

# From Part to Whole: Synergy and the Assembled Trajectory

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**Abstract:** The compositional flexibility inherent in an aesthetic compositional system such as the grid, and in the convention of assemblage, offer artist's with a structural freedom to explore some evocative compositional possibilities. Examples of such possibilities can be seen in the assembled "trajectories" attending works which utilize a contiguous arrangement of discreet parts. A trajectory could be described as a discernable visual "logic," or visual coherence amongst distinct yet neighboring parts in a work, and in some cases, also their potential direction of interpretation. Such a trajectory may exhibit a unity of structure and fluidity of interpretation for the viewer, so that they may be able to discern a palpable synergism amongst dissimilar parts.

This paper will look at a selection of works which can be seen to employ the grid and/or assemblage for the purpose of forming evocative linear trajectories. Common to each of the works explored, is the compositional juxtaposition of discreet components which have been utilized for the purpose of forming such trajectories. Each work will be discussed on the basis of the viewer's perceptual encounter with specific trajectories identified in each work.

Keywords: Technique, Perception

## Introduction

The compositional flexibility inherent in aesthetic systems of organisation which utilise a contiguous juxtaposition of discreet 'parts' as a means of configuring a perceptible 'whole,' (as one may expect to see in such conventions as the assembled grid, collage, and assemblage), can afford artists with a structural freedom to produce evocative new configurations. In instances where such configurations can be seen to collate a spatial sequence fragment parts into a palpable linearity, we could refer to such a sequence as an *assembled trajectory*. This paper will focus on a particular reading of an assembled trajectory to mean a sequential, or syntagmatic<sup>1</sup> grouping of static visual fragments which have been assembled into a new visual linearity. It is proposed that attending to specific trajectories, as they will be shown to exist in a selection of works, can engage the viewer in a rich and imaginative perceptual experience of a work.

The proposed trajectories discussed in the paper become discernable when fragment parts of a work are arranged to convey an articulated linearity of structure, as in the case of an assembled line which may have been constructed from parts of other lines. Trajectories such as these may also imply a possible direction of interpretation for the viewer by virtue of their sequential spacial order, which can be seen when a viewer's gaze moves along the length of a discernable trajectory. Rudolf Arnheim once remarked how a viewer's gaze can be directed when viewing a work, by the nature, and arrangement of visual forms the artist has used, which he claims may appear to, "strive in certain directions...{and} contain directed tensions"<sup>2</sup> for the viewer to follow.

Foundational to the perceptual recognition trajectories outlined in the paper, is the Gestalt notion of grouping, and in particular, the principle of *proximity*,<sup>3</sup> by which it was suggested that there exists a perceptual tendency to perceive objects in close proximity to one another as a *group*. Building on this notion, we will consider the notion of *metamorphosis*<sup>4</sup> which can be applied to the apparently seamless affiliation fragments parts comprising certain trajectories. However, while *proximity* will provide the basis for a reading of the palpable intertexture, amongst the separate parts of each trajectory presented here, other forces will be shown to be at work which interrupt the viewer's formation of a cohesive gestalt, and draw attention to the individuality of the parts comprising each trajectory. Marjorie Perloff remarks that visual aberrations of this type, are indebted to *parataxis*,<sup>5</sup> which she suggests is a collage principle indebted to the principle of juxtaposition.

It will be suggested that visual tensions stemming from the attestable differences of separate fragments comprising each trajectory, contribute an animating effect to the perceptual experience of a viewer who may struggle to maintain a cohesive gestalt of the configured group of parts they are attending to. However, rather than being counter-productive, it is proposed that these tensions invest fragments with new synergies, and become a principle means by which a viewer becomes drawn into a rich and imaginative encounter of each trajectory. The paper will target for the majority of the discussion specifically targeted trajectories

which span both three, and two- dimensional art practice, as expounded in Sarah Sze's assemblage *Seamless*, 1999, Rosalie Gascoigne's assemblage *Tiger Tiger*, 1987, and in a more conceptual manner<sup>6</sup>, also William Kentridge's triptych *Dreams of Europe*, 1984-85.

## **Seamless, 1999**

Sarah Sze's modus operandi is to assemble a variety of conventionally unrelated objects into a three-dimensional network of trajectories celebrating as it were a visual transmutation of discreet objects. One such work is *Seamless*, 1999, (mixed media and existing architecture, 696 x 1234.4 x 805.2 cm overall), is an organic assemblage of variously scaled objects and materials which the artist has spread from one wall to another, yet not without imbuing the work with a palpable continuity. Intrinsic to this continuity, is the configuration of a linear trajectory assembled from separate entities which can be traced from the top of a distorted aluminum ladder on one side of the room, to a freestanding roll of wire mesh on the other. Throughout this trajectory, Sze leads the viewer in a somewhat biomorphic, or seamless manner, to 'navigate' along thin lengths of plastic which are occasionally punctuated by small groupings of miscellaneous objects. Also threaded throughout this linear, plastic procession, is an eclectic network of separate parts and objects such as clothes pegs, coils of wire, electrical hardware, matchstick constructions, key rings and feathers, which occasionally culminate in intermediate congregations or what Jeffrey Kastner has referred to as "interdependent totalities".<sup>7</sup>

There appear to be two major concerns in these assembled trajectories, the first of these being the curvilinear extension of linear materials through space. This can be seen in the linear trajectories of wire, thread, the strips of plastic, and matchstick creations, which extend from one part of the gallery to the other with apparent fluidity of intertexture given Sze's linear organisation of component parts. Another compositional entity Sze generates is the cluster. These clusters can be seen to 'stem' from the major linear trajectories, and form their own sub- trajectories attaining a more self-contained configuration within the work. Sze's clusters harbor a large number of smaller scaled objects such as plastic beads, coloured metal discs, and lids from bottles, in a

non-linear fashion. A larger example of one such cluster can also be seen in the floor-oriented arrangement at the opposite end of the room to the stepladder. In this locale, Sze has assembled a conglomerate of objects such as a lamp, fire extinguishers, plants and glass jars, which provides a significant focal point when viewing the work, and while not overtly linear by nature, these clusters can be perceived as emerging appendages from the more linear trajectories in the work.

Overall, *Seamless* conflates an assortment of materials and objects, which one is not accustomed to viewing in unison. This palpable sense of fusion, or configuration, has been described by Amanda Cruz as a reconciliation of a number of differences, differences she describes as “the minuscule and the monumental, the domestic and the industrial, high speed and slow concentration, chaos and order, the tenuous and the stable, the organic and the manufactured”.<sup>8</sup>

*Seamless*, through its seemingly endless variety of component parts can be seen to engage the viewer in an evocative perceptual tension between a recognition of the elemental components, and their configured trajectories; or alternatively, between the ‘parts’ and the ‘whole.’ *Seamless* can be seen to amasses a composite array of eclectic objects into what almost appears to be a single syntagmatic-like entity, yet not at the cost of sacrificing a discernable autonomy which attends the objects themselves. Perhaps it is Sze’s masterful groupings of objects, in which the passage from one object to another appears to be done with such aesthetic precision, that the viewer is encouraged to perceive the trajectories with the fluency that comes so easily when viewing *Seamless*. Indelible to the more linear trajectories in *Seamless*, are Sze’s long thin lines of thin timber, and conduit, which bridge objects into perceptible wholes, and help to trigger the Gestalt principle of *proximity* in our minds as we attend to the work.

## **Tiger Tiger, 1987**

By contrast, Rosalie Gascoigne’s diptych *Tiger Tiger*, 1987, (retroreflective road signs on two 112 x 112 cm. on plywood panels) is a work which restricts its configured trajectories to a two- dimensional plane. The work consists of two square panels comprising a physical

grid of wooden road sign fragments which have been sawn, and arranged into a flattened compositional structure. Gascoigne appears to be somewhat concerned with the assembly of extended, linear trajectories of remnant letterforms which appear on many of the works components. Through a two-part process of physical segmentation and assemblage, Gascoigne has intuitively re-configured both textual<sup>9</sup> and non-textual components of the original road signs, within the format of a rectilinear grid. The modular nature of Gascoigne's components lend themselves ideally to new aesthetic affiliations within the format of the grid, which, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh suggests, has a "rationalising and quantifying order."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the rational objectivity of literal words becomes subverted by the irrational subjectivity of reconfigured linear possibilities.

Robert Morris once remarked in relation to sculpture, on the similarity that such modular flexibility could be seen to have with other cultural concepts of construction. He writes, "the right angled grid as a method of distribution and placement offers a kind of 'morpheme' and 'syntax' which [is] central to the cultural premise of forming."<sup>11</sup> By extension, the remnants of black text which are attached to the surface of most of the components in *Tiger Tiger*, could be seen not only to establish a sense of signature to the utilitarian history of the fabric constituting the work, but also comprise as it were, the 'morphemes' of a Gascoigne's syntagmatic trajectories. Making such syntagmas possible is the grid, with its flexibility as a restructuring device. Rosalind E. Krauss has suggested that the grid as an organizational "armature"<sup>12</sup> signifies a fundamental *beginning* or "badge of freedom"<sup>13</sup> for the artist, which is perhaps why Gascoigne employs it. Hannah Fink has remarked, "Gascoigne's opus [is] the premise of abstraction, that shattered form reveals order, [which] is the starting point of creation".<sup>14</sup>

One such point of creation can be seen in the linear trajectory that the artist has assembled close to the bottom left corner in the left-hand panel of *Tiger Tiger*. Here, three neighboring components establish a new linear trajectory, which is initiated in the first component containing the remnant letter 'S' in the bottom left corner of the work. This component abuts a second component to its right, which depicts the remnant letters 'OR', which in turn abuts another component

immediately above it displaying the remnants letters 'GR'. The physical contingency of these three components forms a new linear synergism amongst the adjoining textual fragments, resulting in a serpentine trajectory. The perceptual impression of the existence of a continuous line amongst these discrete components could also be attributed to *proximity*.

Gascoigne's assembled trajectories display a similar structural practice to the irrational surrealist photomontages produced by Max Ernst in the 1920's. Max Ernst, a principal member of the Cologne Dada movement, produced some photomontages between 1919 and 1921, in which he assembled late nineteenth-century book and newspaper illustrations of various kinds and types, into imaginative and meticulously unified images.<sup>15</sup> In his work, *The Horse, He's Sick*. 1920. Pasted photoengraving and pencil on paper, 14.3 x 21.2 cm, Ernst has cut images from botanical and scientific journals, and conflated them to form an image of a horse. This work has been so carefully and seamlessly assembled by Ernst, it appears as though the image is seamless, and not assembled from separate pieces of paper. The pictorial intertexture amongst the components of the work stand as an early example of a principle which was to become known as *metamorphosis*; in which a palpable sense that subjects were in an 'organic' state of transformation from one thing to another, has been imaginatively described by Ernst in the remark,

Plants turn into living animals, architectural shapes turn into statues, which are at once plant, human shape and *tropaion*. The metamorphosis takes place so smoothly that it is impossible to make out whether a living substance has been petrified or an inanimate one brought to life, whether these are plants revealing human forms or humans revealing plant forms.<sup>16</sup>

Gascoigne's trajectories of textual fragments similarly attain a level of visual continuity which result from the perception that what is being viewed is not merely a remnant assembly of text, but rather an imaginative metamorphosis formed when one incomplete fragment abuts to another in a palpable linear trajectory.

## **Dreams of Europe, 1984-1985**

William Kentridge in his triptych *Dreams of Europe*, 1984-85, (charcoal on paper, three panels, each 190 x 120 cm), manages to establish one of the most disorienting linear trajectories looked at so far in the discussion. The trajectory Kentridge creates at one level presents the viewer with a pictorial continuity from frame to frame, given its repetition of frame size, subject matter, and aesthetic treatment. However, Kentridge subverts this continuum by establishing distinct interstitial breaks between each panel, as well as by altering the angle of view we are afforded of the scene comprising each panel. When initially viewing the work, one assumes they are looking at a divided drawing of an interior with figures mingling around a horizontal figure lying on a table. However, as one makes comparisons between each of the panels, assuming as it were, that they are simply three sections of the one drawing, it becomes increasingly apparent that the work is loaded with instances of discontinuity, which interrupt a viewer's apprehension of the work as a unified whole. Neal Benezra refers to Kentridge's pictorial discontinuities as the artist's recognition of the possibility for manipulating and confounding the depiction of space.<sup>17</sup> Kentridge himself has admitted to this,

Firstly, you have a series of images of the same place, but each is different because that space is occupied by a different centerpiece each time. Time has passed between each image, objects have been rearranged and even the viewpoint has changed slightly. Secondly, and far more importantly, is the dislocation of space.<sup>18</sup>

The horizontal figure, which approximately occupies the center of each panel, embraces a dislocated trajectory from one side of the triptych to the other. Each section of the figure is deliberately misaligned by Kentridge, sabotaging the apprehension of a linear unity throughout each panel, which according to Kentridge, is an intentional device he has used to create visual tension between each panel, in which he remarks, "[you] set up continuity between images and then don't let it happen,"<sup>19</sup>

The ‘unexpected changes’ or disjunctions that attend the figure in *Dreams of Europe* across all three panels, can have an unmooring effect on our perception of continuity in the work, manifesting as it were that collage principle of *parataxis*, which Marjorie Perloff claims celebrates the visual tensions which arise from the contingent relationships of component parts in a work.

However, the visual tensions in *Dreams of Europe* appear to do more than destabilise one’s perception of continuity, and may be said to actually induce a degree of implied movement. Michael Betancourt suggests that our perception of motion in static works is intrinsically linked to our encounters with actual motion. This link he argues can be described by what Gestalt psychologist Von Helmholtz, referred to as the “likelihood principle”.<sup>20</sup> Betancourt introduces the *likelihood principle* as a way of explaining how the viewer interprets images as a combination of both that which is seen as an “immediate sensory experience”, and “prior knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, our perception of painterly motion is a perceptual construct, which is derived from our experience of “real, empirically eminent motion.”<sup>22</sup> Betancourt describes how the likelihood principle can be applied to the perception of painterly motion in Rubens’s, *Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat*. Describing the twisting torso of *Helene*, Betancourt writes,

Displacement caused *Helene* to appear (depending on the interpretation) to be turning away from or towards the viewer. The apparent motion of her upper body is caused by a specific distortion: as the eye moves across this image the human mind fits the different positions of her body together to form a coherent whole. This process creates the impression she is moving. Her motion is caused by the series of different views showing distinct physical positions. Because we see her from a single vantage point our minds combine them to form a single body. This effect is identified by Helmholtz as the likelihood principle.<sup>23</sup>

A similar application of the likelihood principle can be used to explain the animated trajectory attending the horizontal figure in *Dreams of Europe*. It could be argued that the displacements attending the figure are responsible for the sense of motion one experiences when one



attempts to view the figure as a complete form across the three panels. According to Betancourt's argument, changed states of perspective such as this as seen in the three views of the Kentridge's figure are interpreted by the mind as "markers of movement through time"<sup>24</sup> which when viewed are "treated as motion" because our interpretations struggle to maintain a cohesive Gestalt.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper a selection of works have been targeted for discussion based on the specific assembled trajectories they exhibit. The notion of an assembled trajectory has been introduced as a descriptive term to denote a sequential, or *syntagmatic* grouping of static visual fragments which have been assembled into a new visual linearity. As such, the fragments present the viewer a newly configured order by means of their spatial proximity and apparent intertexture. It was suggested that these perceptions of grouping and continuity can be explained by the Gestalt principle of *proximity*, as well as Max Ernst's notion of *metamorphosis*. By contrast, it was claimed that the perception of intertexture amongst fragment parts can subverted when visual tensions amongst fragment parts become overtly noticeable, signaling a manifestation of the collage principle of *parataxis*. In such instances, the viewer struggles to maintain a cohesive Gestalt, as they oscillate between a recognition of the fragments comprising a trajectory, and trajectory itself. However, these tensions provide an important basis for the animated synergies amongst components comprising specific trajectories, and also become a principle means by which the viewer can be engaged in a rich and imaginative encounter with a work. The works specifically targeted for this discussion were Sara Sze's *Seamless*, 1999; Rosalie Gascoigne's *Tiger Tiger*, 1987; and William Kentridge's *Dreams of Europe*, 1984-85.

Despite differences in the methodology employed in each of the works discussed, each work has been shown to exhibit indebtedness to a close physical, and visual affiliation of discreet parts as a means of enabling the viewer to imaginatively perceive a palpable synergy of configured parts within a specified trajectory.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Aumont points out that the word “Syntagma” is a linguistics term which denotes “the units of meaning linked in actual relations within chains of sequential units.” Aumont is primarily speaking to the convention of montage, however, there is a structural similarity in the syntagmatic chains Aumont introduces here, (which can be assembled from a combination of shots, or on a larger level, by a combination of scenes), and the spatial articulation of fragments parts which constitute the assembled trajectories discussed in this paper. Jacques Aumont, et. al., 1992. *Aesthetics of Film*, Austin, 246

<sup>2</sup> Arnheim, Rudolf. 1951. “Perceptual and Aesthetic Aspects of the Movement Response.” *Journal of Personality* 19:3:275

<sup>3</sup> Wertheimer, M. 1923. *Laws of organization in perceptual forms*. Reprinted in *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, translated and edited by W. D. Ellis. 1969. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. 75

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Lanchner describes metamorphosis as “the Heraclitean recognition that there is no reality except the reality of change, that permanence is an illusion of the senses; nothing is but is in a state of becoming”. Carolyn Lanchner, “André Mason: Origins and Development”;; in, Carolyn Lanchner and William Rubin, *André Mason*, New York, 1976, 85- 86; in, Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and The Modern Experience*, New York, 1991, 25

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 1983 “The Invention of Collage”, *New York Literary Forum* 10-11:8

<sup>6</sup> I here refer to the notion of a conceptual reading of Kentridge’s tryptich on the basis of a proposition that the viewer may be led to conceive a degree of implied movement, and also a degree of duration, as the mind struggles to make sense of the disparate temporal stages of what at first appears to record a single event.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Kastner, 1999. “Sarah Sze: Tipping”, *Art/Text*, 65: 68

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 153

<sup>9</sup> Vici MacDonald. 1998. *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Paddington, NSW: Regaro Pty Ltd: 34

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Heinz. D. Buchlow. 2000. “Buchloh, Hantaï, Villeglé, and the Dialectics of Painting’s Dispersal”, *October* 91:Winter:33

<sup>11</sup> Robert Morris, 1996-7. “Notes on Sculpture 1-3”;; in Harrison, C, and Wood, P. ed., *Art in Theory 1900-1990; An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Cambridge, Massachusetts:820

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind E Krauss, 1985. “Grids”, in Rosalind E Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts:10

<sup>13</sup> Rosalind E Krauss, 1985. “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” in *Ibid.*, 160

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Fink. 1997. “That Sidling Sight: Wondering about the Art of Rosalie Gascoigne”, *Art and Australia*, 35: 2:203

<sup>15</sup> Diane Waldman, 1992. *Collage, Assemblage, and The Found Object*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 24-125

<sup>16</sup> Uwe M. Schneede, 1972. *The Essential Max Ernst*, trans. R. W. Last , London: 168

<sup>17</sup> Neal Benezra, 2002. “William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection” in, Neal Benezra. et. al., *William Kentridge*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, October 20, 2001-January 20:16

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in “Christov-Bakargiev in Conversation with William Kentridge”; in, Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and J. M. Coetzee, “William Kentridge” London, Phaidon Press: 8; in, Neal Benezra, *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Michael Betancourt, 2002. “Motion Perception in Movies and Painting: Towards a New Kinetic Art”, *October* 23:2, online, available Netscape: [www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=349](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=349), accessed May 8, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Michael Betancourt, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

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