

Review article

Architecture and Philosophy: Reflections on Arakawa and Gins

Jondi Keane and Evan Selinger

Introduction

From April 4th to April 6th 2008, 'Reversible Destiny: Declaration of the Right Not to Die, the Second International Arakawa and Gins, Architecture and Philosophy Conference/Congress' was held at the University of Pennsylvania and the Slought Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Philadelphia that sponsors public artistic, architectural, and theoretical presentations. The event was devoted to the oeuvre of Arakawa and Madeline Gins, and emphasis was placed on the philosophical dimensions of their architectural constructions and theory.

As the titles of both the conference and of this issue of *Footprint* suggest, creating a dialogue between architecture and philosophy (phenomenology in particular) can open each discipline to new dimensions and enable a theme common to both enterprises to be clarified—namely, the nature and scope of situated embodied action. To this end, Arakawa and Gins insist that interrogating embodiment in tactically-structured environments is especially promising; and two leading United States phenomenologists, Don Ihde and Shaun Gallagher, made meaningful contributions at the event.

This review essay is a partial overview of the conference. Our main goals are to clarify the key phenomenological issues that pervaded the event and to comment upon how the conference furthered Arakawa and Gins's conception of 'architecture-as-hypothesis'—that is, the use of architecture to pose questions in a 360 degree manner so as to study

the extent and complexity of a person. To accomplish these goals, we will proceed in four steps.

First, in order to help *Footprint's* readers appreciate why concentrated philosophical attention has been devoted to Arakawa and Gins, we will begin by presenting a background sketch of their past collaborations, making mention of their renowned 1997 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. Second, as a means of contextualising preliminary issues concerning space, cognition, and embodied activity, we will discuss the conference's unique approach to the usage of 'procedural architecture' as a laboratory to further philosophical research. In this context, we will pay special attention to the opening installation, 'Reading Room'. Third, we will offer an exegesis of select and primarily phenomenological presentations. Finally, we will conclude by outlining the new horizons of thought that the conference opened.

Background

The painter Shusaku Arakawa, a protégé of Marcel Duchamp, met the poet Madeline Gins in 1962 after which the two embarked on long-term projects, beginning with: 'The Mechanism of Meaning', a series of 67 body-wide puzzle-panels (1963-1973); 'The Bridge of Reversible Destiny' (1973-89); 'The Site of Reversible Destiny' park in Yoro, Japan (1993-95); 'The Reversible Destiny Office' for the Yoro park (1994-1996); 'The Bioscleave House', a residence in East Hampton, Long Island NY (completed in 2008); and 'Reversible Destiny Lofts' in Mitaka, Japan (completed in 2005). Their 'Architectural

Body Research Foundation' has generated fourteen books and numerous publications for magazines and journals.¹ Arakawa's exhibition record, Made-line Gins's publication record, and their collaborative work have earned them many prestigious awards in the USA, France, and Japan (where Arakawa is a national treasure).² Their overarching project draws upon many fields of inquiry from art, art criticism, phenomenology, linguistic analysis, urban studies, poetry, design, sociology, biotechnologies, cognitive science (neuro-sciences & neuro-physiology), to contemporary physics, embryology, evolutionary theory, ecology, Buddhist logics and architecture.³ These are not cursory engagements, but sustained exchanges and interactions within the spirit of the call to being all that a person can rally to the cause of being a person. Authors who have been attracted to their project and have written about their work include: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-François Lyotard, Italo Calvino, Arthur Danto, George Lakoff, Mark Taylor, Andrew Benjamin, Charles Bernstein, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Shaun Gallagher, Don Ihde, Jean-Jacques Lecercle (who organised the first international AG conference), and most recently Dorothea Olkowski, who was the keynote speaker at the Slought/University of Pennsylvania conference.

Procedural laboratory and applied phenomenology

To celebrate the work of Arakawa and Gins, the 'Reading Room', an exhibition on view at the Slought Foundation throughout the conference, did more than put their books on display for the public. It offered a series of posture- and movement-specific reading situations staged to help visitors sense for themselves how their activity (as bodies and as persons) relates to reading comprehension. Arts practitioner Jondi Keane invited the poet and theorist Alan Prohm, the phenomenologist/philosopher of cognitive science Shaun Gallagher and the artist Theo Lotz to think experimentally and environmentally when installing the texts of Arakawa

and Gins in the Slought Gallery. The exhibition consisted of nine works in which the space of the text and of thinking, so often dissociated from the space of the person doing these things, is produced through bodily interaction with the environment. By highlighting certain perceptual phenomena, these reading situations were presented in the same spirit of body-wide exploration that characterises the entirety of Arakawa and Gins's project.

Jondi Keane's three works consisted of text on curved plywood structures designed for three postures: standing, sitting and reclining. In each case a viewer would have to control and change his or her posture to read the text. For example, the reclining scenario required the person lying on the seesaw bed to steady him or herself in order to read the text behind his or her head in a mirror. Keane's works deployed structures from scientific experiments—studies on the effects of head posture and rotation of the torso, and on attention and judgement—in the spatial design of his reading scenarios.⁴ Keane's conference presentation discussed the tactical positioning of architectural features in Arakawa and Gins's built-environments. The positioning is tactical because it disrupts the way persons usually perceive space and spatial relationships in order to encourage experimentation in the way sensory perception is correlated. Keane concluded that, for Arakawa and Gins, the benefit of being able to observe perception and action rests in the extent to which it enables a person to initiate change.

Alan Prohm's works in the exhibition, as well as his conference presentation, focused on the advancement of 'landing site' theory through Arakawa and Gins's emphasis on the body's relationship to thought and that of language to the surroundings. He designed a room using a technique known as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitising and Reprocessing, developed by psychotherapists to help patients with troubling memories), in which a person is unable

to read the beginning and end of a sentence with both eyes (the left eye reads the first few words, and the right eye reads the last few words). As a result, the person will process the text across the two hemispheres of the brain more evenly. Prohm suggests that the type of reprocessing that occurs as a function of EMDR is consistent with the type of reprocessing that the writings and built-environments of Arakawa and Gins provoke.

Shaun Gallagher and Theo Lotz's contribution to the 'Reading Room' developed from Gallagher's main interest is in the 'pre-noetic' and the relationship of posture to comprehension. Their three works put readers into situations in which they had to acknowledge their own unawareness of the bodily responses that the passages articulated. One work consisted of a text that ran from the floor, up the walls and down again. A second text had to be read through a series of vertical blinds that seemingly caused the text to expand. A third text had the top half of some words erased and the bottom half of other words, so as to demonstrate which part is more crucial to reading the words (the top half is more crucial). In short, the works presented in the 'Reading Room' highlighted the complex relation between phenomenology and architecture.

Exegesis

The approach favoured by Arakawa and Gins resonates with William James's conception of 'radical empiricism' in their mutual refusal to appeal to abstractions when describing experience.⁵ James famously declared that 'I think' should be substituted with 'I breathe' to avoid imbuing consciousness with its own substance and separable status. Similarly, Arakawa and Gins signal the tentative nature of description by using new and sometimes opaque terms to designate body-wide processes, experiences and procedures, which they call 'terminological junctions'. For example, such terms as 'organism-person-surround', 'architectural body' and 'atmospheric intricateness' replace the Cartesian

mind-body split with phenomenological depictions of the integrated relationships that obtain between organisms and environments. Because language is one of the ways we hold the world in place, Arakawa and Gins's iconoclastic terms provoke readers to pause before re-entering habitual spaces of perception and action.

The conference sessions were organised around such concepts as 'landing sites' (tracking of our multi-sensory awareness as a function of site); 'reversible destiny' (the name of Arakawa and Gins's overall project, which refuses to foreclose on any idea no matter how impossible, even the idea of not dying); 'bioscleave' (biosphere with the substitution of verb cleaving –the action that both separates and joins– for the static noun sphere), and 'biotopology' (the science of emphasis and viability in which the activities that produce and sustain life are applied to the extension of life at all scales). Phenomenological inquiry, especially when considered in tandem with architecture, is crucial to the questions that Arakawa and Gins ask regarding the body and its person and in studying the degree to which they 'share events but not extent'.⁶

The conference allowed Arakawa and Gins to shift emphasis from theoretical discussions of their work towards the exigency of getting their ideas instantiated into new designs. The conference thus drew attention to ongoing projects, culminating in Jim Harithas's announcement that he would build an Arakawa and Gins's 'Reversible Destiny Hotel' or small community in Houston Texas, as well as discussions about the possibility of having an Arakawa and Gins-inspired Montessori school built in Grand Rapids, North Dakota, and the idea of Arakawa and Gins collaborating with Dr. Scott Faber to design a toxic-free environment that will enhance the treatment of autistic children. Finally, Jondi Keane provided an update on the possibility of Arakawa and Gins designing an experimental teaching space in Australia.

In light of these projects, presentations by the geneticist Stanley Shostak and the poet Don Byrd indicated the scope of Arakawa and Gins's work. Shostak noted that the medical advances against disease would not necessarily translate into an increased quality of life for our aging population. Statistics on changes in deathrates show a flattening of the statistical curve that indicates the projected increase in life-expectancy. Shostak described reversible destiny as a visionary architectural experiment in lifetime enhancement, ameliorating the sequelae of old age, and expanding youthful living. He asserted that their procedural approach would promote the evolution of youthful longevity by allowing individuals and communities to shape our biological niche. From a very different perspective, Byrd arrived at much the same conclusion. He argued that Arakawa and Gins's project increases the number of ways we can think about our lived experience. He observed that, unlike the way abstractions have been deployed in Western history as universal concepts, Arakawa and Gins always direct abstract thinking towards singular experiences. Shostak and Byrd suggested that Arakawa and Gins give us the tools to think concretely and abstractly about how we might shape a new evolutionary niche.

The renowned American phenomenologist Don Ihde had given presentations at several previous Arakawa and Gins events. During past talks, such as 'The Ultimate Phenomenological Reduction', Ihde discussed the phenomenological dimensions of Arakawa and Gins's collaborations, emphasizing how their creative artefacts, both two- and three- dimensional, are structured so as to exhibit 'multi-stabilities' and 'reversibilities'. In drawing parallels between the phenomenologist's reliance on 'variational method' to discern the richness of lifeworld phenomena and Arakawa and Gins's proclivity towards using ambiguous paintings and 'architectural surrounds' to help their audiences better appreciate the richness of cognition and perception, Ihde has demonstrated how the field of

embodied epistemology can make significant gains when philosophers, artists, and procedural architects work together as interdisciplinary partners.

From Ihde's perspective, the styles exhibited by all three types of investigators can illuminate the extent to which embodied action (and not 'belief' or 'representation', as intellectualist explanations posit) provides the existential ground for a range of perceptual and cognitive interactions with things. In this context, Ihde has shown how Arakawa and Gins enrich our understanding of embodiment in a way that simply is not available to the discipline of philosophy. As students and professionals alike know, philosophy is mostly a discursive enterprise. Even phenomenologists have to leave lived experience to confront it through their favoured medium, writing. Moreover, phenomenologists are limited to discursive and (comparatively speaking) visually minimal cues to change how their readers experience the world.

In Ihde's contribution to the present conference, he discussed the possibility that animals may be a hidden and ironic inspiration for Arakawa and Gins, even though they conspicuously are missing from discussions of their architecture. To illustrate this point, Ihde analysed what Arakawa and Gins call 'landing sites' from the perspective of self-righting cats. It turns out that because of a cat's capacity to stretch out and relax at terminal velocity, a high percentage of them can survive falls from high-rise buildings. Given this extraordinary ability to overcome obstacles that would lead to death for others, Ihde suggested that the challenges to equilibrium posed by Arakawa and Gins's architecture may be usefully thought of as a phenomenological training-ground for humans to learn to cope with obstacles in animal-like ways.

As a supplement to Ihde's presentation, Evan Selinger also reflected on how animals, architecture, and embodiment relate. In this context,

Selinger began by identifying the central features of one of Arakawa and Gins's central ideas. At a meta-philosophical level, he noted that five central ideas circumscribe Arakawa and Gins's conception of 'landing sites': (1) a monist metaphysics; (2) an epistemology that privileges embodied action and perception; (3) an anti-essentialist understanding of identity; (4) a porous conception of embodiment that inextricably links organism and environment through processes of co-constitution; and (5) an experimental conception of extended embodiment that accounts for both transparent as well as disruptive extensions of the 'body proper' within architectural surrounds. Focusing on (5), Selinger clarified how both traditional phenomenology and functionalist philosophy of mind exclusively focus on transparent bodily extensions and thereby obscure a range of experiences that Arakawa and Gins target.

Classical phenomenologists, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, as well as contemporary figures, such as Hubert Dreyfus, emphasise how the intentionality relation called 'practical coping' enables us to experience artefacts, ranging from a blind man's cane to an expert driver's car, as prosthetic extensions of the self that fail to be adequately depicted by philosophies that rigidly demarcate 'subject' from 'object' and 'self' from 'other'. The functionalist philosophy that Andy Clark advocates with his 'extended mind thesis',⁷ appeals to the 'parity principle' in order to posit that the human mind extends into the world whenever it makes habitual and reliable use of artefacts that minimise the cognitive expense of processing information. From this perspective, an Alzheimer's patient who becomes dependent on scribbling ideas in a notebook, and the average person who becomes dependent on entering ideas into a computer, both count as cases in which 'mind' is a hybrid bio-synthetic system.

In short, phenomenologists and functionalists treat cars, canes, notebooks, and computers as

extensions of the embodied mind, because these technologies recede into the background of experiential perception and consciousness. Due to the mutual emphasis on transparency and seamlessness, neither tradition adequately addresses the disruptive ways in which the architectural body or organism-person-surround of Arakawa and Gins help us think through the structure of such a disruptive extension.

Selinger turned to Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*,⁸ a work of political phenomenology that has been underappreciated by the philosophical community. Reconstructing Canetti's account of how the pre-modern Bushmen of the Kalahari were so attuned to embodied epistemology and pre-cognitive awareness that they could perceive others—people and animals—within their own bodies as viscerally simulated existences, Selinger raised the question of whether Arakawa and Gins's architecture can provide us with a unique opportunity to engage with material culture. He suggested that it might enable us to experience rich but shocking transformations of extended embodiment that resonate with the experiences that the Bushmen attest to. This possibility is important, Selinger insisted, because the contemporary mind is inclined to dismiss the Bushmen's special relation to animals as an instance of error rooted in primitivism.

Shaun Gallagher appealed to phenomenological insights to clarify one way in which Arakawa and Gins's 'declaration of the right not to die' might be understood as a moral imperative. Gallagher began by noting that, despite his phenomenological sensitivity, Heidegger's celebrated analysis of 'being-unto-death' in his early *Being and Time* was insufficiently attuned to experiential nuance. Like Medieval theologians who demarcated angels from humans by appealing to the body as a principle of individuation, Heidegger's ontological inquiry into death remained too focused on individuals trying to achieve authenticity. As a counter-point to this

emphasis on subjectivity, Gallagher drew inspiration from Werner Marx's idea that intersubjectivity is the non-otherworldly basis for ethics.⁹ There is an intersubjective responsibility in the fact that we all must face death, and in the attempt to keep ourselves alive. In this context, Gallagher stressed that from birth humans are embodied, and that even our basic incarnate existence is structured in a manner that enables us to perceive and communicate significance.

More specifically, from the start most of us cannot help but experience meaning in and through intentionality relations that attune us to other people's gestures, movements, and expressions. Such a capacity, Gallagher claimed, is not thought of as merely one ability amongst others. Rather, the capacity to see and convey meaning in action is the bedrock of direct experience. Direct experience is crucial because it reveals the thoughts and feelings that other embodied minds experience. As mirror neuron studies suggest, direct experience enables us to engage in coping without recourse to cognitively expensive representations. From an evolutionary perspective, this short-cut to other minds is crucial. Indeed, human survival value is enhanced through our capacity for direct attunement. Direct attunement helps us deal with infantile dependency and reproductive needs, and it provides us with a means to perceive and avoid danger.

Gallagher related these observations about the primacy of intersubjectivity to Arakawa and Gins's collaborations, by suggesting that their strategy of using architecture to combat death can be understood as an existential intervention that touches at the very basis of an idea central to Heidegger's later philosophy, namely, 'dwelling'. For, if architecture can be conceived of as a process of innovation that creates designs for living together, and maintaining life, then it deserves to be understood as, constitutively speaking, having ethical as well as aesthetic dimensions.

New Horizons

Many of the scholarly presentations at the conference attempted to construct new relations between disciplinary modes of thought and the trans-disciplinary mode of experiencing that 'reversible destiny' offers. While many tools of analysis were relevant, we conclude by suggesting that the most useful scholarly engagements with Arakawa and Gins's work are ones sensitive to phenomenological insights. The articulation of experience, especially the experience of unanticipated confluences of perception, sensation, thought and memory, may open the door to more inclusive research. Arakawa and Gins suggest that the production of new horizons will require a reformulation of life as daily research that does not take place in a laboratory or a library, but in-situ, where living happens.¹⁰ For Arakawa and Gins the organism–person-surround is segmented by awareness and by emphasis. By bringing phenomenology and architecture into closer proximity, the process by which we may transform the world also moves within reach.

Notes

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- Arakawa and Edgar Allen Poe, *Eureka*, foreword by Glen Ray Todd and prints by Arakawa (San Francisco: Arion Press, 1991).
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2. See www.reversibledestiny.org
 3. Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Introduction to Interfaces Arakawa and Gins Special Issue', *INTERFACES: Architecture Against Death/ Architecture Contre la Mort*, 1, 21/22 (2003), pp. 5-9 (p. 6).
 4. For this see, Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), p. 9.
 5. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
 6. Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Architecture: Sites of Reversible Destiny*, ed. by A. Benjamin (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p. 68.
 7. Andy Clark, *Mindware: an introduction to the philosophy of cognitive science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 8. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984).

9. For this see Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, p. 9.

10. Madeline Gins and Arakawa, *Architectural Body* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. xxi.

Bibliography

Jondi Keane is an arts practitioner and critical thinker and Senior Lecturer at Griffith University in Australia. Over the last 25 years, Dr. Keane has exhibited, performed and published in the USA, UK, Europe and AUS. His multidisciplinary research on embodiment has taken the form of the publication of essay in *Janus Head* Issue 9.2, 2007, the current issue of *Ecological Psychology Journal*, forthcoming volumes *Deleuze: Image and Text* and *Arakawa and Gins: Philosophy and Architecture* and a collection on applying practice-led research - as well as producing creative outcomes such as the *READING ROOM* installation at the Slought Foundation/ UPenn, April 2008 and *Tuning Fork* performances at Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Art, Nov. 2008. Dr. Keane is currently working on a book on the artists-turned-architects Arakawa and Gins..

Evan Selinger is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Rochester Institute of Technology, USA. His research focuses on phenomenology and the philosophies of technology and science. Recent publications include several edited and co-edited books: *Chasing Technosciences: Matrix for Materiality*; *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*; *The Philosophy of Expertise*; *Five Questions: Philosophy of Technology*; *New Waves in Philosophy of Technology*; and *Rethinking Theories and Practices of Imaging*.

