

KEITH TYSON

THE FUTURE AS THE ALMOST NOW

WORDS ALEX GOLES | PHOTOGRAPHY TIM GUTT

Keith Tyson was born in 1969 in Ulverston and now lives and works in Brighton. In 2002 he was awarded the Turner Prize, the same year as he showed his work in the Sao Paulo Biennale. He has been included in the 49th Venice Biennale and the 2nd Berlin Biennale, and exhibited at the Kunsthalle Zurich, the South London Gallery and more recently, *Walking in the Mind* at the Hayward Gallery. His invention of the *Artmachine*, (1991) was his attempt to undermine the artist's voice. The machine which produced proposals of endless possibility, established him firmly as a conceptual artist of NOW.

IN 1972 ANDREI Tarkovsky's quietly pioneering sci-fi film *Polaris* was released in response to Stanley Kubrick's much celebrated epic of the same genre from four years earlier, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Less famous than its counterpart, *Polaris* has nevertheless become something of an underground phenomenon due to its studied complexity. This attribute is partly accounted for by the way it ingeniously collapses a number of the dichotomies that Western films are customarily premised on.

The first dichotomy to fall is the one between the pure visuality of many of the film's scenes, and the medium's customary need of a clear and progressive narrative structure to maintain the attention of the viewer. A large portion of *Polaris*' narrative is communicated by stills and visually arresting slow-motion shots. The film opens with the camera panning across a pond in slow-motion and coming to rest on a bunch of reeds that stir as the water ripples. Eventually this image fades into a shot of a clump of unrecognisable fauna. The shift between the two images acts as a charged signifier, rendering the geographical presence of the film's protagonist ambiguous - as to whether he is on planet earth near his father's house or the planet of *Polaris*. Other

dichotomies collapsed by the film include those between science and poetics, rigour and play, and the old and the new.

Specific moments in the expansive oeuvre of Keith Tyson collapse many of these same dichotomies, each moment representing something of a watershed in his recent development. So it is no coincidence that *Polaris* also happens to be Tyson's favourite sci-fi film, a genre of film making that plays a crucial role in his thinking.

'I don't think there's a specific way of viewing my work that is correct. And with regard to the dichotomy between a scientific reading and a poetic one, I don't see any. I see the work as embodying both equally,' Tyson affirms. *Studio Wall Drawing: May 1st 2004, Inventory of Conway Forms to be used as Command Codes in a Geno/P* is a case in point. The work is composed of a series of so-called Conway Forms, automata invented by the scientist John Conway to populate a two-dimensional cellular universe for which he coined the name *The Game of Life*. Within Conway's automata, the status of each cell is utterly dependant on those of the surrounding cells - whether they are switched on or off, or even left unaltered from one generation to another. The

precise way these automata are repeated and configured in Tyson's drawing - the elements sketched in black, the explanation of each one running underneath in red, renders them readable. However their loose and illustrative handling, enhanced as the rows of drawn elements, sway rather than precisely line up on the grid on which they are liberally set. This lends a degree of illegibility which serves to introduce a certain lyricism into the drawing. Were the elements simply legible then there would be no poetic interference, and the drawing would fail to engage to the extent it does.

Large Field Array (2007) is comprised of a surfeit of two-foot-square modular units deployed on a grid at precisely four foot intervals. The installation was inaugurated at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark in 2006, and gathered in momentum while it toured. It eventually contained three hundred elements at its final incarnation at Pace Wildenstein in 2008. The unit system underpinning the installation is akin to those deployed by the minimalist Sol Le Witt, with the exception that instead of being pristinely empty, it is replete with improbable sculptural forms. Their seeming randomness and obscurity ranges from an oversized black telephone





«I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO EMBRACE COMPLEXITY INSTEAD OF SIMPLIFYING THINGS»

to the gates of hell. The rigorous precision of the grid is everywhere interrupted by these fanciful representations drawn from chaos and string theory, the signs of the zodiac and the table of elements. On the grid, a cubed unit can morph into a washing machine or a giant birthday cake.

Tyson evidently finds it frustrating that confusion arises because of the simultaneous presence of rigour and play in his work. Amusingly, he infers that this confusion is akin to approaching 'somebody who is doing a documentary about science' and 'saying, 'God, that wasn't a very scientific documentary.' In Tyson's way of thinking, 'a scientific methodology doesn't have to be rigorous. The great thing about being an artist is... you can hold two contradictory ideas in your head, and believe them both.' This simultaneity is played through to a fault in *Large Field Array*.

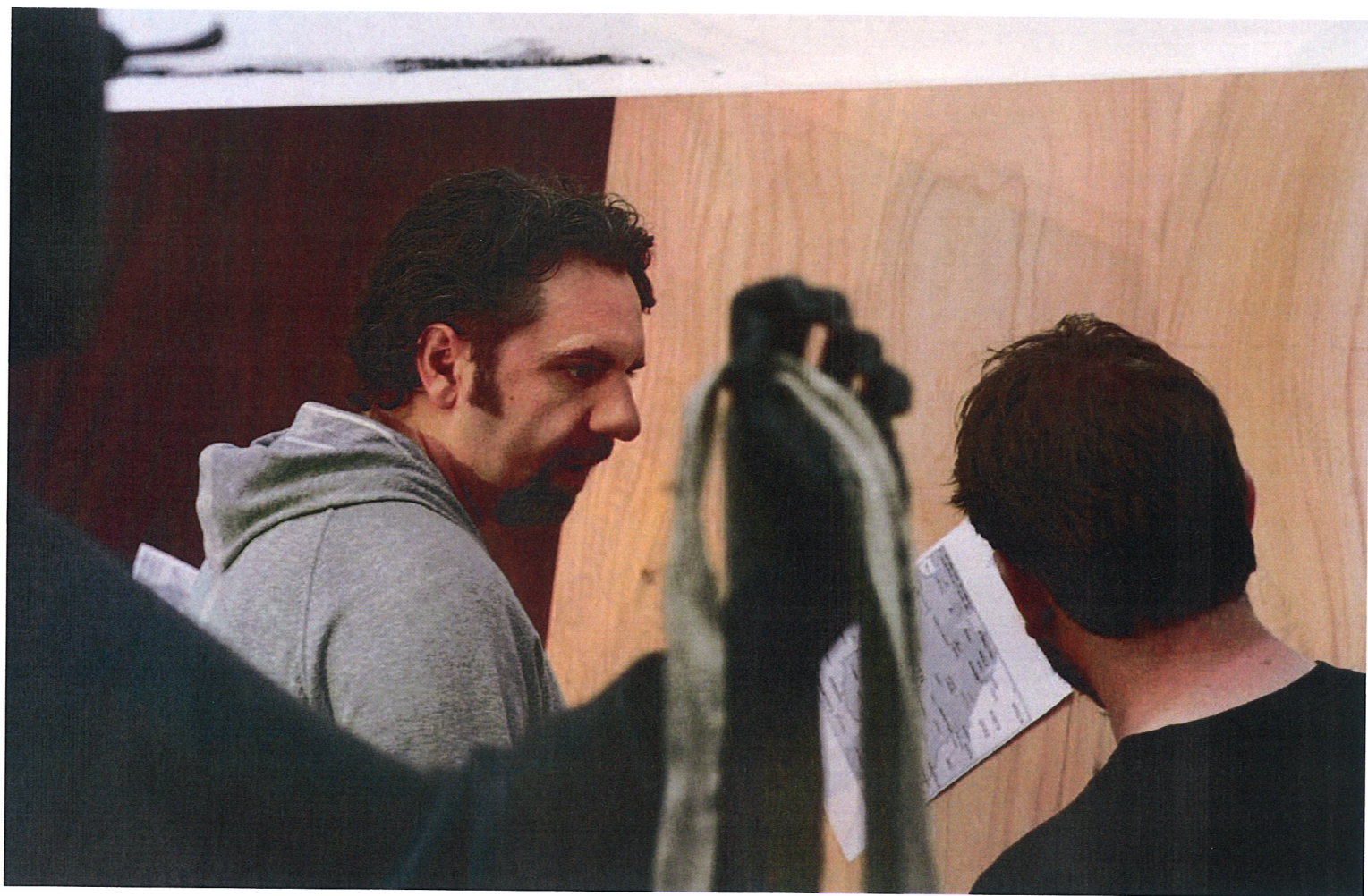
Fractal Dice, exhibited at Pace Wildenstein in New York in 2008, and to be included in the exhibition at Parasol unit in London later in 2009, extends the idea piloted in *Large Field Array*. The sculptures that constitute the series are the direct result of an algorithm, based on a dice system that Tyson communicated to the gallery some time in advance of

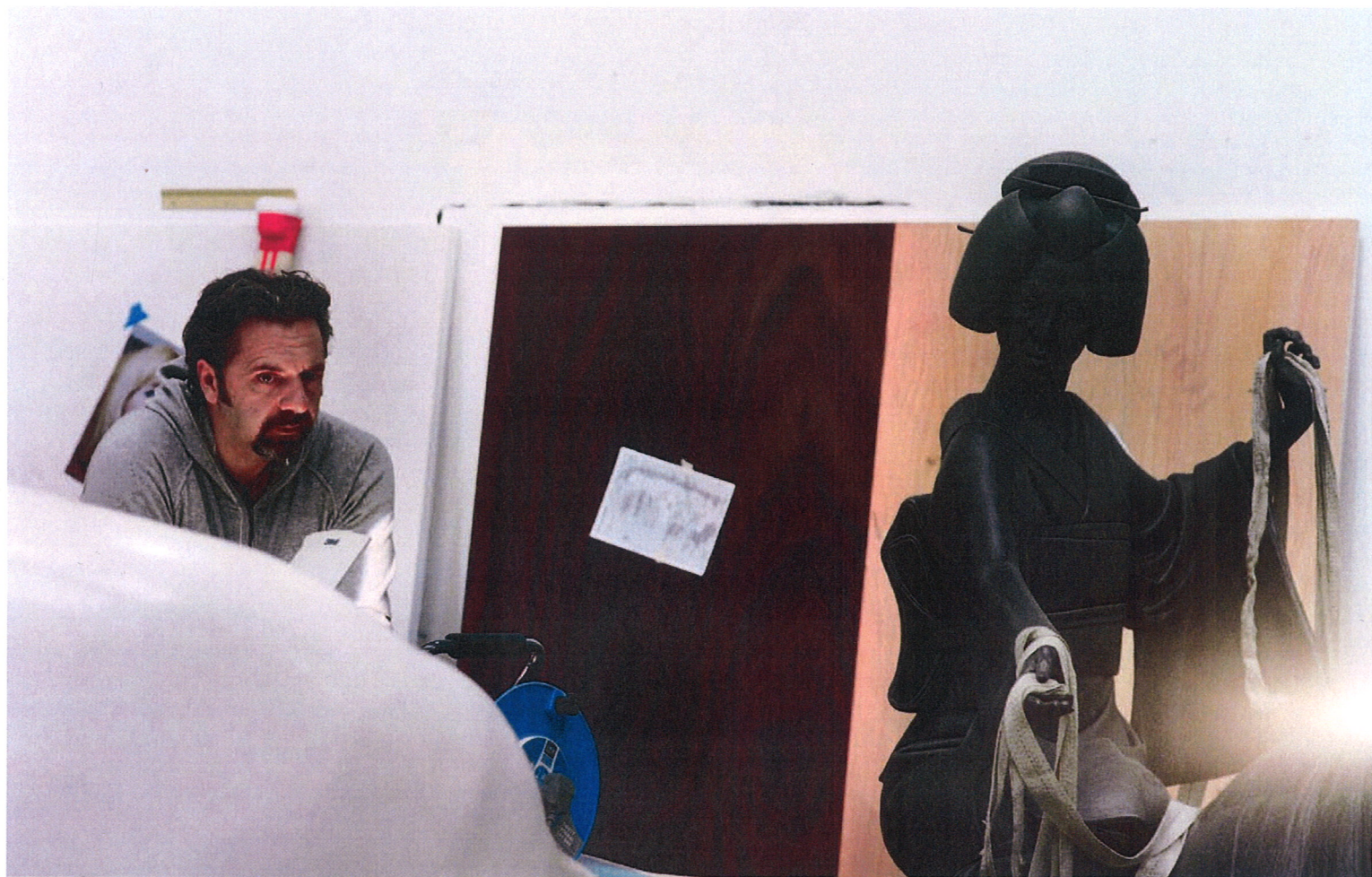
the opening of the exhibition. The gallery's production team used it to determine the size, shape and colour of each individual sculpture. The sculptures start from the naked cube, and the precise method by which they deviate from it is determined by a role of the die. Each face of a cube is subjected to a simple modification based on six separate rolls of the die. The first roll determines the colour; the second roll determines the cubic intrusion or extrusion, and so on. The result is six new cubic elements emerging from the original box, each with five newly minted faces which are, in turn, subject to the same process. Following this second round, the sculpture is fabricated. Each of the sculptures, with their playful colours and inventive cubic forms, has the pared back appearance of a formalist composition composed according to an intuitive sense of balance, however each is actually premised on this rigorous schema instead.

In reference to the relationship between the conceptual and the visual, Tyson clarifies how his individual works 'tend to be manifestations as opposed to representations' of ideas. And it is precisely the fact that each of his works are manifestations, as opposed to representations, of ideas,

that accounts for their visuality. Were the two not so entangled – were each and every element easily readable separately, and a clear sense of narrative progression generated as a consequence, then perhaps Tyson's work wouldn't insist on the visual to such a great degree. But it does.

The difficulty of reconciling the visuality of *The Nature Paintings* with their conceptual basis is compounded by a tension between the visual allusions the paintings make to the natural world and the procedure by which they are fabricated. Intent and skill has everywhere been subjugated to chance in their rendering. The myriad configurations in the series are determined by the reactions between paints and chemicals when combined and poured at different angles and temperatures onto aluminium plates. The conceptual process the materials have been subjected to produces a series of felicitous visual configurations, a portion of which were exhibited at Haunch of Venison in 2007, Blum and Poe in Los Angeles earlier in 2009, and will also be present in the exhibition at Parasol unit. No painting in the series alludes to the process. All refer instead to their intended subject matter, which is clearly indicated in the series' title. *Four Elements*







«BEING AN ARTIST
IS A BIT LIKE BEING
A FILM MAKER WHO
STARTS WITH A GOOD
SCRIPT AND A GREAT
CINEMATOGRAPHER, AND
THEN PUTS IT
ALL TOGETHER TO
MAKE A HIGHLY
ENTERTAINING FILM»





«I DON'T THINK THERE IS A SPECIFIC WAY OF SEEING MY WORK THAT IS CORRECT»

(Fire) (Water) (Earth) (Air), 2008, is typical of the series. A number of algae coloured forms circulate a large central area of deep blue. In places, the edges of the green colour bleed into the blue, which appears to swirl away from the surface. The cacophony of seemingly still liquid visual elements belies their conceptual premise.

Tyson systematically collapses the dichotomy between the old and the new in his work. Interviews with the artist, which are so substantial as to form a crucial annexe to his practice, are littered with references to his intrigue in temporal warps. 'It's a question about oblivion,' Tyson surmises, in terms of 'how what happens before you are born equates to what happens after you're born. It's this kind of tiny sandwich between these infinite matters of nothingness or everythingness that I'm in the painful and privileged position of observing.' Tyson is patently intrigued by how events from the past position the present, and furthermore, how viewing the past through the optic of the present completely changes perception of it. He refers to his own position in the middle as being akin to a 'tiny sandwich' in time. Elsewhere in the same interview Tyson states:

'I've found myself in situations in my life, and

thought, 'Well, how did I get here? How did this occur?' And thought about how none of this was my doing. This is all stuff that happens before you're born. The decisions are made, and you don't ask to replace art history. You don't ask your parents to replace your genetics. You don't ask for any of these things. So all those things are happening before you even put a brush to a canvas, so how can I claim authorship over their manifestation? Ultimately the action is about an emotional disturbance that I'm trying to solve.'

The notion of an 'emotional disturbance' being the direct result of a confused temporality is decisive to grasping Tyson's own view of his work. It is another way of articulating his perception of the artist as being a 'tiny sandwich' in time.

Tyson's evident intrigue in time warps brings our trajectory back full circle to *Polaris*, the artist's favourite sci-fi film. In the closing scene of the film, the protagonist considers whether or not to return to earth or stay on Polaris. Back on the shore of the pond beside his father's house where the film started, his face falls when he sees something is wrong. Water is falling inside the house and though his father is inside, he is unaware of it. Father and

son embrace. The camera draws back, the house, lake and surrounding land are revealed to be on an island, floating on the surface of Polaris. Instead of playing out the dichotomy between the protagonist's old life on earth and his new one on Polaris, the two are revealed to be folded together in his mind, their temporality confused. The inference is that the past sequences were just a series of flashbacks and that the entire film has taken place in the present. Similarly, rather than being conceived of as either the old or the new, in Tyson's work the present is often rendered as the new, but the new being something which has already happened. In other words, as the almost new. In this way, a further dichotomy is collapsed in Tyson's work and its self-professed complexity further played out. ■

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Keith Tyson: Cloud Choreography and Other Emergent Systems

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