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SCALES OF ACTION

Abstract

This paper tracks Jondi Keane and James Cunningham’s preparation for the performative presentation, Tuning Fork: Drill Hall for the SEAM: Spatial Phrases symposium by focusing on the notion of ‘scales of action’. The paper outlines the ways in which the objectives and processes of practice-led research align with research values found in cognitive science and ecological psychology, and influence our enactive/performative process. Insights drawn from the ‘procedural architecture’ of artist-turned-architects Arakawa and Gins provide an exemplary model of interdisciplinary research that has convinced us of the importance of establishing, or performatively constructing, a ‘baseline of perception’ in which scale plays a key role. Each performer offers a first-person account of his approach to performance and the purposeful shifting of perceptual focus and the movement across scales of action. These include personal histories shaped by improvisation, athletics, martial arts, meditation, visual arts, architecture, old-school techniques and new technology, which inform the collaboration. Ultimately, collaborative decisions are made regarding where, how and to what degree we might apply pressure to points of communal understanding and shared experience. One of the goals of our collaborative approach is to de-emphasize the performing body in an effort to amplify the situated and distributed nature of perception (and cognition) shaped by a group of people thinking/feeling into the same event-space. The conclusion of the paper suggests the implications of rethinking importance of scales of action, and spatial and kinesthetic intelligence for research design, particularly in light of the ‘enactive approach in cognitive science’ and the common goal of increasing future possibilities for action.
Introduction: Researching Scale

Not a series of actions taken on this scale of action or that but the coordinating of several scales of action makes a person able to construct a world.¹

... an architectural surround that is procedural, a tactically posed surround, fills an ‘organism that persons’ with questions by enabling it to move within and between its own modes of sensing.²

The notion of ‘scales of action’ provides an interdisciplinary research site relevant to the enquiries in the arts and sciences — from the study of perception and action to the emergence of shared meaning. Our individual and collaborative considerations of ‘scale’ and ‘scales of action’ underpin and inform our preparations for the performative presentation at the SEAM2009 Spatial Phrases symposium. For the presentation, we plan to produce the third iteration of _Tuning Fork_, aptly titled _Tuning Fork: Drill Hall_, to emphasize the link between existing and imported structures, the specificity of the site and the emergent performative event. The _Tuning Fork_ series of installation performances offers an investigative structure in which to produce and test ways of holding scales of action together or pushing them apart. These explorations, consisting of small everyday movements (in contrast to specialized movement vocabularies) are designed to amplify intentional states in/of a performer’s body; the movements of a body as a series of linked kinesthetic events; and the movements of a figure or figures in an environment linking objects to each other and to specific aspects of the site, together with systems of meaning operating through all of the aforementioned. In short, our performances attempt to redistribute the relationships that hold a common world in place. The notion of scale permeates our considerations and allows us to pose a research question
that can only be explored in the complex space of shared meaning production and reception (whether a
discursive community or a viewing audience).

Practice-led research or practice as research is a way of describing an expanded notion of what constitutes
knowledge and the methods appropriate to the acquisition of and contributions to knowledge. This approach
emphasizes the situated and embodied process of research activity. In this way, practice-led research is first
and foremost concerned with methodology and what it means to assign value and fix identity. This mode of
research is recursive and deals with complexity by working on the conditions from which meaning arises
rather than isolating sections of the world at the risk of omitting reality. By foregrounding the constructed
aspect of knowledge, practice-led research occupies a precarious position within and among attention,
inattention and perception, automatic functions and intentional actions, existent conditions and emergent
forms. It is important to note that performative research produces the conditions that are to be observed and
studied, which take shape as a result of an ongoing re-entrant mapping offering alternative modes of
organizing social space. Scale, as a research value, permits a researcher-practitioner to follow movements
and turbulent connections across state lines and identity boundaries to provide a robust description of
forming events. It is the movement from one scale to another upon which, for the purposes of this paper, we
will focus our attention.

Context: Research Perspectives and a ‘Baseline of Perception’

Performance affords a public mode of research in which the technological and intersubjective aspects of
meaning-making can be explored. The investigation of scale is facilitated by a movement-based or
performative approach. Movement, in turn, should not be confined to a body in motion, but rather should
extend to movement through a body augmented and inflected by other material processes. In order to
perceive movement, a baseline of perception is required, which assigns values that define the thresholds by
which to determine the extent of things and distinguish things from events — where a body, object or
environment begins and ends. Rather than propose that a single invariant baseline of perception exists, it is
more accurate and productive to work from a current research perspective. Studies of perception and action
in ecological psychology and in cognitive science indicate that perception is the result of ongoing
interaction with the environment. The baseline of which we speak is a relative and evolving sensory
boundary that can be affected by social, cultural and historical, as well as evolutionary, processes. To the
extent that contemporary experience has tended towards intensification of sensation (speed, volume and
screen-image), and the context in which sensation becomes perceptible has tended towards an immobilized
and desensitized perceiving body, the benefits of recalibrating the baseline of perception become a matter
of increasing human capacity to produce trajectories of change (versus returning to an original Arcadian state).

In contrast to scientific research about the body, ‘performance’ offers an emergent model of experience produced by perceptual learning (vs. conceptual knowing). This approach is consistent with the performances and happenings of the 1960s and 1970s. Contemporary performance has seen a revival of the work and approaches of a range of performers from Allan Kaprow to Marina Abromovich, Joseph Beuys to Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer to Trisha Brown or Bill Paxton, and so on that excavate the ways in which the political continues to bore into the smaller and smaller dimensions of personal thought, feeling, behaviour and genetic predisposition with which we are expected to interact and into which we are expected to intervene. As a result, the significance of contemporary performative work can be seen at the level of affect, impacting the organism–environment relationship and the ‘baseline of perception’ — quite literally, how we form distinctions, attend to subsequent values, disperse meaning and value, and hold these constructs in place over time. The constructed nature of baseline perception changes the stakes of performance, art and the communal devising of the common world.

Identifying Scales of Action and Performing Transitions

Scales of actions are abstract notions of size, proportion and value in that, like the sliding scales of music, one can begin anywhere and designate a note — or, in the case of attention ‘take note’ — and formulate relation (size and proportion) from that noted point. The world is full of insular systems of relation guarded to maintain functionality. In this way, scales of actions are the thresholds at which a critical amount of mass-energy, events or meanings accrues and aggregates to form a larger more complex scale. Scale is a way of assigning values to the modes of behaviour, constrained by meaningful consequence, which organize relations and from which sensory thresholds emerge. Typically, scale is understood in terms of micro and macro, or figure–ground, or organism and environment, or as the concentric or embedded nesting of agents such as the individual within community, society, culture, history and evolution. Famously, the ecological psychologist James J. Gibson stated that the ‘appropriate scale of study for humans and animals ranges from millimetres to kilometres in conditions where humans, animals and the environment are comparable’.v This presents a realist point of view, one which needs to be expanded to consider scales of action in which cognition happens too quickly or is too small to be counted as movement at the human scale. In contrast, artists-turned-architects Gins and Arakawa insist on an embodied realism where ‘the coordinating that goes on across a variety of scales of action, a criss-crossing between different world sizes, continues within and as part of what goes on as basic human-scale bodily coordination’.vi
Opposition to a realist point of view, which involves dismantling of formal systems, has more to do with evading institutional capture of the senses than designating what counts as real. To adequately address this shift in the production and consumptions of meaning, value and consequence, contemporary practices must follow the impact of an aesthetic heritage into the very formation of attention, selection, decision and judgment. Performativity — the awareness that perception, action and behaviour are constrained by the capture of bodily processes — and performance — the public construction of meaning through bodily events — can be brought together in public events and take up the challenge to ‘desist from foreclosing on any possibility, even those our contemporaries judge to be impossible’, by aligning transformation (of self, of community, of culture, of supporting context) with the deliberate production of unanticipated perceptual conditions. More importantly, in a communal setting, performative actions have the capacity to transform how relationships are brought forth (abstracted) while in touch with the dynamics of living bodies thinking into the same event-space.

Performing scales of action requires two modes of action: studying event perception and enacting the world that one is studying perceptually. This recognition of a double movement involves the notion of ‘first-person science’, and is consistent with attempts within cognitive science alternatively called first-person perspective that have utilized Husserlian phenomenology to provide not only a descriptive account but explain the nature of phenomenological data at the level of, for example, mathematical models of neurobiology. First-person science is a term coined by focus-oriented therapist Eugene Gendlin, who calls for ‘a science of subjective experiences interconnected to third person science by virtue of a new science akin to ecology, and the study of complex processes’. Subsequent work in this vein sets the tone for practice-led research in which creative practices can be understood as rigorous attempts to fully recognize the impossibility of studying the world without simultaneously changing it. First-person science, practice-led research and performance re-enter the gaps in our ability to explain our relation to the world: the mind–body...
problem, mind–mind problem$xii$ and body–body problem.$xii$ The following section offers two first-person perspectives — the lived experience of the living body — that reflect our preparations for working with scales of action in the collaborative performance of Tuning Fork:

First-person accounts

James

In each iteration of this work, I have been exploring and playing with focus — my current object of attention, what I’m internally aware of and/or literally what I am looking at. I’m consciously or unconsciously shifting my focus from internal to external, internally gazing, looking at my own body or at the outside world, looking around or focusing on a point. At times I come to a standstill, and sometimes find myself looking at the outside world and at the internal states simultaneously. I draw on my experience in physical, performative and meditative techniques (dance, yoga, Vipassana, Feldenkrais), attempting to reside in a mental and physical, present-moment awareness within the performance space, observing sensations of touch, sound, contact, pressure, alignment, position, gravity and outside forces.
This approach allows me to imagine connections, and to play with perceived relationships between parts of my body; between my body and objects; between my body, objects and the built environment; and between my activities and Jondi’s activities. In responding to objects, surfaces and structures, and my perceived relationship to these, I have used both functional and abstract physical modes of engagement. When constructing an installation by placing rods between tiny protuberances in the floor and walls, my movements have a functional purpose. When approaching the set rod-floor-wall configuration with my body, and moving in and around the negative spaces of the installation, my movement are informed by abstract relationships such as ‘negotiating and maintaining distances between numerous points’.

Al Wunder, through his improvisational technique Theatre of the Ordinary, teaches perceptual feedback, an internal (for the performer) and external (for the audience) method of articulating what one likes to do and observe. Over time, I have come to develop this into a mode of improvisational performance that is about finding significance on a moment-to-moment basis. Rather than drawing from a library of previously loved actions, this is about observing current relationships with/within environment, being in that relationship, and finding in the present moment a personally satisfying creative response.
The scales of action with which I am working range from imperceptible movements perceived within my ‘still’ body to those that continue out through objects in contact with my body. Through this acknowledgment of the extension of action, very small movements on my part — a slight twist of my torso, for example — reverberate and are amplified by objects with which I am in contact. The rods, held low as a bunch extending vertically in the air, amplify millimetric manipulations into metric curves and barely audible scrapings to high-pitched slaps that can be heard easily across the room. The rods draw attention to fine details of the architecture, link features within the room and, by ‘drawing’ curves in the space, make reference to curves that exist outside the room in nature, such as buttress roots, vines and the curve of the earth itself — highlighting through contrast the flat-surfaced cubical geometry of the human room.

I have partial disability of my left arm, from a motorbike accident in 1992, and chronic neurological pain associated with nerve damage. One way I deal with this chronic pain is to remain still. Much of my movement research has been weighted around extremely fine and subtle movement, and visualization, and since 2007 I have been exploring both the non-performative and performative possibilities of extended deliberate stillness. For me, this stillness is a reference point from which I can sense my being within its own systems and in relation to external systems and structures. I am often consciously integrating my partially paralyzed arm through movement, pose or physical contact with object or architecture. This pendulous, skeletal limb responds passively and equally to forces generated internally from my torso and to outside forces imposed by the weight and shape of objects. I play with the somewhat mechanical way it behaves, observing levers, fulcrums and transferal of directional energy. Although it is, of course, part of my body, because of my lack of neuro-muscular control over it, perceptually it occupies a liminal, or shared, space between my body and external physical environment with which it is in contact. One of the explorations facilitated by the Tuning Fork approach is whether this idea of ‘shared space’ can be extended to any part of our body/person, encouraging a perceptual shift that recognizes the interrelatedness of our selves with the environment, from the gross physical level, to microscopic and cellular, to emotional and mood.

In the collaborative site-specific work, we attune ourselves to the scale of objects and architectural features as they relate to the scale of our bodies. For example, in the Judith Wright Centre for the Contemporary Arts’ shopfront space, the I-beam columns match the width of our heads, as do the movable columns we introduced to the space which fit snugly over one shoulder, connecting our bodies to the floor like an elongated leg, and, when laid flat, subtly transform our negotiation with the space by becoming a ‘right-sized’ step. While being physically connected to an object, I sometimes play with how my intentions and body movements might be transferred to the object, as if it is an extension of my body.
We have also introduced scales of time into the work through the projection of time-lapse video. In the condensation of action, the onlookers can see the building and dissolving of physical structures, and performative tempos, becoming aware of changes that occur over larger scales of time than one may be accustomed to perceiving.

**Jondi**

My approach to performance emphasizes task-oriented movement. Two types of task emerge from focusing attention on scales of action. The first is the completion of a simple and obvious activity. Moving things — any things, from 50 tape measures, 40 carbon-fibre rods or four architectural columns to James's body and the audience’s attention — gradually shift my focus on to the accumulation of movements-within-movements, intensifying the activity. The quality of movement necessary to cultivate a shift in the onlookers’ attention requires aligning goal-oriented movements with the tempo and function of surrounding materials and existing structures. The ideal movement quality of the person performing a task is to produce a frictionless image of a body disappearing into the task at hand. The performance goal (versus the task goal) is to make the background — a constant but unnoticed set of vibrations that congeal as forms — relinquish its coherence momentarily, and join with unanticipated and concurrent movements-within-movement.

The second task is ‘a coordinating task’ that loosens the existing relationships in order for movement to occur across scales of action. The reconfigurations (of scales of action and modes of sensing) are guided by what Gins and Arakawa call ‘tentative constructings towards a holding in place’, or by what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi have been calling ‘technologies of lived abstraction’ to describe their ‘Sense Lab’ activities. Arakawa and Gins’ 40-year collaboration and Massumi and Manning’s more recent project explore ‘the generative nexus between action, perception and conception that can be modulated from the environmental side’ with different emphases. The coordinating task requires a performer to find a fulcrum or centre point of stillness in an otherwise ongoing flow of events. Further, the coordinating task links the literal everyday movements (performing) with the reconfigurative (performance) goal to make constituent parts, activities, material processes and concurrent attentions available for recombination. One of the desired results for a *Tuning Fork* performance — that pertains to purposeful shifting of scale — is that the performer disappears into the formal relationships she or he has made tentative and that the performance disappears into the flow of life on the street that has moved far from equilibrium. It is not often that humans disperse themselves in the background to permit materials and material processes to take centre-stage. Similarly, it is not often that individuals choose to focus on the distributed nature of their cognition by
attending to the way a group, thinking into a designated event-space over hours or aeons, inflects the direction of further action.

Conclusion

The *Tuning Fork* performance will emerge from the confluence of site, singular histories, organic and inorganic processes that are coaxed into configurations and tendencies. In our preparations, a ‘score’ of possible actions and sequences are produced that anticipate the generic structures and idiosyncrasies of the space-place and recalibrate from *in situ* gleanings. If it is possible to characterize the way our individual approaches come together, it might be noticed that Jondi tends to work on the features or conditions of the environment with which James forms physical relationships. In this way, different scales are already present in our varied approaches, although we are quick to add that both performers change the configuration of objects and both form bodily relationships with the environment.

Rather than pre-empt what will emerge through the tuning and attunements, perhaps we might suggest the implications of a performative approach for research and research design, which focuses on the complex, filigree connections that occur across the living body, the lived body and the living environment. Most importantly, the creative arts and practice-led research in the arts compliment and may contribute to the
enactive approach in cognitive science. The common research interests point to the necessity for interdisciplinary research, and the exchange of material processes and methodologies. Evan Thompson has continued to clarify the concept of enaction introduced into cognitive science by Francisco Varela in an attempt to unify a number of related ideas: the external realm as a relational domain enacted by an autonomous agent coupling with the environment; the autonomy and dynamism of the nervous system that is a circular and re-entrant network of interacting neurons; situated and embodied cognition that emerges from recurrent sensorimotor patterns; the complementary nature of phenomenology to mind science; and the participatory dimension of meaning. The concerns of an enactive approach must be made available for the production of the everyday.

The aim of performative research such as the Tuning Fork is to integrate first-person and third-person knowledge and recognition that one cannot observe the world without simultaneously constructing it. The experimental architecture of Arakawa and Gins and the Sense Lab of Manning and Massumi’s technologies of lived abstraction also propose inclusive and embodied modes of linking scales of action in thought, society, culture and history to the metameres and geoglyphs of human capacity. Actions can become simultaneously large and small, and it is at this juncture or open moment that the body-environment may become sufficiently atmospheric to allow bottom-up perceptual processing to pass through top-down conceptual processing and invite life to take place on newly expanded terms.

Dr Jondi Keane is an arts practitioner, critical thinker and senior lecturer at Griffith University. Over the last 25 years, he has exhibited and performed in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia, and published on embodiment, experimental architecture and practice-led research in range of journals, including Ecological Psychology, Janus Head, Interfaces, Text and Gilles Deleuze: Image and Text (Continuum).

James Cunningham is a choreographer, performer and co-artistic director of multimedia performance company Igneous (www.igneous.org.au), collaborating primarily with multimedia artist Suzon Fuks since 1993. He has also performed in Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada and India, and is a member of the international cyberperformance group ActiveLayers (www.activelayers.net).

Photos by Suzon Fuks.
Notes


