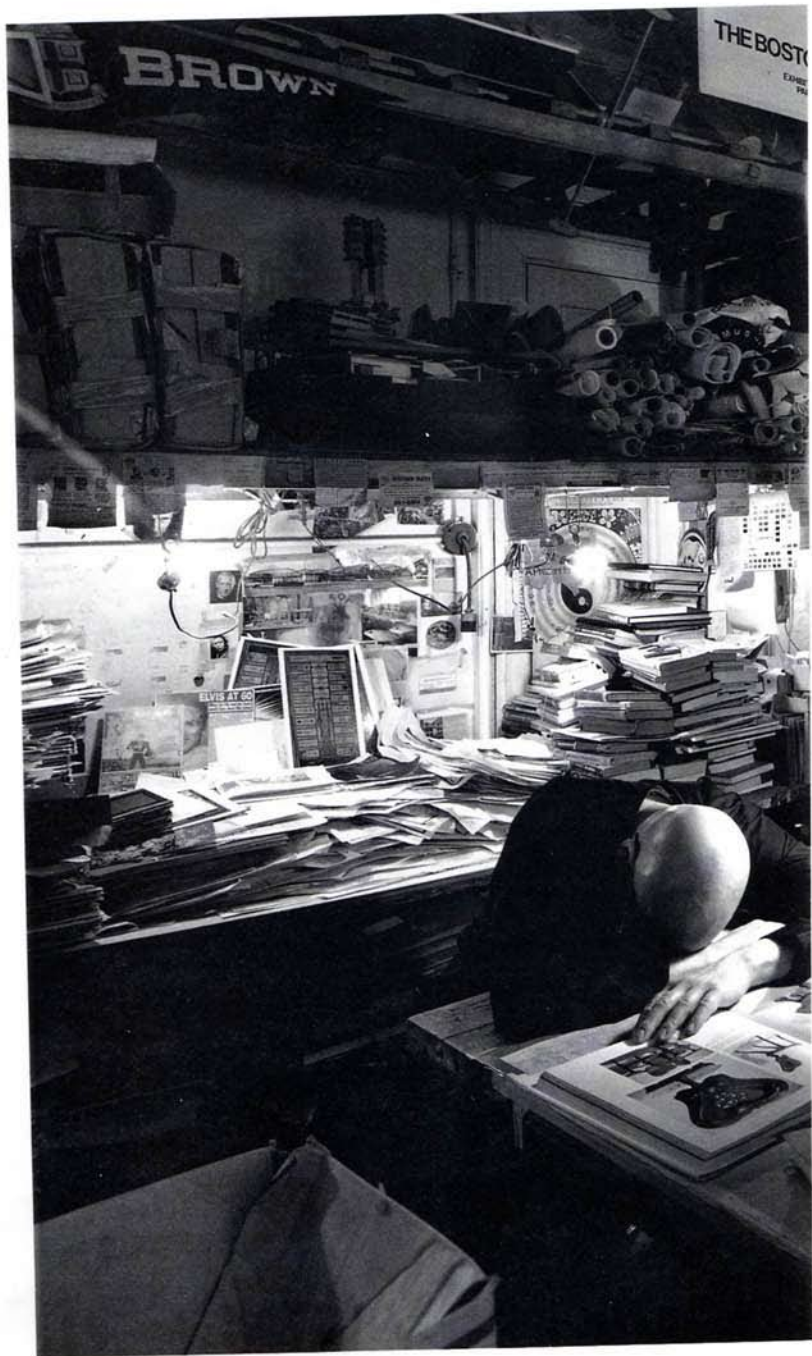


Brain Cell

TEXT *Michael Bracewell*

PHOTOGRAPHS *Abelardo Morell*

This man spends as much time as he possibly can in the Boston Visionary Cell, an 18-by-30-foot utility room that has been serving him as home, workshop, and laboratory since 1968. What might feel like prison to you affords him a vista of time and eternity. Why should he want to be anywhere else?



Paul Laffoley is an artist, architect, polymath, and ideologue who both embodies, and has translated into diagrammatic art, a perception of time and space broad enough to accommodate those areas which are described as magic or parapsychology, yet so coherent and socially aware in its propositions that it suggests the thinking of a new, revisionist school of liberal humanism. In this much, Laffoley occupies the role defined, historically, by the tradition of esoteric scholarship connecting the experiments of medieval alchemy to the philosopher scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He brings the study and practice of lucid dreaming, dimensionality, mind physics, and psychotronics to a schema of visionary architecture. He has also designed a time machine and a prayer gun. Put simply, his practice could be defined as the conversion of mysticism into mechanics.

Since 1968, Laffoley has lived in an eighteen-by-thirty-foot utility room on the first floor of a former commercial property in downtown Boston, not far from Filene's department store. This room—Laffoley calls it the Boston Visionary Cell—is the core of his research and practice. It is reached up a featureless staircase, from a hallway which has the shabby anonymity, tinged with melancholy, of decommissioned functional space.

On entering this building, the sounds of the street are suddenly silenced. It is rather as though one had passed through a heavy, invisible curtain, on the far side of which daylight, filtering through the street-door glass, is thinned to a dust-colored twilight. Glimpsed from the stairwell, where the pallor of daylight falls away, the remainder of the property appears tall and narrow, with the semi-industrial air that one associates with caged service elevators and silent, institutional corridors.

From the stairway landing, the lamplight inside the Boston Visionary Cell appears warm and golden, as though the room is lit against the blackness of a winter's evening. Piles of books (a library of history, philosophy, science, and occultism) and papers, charts, and drawings, reaching to elbow or shoulder height, make an island of information in the center of the room, moated by a narrow pathway and rising to a pyramidal summit. Here Paul Laffoley sits at his drawing desk.

In middle age, with a frank, engaging expression and an enthusiasm, above all else, to communicate the validity of his ideas within their broadest context in the history of science and philosophy, Paul Laffoley could be said to administrate the function of the Boston Visionary Cell as the curator of his own thinking. He supports himself with a job at the Boston Museum of Science, returning to live and work at the Boston Visionary Cell—sleeping on his drawing board. He can entertain friends

at the Harvard Faculty Club, and keeps spaces in other buildings for the requirements of daily living. "I have all the parts of a house," he explains, "but they are not in one place."

With his pale, delicate hands pressed palms down on his drawing board, as though about to shape the meaning of his words in simple gestures, he gives the astrological explanation for his life and work in two spoken paragraphs, the syntax of which is so precise that he could be reciting from a script. Planets, their houses and aspects—a complex geometry of mathematical configurations—seem to fall into a perfect pattern, articulated by his deft recitation.

"My horoscope is essentially a grand cross: Leo sun, Aquarius moon, Mars in Scorpio and Taurus in Uranus. But the sun sign is in the twelfth house, the Moon is in the sixth house, the Mars and Scorpio in the third and Taurus in the ninth. A fixed grand cross means that your energy is completely blocked: it is exactly what happened with the eclipse on the eleventh of August—that was a grand cross in the sky.

"Now, how I am able to operate is a result of the fact that I have Virgo rising, as a consequence of having my sun in the twelfth house; I also have an unsuspected Neptune in Virgo in the twelfth house. And that means that I am able to take cosmic themes and turn them directly into finely detailed work, with the rest of my life having nothing to do with it."

The clarity of Laffoley's thinking is served by the stresses which his accent places on the different items of information. To a European, his accent seems New York colloquial—"I did eleven years of Latin—coulda beena priest." He communicates his own amazement at the way in which his whole life could be recounted as a lived example of the "finely detailed work" which comprises his diagrammatic artworks. In Laffoley, there is a convergence of influences, circumstances, and reactions which lend his autobiography, no less than his paintings, a cumulative, holistic harmony—the functional symmetry of scientific formulae.

This convergence lends his account of himself a kind of narrative perfection: a neatness of imagery and a fluency of themes, empowered by a form of synchrony which seems to convert the effects of coincidence within his life into a realized biographical structure. As related by Laffoley, the esoteric, the bizarre, and the mundane coexist with the allegorical and the supernatural. At times, he seems like Prospero with the comic timing of Woody Allen.

Books dominate the Boston Visionary Cell—filling its shadows with a particular aura, and drying out the air-conditioned atmosphere with the combined absorbent power of their pages—but their presence is augmented by various arcane instruments. In appearance, these instruments can be seen to double as either sculptures or mystical artifacts or both; they have the air of tribal or folk art, merged with the demonstration equipment that you might find in a physics laboratory. The utility room allows no natural light, and the light from the lamps maintains its nocturnal ambience twenty-four hours a day. You could be reminded, with regard to the lighting, of one of the rooms in the suburban villa customized by des Esseintes—the aesthete-philosopher-hero of Huysmans's “decadent” novella *Against Nature*: an environment controlled entirely by intellectual needs.

The Visionary Cell is both a muniments room, containing the research acquired in a long career of scholarship, and a working laboratory. In relation to Laffoley's extraordinary artworks—which could be said to have the high aesthetic status of technical drawings, and to supply their compelling pictorial energy as a kind of unintentional by-product, like the enhanced calligraphy of illuminated manuscripts—the function of the Visionary Cell is closer to housing scientific research than containing the traumas of artistic inspiration and creativity.

“A lot of my work has to do with psychotronic devices—mind/matter interactions—because they appear to be artworks in the same way that what the alchemists did appeared to be artworks. The important point was that what appeared in the mind was as efficacious, in what we could call an experiment, as anything else. As opposed to science, which you could say is methodological sensation, alchemy or magic is methodological revelation. But if you can make a statue cry, then people are going to be very suspicious. Like the alchemists could do miracles on demand, and that made the Catholic Church suspicious.”

Laffoley's artworks, read as signage, have the intellectual intensity of Talmudic writing; they mingle the questions raised by quantum physics with the history of comparative theology and parapsychology. In formal terms, his paintings and drawings have the assertive, descriptive beauty of scientific formulae, touched with a poetry of mysticism which you can detect, for instance, in some of the assemblage pieces made by Robert Rauschenberg. That Laffoley is a significant American artist seems beyond doubt; he resolves questions of influence, form, and integrity which

are central to not only the history of art, but also to the possibility of art being as answerable to its conclusions as science.

What prompts the conviction of this assessment, beyond the pleasures of symmetry and line, image and gracefulness, which distinguish the best of Laffoley's work, is the unimpeachable honesty of intent in his entire project. Far from being some theoretical adjunct to a pop cultural romance of quasi-occult, pseudo Gothicism—"the postmodern reclamation of Bram Stoker," as he puts it—Laffoley's ideas are rooted in a pragmatic and clearly documented presentation of their inspiration, cultural history, and intellectual origins. It is more a question of the viewer having to reframe contemporary prejudice towards the use of certain terminology—"alchemy," "magic," "extraterrestrial"—than it is a matter of Laffoley attempting to coerce a sensationalist aesthetic.

"Anyone dealing with magic today does not ignore the history of science in what they are presenting. And so we have a revival of what you could call ancient wisdom, but placing it in a future context, so that it isn't simply reviving something out of the past—it's recognizing that what has gone on, in between then and now, has as much value and needs to be in the mix. But it's the old story: tell somebody something new and you've probably got an enemy."

The futurology in Laffoley's thinking relates his charting of the evolution of consciousness, from the pre-Classical models of civilization, to the successions of social and spiritual stages which he believes to be awaiting humanity beyond the mezzanine, so to speak, of post-modernism. Thus, as he recounts in a published statement entitled "Disco Volante II," for the "Building the Bauharoque" exhibition of his paintings at Kent Gallery, New York, in 1998, he has found himself to be connected, by a series of events and circumstances, to the uneasy relationship which exists between research into extraterrestrial phenomena, and the framing of that research within popular culture and the broader sub-strands of esoteric study.

In "Disco Volante II" Laffoley tracked the synchronic trajectory of his relationship with the science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Robert Wise and released in 1951. This statement recounts his three-tiered engagement with versions of extraterrestrial phenomena: the set designs for Wise's film, the significance of those designs to Laffoley's concept of architecture, and Laffoley's own relationship with what are known in popular culture as "close encounters." The concluding entry, dated

January 5th, 1996, conflates these three narratives to present a defining account of Laffoley's perception of visionary architecture; it also helps to explain the man:

What Robert Wise created is literally a new "Jungian Archetype—a Tulpa." The Tulpa is the Hindu concept for a "degree of embodiment" from Brahma [true reality] to the Maya [our world of physical illusion]. We might say it is a point on the continuous spectrum from consciousness to mass. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is, therefore, a "Tantric" film and a "built piece of architecture," whose existence is verified, not by walking up to it and giving it a kick, or constructing it within "virtual reality," but by means of lucid dreaming. I have seen this movie, now, over 750 times, most of which were not on the silver screen but in the "Lux Theatre" of the mind.

And extraterrestrial contact, it appears, may not have been achieved only through the movies. According to one of Laffoley's autobiographical notes, dated February 17th, 1992: "During a routine CAT scan of my head, a miniature metallic 'implant' is discovered in my brain, near the pineal gland. A local chapter of 'Mufon' [Mutual UFO Network] declares it to be a 'nanotechnological laboratory' capable of accelerating or retarding my brain activity like a benign tumor. I come to believe that the 'implant' is extraterrestrial in origin and is the main motivation of my ideas and theories." To this day, Laffoley is resisting neurosurgeons who insist he should have exploratory surgery to identify this implant.

On the far wall of the Boston Visionary Cell, Laffoley has hung a work which he made in 1964, part of which consists of the following text: "Beware the end of the world; it will end not by fire or water or disease or aliens from space, but from a paroxysm of kitsch; the conceptual non-form that separates that which has no history from that which has only history—eternity from time."

If Laffoley's work within the Boston Visionary Cell can be said to have one principal preoccupation—a common denominator of his eclectic scholarship and practice—then that preoccupation would be to understand the process by which one goes from becoming to being. Like Kierkegaard attempting to prove to himself, through his many pseudonymous writings, the certainty of his faith in God, so Laffoley is concerned above all with actually proving one's progress through the levels of being described, for example, by Plato.

“What was the mechanism to be able to convert the physical to the metaphysical? Because if you simply assume, verbally, that these two realms exist, then how do you prove it to yourself? And there has to be a way to do it. All the experiences that people call mystical have to go through stages, and I think that that is exactly what Plato was describing.”

The defining directive in Laffoley's art could be summarized as an analysis of the way in which society, science, and culture are encoded with predetermined directives which connect the past to the future on an epic evolutionary scale: the point where prophecy meets prognosis. As an artist, Laffoley both translates the data of these directives into anthropological charts and also provides diagrammatic revelations (incorporating design solutions) of the means by which history can not only be read, but also described in visual signage—text, image, and pattern.

As a character, however, Laffoley has no interest in positioning himself as a guru, iconoclast, or countercultural folk hero. Rather, he resembles the philosopher-scientist, whose experiments generate a by-product of extraordinary art. The Boston Visionary Cell, as a concretized manifestation of its inhabitant's work and preoccupations, describes the way in which a chaos of data—no less than a chaos of marble—can be sculptured by research to release the perfect forms within it.

It seems interesting to me that in Britain, at least, we would probably accept the reasoning that leads an artist to suspend half an animal's carcass in a tank of formaldehyde with greater readiness than we would consider the genuinely radical thinking behind Laffoley's diagrammatic explanations of anthropological and “magical” propositions. “Nature has a tendency to be habitual, and miracles are a nonhabitual event. So placing higher meaning on the things that don't occur very often, and saying that because a thing only occurs maybe once we should simply revere it and not try to understand it—that is not what a magician does. In other words, a magician says, ‘Well, this is a part of nature, as much as anything else, only it has different characteristics.’” Put this simply, there is a muscular rigor in the patience with which Laffoley relates his understanding of himself to the experiments and research which he carries out within the Boston Visionary Cell. In many ways, he can be seen as classically romantic, in the tradition of William Blake, Jules Verne, or H. G. Wells—with whom he shares an essential humanism. His work suggests that you consider certain alternatives to orthodox reasoning and conventional understandings of history; it rejects the imperial despotism of certain forms of conceptualism, preferring to attend, with courage and humility, to its own pressing business of explication.



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