**Serrated leaves, scree slopes, cities:**

**What is the form of things and why?**

As a visual artist, my creative practice uses vision and the visual dimensions of things to produce meaningful statements. The material forms of such statements, again visual things, are the result of engaging with material environments and their conditions. This paper suggests a framework for the relationships between material processes and the form of things in order to position the role of creative practice.

It asks three questions.

1. What processes create shape and form?
2. How do human beings perceive environments?
3. What is the role of the visual artist and what does creative practice do?

Planet Earth has a unique cosmological setup. The sun supplies energy to the Earth’s surface. Due to the Earth’s rotation and curvature, changes in temperature are created. The proximity of the moon’s mass in combination with the Earth’s rotation leads to tidal water movements. These fundamental conditions impact on two different kinds of systems.

Firstly, plants and other organisms use the energy by the sun for their metabolism. Such metabolic activity manifests itself in changes to the shapes of their bodies. Most individuals, no matter if plant or animal, organise their lives between each other, so that communities between individuals are created: Communities of bacteria, or of people, built on continued interaction and relationships.

Secondly, in inorganic systems, the changes and rhythms by the sun’s incoming energy supply create movements of air and water. Weather is atmospheric movements of air and water. Rivers and oceans are movement patterns of big water masses. Over long time spans, such repeated material movements lead to the creation of new material forms: Scree slopes through erosion, sediments as new layers of soil.

Movement is an expression of interaction in inorganic and metabolic systems. Liquids move in cells or bodies, water and air move within an eco-system. In communities, individuals and materials move around. Movement is always accompanied by sound, created by the friction between moving materials. Human beings however, may not hear every sound that occurs due to the calibration of their sound sensors.

Every organism that has metabolism expresses its own ‘livingness’ through its body’s form. And each such body requires a certain amount of free space around itself, due to the movement patterns of the organism. Organisms build things in their environment by changing their material surroundings: People build houses, snails grow shells. Such building activity can also be part of a community effort which leads to bee hives, ant hills and human cities. Apart from the material environments that individuals and communities build, we can also recognise, through our mind’s eyes, the abstract forms of their dynamic community relationships, and express their forms in diagrams.

As human individuals we perceive the shape of things through our sensorial systems. Each specie’s sensorium is adapted to the particular ways of how it lives in its environment. For modern human beings, there seems to be a dominance of vision as an important way of orientating ourselves in the world. Part of this is due to our erect body posture which allows us to look into the distance and anticipate what will be coming up: We can pre-think things as our body posture facilitates cognition. Like that, our eyes and our thinking can surpass our’ body’s journeying capabilities.

When humans perceive shape through their visual mode of perception, only certain forms in our environments are seen, whilst other forms and shapes are not: We are little aware of the looks of a tiny mite, as our sensory system is not tuned to facilitate vision of such minute things. We simply have no understanding and participation in the little mite’s environment. We also have little awareness of the olfactory environments that blind moles are part of in their lives underground.

Form comes to us through the visual, adapted to our sensory system, sometimes complemented by visual aids, like microscopes or telescopes.

Architecture is an expression of human activity. Environments which are visually determined by architecture show a lot of vertical and horizontal lines and a lot of smooth surfaces. We see a lot of repetition and variation of such forms in such environments. We have learnt to understand and interprete such similarities, difference and variation , and it helps our spatial orientation. Architectural environments are material expressions of our human interactions with others, and determined by the human body form, its dimensions and movement patterns.

Natural environments can be a ‘mess’ of forms. They are the living worlds of a large amount of species whose body shapes and environments come in a multitude of scales and shapes. Visual structure seems less organised to us and there seems to be an absence of straight line demarcations. Surfaces only appear smooth when we look at them from a distance.

Many metabolising individuals know that they have ‘a body’. They have a ‘body self’. There are also body selves for whole communities, perceived by their members.

Inorganic things in our environments may not have an awareness of having a body. However, we may impart concepts of embodiment onto such things as a wall, a hill, or even the wind, and we might interact with them in this sense.

As a visual artist I use the visual potential of various materials, processes and technologies and how they affect our senses. Each process brings its own framework that uses the visual together with other dimensions of space and time: Video also uses time as part of its framework, and works have beginnings and end-points. Photography is visual too but timing is brought to it by the viewer’s length of time of engaging with it.

Writing and drawing allow to engage with realms that go can go beyond the visual though drawing eventually produces again a visual result.

When we make artwork we bring the framework of our medium and our individual approach to an engagement with environments: Being there, moving there, making changes, expressing our interactions and contribute.

Making drawings and installations, videos and photographs and writing and moving, can be seen as events happening between the artist and an environment. The artist can also come away, and ‘take away’, from the environment, bringing the results of earlier engagement on site to further interaction in a new environment, e.g. by exhibiting artwork in a gallery.

As artists we ask ourselves how we can engage in meaningful ways with environments feeding back about our engagement and contributing constructively.

The shape of things in our environments are an expression of the processes they undergo and how they live or are used in others’ lives. The shapes of the leaves of a tree, its silhouette with branches and trunk, and the shapes of a shell on the shore all are expressions of particular ways of living and their shapes are optimised for the species’ continuation in space and time.

We perceive form as visual manifestations of shapes in our environments. However, only some of the shape that is there can be perceived by us, due to the calibration of our sensory systems.