HORIZONS ARE NOT INFINITE HORIZONS

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Roger Brown, Agnes Denes, Fred Sandback

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2020

Center for Curatorial Studies
Hessel Museum of Art
Bard College

Horizons are not infinite examines the use of axonometric projection by Roger Brown (1941–1997), Agnes Denes (b. 1931), and Fred Sandback (1943–2003) and speculates on the significance of this technique during the 1970s and 1980s. By reflecting on the cultural conditions of these decades and how they resonate with the present, the exhibition gathers paintings and prints whose axonometric visions of the world create ways to imagine the future.

I. Axonometric projection is a technique for representing three-dimensional space in two dimensions. It is achieved by projecting the coordinates of a three-dimensional object onto a fixed surface, such as the picture plane of a painting, drawing, or print, or what's referred to as the "projection plane" in the discipline of descriptive geometry. The rays connecting the three-dimensional coordinates to the corresponding points on the projection plane are parallel, resulting in compositions often characterized by a sense of flatness, where the scenes depicted appear to unfold across a work's surface rather than recede back into it.

Artists' use of axonometric projection has waxed and waned throughout history. As early as the first century, Chinese artists developed *dengjiao toushi*, or "equal-angle see-through," a style through which parallel forms, such as beams, pillars, footpaths, and courtyards, remain parallel in two-dimensional drawings and paintings. This technique also complemented the handscroll, a medium that encourages continuous, meandering

engagement. Anticipating viewers unfurling the scrolls while imagining themselves wandering through their depicted scenes, artists believed that *dengjiao toushi* facilitated the simulation of environmental immersion.

Around the sixteenth century in Europe, tradesmen, artisans, and military engineers revived axonometric projection because it offers a more precise means of representation than linear perspective does. Invented during the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, perspective is a technique in which orthogonal lines converge into a vanishing point. Artisans found that these lines represented an inconsistent distance away from the viewer, and by instead using axonometry, they could render contours that accurately corresponded to the actual dimensions of their drawings' referents. This precision of distance was vital considering how, as one sixteenth-century author of a military fortification treaty noted, the "imperfection of a line could mean the loss of an army."[1]

European modernist groups, notably the Dutch De Stijl movement (1917–31) and German Bauhaus school (1919–33), celebrated the technique's potential for abstraction and ambiguity. For example, in works by artists Theo van Doesburg and El Lissitzky, forms float freely and flicker between unstable, modular backgrounds and foregrounds. These pictorial contradictions are resolved, however, due to axonometric projection's unique ability to present different layers of information in a nonhierarchical manner. The coexistence of forms within the picture plane symbolized one of the main objectives of modernist artists: a new style for a new, postwar consciousness where the universal and the individual are in harmony.

Art historian Yve-Alain Bois argues that "since axonometric projection abolishes the fixed viewpoint of the spectator and creates several possible readings of one and the same image, there are several different ideologies of axonometry."[2] Furthermore, architect Massimo Scolari identifies a critical difference

between perspective and projection: “In the former, the artist is at the center of nature; in the latter it is nature that is central while the artist is only the interpreter, the go-between.”[3] These statements underscore how representational techniques are not neutral compositional tools. Indeed, an artist’s adoption of one technique over another reveals their predilections concerning perception and interpretation. What’s more, moments where many artists embrace the same technique at once manifest during times of ideological change. As this short history of the technique indicates, axonometric projection emerges and reappears during technological, social, and cultural shifts.

This exhibition, *Horizons are not infinite*, which features works made between 1972 and 1981, proposes that axonometric projection was an apt expression of the shifts that occurred during this period. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed increasingly privatized and deregulated economic policies, agitation of Cold War tensions and conflicts, and

technological innovations such as live satellite television broadcasting, GPS navigation, mobile phones, and email. These decades were marked by new ways to connect and consume, with media and market more networked than ever before. Paradoxically, as the capacity for worldwide connectivity expanded, so too did the sense of geopolitical instability and economic imbalance. Axonometric projection—and its capacity to show disparate information in an organized manner and to resolve compositional contradictions—visually and conceptually complemented the ideological conditions of this era. Roger Brown, Agnes Denes, and Fred Sandback engaged axonometric projection and its unique qualities to explore fundamental notions of reality, representation, and reception.

II. Brown used this technique in his paintings almost exclusively throughout his career. His illustrative depictions of Chicago skyscrapers, suburban tract housing, and American landscapes are refracted through axonometry's

equalizing and totalizing lens. In his 1981 painting *The Daredevil & the Skyscraper*, viewers have unobstructed, voyeur-like views of a building's inhabitants and their activities. Brown's axonometric paintings reveal that, when a scene does not vanish into the distance and when forms and figures are rendered in equal scale, everything and everyone is visible, locatable, and liable to be surveilled.

For Sandback, axonometric drawings and prints function like diagrams or instructions for his installations of elastic cord and yarn. In his two series of prints *Untitled* (1977) and *Untitled (Twenty-two Constructions from 1967)* (1981), Sandback's contours oscillate between descriptions of both coexisting and mutually exclusive planes, confounding clear and easy mapping. While the artist insisted upon the "fact of lines" inserted into the space of a room or a picture plane,[4] his works rather blur the distinctions between drawing, sculpture, and architecture, engendering a sense of ambiguity and imagination.

In her portfolio of prints *Study of Distortions*

- *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space* from 1973–74, Denes transfigures the earth into a pyramid, a cube, a snail shell, and an egg, among other forms, accentuating both the imageability and mutability of the planet. Just one year after NASA captured and distributed the "blue marble" photograph of Earth, Denes depicted the world as an object, one that can be manipulated irrespective of the borders and territories that become distorted in the process. For the artist, this series "projects a dynamic world of rapidly changing concepts and measures, where the appearances of things, facts, and events are assumed manifestations of reality and distortions are the norm."[5]

In addition to the way that axonometric projection structures the content within a work, this technique also produces a unique phenomenological relation between a work and its viewer. Whereas the idealized viewer of a perspectival composition is stationary and monocular, and maintains a fixed distance from the work, the viewer of an axonometric

composition is comparatively more mobile. Untethering viewers from a prescribed vantage point, axonometric projection encourages them to pan, rove, and scan. This sense of flexibility echoes how neoliberalism produces an illusion of flexibility, an ideology that took hold during the same time these works were produced. How one lives, works, and spends are choices ultimately circumscribed within the logic of capitalism, a system in which flexibility does not equate to freedom.

If one accepts that possibilities are not limitless, then such an understanding is perhaps most adequately expressed through a representational technique in which horizons are not rendered as infinite. The works of *Horizons are not infinite* demonstrate how axonometric projection forecloses illustration of a distant vanishing point, of an infinite horizon. They underscore how attempts to image the world from an optical perspective result only in illusion. But if one can instead accept that horizons have discrete ends, then other, seemingly insurmountable, regimes

might similarly come to an end—as distant or oblique as that end may appear. From landscapes to cityscapes, from the corner of a room to the edges of the earth, these works by Roger Brown, Agnes Denes, and Fred Sandback present axonometric visions of a possible world, hope in finitude, and ways to imagine the future.

[1] Diego Gonzales de Medina Barba, quoted in Massimo Scolari, *Oblique Drawing: A History of Anti-perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 6.

[2] Yve-Alain Bois, "Metamorphosis of Axonometry," *Daidalos* 1, no. 1 (1981): 42.

[3] Scolari, *Oblique Drawing*, 43.

[4] "[T]he lines aren't distillations of anything, but simple facts, products of my activity which don't represent anything beyond themselves." "1977 Statement," Fred Sandback Archive, 2007, https://www.fredsandbackarchive.org/ texts-1977-statement.

[5] Agnes Denes, *The Human Argument: The Writings of Agnes Denes* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2008), 139.

Roger Brown

Multiple Tragedy, 1972
Oil on canvas, 72 x 47 3/4 in.
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

The Daredevil & the Skyscraper, 1981
Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in.
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Irrigation of Eastern Colorado, 1981
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Agnes Denes

Study of Distortions – Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space, 1973–74
Prints on Arches paper, 13 3/4 x 9 3/4 in. (each)
17/25, suite XXVIII
Weinreb Family Collection

Fred Sandback

Untitled, 1977
Lithographs on paper, 13 5/8 x 13 5/8 in. (each)
23/30
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Untitled (Twenty-two Constructions from 1967), 1981
Lithographs on paper, 28 3/4 x 22 3/4 in. (each)
15/35
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

My thanks:

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And to my classmates—no more years!

—M. E.

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