

# Alan Johnston: The Northern Mirror (Bury/Manchester)

Thomas Lange

The **Northern Mirror** is a work of art in a landscape. A landscape that has been formed by two hundred years of industrialization and its decay; characterised by “the sense of waste decline, has an unadorned, naked feel” (Alan Johnston).<sup>1</sup> It is a landscape of a certain anonymity – and of ambivalence, too. For this anonymity hovers above it despite all the visible traces of its former history; man’s intervention, creation and manipulation. This anonymity is part of the nature of the site: it is not entirely nature and it is not entirely man-made. Both the forces of nature and former human alterations seem to have undergone a neutralizing collaboration resulting in this anonymous, unauthored being. What can be seen in this landscape is the work of antagonistic forces: the creative, constructive and transforming forces of human industrialization and the forces of nature, which slowly claim back what was once taken from her; and in between there are traces of new human forces of a different kind, taking part in that re-gaining, re-forming process. All this has culminated in a redefined space, a public space; no longer one of work and exploitation, but of leisure and “recreation”. All this is embraced; it seems, within the forces of time. This is not an urban space and the architectural form of Johnston’s work is not architecture either. It is a three-dimensional, plastic work of art, and being so, it does what works of art do: it makes visible that which is otherwise invisible. Its physical structure, visually perceived, works in a somewhat similar way to what Patrick Geddes called a *synoptic view* and its conditions: “Large views in the abstract, Aristotle knew (...) depend upon large views in the concrete.”<sup>2</sup> The key to understand this lies in what such a view does. It is a visual linking of what is within the visual field.

As this public space is intrinsically landscape, the only approach is by walking through it. This is a very basic approach that not only engages our elementary sense of orientation, but also the awareness of our existence as three-dimensional entities, that can freely move in space and time (other and distinct entities). Moreover, walking in or through this space involves our other senses, not only the visual (encompassing our sense for space, distances and directions, for three-dimensional objects, for light and shadows, for example) but also the sense of touch (understanding the materiality, hard or soft grounds and obstacles, dry or wet weather conditions, strong gales or light breezes, etc.); hearing (the sound of the wind in the leaves, the humming of the sub-power station or the distant traffic, the birds and insects etc.); and smelling (the plants, the soil, the atmosphere, the weather, etc.).

This multitude of sensual perceptions are of course strongly fused and constantly shifting and interacting with one another but above all, interconnected with *vision* (as related to *and* distinct from touch, hearing, smelling and the movement of our bodies). *Vision* is the distance-sense, which tells us what touching,

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<sup>1</sup> Email to Thomas Lange, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Geddes, *city Development*, as quoted by Mike Small, *Self & City. Visual Thinking and Concepts of Ecology in Geddes’s City in the Region*, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004,

hearing, smelling can never tell us: the *overview*. In the overview all the sensual information we receive can be *orientated*. Orientation between the body and the outside world can be established. This overview is something that our minds are constantly trying to attain in order to consider that we *understand* or *comprehend*. Whatever we make of "us" in relation to "the outer world" is a sort of mapping, in which disparate objects are accumulated in relation to each other and ourselves; it is the *establishment of relations* and *drawing of conclusions* from that. Vision and the overview provide us with the knowledge of continuing existence out of reach (separate from our bodies); and this is the key to understanding the distinction between the act of touch and the object of touch, the act of seeing and the vision: the overview.

The **Northern Mirror** reflects all kinds of visible and historically related features of the landscape. The brick stone material of a sub-power station and its fenced caging for example, with its almost Miesian appearance - a certain classic modern abstraction, an aesthetic notion of Mies van der Rohe's purity of abstract form – which here seems strangely detached from the sub-power station's functionality. It reflects the industrial remains that appear like ruins, turning this landscape into an archaeological site of former industrialisation; and the traces of the destruction of the Bury coal mining industry in the fire of 1937. It also reflects nature: the geological nature of this area as well as its recapture by vegetation; the form and size-regularities of the plants, bushes and trees as well as the domination of botanical species of the older and tougher kind (grass, moss, fern, birch). It reflects "large views in the concrete" – images created by the shadow-structures of the fences and leaves and the grid work of branches of bushes and trees. Finally and powerfully it reflects "large views in the abstract", in essence, the visible history of this landscape which stretches back to Stone Age fortification.<sup>3</sup> This reflection encompasses the overall dominance of the Robert Peel Tower, Holcolombe Hill<sup>4</sup>, still overlooking and controlling the whole area in the spirit of his self-founded police-force and, forming a line with this, the church towers, representative of another former social-controlling force. This row in turn, strangely lines up with Ulrich Rückriem's Monolith<sup>5</sup>, encircling both the memory of the stone age as well as the towering chimneys of former industry.<sup>6</sup>

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ed. by Kiyoshi Okutsu, Alan Johnston, Murdo McDonald, Noboru Sadakata, Yamaguchi Institute of Contemporary Art (YICA) in association with Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), Yamaguchi 2004, pp. 152–163. p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> The name Bury, (also earlier known as "Buri" and "Byri") comes from a Saxon word, probably meaning "a stronghold". A Bronze Age funeral barrow has been located at Whitelaw Hill in nearby Ramsbottom. Several ceramic urns were unearthed here and are now on display in the Bury Museum.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.thepeelsociety.fsworld.co.uk/robert\\_peel.html](http://www.thepeelsociety.fsworld.co.uk/robert_peel.html) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peel\\_Monument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peel_Monument)

<sup>5</sup> From the Lancashire Evening Telegraph, first published Thursday 28th May 1998.

INTERNATIONAL artist Ulrich Rückriem made an impassioned plea to the people of borough to look after his latest work - a massive sculpture installation at Outwood.

The largest piece of the Irwell Sculpture Trail was officially "unveiled" this week at an opening ceremony at the former colliery site. The collection of standing stones impressed visitors and aficionados alike, and has been hailed by local art bosses as a jewel in Bury's artistic crown. German sculptor Rückriem is considered to be one of the top five living artists in the world, and only makes one installation of this kind in any country. He passed up a chance of putting a work in the Champs Elysees in Paris to work in Radcliffe, and his next commission will be the entrance for the new German Parliament building in Berlin.

"This work puts us on a pedestal with some of the great capital cities and arts centres in the world," said Cathy Newbery, co-ordinator of the sculpture trail. Rückriem's piece - he calls them setting stones, rather than sculptures - covers a large area of the old colliery site, and will now be the centrepiece of a new country park to be built around them. "This is just the beginning," said Ms Newbery. "Come back in three years, come back in 30 years, and it will be different every time." But it was the dereliction of the site that first attracted Rückriem to work here. "I liked the area, it was like a non-space," he said. "It was not developed at all, it was like a non-site."

The Northern Mirror itself reflects architectural designs of different times, spaces and cultures, which it seeks to connect visually. Rather than alluding to or quoting actual features it works on a more subtle level, revealing basic ideas about artistic solutions that establish a feeling of space–volume–border interaction that inquire into the relation of the body to the existence of a continuity outside, out of reach. In doing so, it links territories of the human mind that may only then be revealed as being interconnected: Robert Adam’s design for Hume’s tomb in Edinburgh<sup>7</sup>; Wittgenstein’s House for his sister in Vienna.<sup>8</sup> It encircles the architectural designs and defined spaces of the architects Adams, Piranesi, Ando and Ogawa, and the Zen-related landscape gardens of Sesshu - an imagined quintet which represents a territorial and inter-cultural correspondence between *East* and *West*. It does this in a way that makes the differences seem irrelevant because they are stripped back to a human cultural basis that can only be understood within a radical abstraction: it is radical, because it is fundamental, almost like a reflection of these minds’ elaborations towards a purity which is eminent for a creative beginning, that creates the “new” only with accountancy of the furthest reaches into the past.

So, The Northern Mirror alludes to a creative beginning not in the sense of an initial happening way back in the darkest past at the cradle of mankind, nor an origin that all have in common and which has been past on, but an intrinsic artistic beginning from the moment this site-derived place is established: a beginning which can be described as a continuously “happening” moment; a point of history that connects with similar “timeless” origins. In this sense we could think of the paradox of a “timeless history” – of a concept of history that is disconnected from the idea of a string of time, of a linear time–flow as well as from the variants of circular or spiral time-visualizations. It is much more related to the Huttonian idea of layers of time<sup>9</sup> which can be, if you don’t use a linear time-concept, used to reveal each layer and its connection to each other *at once*, in a moment of vision, of visibility. Like the drilled-out cylindrical sections of today’s geologists and climate–researchers which are read as historical strata: there is of course the linear reading, but also the comparative actual, phase or moment-reading which establishes in the moment of observation a direct connection of past and present. In this sense all the data accumulated over thousands of years can be used *actually*: they are all at once *there/here* in the same timeless moment of being comprehended.

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And he urged the council and the people of the borough to develop the park in a sensitive manner - and to care for his work. "This can be an ideal situation," he told the audience at Monday's ceremony. "It depends on you, and the people on the council, and how carefully they handle it." Tony Trehy, Bury's principal arts officer, helped negotiate bringing the work to the borough, and was clearly relieved that it was now in place. He said: "It is difficult to explain to people how important this work is. But now we have a Ruckriem, other artists will want to be associated with the Irwell Sculpture Trail."

 <http://www.burrs.org.uk/heritage.htm>

<sup>7</sup> See Ian Gordon Brown, David Hume’s Tomb: a Roman mausoleum by Robert Adam, in: Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 121 (1991), pp- 391–422.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Leitner and Kaspar König, Die Architektur von Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Nova Scotia College of Art Press & New York University Press 1973.

<sup>9</sup> For Hutton and further contemporary discussions of the development of the main theories on the age of the earth see S. J. Gould, Time's Arrow and Times's Cycle. Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time, Cambridge, Mass. 1987

“Northern” is the focal point of Johnston’s conception, deeply rooted in Scottish Enlightenment ideas, as executed by Hume. Striking about this Scottish variant of Enlightenment – which perpetuates its challenge for today’s thinkers of aesthetics – is its dealings with and inquiries into facts derived from the sensual together with and *inseparable from* the rational understanding of facts presented to an individual’s body and mind. The famous statement of Hume that fascinates Johnston is that human minds are mirrors to each other, meaning that we need to constantly exchange with each other over the nature of those “facts” and our understanding of them, to communicate reciprocally and indefinitely, to gain understanding of the world, because we cannot leave our bodies and therewith the conditions determining our understanding; because we cannot be the observers of our own perceptions and comprehension.<sup>10</sup>

The similarity of this idea to the workings of the Northern Mirror is that it reflects the environment sensually (visibly), whilst taking into account facts produced by the other senses – particularly touch. In taking touch into account – just like Alois Riegl insisted – vision and touch are being intertwined.<sup>11</sup> Because this site-derived (rather than site-specific) work is explored bodily and understood by walking around it and by taking in observations from different angles and perspectives, literally by *walking* body, vision and memory are intertwined. This *totality of the senses* enables the perception and comprehension of this place. It enables the work of contextualization in the broadest sense. As Johnston explained, “so the context of concept is spread across a diffuse area, still held within a tactile geometry.”<sup>12</sup> This takes into account not only the visibilities, but a transformation of these data to open them to the process of contextualization within an altered perception: “I have changed the colour of the wire structure, I started seeing this as a structural pediment to casting the shadow on neutrality itself. So the wire is no longer a security issue but a drawing one. Of course in this context the grey of shadow also integrates itself as a neutral and passing phenomenon.”<sup>13</sup> The exploration of the outer world, including the work of our minds, becomes essentially sensual. This is what Hume refers to: the work of the mind is sensual, because it is always connected to our senses, and so, the mind is in a particular way a sense too. This is what Riegl insisted upon too: that art, in addressing the primary senses of seeing *and* touching, is a *rational* approach - is thinking and reflecting *world* already – with its own means, which are not that far away from, and which are not at all different to the rational.

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10 Alan Johnston, „Visual Thinking“, Patrick Geddes and his Influence, Light and Shadow, An Ambivalence, Both Native and Extended, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (s. Fnt. 2, pp. 122–135; on page p.131 Johnston refers to George E. Davie, The Mirror Theory: Hume and Smith Against Derrida, in: George E. Davie, A Passion for Ideas, Polygon. Edinburgh 1994, pp. 135-149, on Hume’s relation of language and Consciousness, quoting: „The minds of men are mirrors to one another (...) only in so far as they are accompanied by a reflection, of which custom renders us insensible. In other words, the reflection can be illuminating only in the case where the ideas compared resemble one another in a certain respect according to the complicated pattern stated. The captain can get out of his hip and explore what has happened to it by means of careful observation, but I can’t leave my body and for further knowledge have to rely on other people who communicate their observations to me and serve me as mirrors.“ (p.131–132)

11 Alois Riegl, Spätromische Kunstindustrie, Wien 1927, (unveränderter Neudruck der Ausgabe von 1901, ed. by Emil Reisch), pp. 83-236 and pp. 389-391.

12 Alan Johnston, email to Thomas Lange, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2007

13 Alan Johnston, email to Thomas Lange, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2007

Here we have a further bridge to the cultural reflections of Kubler's *The Form of Time* as well as Ad Reinhardt's work on *Timeless paintings*.<sup>14</sup> Both aim at something that lies under or behind the individual and cultural, the historically differentiated: it is the overall idea of the anonymous, the hidden, the unauthored. Both gain understanding with a notion of abstraction; stripping down to the essential, taking away the temporal, time-bound and fashion-bound to such a degree that the work (the thought on human achievements of form) unfolds to reveal its connectiveness to the basic enquiry (and open, timeless questions) into understanding the relations between "I" and "world"; revealing the connections between factual and spiritual world(s); between matter and mind.

Understanding and creating place *and* context is possible with a *reflection*. Such a reflection can only be created with a *border*, which needs to be anonymous, hidden, unauthored. This, Alan Johnston's Northern Mirror has on a great scale: only here the permeability of the mirror-reflection metaphor is used, for a mirror-reflection is a border which is permeable, which is optically and visually crossed – you see beyond this border; you can optically open a room, you can double a room, multiply a room with mirrors. This leads to "history" as that which is understandable on a greater scale; continuity than is visible due to the mirror, providing the *synoptic view*: it is the abstract and minimalised form, the essence, which leads to its opposite, the "large views in the abstract".<sup>15</sup>

What becomes visible and thereby comprehensible through the double-reflection (optical/touchable and rational) of work and place is the multitude of traces - of anonymous labours, desires and goals - that form a landscape (a region) through a plastic historical process. This is the anonymous work of time, now lying before the eyes. Northern Mirror reveals the timeless structures of the transformative processes of creation and destruction. What can be seen with eyes capable of grasping the plastic notion of this historical *spatial* context of vision, is that the timeless structures that transform a landscape into a *place* are *essentially (wesentlich) abstract*.

Piranesi, Sesshu, Adams, Ando and Ogawa show, through their understanding of architecture and landscape, this particular insight into what abstraction reveals to the mind: the work of time captured in timeless forms. This creates the enormous complexity of *place* – achieved by a bodily *and* simultaneously mental labour of perception.

In Piranesi's ruins the anonymous work of *time* creates literally "a marvellous void" in the sense that the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel implies with *void*<sup>16</sup>: the power and uploading of our imagination whilst we are observing ruins, where the reflective mind meditates (and Schlegel's expression *endless reflection* as a romantic notion possibly hints at this), achieving *space* as vision and tactility, connecting to its surroundings to transform space, to *empty* space and the work into *place*.

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14 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven/London 1962; Gudrun Inboden and Thomas Kellein, „Timeless Painting“, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 13<sup>th</sup> April – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1985, Stuttgart 1985.

15 Patrick Geddes, city Development, as quoted by Mike Small, *Self & City. Visual Thinking and Concepts of Ecology in Geddes's City in the Region*, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (see Ftn. 2), p. 153.

16 Georg Simmel, *Die Ruine*, in: Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*. Potsdam <sup>3</sup>1923, pp. 135 – 143.

Heidegger explained that in the temporal verb *leeren* (to empty) lays the verb *lesen* (to read): in German we say *auflesen* (to collect roots or nuts or grain from the ground), literally: to empty the ground of these.<sup>17</sup> This *leeren* and *lesen* (emptying and reading) is a basic human action that defines and creates a certain place (*Ort*). This *lesen* (reading) is in German also *sammeln* (collecting) or *versammeln* (assembling); and this is indeed what creates a place with *The Northern Mirror*: Its reflection collects the data from its surroundings, assembles it through the work of abstraction, and reads it to establish (the specificity of) *place*. The void that is part of this is part of the complexity that establishes place – in this sense the void is not nothing, but the opposite: something that makes something happen, something that makes *place* possible. The void is part of the plastic process, involved with the creation of space, of the geological and geographical area, of *culture*: not nothing, the void is rather a plastic play at work as a searching, inquiring and designing donor (*Stifter*) of *place* (*Ort*).<sup>18</sup>

A simple drawn line is a border that is already donating distinction and reflection. The garden, the window, the architectural abstract forms of cylinder, cube or sphere all serve as this marvellous border which is in essence a variation of a drawn line. A drawn line – an essential visual measure that Alan Johnston extensively uses in his drawing-connected and architecture-related work – is the primary distinction of a border, a first definition that separates and relates areas in space. It is another step to achieve a three-dimensional line in the form of architecture; a border too, but more complex owing to its three-dimensionality. What a border has in common in all forms is its ability to *make visible* through distinction. It makes visible because it enables things to refer to and react with one another: it creates orientation (defined for example with basic geometry such as left-right, up-down, inside-outside; or temporal as in before-after). In creating a border the Northern Mirror defines a distinct area within which vision is suddenly opened up: opened in the sense that the line reveals, and hence enables comprehension. The concept of the Northern Mirror is in the very sense of the word *visual thinking*.

With the help of these ideas we can describe how the Northern Mirror – in dialogue with the spectator – results in a reading of space. There are loose connections (loose, because they are open and this is a characteristic – in the most positive sense – of the word “speculative”) to a Japanese concept of geometry: “to make visible/comprehensible the realm of existing space where *people and nature* come in and change it.”<sup>19</sup>

The border, realized with the work of abstraction, creates *place* like in Heidegger’s thinking in *Die Kunst und der Raum*, developed, not by chance, by looking at the abstract work of Chida. The border creates

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17 Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum*, St. Gallen 1969.

18 Martin Heidegger, *die Kunst und der Raum*, St. Gallen 1969, p. 12.

19 Alan Johnston, „Visual Thinking“, Patrick Geddes and his Influence, Light and Shadow, An Ambivalence, Both Native and Extended, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (s. Fnt. 2), pp. 122–135; on page p.128 Johnston quotes Pham T. Hien on Tadao Ando (1998): „Geometry (...) should take into account the diversity of intentions and emotion. It is not a synthesis of everyday order and functionality, logic, or rationality. It transcends them into primordial, archaic wholeness. It also means non-geometry in terms of continuity, the open and symbolic traditional Japanese space. In the spatial language, these are pure geometry as a whole, abstract space in which nature (intrinsic light, wind, water) enters into the dialogue with architecture and its inhabitants. Geometry is not the geometry of mathematical logic and order. The Japanese concept of geometry

a sort of tactile geometry which establishes a situation in which *it* – an anonymous force or creation – happens to be at work within the *reflection* in the broader sense, described previously. This situation of perception and reflection is bound to the beholder's perception and reflection and connects – paradoxically - to something impersonal, non-subjective, anonymous; to something that is far beyond the personal; more general and uncontrolled, yet – comprehensibly – existing.

What the Northern Mirror in Bury achieves, is making the history of a place visible through a work of art – and this is precisely what it means to change a space into *place*.

*Place* can be experienced as a continuum in which time, culture and heritage merge with actual sight: the site as *place* has been and will continuously be created by sight. In this visually perceived notion of history the work of art is a neutral, almost non-specific object that works like a „catalyst“, precipitating frames in time and space. To do so, it has to remain timeless. The experience results from the fusing of the subjective with the general (and historical). The experience of *place* as a continuum of space and time is created by the actual – which is initialized in the gaze of the (moving) spectator.

The Northern Mirror provides a concept of time and history that is derived from the present, from the presence of its tactile geometry and its notion of abstraction: here is the place where different times and cultures meet, where essential connections can be drawn and where the *synopsis* becomes visible. The abstract structures reveal in this overview similarities that are deeply rooted in the relations between the sensual and rational interconnections in exploring and understanding the “world” and the “individual” as a connected “whole”.

Alluding to Wittgenstein one can say that the so called logic of visual geometrical structures reveals the logic of the place, and with this the logic of the world *at once*, but it *says* nothing about it.<sup>20</sup> A logical visual language mirrors specific qualities of the world just like the logical language does.<sup>21</sup> There must be more to this to actually say something about it. In the preface to his late *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Inquiries) Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of landscape to describe the nature of his thoughts and the resulting text of his book, in order to preclude the expectation that his text will work like pure logical language. Yet, still not satisfied with this, he insists upon a crucial distinction between landscape (*Landschaft*) and the image of landscape (*Bild der Landschaft*), which seems to him a better, more precise metaphor for the nature of his text. For the *image of landscape* is constructed by a necessary, almost natural work of abstraction: it only works by framing, by cutting it out from the whole - which landscape is - and establishing borders. So, he concludes, the whole book is not “landscape”, but „*eigentlich nur ein Album*“ (just an Album): an assemblage of a multitude of images (*Bilder*), a collection of framed and separated images of a dismantled landscape. The *Album* is a collection and it is used for

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encloses people and nature in its order and logic and goes beyond objectified form into the realm of existential space, or place, where people come in and change it.“

20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tagebücher, Anhang II: Aufzeichnungen, die G.E. Moore in Norwegen nach Diktat niedergeschrieben hat, in: Werkausgabe in 8 Bd., Bd. I, Frankfurt am Main, <sup>4</sup>1988, p. 209–223, p. 209.

21 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen, in: Werkausgabe in 8 Bd., Bd. I, Frankfurt am Main, <sup>4</sup>1988, p.225–580, p. 231–232.

memory: to help to reconstruct a whole that is only real and comprehensible in the spur of a moment, before it dismantles and falls back into the diverse multitude of images.

Here lies a deeper connection to Hume's *mirror-metaphor* that is of importance to Johnston's work on *visual thinking*. To describe the relation of language and consciousness, Hume stated, one has to understand the need to communicate with other people's observations and experiences. For, as we cannot leave our bodies to relativise from *outside*, other people must serve us as mirrors. In a way, the visibility of artificial, man-made objects, of this whole site as materialized thoughts, desires, hopes, disasters, feelings, statements and messages is being mirrored like a multitude of cut-out and framed images. A similar mirroring is initiated by the drawings and paintings that Johnston has hung amongst the permanent collection of the Bury Art Gallery.

Keeping this thought in the realm of visual metaphors, this creates not a simple one-to-one reflection of basic geometrical mirroring like the relation  $A = A'$ , but a multitude of multidirectional mirroring and overlaying like the infinite patterns of kaleidoscopic plenitude. The kaleidoscope is for Johnston a useful metaphor for the very simple, basic and endlessly repeated work of refraction that creates vast complexity. In this way, the Northern Mirror is part of a northern geometry, of a *Gothic* geometry: apparently taking a less simple form than the Euclidian geometry, *Gothic* geometry - as shown for example in the choir of the Dome of Cologne and reflected in Friedrich Schlegel's description of it as a *crystalline* structure - brings to mind the idea of an anonymous self-creating process, the idea of a growing, self diverting and self re-arranging pattern of kaleidoscopic potential, wherein each element is multiplied through its symmetrical mirror-axes.<sup>22</sup>

We can use this thought to understand what takes place with the Northern Mirror in relation to the environment in which it is set.

In the work itself – if it is possible to make such a reduction, because it is the established plenitude of relations as a whole which constitute the work – there is that “tension of the reductive” (Alan Johnston)<sup>23</sup>, emerging from this almost formlessness (*Formlosigkeit*), which makes sensitive to the void, pushing the spectator's perceptive concentration to the edge of the visual. In this very sense the Northern Mirror is aiming at and activating “the space-sense part of the body. The common sense” as Johnston - with Hume's thoughts in mind – puts it.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Friedrich Schlegel, *Grundzüge der gothischen Baukunst; auf einer Reise durch die Niederlande, Rheingegenden, die Schweiz und einen Teil von Frankreich in dem Jahre 1804–1805*, in: *Poetisches Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1806*, Berlin 1806, pp. 257–390.

23 Alan Johnston, „Visual Thinking“, Patrick Geddes and his Influence, Light and Shadow, An Ambivalence, Both Native and Extended, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (s. Fnt. 2), pp. 133.

24 Alan Johnston, „Visual Thinking“, Patrick Geddes and his Influence, Light and Shadow, An Ambivalence, Both Native and Extended, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (s. Fnt. 2), p. 134.

Here, I believe, opens a link to Johnston's remark that one can feel and see the "*shape of time*" in the way that Vico was the first to recognise<sup>25</sup>, followed by Hutton with his theory of visible geological time, which resulted in his conclusion that "there is no prospect of an end". This can also be taken for granted when we consider George Kubler's *The shape of time*, which is a cultural geology of *form*. Following Kubler, "continuities" form a non progressive cyclical pattern of culture which makes us in essence understanding of all human cultures of all times.<sup>26</sup> This is an idea that was explored by Aby Warburg as well, when he summarised in his late lecture on the "Snake-Ritual", his experiences with Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and their cultural images and metaphors similar to those of ancient Greek culture. He reduced this in the powerful formula which I quote in German to preserve the rhyme: "Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern – Athen, Oraibi, alles Vettern" (It is an old book to browse – Athens, Oraibi, [are] all cousins).<sup>27</sup> His late sketches of cultural migration maps reveal the North–South and East–West orientations that usually point out cultural borders and differences as fusions of reciprocal influence; as *Wanderstraßen* (migration roads) of cultural exchange. A pair of photos were found in Warburg's estate that topographically compared the plateau-like island of Helgoland isolated in the North Sea with the Pueblo Plateaus overlooking the surrounding desert – a playful and essential, meaning highly abstracted visual trigger for his imagination to nourish thoughts about cultural continuities in the widest possible sense.<sup>28</sup> Warburg, like Jacob Burckhardt and other creative thinkers was fully aware of the imaginative potential of playing with „unusual constellations“ to fire productive ideas, to make the invisible (culture, ideas etc.) visible. Since at least C.D. Friedrich and P.O. Runge the artist's intellectual achievements in contributing „scientific insight“ have been explicitly characterized as *serious games*.

This is of course the advantage of using artistic means rather than pure scientific ones (in the academic sense) to enable the mind to think on a much bigger scale – to *speculate* in the true sense of the word. What Warburg did in his visual work, the *Mnemosyne-Atlas*<sup>29</sup> wherein he traced and followed the continuities of form and expression over two thousand years, exploring a cultural language-heritage through Europe and beyond with black and white photographs displayed on huge boards, can be related to Ad Reinhardt's collection of thousands of slides made during his travels around the world and presented in endless slide-shows wherein, in a sort of hypnotic repetition the continuities of forms become visible, and the *shape of time* reveals itself.<sup>30</sup> To speak with Wittgenstein's landscape metaphor, the shape of time is revealed within an (endless) *Album*. It is no secret that this material nourished Reinhardt's artistic quest for *timeless paintings*.

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25 Alan Johnston, „Visual Thinking“, Patrick Geddes and his Influence, Light and Shadow, An Ambivalence, Both Native and Extended, in: Patrick Geddes: „By Leaves We Live“, Edinburgh–Yamaguchi 2004 (s. Fnt. 2), p. 135. Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova*, Napoli 1730. See recently published A. Robert Caponigri, *Time and Idea. The Theory of History in Giambattista Vico*, New Brunswick, N.Y./London 2004.

26 Kubler see footnote no. 16.

27 Aby Warburg, *Das Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht [Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nordamerika. Vortrag gehalten in der Heilanstalt Bellevue, Kreuzlingen, am 21. April 1923]*, Berlin 1988, p. 9.

28 See Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York 2004.

29 Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE (1924-29)*, ed. by Martin Warnke, Berlin 2003, 2nd printing.

30 Gudrun Inboden and Thomas Kellein, „Timeless Painting“, *Staatsgalerie Stuttgart*, 13<sup>th</sup> April – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1985, Stuttgart 1985.

The Northern Mirror with its abstraction and reduction of form consists of variations of ambivalent structures, which have much in common with the border, window or threshold. With its permeability of skins, veils and shadows it explores not only the transparent nature of its construction, but the very *place* that has been formed and the work that has been formed by the place. This permeability and ambivalence marks the edge of the void – and is part of the establishment of the void. And here an element can be observed that leaves behind the window-metaphor of western culture, literally opens up this metaphor: for at the core of the metaphor lies the distinction between the body of the spectator (and this body's reality) and the reality of what can be seen in the frame, "through the window" as we say. This distinction is questioned and it is overcome.

In The Northern Mirror the work of abstraction reaches an anonymity that results in a transparent, almost immaterial shadow construction that enables the *Durchlässigkeit* (permeability) of reflection. With the non-material, with the shadow, with the grey reduction, an abstraction is at work which subdues direct, associative reading, the *masking meaning* of the object. Instead, a permeable zone is established in which thinking, reflecting and connecting can take place unhindered; wherein the relations between body and senses and the world outside are connected (unbound by cultural disposition). Johnston is aware of the closeness of science and play. In this respect exploration of the unexpected pushes the ability of the human mind to see and draw connections, overriding established borders of belief. Playing with the elements light, shadow and geometry is indeed playing with the fundamentals.<sup>31</sup> This bears a fundamental insight into the understanding of history and the formation of culture.

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31 Alan Johnston, On the Kaleidoscope. The Kaleidoscope: A Crystalline Form of the Eye. Logan Sisley, interview with Alan Johnston, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2004.