusions we have inherited in the West may be responsible for a growing alienation between ourselves and the mysterious more-than-human world, with potentially devastating consequences. So my project has been an effort to take an ostensibly formalist arrangement and nudge it a little beyond the limitations of such language structures, to suggest that nothing is ever *nothing but*- but always *more than* our assumptions about it. The work is thus in pursuit of an open-endedness and a subtle unworldliness.

These up-in-the-air installation-compositions rely on out-of-consciousness manoeuvres, degrees of unknowing and cohesive ambiguity, rather than utter bewilderment, for their effects. To this end I find help from the Ryoan-ji stone garden in Kyoto, the architecture of Carlo Scarpa, the writings of Rudolph Arnheim and others on perceptual psychology, and the spatial theories of Edward T. Hall and Yi Fu Tuan.

Underneath all these sources lies the stabilising influence of composer Arvo Pärt and his careful, methodical approach to a music of resolute harmony and austerity. Pärt's practice suggests that a work need not be chaotic or challenging, indeed may have deep structure, and still engage and transport. For Pärt musical notes have cosmological implications, which for the purposes of my project needn't be over specified, but here help identify my effort as one not of nonsense or nihilism, but of mythical strangeness and poetic unknowing.

The exegesis should not be thought of as a necessary companion to the artwork, any more than compositional analysis should be thought necessary for musical appreciation. The writing spells out what should, if I have played my hand right, occur prior to or underneath words in the experience of the installation.

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PROLOGUE

*That is why this book might seem to offer too many answers - a drifting net, a network that itself branches out into several answers instead of one answer - or too few answers that are clear, distinct, and universally valid, like those of an iconographical dictionary. That is because the primary element of the religious paintings to be studied here is that of mystery...*¹

- George Didi-Huberman

*Nature connects its genera in a network, not in a chain; whereas men can only follow chains, as they cannot present everything at once in their speech.*²

- Albrecht von Haller

What you are about to read deals with a mode of creative endeavour that is dependent for its very effect on ambiguity, enigma, and defamiliarisation; for its significance on non-linear, non-hierarchical meaning-making; for its beguilement on the failure of complete understanding. The project outlined in the pages to follow is in pursuit of some nameless sensation that doesn't benefit from being treated too specifically with language. It draws on traditions of thought that are suspicious of conclusions and summary, and that hold that words and ideas are unreliable mediators of reality.

All this presents interesting challenges for the writing of an academic exegesis, though the task, I hope to prove, is not impossible. It should be understood, first, that I am not unclear about my intentions. And I do not intend to be vague in my explanations. But the sense of what I am reaching for may take some time in communicating. It is a matter somewhat like weaving a basket, insofar as the interdependent weaves only hold their shape once all the strands are in place. As the artwork is primarily rooted in certain kinds of experience rather than philosophical or theoretical texts, many of the strands of this basket are modes that structure experience - music, story and architecture, or rather

1. G Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. M. Todd, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 4.

2. A von Haller, *Historia stirpium indigenarum Helvetia inchoata*, Societas Typographica, Bern, 1768 Cited in R. Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, 2nd edn, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997p. 234.

specific styles of these as found in the work of Claude Debussy, Arvo Pärt, J.R.R Tolkien, and Carlo Scarpa. Other experience-structures such as the Zen Garden or the magic trick are also woven into the text. In this type of argument the reader would do well to avoid assuming that the first idea mentioned is the most important, or that it means what it is ordinarily supposed to. The meaning of the first idea – in the case of this exegesis it is doubt – or any other idea mentioned, is tied specifically to the context, which is yet to unfold: the context of the whole argument. So I ask the reader to bear with me.

As the reference to artists in the above paragraph may imply, this is not a nihilistic project of nonsense, confusion or bewilderment, but rather an enterprise for the sake of a productive, poetic doubt and mythical strangeness. It is informed by experiences that are in themselves full, though they may appear empty of content or food for discursive thought. And if the work asks questions, they are questions that gain nothing from answers. Rather, if I have played my hand right, the work may encourage the letting go of the need for answers.

To support this approach, in this exegesis I side with schools of thought that would have it that the conscious, articulable processes involved in navigating or perceiving the world (or art) are not necessarily the most important or influential. Therefore, very little of what follows this prologue discusses anything a viewer might reasonably be expected to consciously consider on entering the work. Much of the artwork tries to fly under the radar of the discursive mind so, much of what I have written deals with these subtle and sometimes furtive manoeuvres. (Though, as I say, I allude to music, an art form that is capable of operating on our emotions without recourse to conscious analysis, and I doubt that many would regard music as furtive for doing so.)

In my hands such a project has a cosmological premise, but I make reference to cosmology in these pages only inasmuch as it explains my preoccupation with emptiness and as it flavours the kind of uncertainty and strangeness I seek. I mention skepticism, Zen Buddhism, and mysticism, not to define my exact position in relation to these traditions, nor to make a watertight argument for them, but because they may help to elucidate my desire for an art that keeps things up-in-the-air with an undercurrent of mystery.

So my art should certainly not be seen as an illustration of these traditions. And it is not a statement about these traditions; to the best of my knowledge it is not a statement of any kind. Instead, as already hinted at, its hoped-for virtue is that it slips past verbalisations and recalls the state of things beyond the worded world.

So, although this exegesis represents a verbalised account of the research behind my installation, I do not wish for my installation to give the impression that there is an academic paper out there somewhere that explains it, that without such a paper the work remains unexplained, incomplete.

Before going on I must also address questions that commonly come up in relation to my work.

I'm sometimes asked why, when my installations include mechanisms by which the sculptures can be moved, do I not permit the viewer to interact with the work directly, to change the angles and positions of the sculptures as they see fit? Why, in other words, is the work not more democratic? For one thing, an art like mine that aims for some degree of an otherworldly or remote feel wants to distance itself from the very contemporary art practice of hands-on interactivity. Other worlds, almost by definition, are not the domain of instruments of control and familiarity and their domestic associations. This is their value. And if a viewer could play with the artwork's parts, this could well be mistaken for the point of the work, which is altogether wrong for an art aiming, as mine does, for open-ended meaning-making. Also, and more subtly, the kind of interactivity in which the viewer physically touches the work makes for a gesture at risk of privileging the *conscious* participation of the viewer, over the always inevitable unconscious involvement of an independent and mobile perceiver with the perceived. Such interactivity might seem to succumb to the impression that only when the viewer is *aware* they participate is the participation real. Again, I refer to the world-view in which discursive or analytical thought is not considered the champion of our lives that we may have been given to believe.

Then there is the concern occasionally expressed that this PhD project of mine is riding on the one installation. In a way it is (though I did produce a trial installation in 2009). Apart from the formidable scale and cost of the work, my other justification has to do with the act of keeping secrets - not from the viewer but from the mind that likes to name and categorise things in order to be done with them. In this case it is the secret, for the time being at least, about what *another* installation of mine might look like, which could otherwise help put an end to wondering about this current work's form and language. Isolated, the work employs scarcity, evidenced in the installation itself, which endeavours to keep the question alive by surrounding the work with a kind of silence.

I.

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: DOUBT, EMPTINESS,
& THE IMAGINATION

*Concepts create idols; only wonder grasps anything.*³

- Gregory of Nyssa

Though this exegesis could begin with one of a number of subjects, it begins with this one: the idea of doubt. It should not be assumed, however, that this is the central or most important idea, but it is nevertheless a persistent and pervasive one that inheres to an art of semi-mimetic forms that are left all up-in-the-air, such that this exegesis addresses. By doubt I may also mean uncertainty, or unknowing (which this exegesis holds as having meanings and functions quite distinct from bewilderment or utter confusion).

The seed of twentieth-century art's great doubt, according to Thomas McEvelley, was sown by Marcel Duchamp in his aesthetic renunciations and inexplicable occupational manoeuvres.⁴ His was in part a neo-Pyrrhonian doubt, an ancient skeptical practice that encouraged the suspension of certainty in the apprehension of all things, ultimately with the aim of achieving a state of euphoria.⁵ McEvelley cites Sextus Empiricus (c. 160-210 AD), a Pyrrhonist, saying that such a suspension

solidifies into an inner balance (*arrepesia*) in which the mind neither affirms nor denies...

This balance between affirmation and negation expresses itself in a state of vocal and mental silence (*aphasia*) which ripens finally into freedom from phenomenological influence (*apatheia*) and imperturbability (*ataraxia*)...⁶

Pyrrhonists avoided making assertions of any kind, as no statement could ever be proven by more statements. And some Pyrrhonists developed systematic arguments to demonstrate the absurdity or impossibility of other's assertions or opinions.⁷ As

3. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, cited in J Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, Crossroads, New York, 1992, p. 89.

4. T McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Allworth Press, New York, 1999, p. 59.

5. McEvelley, p. 5.

6. McEvelley, p. 5.

7. McEvelley, p. 7.

Metrodorus of Chios neatly put the situation, 'I know nothing, not even whether I know nothing.'⁸

So Duchamp moves from the ambiguous ontologies of the Readymades, such as the use of chance in an artwork's making, as in the play on the measure in *Three Standard Stoppages*, (1913-14, Figure 1) in which metre-long strings were dropped to determine the shape of three 'standards', to the hanging spade of *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915-16), (Figure 2) to to (ostensibly) abandoning art-making altogether in favour of playing chess.⁹ These may be seen as an attempt to side-slip the kinds of certainties that prevailed in the art-world of the early years of last century. He challenged certainties of taste and the formulae for what constituted good or bad art, or even for what constituted art.¹⁰ He determined to abandon inherited habits of mind to achieve a life that could be, as he declared, 'a kind of constant euphoria.'¹¹

Chance later became the chief strategy of composer John Cage in his interpretation of Zen-as-philosophy.¹² Like Pyrrhonism in many respects,¹³ Zen Buddhism encourages the 'great doubt', that is, a cultivation of a detachment from concepts, judgments, and assumptions – which create artificial essences and engender an illusory certainty – in order to apprehend reality directly and without prejudice. McEvelley relates Hakuin's words: 'When a person faces the great doubt [...] it is just as though he were standing in complete emptiness... At the bottom of great doubt, lies great awakening. If you doubt fully, you will awaken fully.'¹⁴ More practically, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, from whom Cage learned much about Zen, said '...Zen reveals itself in the most uninteresting and uneventful life of a plain man in the street, recognising the fact of living in the midst of life as it is lived. Zen systematically trains the mind to see this; it opens a man's eye to the greatest mystery as it is daily and hourly performed.'¹⁵ Musically for Cage this eventually meant, at the very least, abandoning control over the selection of notes, as control would otherwise imply unjustifiable evaluative criteria in the choice of notes, that there are right

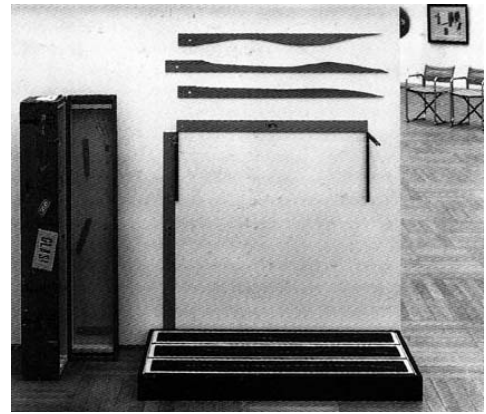


Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp
Three Standard Stoppages

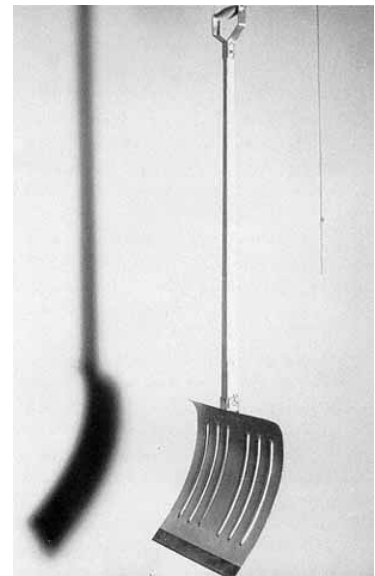


Figure 2
Marcel Duchamp
In Advance of a Broken Arm

8. McEvelley, p. 7.

9. Wikipedia, Duchamp's Transition from Art to Chess, retrieved 9 October 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp#Transition_from_art_to_chess>

10. McEvelley, p. 60.

11. McEvelley, p. 60.

12. DW Patterson. 'Cage and Asia: history and sources' in D Nichols (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 43.

13. McEvelley, p. 57.

14. McEvelley, p. 4.

15. DT Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970, p. 45.

notes and wrong ones. To this end he developed the use of the *I Ching* for the purposes of composition.¹⁶ He included in his music sounds from everyday life in a broad project of ‘giving up control so that sounds can be sounds,’¹⁷ and in an effort towards what he liked to call indeterminacy.¹⁸ His practice is generally regarded to have reached its apotheosis in *4’33’’*, a concert piece in which the pianist lifts the lid, as it were, on four-and-a-half minutes of not-playing, of the sounds of an audience waiting.¹⁹

The doubt of Duchamp, Cage (and others) may be seen as an effort to gain liberation from aesthetic habit and evaluative criteria, an attempt to pull away the mental barriers that conceal the euphoric ineffability of all things. In this light, doubt, at least sometimes, is an early step toward apprehending the ineffable.

But while there is much to enjoy and admire in Duchamp’s and Cage’s efforts to keep things up in the air, I have to confess to a reservation: by abandoning convention, Duchamp and Cage also leave behind the observer/listener familiar only with such conventions. Duchamp’s and Cage’s purposes may be understood by the art or music insider (and not by all of these). To be meaningful, their doubt is, I submit, somewhat dependent on an intellectualised and historicised view of art and music and is thus often understood in discursive terms – by use of the very faculty that they are trying to transcend.²⁰ An artist can’t please everyone, of course, but the point I am building towards is that there are ways to communicate poetic doubt through one’s art not just to non-academics, but to that non-discursive part of most people, by means more immediate.

Nevertheless, I wish to keep something of the flavour of Duchamp’s and Cage’s doubt in these pages. But if their methods aren’t for me, I want to consider another option – not a *new* option, for it is surely quite old, and this is its significance. For while Duchamp and Cage may be said to *challenge* conventions that don’t admit the ineffability of things, others seek immersion *within* ancient conventions that illuminate the expression of the ineffable.

Estonian composer Arvo Pärt is one such artist. In his submersion into the Russian Orthodox Church, Pärt seeks to abide by a tradition in which

16. Nichols, (ed.), p. 18.

17. Cage, John. *Silence*, Middleton, 1961, p. 72. cited in Nichols, D. (ed.), p. ix.

18. Nichols, D. (ed.), p. 34.

19. DW Bernstein, ‘Music 1: to the late 1940s’ in Nichols, D. (ed.), p. 43.

20. I think this is true, even of *4’33’’*. A friend who has witnessed a ‘performance’ of this piece assures me it is a most wonderful experience, which is to be welcomed. But, no matter how marvelous an event, it would still, for many, require a back-story that relates the work to Cage’s, as well as music’s, progress, to keep a naïve concert-goer from feeling like he’s been had, and to communicate its potential significance for their own lives.

the mystery of the divine and of existence is ritually held in contemplation.²¹ Though MacEvilly seems to regard Christianity as a whole as Pyrrhonic doubt's antithesis, others like Thomas Merton see differently. When speaking of the kind of doubt mentioned above in relation to Zen, Merton says

But is all of this totally foreign in the West? It is certainly alien to the cartesian and scientific consciousness of modern man, whose basic axiom is that his 'cogitating' consciousness ('clothed with the ideas of objects') is the foundation of all truth and certitude... Yet in the West there has been a long mystical and apophatic tradition. 'Faith,' for St. John of the Cross, is a 'Dark Night of the Soul,' since instead of giving us knowledge of objects, it empties us of all such knowledge in order to lead us to God by unknowing.²²

In Pärt's return to early music and chant, he assents to ancient intuitions regarding mysticism and art.²³ Though this relationship represents a complex situation, it is evidenced in a music of discipline and essentials and gravity. As Wolfgang Sandner describes it, 'At times, Arvo Pärt's compositions are like the Hesychastic prayers of a musical anchorite: mysterious and simple, illuminating and full of love.'²⁴ That is to say that Pärt's music to some extent has the feel of mystery. Charles Morey, in discussing the art of Byzantium, which is Pärt's Orthodox inheritance, says this about the role of the emotion in relation to the divine:

The transcendental is never completely apprehended by reason; when the infinite or sublime is realised by the mind, it has become a formula in mathematics or a dogma. In language such concepts inevitably emerge in metaphor, being incapable of direct and literal expression. The actual experience of the supernatural is emotional; the content thereof is translated into feeling rather than thought, and to be embodied in art must find an emotional mode.²⁵

So, where for Cage personal preference is omitted from the composition process, Pärt's practice requires of him self-counsel in respect to aesthetics; for Pärt, who can keenly sense expression of the eternal in some musical phenomena more than others, being deliberate about combinations of sound is a matter of devotion.²⁶

21. P Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 6.

22. T Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 13th edn, Harper Collins, New York, 1997, p. 241.

23. Hillier, p. 66.

24. W Sandner, in the liner notes, Arvo Pärt, *Tabula Rasa*, ECM, Munich.

25. CR Morey, *Medieval Art*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., New York, 1942, p. 13.

26. Hillier, p. 201.

Procedurally, then, I'm inclined to follow Pärt's example in that I use aesthetic judgment in the designing of my installations. I make no claims of rising above caring about outcomes. To some extent, the end result matters. This is not to say, of course, that I make any claims to universality of effect, or to any notion of perfection; and there is certainly room for happy accident in the process. But the work, once I have finished with it, is more or less fixed. Ultimately, despite what may be the novel appearance of my work, or its use of the contemporary medium of installation, mine is an art in search of a tradition.

But I have no single tradition to turn to. (This is one reason I have introduced this writing with a plurality of doubting traditions.) Rather than isolate any one I try to adopt and adapt enduring modes found at the ancient roots of much traditional Oriental art. For my purposes, the two most significant are what I am calling open-endedness and unworldliness. They manifest variously throughout the Asiatic as well as Near-Eastern Orient. The open-ended denies resolution and hierarchies, it has no clear centre and privileges no one moment or part, and may be experienced as a dipping in to and out of a continuum; it intimates eternity. In its barest form it can be found expressed in the ornament of the Near-East, in the all-over pattern, such as the tessellation in Figure 3. It has no centre and theoretically, no end.²⁷ A traditional Japanese garden is formulated so that no one element dominates.²⁸ A non-hierarchical continuum can be heard in Pärt's music, in a piece such as *Festina Lente* (Song 1 on the accompanying disc), which has no single significant moment, whose beginning is no different in character than the music that follows. *Festina Lente* uses the medieval technique of the mensuration canon, in which each instrument - in this case violins, violas, and cellos and double-bases - play the same line at different speeds, which establishes an interpenetrating pattern of sound that could theoretically repeat *ad infinitum*, as no moment suggests completion more than another. Pärt is concerned that each note in a composition should have equal importance. He instructs his composition students with the allegory: 'each blade of grass should have the status of a flower.'²⁹ (More on Pärt in Chapter 4.)

The unworldly, through defamiliarisation or strangeness, is intended to

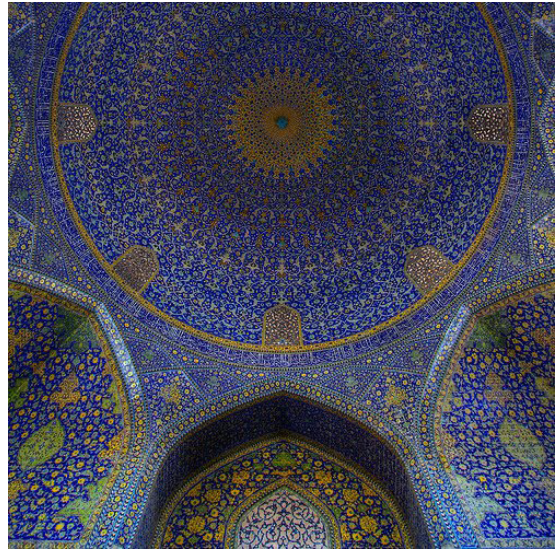


Figure 3
Tessellation in a Shah Mosque

27. Morey, p. 8.

28. *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden*, trans. J Takai, MP Keane, Tuttle Publishing, 2001, p. 59.

29. *24 Preludes for a Fugue*, DVD, Juxtapositions, 2005.

express the hidden transcendent in the imminent;³⁰ or else, through surprise, it shocks the viewer out from the fog of words and concepts in order to know reality directly. The strangeness inhering to images such as the Byzantine icon in Figure 4 is the consequence of the Near-eastern concept of the unknowable divine infused into the image of a man – an expression of the mystery of the incarnation, of God becoming man.

In Japanese literature concerning Zen arts, unworldliness, or *datsuzoku*, is prescribed as a desirable quality in ritual spaces.³¹ The Miyajima Torii in Figure 5 is a gate of the kind that ordinarily constitutes the entrance to a Shinto shrine for visitors and monks. Entry through the Miyajima Torii presents a wholly different prospect and this breach of convention betrays logic and poses unanswerable questions.³² Admittedly, this broad view of open-endedness and unworldliness as agents of unknowing leaves plenty of room for interpretation and dialectic approaches, but they serve as a rough guide for me.

These concepts in traditional or religious Oriental art are a reflection of metaphysical principles and first and final causes to which they traditionally and culturally belong. Ananda K. Coomaraswami wrote that ancient Asiatic or Medieval Christian art endeavours to ‘represent things more nearly as they are in God, or nearer to their source.’³³ He says that mystical art’s ultimate theme is

that single and undivided principle which reveals itself in every form of life whenever the mind so shines on anything that the secret of its inner life is realised, both as an end in itself unrelated to any human purpose, and as no other than the secret of one’s own innermost being.³⁴

The ‘single and undivided principle’ goes by many names, as language fumbles for approximating metaphors. For Arvo Pärt it is silence that recalls the divine, and his music is constantly in its orbit. For other traditions, such as some Buddhisms, it is emptiness that is held to be the positive and productive ground



Figure 4
Byzantine Icon. Artist unknown
c. 1400

30. Hillier, p. 4.

31. KK Inada, ‘A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics: A Prolegomenon’, *Philosophy of East and West*, University of Hawai’i Press, Vol. 47, No. 2, April 1997, pp. 117 – 131.

32. Datsuzoku, retrieved 12 October 2011, <http://bonsaibeautiful.com/nature_of_garden_art/japanese/datsuzoko.html>

33. AK Coomaraswami, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Dover, New York, 1956, pp. 30, 31.

34. Coomaraswami, p. 38.

of all being.³⁵ It is this eternal emptiness to which, I suggest, open-endedness gestures, and is the source of ultimate doubt as it is darkness to the discursive mind. Its presence can be detected in perennial artistic principles – which are also important to my work – such as simplicity, asymmetry, absence and incompleteness.³⁶ These, from a certain point of view, may be said to be instances of human handiwork recalling its origins in emptiness.

While these are all old and remote ideas, in my research I have sought more recent counsel as to how they might find new expression in contemporary art. I have looked to perceptual psychology and other theories as to how we know the world, in order to find ways of making it a little unknown. I have looked at examples from music, story, the architectural interior, and the garden that have been artfully involuted to produce a fruitful doubt: bi-tonal music, mythic stories, the interior architecture of Carlo Scarpa, and the Japanese Zen garden.

My installations aspire to generally operate in some ways like instrumental music: they prefer to self-sufficiently communicate at lower levels of cognition in which phenomena are apprehended on their own terms by the body. This function, I will argue, belongs to a worldview that has it that ultimate reality can only be known through encounter, not ideation. For insight into the more immediate ‘meaning’ ascribable to perceived things, I turn to Rudolph Arnheim and D.K Ching. (These may typically be regarded as formalist concerns, but as I intend to show later the work reaches a little beyond the limits of that label.)

But in de-emphasising ideation I do not mean to deny the role of the imagination. In this context the imagination is not merely the maker of mental images. I submit it is the body-mind’s blind method of connecting an artwork’s distant or incongruous parts, filling it not with logic but with feeling. (I go into this more fully in later chapters.)

This operation can generate a range of felt qualities to which we have given the words enchantment, uncanny, unearthly, and unworldly. The play of emptiness on the imagination to these ends is explored at length by Timothy Walsh. He catalogues from within and without literature examples of what he refers to as the ‘manipulation of shadow and the incorporation of lacunae,



Figure 5
Myajima Torii

35. M Epstein, ‘Sip my Ocean’, in J Baas & MJ Jacobs (eds.), *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004, p. 34.

36. Inada, p. 117.

ellipses, and other forms of conspicuous absence.³⁷ Such strategies, he says, produce a darkness in which lies a sense of ‘some sort of wonderful and wordless plenitude.’³⁸ He writes:

For it is nowhere but in the masterly evocation of hidden depths imperfectly glimpsed, the numinous sense of *what is not there*, of the ineffable permeating the effable that artists are able to conjure up some semblance of those ineluctable mysteries at the heart of humanity’s unalterable liminal condition.³⁹

It is experiences with something of this quality – being for the most part familiar but having some dimension that exceeds the grasp – that has prompted my work; it is a desire to keep things all up in the air against a background of mystery that this research has attempted to meet.



It may be worth at this point to look at the kind of territory we’ve wandered into. I have intended to give some sense of the cosmological drift moving upon my work; Pyrrhonism, Zen, mysticism are mentioned, not to be in any way specific about my cosmology (which is anyhow not available to the viewer), but simply to give a paradigmatic feeling for what has driven the research and to account for the full emptiness and affirmative doubt of my creative intent. Knowledge of them is not necessary to experience the work.

As the first section of this chapter may suggest, in order to make my artistic intentions clear, this exegesis positions me in contrast to what I regard as a prevailing mode in contemporary art: that which operates by discursive procedures. This entails generalisations, but if the reader will forgive me I think it may help clarify the purpose in the decision-making in my research and my art. By ‘discursive procedures’ I mean a mode of art that operates like text, indeed often *uses* text, or symbols, and amounts to what the artwork is ‘saying,’ or else gives preeminence to what can be said or written about it. Even though much, if not all, of the art I have in mind may enjoy a degree of obfuscation of its statement, this seems to constitute the ‘art’ part of the statement and its point is made nevertheless. I doubt there is anything dangerous in this trend, though it seems to me it is symptomatic of a broader cultural conviction about

37. T Walsh, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1998, p. 19.

38. Walsh, p. 35.

39. Walsh, p. 32.

the potency of our statements and concepts about the world. This may not sound significant, but it could be that our concepts about the world cut us off from the world, which may have more disastrous consequences (and I try to make this point more fully in the next chapter). In relation to this consideration I will be referring throughout these pages to Iain McGilchrist's bulky tome *The Master and His Emissary: the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. It bears outlining briefly the main thrust of the book.

McGilchrist looks at the course Western culture has taken in the last 5000 years or so, and attributes many of its missteps and instabilities to an increasing dependence on fragmented left-hemispheric thinking. McGilchrist is careful to point out that he is not drawing on popular misconceptions about the hemispheres, which used to claim, broadly, that the right was responsible for images and emotion while the left was in charge of language and logic. He does draw from recent research on the brain, and largely from studies on subjects who have had one or the other hemisphere damaged, or clinically 'switched off.' Both hemispheres, he says, are involved in all cognitive processes, but it is the manner in which they view the world, their 'ways of being,' that are of interest.⁴⁰ It has long been known that the right brain perceives wholes and the left brain processes small chunks of information,⁴¹ and McGilchrist maintains that this is not a trivial distinction. 'Things change according to the stance we adopt towards them, the type of attention we pay to them, the disposition we hold in relation to them. This is important because the most fundamental difference between the hemispheres lies in the type of attention they give to the world.'⁴² He believes that 'many of the disputes about the nature of the human world can be illuminated by an understanding that there are two fundamentally different "versions" delivered to us by the two hemispheres, both of which can have a ring of authenticity about them, and both of which are hugely valuable...'⁴³ Through various studies it becomes clear that each hemisphere manifests certain characteristic 'attitudes' to the world. The right is more holistic and inclusive, while the left decontextualises information and takes the world one part at a time.⁴⁴ The left is chiefly concerned with representational processes (such as the referential aspect of language) whereas the right is more concerned with presences. Interestingly the left is more capable of, and more inclined to,

40. I McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010, p. 4.

41. McGilchrist.

42. McGilchrist.

43. McGilchrist, p. 5.

44. McGilchrist, p. 4.

occlude the right but the right values both views.⁴⁵ Without recourse to the right brain's contribution to cognitive processes, the left more readily takes its representations for reality. Each hemisphere defines a kind of relationship we have with the world; the right hemisphere is given to an 'I-thou' relationship and is comfortable with a knowing that entails some degree of uncertainty, whereas the left is predisposed to an impersonal 'I-it' position and can't permit anything in the way of ambiguities or interpenetration.⁴⁶

Central to his thesis about the contribution made by the right hemisphere is the matter of metaphor. Where the left hemisphere deals in representations and symbols, only the right side of the brain can comprehend metaphor, which is rooted in the body and is 'the only way in which understanding can reach out of the system of signs to life itself.'⁴⁷ From the Greek *meta-* across, and *pherein-* to carry, metaphor carries us across a gap, says McGilchrist, that 'language itself creates. Metaphor is language's cure for the ills entailed on us by language... If the separation exists at the level of language, it does not at the level of experience. At that level the two parts of a metaphor are not similar; they are the same.'⁴⁸ Fundamental to metaphor's and the right brain's operation is the making or keeping things implicit. Runaway left-brain thinking makes things explicit, and McGilchrist sees this as a primary character of modern and post-modern art.⁴⁹ He says it is a modernist tendency 'to accept an explicit manifesto or message... as a substitute for imaginative experience: this is often an apparently encoded message, which thereby flatters the decoder.'⁵⁰ Metaphor on the other hand creates meanings that

... activate a broad net of connotations, which though present to us, remains implicit, so that the meanings are appreciated as a whole, at once, to the whole of our being, conscious and unconscious, rather than being subject to the isolating effects of sequential, narrow-beam attention. As long as they remain implicit, they cannot be hijacked by the conscious mind and turned into just another series of words, a paraphrase. If this should happen, the power is lost, much like the joke that has to be explained...⁵¹

This, I feel, could be helpful in understanding my intentions in the research

45. McGilchrist, p. 112.

46. McGilchrist, pp. 83, 114.

47. McGilchrist, p. 115.

48. McGilchrist, p. 116. McGilchrist's emphasis.

49. McGilchrist, p. 412.

50. McGilchrist, p. 410.

51. McGilchrist, p. 116.

and the writing that follows. There has been much effort in the work to keep things implicit.⁵² This exegesis makes explicit those efforts. I wouldn't want this exegesis in the hands of the ordinary viewer.

McGilchrist says that just as an individual can impede right hemisphere processes, so can a culture impede right hemisphere kinds of processes,⁵³ and he sees that this is what has happened and is happening. He wants to redress this balance. And this is one way to talk about what my project may be trying to do: if there is a cultural imbalance in the ways we relate to the world and to art, and I think there is, a return to an older mode of art that is full of ambiguities and unknowns and interpenetrations that activate imagination is a move to right-hemispheric operations, which may help to restore a balance to a whole-brain apprehension of things. In the end it is at least a metaphor. But metaphor, as McGilchrist concludes his book, is how we come to understand the world.⁵⁴

A word of caution though, in relation to the discussion of the right and left hemispheres: As McGilchrist says in his introduction, '[t]he differences that I hope to establish are too nuanced to be encapsulated in a few words or simple concepts,'⁵⁵ and if this is true of his large volume, how much more so is it of the few scant references to his work in this exegesis. I ask the reader, therefore, to assume greater complexity and subtlety than is permitted in such a format as this.

Because the research has emphasised experience over concepts, I don't make in the pages to follow much reference to labels such as Romanticism (or its companion 'the sublime'), Minimalism, or Formalism, though these may come to mind for some viewers seeing my work. My intention has been not to handle the appropriate mental and art-historical *categories* of things but to address the ways the work can be related to. This effort has constituted much of the research.

52 Of course, there is much implicit in all art, deliberate or not. My point here is that implicitness has been the focus of my research, though I haven't always thought of it in those terms.

53. McGilchrist, p. 13.

54. McGilchrist, p. 462.

55. McGilchrist, p. 11.

2.

REASON TO DOUBT

*We have been brought up with the absurd prejudice that only what we can reduce to a conscious formula is really understood and experienced in our life. When we can say what a thing is, or what we are doing, we think we fully grasp and experience it. In point of fact this verbalisation - very often it is nothing more than verbalisation - tends to cut us off from genuine experience and to obscure our understanding instead of increasing it.*⁵⁶

- Thomas Merton

*Where is the sweet that is ascribed to sugar? It exists only in the act of sensation.... Thought not only changes immediate sensation thereby, but withdraws further and further from reality and becomes increasingly entangled in its own forms.*⁵⁷

- H. Vaihinger

David Abram set out to Asia with the aid of a study grant, intending to investigate the link between healing and magic as used by the shamans of Indonesia and Nepal. Abram, himself a sleight-of-hand magician who had experienced some success with the use of magic in the treatment of people with mental trauma, was eager to discover how traditional healers used magic in their practice.⁵⁸

After some time spent with these men and women who commonly dwell at the edges of tribal communities, the focus of his investigation shifted. Though their role for the villagers was primarily one of healer, none of the sorcerers in Indonesia nor the *dzankris* of Nepal that he stayed with considered this to be their principal function.⁵⁹ Their greater responsibility is as mediators between the human realm and the more-than-human world in which they are embedded. They commune with the surrounding ecology - the diverse plants and animals, as well as various landforms and the winds and weather - to preserve a relationship of temperance and mutual respect. 'By his constant

56. T Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 8th edn, Anthony Clarke, Wheathampstead, 1994, p.106.

57. H Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of As If*, Routledge, Kegan and Paul, Ltd., 1924, p. 167, cited in R Bandler & J Grinder, *The Structure of Magic*, Science and Behaviour Books, Inc., California, 1975, p.12.

58. D Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, pp. 4, 5.

59. Abram, p. 5.

rituals, trances, ecstasies, and “journeys.” he ensures that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it – not just materially but with prayers, propitiations, and praise.’⁶⁰ A shaman is able, says Abram, to slip out of ordinary consciousness to commune with the other powers. ‘His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations – songs, cries, gestures – of the larger, more-than-human field.’⁶¹

On his return to North America, Abram found his own consciousness had been shifted by his long exposure to these oral peoples. He discovered he was able to engage squirrels in conversation on their terms, and had developed an acute awareness of the surrounding air and a new spontaneous and intense sensorial empathy with animals, insects, birds, and trees. Ultimately the encompassing world had come to seem to him a ‘fluid ambiguous realm’ filled with other powers and intelligences, a perspective about which the concepts and language of his own culture had little to say. His own culture, as evidenced in the way they denude forests and pollute the land, air and streams, has, he says a ‘perceptual problem.’⁶²

Abram attributes this to the fact that we in the West are heirs to a largely reductive scientific model of thought that would have it that the world may be diminished to a set of concepts and facts, only really perceived through our instruments and by our equations. The world then, conceived under these influences, is somewhat abstracted and assumed to be determinate and explainable in mechanical terms.⁶³

One Western source Abram does draw on to help explain his newfound perception of the world is the phenomenology of Edward Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Husserl developed phenomenology in response to his own dissatisfaction with the sciences that, in his time, claimed to stand firmly on the ground of objectivity and that made little account of the pervasive subjective realm that inevitably produces, among other things, scientific thought.⁶⁴ Phenomenology was an attempt to focus on the world as experienced through our senses – the phenomenal world. It was to be a philosophy, says Abram, that would ‘strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it.’⁶⁵

Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty after him, turned to the body as it relates to its

60. Abram, p. 7.

61. Abram, p. 9.

62. Abram, p. 27.

63. Abram, p. 34.

64. Abram, p. 35.

65. Abram, p. 47.

surroundings at every moment.⁶⁶ For them, to be aware of the body's ongoing activity beneath thought – the feel of our weight on the soles of our feet as we walk, the sensation of the wind or leaves against our skin, the sound of traffic or water or breathing – is to know the body as an open-ended channel of interchange with the environmental phenomena that surround it. The body's boundaries are ambiguous and indeterminate, since sensing necessarily involves an uninterrupted current of phenomena from 'outside' to 'inside' the body; from sensed to sense. Since what is without is registered within, there is no point at which a boundary is clearly defined. Our bodies are simply part of the world's phenomenal continuum. (Abram suggests: 'We might as well say that we are organs of the world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us.'⁶⁷) And our perpetual reception to, and acquaintance with, the immediate world's effects, and our body's moment by moment recalibration in response to them, allows for no one representative instance of our presence in the world. From the perspective of our sensing bodies reality is only ever fluid. The open conversation between our bodies and their environment is carried without the aid of words, and to the mind that uses words to try to comprehend the world – the mind that compiles its catalogue of concepts to thereby 'know' the world – it is a conundrum.⁶⁸

Husserl called this world of experience unmediated by thoughts and concepts the *Lebenswelt*, or life-world.⁶⁹ It is that surrounding realm with which our bodies ceaselessly interrelate before we even speculate about it. In Abram's words: 'The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of "facts" – prior, indeed, to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion.'⁷⁰ Abram's 'fluid and ambiguous realm' is the life-world.



Abram wonders how it is that we became so estranged from our bodies and the sensuous realm of which they are a part, to the extent that we can forget it. There have been, and there still exist, cultures which demonstrate an affinity with their particular landscape and its non-human dimension. Says Abram: '... long-established indigenous cultures often display a remarkable solidarity with

66. Abram, p. 45.

67. Abram, p. 68.

68. Abram, p. 44-56.

69. Abram, p. 40.

70. Abram.

the lands that they inhabit, as well as a remarkable respect, or even reverence, for the other species that inhabit those lands.’⁷¹

One major factor, he concludes, that contributed to our own separation is phonetic writing. All our early writing systems, he says, ‘remain tied to the mysteries of a more-than-human world. The petroglyphs of pre-Columbian North America abound with images of prey animals, of rain clouds and lightning, of eagle and snake, of the paw prints of bear.’⁷² When Semitic scribes developed the *aleph-beth* around 1500 B.C.E. their marks still remembered the world of the senses but now each character came to represent the consonants in the spoken language (though, significantly, there were none for the vowel-sounds): *aleph*, which became our letter A, being the word for an ox, and depicted an ox head; *beth*, our B, the name and shape of a house and so on.⁷³ By this move a rift was made between humans and their environment. Of this Abram says, ‘*A direct association is established between the pictorial sign and the vocal gesture, for the first time completely bypassing the thing pictured... the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a necessary part of the system.*’⁷⁴

The alienation from the sensuous realm that phonetic writing was effecting was not complete, however, until the Semitic system found its way to Greece. When it arrived it remained almost entirely intact, which is to say the sounds and shapes that still had more-than-human reference for the Semitic scribes were kept though they had no such meaning for the Greeks. The *aleph-beth* became, with minor alterations in the names and shapes, the Greek alphabet. *Aleph* became *alpha*, *beth* became *beta*, and so on. The Greek names invoked for the Greeks only the human-made letters and the sounds they represented.⁷⁵

The new technology, after initial resistance from what was a profoundly oral culture, was eventually incorporated into the curriculum, and Athenian Greece became ‘literate.’ It happened during Plato’s lifetime (428–348 B.C.E.), which, according to Abram, is significant.⁷⁶

It is significant because of the nature of language in an oral culture. Abram cites Eric Havlock, who suggests that words, for oral peoples, are part of the enigmatic corporeal flow of experience of the world; an utterance is felt by the utterer, and it passes without registering as an entity independent of that person or the air to which it is lost. The word has no visual component and

71. Abram, p. 93.

72. Abram, pp. 96, 97.

73. Abram, p. 101.

74. Abram, pp. 100–101. Abram’s emphasis

75. Abram, p. 102.

76. Abram, p. 108.

its meaning relates only fleetingly to the moment it was spoken.⁷⁷ Phonetic writing, on the other hand, gives words a new autonomy from those who use them. 'It is only as language is written down that it becomes possible to think about it,' says Havlock.⁷⁸ It was this potential to conceive of language brought by the new literacy that Socrates, who though illiterate himself, was able to exploit in his questions. 'By asking the spectator to explain himself or to repeat the statement in different terms, Socrates forced his interlocutors to separate themselves, for the first time, from their own words,'⁷⁹ says Abram. Consequently, ethical concepts such as 'virtue,' which in an oral culture were deeply rooted to the bodies and instances that called them forth, could now be treated as permanent, fixed forms. It was only through the technology of writing, suggests Abram, which fixes events to a flat surface that can be returned to again and again without changing, that Plato can conceive of eternal forms that have their reality in some non-sensuous sphere. Socrates, with Plato in tow, co-opted the term *psyche* – once associated with thought, as well as the breath, the air, and even the soul – and granted it solely to the new apparently autonomous, reflective mode of thought.⁸⁰ Ian McGilchrist charts the transition from pictograms to phonograms, from syllabic phonograms to a phonetic alphabet as a stepwise move from a holistic right-brain processing of language to a left-brain abstracting function,⁸¹ abstractions which, as has been said, seem to the left hemisphere to have the look and feel of reality. As the technology of phonetic writing spreads it becomes possible to think about thought in new ways. Galileo can now maintain that subjective qualities, like sound and taste, are merely illusory impressions, while only what can be mathematically measured is real.⁸² Descartes is able to disembodify thought, and render it immaterial, and set it above and in relative unobstructed view of the material world. The sciences, says Abram, are thereby mobilised, sent forth to get reality's measure, armed with the powers of objectivity and pure reason.⁸³



There are other theories that suggest that language need not be written down to influence our relationship to the physical world. Edward Sapir and

77. Abram, p. 109.

78. Abram, p. 107.

79. Abram, p. 109.

80. Abram, p. 113.

81. McGilchrist, p. 274.

82. Abram, p. 32.

83. Abram, pp. 33-34.

Benjamin Whorf proposed that what we see (and fail to see), and how we think about it all are largely determined by the language we speak; that language to some extent influences perceived reality. From his study of Native American languages Whorf concluded that different tongues fix logic differently, harbour different unconscious assumptions, and ultimately render unto their speakers different universes. Western Indo-European languages, he says, are particularly given to dissecting the world and breaking up reality into discrete parts in a manner not entirely justifiable by the ambiguous stream of experience.⁸⁴ Through the giving of names to fluid events (such as anger) and to illimitable elements in nature (like sky or hill or swamp) and to indeterminate aspects of experience (such as time, and its designated parts: past, present, and future), our language persuades us to ‘regard some elusive aspect of nature’s endless variety as a distinct THING, almost like a table or chair. Thus English and similar tongues lead us to think of the universe as a collection of rather distinct objects and events corresponding to words.’⁸⁵ It is ‘cosmologies’ like these (though they may be seldom thought of as such) that our language presupposes, which the sciences have only in the last hundred years or so been able to transcend (in relativity theory, for example).⁸⁶

Native American languages, on the other hand, bestow on their speakers a very different world. The Hopi language, for example, possesses no explicit or implicit reference to time,⁸⁷ and its sentences may meaningfully contain nothing such as could be broken into subjects or predicates.⁸⁸ A speaker of Nootka may form sentences regarding a boat that contain no word for boat as such, but instead make use of a word referring to something like the vector forces described in Figure 6.⁸⁹ The Hopi have at hand a word that may be translated to English as the ‘Mighty Something,’ and other ready expressions generally concerned with

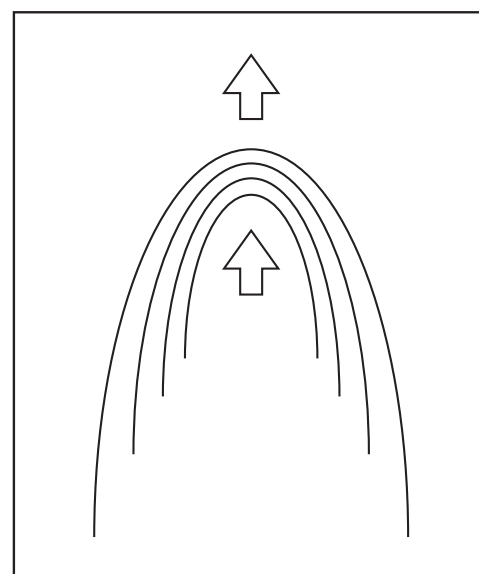


Figure 6

84. BL Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2011, p. 239.

85. Whorf, p. 240.

86. The idea can be, and has been, according to Timothy Walsh, taken too far. Structuralists, says Walsh, have taken Whorf's suggestion that language structures reality, to mean that nothing exists outside of language, that language accounts for all that is perceived. This, despite Whorf having said that: 'My own studies suggest, to me, that language, for all its kingly role, is in some sense a superficial embroidery upon deeper processes of consciousness, which are necessary before any communication, signaling, or symbolism whatsoever can occur, and which also can, at a pinch, effect communication (though not true agreement) without language's and without symbolism's aid.' Whorf, p. 239, cited in Walsh, p. 58.

87. Whorf, p. 58.

88. Whorf, p. 243.

89. Whorf, p. 234.

a sense of awesomeness.⁹⁰ Many of these tongues, says Whorf, have not only words for things we do not, but entire grammar-systems that hint at unfamiliar subtle intuitions and inscrutable psychological undercurrents that don't easily translate.⁹¹ Whorf concludes that a Native American, by virtue of his mother tongue, is made more readily conscious of 'dim psychic sensations'⁹² and may be more naturally predisposed to (what we might think of as) mystical thought and practice than we in the West are given to do by our languages.

'Western culture,' says Whorf by way of contrast, 'has made, through language, a provisional analysis of reality and, without correctives, holds resolutely to that analysis as final,'⁹³ and, more harshly, that 'Basic English, with its concealed premises working harder than ever, is to be fobbed off on an unsuspecting world as the substance of pure Reason itself.'⁹⁴ He is not suggesting that the Hopi or any other Native American language has the *right* take on the universe. He acknowledges that such a thing is outside the powers of words.⁹⁵



If reason⁹⁶ and objectivity as such are illusory, and the certainty they engender, was conjured by language, whether spoken or written, it may be that these are precisely the kinds of tricks, though inadvertent, that the human brain is easily taken in by.

Neurologist Robert A. Burton has recently suggested that, from a biological perspective, reason and objectivity are not the brain's true business, and that certainty simply isn't what the brain is equipped to produce,⁹⁷ though it is easily given to the conceit that it is.⁹⁸

For starters, Burton says that each act of cognition amounts, by analogy, to a summit of billions of committee members (neural connections) each with their own bias or agenda, who meet behind closed doors (the so-called *hidden layer*, a term that refers to the decisive process of a thought which neurologists have no way of observing). Here the delegates debate and vote and influence

90. Whorf, p. 60.

91. Whorf, p. 70.

92. Whorf, p. 266.

93. Whorf, p. 244.

94. Whorf.

95. Whorf, p. 257.

96. It should be noted that while McGilchrist is critical of runaway rationalism, he is less eager to give up the hope of some measure of reason based on what he calls a 'betweenness' that comes of using both hemispheres. McGilchrist, p. 7.

97. RE Burton. *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2008, p. 141.

98. Burton, pp. 7-20.

each other in unpredictable ways, to produce a reaction or decision. Some committee members might represent a particular memory each, while others might represent a genetic predisposition.⁹⁹

The problem for reason and objectivity in this scheme is that there has been given no provision for asking members representing memories, or those representing genetics, each with their emotional content, to abstain from voting. ‘There is no isolated circuitry within the brain that can engage itself in thought free from involuntary and undetectable influences,’ says Burton. Without such circuitry we have no capacity to stand back and judge our thoughts. Under these circumstances, ‘certainty is not a biologically justifiable state of mind.’¹⁰⁰

Further to what Burton says about the brain’s limitations, is the sense organs’ and nervous system’s selectiveness; we see the world as if through a pinhole with blind spots.

The eye, we are told, can’t register an image at the point where the optic nerve joins the eyeball. We aren’t commonly aware of it because our brains take visual information from around the area, the blind spot, and fill it in with an informed guess at what it might otherwise be seeing.¹⁰¹ We can’t detect light frequencies under 390 nm or over 740 nm. And we can’t hear sound waves lower than 20 cycles per second or greater than 20,000 cycles per second.¹⁰²

Sometimes we may not ‘see’ something even though its image may fall on our retina. Psychologists think that what we see is dependent on what we are paying attention to. In a famous experiment participants were asked to view a video of two teams of basketballers and count how many times one team passes the ball amongst themselves. Once the passing was underway a person in a gorilla suit walks into shot, beats their chest, and walks off. After viewing the tape the participants are asked if they noticed anything unusual. In the hundreds of times they have performed this experiment, the researchers found that, so long as participants are counting passes, hardly anyone mentions anything about gorillas.¹⁰³

And what we think we see might not be what is there. McGilchrist says that attention itself is not simply another function of the brain: ‘The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to... Attention changes *what kind of a thing comes into being for us...*’¹⁰⁴ Perception of a

99. Burton, pp. 44–51.

100. Burton, p. 141. Of course, by the terms of his own argument, Burton cannot claim that the neurologist’s instruments can identify what a thought really is. His point is that neurons, while they are remarkable, do not reliably calculate external reality.

101. D Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Harper Press, London, 2006, p. 81.

102. Bandler & Grinder, p. 8.

103. DJ Simons, CF Chabris, ‘Gorillas in our Midst’ in *Perception*, volume 28, 1999, pp. 1059–1074.

104. McGilchrist, p. 28. McGilchrist’s emphasis.

thing depends on the relationship it has for who is doing the perceiving.

A mountain that is a landmark to a navigator, a source of wealth to a prospector, a many-textured form to a painter, or to another the dwelling place of the gods, is changed by the attention given to it. There is no 'real' mountain which can be distinguished from these, no one way of thinking which reveals the true mountain.¹⁰⁵

Richard L. Gregory says that since Hermann von Helmholtz in 1866 described visual perceptions as 'unconscious inferences from sensory data and knowledge derived from the past,' science has been discovering more and more that perception in the present is made with reference to past experience, so much so that, as Gregory says, it has become 'hard to define "illusion".'¹⁰⁶

And what is true of objects is also true of situations. Psychologists and behavioural economists enumerate various strategies the brain uses to short-cut relationship to the real world on a moment-by-moment basis, which it is anyway not capable of, in order to deal more efficiently with circumstances.¹⁰⁷ These are cognitive rules of thumb, known as heuristics, and one of the most powerful is the Familiarity Heuristic, which has us trusting responses that come quickest to mind. A response that occurs immediately must have proved useful often to be so readily available to memory – or so the split-second reasoning goes.¹⁰⁸ These and other cognitive biases demonstrate that the kind of filling-in technique the brain uses with the eye's blind spot is not limited to vision.¹⁰⁹

Rather than relate to the world on a moment-by-moment basis, psychologists tell us, we relate instead to an internal map or model or interpretation of the world, assembled through the accumulation of experience, which, as we have seen, is limited and subject to distortion. This is the situation described by Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert:

The three-and-a-half pound meat loaf between our ears is not a simple recording device but a remarkably smart computer that gathers information, makes shrewd judgments and even shrewder guesses, and offers us its best interpretation of the way things are. Because those interpretations are usually so good, because they usually bear such a striking resemblance to the world as it is actually constituted, *we do not realise that we are seeing an interpretation*. Instead, we feel as though we are sitting comfortably inside our heads, looking out through

105. McGilchrist.

106. RL Gregory, 'Knowledge in Perception and Illusion', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, B: Biological Sciences*, London, 29 August, 1997, vol 352, no. 1358, pp 1121-1127 p. 1.

107. W Herbert, *On Second Thought*, Broadway, New York, 2011, p. 3.

108. Herbert, p. 3.

109. Gilbert, p. 82.

the clear glass windshield of our eyes, watching the world as it really is... We tend to forget that our brains are talented forgers, weaving a tapestry of memory and perception whose detail is so compelling that its inauthenticity is rarely detected. In a sense, each of us is a counterfeiter who prints phony dollar bills and then happily accepts them for payment, unaware that he is both the perpetrator and victim of a well-orchestrated fraud.¹¹⁰

One reason our concepts seem so convincing to us, says Burton, is because of a mechanism our brains use to reward us for taking certain courses of actions over others.¹¹¹ When our ancestors climbed a tree to avoid a lion in pursuit, and the lion eventually gave up and moved on, our ancestors learned that they had done something effective. The lesson that trees are a refuge from lions and result in survival, in order to be easily accessible again, is accompanied by a physiological reward. In future, climbing a tree when in the presence of a lion will *feel right*.¹¹² This is what Burton calls a *feeling of knowing*, which covers the various feelings of certainty, rightness and conviction. The *feeling of knowing*, like its cousins the *sense of self*, and the *feeling of familiarity*, and *jamais vu* (*feeling of strangeness*) and others, is an underlying sensation that generally goes unnoticed as a feeling as such, but that nevertheless qualifies our thoughts. The *feeling of knowing* is how we have the impression that we know.

As our brains developed the capacity for abstract thought, however, they used the same reward mechanism, and thereby reward potentially unproven or unprovable thoughts, and credit assumptions with unwarranted certainty. The measurable cause and effect of real-life situations is often absent from abstract thought, but the *feeling of knowing* remains.

Burton acknowledges that, though few believe we perceive the world without some interference and limitation or that we act on the world without some unconscious agendas and unknowable motivations, we still have a hard time giving up the ‘faded notion of objectivity.’¹¹³ He says that ‘relinquishing the idea of pure reason goes against the grain of how we lead our lives,’ and that ‘the presumption of at least a sliver of a rational mind is the glue of daily discourse, scientific discovery, and self-awareness.’¹¹⁴

So the illusion of certainty and reason remains convincing and widespread. But my concern here is how it may cause us to be blind to the ‘fluid ambiguous realm.’ The problem is that our conviction about our thoughts can steal us

110. Gilbert, pp. 88, 89. Gilbert’s emphasis.

111. Burton.

112. Burton, p. 89.

113. Burton, p. 155.

114. Burton, p. 141.

out of our body-in-the-world and bestow on our concepts unreal powers. As Abram puts the situation:

In a society that accords priority to that which is predictable and places a premium on certainty, our spontaneous, preconceptual experience, when acknowledged at all, is referred to as 'merely subjective.' The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the 'realer' world of quantifiable and measurable scientific 'facts.' It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs. Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and 'real' than the world we experience with our unaided senses.¹¹⁵

It is this primacy given to our words and ideas about the world that Aldous Huxley is addressing when he says that man is victim to language in that it 'confirms in him the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness, so he is all too apt to take concepts for actual data, his words for actual things.'¹¹⁶ The preoccupation of the mystic is to let go of formulations and concepts – to doubt, if you will – in order to have authentic encounter with things as they are: as mysteries. It is in this vein that Anthony de Mello says that if we look at a tree and see a tree, we have only seen the label. 'When you look at a tree and see a miracle – then, at last, you have seen.'¹¹⁷ It is the difference between the two meanings we have in English of the word 'know.' McGilchrist points out that the right hemisphere's way of knowing (*Erkenntnis* in German – knowing through encounter) is through lived relationship, 'a betweenness, a back and forth reverberative process between itself and the Other, and is therefore never finished, never certain,' and the left hemisphere's knowledge (*Wissenschaft* – knowledge about) concerns information, decontextualised and fixed referential fragments – which he says elsewhere are 'general, impersonal, certain and disengaged.'¹¹⁸ But because the left hemisphere's analysis is linear and in control of most aspects of speech and sequential discourse, and the right hemisphere relates to the world in parallel streams and is effectively speechless, only the left hemisphere's version gets given voice and granted the kind of certainty that only this hemisphere can provide. 'The existence of a system of thought dependent on language automatically devalues whatever cannot be expressed in language; the process of reasoning discounts whatever cannot be reached by reasoning,' says McGilchrist. In its own terms, he says, language

115. Abram, p. 34.

116. A Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1960, pp. 22, 23.

117. A de Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, p. 17.

118. McGilchrist, p. 96.

cannot transcend the world it creates but through poetry. And rationality, *in its own terms*, cannot escape rationality ‘to an awareness of the necessity of something else, something other than itself, to underwrite its existence – except by following Gödel’s logic to its conclusion.’¹¹⁹

Perhaps Burton’s explanation for why we have trouble giving up the dream of pure reason offers another clue to how this state of affairs came about so easily in the first place. Burton says:

Our reluctance to face the problems of the rational mind stems from the feeling that the mind isn’t of the same category as the body. We don’t expect to jump twenty feet high or swim underwater for a week; we can easily feel our physical limitations. But we don’t feel the same limits on our thoughts... Our mental limitations prevent us from accepting our mental limitations.¹²⁰

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, we fail to recognize the *feeling of knowing* as a feeling; we just think we know. ‘The *feeling of knowing* may seem as though it is occurring in response to a thought when it actually preceded the thought and was responsible for bringing the thought into awareness,’ says Burton. Because ‘thought,’ he insists, ‘cannot exist without sensation.’¹²¹ That sensation always precedes any conscious thought is called the ‘primacy of affect’.¹²² For McGilchrist, this means that affect is so much closer to the core of our being than conscious thought, so that ‘[e]ven the prejudice we have in favour of reason cannot itself be justified by reasoning: the virtue of reason is something we can do no more than intuit.’¹²³ There is some suggestion that thought takes its sense (if you will) of being non-sensuous from sight. Jean Piaget has suggested, that ‘the entire development of mental activity, from perception and habit to representation and memory, as well as to the higher operations of reasoning and formal thinking is a function of the gradually increasing distance of the exchanges.’¹²⁴ Vision, our principle distance sense, is least concerned with what is happening to the body or what the body is doing, and more concerned with, to use Piaget’s words, ‘more and more remote realities.’¹²⁵ Abstract thought may thus be subject to the impression given to the perception of distant objects: a

119. McGilchrist, p. 228. This last is referring to Gödel’s incompleteness theorems.

120. Burton, p. 159.

121. Burton..

122. McGilchrist, p. 184.

123. McGilchrist, p. 185.

124. J Piaget, *La Psychologie de l’intelligence*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1947, Cited in R Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, 2nd edn, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, p. 17.

125. Piaget.

degree of detachment.¹²⁶ Ian McGilchrist reports that in ancient Greek, ‘words for “thinking” in the sense of abstract cognition, and words for “seeing” come to be closely related.’¹²⁷ And Juhani Pallasmaa stresses the hegemony of vision in Western culture and its long association with knowledge (and, accordingly, of light with truth). He cites, among others, Aristotle, who regarded sight to be the most noble of the senses ‘because it approximates the intellect most closely by virtue of the relative immateriality of its knowing.’¹²⁸ Pallasmaa says that our occularcentrism forces an alienation from the senses as ‘[t]he eye is the organ of distance and separation.’¹²⁹

Nevertheless our language retains the mind’s embodied situation. Whorf observed that even mental phenomena, in English, are described in terms of the body’s experience in space. So that ‘we can hardly refer to the simplest non-spatial situation without constant resort to physical metaphors. I “grasp” the “thread” of another’s argument, but if its “level” is “over my head” my attention may “wander” and “lose touch” with the “drift” of it...’ and so on.¹³⁰

As our thoughts seem to hover in unsensuous regions, our bodies are nevertheless all the while deeply involved in thought’s affairs and in the worldly terrain; in constant open-ended exchange with its environmental phenomena. Abram borrows the word ‘participation’ from French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl to help describe the multitude of ways the body is actively influenced by and influences in return, at distance, the animate world through perception. Lévy-Bruhl used the word to characterise the animistic convictions of oral peoples, for whom the surrounding world seems full of animate powers. ‘Prior to all our verbal reflections,’ says Abram, ‘at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists.’¹³¹ To demonstrate the participatory nature of perception, he gives the example of the slight-of-hand magic trick. To make a coin seem to disappear from one hand and travel invisibly across the air to the magician’s other hand where it seems to reappear, the magician enlists the viewer’s participatory faculty – the imagination. The viewer doesn’t see that two coins are involved, that the first is hidden in one hand, then the second is revealed in the other, though this is the magician’s method. They see instead that one coin has been transported

126. J Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Wiley Academy, England, 2005, p. 46.

127. McGilchrist, p. 266.

128. Pallasmaa, p. 15.

129. Pallasmaa, p. 46.

130. Whorf, p. 146. Rudolph Arnheim thinks Whorf doesn’t go far enough. ‘To put it more sharply: human thinking cannot go beyond the patterns suppliable by the human senses... Language, then, argues loudly in favour of the contention that thinking takes place in the realm of the senses’ *Visual Thinking*, p. 233.

131. Abram, 57. Abram’s emphasis.

because they refer to the magician's apparent experience of the event. The magician's attention and actions are orchestrated to draw the viewer's empathy for how his body must be *feeling* when the coin vanishes here and reappears there. Says Abram:

For the perceiving body does not calculate logical probabilities; it gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully... From the magician's, or the phenomenologist's, perspective, that which we call *imagination* is from the first an attribute of the senses themselves; imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible¹³²

Similarly, he says, in the life-world perception is an empathetic sensual reaching out and pulling in of identifiable events 'out there,' in which we imaginatively invest creatures and plants and stones with a *feeling for what they must be feeling*: muscles strain at sight of the branch bending in the wind; the pressure of a crow's wing lifting itself through the air felt in our arms; the bitter tang tasted in our mouth when we see a blackbird biting a berry.¹³³ All this goes on unnoticed until we pay attention to it, says Abram.¹³⁴ And it suggests that the unconscious impression that sight is non-sensuous is largely illusory.



It is one thing to fail to see a tree as a miracle or the world as a fluid ambiguous realm, but Abram sees much graver consequences in our distance from the life-world brought about by a blind faith in concepts, labels, and formulae. Referring to the state of things prior to phonetic writing, he says that 'the air, for oral peoples, is the archetype of all that is ineffable, unknowable, yet undeniably real and efficacious.'¹³⁵ The Semitic scribes had refused to give letters to the vowels, the breath sounds, (*Aleph* signified not the vowel 'A' but the shape the throat makes prior to speaking¹³⁶) but the Greeks invented signs for them. Abram says that 'by using visible characters to represent the sounded breath, the Greek scribes effectively *desacralised* the breath and the air.

132. Abram, p. 58. Abram's emphasis

133. Abram, p. 126.

134. Abram.

135. Abram, pp. 226, 227.

136. Abram, p. 251.

By providing a visible representation of that which was – by its very nature – invisible, they nullified the mysteriousness of the enveloping atmosphere, negating the uncanniness of this element that was both here and yet not here, present to the skin and absent to the eyes, immanence and transcendence all at once.¹³⁷ This, in league with Socrates' and Plato's application of *psyche* solely to the power of thought, makes of the air an unnoticed phenomenon and it becomes thinkable, says Abram, to pour our pollutants into it without much concern.¹³⁸ We are currently witnessing the consequences of the ease with which this can be done. All this suggests there may be a wisdom in believing the air is 'the unseen repository of ancestral voices, the home of stories yet to be spoken, of ghosts and spirited intelligences,'¹³⁹ and poses the question whether we moderns really know better because we know *facts* about the air.

Obviously, none of this – this incomplete register of our out-of-awareness biases, assumptions, and distortions; our unconscious irrational influences – is to suggest that we should not use words, have concepts, or engage in science. Burton says '[w]e must learn (and teach our children) to tolerate the unpleasantness of uncertainty. Science has given us the language and tools of probabilities. We have methods for analysing and ranking opinion according to their likelihood of correctness. That is enough. We do not need and cannot afford the catastrophes born out of a belief in certainty.'¹⁴⁰ Whorf felt that the kind of cessation of the mind's activity found in Yogic practice – which yields 'a tremendous expansion, brightening and clarifying of consciousness'¹⁴¹ – was an end to which the scientific study of languages and linguistic principles can contribute, by introducing a broader reality than a language like English ordinarily permits. By analogy, he says, '[m]any neuroses are simply the compulsive working over and over of word systems, from which the patient can be freed by showing him the process and pattern.'¹⁴² Abram is concerned for us to return our thoughts to our sensing bodies and the living domain that envelops them, which entails a kind of thinking that has a different claim to truth, not a truth associated with scientific facts but with a quality of relationship. He says, '... a civilisation that relentlessly destroys the living land it inhabits is not well acquainted with truth, regardless of how many supposed facts it has amassed regarding calculable properties in this world.'¹⁴³

137. Abram, p. p. 252.

138. Abram.

139. Abram, p. 254.

140. Burton, pp. 223, 224.

141. Whorf, p. 269.

142. Whorf.

143. Abram, 264.



Finally, I offer another reason to doubt:

Dan Gilbert conducted a study at the University of Virginia in which randomly selected students in a library were given a card with a gold dollar attached. Half of these students were handed a card with an artificial explanation of what the gift was about, while the other half received a card with no explanation. Five minutes later these students (and a control group of students who did not receive a gold coin or card) were approached by a second researcher claiming to be carrying out a survey, ostensibly unrelated to the gold coin, for a student project gauging ‘community thoughts and feelings.’ The questionnaire was contrived to measure, to the extent that such a measurement is possible, the mood of each student. The findings showed that those students who received no explanation for the coin rated higher in positivity than those who received a fake explanation, or those from the control group. Through this and other related investigations – such as having students watch all but the crucial resolution of an emotional film – Gilbert and his team have demonstrated a close correlation between uncertainty and pleasure. (Gilbert points out an exception to this is negative situations, such as the loss of a loved one, in which the ability to make sense of events aids the grieving process.)¹⁴⁴

It may be that our ancestors were acquainted with the emotional benefits of *not knowing* when they developed the riddle. For, as long as the riddle’s answer goes undiscovered we are gripped. As Timothy Walsh says:

It is the experience of a riddle, not its solution, that is at the heart of this ancient form. The predicament of coping with mystery, of plunging headlong into uncertainty, is vastly more significant than the moment when the enigma is resolved. It is the uncertainty, not the answer that is the riddle’s gift.¹⁴⁵

However... In a follow-up to his gold coin project Gilbert asked a different group of students – who did not know the outcome or purpose of the original study – to imagine they received an unexpected gold coin from a stranger, and choose whether they would rather receive the artificial explanation or no explanation. The majority reported that they would prefer the artificial explanation; that is, most of them would take the option that would potentially deprive them of greater pleasure. A number of Gilbert’s studies have suggested that university students (at the very least) do not know

144. Gilbert, ‘Pleasures of Uncertainty: Prolonging Positive Moods in ways People do not Anticipate.’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2005, Vol. 88, No. 1, 5-21, pp. 5 - 17

145. Walsh, p. 113.

very well what makes them happy.¹⁴⁶

The well-executed magic trick can also elicit the pleasures of unknowing. An illusion in which a coin seems to vanish from the magician's right hand, travel invisibly through the air, and appear in the left, can present a delightful conundrum. But, as David Abram has observed in his role as a magician, there is often a small contingent of the audience who claim to have seen wires or other contrivances that were not a factor in the making of the illusion.¹⁴⁷ Like Gilbert's students, they would sooner have a spurious explanation over none at all.

Abram's point is that when we settle for scientific explanations and culturally received, reductive concepts about the world, we snap ourselves out of the 'spell of the sensuous,' and shut ourselves out of the life-world. This is also what I would like to suggest; when we content ourselves with our internal models and interpretations, when we don't allow ourselves to doubt at least a little, we may be cheating ourselves out of some satisfaction that may be a measure of the profit of the Pyrrhonist's, the Zen practitioner's, or the mystic's doubt.

By highlighting interpretation I also mean to implicate the way we are often given to interpret art. Susan Sontag, in *Against Interpretation*, expressed dissatisfaction with the custom of nominating what the artist is 'saying' through an artwork, of assuming that art is a statement of the artist. 'None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it did.'¹⁴⁸ While Sontag was mainly concerned to address 'a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain "code," certain "rules" of interpretation,'¹⁴⁹ I want to suggest that such an emphasis on interpreting or 'reading' an artwork – a common metaphor in my observation – is symptomatic of the kind of labeling and conceptualising that potentially reduces our experience of the life-world. Presumably many artists make art with this process in mind. As McGilchrist says:

Walter Pater's aphorism that all art aspired to the conditions of music alluded to the fact that music is the least explicit of all the arts (and the one most directly attuned to our embodied nature). In the twentieth century, by contrast, art has aspired to the conditions of language, the most explicit and abstracted medium available to us.¹⁵⁰

146. Gilbert, 'Pleasures of Uncertainty', p. 10.

147. Abram, p. 59.

148. S Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1982, p. 96.

149. Sontag, p. 97.

150. McGilchrist, p. 417.

Art, I must suppose, is often made to ‘say’ something. Mine is not.

This chapter, though, may seem to try to say something. I came across many of the resources cited here in search of the subtler influences on our thoughts and behaviours, and to get for myself a fresh picture – it is only ever going to be an incomplete one – of the mind that visits galleries. This chapter is not intended, then, to make for a watertight philosophical case – according to the terms of my discussion, how could it? It has, I acknowledge, been a rather one-sided account, but I wish to redress a balance, to suggest that there is reason to doubt the reach of discursive thought. But to say much more about it – in purely discursive terms – I am in danger of being like the man riding his donkey at full tilt through the town streets. To the townspeople who call out ‘What are you doing?’ he replies, ‘I am trying to get away from my donkey’. If there is anything in the suggestion that discursive thought is not possessed of the power we have attributed to it, or that its hegemony is potentially harmful, it is worth exploring ways to get away from the donkey other than by donkey means. I want instead, through my art, to seclude some part of the world that may more readily be experienced as a ‘fluid ambiguous realm.’

3.

OTHER WORLDS AND THE UNWORLDLY:
 UNKNOWING IN MUSIC, STORY AND MAGIC

*The wish to explore worlds lying outside normal experience was undoubtedly the reason Schoenberg took the radical step of abandoning the tonal system in 1909, and why, in The Rite of Spring (1912), Stravinsky gave such unprecedented importance to rhythm... the tonal system has not proved suitable for those who want to look at the human experience from another perspective.*¹⁵¹

- Michael Hall

*Mooreffoc is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle...*¹⁵²

- J.R.R. Tolkien

In Claude-Achille Debussy's orchestral *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, a faun wakes from an afternoon sleep and tries to recover the events of an erotic dream in which he was ravishing two beautiful nymphs. Ultimately, he recalls, they abandon him at the critical moment to finish their lovemaking together without him. It is based on a poem by Mallarmé which itself draws on the Pan of mythology, who liked to lie about in the fields of Arcadia. The mood of the piece is all longing and vapour. It concludes with the libidinous faun resigning himself to the elusiveness of things and he once again falls asleep.¹⁵³

Up until *Prélude* (song 2 on the CD), which was composed in the last decade of the nineteenth century, music typically had a tonic or home note on which a work began and to which it returned at its end. Michael Hall notes that tonality developed during the Renaissance and reflected that era's humanist and

151. M Hall, *Leaving Home: A Conducted Tour of Twentieth-Century Music with Simon Rattle*, Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 3.

152. J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 4th edn, Harper Collins, 2001, p. 58.

153. Hall, p. 94.

rationalist philosophy.¹⁵⁴ His description of tonal music is a long one, but it paints an important picture and so is worth including at length here:

The tonal system... is based on the idea that a piece of music should be like going on a journey, in which you know full well where you will end up – namely, back home – and, indeed, when you will arrive. It is a hierarchical system in which ‘home’ is the ‘tonic’ triad of the key that the composer has selected for the piece. Returning to the home key and ultimately finding rest on its tonic chord gives music written in the tonal system its sense of direction and purpose. As a result, all tonal music, whether a short song or a complex symphonic movement, is underpinned by a simple threefold structure, based on the principle that in order to confirm or stabilise something you have first to deny or undermine it. The first stage involves establishing the home key, the second journeying to another key and treating it as if it might be an alternative to the tonic, the third returning to the original key so that all doubts about where home is are dispelled.¹⁵⁵

But Debussy’s faun enjoyed no such resolution, and the familiarity and certainty of tonal music wouldn’t do for his world. So for much of *Prélude* there seems the possibility of *two* tonics – c sharp and G sharp, apparently in the key of c sharp minor. First the one, then the other seems the most likely destination of the music. By the work’s end these are indeed the last two notes played, but by this time they belong to a different key altogether – E Major.¹⁵⁶ By way of such ambiguity Debussy was able to express not only the story’s irresolution, but also the shimmering otherworldly atmosphere of its setting. *Prélude* was one of the earliest moves away from the tonal system, into what is sometimes called bi-tonality.

Early in the twentieth century many composers, led by Arnold Schoenberg, moved into somewhat darker and wilder territory with atonal music, which, as the name suggests, possessed no tonic at all, and offered no real hope of resolution. Atonalism uses all twelve notes in the chromatic scale. This music is often restless and dissonant, and suited the mood of the post-war years.¹⁵⁷

In contrast, other composers such as Olivier Messiaen developed Debussy’s ideas further or drew from eastern music (that already possessed similar qualities) or invented polytonal scales¹⁵⁸ whose tonic remained a little at large, by way of new patterns of whole-tones and semitones – the pattern that determines which

154. Hall, p. 26.

155. Hall, p. 25.

156. Hall, p. 95.

157. Hall, p. 39.

158. Hall, pp. 105–9.

note or notes will form the tonic or tonics.¹⁵⁹ In the absence of a single definite tonic the other notes of the scale assume a more even character, no longer stations on the way home but degrees equally at ease with being a little lost. As a consequence most of this music is not so much a progression of tension and release, as most tonal music is, but more a continuous texture. As it has no determinate centre, it is less hierarchical and less certain.¹⁶⁰

If tonic music is a system of musical knowing – certainty, predictability, familiarity, orientation (to home) – and atonality is a system of bewildering disorientation, then I propose this third option (of which there are several subtly different kinds accounting for a range of qualities and degrees), which includes bi-tonality, may be understood as the music of unknowing – doubt, ambiguity, wonder, peculiarity, enigma. Bi-tonal and related music is thus well suited to describing mythical places and other worlds whose atmospheres, by definition, are unlike our own. It is the music of dream, and of other worlds and otherworldliness.



Not all other worlds are Arcadian. *Fäerie*, the realm of ancient fairy-story,¹⁶¹ is just as likely to be horrifying as it is beautiful. For John Ronald Ruel Tolkien it is a perilous realm¹⁶² possessed of a peculiar moody and magical atmosphere, a quality for which he preferred the word enchantment.¹⁶³ '[T]he primal desire at the heart of *Faerie*,' he writes, is 'the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.'¹⁶⁴

Fäerie operates on the imagination firstly by way of deep time.¹⁶⁵ For Tolkien, the enchantment of fairy-story is primarily made possible by the immeasurable abyss of time between the telling and the setting of a story. The improbable affairs of *Fäerie* are made believable, even desirable, when seen through the lens of deep time under a story's spell. Secondly, *Fäerie* is made by fantasy, whose first virtue is an arresting strangeness or unworldliness, that is, an unlikeness to the world as we know it.¹⁶⁶ In *Fäerie*, as in the Middle-Earth of Tolkien's own

159. O Károlyi, *Introducing Music*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 39–46.

160. My own observations.

161. J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 4th edn, Harper Collins, 2001, p. 9. The fairies in the stories Tolkien refers to are not the diminutive sort, the 'flower-fairies and fluttering sprite with antennae that I so disliked as a child...' Tolkien, p. 6, and the stories themselves are not, he claims, solely for, or even best suited to, children. Tolkien pp. 33 – 46.

162. Tolkien, p. 10.

163. Tolkien, p. 53.

164. Tolkien, p. 14.

165. Tolkien, p. 31.

166. Tolkien, p. 47.

The Lord of the Rings, this dissimilitude is achieved partly through the presence of sorcerers and strange beings of one kind or another, but also, and more significantly, through mysterious and intelligent animate powers that haunt the story's places, powers that are called up by the telling of the story, but go under-described and unexplained.¹⁶⁷ According to Tolkien, the absence of explanation characterises *Fäerie*, and partly accounts for its power to enchant. '*Faerie* cannot be caught in a net of words,' he says, 'for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible.'¹⁶⁸

However, Tolkien insists that enchantment only has effect once something of the familiar – 'the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread'¹⁶⁹ – has been established.¹⁷⁰ 'For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it,'¹⁷¹ writes Tolkien.

The enchantment of *Fäerie*, then, is a product of storied unknowing, of mysterious powers, of unexplained presences, all in their careful measure.



While for Tolkien fairy-story's inconceivable events must be seen through the distancing effect of deep time to be believed, a sleight-of-hand magician may be standing next to us on the street yet make the improbable happen. He can do this because he knows we have blind spots (of the sort mentioned in Chapter 2) and he knows how to operate in them. You choose a card from the deck – the eight of diamonds. You memorise it and return it to the deck, which is then shuffled by the magician, who, inexplicably, sprays the cards all over the ground at your feet, not entirely, it would seem, of his own volition. 'Oh. Did you feel that?' he says, as if a little unsure himself. 'Do you mind taking your shoe off?' You reluctantly remove your shoe and it contains the eight of diamonds.¹⁷² And suddenly the world is not quite as you thought it was. Magic,

167. Curry. *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 2004, pp. 51, 52.

168. Tolkien, p. 10.

169. Tolkien, p. 9.

170. This, I think, indicates a key difference between enchantment as described by Tolkien, and the effect of some Surrealism, which also depicts things in a condition otherwise unknown in this world. It seems to me that in many Surrealist works the unfamiliar state of affairs becomes explicit, rather than, as is the case in Tolkien, where it makes up the backdrop against which some other principal concern is set.

171. Tolkien, p. 55.

172. This example was taken from an effect performed by David Blaine, an American street magician, and can be seen at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16w1TD-DNDs>>. For an example of the kind of mind that would rather have an explanation than mystery, I direct the reader to some of the posted comments.

I propose, is what we call it when you have that feeling that you know *you do not know what is going on*.



I said earlier that bi-tonal and related music is suitable for describing other worlds. Just to be clear, though: it is one thing to say that Debussy's *Prélude* is 'based on' Mallarmé's poem. Of course, if you did not know the music's subject matter on hearing it, *Prélude* would likely not evoke fauns, lust, or Arcadia for you. As Anthony Storr says in *Music and the Mind*:

[B]ecause a writer or composer takes as his theme Utopia, the Isles of the Blessed, the Orient, or another place unknown to him, it does not follow that the listener is transported into some never-never land... Imaginary countries are, for the composer, Rorschach inkblots, or triggers of inspiration. What comes out of such inspiration is a work of music, not a looking-glass through which one can walk into an escapist limbo.¹⁷³

But this isn't quite my meaning. As Hall's description of tonal music as a journey demonstrates, music in no straightforward way has world-like qualities – it is devoid of particulars, but it has, at least in the above Hall quote, such associations as location, direction, and stability. These are metaphors relating to our bodily experience in space, which, as we have already seen in connection with Whorf (Chapter 2), our language can hardly do without, even for non-spatial concerns. So it should not be surprising that musical uncertainty can in some ways feel like uncertain conditions we experience in the real world.

Music and story are thus what may be cautiously called world-making structures, in that they are entered imaginatively on their own terms. As Timothy Walsh says of stories – read *as stories* and not the subject of analysis – and more specifically books: 'A book is a house made of doors. Turning a page we open the first to enter in, then turn them, one after the other, until we stumble out. While inside, we live lives as full as any we lead in the world.'¹⁷⁴ The cognitive process by which a story or a song is experientially entered is qualitatively different than that by which analysis of it is made. And about the former not much can be said. Walsh compares story with

173. Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind*, The Free Press, New York, 1992, p.100.

174. Walsh, p. 56.

the way we are moved by music. He says that ‘music is a mode of meaning fundamentally *other* than discursive verbal modes, while being every bit as real and significant.’ It may be described, he says, as ‘a mode of meaning arising from a source deeper than reflective thought that is able to leap beyond the parameters of discursive knowledge, inspiring a felt response without recourse to conceptual categories.’¹⁷⁵ Tolkien, as we have seen, said of *Faërie* that ‘it is one of its qualities to be indescribable.’ Elsewhere he writes of fairy-story that, ‘[s]uch stories now have a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect, an effect quite independent of the findings of Comparative Folk-lore, and one which it cannot spoil or explain.’¹⁷⁶

Analytical thought, such as is required by this exegesis, and as was discussed in Chapter 2, often runs the risk of tricking us out of the fluid, sensuous realm of experience. Music and story can, by contrast, hold us inside it by way of the imagination. For McGilchrist music belongs to metaphor, which engenders an ‘I-thou’ relationship to things. As he says, ‘It is important to note that music does not *symbolise* emotional meaning, which would require that it be interpreted; it *metaphorises* it – “carries it over” direct to our unconscious minds.’¹⁷⁷ But music and story of other worlds or unworldliness have the extra advantage of unknowing: *Other worlds are worlds in which we are not so susceptible, as we are in our own world, to the illusion that we really know what it is.* Unworldliness is the residue of another realm or power in this one. Not-knowing, when it does not overwhelm, is the stuff of enchantment. Magic and enchantment occur when something – not so strange or frequent as to terrify or nauseate – plays like a note outside the key we thought life was written in, and we can admit of more dimension than we assumed, and we can enjoy some measure of its mystery.

I make a point of this because it goes to my aspirations for my art. I wish for it, like fairy-story, to play on the imagination to the benefit of wonder ‘independent of the conceiving mind’ (which I take to mean the mind that knows by concepts). I wish for its spaces to feel strange, as does bi-tonal music, by means unknown, as does *Faërie*. Of course, while music or a story is entered imaginatively, an installation is entered literally. The imagination must be engaged then by means of the body’s active and unconscious participation in the world.

175. Walsh, p. 55.

176. Tolkien, p. 31.

177. McGilchrist, p. 96.

4.

ARVO PÄRT

*That which is oldest is most young and most new. There is nothing so ancient and so dead as human novelty. The 'latest' is always stillborn. It never manages to arrive. What is really new is what was there all the time. I say not what has repeated itself all the time; the really 'new' is that which, at every moment, springs freshly into new existence. Yet it is so old that it goes back to the very beginning. It is the very beginning itself which speaks to us.*¹⁷⁸

- Thomas Merton

*The left hemisphere 'creates' newness by recombining in a novel fashion what is already known, not as imagination does, by allowing something that we thought we knew to be truly revealed for the first time.*¹⁷⁹

- Iain McGilchrist

Arvo Pärt's compositional treatment is one in which sound is recognised as having significance beyond its phenomenological appearance. It implicates something of the meaning and mysteries of being a creature in relation to an eternal God. His cosmology informs his ideas about sound and his method of arranging it.¹⁸⁰

At a time when so many composers have moved away from traditional definitions of music – sometimes beyond atonality towards micro-tonality and further to noise, and the use of chance operations in composition – Arvo Pärt, and a handful of others, are returning to older forms to collect their musical thoughts, to start, as it were, from scratch.¹⁸¹ Led by a love of the sound of bells and early music and plainsong Pärt has pilgrimaged to some of music's oldest materials, venturing further than any other, not just back to tonality but to a single sound and its implications.¹⁸²

It won't be necessary here to give a complete biography of Pärt's life, but

178. Merton, p. 82.

179. McGilchrist, p. 408.

180. Hillier, p. 35.

181. Hillier, p. ix.

182. Hillier, p. 16.

some details of his musical progress may help to show the trajectory of his thinking, and how his theology gives form to his music. Born in Paide, Estonia, on 11 September 1935, Pärt learned his craft while his country was under Russian Communist rule.¹⁸³ He was the first Estonian to use serial technique, a form of atonalism, in *Nekrolog* (1960–1).¹⁸⁴ He even experimented with aleatoric, or chance, methods of composition.¹⁸⁵ Although he wrote several atonal pieces Pärt was never too far from tonality, often contrasting the harsh sonorities of atonalism with moments of recovery to tonality within the one composition¹⁸⁶ or applying the twelve notes of a sequence in the most consonant of ways¹⁸⁷ But this system did not ultimately satisfy Pärt, who was in search of a certain quality, whose fulfillment was yet some years off.

After a political scandal surrounding a performance of his 1968 *Credo* for solo piano, chorus, and orchestra, which resulted in the piece being officially banned, Pärt effectively fell silent.¹⁸⁸ In the years 1968 to 1976 the composer had, according to Paul Hillier, ‘reached a position of complete despair, in which the composition of music appeared to be the most futile of gestures’¹⁸⁹ In these years he undertook a process of what Hillier says was a ‘searching out and stripping away of all that was alien’¹⁹⁰ to his needs. After a transitional Symphony No. 3, says Hillier of this time:

...Pärt began his most radical attempt yet to ‘learn how to walk again as a composer’. With Gregorian chant as his source, he studied how to write a single line of music. Writing semi-automatically, page after page, filling book after book, he sought to enter a different sense of time, to fully assimilate all that might be meant by the idea of ‘monody’...¹⁹¹

Pärt tried a variety of ways of generating musical ideas. He traced the shapes of bird wings or landscapes onto manuscript, or read and responded to texts to produce short one-note-at-time phrases.¹⁹² He progressed to two notes played at a time, which became his simple building blocks from then on, compelled by the idea that two notes, under certain circumstances, could become one.¹⁹³ Further to this discovery, he realised that the secret of the quality he was

183. Hillier, p. 26.

184. Hillier, p. 30.

185. Hillier, p. 59.

186. Hillier.

187. Hillier.

188. Hillier, p. 58.

189. Hillier, p. 64.

190. Hillier, p. 74.

191. Hillier.

192. Hillier.

193. Hillier, p. 75.

searching for was not merely tonal, but lay in the three-note heart of tonality: the tonic triad; that is, he learnt that he could maintain an entire composition, not just in the one key, but effectively in the one chord. Two notes as one, and the triad, represent solutions for Pärt's ongoing concern for unanimity, his sense that the resolution to all matters lies with ONE. Eventually this preoccupation led to a compositional system he called *tintinnabuli*, referring to the sound of bells. Says the composer:

Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of the triad are like bells. And that is why I called it tintinnabulation.¹⁹⁴

It's worth noting that beyond 'unity' and 'this perfect thing' Pärt, at least in these passages, doesn't attempt to name that to which he gravitates and that gives his music meaning and structure. In the above quote it seems not so separate from silence. It is otherwise what he heard in bells but it may easily be traced to his Christological cosmology, to his belief in an infinite God. At any rate it doesn't pay to be too specific or explicit about such matters, but it may well account for his adoption of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose doctrine makes central the mystery of the divine, and maintains the Hesychast tradition of contemplation.¹⁹⁵

As well as the sound of bells, he was drawn to early music, chant, polyphony and further back to plainsong – drawn more, as Hillier says, to the 'spirit' of this music than strictly its method of construction.¹⁹⁶ Early music is harmonically simple and open, preferring octaves, perfect fifths and perfect fourths – anything else was too complex for the medieval ear. A significant factor was the melodic methodology; tunes were often constructed step-wise or by arpeggiated triads

194. Hillier, p. 87.

195. Hillier, p. 8.

196. Hillier, pp. 77-8.

rather than great melodic leaps.¹⁹⁷ This much is present in Pärt's music.¹⁹⁸ Also in medieval music there were guidelines for breaking up the syllables of a given text into rhythm, for assigning notes to vowel sounds, and other systematic prescriptions which, according to Hillier, have equivalents 'in spirit' in Pärt's oeuvre.¹⁹⁹

'This radical renewal of musical language,' says Hillier in his book on Pärt, 'has often been dismissed as a retreat into the past or as yet another twentieth-century example of recycling an earlier musical idiom.'²⁰⁰ But Hillier rejects this. His account of Pärt's years of silence and reemergence into triadic tonalism was a 'rite of passage' that was necessary, 'not just for himself, but as part of the wider process of rejuvenation which Western culture must undergo.'²⁰¹ Hillier goes on:

A culture that attempts to live without the sustaining power of myth is a culture that is not whole, that has no connection with the past. And it is in this manner that we may understand Pärt's sense of purpose: as an attempt to reconstitute art within a sense of past and future time, to fly in the face of the disconnectedness of postmodernism and seize a cultural meta-narrative from time so distant, yet so potently realised, that it has the force of new life.²⁰²

Pärt finds his solution, his ONE, in the tonic note. The result is a music that is reductive, often sombre and resolutely tonal.²⁰³

A single note, such as is heard in the chiming of an individual bell, is composed of many notes, or overtones (see Figure 7).²⁰⁴ A well-formed metal bell is shaped to play across these overtones for the duration of the bell's sounding, to let the listener in on the multiplicity of a single sound. In Figure 7, where *c* is the fundamental note, overtones 4, 5 and 6 are the major triad.

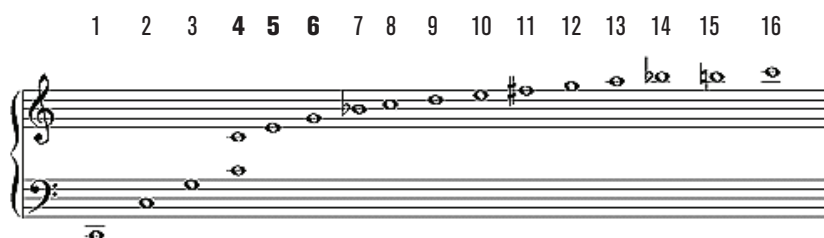


Figure 7
Overtones of C

197. Hillier, p. 76.

198. Hillier, p. 90.

199. Hillier, p. 84.

200. Hillier, p. 91.

201. Hillier, p. 74.

202. Hillier.

203. Hillier, p. x.

204. Károlyi, p. 61.

(2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 16 are triad notes.) It is with these three notes, the three faces of the tonic, that Pärt uses to anchor entire musical works. Significantly though, the triad is seldom played all at once; rather it is distributed across each composition, spread out in time. Hillier describes this as a situation in which the ‘harmonic principle’ of a single sounding bell, arranged vertically on the staff, is ‘tilted sideways to form a musical line.’²⁰⁵

A good example is to be found in the delicate piano solo *Für Alina* (Song 3 on the accompanying CD), which was the first true tintinnabuli piece. The entire work is held together by the three notes of the B minor triad, B, D and F# (with the exception of a C# about two-thirds the way through the cycle. The tonic, in this case is B, and D is the third degree of the scale, and F# the fifth. These are played always one at a time in the left hand in a strict intervallic relationship to the one-note melody line in the right hand, which plays more freely across all the notes of the key of B minor. So there are only ever two notes – a triadic note and a higher melody note – played at a time. The melody line forces an addition of a beat to each successive bar – each bar ending in a sustained harmonic coupling of unspecified length – until it reaches eight beats per bar, at which point each bar drops a beat until back down to two, then three, then the cycle begins again at one.²⁰⁶ (The ‘improvisation’ by Alexander Malter, though, as heard in Song 3, begins not with the one-note bar but with the two-note bar.)

Drone music, in which the tonic note is sounded continuously throughout a song, is not new, and is occasionally employed by Pärt.²⁰⁷ But the tonic triad played not simultaneously but step-wise across the duration of a piece of music produces a peculiar effect. In tintinnabuli, by frequently delegating the tonic’s authority to the fifth note, which is a little weaker than the tonic, and the third (major or minor), which is weaker still, the tonic is often hidden, though always present. We are left with a musical paradox in which the ‘centre’ of a work has diffused or splintered somewhat to occupy the entire space of the work; the datum of the work persists but in an unfamiliar condition. By distributing the three notes of the tonic *over time* the listener is allowed room to move in and around each note with its unique qualities; a point – that first and final point of a piece of music – swells and gains dimension and a strange pellucid quality.²⁰⁸ ‘What we hear might be described as a single moment spread out in time,’²⁰⁹ is how Hillier puts it. The music’s *terra firma* is suffused with temporal and tonal

205. Hillier, p. 90.

206. Hillier, pp. 87-9.

207. Hillier, p. 84.

208. My own observations.

209. Hillier, p. 90.

gaps and elevations to the extent that it is just as much up in the air as it is grounded. It may also be said that, because there is often so few notes in a Pärt composition, the tonic acts as the glue to prevent this otherwise fragile music from dissolving altogether. In this vein, Wolfgang Sandner says of Pärt's music and its 'sparse tones' that they 'are so intensified that any and all sense of the lackadaisical is eliminated...' ²¹⁰

Because the triadic notes are always accompanied by a melodic line that employs the seven notes of the scale, there are occasional intersections of dissonance as some notes in combination are less harmonic than others. For Pärt this is analogous of the relationship between an eternal and unchanging God (the triad), and a sinful and unreliable creature (the wandering melody) as the composer sees himself. That the result even in the dissonances is often beautiful speaks of forgiveness and the hope of atonement. ²¹¹ In any case, music that has no internal conflict of one kind or another would presumably seldom qualify as listenable. Pärt is interested in addressing perennial human conditions, not ideal ones.

Pärt's music holds a subtle surprise for the listener as it continuously refuses to deviate from its tonal course, a discipline and austerity seldom heard elsewhere. ²¹² To this end, in addition to his use of the triad, Pärt may achieve resolute tonality by assembling a composition out of the very sequence of notes of a descending scale. In *Cantos in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, for example, he employs notes of alternating long and short duration, and at varying speeds by different instruments. It is performed in a metric canon, as in *Festina Lente*, mentioned in chapter 1, whereby the violins play the sequence twice as fast as the violas, who in turn play twice as fast as the cellos and double-bases.

To briefly compare tintinnabuli with bi-tonal music discussed in Chapter 3 (these are my own thoughts): where bi-tonality has two tonics between which the music's resolution is suspended, tintinnabuli has one, but is tripartite. In a sense there are three centres around which the music circles, but the close relationship of the notes makes for a stability not present in bi-tonal music. To my mind, bi-tonal music moves out beyond the tonic for its unusual spatial qualities, while Pärt adds the dimension of time to what lies within the tonic to discover the mystery therein. Thus, the otherworldly quality – the product of an ancient attitude to harmony – as such in Pärt's music is inseparable from its sense of gravity and mystery.

210. W Sandner, in the liner notes, Arvo Pärt, *Tabula Rasa*, ECM Records, Munich, 1984.

211. From an interview with Björk retrieved 27 November 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pDjT1UNT3s>>

212. Hillier, pp. viii, ix.

While the ever-implicated triad or the explicated scale in tintinnabuli is possessed of more certainty than music with two tonics, there are in Pärt's music other means by which certitude is deferred. As is the case with *Alina*, Pärt employs a shifting time signature to ensure the work doesn't settle but continues to oscillate or breathe.²¹³

I have elaborated here on the method of Pärt's composition because there is something in the effect of his music – reductive, transparent and open, unitary, structured and consonant (that is, not desperate for overt discordance for the sake of generating interest) – that I seek for my own work. My spaces endeavour to be harmonious in their dimensional relations, following Palladio's ideas of pleasing ratios, which are mathematically related to principles of musical harmony.²¹⁴ And the unworldliness that is consequent of Pärt's extra-spatial methods is also what I aim for in my work.

213. Hillier. p. 87-9.

214. DK Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, and Order*, 2nd edn, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996, p. 299.

5.

HIDDEN STRUCTURE: SPACE, UNITY,
AND EXTRA-DIMENSION

*[B]y admitting a new perception of space and giving it an active sense,
is it not possible to discover a new unexpected, unexplored world?*²¹⁵

- Toru Takemitsu

*There is unquestionable evidence that the formation of everything we see
is governed by that which we can not.*²¹⁶

- Lawrence Krauss

In the outskirts of Japan's old capital of Kyoto stands the fifteenth-century Rinzai Zen monastery of Ryoan-ji, and inside its walls is spread an austere garden in the *karesansui* style. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and has intrigued visitors for centuries. Five groups of weathered stones rimmed by moss stand in a rectangle field of raked white gravel (Figure 8). The garden is intended for contemplation from a platform that runs along one edge of the rectangle and forms the verandah of the main temple. The stones seem not to compose any familiar outline nor depict anything obvious, though they invite a lot of conjecture as to what they are intended to portray - a crop of islands or a mother tiger leading her cubs across an ocean, the Chinese character for 'heart' or 'mind.' (In the end, as Teiji Ito says, 'the fact remains that these rocks are also what they are, neither more nor less.'²¹⁷) It is not known exactly when the garden

Figure 8
Ryoan-ji Garden in Kyoto



215. Toru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, trans. Y Kakudo, G Glasow, The Scarecrow Press, Maryland, 1995, pp. 7, 8.

216. L Krauss, *The Fifth Essence: The Search for the Dark Matter of the Universe*, Basic, New York, 1989, Cited in Walsh, p. 4.

217. T Ito, *The Japanese Garden*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1972, p. 174.

was made – it was some time in the fifteenth century – or by whom, although, again, there are theories. And the anonymous designer left nothing by way of an explanation. It is said that of the 15 stones, only 14 are visible from any one location along the platform. The low wall that forms a backdrop to the garden gets shorter at the far end, giving the garden the appearance of greater dimension.²¹⁸ But none of the illusions and unanswerable questions it poses, surely, would amount to the aura of mystique the site has acquired if the garden did not also *do* something for the visitor.

Recently some insight into the garden's spell on viewers has been offered by Gert J. Van Tonder and Yoshimichi Ejima, from University of Kyoto. Using the mathematical model of medial-axis transformation they have, they believe, uncovered a hidden structure, a simple branching pattern that lies in the intervals between the stones (Figure 9).²¹⁹ As they explain the concept of medial axis transformation, 'imagine drawing the outline of a shape in a field of dry grass and then setting it alight: the medial axis is the set of points where the inwardly propagating fires meet.'²²⁰ The 'branches' are the result of these inwardly meeting points, which are strongest at loci of maximal symmetry between stones. So they lie in the spaces between the stones and are invisible to the eye, and not consciously registered. (It had been demonstrated earlier that humans can unconsciously recognise coherent or global shapes in these medial 'skeletons'.²²¹) 'The overall structure is a simple, dichotomously branched tree that converges on the principal garden-viewing area on the balcony. The connectivity pattern of the tree is self-similar, with the mean branch length decreasing monotonically from the trunk to the tertiary level. Both features are reminiscent of actual trees.'²²²

This suggests three possibilities: natural branch-shapes are inherently

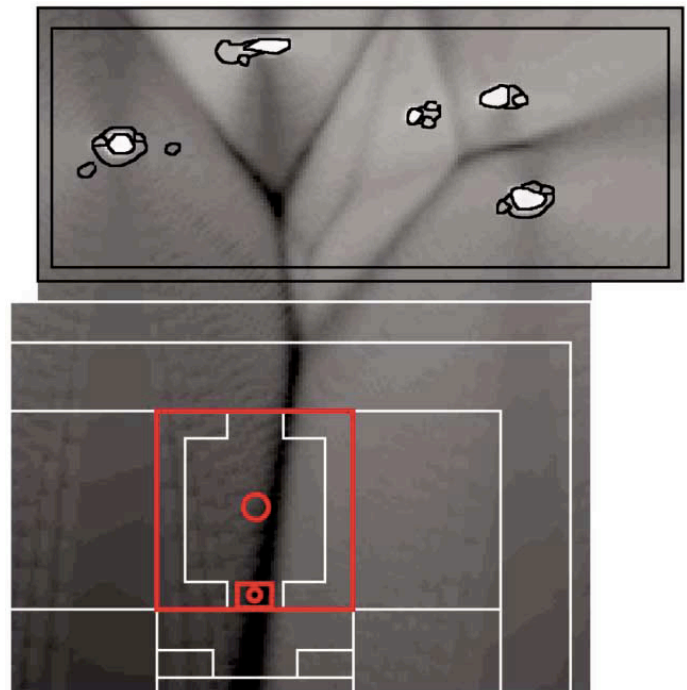


Figure 9
Medial Axis
Transformation
of the layout of the
Ryoan-ji garden

218. Ryoan-ji, retrieved 5 July 2011, <<http://www.yamasa.org/japan/english/destinations/kyoto/ryoanji.html>>

219. G J Von Tonder, M J Lyons, Y Ejima, *Nature*, volume 419, 26 September 2002, p. 359.

220. Tonder, Lyons & Ejima, p. 359.

221. L Kovacs, B Julesz, *Nature*, volume 370, August 1994, pp. 644–6.

222. Tonder, Lyons & Ejima, p. 359.

meaningful to us psychologically; these shapes can be hidden from the conscious mind yet still be perceived; and thirdly, the space outside of the visual elements in a design can be the locus of structure that gives the whole coherence.

Such significance given to interspaces is indicative of the Japanese concept of *ma*. *Ma*, we are told, is difficult to translate as it can be adjective as much as verb or noun, subjective or objective, but has to do with time-space intervals between elements. It reflects a particular Japanese consciousness of the importance of interspaces in the making of structures – buildings, poems, theatrical forms, musical compositions and so on – with emphasis on the relational or participatory nature of space.²²³ The concept has been attributed to ancient Shinto practices in which ritual spaces are made available for the *kami*, or divinities, to come and occupy. The spaces are thus understood as full and meaningful.²²⁴

A Western account of the various psychological conditions of the spaces between elements in art and design is given by Rudolph Arnheim. Other than the spontaneous conception of space as the empty void that holds the world's objects, spaces, says Arnheim, may be given certain psychological characteristics and densities, depending on the characteristics of bounding objects and their contexts. These characteristics are dependent on our *experience* of interrelationships, though they are not always consciously considered. Psychologically, interrelating objects retain some semblance of the conditions to which, as physics asserts, bodies in space are subject. Intervals can be perceived as having gravity-like fields, attraction or repulsion, potential inertia, or other forms of energy, and objects can seem to generate visual forces that act on neighbouring objects.²²⁵

Two objects of similar size are going to exhibit a strong or dense perceptual field in their interstitial space if they are close. When the objects are further apart the space will feel decompressed. If the objects are too far apart or too unrelated in shape the interspace may feel forlorn. That four dots on a page, as in Figure 10, may be perceived as a square where no lines exist to form its edges is testament to the mind's predilection for making connections that are not present on the page (as well perhaps as it's preference for the simplest explanation permitted by a situation). A disk in a square rendered on paper,

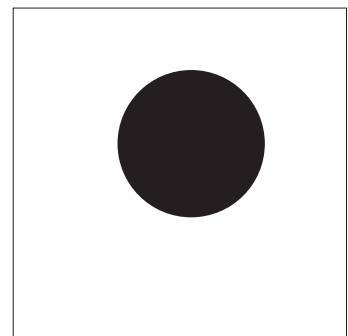
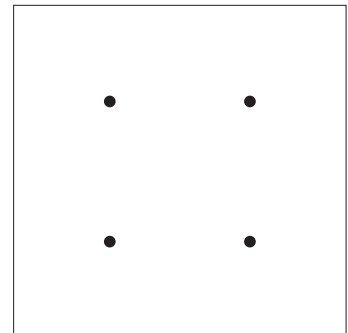


Figure 10 (top)

Figure 11 (above)

223. F Thompson, 'Japanese Mountain Deities', *The Architectural Review*, volume 202, no. 1208, p. 83.

224. RB Pilgrim, 'Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-aesthetic Paradigm', *History of Religions*, The University of Chicago Press in Japan, vol. 25, no. 3, February 1986, pp. 255-277.

225. Arnheim, *Dynamics of Architectural Form*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977, p. 197.

such as in Figure II, may appear to exhibit a desire to return to the square's centre, or else it may give the impression it is in the process of leaving the centre, though no such situation exists on the printed page.²²⁶

All this is to say that perceived forces are understood to come about by imagined relations between elements and their contexts or other elements in the same context. As Arnheim comments:

No physical object offers to the eye anything beyond shapes and colours, at rest or in motion. To be sure, the shades of darkness and brightness in a painting may produce such forces more effectively than does a simple outline drawing... but the basic fact remains that perceptual forces come about in the nervous system, not in the picture as an object of the outer world. Therefore, the essential features of cognitive models exist only in precepts or mental images.²²⁷

When Arnheim turns to analyse the stone garden at Ryoan-ji he writes several years before the University of Kyoto study, but he must have intuited something of their findings. He writes about its perfection and elusiveness, and its non-hierarchical patterning and the distribution of the stones' field forces in perfect equilibrium.²²⁸ He concludes:

The forces at work in such balanced distributions can also be compared with the biological and physical forces involved in the branching of blood capillaries, the venation of leaves, of electrostatic discharges...

In these examples from nature the forces controlling the distribution are physical. The same may be the case when the human mind intuitively balances the components of a perceptual design. The mind is governed by the sensation of pushes and pulls that are perceived as located in the perceived items and that suggest changes by which equilibrium can be attained. These pushes and pulls are the sensed effects of physiological processes that must be assumed to be occurring in the corresponding brain fields – processes attempting to cope with the perceptual inputs from the sense organs and to reestablish the equilibrium upset by the intruder. Intuitive ordering can be considered a reflection of physical field processes that take place in the nervous system and are related to natural branching systems by a link more direct than mere analogy.²²⁹

226. Proximity of objects and space: Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 18; Four dots: Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974, p. 54; disc in a square: Arnheim, *AVP*, p. 10.

227. Arnheim, *VT*, p. 283.

228. Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 197.

229. Arnheim.

Arnheim's explanation is similar to Abram's description of participation in Chapter 2, except Arnheim preferred to see the effect as a reflection of the nervous system, and saw 'no need to resort to another sensory modality, such as kinesthetic awareness, to explain this primary effect.'²³⁰ Muscular responses he regarded as, at least, 'secondary reactions to the primary visual dynamics.'²³¹



Curious states of mind can result from mental exercises involving space, such as the meditation in which one pays attention only to the empty space in a room - not to think about it, but to 'feel it, so to speak.'²³² Another practice involves sitting on a hill (or imagining you are doing so) and allowing awareness to

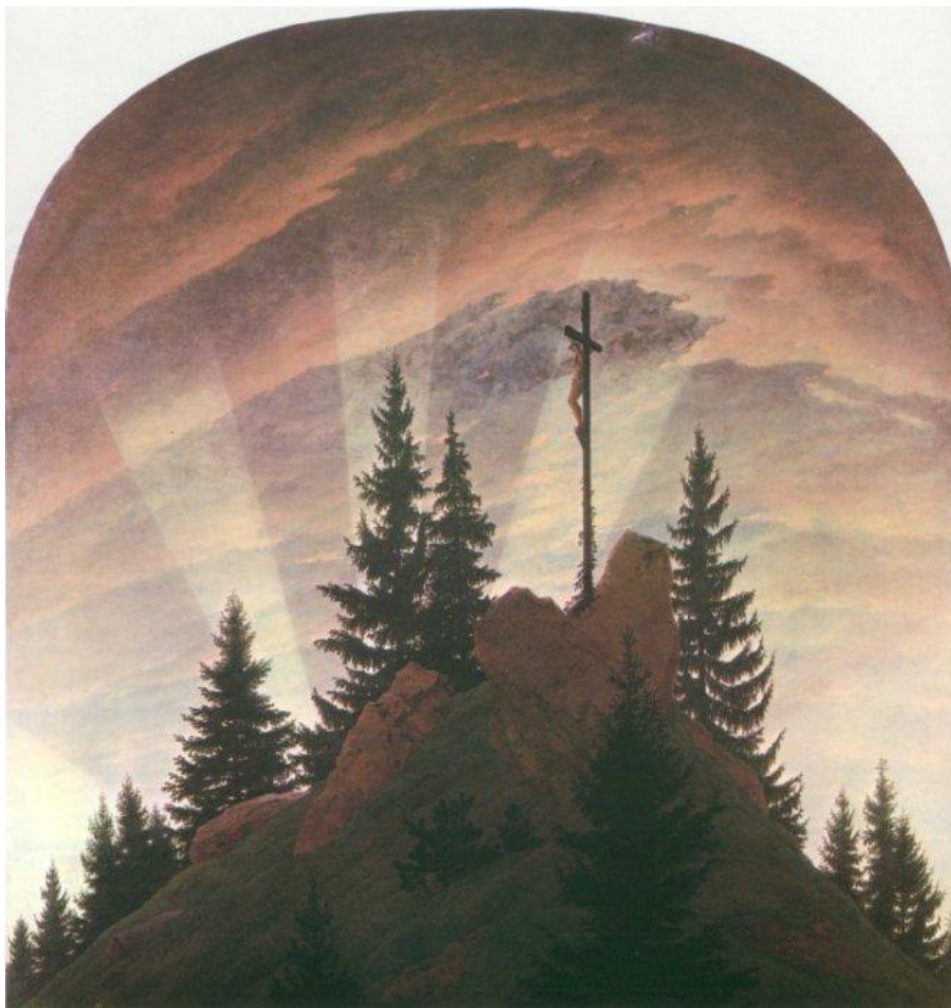


Figure 12
Caspar David Friedrich
*Tetschen Altar / Cross in the
Mountains*

230. Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 213.

231. Arnheim.

232. E Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 3rd edn, Hodder, Sydney, 2004, p. 114.

expand in all directions to achieve a panoramic consciousness.²³³ I have heard of a kind of walking meditation in which the aim is to become fully aware of the feeling of one's body pushing through space. It is perhaps because the sensation of space gives rise to uncommon realms of experience, that representations of heightened dimensional experience in art often have metaphysical implications.

For example, the peculiar spatial conditions perceived in Caspar David Friedrich's *Tetschen Altar/Cross in the Mountains* (Figure 12) is intended, it has been supposed, to be suggestive of a mind transformed by a spiritual awakening, like the opening of the third eye. The scene in *Altar* is rendered from two or more vantages – looking *up* at the mountain but more *across* at the horizontal beam of the cross. These simultaneous perspectives, significantly, are not so distant from each other as might disturb the scene's stability and legibility. In addition, the viewer seems to be suspended in mid-air as the mountain's near side plunges well beneath the bottom edge of the picture. The net effect invests the scene with a heightened sensation of space.²³⁴ (Similar effects can be perceived in many Cezanne paintings and some of David Hockney's, though, perhaps happily, in these there is no discernible religious meaning.)

One contemporary artist playing with amplified space is Mariel Neudecker, whose liquid-filled glass vitrines often quote Friedrich's paintings (Figure 13). She creates landscapes in her glass boxes that, through the diffracting agency of water, dyes, and other fluid substances that fill the 'air' of the scene, make for dense and uncommon atmospheres and skewed perspectival effects analogous to Friedrich's commixed perspectives.²³⁵



Music, as I have already suggested, can be entered into imaginatively, and this effect is complex and unanalysable. An aspect of this is how music, experienced with a kind of colour-blind synaesthesia that senses not hues in the notes but physical spaces in tonal and temporal intervals, defines 'environments' by way of spatial relationships. This in no way means that a visual situation or *place* as such is prescribed, rather that the spaces are felt, much as they are in the real world. But the spaces in Bi-tonal and related musics can feel intense and strange. Polytonal music can suggest to me worlds whose boundaries drift and are uncertain. One such moment of drift occurs when the boundaries slip back

233. E Rosch, 'If You Depict a Bird Give it Space to Fly', in J Baas & MJ Jacobs (eds.), p. 39.

234. J.L. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990, p. 99.

235. M Neudecker, DB Brown, D Young, *Over and Over, Again and Again*, Tate Gallery, St Ives, 2004

**Figure 13**

Mariel Neudecker

*I Don't Know How I Resisted
the Urge to Run*

and space dilates. This can take place tonally when, in a phrase that introduces a note outside a diatonic scale, I hear a whole-tone when I expect a semitone (i.e, a wider tonal interval when I expected a narrower one); or temporally when, say, a bar of four beats is followed by a bar of five or six (as often happens in Pärt's music). I must stretch my senses or hold my breath in response to the yawning dimensions. Amplified space or extra-dimension can have a surprising, or wakening, quality.

Bi-tonality is thus in some ways analogous with Friedrich's simultaneous perspectives. It is interesting to note that perspective painting and the tonal system in music are both products of the Renaissance.²³⁶ Prime examples of the twentieth-century's almost complete undoing of these systems may be said to be atonality and, for pictorial art, cubism. Occasionally in atonality have I felt an expansive space, but to my memory a cubist painting has never produced it. Perhaps there are too many perspectives employed, which far exceeds my experience and therefore my capacity to participate.²³⁷ The 'middle path' taken by bi-tonality and subtly blended perspectives offers, I think, more scope for participation - as the world-as-we-know-it infused with Something Else.



236. M Hall p. 26.

237. For McGilchrist, cubism advanced 'dislocated, abstracted surfaces, composed of rectilinear shapes, represented from a multitude of viewpoints (which therefore cannot be inhabited), intersecting randomly, and destroying depth.' McGilchrist. p. 414.

How does all this apply to my installation? There are in *The Blue Book* hidden structures. What they give structure to are not stones or musical notes but bamboo struts that hang from steel supports. These three self-similar struts refer to nothing in particular (they are non-mimetic as far as I'm concerned, but experience tells me that some viewers will see what they will in them) but are contrived to fall roughly midway between two *kinds* of objects: ornamental and functional. They are coloured blue-green. Their form is an extruded wedge-shape (Figure 14) so their lateral axis, that is, the way they seem to face, is ambiguous. None of this should be terribly obvious in the presence of the work but, with bi-tonal music in mind, I try to instigate ambiguity from the basic elements.

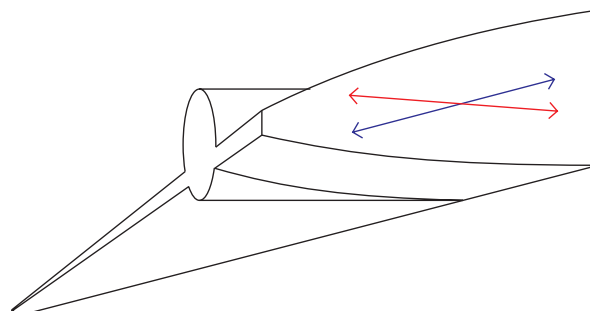


Figure 14

The extruded wedge-shape of a bamboo design and its two lateral axes.

The steel supports twist and deviate from the vertical line of the main rods that connect to the ceiling; this puts space beneath various parts of the steel structure, and visually undermines its supporting role, if only a little. (I do this instead of, say, hanging the sculptures from monofilament. When other artists use this latter method I often feel that they wish the objects to appear as if they are floating, and they do not. Instead I become conscious of being in the presence of Wishful Thinking.)

One of the most prominent conditions of the struts is that they are oblique, or very nearly vertical, for, as a group they teeter to one side or the other of the upright position. McGilchrist cites research that shows that the right hemisphere prefers vertical lines.²³⁸ (Although, it has to be said, straight lines are preferred by the left hemisphere.²³⁹) Also, verticality, according to Arnheim, is for humans on the terrestrial plane the standard direction by virtue of the pull of gravity, and '[a]ny other spatial orientation is perceived according to its relationship to the vertical.' Obliquity, therefore, 'deviates visually from the norm... confirmed by the viewer's kinesthetic sense of equilibrium in his own body.'²⁴⁰ So the lean of the struts may express for the viewer either rising or falling, depending on their personal sensibilities, but the angle nevertheless implies movement.

The 'meaning' in this sense that may be attributed to an object because of its conditions is by way of what Arnheim regards as a symbol. But he makes a distinction between the use of the word that has in common usage come

238. McGilchrist, p. 276.

239. McGilchrist, 447.

240. Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 34.

to refer to a sign, a thing that stands in for an idea, and what he calls an open or sensory symbol, ‘in which man sees fundamental conditions of his own existence.’²⁴¹ In an art gallery, the former may have the viewer going into their mind in search of mental associations with an object, which may help arrive at an answer to the question of what the artist is ‘saying’; the latter allows the viewer to participate open-endedly in an artwork.

Arnheim, as has been said, may not wish to resort to kinesthetic awareness to explain this operation, but he refers to the theories of Theodor Lipps and Heinrich Wölfflin who do. Lipps advanced the idea of *Einfühlung*, often translated as empathy, whereby he claimed we relate to an object’s conditions as if we were experiencing them ourselves. Wölfflin, working independently of Lipps, asserted that ‘the organization of our own bodies is the form that determines our apprehension of all physical bodies,’²⁴² with reference in particular to muscular responses. With regard to the architectural column, for example, he said: ‘We have carried heavy loads and have known pressure and counterpressure. We have collapsed on the ground when we no longer had the energy to oppose the downward pull of our own body’s weight. That is why we are able to appreciate the proud happiness of a column and to understand the tendency of all matter to spread shapelessly on the ground.’²⁴³

When we come across oblique struts that are suspended in the air then, as we do in *Blue Book*, we may feel to some extent their lightness and their freedom from the pull of gravity in our own bodies, such as we may have felt as children when we were on a swing or trampoline. (Qualities of freedom, as we shall see, appear elsewhere in the work.)

Also, as Arnheim points out, the ground plane acts in some ways like ‘the keynote or tonic in music... the zero level for the gauging of all vertical distances.’²⁴⁴ That is, we judge an object’s distance from our body by the position of the object’s lower edge – the part that is most commonly in contact with the ground – in our vertical visual field.²⁴⁵ Hanging objects to some extent deny this operation. Another means we have of judging distance is size amongst self-similar,²⁴⁶ and this measure is also obfuscated in the installation as there is no standard thickness for the bamboo struts. All this is not to suggest, though, that these objects never betray their real positions as such when the viewer moves

241. Arnheim, p. 64.

242. T Lipps, *Raumaesthetik und Geometrisch-optische Täuschungen*, Schriften d. Gesellschaft f. psychologische Forschung, 1897, ch 1, Cited in Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 212.

243. H Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur*, Kleine Schriften, Basel, 1946, p. 15, Cited in Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 212.

244. Arnheim. *DAF*, p. 33.

245. G Collier, *Form, Space, and Vision*, 2nd edition, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, p. 23.

246. Collier.

around them. But they do retain, I feel, something of that strange quality that hanging things exhibit, an effect which Alexander Calder's large mobiles enjoy.

So, by staying off the ground plane, these nameless thin things defer reference to vertical space's tonic, and the installation may in this way recall bi-tonal music. In their elevation they manifest, quite literally, an unearthliness. But as there is no single correlative in terrestrial space to music's tonic, I have looked for a frame of reference or datum across other strata of the work's perception to subtly elude.

The datum by which order among the parts is created is one of these. 'Composition in art,' says Charles Morey in relation to the medieval impulse, 'is clearly the effort to achieve unity, to reduce nature or experience that is to be reproduced or interpreted to considered order...' He goes on:

... to achieve consistency is the most fundamental of human aspirations. To understand the purpose and meaning of life... to realise existence in a pattern through which the mind or instinct can recognise the integrated thread of some harmonising principle is the goal of all speculation and faith. The imaginative reaching of this goal by the intuition of art in composition is but a swifter version of the more profound procedure of philosophy and religion; the objective is the same.²⁴⁷

Order and unity suggest an affirmation and a sense of purpose. And this is true enough for my own aims, but I am also interested in doubt, where it does not destroy the sense of purpose. My task is to divide the datum around which the composition is ordered in such a way that does not ruin the unity, but so that the unit may, Friedrich-like, seem to be viewed from two different positions at once (in a manner unlike ordinary bifocal vision). So, when it comes to these levitating bamboo struts, the first course of action is to unify them; the second is to make ambiguous the reference-point by which they are unified. And if in the process there can be introduced an effect of extra-dimension, then so much the better.

What follows are two possible accounts by which the composition of forms in my installation may be explained in relation to the above-stated intentions:

Observe three vertical lines in a row (Figure 15a). They are perceived as a unit because they are self-similar and they point in the same direction. According to Arnheim, objects whose main axes are parallel – that appear to have a 'common

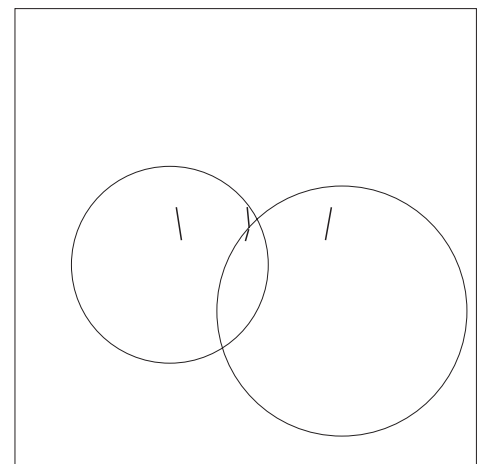
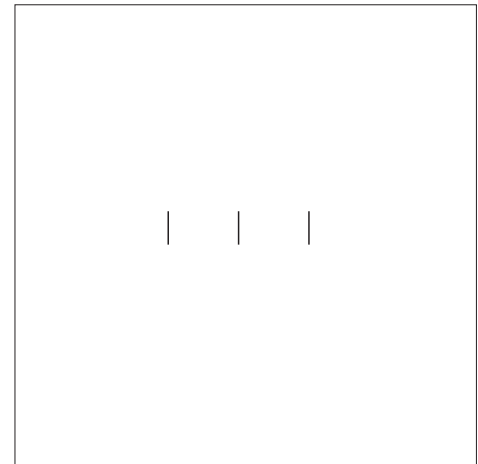
247. Morey, p. 9.

fate,' and resemble one another - are unified by the mind.²⁴⁸ These lines are then warped as if seen through two fish-eye lenses, or in two convex mirrors, across the group of lines (Figure 15b). In this way they may be seen as a unit still, but subject to two optically distorting fields. Imagine the same thing happens to three perfectly upright straights or struts in a room. The struts are now diffracted by a dual vectoral force that function like two lenses but in three dimensions. The middle strut is thereby fractured in two. (None of this is taken literally in the design of the sculptural object; at this level they are treated more or less like 'contraptions.') It is not likely (and not desirable) that the viewer will consciously think of 'dual vectoral forces' but the composition may yet cohere for them, which is more to the point. Arnheim says regarding order that if 'one looks at the windswept pines of the California coast... one notices incompleteness unless one perceives the wind as part of the order.'²⁴⁹ This suggests (though doesn't guarantee) that our familiarity with the effects of forces may make sense of this composition, even if we can't say why. Some hint of the struts' 'original' upright positions may be suggested by the verticality of the supports from which they hang.

The struts and their relative tilts may also be interpreted as consequent of a twin branching structure, whereby the 'branch terminations' are visible as the bamboo struts. The main axes that extend by implication beyond the length of the struts make for invisible regulating lines that join, underground as it were, in a branchlike fashion (See Figure 16). In this way they may be perceived as having a common fate: the making of a branch-form. (This, admittedly, is a method somewhat less sophisticated than medial axis symmetry. But to my current understanding, the verticality, elevation, and obliquity of the struts introduce a complexity that - though desirable for some level of spatial ambiguity - would render any axial skeleton imperceptible.) The branching may be said to occur in two simultaneous schemes to arrange the three struts. At ground level, though, no two struts completely line up. This avoids what may seem to be a (hierarchical) critical moment when one strut disappears behind another, but

Figure 15a (top)

Figure 15b (bottom)

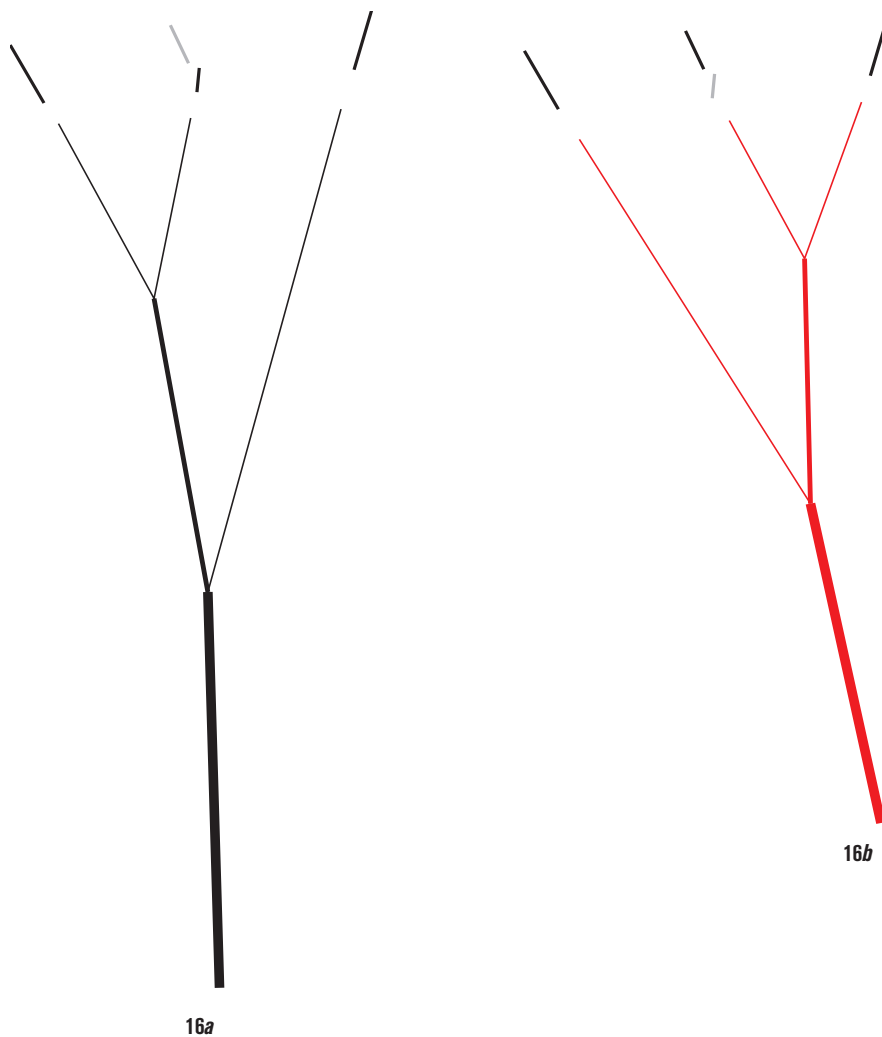


248. Arnheim, *VT*, p. 55.

249. Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 166.

also (and here we witness *my* Wishful Thinking) the action may lend a viscous quality to the interior space circumscribed by the struts.

Which brings me to another means by which the composition is unified: a common purpose. The three struts cooperate with the two floor-bound steel elements to outline an area that is wedge-shaped, a little like the cross-section of the struts. In this way the struts and the floor bits perform the task of the string in a Fred Sandback installation, such as that in Figure 17, except that, in my work, the area is not so clearly defined, and is not a primary form. A zone can thusly be parenthesised because the mind, says D.K. Ching, stretches a ‘membrane’ between two linear elements, establishing an informal plane, as happens more robustly in the consistent spacing of a row of architectural columns.²⁵⁰ However, the varied thickness, spacing, and angles of my bamboo struts weaken the



Figures 16a and 16b

The branching patterns, a simple sample of the type used in the Ryoan-ji study, that may unify the struts, and give their configuration unconscious meaning. The red and black lines indicate two concurrent branching forms within the one composition. One is an inversion and global distortion of the other. Unlike Ryoan-ji, though, the branching occurs in three dimensions in the composition of struts. (The lean of the struts is exaggerated here, to fit on the page.)

250. Ching, p. 14.

membranes, perhaps to the point that the phantom zone circumscribed may go almost unnoticed. It may in other words be implicit.

These are some ways the economy of shards and scraps in my installation may be ambiguously unified. It remains, almost as it was conceived, a mere inkling. Like the stone garden of Ryoan-ji it is open to interpretation, and its interspaces are activated in one way or another. But Ryoan-ji's stones do not stand without registering their presence in their gravel bed. The vertical stones pass their weight onto the horizontal plane by way of ripples in the white gravel, thus expressing the interconnectedness of things. How then can this interpenetration, an expression of the open-ended, translate to the context of the bamboo struts and steel bits? Obviously the composition can't go on forever, but how can it resonate beyond itself?

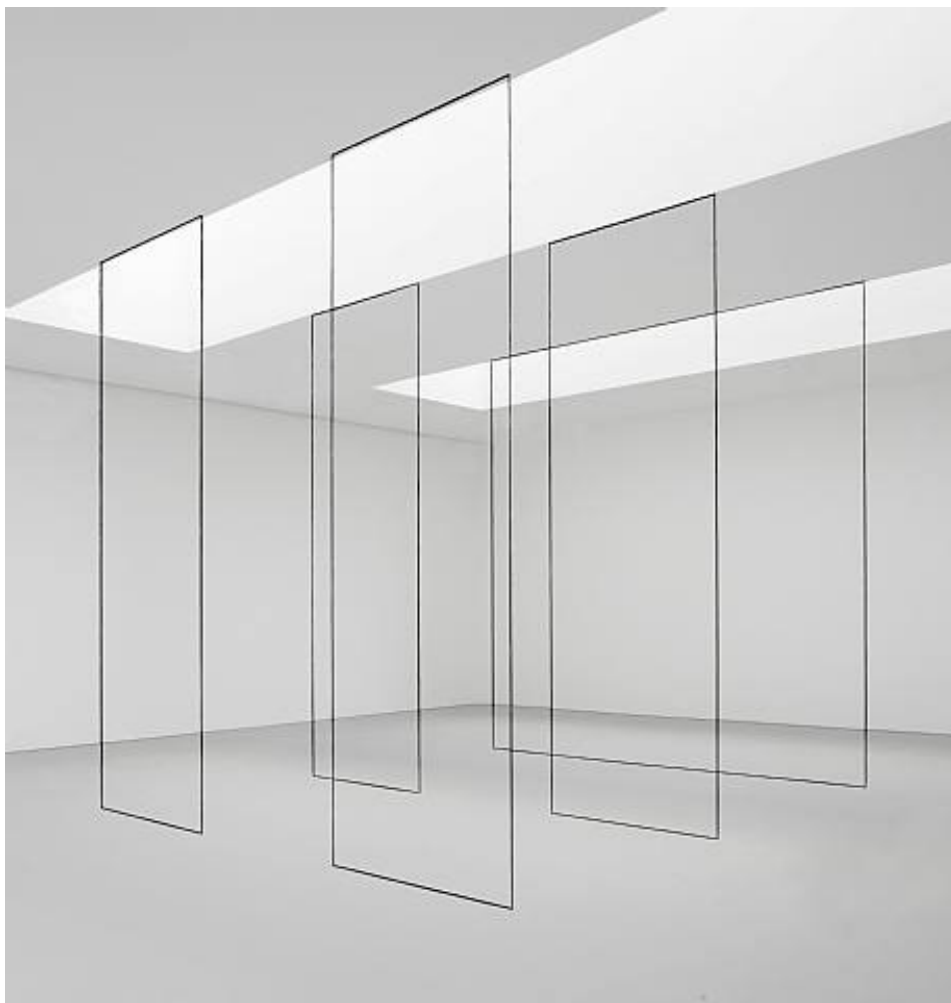


Figure 17

Fred Sandback, *Untitled (Sculptural Study, Five Part Construction)*, 1987 - 1990, String.

6.

PECULIAR PLACES

*Carlo walks along the sunny fondimenta, humming an uncertain tune in two different
keys on certain quiet mornings of a long April...*²⁵¹

– Giuseppe Mazzariol, Giuseppe Barbieri

*You are averse to enclosing things in a single block, you leave everything open... Every
day you learn a little bit more, but you hate summing things up...: as if finally it ought to
be possible to express everything on a single day and in a few succinct sentences,
for good and all.*²⁵²

– Elias Canetti

When Michael Cadwell first encountered Carlo Scarpa's restoration of the Querini Stampalia Foundation, in Venice, 1997, he was bewitched but struggled to account for the architect's intention as to the building's 'text,' according to the convention at the time.²⁵³ He was unsettled, or rather, 'unmoored' by the building's resistant gestures. Two years later he returned to Venice with the aid of a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome determined to uncover Scarpa's meaning. Cadwell made comprehensive drawings of details, not only of the Stampalia, but other Scarpa buildings. 'It seemed a simple matter to tape my crisp ink drawings to the white sunlit walls of my spacious Academy studio and allow their logic to reveal itself,'²⁵⁴ writes Cadwell in *Strange Details*. But, he goes on:

The drawings refused to cooperate. No matter how I arranged the details on the walls, they resisted an order...[M]y drawings confronted me with a catalogue of liquifying motifs: Steel joined at odd intervals, concrete spilled out of concatenated forms, and stone cut in labyrinthine patterns. In spite of its seductive materiality and its persistent intricacy, I could not appreciate this catalogue as anything other than one of sensual compulsion...²⁵⁵

251. G Mazzariol & G Barbieri, *Carlo Scarpa: the Complete Works*, trans. R Sadleir, Rizzoli, New York, 1985, pp. 12, 13.

252. E Canetti, cited in G Mazzariol & G Barbieri, p. 1.

253. Michael Cadwell, *Strange Details*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. xvi.

254. Cadwell.

255. Cadwell, pp. xvi, xvii

Frustrated, Cadwell sought refuge in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, and became fixed on *Making Strange* (which appears in full in the Appendix of this exegesis), in which the poet, at a significant moment of change in his life and career, is urged by a phantom voice to ‘go beyond what’s reliable’, to ‘be adept and dialect.’ and ultimately, to ‘make strange.’ The mood of the poem imaginatively refigured Cadwell’s thinking in regard to Scarpa. Eventually he concedes,

Scarpa made strange with the most resistant aspect of architecture – construction. Scarpa does not anchor us with construction conventions no matter how elaborately construed. Nor, for that matter, does he reaffirm terra firma as we habitually assume it (or question it with the tropes of modernism). Instead construction liquifies at the Querini Stampalia, and we are cast adrift, into a kind of liquid ambience. What I had dismissed as a collection of fetishes, I came to understand as a coherently constructed world that was, nevertheless, persistently strange. I was right to feel unmoored; I was wrong to resist it.²⁵⁶

Carlo Scarpa (born in Venice, 1906) was not trained as an architect, and although he did create some new buildings, his most critical successes were interior refurbishments of existing structures. These commissions he undertook, as Cadwell suggests, with an ‘aquatic sensibility’ at the level of the tectonic, the details of construction, rather than the decorative.²⁵⁷

At the Querini Stampalia Foundation Scarpa’s beguilement begins before one even steps across the canal: for there seem to be two bridges, ‘a curious doubling, even at the entry.’²⁵⁸ One is of the stone and marble type common in Venice that ‘dutifully maintains the fiction of the campo’s solidity.’²⁵⁹ Scarpa’s bridge is smaller and lighter, made of thin wood and steel members that lets light reflected off the water through its treads. The handrail ‘seems suspended above the canal’ as its vertical supports divide and drop wide of the bridge and seem to disappear. The bridge itself is eccentric: its apex lies closer to the campo though the two platforms either side of the bridge are level. Scarpa simply starts the bridge above the

Figure 18
Interior of
Querini Stampalia
Foundation



256. Cadwell, p. xviii.

257. Cadwell, p. 10.

258. Cadwell, p. 17.

259. Cadwell.

campo and ends it underneath the landing on the other side. Over the bridge the visitor is delivered across the canal to the Stampalia, not to a door as would be expected, but to a window with a double door in it. Inside, he signals corners with



Figure 19
The shifting floor grid
of Querini Stampalia
Foundation

linear details before they arrive (Figure 18). His floor tiles or slabs seem to slip around as if on unstable ground, and then up the wall to knee height, again, questioning junctions (Figure 19). Artworks are held off the walls by armatures that deviate one way, then the other, and away again in an effort to deny their role of support.²⁶⁰ The ceiling, a highly reflective plaster, invests attention and care where so many buildings neglect. All this eluding, suggests Cadwell, may be explained by the fact that Scarpa is Venetian; his world is borne, not by solid ground, but by water.²⁶¹ Guiseppe Mazzariol and Guiseppe Barbieri put Scarpa's sensibility this way:

In Carlo Scarpa's oeuvre there is a profound desire to procrastinate, to put off the day when every experience will seem to have been expressed. This Venetian architect's buildings reveal his dislike for summary approaches and ordered perspectives. He was aware of the precariousness of historical time, possessing a love for each instant.²⁶²

This is Carlo Scarpa's poetry: a constant questioning of the habits of architecture and resistance to architectural or spatial certainties. Scarpa's Stampalia, its doubtful boundaries and breached expectations, is, I propose, the makings of a structure of uncertainty, a world not-quite-as-we-know-it.

Robert Irwin is an artist concerned with perception - a way of knowing the world - and his work sometimes alters the way the world ordinarily behaves. In *Scrim Veil - Black Rectangle - Natural Light* (Figure 20), installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977, Irwin occupied the entire fourth floor of the museum, a large space with a black slate floor. He wanted to leave it as empty as he could, even removing the light fittings, relying solely on the forced-perspective window at the far end. The only object as such was a large scrim, which bisected the room, its lower edge at eye-level. The illuminated wall at the window end was 50% lighter than the facing wall, so he painted it a

260. Cadwell, p. 10.

261. Cadwell, p. 5.

262. F Dal Co, G Mazzariol, in G Mazzariol & G Barbieri, p. 7.

grey that was 50% darker.²⁶³ It was, he says,

... a subliminal move that most challenged our perceptual security, leaving the individual perceptually acute... The effect was a moment of disorientation... a breakdown of our perceptual habituation... followed by the necessity for a kind of first-hand perceiving, capable of revealing the subtle qualities of light and space.²⁶⁴

Through Irwin's intervention this room no longer behaved quite like we know rooms to behave. The light seems not to fall on surfaces quite as we have come to unconsciously expect.

The doubtful conditions in Querini Stampalia or *Scrim Veil* are, I suggest, analogous to the uncertain condition of music written with two tonics. And just as art and architecture have their analogues to bi-tonal uncertainty, so there are built approximates to atonal bewilderment, and I offer Daniel Libeskind's architecture, and Bruce Nauman's installations as examples. I am not doubting the individual merit of these works according to their stated terms, but I want to be clear about what degree of deviation from architectural norms for my purposes, is too much. Libeskind's Eighteen Turns, (Figure 21) a demountable pavilion, for example, is a twisted corridor or interlinked series of spaces whose walls and ceilings deny right angles, or any constant reference point.²⁶⁵ Nauman,

Image removed from online version due to copyright

Figure 20
Robert Irwin
Scrim Veil - Black Rectangle
- *Natural Light*, 1977

263. J Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1993, p. 42.

264. Butterfield.

265. Libeskind's 'Eighteen Turns' retrieved 8 November, <http://www.0111.com/archgallery2/libeskind_cork/>



in his *Yellow Triangular Room (Installation with Yellow Lights)* (Figure 22) wants among other things to confront the viewer with their desire for comfort, and demonstrates that triangular rooms or, elsewhere, narrow corridors, do not provide the conditions for this desire to be met.²⁶⁶ Liebeskind and Nauman, each for their own purposes, make structures that are free from architectural habit, to be sure, but the effect is either exciting or punitive, neither of which befits enchantment as I have defined it here.

Arnheim says that there used to exist off-highway ‘mystery’ houses in America that purport to be subject to special magnetic phenomena, but are secretly built at a slight angle – so water runs from taps in surprising directions and balls roll across the floor at unexpected speed. These may, in their own way, deviate from the world as we know it, and may enchant in so much as the explanation for their peculiarity, ostensibly scientific, is nevertheless held to be mysterious.²⁶⁷



As has been discussed in Chapter 2, we do not operate directly on the world. We build what proves to be a reliable model or interpretation of the world through our experience of it so far. Through experience we unconsciously define what’s normal.²⁶⁸ In regard to architecture Edward Hall calls it ‘internalised fixed feature space.’²⁶⁹ What we have experienced most in buildings in the past teaches us what to expect of buildings in the future. It is a process that goes on for the most of us outside of awareness. This is true in relation to tectonic details as well as the manner in which buildings articulate their spaces (and

Figure 21 (left)
Daniel Liebeskind
Eighteen Turns, 2001

Figure 22 (right)
Bruce Nauman
Yellow Triangular Room
(*Installation with Yellow lights*), 1973

266. Butterfield, p. 141.

267. Arnheim, *DAF*, p. 35.

268. ET Hall, *The Hidden Dimension: Man’s Use of Space in Public and Private*, Bodley Head, London, 1969, p. 66.

269. ET Hall, p. 100.

I'll develop this second point in a moment). The above examples suggest that when a building's fixed-features deviate from our internalisations, in some ways at least, it is possible for architecture to 'unmoor' as it did for Cadwell, and 'disorient' as it did for Irwin.

Presumably not all viewers of Irwin's *Scrim Veil* would seek to account for their 'moment of disorientation.' Nor could it be expected that all visitors to the Querini Stampalia are, like Michael Cadwell, searching for the cause of their peculiar feelings. It may be assumed that, for many people, these places are possessed of their qualities and go happily unanalysed. Analysis is the undertaking of the academician and the theorist, but not necessarily the visitor who comes with other things in mind. The unconscious nature of 'internalised fixed-feature space' suggests a situation, I propose, not unlike the tonal structure of music, of which the listener also has an internal standard. A listener need know nothing about the various scales to feel the woozy effects of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Cadwell's and Irwin's accounts suggest that buildings too can beguile by way of unconscious uncertainty.



The space that *The Blue Book* inhabits is, effectively, a gallery; it functions to some degree as the ground to the figures of the hanging forms, and can isolate the fragile quality of the forms and their interspaces from other stronger stimuli.

This gallery, however, actively responds to the presence of the art it houses.²⁷⁰ Something of the quality of the sculptural composition filters into the internal envelope of the building it occupies. The influence of the sculptures on their container – by no means overt or literal – is a small gesture of continuity, a subtle expression of the ongoing movement of the infinite (as expressed more fully in the all-over pattern, mentioned in Chapter 1). My enterprise, then, is to bear this influence upon the space, so that it begins to behave a little peculiar. Something must gradually reveal itself to be at odds with first appearances and with the world as we know it, which makes for a discrepancy that registers in the margins of awareness. And, as the sculptural works in this gallery are subject to an ambiguous space-swelling action, this determines the kind of strangeness that their built context succumbs to.

Where the hanging forms may be conceived as lines, and are acted on in an extra-dimensional way accordingly, the walls may be regarded as planes, so the operation is a little different. As mentioned, the floor acts as an equivalent of

270. This is not unusual. In biennales artists must design suitable spaces to temporarily house their artworks.

music's tonic in that it is a common referent of an object's position in space – raising an object off the floor defers certainty as to its location. It signals, potentially, that the objects are further away than they are. Though this is good enough for the hanging forms, which are light and have little consequence for the body, the walls must adopt a different strategy if an extra-spatial quality is to prevail; that is, it wouldn't do for walls to prove to be closer than they first seem, as this would compress space.²⁷¹ I want space to open out. For a room, the dimensions, the distance of the walls from the body, are a principal factor in unconscious environmental certainty.

In the spirit of music written in two simultaneous keys, I want to make a room two sizes at once. In the spirit of Arvo Pärt, who adds the dimension of time to the sounding of a single note, I wish to give a fixed enclosure more space than it may ordinarily be given, to lay it open. At the very least this is because '[s]paciousness,' as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out, 'is closely associated with the sense of being free.'²⁷²

Francesco Borromini's Palazzo Spada in Rome (Figure 21) suggests an approach. It is a false-perspective colonnade lined with columns on either side that increase in scale at a fixed rate to the end that widens, thereby giving the illusion from the narrow end that it is a rather short colonnade.²⁷³ This is a clear instance in which we do not perceive the world as it is. The illusion goes something like this:

The image of a colonnade hits the retina of someone not familiar with the true shape of Borromini's arcade. The brain refers to its interpretation of the world thus far. It has learnt, for example, that objects diminish in size, and parallel lines merge, at a given rate according to distance from the eye; and it 'knows' that colonnades have equal-sized parts and parallel sides. Based on its experience, the brain estimates the length of the colonnade.

As the individual makes their way along the colonnade, however, its distorted shape becomes apparent. This

Figure 23
View of Borromini's
colonnade, Rome



271. Bruce Nauman has done this. In *Floating Room (Light Outside, Dark Inside)*, 1972, he elevates a small room off the floor. I have been inside and, if I had any impression other than that I was in an elevated room, it was that the walls seemed to close in. The lower edge of the walls behave in a way consistent with walls further away – they are higher up in the vertical visual field – while other visual clues suggest more strongly that they were closer, and this may account for the feeling of compression. Also, it is a small room.

272. Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 6th edn, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 52.

273. Borromini's Colonnade, retrieved 24 June 2011, <<http://www.camillotrevisan.it/borromi/borromie.pdf>>

is partly because, as transactional psychologists have discovered, the body always trumps the eye in perception. In the 1960s, Adelbert Ames conducted experiments in which participants viewed a small, distorted (trapezoidal) room that, seen through an eyehole, appeared to be square. The participants reported seeing the room as square until they tried to touch a part of the wall with a stick, which initially proved difficult. Eventually participants were able to touch the spot, after which they knew the room's actual dimensions. This was the case even though the retinal image of the room had not changed. Signals from the body overwrite what the information from the eye reports.

In the Borromini colonnade and the Ames distorted room the difference between the eye's image and the body's experience is great enough to bring about a moment of realisation, an aha! moment (Arnheim claims the observer will feel a 'strong sensation of seasickness' once inside the colonnade.²⁷⁴). But it is one of the stated qualities I seek for my work that no one moment or element is privileged over others. To the interpreting mind always ready to grasp that which stands out (because to grasp is to understand), an aha! moment may constitute something explicit, and seem to signal the 'point' of the work.²⁷⁵ 'So the work is about visual illusion,' the viewer may say, and are thus deprived of the pleasures of not knowing. The extra-spatial distortion – the disparity between the optical and kinesthetic perception – of *Blue Book*'s walk-through space is thus not so conspicuous as Borromini's. It is intended to be more of the order of Stampalia's architectonic side-slips; of a subtle, background character.²⁷⁶ And a subtler false-perspective is more likely to look less distorted from more positions in the room for more people of different heights. Perhaps, if I can strike the right balance between what the body registers and what the conscious mind does not, some viewers may not notice the cause yet will feel the effect. After all, it is a fundamental principle of perceptual psychology that what we are looking for determines what we see.²⁷⁷ As Ames concluded from his research, nobody expects a distorted room.²⁷⁸ In a gallery it is surely seldom the case that the viewer wants to see the walls. In any case, the composition of hanging shapes forms an oblong outline that widens to the end that it also climbs. The room echoes this.

274. Arnheim, *AVP*, p. 273.

275. Such may be said of Mowry Baden, whose art was inspired by Ames' experiments. <<http://mowrybaden.com>>

276. The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne, by architects Wood Marsh, has distorted rooms, though they are not false perspectives. The ceiling does not rise, nor does the floor slope down to the end the walls widen. Instead the appearance is of a shorter room whose ceiling pitches down, and the floor climbs, towards the far end. The effect, interestingly, is mildly sinister.

277. Sergio C. Masin (ed.), *Foundations of Perceptual Theory*, Amsterdam, p. 86.

278. A Ames, CA Proctor, B Ames, 'Vision and the Technique of Art', *Amer. Acad. Arts and Sciences*, 1923, vol 58, no. 1, Cited in Arnheim *AVP*, p. 275.

More specifically the *Blue Book* envelope is a two-part trapezoid, the first more subtle than the second. It is only the walls on the left (of one entering the room) that deviate laterally, though both sides climb in height towards the end furthest from the entrance. This asymmetry almost imperceptibly swings the axis of the rooms to the left. As Tuan says in relation to the importance of orienting ourselves in space, though we rely strongly on the cardinal positions of the compass, we also to some degree establish our bearings with respect to the left and right sides of our bodies.²⁷⁹ Bear in mind that it is not my intention to disorient the viewer but rather shift their experience in subtle ways.

The envelope advancing and retreating from the body and twisting its axis in this way recalls Richard Serra's Corten steel walls that warp over and away from the viewer as he or she moves through the sculpture's winding narrow passageways. As is the case with Serra's art, it is the effect on the body that matters, though in my work the feeling is preferably not so pronounced, and, as I say, its causes need not be consciously discovered.

Finally, the walls are set with gaps. No corner is fully resolved by the joining of two walls. D.K. Ching says that when an opening exists in one side of a corner it 'weakens the definition of the volume within the form...' ²⁸⁰ in a similar way, I hope, that having more than one tonic weakens the definition of the scale. These perforations are a further means of admitting emptiness into the structure, and they help lighten the load of the enclosure at the end where the walls loom larger over the viewer. Also, because these gaps are human-scale, viewers will most likely investigate what lies through them. But there are no tricks, no surprises, just the structures that hold the walls up.

Though I have referred to research in this chapter that relates to the devices employed in *Blue Book*, there has been no research (to the best of my knowledge, other than my own work with scale models) done on the degrees of visual illusion required to affect a felt response without exciting much attention to the causes. Finding out these degrees, I imagine, constitutes the rest of my practice.

279. Tuan, p. 35.

280. Ching, p. 81.

7.

AURA: MYTHICAL STRANGENESS AND POETIC UNKNOWING

*Myths are not stories about the gods in the abstract; they are about
'something mysterious', intelligent, invisible and whole.*²⁸¹

- Sean Kane

*I said I thought our present world had been so drained of elemental qualities such as the
numinous, the supernatural and the wonderful that it had been consequently drained
of much - perhaps most - of its natural and religious meaning.*²⁸²

- Clyde Kilby

A visit to Kronberg Castle in Denmark by atomic scientists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg was transfigured by the mere possibility that Hamlet once lived there. Said Bohr of his experience:

Suddenly the walls and ramparts speak a quite different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness of the human soul, we hear Hamlet's 'to be or not to be.' Yet all we really know is that Hamlet's name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived, let alone that he lived here. But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he too had to be found a place on earth, here in Kronberg. And once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different place for us.²⁸³

That imaginative possibility can enhance our encounter with real places suggests something for an installation art aiming for a degree of unworldliness. We're in pretty vague territory with this kind of thing and this is no place for formula, but there is some support for the potential that one idea in relation to another can engage the imagination, even where there is no real relation beyond context. A somewhat prosaic illustration is the case of Millennium Orange. In a study by Elizabeth Miller and Barbara Kahn, the sales of a crayon sold as Millennium Orange was compared with the sales of a crayon of the

281. Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, Broadview Press, Ontario, 1994, cited in Curry, p. 123.

282. Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion*, Lion Publishing, Berkhamsted, 1977, p. 79, cited in Curry, p. 116.

283. Cited in Tuan, Yo-Fu, *Space and Place*, p. 4.

same colour simply called Orange. Millennium Orange, it turns out, far outsells mere Orange.²⁸⁴ The comparison suggests that, as is the case with the magic trick, people may be entranced by the unseen portion – in this instance, the thread that connects the two seemingly unrelated ideas. People buy the crayon perhaps in the hope of resolving the enigma.

But enigmatic conjugations are often best left unresolved as I learned in my youthful encounter with the *Book of Hours*, about which I knew nothing other than that it was a Medieval artefact. It seemed for a while a deeply mysterious prospect, a volume whose ancient and secret purpose remained open-ended for me, because the nature of its ‘hours’ was unspecified; and quite how they were held in a book was unexplained. That it is Medieval was no doubt a key factor in producing the effect it did. Its enigma ended the moment I discovered it was a book of hourly prayers. But my enchantment, while it lasted, was my imagination’s doing, though I held no *image* at all. The penumbra of the unexplained connection was nevertheless felt. It speaks of our capacity to hold two irreconcilable figures at once and dream feelingly into the gap made. Such fertile combinations suggest a sum in which $1 + 1$ may equal 3.²⁸⁵

Timothy Walsh discusses the gaps created in literature that are the consequence, not of the sum of two parts, but of significant things merely hinted at in the telling of the stories. He explores the instances in fiction where, for various reasons and to varied effect, the author sets up the narrative framework around an event or a quality that then goes unnamed and only faintly defined. Of significant absences in general, such as intersections without traffic signals in the city, Walsh says:

Whenever the mind is confronted with a perceived absence, it becomes more highly sensitised, more aware, observant, and expectant. The perception that something that could or should be present is not there becomes vaguely threatening, requiring some sort of resolution or closure... whenever we are plunged into uncertainty, we become more speculative, more given to hypothetical and creative reasoning, as we attempt to compensate for the disquieting multivalence that makes rational analysis infinitely more complex and difficult.²⁸⁶

284. NJ Goldstein, SJ Martin, RB Maldini, *Yes: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive*, p. 75.

285. It operates somewhat differently to either-or propositions, such as some of the puns employed by the Dadaists, in which the meaning flips to one or the other of two understandings. This may invest the object or word with ambiguity but, for me, it is not when one image has two alternate meanings, but when two (or more) images generate one indeterminate meaning that mystery is more readily felt. An analogy of the poetic coupling I seek can be found in the science of superposition, where two simultaneously occurring waveforms may, if the relationship is right, produce a third waveform the sum of the first two. A different relationship may result in nothing.

286. Walsh, p. 104.

Walsh observes that the blanks often find expression in literature as ‘somethings.’ It doesn’t do the subject much service to be brief about it, but I provide here a couple of the examples Walsh offers. From James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ is a passage where Gabriel sees his wife at the top of the stairs ‘listening to something.’ ‘He stood in the hall trying to catch the air that voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was a grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of.’²⁸⁷ Or William Faulkner’s *The Bear* in which the aging Ike McCaslin comes across an old and enormous rattlesnake, whose odor overwhelmed him: ‘he could smell it now: the thin sick smell of rotting cucumbers and something else which had no name.’²⁸⁸ These things in the context of their stories hover over the experience like a spectre, and the narrative is all the richer for the uncertainty they provoke. (Of course, there are many things absent in every story. Walsh refers to those that are in some way made important to the narrative.)

Behind these and many other instances of what Walsh calls structured absences,²⁸⁹ there seems to dwell a mysterious fullness whose presence can only be invoked if left unsaid. Naming and labeling, the stamps of familiarity and explicitness, are deferred in order to point beyond the known world into darkness. ‘[B]ut,’ claims Walsh, ‘it is a productive darkness, an “illuminating” darkness. As Rudolph Otto suggests, vagueness is often our only analog to the visionary, the nebulous our mirror of the numinous.’²⁹⁰ (Though, elsewhere he warns: ‘We would obviously be on dangerous ground to assert... that a vague or unclear idea is the hallmark of profundity...’²⁹¹) ‘Paradoxically,’ says Walsh, ‘absence can be perceived only if the expectation of something is not satisfied, and this expectation always arises because of something present.’²⁹²



The something present in *The Blue Book* is a cluster of five thin suspended and floor-bound shapes (including the *something* they loosely circumscribe) and the incomplete image of a horse. What is significantly absent is, effectively, the explanation for how the horse relates to the forms. Whether or not such an incongruous pair of signs or images can produce a perceived structured absence

287. J Joyce, ‘The Dead’, *Dubliners*, Penguin, New York, 1914, cited in Walsh, p. 26.

288. W Faulkner, *The Bear. Three Famous Short Stories*, Vintage, New York, 1961, cited in Walsh, p. 27.

289. Walsh, p. 103.

290. Walsh, p. 28.

291. Walsh, p. 125.

292. Walsh, p. 104.

(as opposed to two unrelated units) may largely depend on the execution: the degree to which the two components are proximate and complimentary enough in style or scale as to affirm the *possibility* of a connection, but not so close for a connection to be made by reason. Presumably not all words when combined with Orange would intrigue so well as Millennium. Of course, if the combination is effective for a viewer, it may be said that there *is* a connection, and it is made only in the imagination, by which the association is not so much thought as it is felt. (This certainly reflects how the image imposed itself on the artwork in the development stage: it was sensed. If there is a rational connection between the horse and the sculptures, I don't know it – I don't even know what the sculptures *are*! In this matter I am no better informed than the viewer. Yet I maintain, for what good it will do me, that the image is not simply there for the sake of a conundrum. It *means* something.) Just as two rods set at a distance may be connected by the imagination, so the horse image and the group of rods stand at a conceptual distance, and may be linked by the same faculty.



But the horse image also plays a further role, not separable from the first, and this has to do with the subject matter and the mood of its rendering: It depicts an intelligence from the non-human realm, and specifically a creature that comes already tinged with unworldliness; its stylisation, influenced by medieval and ancient painting and sculpture, should at least be suggestive of another time (if post-modernism's relentless appropriation hasn't drained such things of their evocative feeling). Whatever the image evokes may, if the viewer is willing, get imaginatively tangled up with the peculiar space (if it is felt) made by the elevated forms and the false-perspective room, and its qualities may be projected, as it were, into the air. It is, I want to suggest, for the same reasons that an experienced close-up magician knows it is not enough to make a coin vanish, he must also affect a little puzzlement as he opens his hand to discover that the coin that was there is there no longer. How different the effect would be if the magician looked self-satisfied with what *he* had just accomplished, rather than letting on that *something strange* had just taken place by forces beyond himself. The expression of vague incomprehension potentially pervades the event with an undercurrent of mystery.²⁹³

Similarly, the strange image of a horse is, in no reliable way, an appeal to that ancient human instinct to get caught up in imaginary worlds and powers.

293. P Lamont & R Wiseman, *Magic in Theory*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, 2008, p. 68.

In other words, it is an attempt, once a strangeness and uncertainty has been established, to make it mythical. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* combines the modes of myth and fairy-story (which share a common origin²⁹⁴) in the format of the modern novel.²⁹⁵ Mine is an attempt to take however small a part of these – principally an interpretation of their 'atmosphere' – for my installation. As mentioned, these stories are made of strangeness and the unexplained, deep time, mysterious powers, and animated places. They are set in what Tolkien calls a Secondary World, which is the invention of its creator; the Primary World being the 'real' world, in which the Secondary one is created. He was dissatisfied with the 'willing suspension of disbelief' as an explanation for what happens when one gets caught up in the Secondary World. 'What really happens is the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator."' He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside it.²⁹⁶ This he calls a Secondary Belief. But however one might explain the mechanism for being 'inside' it, being inside is crucial to how one relates to it. A main purpose of this Secondary World of creative myth is, for Tolkien, to aid Recovery. He felt that that which becomes familiar is 'possessed' by the mind and becomes trite, and that what we need is to see things afresh.²⁹⁷ He saw that this could be done by way of entry into an enchanted Secondary World. Rather than trying to find it in 'the willfully awkward, clumsy or misshapen, not in making all things dark and unremittingly violent.'²⁹⁸ We can, in our art, invent alternatives:²⁹⁹

Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you.³⁰⁰

294. Curry, p. 118.

295. The myth of interest to Tolkien is not that of the Olympians – for these, '*allegories* would have been a better word,' which he disliked, Tolkien, p. 23.

296. Tolkien, p. 37. Fairy-stories, and Tolkien's own stories, are often subject to the charge of escapism. Tolkien suggests that this is a 'misuse of words and confusion of thought', as an escape can be as much the Escape from Prison as it can be the Flight of the Deserter. The critics' meaning, Tolkien suspects, is more often the latter. As for the prisoner, he says, 'Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?' 'Home' may thus be understood as a state of wonder.

297. Tolkien, p. 58.

298. Tolkien.

299. It should be noted that Tolkien's stories are not all fairy dust and daisy chains either. Darkness reigns over most of *The Lord of the Rings*, and even when the dread force of the title is eliminated, there is still terror and death to contend with. For Tolkien writes that the joyous ending in fairy-stories 'is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance...' Tolkien, p. 68.

300. Tolkien, p. 59.

Patrick Curry (who took up the task of addressing the various charges made against Tolkien – that fairy-stories are escapist, or for children; that Tolkien’s stories are racist, fascist, or nostalgic parables) insists that for him, as for others, Tolkien’s stories are an intensification of reality, and had from the beginning overwhelmed him with ‘an unmistakable sense of having encountered a world that was more real than the one I was then living in, or the reality of which was much more concentrated.’³⁰¹ I have already quoted Tolkien saying the ‘primal desire at the heart of *Faërie*’ is ‘the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.’ Curry adds that ‘the “realisation” here is ambiguous, and properly so; it signifies both the making of the natural world wondrous through the creation of a “Secondary World...” and the realisation (through the former) that the Primary or “real” world actually is wondrous.’³⁰² The mythic imagination thus places one back inside the living, mysterious Primary World with eyes open.³⁰³ Curry concludes:

Positively, *The Lord of the Rings* imaginatively reconnects its unprejudiced readers with a world that is still enchanted, that is, a world in which nature – including, but also greatly exceeding, humanity – is still mysterious, intelligent, inexhaustible, ensouled. Its places each have their own personality, and its spirits each have their home. (What a relief for human beings to no longer feel they have to shoulder the burden of sentience and agency alone, in an otherwise dead and meaningless universe!)... And that connection opens the door to the possibility of realising that our own world (once seen aright) is *still* enchanted.³⁰⁴

Myth thereby claims illusion and imagination as the means by which reality can be effectively encountered. I have cited David Abram in Chapter 2, and Rudolph Arnheim in Chapter 5, as saying that we relate to the world’s objects and non-human dimension through imaginative *participation* with our own muscles and nervous systems. To this one hears the rationalist say, ‘Well there you are then, it is just illusion!’ But I hope I have shown in Chapter 2 that rationality as such may also be illusory. To get to the kind of truth that Abram promotes, that speaks of a quality of relationship, myth is well suited, if it can – through imagination – fill the air with intelligence and mystery. Myth, according to Joseph Campbell, answers to the ancient need for ‘life-supporting

301. Curry, p. 114.

302. Curry, p. 62.

303. Curry cites incidents from various parts of the globe that support the idea that Tolkien’s books have galvanised peoples to reform and revolution, including his own activism: Curry, pp. 43–45.

304. Curry, p. 152.

illusions.³⁰⁵ The need now is to know that we don't know. We need to know that science or our concepts takes us no closer to knowing *what things are*, that such a thing is after all not our proper undertaking. Myth provides us one way by which we can relate the world as mystery.

The final gesture of my installation – leaving the space unlit (probably the most explicit of my moves) – is intended to aid the unknowing and the mystery. By undermining vision, or what Juhani Pallasmaa calls 'the dominion of the eye,'³⁰⁶ the faculty held most responsible for 'knowing' in our culture, low light permits doubt and the play of the imagination. As Pallasmaa says, '[d]eep shadows and darkness... dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous... Mist and twilight awaken the imagination by making visual images unclear and ambiguous; a Chinese painting of a foggy mountain, or the raked sand garden of Ryoan-ji Zen Garden give rise to an unfocussed way of looking, evoking a trance-like, meditative state.'³⁰⁷



To be sure, as a bare-bones installation, *Blue Book* can only partake so much of myth or fairy-story and achieve so much of its recovery. Tolkien himself, speaking of the recovery that fantasy provides, asserted that '[t]he "fantastic" elements in verse and prose of other kinds, even when only decorative or occasional, help in this release. But,' he conceded, 'not so thoroughly as fairy-story.'³⁰⁸ Elsewhere he stated that '[i]n human art, Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy... Silliness or morbidity are frequent results.'³⁰⁹ And one can see his point. But my installation is in no way literal. I have tried to engage unknowing in terms of perception and, as regards the horse image and the identity of the hanging forms, in terms of signs.

The fact that myth and *Faërie* are mentioned in this exegesis should not be taken as a desire that these things come to the mind of a viewer in my work; the opposite is true. My installations are an authentic byproduct of my having little interest in actual fairy-stories, or even Tolkien's stories as such, but reflect by whatever means I can have developed it a liking for their atmospheres, their

305. J Campbell, *Myths to Live by*, 4th edn, Souvenir Press, Germany, 2009, p. 10. The error in the past, according to Campbell, has been to take them literally, as many Jews, Christians, and Muslims have done.

306. Pallasmaa, p. 46.

307. Pallasmaa.

308. Tolkien, p. 59.

309. Tolkien, p. 49.

peculiar quality, tasted after the stories are told.³¹⁰ The power claimed for myth, to bring about recovery, I have found for myself elsewhere, such as in the extra-spatial moments in Pärt's music, or in unidentified polytonal pieces heard on the radio. It is these moments of swelling vitalised intervals, as much as half-glimpsed numinous airdscapes in story, that provide a rare jolt out of the dull reverie of moments or months lived unconsciously and incuriously.

The task and effect of Fairy-story or myth, of what is unknown and strange, 'known' through imagination, and that calls one to wake in wonder at a living cosmos, seems not so far from the methods and purposes of the religious icon: it sets the strange amongst the familiar to remind the viewer that the divine and the natural are not so split. Near to this end it is hoped that absences and airborne conundrums may carry us; that they may remind us that what is unseen and fills the air may be meaningful and mysterious.

310. This is how, though I have read Tolkien's and Curry's explanations of myth and fairy-story *discursively*, I can still claim the primacy of *experience* for their power: I have 'tasted' these worlds. This says something of the suggestive force of their writing, the poetry in their prose.

8.

HOW I PURSUED THE RESEARCH

*The work of inventing and constructing music really holds
no interest for me. I want to carve away the excess sound finally
to grasp the essential single sound.*³¹¹

- Toru Takenitsu

*Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is
beautifully played. This one note, or beat, or moment of silence, comforts me.*³¹²

- Arvo Pärt

The work in my Bachelor of Arts with Honours in 2006 was, I said at the time, about lost worlds. Even then the installations were only hinting at imaginary distant bleak places, and there was no desire to be literal, but moving into this PhD project I was keen to empty the work of as much subject as possible. If there was an other world to be seen, I wanted to allow the viewer to discover it for him or herself. What prevailed was, in fact, a desire for a quality I couldn't name, but I now think had to do with a heightened sense of emptiness. This was not an emptiness that demanded I remove every object from the room (i.e. not a rhetorical, explicit emptiness as I interpret in Yves Klein's 1958 *Void* exhibition, in which he sold all the vacant areas in the Iris Clert gallery; or even Martin Creed's playful *Work No. 227, Lights Going On and Off*) but an active, full emptiness that is contingent for its expression on what is present. It was this nameless quality, I believe, to which my works in previous years were striving, though perhaps I needed the convenience of a subject and some sort of explanation. In early 2007 I set out in full pursuit of this nameless quality *as it was implied by my existing practice of arranging vertical or near-vertical objects in space*. It was not a pursuit of extra-dimension (or unworldliness or openendedness or anything else) *ex nihilo*; if it were the outcomes would probably look very different.

311. Takemitsu, p. 14.

312. A Pärt in Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, p. 87.

Work done in Honours has already pointed to the psychology of perception as a source of information on ways to play with the feeling of space – at which time it mainly applied to suspending thin sculptures from the ceiling. But there was more to learn. James Gibson in the 50s enumerated 13 ways we (unconsciously) determine the distance of things.³¹³ For my project these were potentially 13 ways with which to mislead in regard to distance. The research of Adelbert Ames and other transactional analysts were also investigated. Arnheim covers a great deal of broader psychological factors attending to architectural spaces.

This line of enquiry also led to other areas of psychology, as I wanted to consider afresh the whole experience of going to and being in a gallery, and get a closer look at the subtler forces that influence our thoughts and feelings. Whorf and other linguists were stumbled across, all who suggest we are swayed by language in no small way. Hypnotherapists and related practices were also investigated. These are people who understand that it is not what we *think* we know or hold in conscious awareness that matters, but it is the unconscious (which itself is only a metaphor) that largely governs our lives.³¹⁴ They understand that we relate not to the world but to an internal model or representation of the world, and that healing is a matter of expanding the patient's model, thereby giving them more options. I looked at magicians, who are well acquainted with psychology and who exploit our biological blind spots and our internal models – which determine what we pay attention to and therefore what we miss – to remind us to be less certain. The felt quality of magic, of what remains unknown, was related to the quality of emptiness I was after. The connection was strengthened by Timothy Walsh's evocative 'structured absences' and Tolkien's wonder and enchantment, products of storied unknowing.

In regard to the form of the artwork itself I was looking for governing principles to determine what position and what angle the objects should take in a given space. I wondered if there was some system, like the tonal system in music, that could inform the composition of objects, their tilt, and their elevation with one principle – which could then be subtly doubled or deviated from. I played with distorted grids and intersecting circles and spheres but nothing was convincing. (This 'one principle' eludes me to this day.) I had been ruminating for some time on this when, one day, I was at a café and spied the bottom half of a newspaper's 'house and home' lift-out folded over

313. J Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1974.

314. MD Yapko, *Mindfulness and Hypnosis*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2011, p. 101.

the magazine rack. There I could see chromed-steel rods of some sort that, though they leaned in various directions, seemed to adhere to some sort of order. On closer inspection I saw that the steel rods were the legs of chairs, and they were arranged neatly around a table. Each chair 'unit' determined the spacing and angles of sets of four legs, and the table determined the spacing of the units; order was created. With this I saw I could regulate the angle of the struts by 'joining' their longitudinal axis at some hypothetical point overhead. (Later, for *Blue Book*, the axes were joined 'underground'.) The possibility that two of these regulating points could send a single group of linear struts in two directions followed shortly.

In late 2009 I created an installation in the old Inflight Gallery on Elizabeth Street, Hobart, to explore my thinking to date. Beginning several months before the exhibition I built a 1:10 scale model of the site. I worked circularly between the model, complete with model struts, and a drawing board that took up one wall of my studio, on which I could draw the struts to scale. I would cut out five model struts that seemed to compose an 'incomplete whole'; that is, a harmonious unit that nevertheless had the sense of something missing. Then I would draw five struts according to the lengths determined by the models. These drawings, the shape that emerged, would then be reflected in the model, which would in turn suggest a change in length of one or two of the struts. All the while the designs would suggest a particular arrangement of the struts in the space. In this project the sculptures were scaled so that the shorter ones were also thinner. I was also working with two floor-bound objects that would form part of the composition. These were added intuitively, largely informed by the way gum leaves are counterpointed by gum nuts, as is text with punctuation. Rather than draw these I made them out of clay initially, then later cut them out of card.

During this process the hanging sculptures shrunk from a maximum of 60mm 'blades' to 24mm 'struts.' Also in this time I realised that, in the design of the sculptures and their arrangement in space, I was using proprioception to guide me. Muscle memory (in regard to other embodied experiences I was borrowing from) and tension were dictating the lines and angles and distribution. It seemed appropriate in a project that wanted to operate under the radar of the conscious mind for the processes to take place unconsciously in the body.

The walls were to be painted, or rather dribbled on with milk paint, in an attempt to pass the vertical presence of the hanging forms onto the walls. The floor was to be painted the same colour but slightly darker in a high gloss,

to help ‘withdraw’ the floor further. There was to be a board leaning over the entrance, to hide the forms until the last moment, up to which the space may appear empty. (This strategy was to be abandoned for *Blue Book*. See below.)

It was while I was designing the flyer for the show that I felt the urge to include with the title the motif of a horse. That’s all it was at first – the need an emblem of sorts. Its appeal for me grew, and had to do with the wish to imply something like an equine spectre in the installation, wherein nothing explicitly horse-related could be seen. At the very least it would have taken the work out of a purely formalist language and therefore out of easy conceptual categories. However, I did not go through with it at this time. I was concerned that it would introduce a word – ‘horse’ – to what I had hoped to be a wordless zone. I was apparently naïve enough then not to know people would bring their own words in anyway, words such as ‘windscreen wipers’ (as, at a guess, 15 percent of viewers later assumed the struts to be) or ‘formalism’.

I installed the show, *The Grey Book*, in March 2009 (Figures 24 and 25). Getting feedback from viewers presented a problem because many claimed they didn’t ‘get it’, but according to my goals and the sought element of doubt that didn’t *necessarily* mean the work had failed. My own experience of the



Figure 24
The Grey Book, 2009,
Installation view, wood,
paint, dimensions variable



Figure 25
The Grey Book, 2009,
Installation view

installation threw up questions about the effectiveness of the wall treatment. And the composition of forms didn't quite have the sense of incompleteness I had hoped. I enjoyed how the steel devices implied a 'front' and a 'back' to the shafts they were holding up – supports seldom project *forward* of that which they bear up. Because of this the sculptures felt like they had their backs to, and leaned away from, the viewer as they entered, as if they weren't expecting or wanting to be seen (Michael Fried comes up often with my work). This introversion, and the fact that the space was not lit (except by indirect natural light), was intended to help the viewer play 'intruder' to this other world. (As regards the objects' leaning away from the viewer, this advantage was to be lost to some degree for *Blue Book*.) For all this the installation still did not have the dreamlike qualities I had hoped for. I wondered how it might feel to be in a Japanese so-called Zen garden. (I have not had the space in these pages to outline the influence of Japanese aesthetics on my work. In any case, traditional Japanese principles had already made their mark on my art before this research project began in 2007.)

In November 2009 I left for a two-week tour some of Kyoto's 30-odd traditional gardens. There were many interesting aspects to the gardens, but three critical issues emerged from that trip. The first had to do with the wandering gardens. It has been admired that these gardens could give the illusion of vaster distances than they occupied. But I found they felt kind of compressed and twee, like a train set. I resolved to explore working the other way – to make the space seem smaller than it is.

The second issue was highlighted by a visit to the Ryoan-ji stone garden. I had clearly misread an account of how the viewer comes upon the garden – I expected to come through the temple so the grand site of the garden rose before me. Instead, I rounded the corner of the entrance and could immediately see half the gravel rectangle at an acute angle; to approach the garden was to come alongside it. I decided in future to do away with the leaning board that blocks the view of the hanging forms in my installations.

The third issue was also raised by Ryoan-ji. I don't know how many photographs I'd seen of this garden but I had never noticed how different in character all the stones were. There is a flat stumpy one, one with a peak like a mountain, another a rounded knob and so on. In *The Book of Tea* Okakura Kakuzo talks about how each of the elements of the tea ceremony – the bowl, the kettle, the whisk etc. – should be of a different shape and colour so that the participant takes no part for the whole. His or her attention is demanded for

each object in the room.³¹⁵ When I started working with scaled self-similars I was trying to do the opposite. I wanted to avoid a sense of ‘this’ then ‘that’ then ‘the other’ that seemed to me to be absent from Pärt’s music, which, I felt, is made up of an unfolding continuum of ‘this’; its virtue being its very refusal to be distracted from its simple theme. But Ryoan-ji’s ‘figures’ are all rocks, despite their differences in character. And all the notes of *Für Alina* are piano, and they are all in B minor, though each note possesses its own personality. Contrast, I concluded, is not necessarily to be avoided. It need not compromise unity. Rather, the presence of contrast within unity can lend a composition its sense of purpose, to join different voices toward one goal. After Ryoan-ji, my struts were to have greater variance in thickness and length.

On returning from Japan in November 2009 I set the next six months aside for the writing of this exegesis. I am finishing it two years later. The difficulty had to do with the extra-linguistic and non-linear character of what I was trying to do with my art. Because I don’t work from theory to practice, but rather from largely synesthetic affects experienced in music and other sources into physical form, I have to go searching for words to explain it. Such affects did not seem to have readymade language to fit. For quite some time the ‘nameless quality’ remained *in my body*, as it were, and for a while was not available even to my mind’s eye. Ideas had to play catch-up. As written or spoken language is necessarily linear and sequential (indicative of the functioning of the left-hemisphere which produces it), while the nameless quality was manifold and experienced all at once, the question of where to begin remained unanswered for some time. Anything I wanted to say needed to be preceded by something else. For this reason it seemed appropriate to start with a discussion on doubt and then explore the kinds of music and story which possessed some degree of the nameless quality.

All the while I was working on my final submission installation. Envious of composers who can write their music on manuscript paper, I wanted a way of rapidly representing a spatial idea. Because I was representing suspended objects and distorted rooms (at first a misshapen room, then a five sided one, and finally a false-perspective), a perspectival drawing would indicate nothing of my intentions. The solution, pretty obvious now, was isometric drawings, in which the dimensions of an object depicted do not recede with distance. Arnheim says of isometric drawing that, ‘[h]aving abandoned every element of frontality, the pictorial object moves much more freely, and although it is anchored in the spatial framework of pictorial space, it seems to float in relation

315. O Kakuzo. *The Book of Tea*, Running Press, China, 2002, p. 40.

to the viewer, to whose orthogonal coordinates it is no longer tied. This is the compositional pattern of traditional Japanese paintings... and also the Ukiyo-e woodcuts of the eighteenth century.’³¹⁶ The non-hierarchical nature of isometric drawing thus made it well suited to the project.

I also worked on Cinema 4D, a computer modeling program which allowed me to test ideas quickly as I could ‘move through’ a space to test, as well as the flat screen permitted, the degree of ambiguity etc.

During this time the struts were reduced to three and the floor-bound forms were scaled down and, rather than serving as a secondary compositional dotted ‘line’ interacting with the ‘membrane’ (See p. 47 above) of the hanging forms, were now integral to defining the circumscribed zone; three hanging struts are too few to mark out an oblong area.

In March 2009 I started looking for a site outside the Tasmanian Centre for the Arts’ Plimsoll Gallery in which to hold my final submission installation. Because of the Plimsoll’s busy calendar a graduating student ordinarily has less than a week in the gallery to set up, which, I felt, was not long enough to take care of every detail. (Not that every element had to be perfect but Carlo Scarpa and the Inflight show had taught me that details matter.) Also I wasn’t sure how I could use the space: the low gallery is too low for a false perspective, and the tall gallery is not long enough for a gradual distortion. A warehouse would have been the most suitable space – they are often long rectilinear spaces with high ceilings and concrete floors (which I may be permitted to paint. Also, floorboards would betray the false perspective) and have an industrial exterior, which could justify erecting gallery-like walls (a site that already has gallery-like walls may encourage speculation that *my* walls may be ‘up to something’, which they are). While there would seem to be a number of appropriately sized warehouses, my terms – a short lease and little money – were not attractive to proprietors.

When the Plimsoll became available with two weeks to set up, I saw how I could make use of the area therein where the two spaces adjoin; I could begin my false perspective in the low gallery and expand it into the tall gallery. (And I would be permitted to paint the floor.)

The final installation is intended to be reductive, to represent the findings of the research by way of the least means.

316. Arnheim. *AVP*, pp. 267, 269.

9.

CONCLUSION

*As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, we feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We deserve something better than resolution: we deserve our birthright, which is prajna, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity. Prajna is the unfiltered expression of the open ear, open eye, open mind that is found in every living being. It's a fluid process, not something definite and concrete that can be summed up or measured.*³¹⁷

– Pema Chödrön

What started some years ago as an unjustifiable and unexplainable desire for thin black things in ample space (things dark and distant) has come to find, for me, some justification insofar as the installation-compositions implicate a way of being in the world. This exegesis has traced the expansion of the ample – or preferably, amplified – space of the up-in-the-air strut-composition outward onto its gallery envelope, and has proposed that this quality may also expand beyond the material components by way of the imagination into the world. To paraphrase Patrick Curry (Page 70): if the Secondary World made by the structure of the installation is seen to be in any way wondrous, it may contribute to a realisation that the Primary World is wondrous too. (To be consistent with the rest of this exegesis, I would suggest that this realisation need not be consciously reached.) I say it may ‘contribute’ to a realisation because I expect many people do find the world wondrous in one way or another; I am proposing that my work may offer a new expression, or a new degree, of wonder. (Presumably any art with a wondrous quality may do this to some extent.)

Which brings me to the matter of my contribution to contemporary art. I see my contribution as having little to do with the idea of art-as-progress, and more to do with how something very *old* – the mythic task of making things *new* – may find expression in contemporary practice. McGilchrist says of art in the last hundred years or so that ‘[t]here’s a fear that without novelty there is only banality; but the pay-off is that it is precisely the striving for novelty that leads

317. P Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty*, EH Sell (ed.), Shambhala, Boston, 2002, p. 145.

to banality. We confuse novelty with newness.³¹⁸ And that '[n]ewness' is 'seeing afresh what one thought of as familiar, as though for the first time.' It is 'by the *implicit*, and by an indirectness that borders on indirection, one can make something that the explicit had deadened to total inauthenticity come to life again.'³¹⁹ I have spoken of the methods used by Tolkien to these ends. He too seemed aware of the dangers of merely reacting to the 'drab blur of triteness or familiarity'³²⁰:

We do not, or need not, despair of drawing because all lines must be either curved or straight, nor of painting because there are only three 'primary' colours. We may indeed be older now, in so far as we are heirs in enjoyment or in practice of many generations of ancestors in the arts. In this inheritance of wealth there may be a danger of boredom or of anxiety to be original, and that may lead to a distaste for fine drawing, delicate pattern, and 'pretty' colours, or else to mere manipulation and over-elaboration of old material, clever and heartless. But the true road of escape from such weariness is not to be found in the willfully awkward, clumsy, or misshapen, not in making all things dark and unremittingly violent; nor in the mixing of colours on through subtlety to drabness, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red.³²¹

He goes on to say that for him fairy-stories and the peculiar qualities inherent in the tradition are one such aid to recovery. I have suggested that storied unknowing plays a major role in this quality. Of Arvo Pärt's method and music the word, for Hillier, is 'rejuvenation' 'which Western culture must undergo.' Pärt is also concerned about how art is supposed to move forward.

I am not sure there could be progress in art. Progress as such is present in science. Everyone understands what progress means in the technique of military warfare. Art presents a more complex situation... many art objects of the past appear to be more contemporary than our present art. How do we explain it? Not that genius was seeing two hundred years ahead. I think the modernity of Bach's music will not vanish in another two hundred years... the reason is not just that in absolute terms it could simply be better than contemporary music... the secret to its contemporaneity resides in the question: How thoroughly has the author-composer perceived, not his own present, but the totality of life, its joys, worries

318. McGilchrist, p. 413.

319. McGilchrist, p. 412. McGilchrist's emphasis.

320. Tolkien, p. 58.

321. Tolkien, p. 57.

and mysteries? ... Art has to do with eternal questions, not just sorting out the issues of today...

In any case, if we want to reach the core of a musical work, no matter what kind, we cannot forego the process of reduction. In other words we have to throw out our ballast – eras, styles, forms, orchestrations, harmony, polyphony – and so to reach one voice, to its ‘intonations.’ Only there are we eye to eye [with the question]: ‘Is it truth or falsehood?’³²²

In Pärt’s hands this reductive approach yields what Hillier calls ‘a different sense of time.’ In a similar vein Tolkien speaks of the ‘unanalysable effect’ of fairy stories in that ‘they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, if only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.’³²³ This removal from ordinary time, far from being an escape from reality, is, Tolkien insists, a means to overcome the effects of familiarity. I suggested in Chapter 2 that familiarity is an illusion brought on by a conviction in the labels and concepts we have received about the world. Pärt and Tolkien, each according to their own methods, create a situation that is ‘entered’ and which demands fresh attention. They give us a realm more easily apprehended as ‘fluid and ambiguous’ so that on reentering the ‘real’ world, we are better prepared to see it afresh, as something equally mysterious and unfamiliar. Or, put another way, they give us a view of our own world as it may be seen through the not-knowing mind of the mystic, the Pyrrhonist, or the Zen Buddhist. This, then, is the ambition of my project: that by creating, following Pärt and bi-tonal music, a sense of more-space and, after Pärt and Tolkien, by throwing out the ‘ballast’ of the contemporary and the everyday, I too may permit a different sense of time. And just as Tolkien fills his places with unknown intelligences, I, in my own way, try to activate the space in the room with implied vectors, invisible membranes, unseen regulating lines, circumscribed absences, and false perspectives.

Though the work strives for newness through its effects, there is nothing particularly new in my methods. I have shown how I employ similar techniques to Fred Sandback, Robert Irwin, Francesco Borromini, and to some extent Richard Serra, Carlo Scarpa and Alexander Calder. What I see as new in this context is the *purpose* for which they are used. For example, Irwin’s interventions concern perception. But a work like *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* evokes, we are told, a feeling of uncertainty. I ask: Why should the consequent affect of this type of intervention not contribute to a kind of imaginative fiction about the site in which it is made? It would simply offer an alternative fiction to the one most of us would be playing out anyway (the fiction that we know,

322. From an interview on Estonian radio in 1968, cited in Hillier, p. 65.

323. Tolkien, p. 32.

or will shortly know, what's going on). Unlike the theme-park haunted house, which largely achieves its effect by *explicit* means – subfloor lighting directed upwards, fog from a machine, sound effects etc. – my installation doesn't depart, strictly speaking, from a gallery format, its methods remain (I think) implicit, and it's 'haunting' is open-ended and avoids cliché.

It is for this reason I would have preferred not to use the word 'enchantment' at all. Enchantment, as I mean it, occurs when one is not led to expect it. It is by nature a kind of slow surprise. The same goes for other worlds; the viewer ought to be able to 'discover' it as another world for him or herself. Herein lies the necessary risk in open-ended and implicit art: in a way it must be configured so that it may well fail. For something to be genuinely discovered, there needs to be the possibility it will be overlooked. The work is in this way democratic. Though I have autocratically taken it upon myself to determine the final form of the work, I can ultimately only hand it over to the viewer to do what they will with it. The viewer's involvement is not the manual control of the mechanisms to change the angle of the struts (the manipulating action of the hand, according to McGilchrist, is activated by the left hemisphere³²⁴) but to bring their muscles and nervous systems to participate imaginatively, to *relate* to the work as Other (a right-hemisphere 'way of being'³²⁵). In this respect I seem to have heeded Seamus Heaney's encouragement to 'go beyond what's reliable.' There is little as unreliable as what happens in other people's heads.

I would rather, then, speak of my art as a matter of arranging things, the nameless things that come to me, in space at some distance – whether that's the topological distance between strut-like elements or the semiotic gap between these and other symbol-like things – thereby offering a pellucid field through which the viewer may see things in a new way. (After all, I have been told my work is hard to actually look *at*, by virtue of all the emptiness.)

This is largely literal, but McGilchrist speaks of the need for a work of art to be *metaphorically* semi-transparent or translucent.³²⁶ He asserts that an artist's vision needs to go beyond the art work, so that '[i]n viewing the art work, we too are carried beyond the work of art, precisely because the artist has not focused on the art as such, but in something beyond it...'³²⁷ The awakening episodes in music that I have talked about, that served as the impetus for this project, while they make me curious about music, do not wake me to music

324. McGilchrist, p. 113.

325. McGilchrist, p. 98.

326. McGilchrist, pp. 182, 293, 409.

327. McGilchrist, p. 409.

but to life. On my terms I will have failed if my work only resulted in questions about what art is. Rather, I hope that it may expand, for someone, even if only a little, the possibilities of what the world is.

Likewise, my PhD candidature has not been an end in itself. The processes begun in this research project have not delivered me to some destination; rather they have set me on my way. For one thing, there's the analogy of magic in relation to my work. It may have its limitations as an analogy, but I doubt it is yet as strong as it could be. I try to employ some small portion of the 'pleasures of uncertainty' found in the experience of the magic trick. Magic 'requires a method (how the trick works) to achieve an effect (what the spectator perceives),' and '[s]uccess requires that the spectator experience the effect while being unaware of the method.'³²⁸ In my installations the effect is intended to be of a subtle, non-specific, and generally 'atmospheric' character, so that, if the balance is right, the method is not necessarily sought.

With regard to distorted rooms, though, there is more work to do to realise this fully. Having installed *Blue Book* I suspect that, though the dimensions are architecturally pleasing to me (i.e. they are harmonious rather than challenging), the distortion is not so great as to create the desired degree of uncertainty, particularly in the Tasmanian School of Art, which is a building comprised of many strange angles. These are the kinds of lessons one can only learn by building the spaces to scale; models reveal only so much, and computer programs even less. But what matters to me at this stage is that the effect is sympathetic to the whole experience, and does not dominate the other gestures in the room. It still offers more space the further in one goes (though those familiar with the Plimsoll Gallery will know that more space is available than is used). Strictly speaking, it is not a true false perspective as there is no position in the room from which it looks completely square (and no effort was made to reinforce the 'illusion of proximity' with larger boards and screws in the walls furthest from the entrance), but this is necessary, particularly where the distortion is noticeable, to avoid privileging one moment or position over others. And because I left the top open, the ceiling grid and the lintel of the doorway connecting the low space with the tall gallery still exert a great deal of influence over how the space is perceived.

The gaps in the corners that lead into uncontrolled spaces become important as they make for zones of uncertainty that surround the space. But the construction of the walls, with the studs and supports showing at the back, may give to the viewer investigating through the gaps the sense of 'revealing

328. P Lamont & R Wiseman, p. 28.

the façade', of making the artifice explicit, as if it were a stage or film set, which is a long way from my intentions. In future I will control the design and construction of the walls more. It was and is more important to me that the envelope – the space within the gallery space – is literally open-ended and interpenetrating, that it always connects the viewer to spaces beyond the installation.

It is also still important to me that the space is lit, or appears to be lit, from outside the installation, as this contributes to the subtle fiction that the objects in the installation are not meant to be seen. (Given that the objects are in a gallery context, the viewer must play along with the fiction). And it keeps the struts from throwing shadows, which would introduce too many elements to the room. Illuminating the horse image from the corridor allowed me to hide to some extent the transition in the wall paint from the relatively warm 'Plimsoll Grey' of the entrance to a lighter, cooler colour that begins to the left of the horse and continues into the larger space in which the struts hang. Ultimately, though, I would prefer the work not to be quite so dark as *Blue Book* is. For future projects I will consult a lighting expert, as the business of lighting without appearing to light is a specialist art about which I have much to learn.

For *Blue Book* the context is an existing gallery, but for future projects I am interested in temporarily transforming the interiors of disused buildings and warehouses by subjecting them to the kinds of mysterious and extra-dimensional treatments this research has only just begun to explore. Discovering how to do this more effectively and in new contexts is the enterprise of the rest of my practice.

APPENDIX

Making Strange

I stood between them,
the one with his travelled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,

and another, unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

Then a cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect,
tell of this wind coming past the zinc hut,

call me sweetbriar after the rain
or snowberries cooled in the fog.
But love the cut of this travelled one
and call me also the cornfield of Boaz.

Go beyond what's reliable
in all the keeps pleading and pleading,
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how you were

when I visited you first
with departures you cannot go back on.'
A chaffinch flicked from an ash and the next thing
I found myself driving the stranger

through my own country, adept at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at the same recitation.

- Seamus Heaney

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Figure 25

The Grey Book, installation view, photographed by Peter Whyte, May 2009.