

Bay Bridge Mandala



John O'Keefe

Work was pretty scarce. The first job I got was mowing lawns for the black people in south Berkeley and north Oakland who were kind enough to hire me. I started studying with John O'Keefe and Jonathan Albert as soon as I could. O'Keefe was working at the Exploratorium, an interactive science museum in San Francisco. Frank Openheimer, brother of the famous Manhattan Project physicist Robert, was the curator. O'Keefe was teaching an excellent course in making vocal sound. He took groups into this sweet little soundproof room, it was a little octahedral room, a many-faceted jewel of carpentry work, right out there on the floor of the cavernous museum, made out of varnished hardwood and glass, that could fit maybe 6 people crowded together, with double pane glass walls, so that when you closed the doors the great clanking and whirring and barrel bonging sound of the Exploratorium vanished.

O'Keefe, who was already an accomplished theatre director, relished being a wildly enthusiastic choirmaster, ardently leading these innocent museum-goers into a fascinating class of making modern aleatory-jazz, be-bop vocal sound. It was Stockhausen meets Sun Ra, or John Cage meets Pharo Sanders. He'd get us to take apart words and use just some of the syllables as our instrument to blow like jazzers piping in on cue with our phoneme. We'd repeat and repeat a word like a mantra blending and harmonizing, introjecting or trailing.

I'd ride over to San Francisco on the bus, or hitchhike onto the bridge, then take a bus out into the Avenues. The Exploratorium was in the marina, a gorgeous part of town, with yacht clubs and fine houses like villas from Spain. And I'd catch a ride with O'Keefe back to Berkeley. All the way back we'd be all flushed and high from his sound class at the Exploratorium where he led us on experiments in sound synthesis. We sang electronic music! — by shaping the pure voiced and unvoiced vowel color energy in words with diacriticals of attack, sustain and release. By removing the meaning from articulation this way, you were left with just pure joyous mimetic sound: a meditative practice, a repetitive activity done just for the devotion of it. Long enunciated repetition of the word made it become like a mantra, freezing the word in sound-space and stripping the word of its

sense. When words lose their sense like that and are held pinned down in the moment, they burst into pieces, and decompose: what were once signs were now pure fundamental vowel energy being shaped into meaningful vehicles by their consonants — their diacritical attacks, sustains, and releases. This releases the spectral energy in the word and it floats out into the world to act like a chaos attractor — a seed syllable penetrating the mind and the body and the world — drawing like energies to it, pushing untoward energies away.

One day, while riding back to Berkeley with O’Keefe, the Bay Bridge mandala happened. I am moving in a car across the San Francisco Bay Bridge. The sun setting behind us is splashing the Oakland cityscape in front of us, glinting of the girders and glancing of the cars racing headlong on the great, wide, double-decker roadway arching across the sky. Vast expanse of Bay below. The East Bay sprawl we are headed into is a shimmering of mirror surfaces, the glass skyscrapers like facets of one large gem. We are in O’Keefe’s blue Volkswagen bug convertible, running headlong toward the complexity in a pack, everybody running neck and neck in a race, their cars swarming all around us on the wide road bed. From this height, spanning over the great bay, the ocean-going vessels and ferry boats below look like toys in a bathtub.

Somewhere along the arch between San Francisco and Berkeley, in the monotony of the miles and the rhythmic thump of the tires bumping over the sections of the bridge, I notice we appear to be standing still. Something was wrong with the time. All the cars were proceeding at the same speed in phased lock-step, exactly uniform so that there was no perceptible relative motion — at all. I sat bolt upright in my bucket seat and felt an embracing attention take hold of me, a serotonin cascade in the frontal lobes, a rush of penetrating feeling from somewhere way down inside where the world intrudes like a neuronal dendrite into the subcortical substrate, and fans out to meet the complex geometry of the soul. I think my head actually snapped back, like I was in some kind of premonition — an accident maybe?! I blinked a few times, looked around to check my surroundings to see if we had actually all stopped on this superhuman span of steel. Though we were being carried along in a forceful flow, a river of momentum, it felt like shadows flashing past. We were falling. Falling into the vanishing point. I said: “My god! Look at that. We are all moving in synch! All going at the same speed! No one is moving faster or slower. Like we are standing still. And we are falling into the scene.”

Can you imagine? Bits of color on the cars moving beside: red,

blue, green — relative flashing motion of color roll together blue red yellow black into the East Bay sprawl, glinting in the sun, flashes of light off the down town buildings — Oakland of endless little roads snaking, antsy-dancing up the far hills. It was like I could see the whole Bay area at a glance, like it was some kind of vast cloud-chamber evidencing the ghostly vapor trails of so much movement strobed into existence with pulses of annihilation and creation. There were islands in the bay, boat waves in the water, contrails in the sky, curved freeway clover-leaves governing the particle trajectories; there were great avenues plowing a wide swath through neighborhoods. These elegant curves left by particle tracks in the cloud chamber show the tracery of primary energies surging into and out of existence. This tracery of forces in the toroidal-ring vacuum of an atom-smashing, particle-accelerator are the mandalas of my time. Berkeley is the home of the cloud chamber, it was invented here. Some how this view from on top of the bridge got super-ordinated into a shift in perspective. It was indeed an avalanche, a serotonin cascade—some damn thing inside me broke. Something was oscillating in and out of gestalt. It was a paradigm shift, a profound shift in perspective. The View into scale. When the space ceases to be merely something you are moving through, and you have driven into a pause, you enter into an expanded moment, and the space bursts into subspaces, niches of free energy that the creatures have adapted to, you have a view into scale. I slipped into a zoom, for the catenary curves of the bridge cables are logarithmic. I saw the scale with man about the middle between the astronomical and the subatomic as my imagination zoomed in powers of 10,

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with man the 1, the point at the center between the microcosm and the macrocosm. I let my spirit go and it flew out from there over the bay, zoomed up to see the hills way off, got higher to see beyond the horizon to see the valley and out to sea. Logarithmic scale space: for every second zoom back out a power of 10 — 1 meter above where you are, see the swirl in your hair; 10 meters above, it is like looking at yourself from a high diving board; at 100 meters, you are seeing yourself from on top of a large high rise, above the towers of this bridge. Next I start to see the two shores — bay and ocean. At 1000 meters it is like looking from an airplane: if it is not cloudy you start to see the two shores at once and way down the whole bay. I

looked toward the naval base at Alameda, looked down the far reaches of the bay — way, way to the south where the Bay’s water leaks out of the horopter into the horizon. Or zoom the other way, down into my hand, the hairs on the hand, into the pores of the skin, life slipping in and out of holes into capillaries into the blood cells, into the individual cell, down into the mitochondria see the great golden spiral staircase of DNA going down into mass slipping in and out of “holes in space-time” — wells of potential attraction. While passing Treasure Island, looking at the great machines of the Oakland port; I almost lost it, a kind of vertigo was settling in, a kind of existential nausea you get in realization of your own being. The giant container-unloading cranes stationed along the shore stood like invading alien machines — striders walking along the land. Alien-dazzle tractor-beams are moving ALL of us to the secret desires of the heart. All things are in motion, in progression, in change. Even space and time itself. The view! From up there as we traverse the air on this solid and immobile steel. We too are trusses stretched-out, spanning the gap. High up there, I felt a part of the machinery, felt a part of all that was, and all that ever was, the fuel that feeds the fire, part of the history of the earth. I reveled that even molecules of air breathed in by Caesar and exhaled by Jesus and breathed in again by Hitler are still around for all. They could have dispersed and percolated across time through so many mouths into my breath. We are flying in our cars and I thought about you 50 years hence: Will you be flying across the bay in your cars. Just as you 50 years hence will have the same thoughts and feelings I have, will breath the same air that I once breathed, just as you are stuck in a traffic jam so was I once one of the many in this hedgy flow that makes the light through which clarity is transmitted. In my time — the first generation after Einstein, itself a generation after Kant — the debate about space continues: is it absolute and immovable or not. I scramble trying to think about what it meant. If motion is space passed through in time. . . I had slipped, been velocitized, phased, into the tunnel perspective of motion. And I let my imagination go for a minute into creating the mandala, with its central point and its rhythmic isoclines of structure — temples and intricate courtyards were states in a unified presentation of the self as city. I saw Oakland like some golden city of the future set in the Bay Bridge Mandala. Here the whole East Bay backdrop — Oakland with its fearful spots full of wrathful deities and demons, and its wealthy uplands, full of hungry ghosts, its endless struggle between the flatlanders and the mountain people, between

the black and the whites, the rich and the exploited class, the student and the teachers. I had fallen head long into a kind of swoon. I almost wanted to rear back in my bucket seat and put my feet on the dash board to brace myself for sliding down the roadway like I was on the upended Titanic — sliding down beneath the sea into a mandala scene. I almost raised some kind of alarm but sweated out the fever myself. The spirals are forming the complex quasi-closed space-time-matter lattice. The whole Universe appears to be alive. There was so much flowing into me that I felt sweaty and saturated — the ego is being flooded out with id. It's the Golden Dream for the future that the immigrants had. I'm an alien here myself. Never been here before. There used to be no bridge here, everyone took the ferry: the women wearing white gloves to the city, men in their fine felt fedoras. And before that, the ancient peoples, who have gathered for eons at the edge of the bay — polling around in reed pirogues. I imagined Ghosts rising from shell mounds and hovering in the air — a place, a city, has ghosts floating in spirals like the weather — just as an individual. There are many characters that swarm up and intermix like a gas All these gaseous souls surging out to fill the expanse flowing under us and out and above the Bay and sunset and all the lives touched by the tide. I am being . . . held in solution by whatever it is that makes a flower brighten. It holds us here.

O'Keefe drifted in an out of the warehouse. It was always inspiring to see him, get into high speed gab-fests at Moishes a Jewish delicatessen owned by Chinese, staffed by Filipinos and Japanese. I tried to get a job at the Exploratorium doing work in their exhibit fabrication shop, trouble shooting electronics, but they were full up. I worked for a while at the world's largest hash-pipe screen factory which was also in the warehouse. I also worked in a little woodworking shop where we made fine and fancy boxes out of exotic and beautiful hardwoods. After a while Russ got me a job at the frame shop in the Vorpall Gallery where he worked. There I learned to do fine framing, to cut glass, and beveled mattes in acid free papers and mount art works using acid free glues and tapes. At the art gallery were all these *tres chic* elegant young women salesgirl personnel, whose job it was to sidle up to you and urge to you buy a \$5000 painting. This was a hell of a lot of money to me, more than I had ever seen. I didn't fit in. In between jobs I ate at the Food Project, which was a good big healthy meal they put on every day in the late afternoon at the Presbyterian church on Haste, a block above People's Park. Later I got a job driving a cab at Taxi Unlimited. But I am getting ahead of myself. The most important thing was my writing education.