

Notes

- 1 Maturana, H. & Varela, F. 1998, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, revised edition, Shambhala Publications Inc, Boston, Massachusetts, London, UK, p. 25.
- 2 Stewart, J. Gapenne, O. & Di Paolo, E.A., 2010, *Enaction : Towards a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [10 August 2019].
- 3 Maturana & Varela, 1998; Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. 1991, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- 4 Notions put forth by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927) cited in Käufer, S. & Chemero, A. 2015, *Phenomenology: An Introduction*, e-book, Polity, Cambridge, UK, Malden, Mass; and Merleau-Ponty, M. 2004, *The World of Perception*, trans. O. Davis, Routledge, London, New York.
- 5 James J. Gibson offers one of the first comprehensive approaches to this in *The Ecological approach to Visual Perception*, 1986, Psychology Press, New York, Hove, UK.
- 6 Maturana & Varela, 1998, p. 26
- 7 Noë, A. 2015, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, Hill and Wang, New York.
- 8 Maturana, H. & Varela, p. 23

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nation's cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.
Always was, Always will be.



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The Cities, They Tremble

Alexandra Spence

18 September - 5 October 2019

Our being, our doing, our knowing¹

Essay by Gail Priest

*Natural cognitive systems...engag[e] in transformational and not merely informational interactions: they enact a world.*²

Embodied cognition proposes that “thinking” doesn’t just occur in the brain, as posited by traditional cognitive science, but that the brain and sensory motor system are inextricably entangled; cognition/thinking is a process that is distributed through the body via our sense organs. Our embodied engagement also takes place in relation to the world and just as it effects us, we effect it. This theory is called enaction, or enactivism,³ and it offers a particularly attractive proposition to artists with perpetual preoccupations as it provides empirical study into the idea of reciprocity, which is at the core of phenomenology. Enaction attempts to prove that we are our interactions with world; that they make us while at the same time we make it.⁴

However even within embodied cognition, the perception of sound is a slippery subject, with the majority of studies and theoretical developments focusing on visual systems.⁵ Perhaps this is because of the tacit (mis)understanding that visible things and processes are more present and easier to study. When embodied cognition studies do venture into the aural it is often via language or music which adds a semantic and systematised dimension. While this situation may initially be frustrating for those focused on the notion of sound and listening itself, it also invites artists to devise their own experiments and define new testing grounds.

*Every act of knowing brings forth a world.*⁶

In *The cities, they tremble*, Alexandra Spence offers three experimental engagements that explore the notion of embodied and enacted knowledges. The experiments connect site and sound through poetic processes creating microsystems that reveal new perceptual knowledges.

The system is at the forefront of *Inanimate dialogue*. The gallery site is transformed by displaced and discarded vessels from domestic life. The resonances of these bottles and containers are tapped and tuned by inserting microphones into them and pairing them with a speaker. Of course placing a microphone in a particular relationship with a speaker creates feedback, an infinite cycle of transmission and reception, drawn from the air, that allows this daily detritus to sing. There is no clearer exemplification of intertwined relations than a system made from audio feedback. The viewer/listener also becomes part of this system, their presence in the space effecting the room resonance, flesh and air currents interacting with lines of flight of sounds between microphones and speakers. *Inanimate dialogue* enacts a knowledge system of parts and of wholes in iterative communication and delicate balance.

Everything is trembling makes subtle interventions into both site, sight, sound and tactility. The position of the viewer in relation to the window offers a visual frame or screen. The contact microphone on the window transmits the outside world, filtering both the visuals and the sound through the unresolved ambiguity of solidity and transparency. The transducers below the seating bench ensure the body is vibrationally implicated in the experience. However, while the other senses are strategically enabled it is the sonic system that initiates the mediation and reframing. The sonic system first dislocates then re-embeds the listener in a heightened multi-sensorial engagement with the world outside the gallery window.

In *Listening with the river*, Spence initiates an intervention and then allows the environment to offer its own resistance or interpretation. Here the process works with site and sound, but a temporal element replaces the visual framing we experience in *Everything is trembling*. While each playback loop of devolved field recording is brief, it carries with it the duration of its interring. Time is physically manifested in its effects on the material surface of the tape; the earth and elements have a say in its reproduction. Contained within the grit and hiss and even erasure of sound is a new knowledge, a never before heard version of these sites alongside The Brisbane River.

While Spence’s artworks enact new knowledges, these knowledges are not simply informational but transformational. This is the essential difference between science and art. Alva Noë calls art a ‘strange tool’⁷ in that it operates but it isn’t functional. Art’s dysfunction, its tendency to disruption, is its function. What good art does, via rupture or obstacles, is to reorganise our perceptions, and in this confrontation we become more conscious of the process in which we are engaged. In each of Spence’s installations, she subtly intervenes and disrupts a site and its sounds in a way that asks us to renegotiate our inner workings of sensation, thought and action. Through her poetic processes — her being and doing — Spence brings forth new perceptual knowledges that ask us to reframe our knowing of the world.

Maturana & Varela propose that ‘We do not see the “space of the world”: we live our field of visions. We do not see the “colours of the world”; we live our chromatic space.’⁸ Alexandra Spence’s installations invite us to consider that we do not listen to the sounds of the world: we live our aural realm.

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