

**THE POET AS THE WORLD:
THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL POETICS OF ARAKAWA AND MADELINE GINS**

*Forgetting mind, its complications,
My hand is free; The All appears.
I use devices, simultaneously.
Look—a halo penetrates the Void.*

(Zen Masters qtd. in Madeline Gins,
Helen Keller or Arakawa 160)

Arakawa’s “blank” and the poetics of the negative mystic

In June 1997, the first major US exhibition of the collaborative art of Arakawa and Madeline Gins, entitled *Reversibly Destiny*, opened at the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo. It featured two ongoing projects, *The Mechanism of Meaning*—a cycle of paintings, diagrams and words-in-painting begun in 1963—and a separate section devoted to their more recent experimental architectural sites. These works-in-progress represent the two main “phases” of Arakawa and Gins’s career up to the present day. Whereas the visual puzzles and language games of *The Mechanism of Meaning* concentrate on themes of representation, perception, and cognition (and can therefore be seen as a continuation of Arakawa’s conceptual drawings and collages from the early 1960s), the *Reversible Destiny* sites address the question of how art can enact what Samira Kawash recently described as an attempt to “multipl[y] and complexif[y] the ways in which the body engages with architectural surround” (17).

These projects hold in common both a rejection of the notion that art should be the vehicle of self-expression and an emphasis on works that stimulate the viewer’s participation in the creation of meaning through interactive experiments. Building upon the Kantian insight that reality largely amounts to our awareness of it, the mixed media panels of *The Mechanism of Meaning* create an art that combines linguistic and visual stimuli as well as various forms of concrete and near-concrete poetry in order to explore a modern awareness that personal experiences and concepts of reality are biased due to the relative position of the observer and to the mental processing of sensations. Central to this project is what Arakawa and Gins call “blank.” I will first concentrate on the ways in which this terms plays out in Arakawa’s early solo work. On the surface, the notion of “blank” is reflected in Arakawa’s use of isolated words and fragmented narratives interrupted by gaps, silences, and empty spaces, which testifies to a Beckettian desire to build an art of emptiness and “less-

ness.” But the more specific relevance of “blank” to contemporary aesthetics and poetics is best examined in the context of an early “minimalist” painting of Arakawa entitled *Landscape* (1968) (*Reversible* 34).¹

Landscape comprises a number of dots labeled by means of arrows and familiar objects as well as two empty boxes, signaling the presence of empty signifiers that nonetheless seem to designate an unnamed object. Those two boxes point to the existence of a pre-verbal state that precedes the creation of meaningful, fixed relationships between words and objects, self and world.² In the context of Arakawa’s *Landscape*, “blank” would thus not seem to denote emptiness *per se*, but rather “an event preceding language”: a pre-linguistic, pre-signifying state which potentially coordinates our experience (*Reversible* 134). According to critic Dagmar Buchwald, blank “denotes by approximation that which precedes and underlies all thought, action and perception and cannot be directly thought, acted, or perceived” (*Reversible* 26). Gins and Arakawa together have described “blank” as a “neutral positing—in the sense of holding it open; it is what is there but undifferentiated, so it is not nothing [...]. It is what fills emptiness” (36). In Arakawa’s 1982 painting, “Blank Dots,” such a pre-forming space is described primarily as an image-forming process, a “FORMING BLANK... OUT OF WHICH UNRECOGNIZABLE PLACES JUMP, SHAPING VOLUMES INTO IMAGES” (27).

There are a number of connecting lines between Rosmarie Waldrop’s definition of the “negative mystic” and Arakawa and Gins’s notion of the blank as an inchoate state of (pre-) consciousness that is neither meaningless nor meaningful, neither nothing nor something. Waldrop uses the term “negative mystic” to refer to modern and contemporary poets “whose terminology and whose efforts towards a transcendence put them in a mystical tradition,” a tradition in which “the meaningful joins the meaningless, and the scientist the mystic.” Meister Eckhart’s famous insight, “Gott ist Nichts,” provides the conceptual ground of such negative aesthetics, which is based on the recognition that “the absolute is also the void” (Waldrop, *Against Language?* 17). Yet most of the poets she has in mind “are not mystics in the normal sense of the word; they are at best ‘negative,’ or perhaps abstract mystics, since the transcendence they try to explore is not God, but the void [itself]” (17).

Among modern poets, Waldrop reminds us, Stéphane Mallarmé claimed to have created his work “only by elimination... all acquired truth being born only from the loss of an impression,” and was one of the first artists to conceive of the poem as an approximation to the void of silence (the “poème tu, aux blancs”) and an expression of the “Nothing which is the truth” (18):

Language, even when it denies all earthly objects, still stands in front of the nothing. Even the word “nothing” is still a word, and therefore still something. But since the silent poem is not possible, Mallarmé has to make do with approximations: such as to negate every object as soon as it is named and, more important, to dislocate French syntax. This has two functions: it obscures meaning which, too, hides the void

¹ See Delville, fig. a (landscape_1968.jpg).

² “Dots can stand for things.” (*Keller* 128).

which is the truth. And it gives an impression of disjunction and fragmentation which Mallarmé welcomes. For fragments approach the Nothing and are therefore “preuves nuptiales de l’Idée.” (18)³

Mallarmé’s conception of the blank space of the page as what Waldrop calls “a kind of abstract void, a void of pure spirit,” and his exploration of silence as “an empty transcendence” enable him to create paradoxical objects, which are denied as soon as they are named (one is reminded here of his “absent tombeau,” “aboli bibelot,” and “vols qui n’ont pas fui”) (21). Similarly, Arakawa’s *Landscape* prompts a heightened, reenergized attentiveness and inventiveness on the part of the reader/viewer, who must make sense of a paradoxical diagram that signifies both the physical absence and the nominal presence of the “object” described.

Helen Keller and the architectural body

The Poet as the World.

(Madeline Gins, *What the President Will Say and Do!* IX)

The implications of the “blank” for Gins’s own poetic project can be further explored in the context of her reading of the life of the deaf and blind Helen Keller whose autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1902), has been extremely important to the development of Gins’s phenomenological aesthetics. Helen Keller (1880-1968), who lost her sight and hearing at the age of nineteen months, recovered an ability to perceive her environment through the sense of touch. Thanks to the manual alphabet that her tutor, Anne Mansfield Sullivan—herself partially blind—began to teach Helen just before her seventh birthday, she was able to attend Radcliffe College, manually communicating through the hands of Mrs. Sullivan, who remained at her side during lectures.

In *Helen Keller or Arakawa* (1994), Gins attempts to describe the process of Keller’s modes of perception through the intermingling trajectories of her own poetry, Arakawa’s art and Keller’s journal entries. In the absence of direct visual and auditory stimuli, the development of Keller’s consciousness and identity is carried out with the help of her three remaining senses, but also, and above all, through language. Helen Keller herself described the awakening of the “strange, new sight that had come to her” as a result of her learning language. “Everything had a name,” she writes, “and each name gave birth to a new thought [...], every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life” (qtd. in *Reversible* 21). In Gins’s theory, this leads to an interpretation of Helen Keller as a “living canvas” whose inability to see or hear pushes her to construct “the world anew each day” (177). More generally, Helen Keller’s life provides Arakawa and Gins with an extreme case of coordination between person, body, and world that is directed towards the re-creation of that world.

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Architectural body: reversible destiny sites and the poetic subject

Arakawa and Gins's interest in Helen Keller's life as a continuing experiment in living and being in the world was one of the major sources of inspiration for the architectural projects they developed in the early 1990s. What remains essentially a thought experiment in *The Mechanism of Meaning* becomes an entire philosophy of life in the *Reversible Destiny* projects. In this trajectory, Arakawa and Gins's multidiscursive approach gives way to a truly multidimensional "thinking/feeling field." *The Site of Reversible Destiny*, completed in Yoro, Japan, in 1995, comprises artificial terrains, labyrinths, gardens, walls, paths, as well as a series of strangely-shaped, gravity-defying buildings that seem to challenge the predictable flat areas and vertical walls of our everyday reality. The result is a kind of multilevel, three-dimensional Cubist labyrinth that attempts to disorient walkers in their most basic conceptions of perception and space. Such sites sometimes require visitors to execute conflicting instructions (such as following, at the same time, two or three arrows that move in opposite directions), and urge them to keep their bodies "in a state of imbalance for as long as possible," making simple actions like standing or walking unbalanced by the unpredictability of the artificial landscape (*Reversible* 209).

One of the most important considerations in dealing with architecture on this level is establishing the boundaries of self and world: "to what degree the world that envelops a person's body belongs to that body and is in some way integral to its functioning has not yet been determined [...]. Where does person leave off and world begin, or, indeed, does this happen?" ("Person as Site" 58). In order to investigate those issues, Arakawa and Gins often require the viewer to touch, operate, and, in the case of the Reversible Destiny site, even inhabit the work of art. Like Diderot and D'Alembert before them (see their entries on "The Blind" and "The Apparent Distance of Objects" in the *Encyclopaedia*), Gins and Arakawa believe in the necessary interaction of the senses of sight and touch in the apprehension of external objects, especially the perception of distance, depth or relief. By literally drawing us into the work of art, the sites of reversible destiny place particular emphasis on the trajectories of self and body in the hope of revealing alternative ways of understanding and acting in the world.

The central premise of Arakawa and Gins's reversible destiny sites is that architecture assumes an unavoidable responsibility in the structuring of the self. Acting as an outer skin dictating our behavior, beliefs and perceptions, architecture influences our physical and mental abilities to interact with reality at large. Instead of "consuming" architecture, Arakawa and Gins argue, we should be "involved [...] in a process of self-invention" (*Reversible* 2).⁴ As I have suggested, such an attitude presupposes a willingness to relinquish normative modes of apprehending space and time. In Arakawa and Gins's theoretical writings about reversible destiny sites, the question arises of how our potential for perceiving the world can be augmented or maximalized.

⁴ There is also a moral and political concern underlying Gins and Arakawa's reversible destiny sites that is linked with the artists' conviction that "those who cease being passive in relation to architecture are less likely to be cruel and murderous" (*Reversible* 246).

By multiplying the perceptive vectors by which we organize our experience, reversible destiny sites seek to account for the fact that “the fabric of the world equals all a person presently perceives plus all she believes she perceives or believes herself to have ever perceived plus all she might perceive” (*Reversible* 146).

In the description of one of their experimental houses—of which more will be said later—Arakawa and Gins write that the building “accommodates the body’s endless desire to draw close to and be in rapport with virtually everything” (qtd. in Piombino, n. pag.). Reversible destiny sites urge us to reach beyond the bounds of ordinary perception—which involves the selection of details, the primacy of the visual, the separation of body and mind, the privileging of a particular point of view, and the imposition of a linear continuity on the real—in order to embrace a multiplicity of “landing sites,” or the places where the body interacts with the object perceived.

Clearly, Arakawa and Gins’s blank—the prime moving principle behind all the sites of reversible destiny—does not result so much from “a process of elimination” (Mallarmé’s favorite method) as from what Charles Bernstein describes as “a confounding by multiplication” (*Content’s Dream* 192). Such a process enacts a radical transformation of the self through a new coordination of the senses. Ideally, Arakawa and Gins’s reversible destiny sites should enable the visitors to the sites to “[become] increasingly able to field an ever greater number of possibilities” in a way that would eventually teach us “how to live as a maximally invigorated sensorium” (*Reversible* 11, 241). In this respect, Arakawa and Gins’s ideal reader/viewer resembles the protagonist of Borges’s short story, “Funes, the Memorious” (1942), who in falling from a horse acquired a capacity for total recall.

Ireneo Funes perceives and remembers everything, not just the particulars of the world around him, but literally everything he has thought of, experienced, or imagined:

A circumference on a blackboard, a rectangular triangle, a rhomb, are forms which we can fully intuit; the same held true with Ireneo for the tempestuous mane of a stallion, a herd of cattle in a pass, the ever-changing flame of the innumerable ash, the many faces of a dead man during the course of a protracted wake. He could perceive I do not know how many stars in the sky. (Ficciones 112)

However, the state of total awareness that characterizes Funes’s consciousness paradoxically entails a number of psychological and intellectual limitations. Indeed, he is “almost incapable of general, platonic ideas.” It is not only difficult for him “to understand that the generic term dog embrace[s] so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms,” he is even “disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front).” Finally, he finds it very difficult to fall asleep because “to sleep is to be abstracted from the world”! Towards the end of the story, Borges’s narrator issues a warning: “the truth is that we all live by leaving behind,” which is to say that a certain degree of selection, generalization, and abstraction is necessary to the psychological survival of the individual. Funes, who lives in a world in which “there [are] nothing but details, almost contiguous details” (115), is a helpless individual whose refusal of categorization and naive commitment to an anti-Platonic form of realism leaves him intensely vulnerable and incapable of coping with the endless detail and variety of the physical world.

Gins and Arakawa would probably reject such common-sensical objections, and reply that reversible destiny sites are first and foremost about the suggestion, recognition, definition, and reconfiguration of more possibilities within a constructed space. Indeed, the multiplication of perceptual landing sites is above all a means to an end, a necessary step towards an understanding of “how it is possible to be a body, or a sensorium, and what goes into forming a person” (*Reversible* 241). As we will see, reversible destiny does not amount to a rejection of abstraction but, rather, strives towards the attainment of a “stretchable” abstraction (*Keller* 261), liable to effect the physical and spiritual transformation of the individual and thereby “engage questions of existence more intensely” (*Reversible* 241). Lastly, reversible destiny also has to do with what is probably one of the most extraordinary proposals ever put forward in the history of Western aesthetics, one which is meant to conduct nothing less than a “frontal attack on mortality itself” (*Reversible* 313).

Reversible destiny

WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE.

(Arakawa and Madeline Gins)

In order to fully appreciate the nature of Arakawa and Gins’s project “to construct sensoria that will elude mortality” (*Keller* 238), it is helpful first to consider the following examples of experimental houses. Designed by Arakawa and Gins to expand the limits of the human mind and body, these houses attempt to reverse the parameters ruling our experience of time and space. In “Rotation House,” one of the experimental houses devised in the context of the Reversible Destiny project, the five different rotations of the rooms make the rooms appear to be different in size and in form even though their size and form are identical. The rooms, Gins and Arakawa conclude, “act as spatial anagrams” of each other. As the residents move from one room into another, the performance and repetition of actions within the “living space” inevitably become estranged from themselves. The residents are “struck by how the same features appear different or remain to some degree the same from one rotated version of the room to another” (*Reversible* 283). Another example of such anagrammatic reversibility is the doubling of rooms in the “Twin House” (304), a construction in which, next to every room, is “a twin [room] with identical layout but oppositely pitched terrain” (270). Because the two halves of the building consist of identical walls and enclosures, juxtaposed at different angles of perspective, the residents know “that an action performed in one part of the house might equally well have been performed in another.” By dislocating the notion of the uniqueness of our actions and individuality, the twin house “makes the course of events seem less inevitable and surely less weighty.” Eventually, the doubling of walls and rooms effected by the “Twin House” results in the doubling of the self, altering our sense of being in a way that enables us to transfer our lives and actions into those of phantom *doppelgängers* occupying the other half of the house.

One necessary condition for this “doubling” of the self is a readiness to “neutralize” one’s subjectivity.⁵ “No longer needing to have a personality,” Arakawa and Gins write, the residents of their experimental houses “adopt a wait-and-see policy toward themselves” (*Reversible* 55). But the dissolution (or suspension) of personality required by reversible destiny houses does not imply the death of the subject, nor does it have to lead to a dissociation from outer reality. On the contrary, it calls for a heightened attention towards one’s surroundings while it simultaneously reaffirms the importance of the notion of proprioception. Proprioception, or the body’s knowledge of its own depth, texture and placement, is an awareness that in Charles Olson’s writings determines how to use oneself and on what. In the symmetrical environment of the 70-foot long cylindrical “Architectural Body” entitled *Ubiquitous Site* (1992-94),⁶ which now makes up an essential part of the Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan, the central notion is once again the possibility for the proprioceptive self to “supplant identity” (189). The visitor to *Ubiquitous Site*, having lost balance and traditional bearing, is invited upon entering the symmetrically organized cylindrical building to “cast the little that remains of its identity as a person, outside itself.” Since for Arakawa and Gins the body of a visitor cannot be separated from the space it occupies, that body coordinates itself with an “architectural body” that seems to exist both within and outside the bounds of subjectivity. Such a notion aims to blur the boundaries of traditional divisions between past, present, and future, as well as between self and community, and ultimately between life and death: “‘Beginning,’ ‘past,’ ‘future,’ ‘I,’ ‘me,’ and ‘you,’” the artists write, “are all words that have no place in this process. They are superfluous” (189). The avowed desire of the artists is to “escape the mortal condition” (*LINEbreak*). At this stage, it has become obvious that Arakawa and Gins’s projects have more affinities with philosophy and cognitive psychology than with any modern tradition of art and architecture. As Samira Kawash remarks, both *The Mechanism of Meaning* and *Reversible Destiny Architecture* are conceived as “experimental apparatuses or interactive technologies rather than as formal or aesthetic expressions” (20). “Medium and form,” she concludes, “are secondary to a process of inquiry that is engaged in and carried out through the reader/viewer/participant/inhabitant’s interactions with the painting, page, or spatial surround” (20-21).

Arakawa and Gins’s attempts to abolish the basic categories that guide the subject’s awareness of itself can be usefully compared with Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, in which he lays the ground for a redefinition of contemporary social theory based on an analysis of symbolic exchange and its effects on the rituals of death. In his chapter on “Political Economy and Death,” Baudrillard argues that the way we relate to death largely depends on a “disjunctive code” that prevents us from thinking otherwise than by subscribing to such dichotomies as “mind and body, man and nature, the real and the non-real, birth and death” (205). Accor-

⁵ In *Helen Keller or Arakawa*, Madeline Gins quotes a “practical mystic” (257), the Zen master Dogen (1200-1253), for whom the rational mind of scholars “fail[s] to understand the flowers of emptiness, because of their ignorance of emptiness” (269). For the Zen Buddhist, the awareness of emptiness is facilitated by a capacity to cancel one’s subjectivity in order to open oneself to new ways of contemplating our environment. Such a conception links up with what *The Mechanism of Meaning* describes as the “neutralization of subjectivity” a process by which the subject divests itself from the most central beliefs conditioning our subjective modes of interpretation (*Reversible* 55).

⁶ See Delville, fig. b (*Ubiquitous.jpg*).

ding to Baudrillard, such a disjunction does not exist in certain “primitive” societies where death is conceived as part of the community’s symbolic circulation. In contemporary Western societies, however, the dead are no longer “beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange.” “Death,” Baudrillard concludes, has become “a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy” (126):

There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist. They are thrown out of the group’s symbolic circulation. [...] In the domestic intimacy of the cemetery, the first grouping remains in the heart of the village or town, becoming the first ghetto, prefiguring every future ghetto, but are thrown further and further from the center towards the periphery, finally having nowhere to go at all, as in the new town or the contemporary metropolis, where there are no longer any provisions for the dead, either in mental or in physical space. (126)

Baudrillard then examines Robert Jaulin’s anthropological study of ancestral initiation rites and Marcel Mauss’s writings on the potlach (a Native American ceremonial festival involving the exchanging or destruction of gifts and counter-gifts), and concludes that those rites establish “a reciprocal relationship between the ancestors and the living” (131). In the “primitive” order described in Jaulin’s *La Mort Sara*, for example, the group has to “swallow” the young initiation candidates, who “die ‘symbolically’ in order to be reborn” (131):

It is clear that the initiation consists in an exchange being established where there had been only a brute fact: they pass from natural, aleatory and irreversible death to a death that is given and received, and that is therefore reversible in the social exchange. [...] At the same time the opposition between birth and death disappears: they can also be exchanged under the form of symbolic reversibility. (132)

It is not, Baudrillard writes, a matter of “staging a second birth to eclipse death.” What is at stake instead in these initiation rites is the possibility for “the splitting of life and death” to be “conjured away” by the power of the “revolutionary” symbolic, defined as “neither a concept, an agency, nor a ‘structure,’ but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary” (132-33). This suggests “a possible reversibility of death in exchange,” a possibility confirmed by the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts in Mauss’s analysis of potlach (147). Baudrillard’s reading of Sara initiation rites also interprets initiation as “the social nexus, the darkroom where birth and death stop being the terms of life and twist into one another again; not towards some mythical fusion, but [...] to turn the initiate into a real social being” (132). In *Helen Keller or Arakawa*, Madeline Gins also criticizes the Western world’s privileging of individualism over communality in a society encouraging what Baudrillard defines as the “extradition of the dead and the rupturing of a symbolic exchange with them” (127). She insists on the centrality of the “communal nature of self-consciousness” which is lacking in the non-East, “except among American Indians” (*Keller* 176). For Gins, as for Baudrillard, one way of counteracting the effects of the ghettoization of the dead is to search for a communal basis for conscious life established through a new social and architectural space. Gins and Arakawa’s project for a “City without Graveyards” is one such space.

Poetic reversibility

In the closing chapter of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard designates the poetic as the supreme example of the principle of symbolic reversibility. Baudrillard's definition of the poetic is inspired by Saussure's "law of the coupling," according to which the principle of symmetry and repetition at work in Saturnian poetry results in the mutual annihilation of phonemes (195). These phonemes are consumed by the "cycle of redoubling" which allows each vowel to be abolished by its "anagrammatic double" (236).⁷ Baudrillard begins with the assertion that there is some analogy between the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts in ancestral cultures, and between the principle of the vowel and counter-vowel in Saussure's study of Saturnian poetics, or as he puts it, "between any given signifier and the anagrammatic double that cancels it" (236). From this connection, Baudrillard develops a theory for which the poetic is a paroxistic form of symbolic exchange in which, to quote Julia Kristeva, "logical laws of speech have been weakened, the subject dissolves and, in place of the sign, the clash of signifiers eliminating each other is instituted" (qtd. in Baudrillard 340).

For Baudrillard, this principle of poetic reversibility is applicable not only to Saussure's Saturnian verses but to modern poetry as a whole. Like Kristeva before him, he posits "the ambivalence of the poetic signified (and not its mere ambiguity)" as follows:

[I]t is concrete and general at the same time, it includes both (logical) affirmation and negation, it announces the simultaneity of the possible and the impossible; far from postulating the "concrete versus the general," it explodes this conceptual break: bivalent logic (0/1) is abolished by ambivalent logic [...]. The negativity of the poetic is a radical negativity bearing on the logic of judgment itself. Something "is" and is not what it is: a utopia (in the literal sense) of the signified. The thing's self-equivalence is volatilized. Thus the poetic signified is the space where "Non-Being intertwines with Being in a thoroughly disconcerting manner." (219)

But the antithetical sense Baudrillard and Kristeva regard as one of the central properties of poetry is by no means exclusively associated with poetic language. Rather, poetry only foregrounds and systematizes an element of reversible ambivalence which is inherent in language itself. According to nineteenth-century philologist Karl Abel, early Indo-European and Semitic languages have many words that simultaneously mean one

⁷ Saussure's "law of the coupling" posits that "a vowel has no right to figure within the Saturnine unless it has its counter-vowel in some other place in the verse... The result of this is that if the verse has an even number of syllables, the vowels couple up exactly, and must always have a remainder of zero, with an even total for each type of vowel." "The law of consonants," Saussure writes, "is identical, and no less strict: there is always an even number of any consonants whatever." Finally, the "Law of the Theme Word" states that "entire verses [are] anagrams of other preceding verses, however far off, in the text" so that "polyphonies visually reproduce, when the occasion arises, the syllables of an important word or name, whether they figure in the text or present themselves naturally to the mind through the context" (Saussure and Starobinski qtd. in Baudrillard 195-96).

thing and its opposite.⁸ The Ancient Egyptian word for strong (*ken*), for example, was also the word for weak, and it was only by means of an additional sign or a gesture that one could distinguish the two sides of the antithesis. Abel's theories were later rediscovered by Freud, who, in his review of Abel's essay, "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," argues that "man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposites." It is only gradually, moreover, that he "learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other" (187). Freud cites further examples of antithetical meanings, including the Latin word *altus* (meaning both high and deep) and the German *Boden* (meaning both attic and ground floor), and eventually concludes with Abel's discovery that many words from the Aryan and Semitic languages originally could "reverse their sound as well as their sense" (the examples he cites include the pairs *Topf*, German for pot and hurry, and *Ruhe*, German for rest as well as care, and its archaic near-synonym *reck* (190).

This reversible principle of sonic and semantic, phonemic and morphemic, has notable affinities with the inverted and modified symmetries of Gins and Arakawa's anagrammatic houses. More specifically, the reversible bipolarities that characterize *Twin House* and *Ubiquitous Site* appear as a three-dimensional conceptual extension of Arakawa and Gins's concept of "cleaving"—itself an "antithetical" word, since it signifies both "to part or divide" and "to adhere closely"—a notion systematically explored in "Splitting of Meaning," the seventh section of *The Mechanism of Meaning*. In the panel entitled "This Is About to Split," a series of dots and pinheads point to basic "body-schemas" such as head, neck, thorax, arm, pelvis, forearm, hand, thigh, leg, and foot (*Reversible* 77).⁹ George Lakoff has furthermore defined these "body-schemas" as elemental universal structures we automatically and unconsciously use to structure a mental image of a thing or scene perceived (*Reversible* 118). Each "body-schema" word is associated with handwritten words like "sky," "sun," "mountain," or "ship," thereby building unusual pairs of signifiers whose combination opens up new possibilities of meaning.

If the semantic junction between the printed and the handwritten words often remains "unnatural" (the main exception, of course, being the combinations created by "LEG/leg" and "shoes/FOOT"), a hierarchical pattern is reestablished by the corollary likeliness of body and landscape (the sky whose superior position in the landscape is associated with the HEAD, the NECK with the sun, etc.). Lastly, the juxtaposition of printed/stenciled and handwritten words is indicative of the uneasy interaction between the gestural and the mechanical in the act of naming and reproducing the real. The final reference to "moving property" is ambiguous. Does it serve as an additional reminder that the act of naming may result in the (mis-)appropriation of "moving" objects through language? Is it supposed to warn us against the danger of the reification and commodification of the painting or of the unnamed and unseen individual (the viewer?) that is doing the "talking" and the

⁸ Here, I am indebted to Ben Watson's book, *Art, Class, and Cleavage*, which first drew my attention to Karl Abel's theories.

⁹ See Delville, fig. c ([this_aboutto_split.jpg](#)).

“walking,” and who may well eventually become a “moving property”? Or are the implications of this pun-chline more positive in prefiguring the transformed self that emerges from the process of the “splitting of meaning”?

Other exercises in the cleaving of meaning include a panel that instructs the viewer to “SAY one” and “THINK two,” and the following post-Magrittean illustration of the reversibility of visual and verbal signs/bidirectional arrows (*Reversible* 77, 93).¹⁰ One is again reminded of Mallarmé’s paradoxical objects (“absent tombeau,” “aboli bibelot”) as well as Waldrop’s more recent suggestion that poetry should strive for an “excluded middle” located between right and wrong (left and right, back and front,...), which are inscribed in the double aspect of the sign even as it attempts to deconstruct it.¹¹ The aim of such visual and verbal paradoxes is to encourage us to put the ambivalence of the (poetic) sign to direct use and extend it to address how we can combat the irreversibility of our perception of space-time and our use of language by neutralizing the deadening effects of habit and repetition.

In light of the architectural experiments described above, one can easily see that Arakawa and Gins’s claim that their sites enact the “possibility of a nonmortal human life” is not to be taken in a metaphorical sense only (*Reversible* 313). The implications of this project, however, are left deliberately ambiguous by the artists themselves. Are reversible destiny sites providing “infinite quantities of spacetime necessary for living” liable to multiply their visitors’ horizons and permit them to exist on different levels at once (302)?¹² Is it a continuation of the modernist faith in the possibility of nonlinear time and, by extension, of a consciousness unfettered by the need to frame experience along a linear narrative line?¹³ Are Gins and Arakawa merely positioning themselves against the deadening of the senses when they argue that “learning how not to die starts with learning how to live as a maximally invigorated sensorium” (*Reversible* 241)? Should the suggestion that we

¹⁰ See Delville, fig. d (mech7_3.jpg).

¹¹ For a summary of Waldrop’s conception of poetic language and its interaction with language of Western rationality, see her appendix to *The Lawn of Excluded Middle*.

¹² Commenting on the “doubling of horizons,” which results from such projects as the “Twin House” and the “Ubiquitous Site House,” Arakawa declares that “by creating a second horizon, or better yet many more, we can be released from the out-of-date moral values or obsolete structures of common sense that accumulate on the ground-surface we normally exist on. We’d be truly free to develop potentially more fruitful and expansive moral values.” Insisting on the necessity for his “landing sites” to transcend the methods and conditions of the philosophical, the poetic, and the aesthetic and account more completely for the transformations that occur in the apprehension and configuration of volumes, colors, weights, and spaces, he adds: “Poets and philosophers have said much about the possibility of such a world. But theirs is a world of words and ideas without shape or color or weight. Theirs is a fiction, no matter how wonderful. Painting turns out to be only such a fictional world, too” (*Reversible* 32-33). See also Gins and Arakawa’s response to Jean-François Lyotard in *Reversible Destiny* and their definition of “growing young” as “becoming increasingly able to field an ever greater number of possibilities” (11).

¹³ See Jean-François Lyotard’s suggestion that reversible architecture might neutralize “the distribution of time between beginning and end” (*Reversible* 11).

“[take] a stance against death” be metaphorically associated with the idea of “growing young” as a result of our “becoming increasingly able to field an ever greater number of possibilities” (299, 11)? Or are architectural surrounds supposed to express the body’s changing relationship with its environment/the universe in a way that would prolong itself beyond the death of a human being?

The answers to these questions matter less than the implication that our most fundamental notions of self, as well as our understanding of how the world can be perceived and understood, ought to be revised according to the recognition that “changing the conditions of perception changes perception itself, and changes what it means to be a person perceiving” (Kawash 23). Looking at Arakawa and Gins’s visual/verbal paradoxes and poetico-architectural sites, one begins to understand how the mind and body can be fruitfully disoriented into producing an alternative/poetic subject who rejects the notion that we are completely bounded by the mechanisms that traditionally construct us. Only in this way can their “post-utopian” sites act as a motivating force for developing “less dying” subjects who refuse to take their linguistic and concrete environments for granted (241). Only in this way, moreover, would they welcome an opportunity to systematically allow themselves to restructure their lives and aspirations. Some of the most interesting poets of this century, dedicated to providing lyrical comfort and aesthetic delight, have tended to reject traditional conceptions of poetry as a sentimentalized utterance. In a similar manner, Arakawa and Gins’s reversible destiny rejects the notion that architecture should be designed to (merely) provide convenience, safety, and stability. They argue instead for a radical redefinition of what constitutes the self and its experience of time and space—a redefinition, in other words, that demands the theorization of the subject as body, rather than simply as a model of interiority.

In a recent essay entitled “Every Which Way but Loose,” Charles Bernstein writes that “the idea that genres, if not the aesthetic itself, are a barrier to perceptual transformation connects the projects of Arakawa and Gins and Blake to a range of practitioners from Mallarmé and Williams to Duchamp and Cage, all of whose antifoundational investigations have a visual and verbal component” (184). He adds,

In retrospect, we might say that these artists do not so much abolish the aesthetic as extend and transform it, partly because the boundaries of the aesthetic—our willingness or ability to see something as a work of art—are surprisingly mobile. But if aesthetic is not a static category, then it may be possible for the “same” object to be viewed, alternately, as aesthetic and not aesthetic. [...] In the case of Reversible Destiny, the goal is neither to aestheticize the nonaesthetic nor to deaestheticize the aesthetic but rather to create a zone that is no longer subject to this oscillation. (184)

As we know, this pendulum movement between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic is a recurring concern in the history of the contemporary avant-garde. The happenings, ready-mades, and spectacles of the revolutionary avant-garde merge art into life even as they proclaim the destruction of “art as art” in an act of joyful self-destruction. After abolishing traditional separations between high and low, and after positing the relativity and constructedness of the real, postmodern art rejects art in favor of the glamorous surfaces of commodity culture and the use of concepts as material. Instead of prolonging the movement of the pendulum that swings between such polarities as art and life, self and world, Gins and Arakawa’s main concern is with developing an aesthetic that would encompass different systems, use-values, and activities that most avant-garde artists continue to separate.

At a time when Arakawa and Gins's conceptual works and thought experiments are beginning to extend into the domain of city planning (several reversible destiny sites have already been developed in Japan), reversible destiny suggests that twenty-first-century poetics will likely have to embrace much more than just prosody, genres, and even literary criticism *per se*, in order to encompass the consideration of not just form and content but also of cognitive and experimental psychology, art, linguistics, architecture, and the mechanisms of the perceiving body. Only by enlarging the notion of "poetics" to accommodate for this larger compendium of methods can we truly hope to come to terms with works that support the process of this aesthetic revolution. This field of study, still not fully formed, may soon prove to be one of the forming blanks out of which twenty-first-century aesthetics and poetics will emerge.

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