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Allusions to the body: Jeremy Wafer's Oval Sculptures.

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Chapter 2

Jeremy Wafer's non-illusionistic vocabulary and reductive articulation of surface, material and form.

In their puritan austerity, Wafer's sculptures appear to be Minimal in nature. This desire to purge the unnecessary underlines the fact that every element is crucial. Energy is distilled, not dissipated. The sculptures are akin to cells: primary, original structures that are filled with possibilities. This reductivism is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function and to unify experience. In this sense the *ovals* become distillations of symbolic, simplified patterns that are publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning. As layers of meaning and association are discovered, the classical distance of Minimalism becomes obsolete.

Wafer's sculptures are a hybridisation of two forms of abstractions: the mathematical perfection of Western Classicism in Formalist 'Abstract' Art with the expressive abstraction in African Art. Wafer clearly evolves from a Western European background, but has been profoundly influenced and stimulated - visually, culturally and intellectually - by his surroundings, be it KwaZulu Natal, Johannesburg, Paris, New Delhi, Amsterdam or Italy.

Jeremy Wafer studied Renaissance art theory quite extensively during his honours year and his sensibility to form was influenced by these classical notions. The underlying Italian rather than Flemish Renaissance ideas of the ideal, perfectibility and essence derived from Greek Classicism, have since been re-thought, mainly because we have been influenced by almost all recent thinking (deconstruction and post modernism) to distrust these grand narratives'. But 'Still they are there'[25], he says.

Ernst Gombrich explains that this 'grand narrative' represents our very concept of 'structure' (the idea that some basic scaffolding or armature

[25] Wafer, interview with the artist, 2005

determines the 'essence' of things), and reflects our need for a scheme with which to grasp the infinite variety of this world of change.[26] This need is revealed by our search for fundamental organizing principles and values.

In Western art, abstraction has followed a tendency toward a purificatory and heroic emptiness of figuration and of direct, external reference.

In Western Reductivism, the 20th century sculpture of Constantin Brancusi is seminal, and there are many elements which may be similar to Wafer's: the reductive form 'cleansed' of all excess becomes simplified and thus more potent and universal.

Alex Potts, in describing Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1909-10) (Fig.11), could almost be describing Wafer's *ovals*:
'…(It) struck me partly because of its economy of form and the absence of arbitrary bulges and protrusions, but more because of the way it was poised – it seemed self-contained, yet its presence impinged subtly on the surface where it rested. This work played out a creative tension between the idea of autonomy and the need for such autonomy to be activated in the work's placing and address to the viewer. An isolated, small-scale sculptural object is all too likely to strike one as a mere thing or ornamentally failed object unless it is staged so as to prompt one to think otherwise of it.'[27]

Just as Wafer's *ovals* are staged to become more than just decorative pods: they are presented in a situation, i.e. a gallery, where the viewer is forced to contemplate them not just visually, but on an intellectual level as well.

Wafer's work seems to be far more static and iconic than Brancusi's sculpture, as they do not move in space as Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (Fig 10). The environment for Wafer's sculptures ideally has to be austere and minimal, as any intrusion could damage its fragility. Brancusi's sculptures are placed on plinths that are part of the sculpture, yet still present the work in a

[26] Gombrich, 1959
[27] Potts, 2000, p.104

traditional manner by setting it apart from its immediate surroundings. Wafer uses no such device, and thus he needs to control the environment where his pieces are viewed.

In Rosalind Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977), Brancusi is seen to prefigure the Post-Minimalist shift from an obsession with inner formal logic of the object to a concern with its surface qualities and its staging.

Minimalism is often cited as the main art historical reference in Wafer's work, and consequently the influence of late modernism. The concern with materiality and perceptual focus is evident in much of his production. Yet in terms of its idealistic bedrock, ethics and above all its metaphoricity, Wafer's conceptualism remains at a distance from the cool minimal gaze.

Lucy R. Lippard explains this 'complex minimalism' in the following way: the meaning of abstraction in contemporary aesthetics is no longer that of a distillation of content still comprehensible to an entire community, but that of an independent form which may mean any number of things to any number of people."[28] This statement is crucial to the viewpoint I have adopted and utilized in analysing Wafer's *ovals*.

I believe that the *ovals* and other works of Jeremy Wafer are informed by the Minimalists' and Conceptualists' obsession with simple word and number systems, with basic geometry, repetition, modules, measurement and mapping. Yet whereas the Minimalists made a concerted effort to exclude all symbolic, metaphorical or referential aspects from their art, Wafer includes greater themes, exploring more complex areas of myth, history and association. The visual result may correspond to the Minimalist's hope to create a concrete and modular actuality, perceived within the 'real time' of the immediate present.

Another crucial difference is whereas the Minimalists rejected the anthropomorphic and illusionist base of most traditional sculpture, Wafer

[28] Lippard, 1983, p.11

affords an entry for the viewer. Wafer alludes to ‘known forms’, whereas Minimalism attempts to reject association.

In Wafer’s *ovals* a non-Modernist, non-reductive abstraction is glimpsed. This abstraction, which is about addition and plenitude and not reduction, interrogates signifying languages, similar to Wittgenstein’s use of the visual trick of the ‘rabbit-duck’ drawing to point to ‘the gap between perception and what a mind might make of it.... There was always a change lurking, a bit of the unknown surfacing, a duck in the rabbit.... Language could be shown to fail them all.’[29] This is an abstraction that pushes art forms beyond the parameters, as though possessed with the force of other things.

I concur with Ivor Powell who says that Wafer’s sculptural forms are ‘of such potent and scale-aware minimalism as to acquire the experiential presence of archetypes.’[30] They become symbolic images, which are inherently abstract, carrying seeds of meaning as effectively as the most detailed realism, even to our own individualist society. Considering Powell’s quote, he uses the term ‘potent’ and ‘minimalism’ in one sentence: terms traditionally not used together. This is where Wafer’s work moves away from the Minimalist ideology, and into the realm of loaded reductivism: the reduced form is superficially minimalist in appearance, but on further investigation reveals itself to be loaded with meaning and associations. The works can also be experienced on a physical level without needing to grasp the artist’s possible intentions, as they are of such a nature that they can speak multidimensionally. The apparently simple images are loaded, utilizing as they do the language of iconicity – normally associated with frontality, abstraction, symmetry and saturation – even as they operate as symbols of integration.

Robert Morris defines the ‘new limit for sculpture reference to a remark by Tony Smith that situates minimalist work somewhere between the object and

[29] Nesbit as cited in Van Wyk, 2003
[30] Powell as cited in Frost, 2001, p.33

monument, around the scale of the body.'[31] This would be an important aspect to an anthropomorphic interpretation of Wafer's *ovals*.

In the 20th century, many European artists were '…attracted to ancient images because of the ways in which those images formally resembled modern art - for a certain geometric simplicity, large scale, directness, …'[32] This is true especially in African arts. One of the most profound and well-known examples is of how the influence of African masks upon Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a painting which set the course for Cubism and Abstraction in Western art. Kahnweiler effectively saw African sculpture as the very embodiment of the Modernist fantasy of an absolutely autonomous art object existing only in and for itself.

Yet was it understood why the African artist used such potent, simplified and geometric images? In comparison to the cerebral abstraction of the European artist, how did the carver of an African mask arrive at the stark, exaggerated and embellished images with their often decorative patterning?

African artworks tend to favour visual abstraction over naturalistic representation and realism. This is because many African artworks, regardless of medium, tend to *represent* objects or ideas rather than *depict* them. African artists also tend to favour three-dimensional over two-dimensional works because a single artwork, with a multitude of uses, is able to carry a multiplicity of meanings in a variety of social contexts.

Ernest Mancoba remarked aptly on the works of Ife and Benin sculptors: 'these works, in disregarding the outer face of man, reveal Inner Man.'[33]

Another reason may be that because of the sculptures' spiritual and ritual context they conform to relatively stereotyped shapes, patterns and decorations. The main reason for using traditional materials and shapes or

[31] Morris as cited in Foster, 1996, p.47
[32] Lippard, 1983, p.10
[33] Mancoba as cited in Beumers, 1996, p.21

decoration related to the general belief that the ever-present ancestors would be more attractred to recognizable, tangible and familiar items.

Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani visually appropriated the abstracted forms of African arts in two-dimensional works. Wafer, in his *ovals*, hybridises the European and the African methods and reasons for abstraction.

The *ovals*, especially the first series from 1995 (Fig. 1a-c) and the *Large White Oval* (Fig. 4) also remind one of 'stones'. Placed in a particular way, stones are embodied with meaning both overt and covert. Stones are not made but shaped by man and thus form and content are enmeshed. The hermetic quality of stones and mounds is different but compatible with Minimalism's obdurate silence.

'Stones touch human beings because they suggest immortality, because they have so patently *survived*. Virtually every culture we know has attributed to pebbles and stones, rocks and boulders, magical powers of intense energy, religiosity, luck, fertility and healing. And in virtually every early culture the entire world was sexualised, "divided into male and female, incorporating the entire life force into reality." Earth and stone are two forms of the same material, symbolizing the same forces. Both are the sources of the world as we know it. The alchemical *petra genetrix,* or generative stone, is an incarnation of *prima material* – the beginning, the bedrock, the Old European Great Goddess who was both earth and sky – "unmated mother" – sole creator of everything.'[34]

[34] Lippard, 1983, p.15