

Dear Friends,

Observation is central to everything we do at The Nature Institute. In all of our research and educational work we strive to refine our capacities of observation. On the one hand this means turning with an open awareness toward the phenomena of the sense world. On the other hand it means observing human thought processes so that we become more sensitive to the way our thoughts interpenetrate with experience. How often do we attend to our abstract notions more than to the things themselves! Such abstractions can cut us off from the deeper roots of understanding and at the same time can shape our thinking and actions in ways that become destructive.

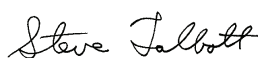
This issue of *In Context* encompasses these complementary aspects of our work. The feature article by Georg Maier—extracted from a chapter of his forthcoming book, *An Optics of Visual Experience*—is perhaps most noteworthy for its calm spirit of exact observation. The subject—what sort of world does a mirror space present us with? what are its qualities and its principles of coherence?—may seem almost banal topics. But our little excerpt hints at the value of carefully attending to phenomena for their own sake. Maier’s work reminds us that, however “commonplace” the subject matter, a well-trained receptivity can bring new insights and render the matter less common than our inattention may have led us to imagine. Surely this lesson bears upon our busy times in which we all too easily overlook and ignore—and therefore do not take seriously—what is right in front of us. What could be more urgent than to meet events in the world with a quietness and depth of mind bent on absolute fidelity to the truth of experience? Meier’s work is an invitation to discovery through disciplined perceiving.

At the other pole—observing contemporary thought processes—our opening article focuses on the field of biological engineering. It reveals a realm of human ideas and manipulation that is deeply unsettling. The very nature of the living organism is being made into a subject for both trivial gaming and commercialized re-engineering. As the examples in the article show, the relation with the living world has become so disconnected that it is dissolving into a kind of chaos where everything is imagined to be possible and where projects need only to be imagined as possible in order to be attempted. In their starkness these ambitions and efforts reveal how important it is to move in a different direction—to anchor human thought and action in concrete perception and experience.

And between those two articles, we come upon the brilliant and currently overlooked twentieth-century cell biologist, Paul Weiss, who combined clear, precise observation of the organism with equally clear thinking. His prominent achievements during the middle two-thirds of the last century can serve as a beacon for those trying honestly to follow the lead of the many surprising biological findings of the still young twenty-first century. He combined the most rigorous scientific observation with a profound respect for the character of the living organism. We consider both Weiss and Maier to be among the guiding lights for our own work at The Nature Institute.

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