

Chapter 4

Secrecy

There exist many kinds of secrets. Perhaps I can compare the secrecy I would like to write about to the kind of secret that an African mask has: even though much research may have been done to try and understand it, it will invariably have a veneer of the unknown. One might speculate on its creator, its owners, its uses and its social and political history, there will always be certain aspects of its history, story and meaning both socially and privately that will remain intriguingly undiscovered. In Western conditions, many African masks are publicly displayed divorced of their original context, in museums or galleries, presented in the same light as an artwork: static, precious, unique and imminently symbolic. The viewer is conditioned to look at it in a specific (Westernised) way: as static, precious, unique, rare and symbolic, even though the mask's intended use or display was distinctly different: sometimes it was not even meant for the public eye. Yet, as with Wafer's *ovals*, the viewer's interpretation could be personal: how one relates to the masks and finds entrance to them or not, how one might be baffled by them or find meaning through contemplation and meditation and not necessarily through knowledge.

In viewing such a display, the objective is not to adopt the role of a 'secret agent' and solve a mystery to reveal a great, powerful secret that is revealed upon pressing the correct button, or to discover the kernels of insight in which the 'truth' is located, the secret exposed. Secrecy is slippery and ambiguous by its very nature. The awareness of the unknown becomes a meditation and not necessarily an unravelling.

'Secrecy, with its ability to both conceal and reveal, is "rooted in the most basic experience of what it is to live among others, needing both to hide and to share, both to explore and to be aware of the unknown.'",⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Nooter, 1993, p.18

Secrecy may refer to the protection of some form of knowledge, implying the challenge of revelation and insight. Yet, as Suzanne Preston Blier mentions, 'The paradox of secrecy lies in the fact that the most important secrets are those that are open to public view.'⁴⁹

Secrecy connotes something protected from intrusion, yet the hidden implies possibility. Besides being socially and culturally constructed, secrecy is also an essential mental construct. It speaks of suppression, isolation, intimacy, privacy, the enigmatic, meditation and the enclosed.

Secrecy from a poststructuralist viewpoint is multilayered: not only does meaning not refer directly to the object, but it refers to existing descriptions and interpretations that relate to the object and exists in the viewer's frame of reference. These words thus refer to other words and never reach out to material objects and their interrelations mean that there is another 'gap' in relating to the object: not only is there visual ambiguity but ambiguity to the verbal and interpretative entry into the works. Resolution and meaning is thus constantly deferred and never affixed.

The decoding of secrets is one of the major ways in which we are used to thinking about art. It is not knowledge intentionally kept from the viewer, it is that the viewer has to put in effort to gain access to that particular knowledge, in the broadest sense. The artworks are not about exposure, but about existence and significance. Writing or 'exposing' evolves into a betrayal of the subtle, non-linguistic sensory modes. Silence holds a power. Unrevealing is a dialectic. Like lockets, objects of art constitute a form of supplemental containers in which secrets both private and public are guarded and displayed. The container has acquired its own form. The secret makes the viewer as acutely aware of what is unseen and invisible as we are of what there is on the surface for everyone to behold.

A concept of secrecy may be reflected in the closed forms used by Wafer, exploring the existence and significance of containment rather than overt and

⁴⁹ Blier as cited in Nooter, 1993, p.185

readable exposure. While his works exist as autonomous objects, his interest in African art forms and cultures, philosophy and a deep knowledge of art historical and contemporary precedents results in work of such complexity and richness, that it becomes virtually impossible to lay hold of in a cognitive sense. Jeremy Wafer had no intention to make the *ova/s* secretive, as such. They become ambiguous through their closed, reductive forms and their lack of direct signification, in which knowledge of the interior is negated.

Secrecy is eternal to both the viewer and the artist. Its function is to have the viewer perambulate constantly between lines of uncertainty. The *ova/s* are not merely iconic, holding no secret for the aesthete, except for their visual power which is the superficiality of visual obsession.

‘Power is not how it is expressed, but rather how it is concealed.’⁵⁰ The possibility of entrance to the interior might be potent, as knowledge is powerful, assuming that knowing the object’s ‘secrets’ will give you some form of power. The inherent yet invisible power can be compared to a bomb (violence) or an egg (growth, life): power is tangible yet always hidden. It speaks of the possibility of release like an explosion and the unexpected, leading to some form of drastic change, but this action may never take place. It remains always imaginary. The outside shell of the *ova/s* remains calm, contained and unassuming at all times. Power also binds those that share the knowledge, keeping others out. The secret is the barrier that seduces the outsider to decide whether to intrude and embark into the dialectic. Boundaries are created between those that believe and those that don’t. Secrets imply that their own disclosure and knowledge are desired, because secrets give power to those who know them. Secrecy can thus become a strategy employed by those in the know. What power does searching for insight into Wafer’s *ova/s* afford one? Or is it the act of searching, of trying to ‘open up’ that is liberating or empowering? Or do the silences of the artwork provide the viewer a feeling of being ‘excluded’, inadequate, powerless, alienated? Wafer’s work needs mental work and many observers refuse to engage in it. His use of reduced form may also be a conscious limiting of

⁵⁰ Nooter, 1993, p.28

knowledge, as the forms contain and are contained. As Phillip Ravenhill states, 'The visible functions to keep the invisible invisible.'⁵¹ The accessible, visible aspect is the sculpture's public sphere. As the most important secrets are exterior and conveyed through form and material, initiation into the enigma may become its private sphere. Implicated in the secret is the possibility of something unknown waiting to be discovered, but the secret is always ambiguously poised on the threshold of understanding and obscurity, of penetration and prohibition.

Some of the altered surfaces of Wafer's *ovals* give signs or evidence of the interior, signalling a contained presence. The surface of the sculptures can be compared to skin: a boundary that keeps the functioning body inside. In its shape, it conceals and protects the inner workings of the body. Penetration encourages crossing a boundary that involves action. The sculptures allude to this intrusive action that needs an existing orifice like a navel, or actual cutting and wounding. Wounds and scars speak of penetrating; tears speak of emotion, cuts of surgical procedures to explore the interior. The body had been 'opened', but has closed again, and even the openings like navels and cuts seem superficial: clues, but not answers.

The oval sculptures could be compared to relics and fetishes: objects that hold some form of sacred, revered power or meaning, often stored in a container that emphasizes or expresses its religious potency/value. The hidden powers are promoted and manipulated by the elaborate adornment of the containers that conceals them. The container is both a protective shell that hinders public access and a didactic tool, that proclaims the nature of its contents through symbolic decorations. Both Christian relics and fetishes represent movements from an internal, secret self to an externalised object.

Wafer's *ovals* become vessels comparable to African pots: the visible form is not just a hollow vessel. A pot is the boundary between what is kept in it safely, and the outside. If empty, it contains a void waiting to be filled. Often a certain shape of pot has to do with what it is used for, e.g. a milk pail is longer

⁵¹ Nooter, 1993, p.24

that a beer pot, and both have nodules or *amasumpa* for grip, yet the milk pail's *amasumpa* also help in hearing when the pail, during milking, is almost full.

In comparison, Wafer's *ovals* and African masks become, because of their reduced form, abstraction and decorative quality, de-individualised. This de-individualisation can act as a form of concealment too. Masks are paradoxical in nature as they both conceal and reveal identity: they reveal the role in which individuals are cast, but they obscure many other features of the wearers. Both the *ovals* and many African masks and artworks are objects that have visible, public dimensions and invisible ones as well. The European's lack of knowledge of a culture (African) makes their rituals, images and objects seem encoded, especially in oral cultures. This lack of knowledge confronts the viewer when looking at Wafer's *ovals*. The same gaze is employed as when looking at an African mask: there is the delight in the decorative, often aesthetic form, texture and surface treatment but the reason behind these forms may always remain enigmatic. As with Wafer's *ovals*, once the objects have commanded the viewer's attention, the narratives around them could be revealed, enriching that attention and increasing its rewards, except that the *ovals* are cerebral not humanoid, silent and not animated.

Abstraction, accumulation, obscurity, omission, and containment, to suggest the presence of a secret and to camouflage it, are some of the principles of secrecy's visual language in many African cultures. There is often a dialectic between what is seen and what is unseen: the more secret something is, the more enigmatic and non-representational its form. Masks often encode knowledge through the graphic systems of design and pattern. One's degree of comprehension depends upon how far one has progressed through the initiation cycle.

In Western societies, secrecy is considered to have sinister, negative and subversive connotations, whereas in Africa, secrecy is viewed as a necessary part of social reality and a coherent part of certain systems of knowledge. The

retrieving of this knowledge is often proverbial and enigmatic. The seeming contradiction between secrecy as the careful conservation of knowledge over time and, in contrast, secrecy's potential for innovation, adaptation, growth and change in belief and practice, conveys secrecy's paradoxically generative nature. Western methods of ethnographic research and museum exhibition, with their emphasis on scrutiny, analysis, meticulous observation, and the dissemination of information inherently runs counter to the indirect, allusive, metaphoric means by which knowledge is often both restricted and transmitted in Africa. This is contrary to the reserved and controlled ways in which African art is deployed and displayed from its original context. In many Nguni cultures the vocabulary of secrecy relates to the concept of obscurity, with connotations of introspection, insight and creative potential. Contrasting light and dark is used to convey the dialectic nature inherent in secrecy of knowledge. It is simultaneously concealed and revealed. Interestingly, the word 'secrecy' in six Nguni-speaking groups is derived from a root which means 'black'. The relevance of this will become clearer in chapter 5.

Probably the most widespread, institutionalised revelation of secrets in African societies involves the liminal states of initiation, for example during the ceremonies that mark the transition from boyhood into adulthood. Such secrets may be bought with sacrifices and fees, but also through bodily suffering: bodies are our primary property, so that in physical intimacies like cutting, scarification, and other ways of remodelling the body, the secret is inscribed onto the person and constitutes a sacrifice or pledge of dedication to the elders and to the dead and becomes a sign of transformation. Scarification marks are also common in African sculpture. In many African cultures, suffering illness and misfortune, and being treated and cured, have misfortune yield up its secrets to the sufferer.

In perceiving the sculptures as reminiscent of the body, their inherent secretiveness indirectly refers to the body's secrets. Firstly, skin is the necessary containment of the hidden or inside of the body, acting as a protective shield. This is not even looking at the clothed body, which perhaps denotes physical modesty and shame, body decoration and the orchestration

of both exposure and concealment of different bodily attributes. Skin reveals outward signs that disclose clues to the inside or interior of the body like discolorations, eruptions, malformations, wounds and scars. Rarely does one have access to the inside of the body. One trusts one's body, and it is only when something out of the ordinary happens (a cancerous growth, pain) does one question the inside. One may mark or record a change in the body (boyhood to manhood), with rituals: tattooing, painting and scarification. The only spaces where there is access to the body are those where inside and outside meet: the orifices. The Latin root of the word 'tears' is *secretus*: secretions, which contains the word: secret.