

Embodied Aporia: exploring the potentials for posing questions directly to the body
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The encounter that I hope to bring about through my artworks is one that begins to raise questions about a person's relationship to architectural surroundings, and perhaps to discover aspects that both person and surroundings have in common. My belief is that raising such questions can eventuate new forms of relation between person and architectural surroundings as well as a reconsideration of the importance of this relationship in how we position ourselves as part of the world.

This practice of architectural questioning begs the question, how does architecture ask? To say that it speaks to the body is to obfuscate through metaphor, as architecture does not have a voice to speak with in the way that a human body does. If not through language-based discourse, what relation between architecture and body might afford the conveyance of a question from one to the other?

It is through our sense modalities and in their coordination that we immediately take in an environment and select actions in response. What an environment affords the body effects changes in that body, through movement, through sensation, through selections that lead to actions and change. This ongoing process that tends to take place below the threshold of consciousness comes to our attention in moments when the coordination of our senses is disrupted. One such example of this is the situation of feeling lost.

In the sprawling metropolis of Bangkok many years ago, the friend I was living with helped me realise the benefits of being lost. She told me that when she first moved to Bangkok, she would take a random series of buses in the city until she was lost, and then tried to find her way home. This was her method for getting her bearings in the city.

Jondi Keane recounted to me that once when he got out of the subway in New York thinking he was walking the direction towards his destination, and realized after many steps that he was going in the opposite direction. At that moment of realization, he said that it felt like the street turned back through itself, and this was paired with an internal physical feeling of turning through himself, though no motion took place. Rather, it was his feeling of reorientation, his coming on-line with the actual direction he was facing.

Brian Massumi writes, "[t]he alarmingly physical sense we feel when we realize we are lost is a bodily registering of the disjunction between the visual and the proprioceptive. Place arises from a dynamic of interference and accord between sense-dimensions."

This vertiginous experience of being somehow on unstable ground established a different kind of encounter, one that throws off track the continuing intentional flow of movement and action by introducing dissonance into the process of relating-to the surroundings. This disorientation, or destabilization, instigates a more tentative way of relating to the surroundings. Being unsure of our direction, of what we have moved through and when, establishes a different kind of relating-to our surroundings. In this event, there exists the disjunction Massumi describes "between the visual and the proprioceptive." The lack of accord creates an uncertainty about our location but also about how to relate to the environment.

It is particularly the sense dimensions of vision and proprioception that co-function towards orientation. In such an event of dissonance, an architectural surrounding poses a question to the body, a question that can only be answered through a more effortful and conscious coordination. This moment of disorientation offers an opportunity for developing a different relationship to the surroundings we are with, and greater awareness of these mechanisms and their operations, present in such an event. Returning to Jondi's feeling of both the street and his body turning through themselves in that moment of disorientation, this event might be described as an embodied aporia, a physical sense of puzzlement that is lived; an internal contradiction, a feeling of doubt, and an impasse as one cannot continue in that same direction or with that same flow of directed intention.

Certain architectural environments can trigger this kind of puzzlement. The transition from room to room has been shown in recent psychological experiments to lead to forgetting. Radvansky and Copeland have shown in experimental situations that walking through doorways causes forgetting. This is believed to be caused by the spatial shifts affecting cognition that demands that a person update their understanding of the spatial environment they currently find themselves in. Adjusting to a new space causes a cognitive disruption, and so moving through multiple doorways has a statistically significant potential to disorient.

As there are many situations in which an experience of disorientation or destabilization come about, through sense failure or lack of sense coordination, the body will right itself and reorient in order to continue with its habitual ways of moving and relating-to. To invoke a shift that would open up new potentials for action, the question must be held open long enough for recomposition to begin. The act of 'holding' is imperative here, in that it creates the possibility for engaging with a question that is posed. Remaining within the immediacy of such moments or events holds us back from rushing to a complete, reoriented position, or to a brushing away of tentativeness. It means to withhold at least momentarily from closing down on the sense of disorientation or somatic dissonance, and to be attentive to what potentials might be present. Or perhaps it means to simply be attentive to what senses are being activated, to what is happening experientially in that instance before fully coordinating the different sense dimensions into a coherent image of the world. This process of reorientation is important for us moving around in and participating in events, but perhaps to be more tentative in our act of perception – to refrain from ending that process – offers a generative potential.

Artist/architects Madeline Gins and Arawawa designed architectural environments to increase tentativeness in the body. Where the process of reorientation begins to close doors that might be otherwise prised open, what is presented by the works of Arakawa and Gins are particular methods for building architectural surrounds that might help us open these doors a bit wider, potentially to pass through them. They propose that building in a certain way can allow us to step into the threshold so that we might consider whether crossing through would be a beneficial step.

In describing his own experience of Arakawa and Gins 'Bioscleave House', Jondi Keane writes,

"the disruptions I experienced in Bioscleave House were made more acute, resembling sea-sickness of a land lover alongside the excitement of a flaneur in a self-organizing city. My struggle to identify the indicators responsible for my unbalance, dysmorphia and lack of

orientation hinted at the insufficient coordination I possessed for dealing with new learning conditions. Uncertain boundaries and inconsistent points of reference left me no choice other than to assemble alternative modes of measure and engagement.” These disruptions, effecting a disorientation and unbalance, lead to a situation of puzzlement, and it is this puzzlement that questions. The questions may be multiple, and may be at first imprecise, but they begin to be addressed through some form of change, in Jondi’s case in finding alternative modes of measure and engagement.

Arakawa and Gins write, “questions that query the degree to which persons are surroundings-bound need to be posed by actually erecting measuring frames around them.” This begins to answer how architectural questions are posed. Their contention is that the human body is understood through its relations to its surroundings, and that these surroundings are coextensive with the body. They write, “the Architectural Body Hypothesis/Sited Awareness Hypothesis [...] would have it that a person never be considered apart from her surroundings. It announces the indivisibility of seemingly separable fields of bioscience: a person and an architectural surround.” Such an indivisibility between body and surrounds leads to the potential for aspects of an architectural surround to be taken up by a person and in this way included in an emergent architectural body. It is through such a direct connection and immediate conveyance that questions can be posed directly to a body by architecture, as they write, “the architectural surroundings themselves, by virtue of how they are formed, pose questions directly to the body.”

This idea that the body and surrounding architecture are coextensive can be off-putting, considering the material differences between human physiology and architectural constructions. However, there is an art historical precedent for finding a bodily connection between such materials and forms. The work and writing of the Minimalists proposes a bodily relation between human (spectator, viewer, participant, museum visitor), art object and architectural surrounding.

Minimalist sculptures such as those created by Robert Morris or Donald Judd presented large geometric forms made out of industrial materials. Cubes of steel or mirrored surfaces, or white rectangular forms placed in gallery environments afforded a peculiar encounter. A prominent art critic of the era, Michael Fried, found this work problematic as it was, in his opinion, ‘theatrical’ in its bodily presence. An encounter with such work, which he called ‘literalist’ rather than ‘minimalist’, was like an encounter with another person. He writes, “being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person [...] Second, the entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the nonrelational, the unitary and the holistic are other persons”

The idea that the encounter with a Minimalist sculpture is in some way similar to an encounter with another person is a curious comparison, but could reveal an aspect of the kind of relations that such work seeks to generate. This encounter with a voluminous material (a steel cube, for example) instigates a bodily relation to another body, or perhaps to another person, as Fried suggests. This similarity of relation, marking the object as having qualities of personhood, calls into question the difference between the bodies that take part in this encounter. The otherness of the material, be it steel, wood, glass or plexiglass, is somehow reduced through the engagement with the sculpture within a given environment. This

encounter becomes less one of contrast and otherness and instead one of similarity, of sameness, be it through the scale of the object or through the horizontality of position established through the expansive inclusion of person and surroundings as part of this artwork.

What the Minimalists contribute through their artworks, which have the appearance of being very stable and independent (perhaps even cold) forms is that through an encounter with such forms they call attention to our sensibility to these relations between us and between the elements that surround us, such as sculptural objects and architecture.

This similarity between formally and materially distinct bodies is an idea presented by Jane Bennett in her discussion of the 'thrill of an aesthetic experience' of an artwork. Bennett writes: "The thrill may also involve something like recognition. By this I mean an uncanny feeling of being in the presence of an aspect of oneself – a non- or not-quite-human aspect that is nevertheless intrinsic to one's flesh and blood and bones – also present in the body of another."

The recognition of this possibility might lead to a rethinking of this relationship, noticing this potential to be affected by this material agency. Seeing oneself as part of an assemblage, as taking part in the architectural and material surroundings rather than observing them at some distance, has consequences for how our own bodies or persons are defined and identified.

Such an encounter can begin to call attention to a particular aspect of the relationship between body and architecture. This common ground between person and thing, body and architecture, can draw out what they share, and seeing a thing such as an architectural object or element in the way that a person might see another person could make apparent an aspect of this relationship between body and architecture that goes otherwise unnoticed. Making this common ground apparent can make us, as Bennett writes, "more sensitive to real forces that previously operated below the threshold of reflective attention."

These architectures that we encounter in our everyday comings and goings, made of steel, concrete, wood and glass, might be reconsidered as bodily presences similar to our own bodies in the way that we encounter and engage with them. Perhaps it is this bodily interaction, a social dimension present in our engagements with built surroundings, that allows for questions to be posed by architecture. Through moments of disorientation, sensorial dissonance, or feeling lost, an architectural invocation of embodied puzzlement offers us a moment for critical reflection on our habitual ways of relating-to our surroundings, holding open a door for us to redirect and recast this ongoing processual relationship.