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

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Chapter 3

'*Context is more overwhelming than you think, even on the object*'[35]

The key areas of discussion, referring to Wafer's *ovals*, centres on how these reduced forms can evoke metaphorical referencing, especially in terms of the body and secrecy.

The theoretical grounding of this chapter will be Mary Douglas' (1966) theory of the core metaphor as the body and how one transgresses across boundaries, Victor Turner's theories about performative mode, Brian Turner's sociological notions of the body, and James Elkin's semiotic readings of the body and the search for bodily forms or metaphors. Bryan S. Turner's (1996) view of the body in a 'somatic society' as the axis of sociological analysis and a profound source of metaphor will corroborate the core anthropological and post-structuralist component.

These will then be contextualised in referring to a reductive, contemporary sculpture as seen in Jeremy Wafer's *ovals* series, and as seen in my own sculptural work.

Structuralism was used as an essential strategy to interrogate how things were structured, in the process of making and observing. Every object can thus become meaningful when placed in a context (as a signifying thing) in which it becomes engaged in the process (relationship) of signification. Especially in abstract work, the question arises - what is the context and how does the form become engaged in this process of signification?

Poststructuralist theory denies the distinction between signifier (description or conception thereof, located in the strategy of the viewer, who is located in situation) and signified (sculpture, continually in the process of being made, the thing).

[35] Wafer, interview with the artist, 14 Feb 2005

It is a self-reflexive discourse, which is aware of the tentativeness, slipperiness, ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings, which are aspects clearly evident in Wafer's work.

According to the Poststructuralists, concepts are nothing more than words. Thus, signifiers are words that refer to other words and never reach out to material objects and their interrelations. The signifier is enigmatic. In describing the object, you are always referring to existing descriptions and interpretations that are already within your frame of reference. To indicate this shift in theory, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida introduced the word "**différance**" (ambiguous, multiple…meaning is created in relationship to something else) to indicate the relation between signifiers as one of **difference** and ***deferral*** (resolution is constantly deferred). Meaning is deferred, never affixed, and leads towards the re-made. If a word's meaning is solely the result of its difference from other words, then the meaning (the concept or signified) is not an additional thing 'present' in the sign itself. On the contrary, 'meaning' (if it can be called that at all) is the ever-moving play of difference from signifier to signifier; a slipping from word to word in which each word retains relations to ('traces' of) the words that differ from it. A sense of disquiet is present in this 'slippage' of meaning that takes place.

In Wafer's *ovals*, the paradox is that this slippery, indefinable allusiveness is achieved through the simplest and most logical means, where repetition and reduction of form induces a process of looking where meaning continually spills over and is not containable within the seemingly static boundaries of these simple and logical forms. The specification of meaning is contextual, i.e. affected by related words and is an infinite and endless process. Meaning is never fully present in any one signifier (sculptural form), but is infinitely deferred or suspended. Roland Barthes sees this contradiction as inevitable; there will never be closure and always inconsistence and an excess of meaning.

Thus in looking at Wafer's *ovals*, all interpretations come from the viewer's process of participation and frame of reference and more specifically the

viewer's verbal frames of reference. The intentionality of the artist is only relevant if it is known to the viewer. The viewer could also make an intuitive and educated guess by examining the physical presentation of the work, but without actually involving the artist, the artist's intention may remain a secret. Barthes calls this the move from the 'death of the author' to the 'birth of the viewer'.[36] Thus the layers of meanings are actually interpretative possibilities that can be uncovered as the viewer interacts with the sculptures. We bring our 'baggage' into interpretation from different perspectives, in the contexts of on-going social lives. The object and how you experience it is constantly changing in a social situation. Any interpretation depends on the position and context of the interpreter.

The multiple meanings in Wafer's *ovals* are elusive, existing in a wider field of associations, which shift and will continually change over time. Meanings are inherently unstable because they are continually re-created in relation to a shifting context. This possibility of multiple meanings is potentially a stimulus to creative thought and increased understanding.

One becomes cogniscent of these diverse implications that spring from multiple sources in Wafer's work. His minimalist and structuralist searches for simplicity as a student may not be known to the viewer and thus be absent in the viewer's interpretation. Wafer is conscious of the possibilities of interpretation of his work and encourages debate. The blank slate for interpretation is set. The 'genetics' may be pre-determined, not necessarily known and only partly revealed through in depth study, even though they will change as the viewer's knowledge and input changes. What makes these works so intriguing is that they have the capacity to grow with the viewer, as they cannot be 'read' one dimensionally. They constantly refer to more, even though they seem so 'less'. The *ovals* are multi-referential, referring for example to ants, termites, buildings, African art objects, fields of colour, and industrial and bodily forms.

[36] Foster, 1996, p.50

The context of presentation shapes meanings and thereby becomes a framing mechanism. The defining elements are not inherent, but are related to the frame of reference or context in which the object is perceived. Meaning is thus shaped in a process of referral, and in relation to associations and contrasts evoked by the object in the viewer's mind. The power of presentation is huge and conditions our entire assessment and thus we are orchestrated. Within the gallery space, the viewer presupposes meaning, and always attempts to extract it. Artworks are seldom there for their own sake. The interpretation of an event (or style) is itself an event to be regarded in an endless sequence. This outward genetic spiral of interpretation triggers the visual 'signified' as a starting point. The *ovals* are firstly read on a visceral level and that is part of their intrigue: they can be read physically and can absorb one's physicality, and only then is intellectualised meaning revealed or discovered. Scrutiny becomes such an intensely personal experience that the sculptures become internalised physically, emotionally and spiritually. In thus personalising and 'possessing' them, the viewer at the same time senses a handing over of self to the pieces: they, in turn, possess him.

Paradoxically, another source of ambiguity is the apparent lack of abstruseness in these pieces. Combining the abstract and the concrete in a single form has the capacity of allowing fine discriminations of meaning, but the inherent ambiguity has attributes that are both invisible and extremely visible and present a particular problem for analysis. The material presence of objects makes them appear readily accessible to analysis. This tends to deflect attention from their less obvious ability to evoke abstract symbolic associations and to communicate subliminally. The intrinsic physicality of the objects that make them appear immediate, sensual and amenable to assimilation belies their actual nature.

Within the context of being compared to African art and artefacts, Wafer's *ovals* encompass an inherent ambiguity or indeterminacy that affords them to communicate subtle shades of meaning. They are open to continual re-interpretation, as is certainly the case with traditional African art in South Africa. One can engage with the visual experience of these objects without

knowledge of their meanings or makers. This is due to centuries of cultural dominance and inobservance.

Symbols are classified according to goal structure of the specific situation and there are different planes of classification that transect one another, of which the constituent binary pairs (or triadic rubics) are temporarily connected.
For example in describing the Ndembu, Victor Turner sees in one situation the distinction between red/white may be homogenous with male/female, in another with female/male, and yet in another with meat/flour without sexual connotation.[37] Single symbols may represent the points of interconnection between separate planes of classification.

There is a ‘polysemy’ or multivocality of many symbols: the fact that they may possess many significations simultaneously. Thus a slippage takes place, multiple meanings provide endless possibilities, resulting in no ‘border’ for exact interpretation: it is the play on images and words which intertwine in various forces of meanings.

A rich tension exists between the distilled knowledge of the flawless formal aesthetics and the deeply embedded complex content of the works, and the relationship between the 'natural' and the 'structured'. The process of producing the works appears to have evaporated at this stage and the evidence of labour is downplayed and not apparent. One could also compare the *ovals* to a sculpture of a Buddha: there appears to be no evidence of process or labour. The manufacture and process is concealed. The spiritual is serene, a careful procedure for meditative contemplation.

Jeremy Wafer is interested in the liminal or interstitial spaces between what he calls ‘clean process’ (empirical 'measuring', whether this is surveying, observing, documenting) and a more physical working with materials and notions of embodiment. These liminal spaces have ambiguous and indeterminate attributes which are expressed by a variety of symbols. In

[37] Turner, 1969, p.41

societies that ritualise social and cultural transitions, the liminal blend 'lowliness and sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship'.[38]
Brian Turner, writing on the interstructural character of the liminal, says: '…Undoing, dissolution, decomposition, are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation and the reformation of the old elements into new patterns…. Antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, e.g. huts, tunnels, which are at once tombs and wombs…. The coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal, that is neither this nor that, and yet both.'[39]

'Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide us with a set of templates or models that are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously.'[40]

Jeremy Wafer's sculptures are physical manifestation of these liminal 'slipping in-between spaces where signification is constantly being evoked and produced. Lacan calls this slippage of the signifier 'the creative spark of metaphor'[41]. Rather than having fixed attributes, meaning and metaphor in the *ovals* should be seen as fluid variables which shift and change in different contexts and at different times.

Wafer's *ovals* utilise at once a reduced use of metaphor and an abundance of metaphor. They may possess many significations simultaneously, thus being polysemic, or multivocal of many symbols. Visually, they are reduced to

[38] Turner, 1974, p. 94-95
[39] Turner, 1967, p.99
[40] Turner, 1974, p.128
[41] Gallop, 1988, p.96

coloured ovaloid shapes with protrusions and incisions. Yet in terms of metaphor, their references are wide and multivalent. The metaphors can range from the body, the pupae, the bomb and the container (to many more), all in relation to the forms, surface markings, use of colour and display.

Yet the works also possess a contemplative 'beingness', a kind of 'silence' as an absence of direct metaphor. 'If seen in this way, these blanks work against the rich allusiveness or social efficacy of metaphor, and this 'existential beingness' operates as a necessary void against the plenitude of meaning.'[42]

Plenitude of meaning both obfuscates and affords, making it a conduit of meaning for both the artist and the viewer. In their simplicity, the *ovals* bring about a challenge to the viewer. They are not 'easy' to read, even though visually they might be easy to decipher ('oval form with colour and additions'). From an interpretative point of view, active participation and involvement will reveal something, but not all, and even that will change. The Gestalt, secret and non-revealing, is part of the fascination of the works. There is a rebellion against visual, sensual and intellectual overload. An invitation to active viewer participation and 'unpacking' of multiple and possible meaning is afforded to the viewer.

A semiotic perspective on the interpretation of metaphor, which views the phenomenon as an unstable or dynamic sign, is offered by the philosopher, historian and semiotician Umberto Eco in his 1984 book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Wafer's *ovals* can be interpreted in such a way, using musicality, affective and allusive systems to allude to the multiple semiotic possibilities of metaphor. The perceptual ambiguity inherent is his works have to do with the existence of paradoxes in intention and meaning and the disarticulated visual codes that are underlined by the use of thematic reiteration. This adds to the sense of enigma in the works.

Derrida's book *The Truth in Painting* emphasizes the layers of meanings deriving from textual and visual attributions and appropriations. The *ovals* thus

[42] Frost, 2001, p.60

can become composite metaphors, which celebrate amongst other things the African and the European, Christianity, body, psyche, and cultural and religious transformation.

From a Post-Structuralist perspective, Wafer's *ovals* are seen as having binary attributes that are interdependent, a two-sided contribution that is part of a whole. This is evident in the importance of symmetry of structure in his pieces. Yet the dichotomies are flexible and 'fluid variables which shift and change in different contexts and at different times.'[43] Lola Frost describes this as a 'non-hierarchical binarism (that) is a curiously open reformulation of the idea of classical balance which synthesises, rather than displaces, opposites'.[44] In an ongoing dialogue, transition and transformation takes place to form the 'unifying pattern' that Wafer's sculptures present. They become symbols of unification, alluding to not only a physical sense, but also to a ritualistic, social and political sense. The sculptures elicit meditation on formal, social and spiritual integration. The ambiguities inherent in possessing attributes that are both invisible and extremely visible act as a particular problem for analysis. Thus the *ovals* demand both our active and contemplative/meditative cooperation and cannot be passively consumed.

I have discussed how African and European or Western aspects have been absorbed and hybridised in the *oval* sculptures of Jeremy Wafer. Wafer may be quoting, mediating or indeed even appropriating a Zulu vocabulary, but he does so in a unifying spirit which is germane to the new consciousness in South Africa. The sculptures are a cultural amalgamation of African influences and European views that express a desire for holistic integration and wholeness, even as they acknowledge that such a synthesis is never stoic or static. His use of African motifs together with a minimalist and classical order produces an inclusive spectatorship for African and European viewers, and the 'liminal space each occupies in relation to the other's vocabulary marks an idealised and hybridised – indeed utopian – moment of cultural integration.'[45] Lola Frost determines these utopian energies as conceptualisations of an

[43] Gallop, 1988, p.96
[44] Frost, 2001, p.48
[45] ibid, p.49

‘African Renaissance’ which sees South Africa as the powerhouse of sub-Saharan Africa and implying a social and cultural entity that draws on a well-established and modernised infrastructure even as it affirms traditional African values. The *ovals* thus afford an ideal harmony aimed at reconstituting a society mangled by division, hatred and inequality.

There is also the play on the procedure in which most African art is presented in European museums: on lighted pedestals, in clean sterile spaces, inviting the viewer to scrutinize and analyse. Everything is constructed according to the dominant culture. A situation of rarity and worship and exclusivity is created, a sense of sacredness. In their original context, most African artworks are not conceived to be perceived in this way. Wafer’s works elicit and utilise this same response.

The sculptures draw from and refer to the past and to the present. Subtle references are made from a variety of both contemporary and past aspects not only regarding the arts, but social, political and spiritual sense. He balances concepts of reductivism ‘then and now’ with the idea that the ‘African’ evolves from the past. The antiquated European/Western attitude that the European is the ‘now’, and Africa’s art and material culture, is history is misplaced. Wafer thus presents conscientious works that are dynamically holistic and amalgamate the present with the past, moving both into the contemporary realm. The ‘ovals’ become ‘…social messages from past to present about the meaning and function of art, exposed by the tensions between two such distant and disparate times.’[46]

A further hybridisation of binaries is evident in the simultaneous references to excess and simplicity. The restraint shown in the oval forms is balanced by the often overabundant surface markings, sensuous surface treatment and rounded mounds that imply wholeness and fecundity. One could speak of a ‘less AND more’ philosophy. The *ovals* simultaneously present themselves as pleasurable visual excesses and stark, simplified, reductive images. The severely reduced forms are deliberately used repetitively and could continue

[46] Lippard, 1983, p.1

indefinitely, not unlike Brancusi's *Endless Column*. This refers to Wafer's interest in the relationship between the macro and the micro.

Another hybridisation of dualities takes place in Wafer's interest in the micro/macroscopic and the concept of *pars pro toto* – the part standing for the whole, the relationship between the universal and the particular. Wafer utilises small, intimate bumps and surface articulations versus large iconic/archetypal forms. As in Wafer's artworks on termite mounds and ant heaps, like *Anthole* (1996) and *Xoë* (2000), the 'macro' structure houses a world of 'micro' activity where a community or a body/body corporate brings about a specific iconic form, the *ovals* are earth forms that are somehow both random and systematic, the emanation of tremendous, seething activity as well as reduced and contemplative forms. Michael Dames cites 'the familiar urge to create a structure capable of being simultaneously perceived as all possible sizes – a speck of dust, an egg, a human belly, the world, the universe.'[47]

[47] Lippard, 1983, p.142