

A CONVERSATION ON GORDON PASK AND ARTSTATION (APRIL 2008/09)

by

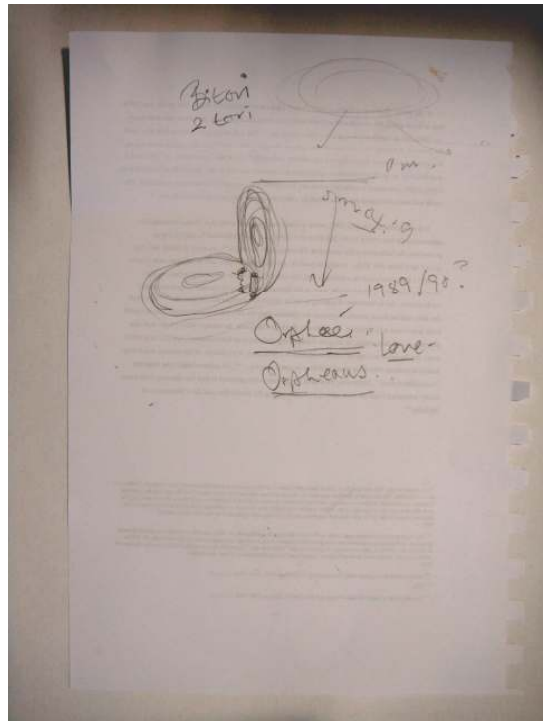
GONÇALO FURTADO

(<http://paskpricefrazer.blogspot.com>)

and

GLENN DAVIDSON

(www.artstation.org.uk)



(GONÇALO FURTADO) - As I referred in my PhD thesis and forthcoming book: “Pask influence to computer interactive arts (a field firmly established at the 1984 Venice Biennale), goes back to his impactful contribution to *Cybernetics Serendipity*, and it extends for instance to Artstation’s work”.

Artstation directors - Anne Hayes and Glenn Davidson - acknowledged in a 1993 festschrift the relevance of Pask’s understanding of art as a creative process of potentialities and his contribution to their work. They pointed out: “Gordon Pask added to the basic vocabulary of our work. He has, through CT and its fundamental mechanics, provided us as artists with an image and architecture of our own creative work”. “Using our computer we began in 1988, drawing and animating topological representations of aspects of CT, concentrating on exchanges that take place within bifurcation events that occur through the process maintaining their distinctions, moments of creativity [...]. Over this period of time we experienced a broadening of our understanding of our work. This was generally through the opportunities afforded us by Gerard de Zeeuw [...] when we were brought together closely with Gordon for a prolonged period. Gordon’s ideas have shown us in a model how we, as artists, act in the social domain: as processes.”

(Out of curiosity, the aforementioned large festschrift for Pask was edited by Glanville in 1993, to mark Pask’s retirement date. It included a biographical account and description of Pask’s publications and projects, as well as a series of texts - such as by Price, Frazer, Von Foerster, Beer, de Zeeuw, Hayes and Davidson, Glanville, Pangaro - of varying lengths expressing the diversity of fields touched on by Pask.)

It also briefly pointed to Glenn and Anne’s work on design software and interface; and stated that the “work of artists such as Davidson and Hayes expressed the influence of Pask’s thought.”

The present conversation of myself and Artstation, concentrates on their memories and relationship with second-order cyberneticist Gordon Pask.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - Glenn, your work with Anne went back to late 1970s. You worked since 1979 as 'Live Support' and realized the outstanding kinetic happening 'Locomotion'. After this in 1989 you formed 'Artstation' in Wales – an art and technology partnership.

Gordon Pask had a lifelong interest in the arts and throughout his life he produced many artistic pieces. However you were among the very few artists who worked with Pask. Among the work you developed together is "On conversation" dated 1988-89, for the American Society for Cybernetics Conference at Virginia Beach. It encompassed animations programmed on an Atari (i.e. animated representations of Pask concepts, or, more precisely, animations of the bifurcations arising in Pask's conversational process), as well as the huge topological installation in Virginia Beach called the 'Bitori.'

During my research at Pask archive I realized that your work with Pask leads back to the time when Pask was involved with Gerard De Zeeuw research program OOC (Ondersteuning, Overlaving, Cultuur) at Amsterdam. How do you remember your first contacts with him in late 1980s?

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - It is entirely down to Ranulph who had seen Locomotion in Plymouth that we ever met Gordon Pask, having been invited to the conference 'The Possibility of Impossible Worlds' held by OOC research programme directed by Prof. Gerard De Zeeuw at Amsterdam University in 1987.

Joined by fellow artist collaborator Hugh Thomas, Anne and I presented a lecture and two performances of Locomotion. Pask had participated in Locomotion twice if memory serves. The latter involving a recently arrived, end of conference after dinner speaker, architect Cedric Price. The presentation covered the ideas informing Locomotion and also the educational workshops with which the group subsisted. Much of what was presented was about perception and using "Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake"(est. 1648) from Nicolas Poussin (1594 – 1665); the painting was used to discuss the narrative of regressive perspectival space. Locomotion also lead us to look at Richard L. Gregory's book – "The eye and the Brain" - Betty Edwards then recent book – "Drawing on the right side of the brain" - and Joseph Albers (1888 - 1976) Colour Theory – we had even tried to recreate Edwin Lands colour theory experiments.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - It led to an interesting exchange between the so called art and sciences ...

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - Yes. As young artists we were petrified by the idea of participating in a conference of scientists. Through Locomotion we had worked with around 25,000 people and countless more in public and educational workshops, appearing on TV and radio shows. We had convinced ourselves that talking to scientists, would be of no interest to them, that they would be far more intelligent than us, and we would not be able to understand them. The whole proposition felt highly intimidating, as though we might be debunked or revealed as simplistic play. It was then, with complete amazement, that at the end of what came to be known as “The Three Wickers speech’ named so by Ranulph, the presentation had clearly captivated the highly attentive audience. The most senior and eminent, we failed to see his obvious visual eccentricities at that point, then stood up to congratulate and address us and convey approval to the conference.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - It was Pask, the well-known proponent of second-order-cybernetics ...

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - Gordon Pask had a wonderful way of bestowing great worth upon ones endeavours especially at first meeting. He immediately assumed a friendly and almost paternal role to ward the three of us standing in a line at front of the presentation bench of the central lecture room. The assembled cyberneticians (as we had learned they were) listened and watched as Gordon embarked on the question of metaphor in the work we had shown. How the observation, co observation and self observations were integral elements of Locomotion’s system, how we had found self regulatory processes emergent from experimental public sessions. It was amazing to us, that here was someone who appeared to grasp the very “time-based” nature of our work and on reflection, this was the first time any of us had come into contact with specific language that could describe events in motion and shifting relationship that we had been exploring. Identity of our interests had at times eluded our practice as artists. Locomotion had been seen more as a science than art by the Art world – R.L Gregory had written about Locomotion as a confirmation of this. In discussion with Gordon Pask with regard to his brand of cybernetics, on this our first meeting, we suddenly felt somewhat generic.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - Gerard De Zeeuw was there of course; and invited you to return to Amsterdam, where Gordon also got a post as guest professor ...

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - Yes. In the late evening / early morning of conference departure party, Professor Gerard De Zeeuw made his way on his crutches across the dance floor of the host discothèque, up to where we were standing at the bar. In what we came to know as his characteristic warmth. Gerard invited us to work with the OOC. In January of the following year Anne and I set off from Cardiff to Amsterdam in a large white Ford Transit van, carrying most of our worldly goods with us.

OOC had organised a studio for us in the centre of Amsterdam off Leidse Plein, the tourist centre of town. Out of the window we faced the entrance the Melkweg (Milky Way Club) where we had worked a couple of times in early 1980s.

Early in the fellowship we attended Gordon Pask inauguration as he accepted an academic chair on the OOCs programme. Shortly after this, Gordon arrived at our studio. This was and remains one of the most vividly creative periods of our professional lives where, somewhat curiously, ‘nothing’, it appeared, was expected of us in terms of output. There was a vague idea about us being helpful to the Phd research programme, we did work with some of the student doctors, however it was the work with Pask that so enriched us .

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - In my writings I pointing that Artstation developed interesting graphic software such as ‘Splicer’ from 1988 – a topological CAD that enabled 3D objects and animations to be designed. You later developed a complementary interface called ‘Hare’ to extend usability and handling with diverse forms. ‘Splicer’ was developed with Joachim Mowitz (with who we were in Wien), enabling internal visualisations of the Conversational process; and the “Hare” encompasses a robotic appliance to enlarge and print outputs.

Pask kept flyers of the aforementioned ‘Splicer’ and the ‘Hare’. I noticed that in a 1992 letter, you commented to Pask that the ‘Hare’ was discussed with Zeeuw, an occasion during which the similarities of your aim with Zeeuw’s allusion to the ‘process of externalisation’ were acknowledged. I found this equation of your aims with ‘Hare’s with Pask I.A. and Zeeuw’s “externalisation” process, interesting.

To what extent were your (later) developments connected with Pask and Zeeuw' development of Conversation Theory/Interaction of Actors theory?

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - We became close to Gordon, at first programming animations of bifurcating tori – and attempted to bring to life predefined animated sequences. To my mind, these were the first glimpses of the three dimensional worlds Gordon had been dreaming of for many years. The computer enabled us to placed the viewers point-of-view (POV) inside the working architecture, to witness for the first time the actors, their interaction and the forms exposed by these energies. The work had been about how to represent time based processes and products with rudimentary polygone geometry and programmable camera. Even in the very basic 16 bit graphics of and Atari ST computer, we could generate and move around sufficient spatial information and perspectival depth queuing for the eye and brain to construct a suspension of disbelief. This was how we attempted to place Pask and others within a live CT model. I remember Gordon being quite emotional in the studio as these first codeings worked and we began to see the architectural spaces emerge firstly in 640 by 480 high resolution black and white and later in 320 by 240 in a pallet of 16 colours.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - Regarding the development of CT and the IA, I also noticed that also in 1992 Pask prepared of a crucial lecture to present at Birbeck University.

As I wrote in other place : “This relates to Pask’s acceptance of an invitation from the British Computer Society, and Opportunity he took to present a synthetic retrospective look at his three-decade career – from Learning Machine to his new Interaction Actors Theory. [...] This was a significant moment for Pask, and he invited many colleagues to take part in a subsequent discussion (Christine Hawley, Anthony Feldman, Anne Hayes, Glenn Davidson, Nicholas Grimshaw. etc).”

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - We did not attend this...

(GONÇALO FURTADO) - As you know, Pask had a lifelong engagement with the Architectural Association School of architecture. In this connection, I highlighted that, several times “[...] Pask expressed them his intention to make a computer regulated gadget - for instance, for an AA exhibition in 1984 (as commented on to Boyarsky), and later in the early 1990s for his ‘A of K’ idea.” At a certain point, Pask envisioned an exhibition and wrote to the AA saying that contacts with the artists Davidson and Hayes were being established. This occurrence is significant for it alludes to Pask’s continuous transaction with the art field and his particular interest in topology.

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - Pask invited Anne and I to the AA to deliver 3 lectures over three consecutive weeks. At the end of one of these lectures the Amsterdam teapot was inflated, intersecting tori were projected onto the paper and the entire audience of students and staff got inside. These were the kind of events which reminded us all of 1960’ happenings – an association to which Gordon was especially fond. Though Anne and I are too young and missed the spirit of 1960s, such events chimed with the ethos of the AA at that period, students were easily moved to performative involvement in such events and this in turn suited Gordon and ourselves.

(GONÇALO FURTADO) -We should end with an explanation of the cooperative basis of the other works developed with Gordon (i.e. “Thistle” and “Bitori”). We were recently together at one of yours’ artistic interventions. To what extent were your exchanges with Pask influential to your future work?

(GLENN DAVIDSON) - Thistle we commissioned by American Society for Cybernetics 1990 Montreal conference. This followed on from the success of Bitori at Virginia Beach. Bitori had been pre designed and made, then transported and inflated in USA. Thistle on the other hand did not exist. The question for us was, could we use the conference as a generating system for a work of art. Could the social techniques we had developed using paper be used in the context of a conference?

This became a mimetic form of work, to try to understand how work in one domain might be equivalent or equal in value to another. This was interesting because at the very core of cybernetic discourse Pask’s work on CT focussed on describing the emergence of the ‘new’ within the context of the theory of conversation. Here in Montreal our focus was placed within the discourse itself. The Montreal conference became the

conversational domain, our process. Art utilising paper became the language within which that emergence occurred and the interaction of the participants were the generative energies and orientated processes that created the work. We were, by then, consciously attempting to utilise our understanding of CT to create social interaction and paper architecture, forms defined and built through the interaction.

The End
