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Madeline Gins (1941–2014)

TO BEGIN TO TALK OF Madeline Gins is to talk about Gins and Arakawa, and, in many ways, it is to embark upon an investigation from which one cannot emerge unchanged.

As a young artist and poet, having just met her partner and fellow artist Arakawa, Gins set off on an ambitious trip to acquire advice from living legend Giorgio de Chirico. Arakawa, a celebrated conceptual painter, was a friend and protegé of Duchamp. Madeline was a student of physics, Buddhist thought, painting, and poetry, both responding to de Chirico’s enigmatic imagery and his search for the key to art’s self-sustaining power (he had attempted to mix paint mediums that would never dry to keep his paintings alive). De Chirico’s catalytic mixture of image and poetic vision, so influential on the surrealist painters, French and Italian cinema, and anime, led Madeline to carefully construct a question from him that would unlock the connections between language and imagination, body and environment. After several days and unsuccessful attempts at meeting the aging master, Madeline was given an audience. Wasting no time, she immediately asked, “What is missing from the world?” Without skipping a beat, de Chirico answered “Morality, kindness and social justice.”

Yet Gins was quick to counter, remarking that she was thinking of “something else”—specifically reversible destiny, and all that project has come to mean: the myriad attempts to find, within the processes of life itself, the possibility of constructing it again on new terms. In many ways, Arakawa and Gins’s work was, and is, a sustained response to de Chirico’s list of what is missing from the world.

Over the years, many have sought them out, attracted by the experimental approach of sustaining life through the orienting precision of language and through the use of environmental prompts to adapt and adjust our bodies. The wide range of prominent thinkers attracted to Gins and Arakawa’s project reflects the scope of their experimental research and includes philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jean-François Lyotard, novelists Bob Calhoun, poets Robert Creeley and Charles Bernstein, cognitive linguist George Lakoff, philosophers of cognitive science Brian O’Shaughnessy and Shaun Gallagher, geneticist Stanley Shostak, psychoanalyst Eugene Gendlin, and art theorist Arthur Danto— to name a few. Visiting Madeline and Arakawa’s studio over the years, one might well be forgiven for thinking that the contours of consciousness were being stretched to the limit on the corners of their worktable. For more than forty years it went this way, finding new variations to build upon and exploring the ways in which methods of research might themselves vary continuously.

Madeline approached every day with vitality and wonder, exhibiting an extraordinary ability to undergo change. This commitment to tentativeness rather than to closure made her appetites for knowledge voracious and her dealings with others a gift economy. Her enthusiasm for work was indefatigable, allowing her to labor ceaselessly (with Arakawa until his death in 2010) on the shape of awareness. This endeavor is evident in her written works: Word Rain (1993), Interland (1978), What the President Will Say and Do (1984) and the amazing work of speculation and precision, Nelson Kollar or Arakawa (1954), Madeline constantly encouraged the familiar to pass through itself and, through that continuous passage, grasp the means by which to remain in and of the world by transforming it.

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