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THE PLAY OF STRUCTURE: RASHEED ARAEEN’S *CHAKRAS* AND RELATED WORKS

In February 1970 Rasheed Araeen released sixteen plywood discs coated in red fluorescent paint into the water off St. Katharine Docks in London. *Chakras* (1969–1970) would be the first work in a series to continue throughout 1970 involving discs launched into water: *White Discs* and *Canalevent* both in London, and *Discs in River Seine* in Paris.[[1]](#footnote-1) A photograph from December 1969 shows Araeen in his studio, one of the original artist-run S.P.A.C.E. studios that occupied a disused warehouse at St. Katharine Docks; the discs lean against the wall alongside other structural works from the same period, an idiom in which Araeen had been working since the mid-1960s.[[2]](#footnote-2) The circular forms of *Chakras*, as single flat elements, do not have the same complexity of interior relations as the structural works, and, formally, seem to represent a change of direction. A series of photographs show Araeen, with participants from the other studios observing the discs from the edge of the dock as they float east, eventually becoming mixed in with various drift material in the corner of the eastern dock.

The play of the work is not confined to a predetermined structure: it is open to the contingent determinations of its environment, the movement of water and wind. The lack of interior formal relations diverts attention outwards to relations between the work and what is around it. The way in which its form produces its relationship to its environment finds similarity with Daniel Buren’s *Affichages sauvages* from the same period, where Buren pasted up coloured striped paper of varying dimensions on advertisement hoardings or walls in Paris and other cities. Each circular element of *Chakras* has the same absence of interior composition as the repetition of stripes, producing a kind of ‘zero degree’ of form that acted as the condition for the work’s capacity to establish relations with its exterior environment. In connection with a later realization of the work in 1974, Araeen writes: ‘It is essential that the same size and colour is used to eliminate the RELATIONS which exist between the elements or objects owing to their difference in size and colour.’ This elimination of interior formal relations allows for an awareness of the ‘RELATIONS which exist between equal elements/objects in time and space and their relationship with environment’.[[3]](#footnote-3) His statement can be compared to Buren’s analysis of his own work in his 1969 text ‘Beware’, where he claims the ‘formal neutrality’ of the work’s interiority gives it an ‘*indicative*’ or ‘*critical*’ character with respect to its exteriority.[[4]](#footnote-4) And, like Buren’s work, *Chakras* is photogenic. The sense of its visual separateness from its environment – while being immersed in it – is necessary for its identity as art. The red colour is picked up so strongly by the emulsion of the slide film used to document the event that, against the greyness of the surrounding docks and buildings, the discs look as if they are painted onto the film itself. The painterly effect may be supplementary to the event itself, as it is an attribute of its medium of documentation. Nonetheless, since the original work, like Buren’s *Affichages sauvages*, and indeed many process works of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is no longer extant, the photographs inevitably stand in for and mediate its continuing existence.

The absence of interior relations or composition within each element mean that *Chakras* establishes its identity and formal unity through the dispersing and gathering relations between its circular elements, determined by natural forces. Unlike Araeen’s earlier structural works, the play of the work does not depend on the viewer. The incorporation of diagonals, in the more complex pieces such as *BoO* (1969), introduce a sense of movement through an interior illusion of spiralling activated by the movement of the beholder.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this sense, *Chakras* is indifferent to its viewer. Although Araeen invites participation in the making of the work, the work is not dependent on the participants for its continuing mode of existence. Once in play, launched into the water, the work has its own life and suffers its own fate. Its form constitutes the precondition for the open-ended play of identity and difference that defines this life, a play that extends to its subsequent variations and the relationships between these and their situations.

In this respect, a helpful distinction might be drawn between *Chakras* and a work that explicitly depends on action and participation. In 1968, Araeen had proposed a work to the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London with the title *Bio-structural Play*.[[6]](#footnote-6) The work was only realized much later, with the changed title *Zero to Infinity*. It consisted of 100 open cube structures arranged in a ten by ten square pattern on the ground intended to be freely reordered into any kind of structure by its audience who, through their physical involvement, became participants. The wooden cubes incorporate diagonal struts, and are painted (blue in a later realization of the work now owned by the Tate). The diagonals are slightly displaced since the cut end is joined, for strength, to a vertical or horizontal strut, producing a slight change in angle. Within the structure there is thus an initial play between a geometrical order of linearity and points and an order that resulted from the width of the actual material used to make it, which must have been a matter of practical knowledge for Araeen, who was a trained engineer. The basic structure of the cubes follows that of earlier works, including a precursor for *Bio-structural Play*, titled *Chaar Yaar* (1968), which comprise four cubes painted red, blue, orange, and yellow, which could be composed in different ways (square, line, or vertical stack). In one sense, *Bio-structural Play*, and its later realized version, *Zero to Infinity*, take the interior illusion of play within the earlier structural works and exteriorize it through a physical engagement with participants, actualizing a potentiality already contained in the work. Like *Chakras*, it depends on the action of play, but this agency resides in persons rather than environment.

The original title, *Bio-structural Play*, suggests theoretical parameters to interpret the development in Araeen’s work from the earlier Minimalist structural works to the Postminimalist work from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The word ‘play’ contains a polysemy, which is brought out by its relationship to the other two terms. Play can pertain to a movement within an already existing structure, as in, for example, the play in a mechanism, or in a game with rules. Play, however, can also refer an absence or excess of structure, consisting in free action; here it is closer to life, in which new forms and relations are continually emerging. *Bio-structural Play* invokes this continuum of meanings, and the terms suggest some affinities with the contemporary philosophical thinking concerned with the structurality of structure. Both Jacques Derrida’s ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ first published in 1967, and Gilles Deleuze’s text, also from 1967, ‘How Do We Recognize Structuralism?’ draw attention to the necessity of the indeterminacy of play in defining structure, from Derrida’s concept of play as ‘a field of infinite substitutions’ within a finite structure to Deleuze’s metaphor of the ‘empty square’ in a game to refer to the serial organization of structure as the actualization of its properly virtual existence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Structure and play are inseparable, and each conditions the other.

It is impossible to dissociate Araeen’s work of the late 1960s and early 1970s from a general tendency in art to explore the social and political potential of participation and play (and its complex interactions with other currents, including the kinetic and cybernetic). Probably the first overview of these trends is Frank Popper’s 1975 book, *Art – Action and Participation*, which includes a discussion of Araeen’s *Canalevent*. In Britain, Popper identified such exhibitions as *Play Orbit*, shown at the ICA in late 1969, and *Popa at Moma: Pioneers of Part-Art* (‘Part-Art’ short for ‘Participation Art’), at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in early 1971, as representative of this tendency.[[8]](#footnote-8) The first identified art with play through toys and games, while the second included works that were intended for participation (although in practice this proved too chaotic).[[9]](#footnote-9) Several of the artists involved in the latter had been associated with the avant-garde gallery Signals London during the mid-1960s, including David Medalla, Lygia Clark, and Hélio Oiticica, of which Araeen would have been aware. Medalla’s early ‘biokinetic’ works, and others by Clark including her rearrangeable *Bichos* (shown at Signals in 1965) and *Monument in All Situations* (1964) give some sense of the artistic milieu in which *Bio-structural Play* might be positioned. Much of the work addressed in *Art – Action and Participation* was processual and participatory. It was often intended to produce a sensory awareness of the environment, but also in its combination of technical innovation and play typified a kind of technological optimism absent in *Chakras*.

Popper discussed some of the theoretical resources for this tendency, ranging from Johan Huizinga to Herbert Marcuse, but the social and political meaning of art as a form of play may be traced back to Friedrich Schiller, and to the promise of reconciling art and life through the free play of the aesthetic.[[10]](#footnote-10) One could argue that play and participation in art in the 1960s took on its political meaning as an expression of this promise. The institutional art world was often identified with the repressive structures of work and state, and so artists often attempted to address a wider community. Araeen certainly saw the participatory aspect of works such as *Chakras* as in opposition to a separation between the artist and public. In a statement from 1970 published in Popper’s book, Araeen comments on this as being a consequence of the artist’s relationship to the ‘elitist-cultural tradition of the past’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Photographs of *Canalevent*, part of a community arts festival in 1970, show participants, including children, throwing discs – this time made of polystyrene – into the Grand Union Canal in West London. This event also gave Araeen the idea for another form of art as participatory play, *Waterplay* (1971) (later given the title *Discosailing*), after seeing two people floating on the canal on a large piece of polystyrene. This work was not realized then, but it involved participants directly by having them float, and sail, on the discs.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Araeen’s work from this time could take up some of the democratic and utopian meanings associated with the artistic explorations of play and participation surveyed by Popper, this reading is complicated by the proviso that the universalized participatory subject might be seen as an ideological illusion given certain subsequent variations of *Chakras* and Araeen’s later trajectory.[[13]](#footnote-13)

While *Chakras* begins with actions of participants, the patterns it produces in the water are determined by natural or material agency. Whereas the earlier work, *Bio-structural Play*, could be related to the idea of play thematized in an exhibition such as *Play Orbit*, the material determination of *Chakras* brings it closer to the concerns of another exhibition staged at the ICA: the London showing in September 1969 of *When Attitudes Become Form* following its appearances at the Bern Kunsthalle and the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld. This exhibition brought together a diverse range of recent work concerned with material process, site, and information – from American ‘Anti Form’ to Italian Arte Povera. The patterning of the elements in *Chakras* identify it as a process piece, since its forming is, like the other materials floating in the docks, in a state of continual gathering and dispersal caused by the material actions of water and wind. *Chakras* is not, however, concerned with a materiality *per se* in the same way as the work in *When Attitudes Become Form*. The immediate materials of *Chakras*, plywood and paint, were shaped according to a particular form, a circle, and the identical shape and number of these circles constitutes a more general form. These circular elements retain an intentionality orientated to form and meaning – that is, a figural dimension. (The title of the work, which employs an esoteric term found in Indian religions, also contributes to this dimension.) At the same time that *Chakras* is shaped by its environment, it also shapes this environment by referring to it. The work thus intends relationships to its environment, St. Katharine Docks that as part of London’s industrial infrastructure is itself subject to processes of history.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When seen according to the registers of material determination and reference, *Chakras* appears less concerned with the utopian promise of play and participation than with the actual locations in which its versions are enacted – the relations produced between the work and the social and political realities in which it is immersed. For instance, later in 1970 with *Discs in River Seine* in Paris, white polystyrene discs are released at the foot of some steps next to the Petit Pont by the Notre-Dame Cathedral. In a photograph that documents the event, taken from the other side of the Seine, the figures involved in the action are completely dominated by the size of the cathedral, but more significantly by the Préfecture de Police located immediately next to the bridge where they stand. This location must have been meaningful, given Araeen’s statement from 1970 relating to this work:

[I]n the circumstances of not being able to organize the event in such a way when I could have given the information to the public beforehand about my intentions (although it is not always necessary to do so), I should not have expected much more spontaneous response. As a matter of fact, to some extent, it was my own apprehension of the police which prevented me from involving the public directly. … Therefore instead of throwing the discs from the bridge with the participation of the public, I myself alone went down to the river bank and started throwing/ releasing the discs into the river. I must say when I was doing so, some young men came down from the bridge and to my surprise asked me for the discs, which I gave them. Then we threw the discs together. You can imagine how happy I was to receive this unexpected response from the public.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This work was enacted in the wider context of the ‘return to order’ following the mass action of workers and students in May and June 1968 in Paris, characterized by increased police presence, surveillance, and state repression.[[16]](#footnote-16) The unauthorized nature of Araeen’s event necessitated the spontaneity of the participation he described, and thus registers the real limits placed on it.

In 1974, writing in relation to *Chakras –* albeit a later version, *Discs in Jheel Park, Karachi* – Araeen is much more trenchant in its distinctions between the ‘dominating class’ and people who are ‘exploit[ed]’ and ‘depriv[ed]’ of culture.[[17]](#footnote-17) This statement reflects the shift in Araeen’s work towards a more politicized mode of address that begins in the 1970s with *For Oluwale* (1971–1973). Although community-orientated participation can be seen as political and oppositional, particularly in the early 1970s when the British institutional art world was firmly bourgeois in its class composition, it did not explicitly provoke an awareness of social distinctions in its public to the extent that Araeen’s later work would. These two statements by Araeen from 1970 and 1974 amount to a critical attitude towards the tendency in which his work from the late 1960s and early 1970s was historically immersed, since the utopian promise of art as participatory play tended to ignore actual material conditions. Araeen’s work from the late 1960s and early 1970s, although abstract in form, contains within it the possibility of both readings. The poetic character of *Chakras*, and its historical meaning as art, lies in its state of being suspended between the incompatible positions that characterized its moment, without resolution.

1. Related works such as *Touch* and *Triangles*, which were made of the material that remained after the circles were cut, also took place that year. All of these works are reproduced in Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984), 43–47, 49, and 51–54. In general, I have followed *Making Myself Visible* for titles of works. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rasheed Araeen archive, Grosvenor Gallery, London. I would like to thank Conor Macklin from the gallery for facilitating access to these slides. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Statement made by Rasheed Araeen in Karachi, 11 April 1974. Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 64–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniel Buren, ‘Beware’, in Buren, *Five Texts* (London and New York: Jack Wendler Gallery and John Weber Gallery, 1973), 14; the phrase ‘zero degree’ was one that Buren appropriated from Roland Barthes. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Patricia Bickers, ‘From Object to Subject’ (1987) and Jean Fisher, ‘An Art of Transformation’ (1993), in ed. Jean Fisher, *The Triumph of Icarus: Life and Art of Rasheed Araeen* (Karachi: Millennium Media, 2014), 20 and 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Rasheed Araeen, *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaeshetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century* (London: Third Text Publications, 2010), 45. In Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 175 the title is given as *Spatiostructural Play*, but Araeen has confirmed that it was originally *Bio-structural Play*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 365; Gilles Deleuze, ‘How Do We Recognize Structuralism?’, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974* (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frank Popper, *Art – Action and Participation* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), 180 and 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hilary Floe, ‘“Everything Was Getting Smashed”: Three Case Studies of Play and Participation, 1965–71’, *Tate Papers*, no. 22 (Autumn 2014), www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/everything-was- getting-smashed-three-case-studies-of-play-and-participation-1965-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On Schiller and the ‘“original scene” of aesthetics’, see Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy’, *New Left Review* 14 (March – April 2002):133–151. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Popper, *Art – Action and Participation*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the description of this project in Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 175 and the account in Araeen, *Art Beyond Art*, 51–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This distinction concerning the participating subject may also be read in Claire Bishop’s more recent critique of Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October*, no. 110 (fall 2004):51­–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Courtney J. Martin’s interpretation of *Chakras* for which Araeen’s radicalized work of the mid-1970s and 1980s provides the allegorical pretext: ‘Araeen’s later social justice and political art actions position *Chakras* as a comment on the ways in which difference (be it class, race, ethnicity, or gender) was an uneasy fit in Britain in the late 1960s. … Floating a symbolic object with bodily connotations drawn from Eastern spiritual traditions (chakras occur in both Hinduism and Buddhism) in water that leads to the open sea is a performance of reclaiming, of liberation from imperialism, and with it, slavery, colonialism, and all it implies.’ Courtney J. Martin, ‘The Studio and the City: S.P.A.C.E. Ltd. and Rasheed Araeen’s *Chakras*’, in ed. Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner, *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 306–307. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Popper, *Art – Action and Participation*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 60–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)