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# Daddy, Why Do Things Have Outlines?

Constructing the Architectural Body

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There is some sort of a thinking feeling body and there is an atmospheric sack of something that surrounds this body. Sometimes the sack is sickening close, liquid, sticky and claustrophobic sometimes it flies out wide like a wayward sail and leaves her body cold and exposed, the air too rarefied. The relation between organism and environment operates at many scales, from the foreground of the near-near, to the background of the far-far away. The relative scale is determined by what Arakawa and Madeline Gins have called the organism-that-persons, presumably in order to give her a conjunctive capacity to feel-think. It is along the precariously defined line, leaky and pliable, that draws its path between a person and her surroundings that their project for the architectural body plots its tentative course, one that is necessarily, always tentatively, open to constant revision and renovation. It is along this line, which can also be conceived as a threshold, that this essay will present a series of scenes all of which rest upon this line as an outline.

In scene one the architectural body is seen as a tactical procedure that cleaves organism and environment, separating and uniting her and her surroundings simultaneously at the same time as uniting her and her surroundings. This first scene will ask: how does she make herself an architectural body? Yes, the feminine third person will be employed, as she is the one who most apparently peoples Arakawa and Gins's book, *Architectural Body*. In the second scene she

will be the daughter and will ask: Daddy, why do things have outlines? This question is framed in one of the metalogues that open the most recent edition of Gregory Bateson's book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson is an appropriate companion for Arakawa and Gins as he too stresses that an organism cannot be without her environment, natural or artefactual. Bateson also extends the concept of ecology beyond fixed images of wilderness scenes or Nature. Ecologies pertain as much to mind as to matter, to nature as well as technology and the complicated changeable matrixes that articulate and blur these, and that question any quick distinctions. For Bateson organism plus environment form the basic unit of survival. Scene three works outwards from a footnote in Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, where he refers by way of the poet William Blake to Gregory Bateson and this question of outlines. Through the medium of Francis Bacon's paintings, the outline is described by Deleuze as a contour between a figure and an infinite, monochromatic, flat ground. In the final scene we establish that we do not yet know what an (architectural) body can do, which will be taken as a challenge to continue thinking-doing, and along the way to maintain an ethical know-how that concerns itself quite simply with coping.

### **Scene One: How to make herself an architectural body**

Architecture, Arakawa and Gins insist, "actively participates in life and death matters" (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xi), it does not merely stand by as shelter or monument. Architecture is not passively occupied, but actively enlivened. Quite simply, there pertains a reciprocal relationship between the inhabitant and her environment such that the outline of life itself can be transformed through architectural procedures. Their book *Architectural Body* is the manifesto that Arakawa and Gins present so that the willing 'organism-that-persons' can come to actively participate in the creative and poetic constructing of her immediate, and even her not so immediate, built surrounds. Arakawa and Gins's project extends beyond homes into towns and beyond, demanding: "we ask only that enormous sums of money be spent on constructing the world as a tactically posed surround" (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xix). It is not a project that can be completed, creative construction here is radically non-teleological. By definition

architecture is “*a tentative constructing toward a holding in place*” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 23). There is an ongoing activity toward a tentative constructing that is a delicate holding in place for the meantime, an approach, which is followed by an embrace, but which may also finish off with withdrawal.

Arakawa and Gins tell us that “the inextricability of person and bioscleave must at all costs be respected” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 95), this is announced as an ethical imperative. The bioscleave by definition already includes the person as a component of what cleaves. It is a neologism that augments the term biosphere by suggesting that not enough is rendered at stake in this term. That is to say, the biosphere, the sphere that sustains life, can only be thought in terms of this active and passive life, or *bios*. There is much to be done between the organism-that-persons, and biosphere, and how they cleave together. Between these two changeable conditions an architectural body, or a tactically posed surround, can be creatively modulated. The architectural body, always tentatively described by Arakawa and Gins falls neither entirely on the side of the organism-that-persons, nor on the side of the ecological niche or specific biosphere in which she finds herself. Architecture is a form of life, and like all forms of life, it is tentative and uncertain and proceeds according to trial and error (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 49). Given this precarious ground and the wavering outline that allows the organism-that-persons some purchase in her bioscleave, how is it that she can make herself an architectural body? One thing is for certain, “At any rate, you have one (or several)” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 149).

The architectural body is very much like another kind of body, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s Body without Organs (BwO), of which they say: “...you make one, you can’t desire without making one. And it awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don’t. This is not reassuring, as you can botch it. Or it can be terrifying and lead you to your death” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 149). This essay will not undertake any kind of comparison between bodies, but it will take on board a few tips. What can a body do? Well, we do not yet know what a body can do (Deleuze 1992: 224-226), and the ever-

receding horizon of this not knowing is what turns out to be productive. In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Gilles Deleuze explains that an existing mode (i.e., an architectural-body) is endowed with a kind of elasticity, which is “a margin, a limit” between our capacity to be affected and our capacity to produce active affects (Deleuze 1992: 222-223). This elastic threshold or outline demarcates the shifting ratio between our power of suffering and our power of acting. The ethical question for Deleuze is then a matter of how we produce more active affections and proportionally reduce our passive responses.

If we translate this ethical imperative into the language of Arakawa and Gins it is a question of which procedures can be best applied to produce the most adequate architectural body. Yet the body, the organism-plus-environment continues to strive, grow, transform, practice, and experiment. “A person can never get to the bottom of her own alertness”, Arakawa and Gins say (2002: 52). Deleuze likewise stresses that “existence is a test” in the sense of being a material or chemical test—rather than a test in which the answers are already determined (Deleuze 1988: 40). The ethical imperative is one that needs to be continually applied, as experimentation is ongoing (since we never get to the bottom of our own alertness or capacity to act). It is important to note that for Deleuze and Guattari how to make a BwO is also “a question of life and death” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 151), an ongoing experimentation. With their operative concept of the architectural body Arakawa and Gins emphasise the prosthetic component: the architectural surround.

How does she make herself an architectural body? She follows a program of experimentation, which means she gets lost on the way. Every organism-that-persons carries her own instructions with her in that these instructions are her immediate awareness, and awareness is always concretely sited. The event-fabric, as Arakawa and Gins call it, is an immanent surface of variable undulations that throws only contingencies in her way. What she has to learn to do is to cope both aesthetically and ethically.

What is the outline between organism and environmental surround, if any, by which the architectural body is modulated? The architectural body cannot be composed without the body nor without the material and conceptual stuff we call architecture, though it is an architecture considerably rematerialised and reconceptualised. For Arakawa and Gins the architectural body is always concretely hypothetical. It asks questions such as 'what if?' or tentatively suggests 'let's feel our way.' Arakawa and Gins posit three hypotheses in *Architectural Body*, which they expect to be acted upon and tested. Their manifesto for constructing an architectural body, as they stress again and again, is an ongoing experimentation, that of venturing a tentative constructing toward a holding in place. There are procedures, which include a panoply of provocative neologisms to help us think otherwise than along habitual pathways.

As for the always tentative hypotheses: First, there is the Architectural Body Hypothesis or Sited Awareness Hypothesis; second, there is the Insufficiently Procedural Bioscleave Hypothesis; and third the Closely Argued Built Discourse Hypothesis. In turn these hypotheses identify a situation, then a problem and finally a possible (or tentative) solution, or at least an approach.

First there is the suggestion that the body by way of its awareness extends beyond the corporeal limitations we tend to constrain it within. Awareness is always sited, aroused through the specificity and haecceity of locatedness, it is not locked inside the conscious body. In fact, sited awareness is already an entry to the architectural body, and like the BwO it is already accomplished the moment you undertake it: "it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 149). At the same time, and paradoxically, although its activation is inevitable, it can never be satisfied or completed, instead you are forever attaining it, for it is a limit! The sensate, conscious body, (including all its pre-conscious workings), is apt to unfold into a world, to grope about, to feel and suck, to think and do by extending into its environment.

Second, there is the suggestion that more procedures need to be tested in order to venture the outline of an architectural body, and the problem is that we do not

sufficiently appreciate what a body can do and how its awareness can be tactically activated. That is, we do not engage sufficiently in our own agency, our capacity to create immanently. We have not experienced or experimented enough. And this is a problem. This second hypothesis suggests we get caught in the rut of habit, we get stuck in a slump, we don't challenge ourselves in contact with our environment.

Third, we need to add procedures to our repertoire of interactions in order to cope with our inherent incompleteness as 'organisms-that-person'. To resist with our tendency toward inertia and inaction we need to add to and augment those procedures that are already habitually available to us in the intimate relation between organism (that persons) and environment (or surround).

So there are three hypotheses concerning how she can make herself an architectural body, all of which tentatively suggest 'what ifs'. To follow through the three hypotheses requires that she, the organism-that-persons, activate her always available sited awareness, that she recognizes what is still missing in terms of tactical procedures, and that she contributes further procedures so that the architectural body can be composed for the meantime, provisionally. As Arakawa and Gins explain to Angela and Robert in a dialogue within *Architectural Body*: "You are not given a finished house but instead form it through your movements and through those of whoever else is in there with you" (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 28). The architectural body is not just about individual inhabitation, but is also intended to activate and encompass communities. Because it can only be tentatively suggested, Arakawa and Gins frame the third chapter, 'Architecture as Hypothesis', as an interrupted dialogue. The dialogue affords a performative approach as we, the reader, are able to observe Angela and Robert, who are presumably clients of Arakawa and Gins tentatively groping their way through a display home that demonstrates the principles of the architectural body. At first the house appears to be nothing but a semi-transparent or translucent heap that can be apprehended all at once. Little by little on their guided tour Angela and Robert discover new relations between their bodies and the environment, which they can test and mould around

themselves as they venture tentatively forward. Nevertheless, “everything that can be done in an ordinary house can be done in this one” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 28), only this house requires more manoeuvring.

### **Scene Two: Daddy, why do things have outlines?**

Arakawa and Gins’ dialogue with Angela and Robert is interrupted by the figure of a snail, borrowed from the poet Francis Ponge. The snail is given as an exemplary creature, intimately uniting organism and environment in the form of its shell as an architectural body. “They *go* through it. It *goes* through them” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 26). Snail and environment interpenetrate and in the process excrete the architectural body. What is performed between the snail and the dialogue is the inseparability of organism plus environment as the basic unit of life. What is curious about the snail is that without its house it becomes as amorphous as a slug, and with it, we are able to identify some sort of outline. Likewise, the house that Angela and Robert slowly unfurl through a kind of purposeful proprioception and kinaesthetic sited awareness is nothing but an amorphous heap before they come to activate it. This is not to suggest that things without outlines are necessarily bad. An amorphous state of affairs may simply be an architectural body in the midst of finding a form for the meantime. The conversation between Gregory Bateson and his daughter, which I will introduce below, demonstrates that the status of the outline is not always definitive. Instead the outline, for instance, between an organism and an environment, is that threshold along which transformations are apt to occur.

Gregory Bateson anthropologist and second order cyberneticist, amongst other things, strenuously propounds the thesis that the basic unit of life equates to organism plus environment. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* he argues that “the unit of survival is the organism plus environment. We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself. (Bateson 2000: 491). Let’s have a brief look at one of the dialogues, or what he calls ‘metalogues’, that open *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. As with all the metalogues, ‘Metalogue: Why do Things Have Outlines?’ is a conversation

between a daughter and her father. As Bateson's own daughter explains "daughter is uncorrupted by academic labelling and becomes Father's excuse to approach issues outside of their boundaries" (ix). Embedded in the approach of these dialogues (as the performance of dialogic thought ambling backwards and forwards) is the very issue of the outline as a threshold between disciplines; between things; between organisms and their environments, and importantly, how this threshold always needs to be tested. The metalogue, Bateson explains, is like a conversation between man and nature "in which the creation and interaction of ideas must necessarily exemplify evolutionary process" (Bateson 2000: 1). As with the architectural body, there is not necessarily an end point to this process. Instead what is produced is an ongoing conversation between organism and environment.

The daughter begins by asking why do things have outlines, for example, the things that she draws and then colours in? Her father counters that conversations and flocks of sheep do not have outlines. The 'metalogue' ambles between arguing for and against outlines to things, such as conversations, or between living things and machines, and even between ethnic groups, such as Jews and Gentiles. It is as though father and daughter are trying incrementally to work their way through a muddle in which sometimes things have perceptible outlines and sometimes they do not. Citing the "mad-angry" poet William Blake, the father suggests that things without outlines belong to the 'slobbering school' in that they are inadequate and poorly thought through. Things without outlines are considered to be like matter in the wrong place, that is, like dirt, or spit, or some other abject material. Without a recognizable outline, how can one think clearly and distinctly about things? Sometimes though, outlines fix too quickly on things, especially when things include living things, which are apt to change and evolve. Where to draw the outline becomes a question of how far something can be predicted or not, and living things, it would appear, are very unpredictable.

Finally, father and daughter remain undecided, they cannot resolve whether outlines are preferable or not. But the important thing about the metalogue



between them is that it is a process, an ongoing conversation and negotiation across the threshold of an outline more or less defined. In this it is like the explorative process of the dialogue that takes place between Angela, Robert, and Arakawa and Gins in *Architectural Body*, it is performed as a tentative muddling oneself through a productive problem. In both scenes what is maintained is the comfort of a more or less familiar domestic surround, beyond which more global applications can only be speculated upon.

### **Scene Three: Francis Bacon's Contour**

In a footnote to *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze cites Bateson's reference to William Blake in the above metalogue (Deleuze 2003: 161, fn 18). Depending on where and when one refers to Blake, it appears that according to the poet, both wise and mad men draw outlines around things. What Blake understood, according to Deleuze was that "a line that delimits nothing still has a contour or outline itself" (Deleuze 2003: 83). In Deleuze's treatment of the paintings of Bacon, the pictorial concept of the contour is located between the figure and the field. The field or ground here, which Deleuze calls *aplat*, is given as an infinite, though monochromatic and flat plane. The *aplat* is a spatializing and material structure that extends indefinitely. Across the threshold (Deleuze also calls it a membrane, (2003: 13)) is a two-way passage between figure and field, which move in and through each other like Ponge's snail and its earthy ground. The rhythm that modulates this to-ing and fro-ing operates according to an approach, an embrace and a withdrawal, which defines and then in turn dissipates the figure.

Where Bacon's background of monochromatic and flat colour corresponds to the environment, the biosphere, or what Arakawa and Gins have renamed the bioscleave, the figure is the organism-that-persons working herself out as she goes through serial procedures. She is also composed of this background where it emerges as figure, and in turn the figure herself likewise falls down and re-enters a zone of indistinction with the background. The contour as a place of exchange is there as the common and dynamic limit between organism and

environment, or between figure and field. The animated limit that is the outline or contour defines organism and environment as distinct, but also draws them together into a profound and reciprocal as well as co-productive and sometimes even destructive intimacy.

### **Final Scene: Ethical know-how**

If the contour, the outline, is ever unfolding as the common limit and place of exchange between organism and environment, between the organism-that-persons and her bioscave, and the problem is one of continuing to test tactical procedures that propose or pose an architectural body that is never at rest, but forever redefining this outline, how does she cope with all this perpetual experimentation? In forwarding his concept of ethical know-how, Francisco Varela suggests that “actions such as these do not spring from judgement and reasoning, but from an *immediate coping* with what is confronting us” (Varela, 1992: 5). [1] Arakawa and Gins likewise affirm that: “Whatever has come to be know how has been cast as procedural” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 52).

It is a question of ethics as well as aesthetics, but not according to a fixed set of codes or locked procedures. Ethics is derived from the place we call home and its attendant sentiments. That is, ethics is derived by our ethos, the kind of ethical know-how at work here makes no assumptions about what constitutes this home, or the relation of one home to the next, or their relation with the town, and the town’s relation with the region, and so on. Although Arakawa and Gins discuss what they call a crisis ethics—in order to challenge mortality in favour of a reversible destiny that indefinitely prolongs life (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xviii, 95)—it is as much the ethics at work in the embodied coping and tactical groping toward and through the architectural body that is of concern to her. As they move through a home that emerges in response to the explorative gropings of their bodies, everything about the dialogue between Angela and Robert and Arakawa and Gins ventures a tentative tactics, a kind of know-how that supposedly responds to contingent encounters. They combine an aesthetic with an ethical comportment. That is to say, they distribute their portion of the

sensible world according to the materials available to them – some of which have been developed by NASA!

They also cope with contingent encounters through a combination of conscious and subconscious ‘procedures’. Varela does caution that ethical know-how is not simply an automatic response to a repertoire of habitual responses, but is rather cultivated through a long process: “intelligence should guide our actions, but in harmony with the texture of the situation at hand” (Varela 1992: 31). Deleuze in his seminars on Spinoza, goes so far as to suggest that “ethics tells us nothing, it does not know” (Deleuze 1980). Instead, ethics is a question of what you *can* do, what you are capable of, and this we will never know in advance. We need to continue to test the fibre of our existence in order to see what we can become, but never so far as to destroy the very environment that supports us, and this involves a whole exploration of things, an experimentation in contact with a world.

Arakawa and Gins’ procedures for making an architectural body are practiced until they become habitual, they are like walking, eating, talking, they move in and out of awareness, and presumably, if they are fostered they can be articulated as an active ethico-aesthetics. They insist that procedures should also be entered “wittingly” and that they can be cultivated, in much the same way that Varela has described with respect to ethical know-how (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 53). It is how these procedures are writ large and how the feedback between skills and “perspicacious intellect” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 54) can be generated at scales that exceed the unit of the home and extend into a world that is evidently one of the larger aspirations of Arakawa and Gins. She wonders, finally, what kind of outline does a global ecological architectural body make?

## Notes

[1] For a more in depth discussion of the relations between Arakawa and Gins’ argument for the architectural body and Francisco Varela’s work, especially Varela’s work with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*:

*Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, see Russell Hughes's soon to be submitted for examination PhD thesis, *The Biopolitical Paradox, the Deregulated Self and Arakawa and Gins*.

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