

Paul Laffoley



The Visionary Point



Paul Laffoley, 1964

Paul Laffoley (1935-2015) was a dreamer. That is what he was called by his mentor, the visionary architect Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965), whom he met while in his mid-twenties and under whom he apprenticed for about a year in New York. Laffoley was never able to determine if Kiesler's remark was a compliment or an insult, but it is perhaps no coincidence that his career as an artist began with a dream. In July of 1961, after having been subjected to multiple sessions of electro-shock therapy for a condition of catatonia (a state of lethargy caused by a mental disorder), he dreamt that he attended an art exhibition containing sculptures that were so precise in their expression that he was overwhelmed. "All the forms I've been thinking about

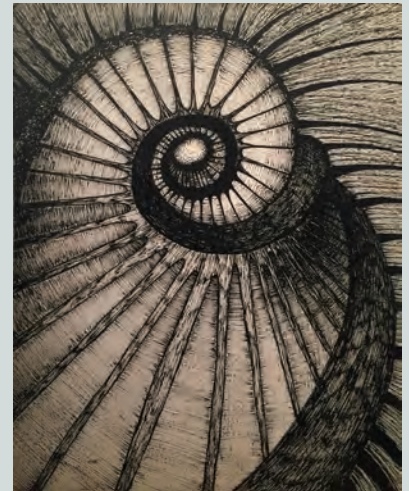
or could think about for years and years to come," he later recalled, "are expressed in this work." He would spend the next fifty years creating works of art that attempted to approach the clarity of vision expressed in those sculptures, paintings that are so complex, transdisciplinary, theoretical and all-encompassing in their message that they are best described—like the architecture of Frederick Kiesler—as visionary.

"Visionary art is the art of making symbols," wrote Laffoley in 1970, "which evoke the transcendental existence and character of the cosmic forces of the universe." He believed that the works themselves possessed an ability to manifest these forces, which he felt were eternal and shared by artists in different periods of history. "The forms of visionary art are not time or ego-oriented in terms of style," he wrote, but instead, to paraphrase the writings of Carl Jung, are a product of "mankind's collective unconscious." Today, the term visionary is used to describe artists who are often untrained, yet naïvely attempt to express grand ideas that they understand only superficially. In this sense, Laffoley is anything but a visionary, for there is no question that he fully comprehends the complex nature of the conceptual constructs he employs, which are drawn from his deep reading and understanding of science, mathematics, higher dimensions, time travel, alchemy, astrology, psychology, mysticism, literature, philosophy, religion, the occult, etc. "The visionary genre attempts to link the memory of the past," he wrote, "with the anticipation of the future by means of a transdisciplinary process in the present." His is a vision that attempts to encapsulate complex ideas extrapolated from these disciplines into a single painted image.

Upon graduation from high school, Laffoley studied at Brown University, where he took courses in the classics, philosophy, and art history. During the course of his studies, he became increasingly interested in architecture, because it consisted of diagrams that rendered objects in space with accuracy and precision, so upon graduation, he enrolled in the Department of Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. It was while studying there that he took a class with the Italian painter and sculpture Mirko Basaldella, who taught at Harvard's Carpenter



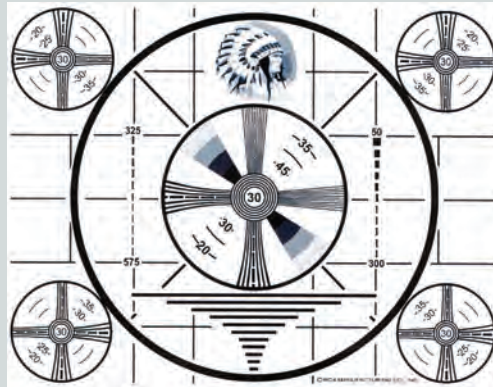
Untitled, 1963 (PL-63.02)
India ink on museum board
21 x 15 inches



Untitled, 1963 (PL-63.03)
India ink on museum board
20 x 15 ¼ inches



Tibetan Mandala



Indian Head Test Pattern, introduced by RCA in 1939

Center for the Arts. "What he asked me to do," Laffoley later recalled, "was to go away and do 300 drawings in ink about 20 x 30 inches, and not to come back until I finished them all." A handful of these drawings were discovered in Laffoley's studio after his death, and are shown in this exhibition for the first time.

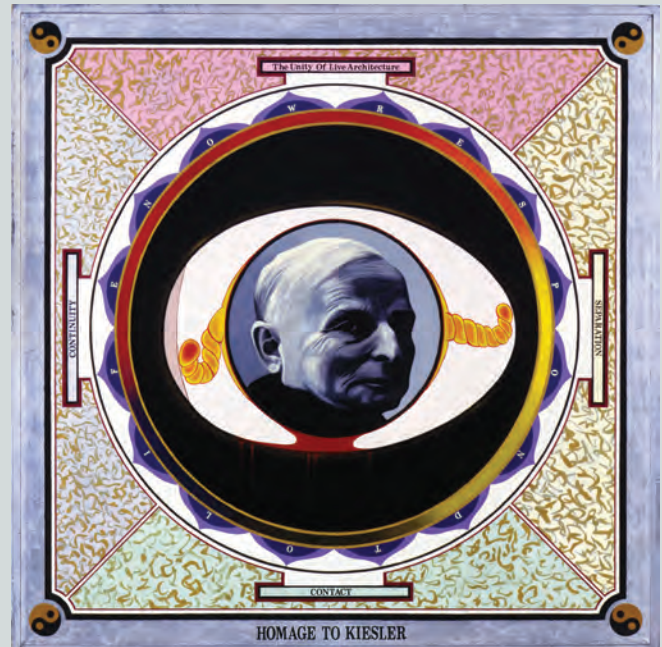
These remarkable black-and-white images are composed of

organic shapes, repeated patterns that echo forms in nature; they are not precise visual analogues, but rather images that seem to have been composed of the microscopic and, at the same time, visions of the cosmos (the two extremes in the natural world that physicists have attempted to unite in a common formula for generations). Laffoley's study at Harvard came to an abrupt end, for he was dismissed from the program for what he later described as "conceptual deviance."

Many of Laffoley's mature paintings consist of a large circle inscribed within the square format of a stretched canvas, often accompanied by smaller circular forms surrounding it, evoking comparisons to Hindu and Buddhist mandalas and cosmic diagrams. Sources such as these were a logical extension of his way of thinking, for his father (a banker by profession) was interested in Eastern religions and philosophy, as well as the practice of a spiritual life, to the extent that he performed as a trance medium at a theatre in Boston. Compelling though these comparisons might be, there is yet another source for Laffoley's imagery, far more mundane in nature but strikingly similar in format: the so-called Indian Head Test Pattern projected on black-and-white television screens when not transmitting programs in the early years of television. Laffoley recalls having stared at that pattern for hours in a fire station that Andy Warhol had purchased in New York. He met Warhol by simply looking up his number in a phone book and calling him. Warhol



Homage to Jung, 1968
Oil, acrylic and hand applied vinyl type on canvas, 52 x 52 inches



Homage to Kiesler, 1968
Oil, acrylic, ink and vinyl lettering on canvas, 37 ½ x 37 ½ inches

invited him to an opening and, when he discovered that the young man had no place to stay, told him that he could sleep in the fire station for a few weeks, just so long as he agreed to watch television from 2:00 AM to 6:00 AM, when only this test pattern appeared on the screen (apparently, Warhol wanted to see if watching television over prolonged periods would make an appropriate subject for a film). It was in this same period that Laffoley worked with Frederick Kiesler, who hired him to prepare pieces for an upcoming Guggenheim exhibition. It was through Kiesler's recommendation that he secured a job working for the architectural firm of Emery Roth & Sons, who, with the architect Minoru Yamasaki, were then in the process of designing the World Trade Center. At one meeting, Laffoley came up with the idea of joining the two towers together by a series of bridges, a suggestion that was considered so impertinent that it resulted in his immediate dismissal.



The City Can Change your Life, 1962
Oil, acrylic, and hand-applied vinyl letters on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

While living in New York, Laffoley never abandoned his studio in the basement of his family home in Belmont, Massachusetts (a suburb of Boston), where he would travel to paint on weekends. It was here that he painted a remarkably prescient picture called *The City Can Change Your Life* (1962), where, in a triptych-like format to be read from right to left, a single-engine plane strikes an island metropolis at precisely 9:03 AM, forecasting the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City 39-years later (the second plane impacted the south tower at exactly 9:03 AM). Laffoley himself was baffled by the accuracy of his prediction; if pressed to come up with an explanation, he might very well have told us that it came to him in a dream. In 1995, for example, he was shown images taken by the Hubble Space Telescope of gas clusters thousands of light years away from earth, an image that astonished him, not because they had never been



True Liberation, 1963
Oil, acrylic and hand applied vinyl type on canvas, 55 x 54 x 3 inches



The Astrological Ourboros, 1965
Acrylic on canvas with vinyl press type, 48 ½ x 48 ½ inches



The Unity of Being and Becoming, 1965
Oil, acrylic and hand applied vinyl type on canvas, 55 x 53 x 4 inches

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Cover image: *The Visionary Point*, 1970, oil and acrylic, ink and letraset on canvas, 73 ½ x 73 ½ inches