

De-scribing the *Timaeus*: A transgression of the (phal)logocentric convention that discourse has only one form, language

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This article focuses on a recently created artwork entitled “The Four Fields of X” - an attempt to frame an imagographic¹ form of philosophical discourse in the hope that it would provide a model of signification not constrained by the logic of (phal)logocentrism and, therefore, better suited to suggest the mutability and open-ended dynamism that marks our (signified) existence. Initially, the article involves a description of the artwork’s basis – Jacques Derrida’s notion of discourse and language. The constituent parts of the artwork and their allusions to the *Timaeus* and Derrida are then presented, followed by two passages of ‘exit lines’.

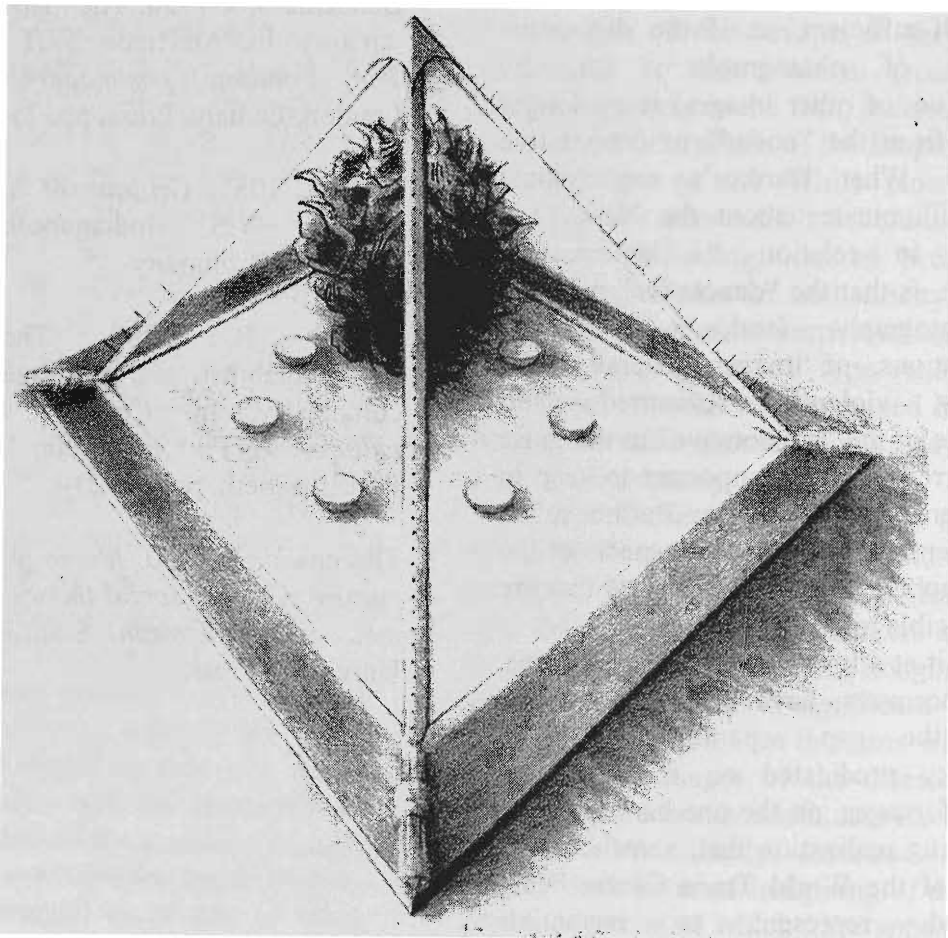


Figure 1
The artist’s original conceptual drawing for an installation entitled: *Four Fields of X*

The Artwork’s Genesis

The process of generation was initiated by a wish to articulate a form of discourse that would more aptly imply the apparent inter-subjectivity², un-certainty and

uncontrollable / uncontainable relativity of our world (Gleick, 1997:5). Instead of using the “language of reason” (the masculinized, authoritarian voice of “objectivity”), that has traditionally been used to identify and “absolutely

guarantee” a constant, meaning-giving (meta) presence – the true, transcendent reality, the essence or totality of everything (Appignanesi, 1999:78); my aim was to apply the open-ended dialectic of inter-subjectivity – that is a binary dialectic sans the final closure of synthesis in an absolute condition, a shared, non-authoritarian dialectic or form of exchange that continuously changes its place since it has no foundation (Gasché, 1995:33-34) – and this was in order to suggest that knowledge or cognitive meaning is relative, indeterminate and uncertain, thus supporting the view of the world referred to earlier.

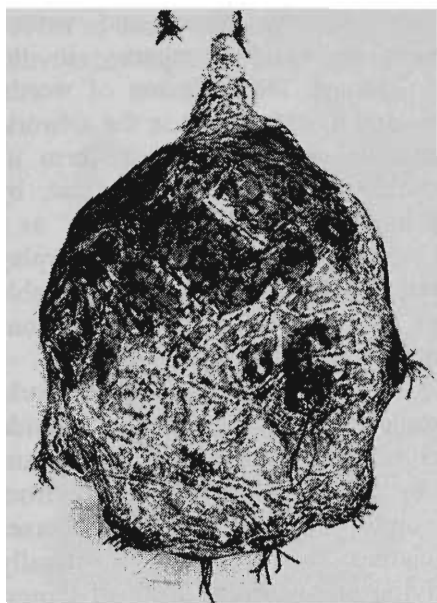


Figure 2
The Seed

To ‘supplement’ the lop-sided, one-legged tradition of a single ‘master’ code and all that that entails, I thought that the most appropriate vehicle would be a “visual model of textuality”, a “mistress” in the garb of an assemblage of non-representational, two- and three-dimensional objects, images and words, since as Mitchell suggested: an assemblage has the ability “to cover so many diverse things without revealing any image of totality”, i.e. an image of a consistent, centralized binding force (Mitchell, 1994:11,419). The assemblage, the heterogeneity of which would include imprints of its (traditional) other - language - would thus lie both inside and outside conventional logical systems of signification. It is this neither-either / or-but-both- (or more) disposition that was thought might

render the assemblage a site of multiple references and provisional meanings, a site that would, therefore, preclude closure in certainty and completeness, that would function as a Derridean pharmakon (a poison and remedy).

With this in mind, the artwork could not be self-reflexively or formalistically Greenbergian – the work obviously had to be philosophical yet without becoming overtly illustrational. So, looking at the ‘line of flight’ taken by Western philosophy, it was decided to appropriate the beginning point of the trajectory – Platonic metaphysics in the form of the *Timaeus*, given that, according to I. M. Crombie (1952:198), it is Plato’s “main cosmological essay”, one that Paul Shorey (1965:298) regards as “the earliest and grandest statement of the teleological view outside the Bible”. As such, it has been “utterly pervasive in Western culture”, and it was therefore decided to apply to it what I perceive as being at this trajectory’s other end, namely, Derrida’s radically relative (contextual) methods of reading texts i.e. his form of inquiry which has sought to overcome the dominance of among others, the reality-appearance distinction in Western thought. More specifically, then, the assemblage would “stand” as a Derridean response that refers to, differs from and defers validating Plato’s claims in the *Timaeus*:

- That there is an intelligible realm of eternal, unchanging, perfect forms; a set of abstract universals based on elementary, geometric form – the realm of “being”, which provides humans / mortals with a “divine paradigm”;
- That the sensible world is a dimension of primitive, chaotic, random events / phenomena – the realm of “becoming”;
- That there is an agent, a demiourgos, a “craftsman” who, through necessity and intellect, orders the sensible world according to the model of perfect forms.

Ironically, Plato also intimates that there is a space, a “receptacle” described as the “nurse of becoming” who / which can accommodate the process of ordering (Lee, 1965:9, 47 & 70; Ross, 1961:127; Crombie, 1952 – 63:199 – 236; Grube, 1995:1 – 50 and Cornford, 1937:21 – 239)

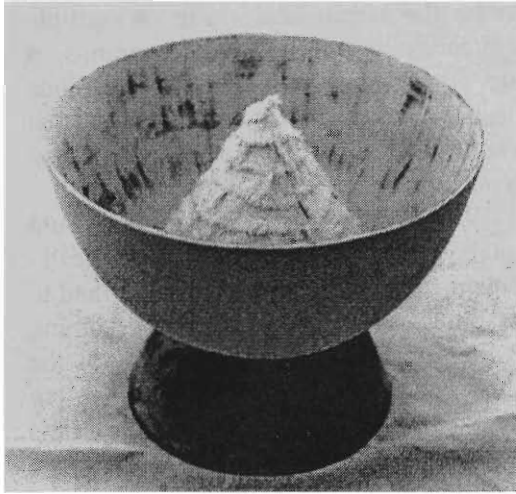


Figure 3
The Bowl

(This “receptacle’s” likeness to Derrida’s *différance*, a “quasi-transcendental”, will be dealt with later).

The donning of Derrida’s deconstructive spectacles (bi-focals?), seemed fitting in the light of an attempt to image philosophical discourse visually, that is to render and recognize Fine Art practice as a valid and apt means of or opportunity for the investigation and communication of a “view” not centristically bound to a secure and certain ground. While image definitions and configurations may not be synonymous with language in its abstractness, this does not mean that similar relationships of import and significance cannot be embodied in imagic form. The spatial composition of images in relation to one another, serve just as well as the linguistic form of discourse to indicate hierarchies, positions of power, dominance or subjugation. In conversation, Olivier cited the example of a family photograph where the father occupies a central position. In the case of non-representational images, they are not only able to manifest meaning through their disposition in artwork; but by their irregularity and abstractness, are also able to express an ambiguity and obliqueness that relates to Derrida’s notions of language as metaphor and discourse without closure (see pp 6-8). Moreover, it was thought that since the assemblage’s components would be non-representational, they would not point to the kind of presence suggested by mimetic imagery; in other words, a kind of presence that in the realm of the word, Plato ascribed to speech, thus privileging it over writing, its graphic, second-rate representation³. In this

way it was hoped that the assemblage would carry a re-markable re-semblance to what Derrida in *Dissemination* (1982:110) describes as the activity of writing, i.e. of writing as “grammatology”: a process of differing that defers closure in a “transcendental signified” – Plato’s indispensable, yet unrepresentable source of meaning. For, according to Derrida, it is in the absence of a “transcendental signified”, of an ultimate, the-buck-stops-here referent, that “the domain and play of signification” is infinitely extended (Wood and Bernasconi, 1988:280). It should be mentioned that the aim here was not to deny verbal and written discourse its valid occupancy in the world. Through the inclusion of words, phrases and blocks of text in the artwork, the intention was rather to re-form its relationship with visual art so that, by losing its “unequivocal domination” as a mode of signification, an interplay between two distinct yet equally valuable players in an extended field of relations would result (Mitchell, 1995:84).

So, fundamental to shaping the work, was some understanding of how Derrida “views” the traditional, dialectical means used by Western metaphysicians from Plato onwards, to articulate discourses that claimed to establish the usually underlying or overriding truth of things, that is the “immaterial true world of reality” as opposed to the relative, sensory “world of appearance” (Rorty, 1999:1). This involves...

The dethroning of logos

In *Dissemination* (1981: 166 – 68), Derrida puts forward the notion that philosophical discourse involves patricide; in other words, in the presence of the Father – logos, God, the Ideal, the Absolute, the Truth, the Original, the Universal – discourse cannot unfold because, in the unimaginable realm of “absolute being” (the locus of the Father, etc.), there is no room for difference, for the “other”, and, insists Derrida, “the very condition of discourse – true-or-false – is the diacritical principle of *sumploké*”, the incessant interweaving of differentiations and distinctions that can only take place in

the realm of writing, i.e. within a process of signification. Because signs are characterized by this diacritical / differential principle, they cannot point to an independent concept or idea that constitutes their immutable essence or origin – what is signified by a signifier is, in any case, in itself defined by its relative position within a differential organization of signs. An integral part of *sumploké*, of the warp and woof of Derridean discourse, is *space*, because it is where gaps occur that “alterity” (the web of differences and deferrals) is suggested. This is where discourse is at its most critical (in so far as it resists any attempt at “centering”), and not, as has occurred traditionally, where it strives to reach closure, finality, certainty in some extra-linguistic condition or referent.

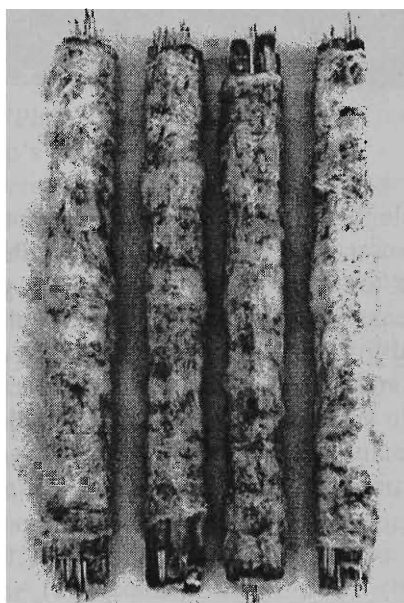


Figure 4
The Scrolls

Now the style of language or the kind of discourse traditionally used by metaphysicians to posit their claims about the truth residing beyond the world of apparent phenomena, is, according to Derrida (Dissemination, 1981:76), (phal) logocentric⁴ because implicit in it (explicit in Plato’s dialogues), is the assignation of “the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position” – the presence of a centristically placed, originary “überfather” (the masculine as the absolute qualifying condition of being), assures the authority of what is being communicated regarding truth, but in so doing, also limits the truth

(meaning) by enclosure. Contrary to this, Derrida suggests that for written discourse to be “proper”, it “ought to submit to the laws of life” (to time and space), “just as living discourse”, i.e. discourse without closure “does” (Dissemination, 1981:79). The writing that Derrida therefore proposes, is a kind that introduces a destabilizing moment into philosophical discourse because, according to him, its sequential “unfoldment” involves spacing and spacing implies timing – space “facilitates” differentiation, while time “allows” deferral, deferral of “the immediacy of presence” (Of Grammatology in Kamuf, 1991:47), of the Father, that non-spatial, atemporal principle which Plato used to preference speech over writing; or, metaphorically, the father over the son. The order that Derrida’s writing implies, then, is the continually differentiating and deferring play of same and other (Dissemination, 1981:62). As such, writing as well as speech is a process of inscription that harbours “the complicity of contrary values”; that has no “ideal, stable or fixed identity” and, consequently, produces multiple meanings through “an endless play of differences” (Dissemination, 1981:126, 129).

The thrust that differentiates, that fragments the solidity of any phenomenon or notion into innumerable shards of possibility is attributed to woman by Derrida. In “Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles” (in Kamuf, 1991:362), he suggests that philosophical discourse as a means of establishing stable meaning and identity is confounded, stopped short in its tracks by woman, not because she presents an alternative truth or untruth, but because she differentiates. Under the rubric of (phal) logocentricity, female sexuality is negatively represented; while male sexuality is given positive representation in the form of the symbolic father, the (omni) potent patriarch. As such, however, the male subject (as other than father) is alienated, i.e. restricted in his field of operation to an order that seeks “continuous meaning” and “stable identity” (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:81) in a centristically placed, omnipresent, paternal principle or essence. On the other hand, excluded

from this “arena”, the female subject is rendered unfathomably “other”. From a patriarchal perspective, she thus becomes a dark force that threatens to disrupt or destabilize (phal) logocentric order. Her expulsion from the patriarch’s palace or the father’s fort (fortress?), means that she escapes the strictures of his structure, and as an escapee not subject to his laws, is free “to engulf and enveil any vestige of essentiality, of identity, of properness” (Spurs in Kamuf, 1991:359). This is reflected in the third of three positions that Derrida claims (Nietzsche’s) woman occupies in relation to truth, and that is the one in which she eludes the truth-non-truth dichotomy inherent in Western metaphysics: “beyond the double negation” – that is of her identification with either truth (the idealized female), or untruth (the debased figure of falsehood) – she is recognized “as an affirmative power, a dissimulatrix, an artist, a dionysiac” (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:81). In this position, where the “transcendental signified” that gives the Western symbolic order its coherence (Silverman, 1983:131) is absent, woman is the indecisive and indeterminable process of inscription that for Derrida is writing. (Spurs in Kamuf, 1999:354). Here woman functions as a metaphor for “playfulness and artistry, for an artist’s philosophy” (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:82), a philosophy that shakes loose the elements of a (signifying) structure from the constraining corset of (phal) logocentricity.

Woman as a metaphor for inscription / writing points to Derrida’s notion of language as fissured, loxic, complex, figurative, indirect, aphoristic, metaphoric, which, in my attempt to transgress⁵ the (phal) logocentric convention that discourse has only one form, the language of reason, I have identified with Fine Art practice. Consequently, what follows is a dip into Derrida’s world of language-as-metaphor (a pharmacopoeia?).

Pharmakon: Derrida’s writing

In “Of Grammatology” (Kamuf, 1991:38), Derrida proposes that language, the word, is a metaphor in as much as it ambivalently stands in for something that is not present and does not share the same form. For

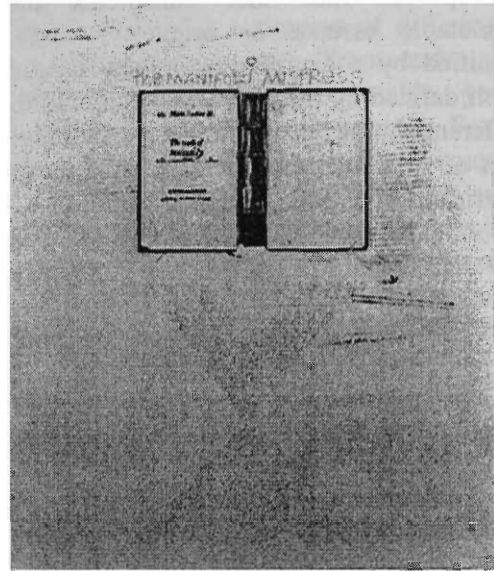


Figure 5
The Script

example, logocentric discourse implies the omnipresence of an inaudible, wordless voice, “the voice of being”, of God, yet the means of implication (paradoxically, ironically) is language, which in both its aural and written forms, is distinctly sensible and temporal, phenomenal rather than noumenal. This paradox indicates an interaction between the sensible word (the distorting, derived form, according to Plato) and its incorporeal referent (“the originary” from Plato’s perspective) – or between a phenomenal signifier and the noumenal signified – that is not direct, not straight forward, not exact. Although Derrida maintains that “the difference between the sign and the signified is nothing” (Of Grammatology in Kamuf, 1991:36); the distinction between the sign and its referent suggests a relation based on deferral because the sign is displaced by what comes after it in a temporal chain of signification; and based on difference, a difference that while it gives shape to, articulates meaning, also precludes exactitude, certainty and singularity of meaning because “embedded” in the sign, is the “silent *trace*” of that from which it differs (Of Grammatology in Kamuf, 1991:42-7). It is this movement of deferring in time and differing across

space, this *différance*, as Derrida coined the configuration that is writing, that displaces the centrality of *logos*, that places the “centralized presence” relative to its opposite, that in fact “hinges” all oppositions, leaving signs to swing both ways. (*Différance* in Kamuf, 1991:61-66). So in this sense, language is metaphorical rather than literal; or as Derrida would have it: “the literal meaning of writing (language) is metaphoricity itself” and “metaphoricity itself cannot have an ultimate referent in some eternal, immaterial present” (Of Grammatology in Kamuf, 1991:15), in an irreducible, “transcendental signified” or referent that is distinctly other, that is outside time-space. In other words, language cannot be totalized because it has no absolute or ideal identity and because the signified / signifier is endlessly commutable (*Dissemination*, 1981:126).

By oblique reversal and displacement in “Plato’s Pharmacy”, Derrida de-centres Plato’s inflexible, hierarchical relation between the originary (best represented by speech, claims Plato), and the derived (writing, according to Plato); and he does so with an ambivalent term to which Plato through Socrates likened writing, namely, *pharmakon* (in Greek it means both remedy and poison). While Plato presents writing as a “remedial poison” for a deficient memory, a “harmful substance” because it distances us from the presence of the ideal, the real, the proper etc; Derrida uses the term to describe the “neither / nor that is simultaneously either / or”, non-binary logic that for him characterizes writing as metaphoric, as the play of *différance*:

If the *pharmakon* is ‘ambivalent’, it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that link them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul / body, good / evil, inside / outside, memory / forgetfulness, speech / writing, etc.) (*Dissemination*, 1981:127).

In its ambivalence, the *pharmakon* does not unify opposites, distinctions, differences, but with its dual personality (multiple, if you take into account that in Greek, *pharmakon* also means paint, “an artificial tint” (*Dissemination*, 1981:128), it mediates them, it is the site of their exchange, the means, the form of their interrelation not their synthesis in an “ideal identity”

(*Dissemination*, 1981:126). Without this “ideal identity” – the Platonic, ever-present centre, the “transcendental signified”, the restrictive, stentorian father – the “freeze” on time-space is lifted and marked by a ceaseless play of difference, a “dialectic of weaving between same and other” (Haar in Wood, 1992:61), that is Derrida’s *pharmakon* (*Dissemination*, 1981: 127 – 28). As such, writing (including, ironically, Plato’s texts), signification, is the dissemination, the “seminal scattering” in time and through space of multiple truths / readings / interpretations.

What language-as-metaphor implies, then, is “incomplete signification” that, like Derrida’s neologism *différance*, has “double, contradictory, undecidable value” in that it defers the determinability of meaning (*Double Session* in Kamuf, 1991: 190).

It is this “vision” of language as metaphoric, enigmatic, that led to my appropriation and application of it to Fine Art practice in order to transgress the limit imposed on discourse by (phal) logocentricity.

The result is an assemblage of objects and words as multivocal signifiers that leave clues but offer no solution, no resolution because the directions in which these signifiers move have no final resting place. Unlike (phal) logocentric discourse, which appears to run along a narrow-gauge track from an unreal, false, ephemeral departure point, to a real, eternal, paternal and true destination; the signifiers in this artwork just refer to more signifiers that refer to more signifiers, ever postponing the arrival at a point of certainty and absolute meaning. Thus it was hoped that an imagographic form of philosophical discourse, that like Derrida’s “poetic performance” (Kamuf, 1999:144), no longer uses rationalism to posit closure in some transcendent, and, therefore beyond-our-frame-of-reference condition, would offer a means of critical inquiry; one which by throwing the viewer / reader “into the realm of complex, contested, symbolized, intertextual, interactive, mediated experience” (Lye, 1996:5), might result in the realization of our signified world’s mutability, multiplicity and relativity.

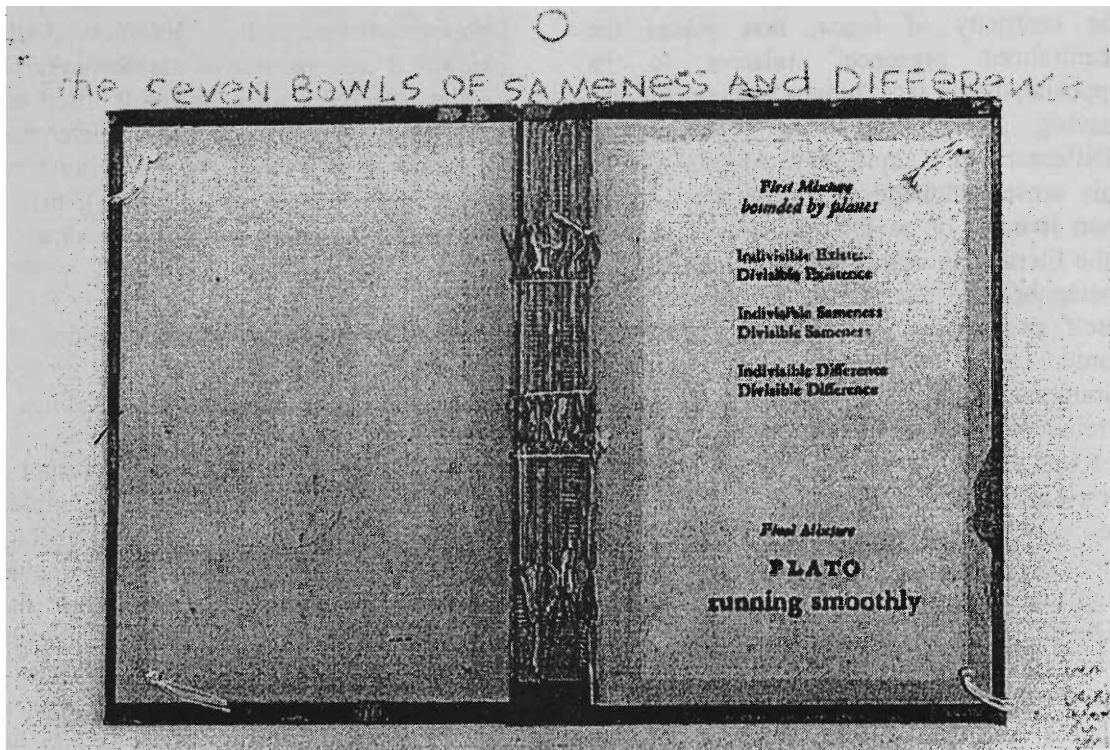


Figure 8
Plato's stuff

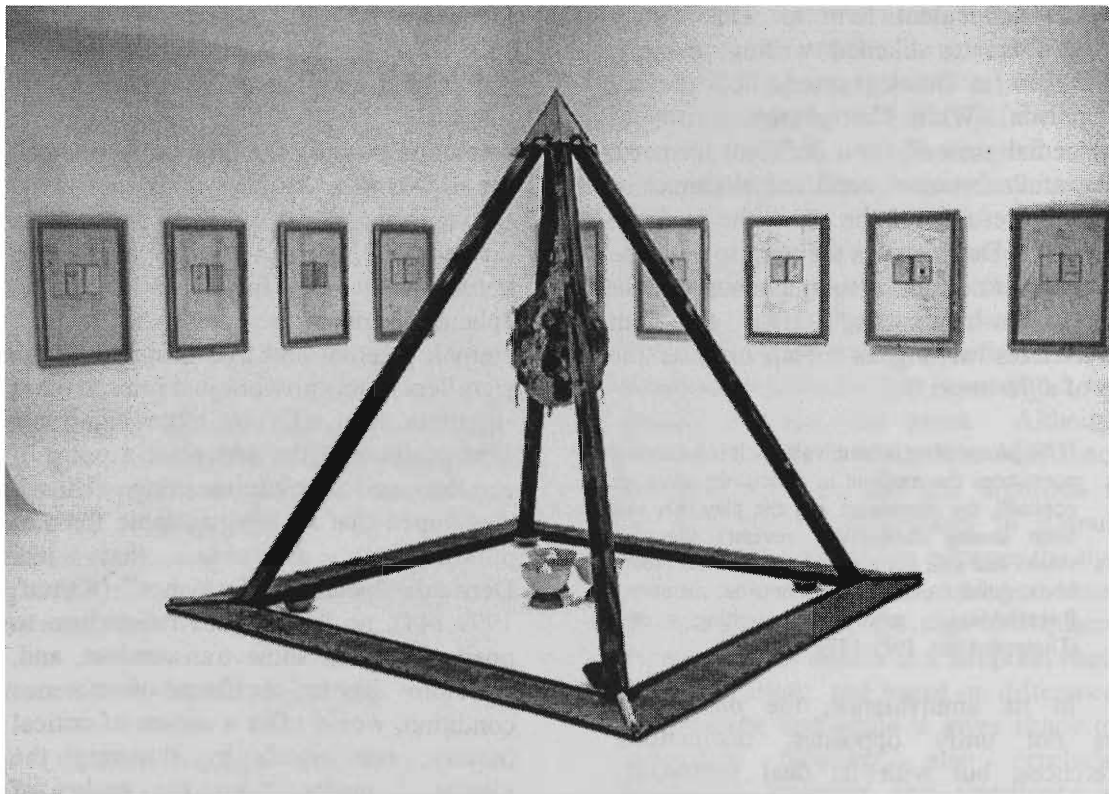


Figure 9
General view of final installation for 'Four Fields of X' December 2002

The (De?) Coding of Philosophical Content in “The Four Fields Of X”

What follows should not be read / viewed as the key to de-ciphering the artwork – that would be to clap hands in unison with the one-truth, one-meaning brigade. Instead, in the wake of Derrida and the making of the assemblage, comes a written reco(r)ding that provisionally traces possibilities of meaning – through “figures of speech?”

Plato’s cave / Derrida’s umbrella: the pyramid

(cf. fig. 1)

Like all the other images that constitute this work, the open, four-sided pyramid is a manifold signifier, one that spins a web of significances.

As a reductive, abstract, geometric form, it may be taken as a reference to Plato’s uncreated, ideal, intelligible realm of eternal, unchanging, perfect, non-composite forms that are imperceptible to the senses, that provide the *demiourgos* (the “divine craftsman”, the “nurse of becoming”), with a model for ordering the fluctuating, sensible world. It also points to the fact that Plato’s ideal, incorporeal model, paradoxically, can only be expressed, be known through its articulation as a sensible sign of indeterminate meaning and, therefore, open to interpretation.

Ruffling the “clean” line of the pyramid’s geometric form, are series of toothpicks protruding from the outer edges of the four posts. These “spines” imprint upon the pyramid a mark of its non-mathematical other - organic life, nature, the imperfect, chaotic alternate to Plato’s transcendental, intelligible realm.

As an open frame rather than a solid form, the pyramid does not so much displace lived space to speak exclusively of perfect triangularity, but becomes a container, a receptacle of what is contrary to it. Introduced into the “belly” of father logos (the pyramid as ideal form), is the spacious mother, the *Timaeus*’s “nurse of becoming” and her progeny, sensible phenomena. Thus the three aspects of Plato’s cosmology described in the *Timaeus* – the two worlds of “being” and

“becoming” and *khora* as space – intermingle in a manner that suggests the “paradox and contradiction in which univocality gives way to equivocality” (Taylor, 1992:193).

Also, as an open frame, the pyramid alludes to Derrida’s umbrella, i.e. his “spurring style”, an “undecidable process of signification, a type of critique that wards off determinable meaning” (Spurs in Kamuf, 1999:356). Unfolded (as the pyramid suggests) the umbrella is a metaphor for the “affirmative writing of the feminine” (Kamuf, 1991:354), that “dissimulatress” that is Derrida’s *pharmakon*.

The view of the pyramid’s four posts as an X, might be assumed a reference to the description of the soul in the *Timaeus*, i.e. to the crossing of the two rings into which the strip of ingredients constituting “the soul of the universe” and the “souls of the living creatures within it” was compounded and divided by the *demiourgos*, the Divine Craftsman (more about this later), in order “to set the world upon its unceasing course of intelligent life” (Cornford, 1937:58). At the same time, the ‘X’ as an intersection, a crossroad, alludes to Derrida’s description of the *Timaeus*’s *demiourgic* operation: it figures “the double gesture” which “leads nowhere in particular and particularly not to a point of mathematically determined harmony” (order) (Truth in Painting, 1987:166).

Textus: The Hanging Seed

(cf. Fig. 2)

From the pyramid’s apex, hanging like a pendulum – “emblem of classical mechanics, exemplar of constrained action, epitome of clockwork regularity” (Gleick, 1997:39) – is an irregular form with a scabrous surface that given its non-Euclidean irregularity, might be taken to represent what Plato perceived as the imperfect, changing, disordered dimension of primitive chaos (Lee, 1965:71 – 72); the sensible and phenomenal appearance as opposed to the intelligible and noumenal thought object.

Because of its placement, it might also be “read” as a signifier of essence, of a metaphysical, ever-present core, which gives meaning and certainty to everything around it. However, because the seed’s

centrality is relative to the pyramid that enframes it, it “cedes” its apparent essentiality to what surrounds it. Defined by contrast, by difference within itself and outside of it, the seed suggests that the core of our existence, our universe (multiverse?) is not essence but as Derrida suggests, *différance*. In this way the seed could be seen as a reference to Derrida’s denial of the possibility of an abiding, atemporal, privileged condition of being (Sim, 1992:24); in other words, an irreplaceable centre that is the origin, the foundation of all things, or that in semiotics is the “transcendental signified”, the unrepresentable, ultimate source of meaning, the absolute referent.

The woven cloth and layers of hidden criss-crossed strips of text on paper that constitute the bulk of this image’s form, may be said to relate to the idea that “texts are created by weaving together” words and concepts which “can be read in many ways” (Taylor, 1999:32). So, in this sense, the seed points to Derrida’s notion of textuality as a point of intersecting, interrelating oppositions; a point, moreover, that shifts, that is extended into a web as each reader engages with it. As such, the seed may be described as a cipher of *sumploké*.

Quadrature: The Square Base

Surrounding the pyramid on its outside, is a twenty-five centimeter wide, double-layered border that frames the space that is the pyramid’s base, its “square mouth”. This “square mouth” is the opening through which certainty escapes the “decoder of meaning”, the “purveyor of truth” (Dissemination, 1981:297). It is the gap or space that is neither one thing nor its opposite, neither a mixture nor a synthesis, because (metaphorically) it opens out into infinity – a suggestion made by the fact that as a base it is not solid, stable as a foundation should be; rather it is a frame, an “outline”. In other words, the “base” is an oblique reference to Derrida’s insistence that by means of “squares, crossroads and other four-sided figures... a violent but imperceptible displacement of the triangular – Dialectical, Trinitarian, Oedipal – foundations of Western thought” (Dissemination, 1981:xxxii), can be worked

to dismantle “the Platonic order of presence (Megill, 1987:247).

The four scrolls

(*cf.* Fig. 3)

Marking the four points of the “square mouth”, are missives, dispatches, textual passages, coded bytes of knowledge, scrolled and enfolded to appear as simulacra of viscera, viscera that infer embodiment. These objects may be interpreted as two-way allusions: on the one hand, to the ‘belief’ expressed in the *Timaeus* that the visible world of sensory experience (the lower order of “becoming”), is separate to and distinct from an invisible higher realm of “eternal and unchanging being”, one possessed by five perfect, geometric forms and “dialectic which yield a severely grounded apprehension of truth and reality” (Cornford, 1937:24); and, on the other hand, to the notion that intelligibility (making sense of the world through systems of signification), lies in sensibility. In contrast to Plato, Derrida sites Edmund Husserl’s recognition “that ideas are not eternal or simply there”, but “are constructed or produced out of the experience of living beings”. Ideas, claims Derrida, are inextricably bound to embodiment and vice versa, as ‘traces’ of the other (Zuckert, 1996:203).

So, the (phal)logocentric distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, between materiality and ideality is untenable, as Derrida would have it, because it presupposes the singularity, if not absoluteness, of truth and meaning (Dissemination, 1981: xxxix)

The seven bowls of sameness and difference

(*cf.* Fig. 4)

The seven bowls, three containing cones of stitched, spiraling strips of cloth and four empty, form a circle within the space that is the pyramid’s base. With regard to the *Timaeus*, they indirectly refer to the composition of soul as a long, proportionately divided strip of indivisible and divisible existence, indivisible and divisible sameness and indivisible and

divisible difference, which has been cut lengthwise into two, placed crosswise and then bent round to form two rings (Lee, 1965:46). The *demiourgos* endowed one with “the motion of sameness and similarity”, and the other, further subdivided and split into seven orbits, with the “motion of difference”. As two rotating circles, the outer orbit of sameness has “charge over the relations between universals while the inner orbit of difference has “charge over the relations between particulars” (Crombie, 1952-63: 212-14) – the play of *différance*?

From a Derridean perspective, the circularity of the bowls and their placement, and the partially revealed / concealed portions of text and alphabetic letters (signifiers of the preferred medium of discourse), suggest the circulation of ideas or theories, within a prescribed boundary – in other words, “traces” of discourse encircled, circumscribed by the (phal) logocentric metaphysics of presence (Kamuf, 1991:464). Furthermore, the bowls’ composition out of strips of text, poetically “figure” Derrida’s claim that the soul, like the *eidōs*, is a concept, and like all concepts cannot be without signification, without definition by the “graphic” of difference, the ambivalent *pharmakon* (Dissemination, 1981:127).

Scribbles: twelve pictures of text / ure
(*cf.* Fig. 5)

Twelve box-framed paper sheets with displaced fragments of the *Timaeus* in a number of typefaces, sizes and mediums, and unevenly printed in reverse on their surfaces, suggest the loss of the voice of reason, its distortion by disjointed, mirrored representations. Also, because of the way in which they have been applied, they may be read / viewed as both text and texture. In each of the panels these disparate reproductions of Plato’s dialogue, surround an open, hardcover book that is sans leaves of text, a book thus de-scribed, freed of its singular scribe, its author, its “authoritative” source of meaning. Substituting what normally constitutes a book, are montages, re-worked phrases and geometric figures from the *Timaeus*. As a result there is no dialogue, no *maieusis*, just a number of elusive, metaphoric, sometimes

parodic references to Plato’s (phal) logocentric notions.

The placement of the panels is also significant: In as much as these panels of text form a border around the pyramid and its contents, they may be seen as referents to the traditional philosophical attempts at giving art a frame(work) of understanding, that is to the classical determination of art by philosophy / art theory (Carroll, 1987:132). However, what the placement of the unreadable (the pyramid) and the readable (the panels of text) under one umbrella (Derrida’s) does, is to re-inscribe the boundaries between the two disciplines albeit with a difference. In this sense, the border is more of a passage that, because it lies within the artwork, ruptures the traditional distinction between Fine Art practice and philosophy / art theory – they are no longer definitively exterior to each other. The passage thus presents the viewer / reader with a “double session” that is not a repeat performance. In this way, the viewer / reader is folded into the fabric of an artwork, one that bears “traces” of its maker interpreting Derrida, interpreting Plato in the guise of the *Timaeus*.

The composition: a con-centric con-figuring
(*cf.* Fig. 1)

Considering the intent to transgress (phal) logocentricity, some explanation seems necessary to justify the assemblage’s symmetry:

To have taken the planes of the pyramid and placed them at odd angles to each other, and then to have randomly scattered the other elements constituting the artwork, would have been to literally apply and, therefore, to contradict Derrida’s notion of language-as-metaphor. Furthermore, a composition of the kind just described, would have indicated the collapse of order altogether, when the point was not to establish its opposite, chaos, but rather to prevent the imposition of any form of total(itarian) order, an inflexible, inhibiting, prescriptive order not open to interpretation because of totalization by an omniscient omnipresent. The symmetrical arrangement of components that are irregular to varying degrees, defines an identity that is as ambivalent as Derrida’s

pharmakon. As such, the presence of symmetry and irregularity suggests the *play* of order in *poiesis*.

The placement of objects in “The Four Fields of X” may also be described as con-centric, con(tra)-centric – the common centre that the assemblage’s parts share, the “seed”, is *relative* to what is not centrally situated. Following Derrida, the composition (like any system), is not denied a centre (order), but given one without the privilege of occupying an irreplaceable, absolute position. Metaphorically decentred, the configuration is able to function as a “pharmacy whose signifiers are freed from logos” (Dissemination, 1981:144).

Lastly, although the symmetrical, cluster-like arrangement of pieces that form the assemblage may seem to negate the basis on which Derrida posited deferral – the sequential unfolding of signifiers in space; it does not do so in the instance of the panels of text surrounding the pyramid because they require viewing / reading one at a time, one after the other. As far as the composition as a whole is concerned, the chain of signification that is written, spoken and filmic language, has been “curved” by con-(tra)centricity to suggest the nonlinearity⁶ of Derridean language. However, of more significance here, is the fact that the work is both sequential (i.e. its detail arranged systematically), and non-sequential (the work can be viewed as a whole).

Exit Lines

“The Four Fields of X” is a tract of inter-subjectivity, it is not a self-sufficient, specific something yielding a one-off, fixed message; but is rather a complex intersection of envisioned and textualized interpretations that the viewer physically moves into and, in turn, interprets *in relation* to his / her world – yet another “web of non-binding relations” (Zuckert, 1996:201). As such, “The Four Fields of X” is not an excavation site where, by peeling away and discarding encrusted, obscuring layers of irrelevant material, the artwork’s quintessential meaning may be extracted. It is rather a matter of “folding” into the world of metaphor, or, more specifically, Derrida’s world of “radical

metaphoricity”, which is, according to him, the realm of language.

As a “playful” and “artistic” response to philosophical texts, that is as a system of multivalent referral rather than a problem solving, truth seeking discourse, the multi-dimensional, mixed -media “artist’s philosophy” that is “The Four Fields of X”, also refers to what Derrida finds in the differentiating woman from Spurs – “an antidote to” rather than the doting aunty of “univocal meaning and intelligible continuity” (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989:82). The diverse and heterogeneous objects forming the assemblage – objects differing in medium, shape and texture – “de-scribe” the pluralistic nature or character of the “spurring dissimulatrix”, that “undecidable process of inscription” that is Derrida’s *pharmakon* (Spurs in Kamuf, 1991:372-35).

Notes

1 A term used to denote a combination of image and word.

2 By “inter-subjectivity” I mean an outlook or view that, because it arises from a subject that is a matrix of shifting relations and signification, is interdependent, mutable, unstable, impermanent.

3 This applies to philosophical discourse that relates to a use of language where a specific conception of reason is inscribed in the value relationships by which it is structured – for example, where the male pronoun is privileged, where sensibility is subordinated to intelligibility, etc. (Olivier, 2002).

4 For Plato, the speaking subject implies a self-presence, an immediacy of being that escapes the limits of time-space (Dissemination, 1981:127).

5 Alice Jardine pointed out that since logocentric logic has been coded “male”, the other “logic of spacing, ambiguity, figuration and indirection are often coded as “female”; therefore, “a critique of logocentrism can enable a critique of phallogocentrism as well” (Lye, 1996:6) – hence my use of the term (phal) logocentrism to imply the masculine character of an abiding, authority-giving presence that inhabits traditional philosophical discourse.

6 In this instance, transgression does not imply a process of replacing one system of

signification with another; but rather the lifting of the limit imposed on discourse by the privileged, masculinized voice of reason so that a play of “languages”, of texts may occur.

7 According to Gleick (1997:250-51) non-linearity introduced the unpredictable, the apparently random into “classical deterministic systems”. Non-linear systems generally, he claims, cannot be taken apart and put together again – the pieces just do not add up, cannot be calculated, pinned down (23-24).

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