

The worldcentric art of Willem Boshoff: an analysis of artefact and discipline in *Children of the Stars*

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Willem Boshoff is a practicing conceptual artist. Readings typically emphasise his use of language, socio-political consciousness and critique of authority within the South African context of colonialism and apartheid. In this article I posit Willem Boshoff's art practice and production (discipline and artefact) within a broader framework, as an expression of a worldcentric consciousness. I will justify my endorsement of worldcentricism as a viable 'mode of consciousness' for our times and argue for the artist's vital role in the transition from one stage to another. My use of the term 'worldcentric' adheres to Ken Wilber's definition of an identity that transcends ethnocentric boundaries and has expanded to include all human beings. My analysis is based on the integral framework formulated by Ken Wilber. Integral Theory is cross disciplinary and aligns evidence from diverse fields of study: including psychology, ecology and spirituality. The stages of consciousness identified by Wilbur will be outlined in order to contextualize and unpack the concept of a worldcentric paradigm. I will be examining Boshoff's ideas, artifacts and discipline with reference to their ecological, scientific and symbolic significance, and arguing that they adhere to the worldcentric criteria set out and can be evidenced in his art and commentary.

Keywords: conceptual art, integral theory, evolution of consciousness, worldcentric, ecology, Cradle of Humankind, sacred place, genius loci, druid, dada

Willem Boshoff is 'n praktiserende konseptuele kunstenaar. Interpretasies van sy werk beklemtoon sy gebruik van taal, sosio-politiese bewustheid en kritiek op outoriteit binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks van kolonialisme en apartheid. In hierdie artikel plaas ek Willem Boshoff se kunspraktiek en produksie (disipline en artefact) binne die breër raamwerk van 'n wereldsentriese bewustheid. Ek sal my ondersteuning van wereldsentrisisme as 'n waardige eksistensiële bewustheid verdedig en redes aanvoer vir die kunstenaar se rol in hierdie bewusmaking. My gebruik van die term 'wereldsentrisisme' stem ooreen met Ken Wilber se definisie van 'n identiteit wat etnosentriese grense oorskry en die hele mensdom insluit. My analise is gebaseer op die Integrale verwysingsraamwerk wat deur Wilber uiteengesit is. Sy integrale teorie is multi-disiplinêr en hy beywer hom om harmonie te bewerkstellig tussen uiteenlopende studierigtings soos die sielkunde, ekologie en teologie. Die stadiums van bewussyn wat deur Wilber geïdentifiseer is sal bespreek word om die konsep van 'n wereldsentriese paradigma te belig en kontekstualiseer. Ek sal Boshoff se idees, kunswerke en disipline bestudeer met verwysing na die ekologiese, wetenskaplike en simboliese betekenisse, en argumenteer dat sy werk ooreenstem met wereldsentriese kriteria, en waargeneem kan word in sy kuns en kommentaar.

Stelwoorde: konseptuele kuns, integrale teorie, evolusie van bewussyn, wereldsentrisisme, ekologie, Wieg van die Mensdom, beskermgees, druïde, dada

The artefacts of Willem Boshoff's discipline have always reflected a determined inclusivity. This is the first indication that his is a worldcentric art, one that resists homogenizing meta-narratives through an accumulation of multiple perspectives, languages, histories, processes and media. While this inclusivity is often labelled postmodernist, Boshoff's art possesses none of the apathy, amorality or irresponsibility typically associated with postmodernism. His work is not a celebration of chaos, surface, nihilism or meaninglessness, but a masterful integration of modernist idealism and rationalism, and postmodernist pluralism and doubt. Here, it should be noted that the shift from modernism to postmodernism corresponds in part to the shift from ethnocentric to worldcentric consciousness. Interestingly, Integral Theory situates postmodernism not as an end, but a beginning, a catalyst for more idealistic and pragmatic cultural trends and ideas such as universal care and welfare, environmentalism and cultural and religious pluralism (Fernández-Armesto 2003) all of which point to an emerging worldcentric paradigm. This article examines Boshoff's work as a harbinger of this emerging consciousness.

Predominantly a conceptual artist, Willem Boshoff's art is about communicating ideas. In addition to having a philosophy, being a worldcentric artist also requires a course of action, a practice or discipline. For Boshoff, who follows in the tradition of Joseph Beuys and Hans Haacke, the artist has a social responsibility that incorporates pedagogical, ecological, socio-

political and spiritual agendas. His practice as an artist incorporates his capacities as activist, anarchist, druid and encyclopaedist. Thus Boshoff's work could be said to be integrally informed by moral, artistic and scientific intent.

In the politicised atmosphere of post-apartheid South Africa, artworks such as *Psephos* (1994/5), *The Purple Shall Govern* (1997) and *Prison Hacks* (2003) were seen as benchmarks in the history of Resistance Art. They have been acclaimed as critiques of the ethnocentric legacies of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism alike, and seen as celebrations of diversity and multiculturalism within a South African context. Challenging the pathologies of ethnocentrism is another sign of a shift in consciousness from ethnocentric to worldcentric. In this regard, Boshoff displays the postmodernist 'incredulity to meta-narratives'. Notwithstanding his employment of scientific and rational methods to collect, study and document words and things, Boshoff has recognized how scientific thinking might become pathological through its universalising dogma. He explains how the age of enlightenment, and later a modernist vocabulary "provided the world with a rhetoric based on so called universal values" and as such "this self-assured discourse was used by the colonial powers to subject and order the peoples of Africa and of much of the rest of the world" (Boshoff 2007:80). It has not escaped his attention that the 'uniform certainty' of nationalism, imperialism and fundamentalism are all rooted in an ethnocentric consciousness and have justified slavery, wars, colonial domination and crimes against humanity. Thus, the patriotic view of a nation is replaced by one that sees a nation as "a society united by delusions about its ancestry and by common hatred of its neighbours" (Inge in Fernández-Armesto 2003: 260).

As such, Boshoff's rejection of divisive ethnocentric values, along with the meta-narratives and absolutist tendencies that privilege often violently one group over another, is not limited to a South African context and has expanded to include religious fundamentalism and dogma, capitalist globalisation, American imperialism and nuclear warfare. These issues are raised in works such as *What is our oil doing under their sand?* (2004), *JerUSAlem* (2004), *Flag I and II* (2003) and *Hiroshima Shadows* (2007). The atom bomb is of course the ultimate symbol of pathological ethnocentrism, and while most artists skirt around this critical issue, Boshoff unequivocally takes an anti-nuclear stance, espousing the worldcentric view that "you wouldn't even be human beings if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelings about nuclear combat" (Kubrick in Fernandez Armesto 2003: 341). Boshoff's critique of the delusions and hatred embedded in ethnocentric discourse paves the way for this worldcentric view.

To avoid the temptation of biased certainties, Boshoff has nurtured a dada-like attitude, saying offbeat things like, "I have a head full of uncertainty. I don't know where I am with anything...but that is a kind of certainty in itself" (Sasol New Signatures 2009: 1). This is best seen in works such as *Nothing is Obvious* (2004) and *Cacoethes Scribendi* (2004). The latter, a post-dada manifesto, throws everything and everyone into question including Allah, God, the promised land and chosen people, Americans, Jews, Arabs, Blacks, Whites, morality, universal standards and world peace (Boshoff 2007: 110). His problem is essentially with "the subtle machinations of ideological control which exert a stranglehold on what we regard as natural, obvious or facts that speak for themselves" (Boshoff 2004: 106). Not one group is exempt or beyond reproach. By undermining assumptions and stereotypes, he seeks to free us from "discursive hegemony to think that which is not obvious ... to think for ourselves" (Boshoff 2004: 106). As such, Boshoff's recourse to knowledge is equalled only by his insistence on doubt. Humility, uncertainty and submission to chance, even fate, are an equal part of Boshoff's discipline, which is why he might if cornered describe his practice as dada, and why the theme of uncertainty also lurks slyly in the otherwise monolithic *Children of the Stars*.



Figure 1

Willem Boshoff, *Big B and Little B*

Big B Dimensions: 3300mm (length) X 850mm (width) X 1680mm (height); approximate weight: 8 ton; languages (as read from top to bottom): 1. Maori, 2. Thai, 3. English, 4. Luchazi, 5. Finnish, 6. Bulgarian, 7. Sundanese; collection: Benji Liebman and Little B Dimensions: 2620mm (length) x 665mm (width) x 620mm (height); Approximate weight: 2.5 ton; Languages: as for 'Big B'; Collection: Benji Liebman (courtesy of Willem Boshoff).

One of his most recent works, *Children of the Stars* (2009) draws together two favourite themes: science and religion. This site-specific installation, or monument, is situated on a UNESCO World Heritage Site identified by scientists and ecologists as the “Cradle of Humankind”. This site could be called worldcentric in that it is a place that belongs to all of us, and is a symbol of our shared responsibility to the planet (Read in Hilton- Barber and Berger 2004: 6). While the granite rocks allude to recent ‘asteroid theories’ on the origins of life, the science of the site as well as the biblical texts inscribed on them introduce a spiritual component that alludes to Genesis, the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel. The chosen verses, inscribed in numerous languages, relates the mythic origins of language and diversity, and explains the widening gulf between human beings. Boshoff has collected over one hundred versions of this text for the purposes of referring to “common humanity, to all peoples of all languages” (Boshoff 2009: 4). Neither the scientific nor the religious worldview is promoted over the other. They are presented as two stories speaking in different ways about the same core themes: human origins, evolution and destiny. Boshoff leads us down the garden path, as it were, back to the beginning of life, of humanity and language, so that we might ponder our shared past and shared future. In this way Boshoff brings together mythical, rational, ecological and spiritual perspectives in service to the greater whole.

By attempting to integrate two of the most antagonistic worldviews namely, the mythic and the rational, or creationism (religion) and evolution (science), this artwork has been conceived in line with a perspectival integralism. This term describes the accumulation, investigation and validation of multiple perspectives and is characterised by the refusal to settle on or advance one perspective or “value sphere” (Graves in Wilber 2000: 40; Wilber 2000: 163). It is also the modus operandi of Integral Theory and a key trait of a worldcentric consciousness, in that consciousness has expanded to honour, include and integrate multiple perspectives. The ability to take on other perspectives also results in the capacity for expanded empathy and compassion lacking in ethnocentrism. This view sees not only multiple perspectives but also moves towards drawing parallels across disciplines, identifying similarities and shared commonalities in order to access the commonwealth of all humanity (Wilber 2006: 12).

The late authority on world myth, Joseph Campbell, stated unequivocally that “we need new myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet” (1988: 30). This call for a paradigm shift has been echoed by contemporary artists, scientists, psychologists, ecologists, feminists and theologians alike. Integral Consciousness Studies correlate and synthesise cross-disciplinary developmental theories. Modern pioneers include developmental

psychologists James Baldwin, Abraham Maslow, Clare Graves, theologian William James, philosophers Sri Aurobindo and Jurgen Habermas (Wilber 2000). A remarkably consistent story of the evolution of human consciousness emerges. Based on findings and correlations, this paradigm shift is not only a possibility, but a viable theory. From an integral perspective, which embraces scientific evidence as well as other modes of knowledge, consciousness is seen to evolve according to a hierarchy of stages. Stages often go by different names, and between three and ten developmental stages have been identified. The following integral chart (figure 2) serves to show cross-disciplinary correlations. A consensus has emerged on the general developmental paths and traits of consciousness from archaic to magic to mythic to rational to integral, or put more generally, from traditional to modern to postmodern.

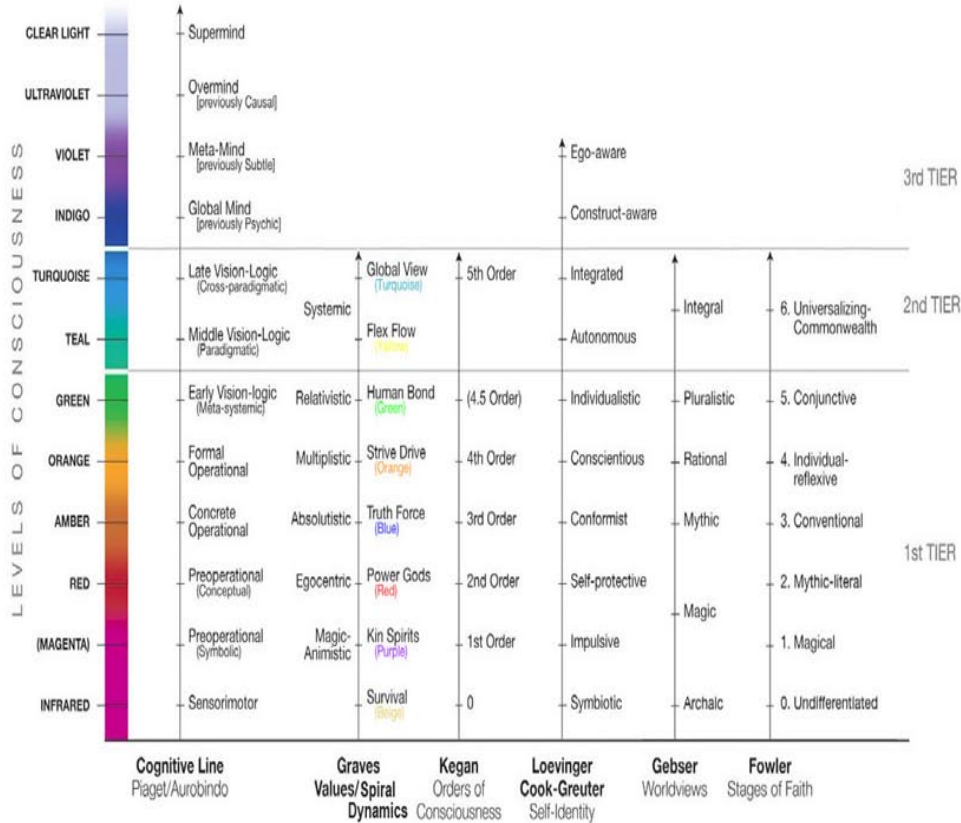


Figure 2
Integral chart
(Wilbur 2006).

In order to elaborate and ground more specifically in theory, I refer to Wilber’s reading of Carol Gilligan. Wilber (2006: 21) asserts that the evolution of collective consciousness can be described in similar terms to the evolution of individual consciousness. A simplified overview that identifies three major levels or stages of moral development should suffice, namely: selfish (preconventional), care (conventional) and universal care (postconventional). The preconventional, egocentric or selfish stage is linked to an identification with the gross, discrete, physical state and is characterised by a self-centred morality. The conventional, ethnocentric or care stage is identified with the mind. Here an individual’s identity extends from separate physical sense of self as the mind allows us to identify with other perspectives, to care for others, form groups and develop relationships based on shared interests, values, beliefs and ideals. However ethnocentric care has limits, and this is an ‘us’ which exists only on the premise and ultimate extinction of those identified as ‘them’.

Later in this stage we find the emergence of rationalism. Here the individuated self escapes from herd mentality but remains ethnocentric in its confirmation of absolutist values, this

time based on the universal truths of science. This stage correlates with modernity, and the technocentric, materialist culture that has ensued tends to exploit human and natural resources in the name of progress (Wilber 2000: 49-51). This cultural problem and the pressing need for a solution have been addressed unanimously by ecologists. Many insist that it calls for a new paradigm or a shift in consciousness. The pluralistic relativism of postmodernism that followed the scientific achievement of modernism has gone a long way in challenging centralising myths and the coherent sense of self inherent in traditional, conformist paradigms which hold truth to be exclusive, one-sided and based on absolute principles of right and wrong. However the rationalism rejected by the sensitive, feeling, caring and contingent postmodernists, remains a key tool for releasing the grip of absolutism by making available multiple perspectives. In fact, pluralistic relativism is the first stage to embrace the multiple perspectives made available by rationalism, while still rooted in an absolutist kind of relativism.

To pinpoint the problem and its solution, Wilber (2000: 137) argues the current ecological crisis is not so much rooted in the symptoms of “pollution, toxic dumping, ozone depletion or any such” but the insufficiency of what developmental psychologist Graves calls first-tier thinking.

First-tier value spheres are either selfish or ethnocentric, meaning that all previous paradigms, including traditional, mythic, conformist, conventional, rational and post rational pluralistic memes are exclusive, each one assured of its correctness and superiority. According to Wilber (2000: 137) “not enough human beings have developed to the postconventional, worldcentric, global levels of consciousness, wherein they will automatically be moved to care for the global commons”. Second-tier, or integral thinking, is instrumental in moving from pluralistic relativism to the next stage of universal integralism or aperspectival integralism. A realisation of the commonwealth and interconnectedness of all beings is required for the monumental leap from ethnocentric to worldcentric consciousness.

According to Gilligan (in Wilber 2006: 12) a postconventional identity is characterised by universal care. This third stage of consciousness has expanded to include ‘all of us’. Within this worldview compassion arises “not just for me, or just my family/tribe/nation, but for all of humanity, for all men and women everywhere, regardless of race, color, sex or creed” (Wilber 2006: 12). A worldcentric consciousness moves through the rich, though fragmented, view of human diversity to seek out similarities and trace commonalities. Thus worldcentricism is a paradigm or stage of expanded consciousness epitomised by inclusivity, aperspectival integralism and universal care.

If as Joseph Campbell (1988: 32) stated in the 1960s “the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet and everybody on it”, how does an artist go about shaping such a myth? According to Wilber, an integral artist or individual does not exclude or deny prior stages, but includes and transcends them. As we have seen Boshoff’s level of consciousness could be said to be second-tier or integral in that it challenges conformist and ethnocentric first-tier thinking without privileging another absolutist narrative. Rather, he weaves together the mythic, rational and plural, finding ways to facilitate and simulate the expansion and integration of perspectives. A brief analysis of *Far Far Away* (2004) serves to illuminate the innovative methods and intent that characterise his discipline.

Far Far Away is an installation of maps that traverse the personal, political and global. Dealing with the life of Boshoff’s grandfather, the South African War of 1899-1902 and his own Afrikaner heritage, this piece consists of various maps locating Boshoff’s grandfather’s home town and British concentration camps from different aerial perspectives. While ethnocentricity

underpins both the Boer's battle for sovereignty, and the horrors of the British concentration camps, which held women and children, Boshoff goes one step further. Boshoff (2007: 28) elaborates:

It was not just my grandfather who had been taken prisoner but 32 000 innocent children ... so I turned my grandfather into a kind of superhero by taking him straight up into the air, initially hovering over his farm. But he keeps on travelling, up to 100 kilometers above the earth. From that vantage point he starts to see more of the global reality. When you are close to your farm all you can see is your farm, and you know only so much... I wanted my grandfather to have what I have had the chance to do: to rise above and see the big picture. I made him go a few thousand miles above the earth, so that he could see the world as a little ball.

In this way Boshoff shows how, through a process of inclusion and transcendence, greater perspectives might be gained without negating the former. Thus he has arrived at a method for visualising a worldcentric view and his critique is not for its own sake, but firmly rooted in the service of transcendence and healing.

The same intent and discipline could be said to apply to *Children of the Stars* (2009), an artefact encoded with “the agency of the being that created it”, and distinguished by “the conscious attention that went into its design” (Wilber 2005: disc 1: 9). Wilber defines an artefact as an intentional creation, as opposed to a heap, which is an accidental conglomeration (2005: disc 1: 7). *Children of the Stars* is a site-specific artwork and artefact, installed in June 2009 at the Nirox Foundation in Mogale City of Human Origin. It consists of six magnificently polished black granite boulders, ranging from the 2.5 ton *Little B* (figure 1) to the 10 ton *Calculus Moo* (Fig. 4) stone, each inscribed with strings of snaking text. The inscribed text from Genesis, Chapter 11, verses 6 and 7 tells the story of the Tower of Babel in which the origins of different languages, and the ensuing chaos, is seen as God's punishment for man's hubris. The verse goes as follows:

Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech (Boshoff 2009).



Figure 3

Split B1 and Split B2

Split B1 Dimensions: 1360mm (length) X 1570mm (width) X 1350mm (height); approximate weight: 3.5 ton and Split B2 Dimensions: 1230mm (length) x 1800mm (width) x 915mm (height); approximate weight: 3 ton; Gap between Split B1 and Split B2: 200mm; Languages (As read from top to bottom): 1. Luvale, 2. English, 3. Esperanto, 4. Telegu, 5. Nama, 6. Zulu, 7. Syriac, 8. Swedish; collection: Benji Liebman. (courtesy of Willem Boshoff).

This text is repeated in seven to eight different languages per stone. For example *Split B2* (figure 3) includes the following languages: Luvale, English, Esperanto, Telegu, Nama, Zulu,

Syriac and Swedish, while *Calculus Moo*, (figure 4) is inscribed with Oriya, Herero, Amharic, Hungarian, Spanish, French and Northern Sotho (Boshoff 2009: 1).



Figure 4
Calculus Moo

(Dimensions: 2540mm (length) X 2430mm (width) x 1050mm (height); approximate weight: 10 tons; languages (as read from top to bottom): 1. Oriya, 2. Herero, 3. Amharic, 4. Hungarian, 5. Spanish, 6. French, 7. Northern Sotho, collection: Prospero Bailey (courtesy of Willem Boshoff).

When Wilber (2005: disc 1-7) says that a rock is a heap, he is not referring to rocks such as these, that have been consciously sought out, cut, polished, inscribed with text, transported and installed at specific sites. These rocks are artefacts, signifiers of an individual and a cultural consciousness. While there is a universal timelessness to its constituent elements - the primal place, a cosmic rock, human language - they have been crafted, shaped, formed and conceptualised with a broader cultural context and according to a discipline with a function and a philosophy in mind.

Children of the Stars resuscitates Boshoff's existing tools, vocabulary and discipline. It is a conceptual, monumental, site-specific installation that incorporates elements of Land or Eco Art. Thus Boshoff maintains his ecological commitment to knowledge and conservation evident in previous artefacts and projects, including *Gaia* (1989), *Tree of Knowledge Series* (1997) and *Garden of Words I,II,II* (1982-2009). He elucidates these projects and the integral nature of his discipline as follows:

I have written dictionaries not to make art but exercise my mind. Without making the effort to learn about plants, seeds, sand, wood and their classifications in language, I would never have been able to create these works in the first place. I began purely to enrich myself, because I love plants, flowers, grasses and everything else I make art about. Part of the joy of being an artist is having something to give or something to share with people (Boshoff 2007: 33).

In *Children of the Stars* he applies a similar methodology to site, stone and scripture, each of which lend an additional aspect to his ecological agenda. But by suggestion, motifs such as the tree of knowledge recur in this choice of site and text. The Cradle of Humankind is after all the most recent location for Eden, where complex life is now said to have first emerged and Homo Sapiens to have evolved his distinguishing traits, such as "a neural potential for symbolic thought" which according to Ehret (in Blundell 2006: 63) was acquired approximately 100 000 years ago "as a by product, in the event that gave rise to the emergence of Homo sapiens as a distinctive anatomical entity" and led to increased cognitive abilities and the invention of language. The event that caused these leaps in evolution, as well as mass extinctions, have recently and controversially been linked to asteroid collisions. According to Calder, impact geology is an exciting new field in the study of life's origins (1997: 444) and "comets now figure in a wide range of theories about life's origin" (1997: 456). Astronomers have also linked

geological periods to expected intervals between collisions with large comets, also called starwounds or astroblemes (Calder 1997: 440). Boshoff title *Children of the Stars* alludes to all these fascinating theories.

The title is ambiguous in that it refers both to the rocks that serve as microcosmic replicas of the asteroid said to have collided with the earth 2023 million years ago (Calder 1997: 440), a few miles from this site at Vredefort, as well as the human race, that some scientists now claim directly stems from this archaic catastrophe.

The site pertinently chosen is the Nirox Foundation, situated near Sterkfontein in the Cradle of Humankind, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which in theory at least belongs to every human being because it is our 'birthplace'. Ecologically speaking, this artefact is deeply embedded in an awareness of our connection and responsibility to the planet and each other. For these and other reasons, *Children of the Stars* is accessible as an ecological work. In this regard, I will examine not only the scientific evidence but also how the notion of spirituality, nature, sacred place, genius loci and druidism apply to an ecological, worldcentric interpretation.

My interpretation of this site-specific artefact as sacred is supported by a mythic or spiritual reading of space and origins, not rooted specifically in place and time but in a collective consciousness, as well as a 'rational' reading based on scientific knowledge. The way in which this confluence of perspectives influences a genius loci, the "domain" (Korp 1997: 86) or spirit of a place, is explained by Loukaki (1997: 309) who cites Dodds and Purini on the "production of place as a multilayered interaction between nature and culture, into which mythical, ethnic, aesthetic and artistic considerations enter." On the role of the artist Loukaki, citing Hunt, (1997: 309) claims that

we rely more on gifted translators in the belief that there exists an inseparable liaison between the genius loci and the artistic geniuses encountering it. In their effort to unveil and enhance what they consider most essential physical, social and spiritual features of places as a way of looking for the deeper truth of things... these translators express themselves, their society, and the universal through their own subjectivity.

Thus according to Loukaki (1997: 309) "a genius loci speaks in terms of essential and authentic character of places as well as contextual, cultural issues, about who has the power and privilege to define standards of judgement for the understanding and transformation of a particular place". Thus this site could be said to have been rendered sacred through the artist's knowledge and manipulation of site, material and concept.

Culturally the site is significant on many levels: as a world heritage site, it's a global symbol, a golden thread linking us to our past and to each other. Yet this particular location as well as the exact cause of the evolutionary leap, is still hotly debated. The out of Africa hypothesis is relatively recent, as are the asteroid theories and Gould's theory of punctuated evolution. These theories are firmly rooted within a contemporary scientific and cultural context and thus require a brief overview. According to Hilton Barber and Berger (2004: 10), the Cradle of Humankind is "a unique location blessed with a greater wealth of prehistory of humankind than almost any other place on Earth." Within the scientific, modern and global socio-political paradigm, this area acquires a new meaning, what Korp calls 'domain'. According to Stringer (1996: 7) "we see evidence of this startling 100 000 year old genesis not only in the bones of the dead but in the genes of people alive today, and even in the words we speak. This idea also shows the remarkable similarities of every member of the human population of this planet." Mogale City, as it is now called, has been awarded the highest conservation status, thus also giving credence to the notion of an African Renaissance. All these possible meanings are now embedded in the domain of this site.

The out of Africa hypothesis for human origins began to emerge in the early 20th century as a result of the fossil findings of David Draper, Robert Broom, and Louis and Mary Leakey.

Robert Ardrey's seminal text *African Genesis* (1961) helped to spread the idea that was cemented during the last decades of the 20th century when the findings of a small group of paleontologists, archeologists and geneticists in Kenya and Ethiopia suggested that humankind emerged out of Africa and "rose like a phoenix from a crisis which threatened its very survival, and then conquered the world in a few millennia" (Stringer and McKie 1996: i). The idea that man is a chance survivor of a violent and random natural process is given further credence by recent catastrophist theories proposed by eminent scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould and the impact event hypothesis of Walter and Luis Alvarez.

In the 1990s Uwe Reimhold "conclusively proved that the Vredefort Impact was caused by an alien rock strike" (Hilton-Barber and Berger 2004: 52). This location in the Cradle of Human kind is now seen as "the scene of some ancient geological catastrophe... and is the earliest and largest known site of extra terrestrial impact on earth" (Hilton-Barber and Berger 2004: 52; Calder 1997: 444). To illustrate the monumental proportions of this event, I cite Reimhold's findings that include evidence of a 10km asteroid that collided with the earth with a force that unleashed the force of ten million atomic bombs (Hilton-Barber and Berger 2004: 52). Without elaborating on the numerous scientific explanations for exactly how this event might have caused complex life to evolve, suffice it to say there was no life as we know it until this alien rock strike began the chain of events that led to a quantum leap in evolution.

Thus Boshoff's use of the both the site and the archaic granite rock, embedded with iridium, a chemical only found in extraterrestrial meteorites, asteroids and dust (Calder 1997:278) point to a monumental cosmic moment in human and planetary history. While the status of sacred place might not sit easily within a scientific framework, as a UNESCO world heritage site that belongs to all the people of our planet and with the aid of the artist's translation and direction, this domain could be said to resonate on a worldcentric level.

A sacred place however must by its very nature transcend literal or scientific explanations. Spirit is an important component of a sacred place. As a place that elicits ones attention, demands participation (Korp 1997: 85) and provides opportunity for mediation or communion, it is the interior world of experience and existentialism that in this instance takes us beyond the scientific world of objective facts. A sacred place can be described as "an architectonic space that is enclosed or set aside in some way; it is a place that has a point of entry, requiring the visitor to go from here to there along some directed path" (Korp 1997: 130). A sacred place is animated with 'energy' and delineates a site "where something important happens, where our everyday sense of time and place collapses" (Korp 1997: 30). For these reasons, an architectonic space is "particularly suited for the plastic realisation of cosmogonic myth, our stories of creation and origin" in our quest to "know ourselves as earth centred people" (Korp 1997: 10). In fact the earliest Indo-European word for human, *dhghem*, means "of the earth." As human beings we have walked the earth for eons, and have collectively known many places of significance or presence. The role of the artist in facilitating our experience of the sacred is explained by Korp (1997: 101): artists "are capable of clarifying cosmogenic vision in order that others may share some aspect of it".

These aspects of architectonic space and cosmogonic vision apply to *Children of the Stars* as do the morphologies of sacred space distinguished by Korp (1997: 85). She cites the foremost authorities, namely Bolle, Higuchi, Norger-Schulz and Eliade who concur that most sacred places feature an enclosed space, set aside or apart, with a boundary, a point of entry, a focal point that emits a power or energy and a path which leads us from here to there, from the ordinary world into the realm of the sacred.

According to Bolle (in Korp 1997: 75) an enclosed space is defined by its boundaries which may be man-made or natural. Earth and sky might equally enclose a space. In *Children of the Stars*, the focal points are the stones themselves. Designed to emulate asteroids of recent scientific theories, Boshoff is well aware of the ancient symbolism and geomancy of rocks and stones. Rocks and stones have “always held a special fascination for the human race” and have been visited and venerated since antiquity by druids and pilgrims (Pennick 1979: 22). According to Eliade (in Stevens 1998: 113), “the stone is the archetypal image of absolute and indestructible reality”. Rooted in the ancient civilisations of Central America, Greece, Asian Minor and Oceania is the myth that “stones can give birth to people, and “the apparently universal notion that stones are the ‘the bones of Mother Earth’” (Stevens 1998: 114). Pennick elaborates on the geomantic significance of rocks as “places regarded as habitations of the earth’s spirit and, like holy hills ... visited in order to obtain states of heightened vision or enlightenment”. The correct term for these objects of veneration that varied in size from ten foot megaliths to football sized boulders is *baitylos*, otherwise called baetylic stones (Stevens 1998: 114) which according to the Greek writer Pausanias (in Pennick 1979 :22) is a type of sacred meteoric stone “said to have fallen from heaven”, and believed to come directly from the gods. Several great religious shrines are based upon meteoric rocks, such as the Ka’ba in Mecca, the Black Stone of Pessinus which embodied Cybele, the Great Mother of the Phrygians (Stevens 1998: 144) and the original “speaking stone”, the omphalos at Delphi, seat of the Oracle Apollo, which are all *baitylos* (Pennick 1979: 23). Many Christian churches were placed over such stones, or had them incorporated into the actual fabric (Pennick 1979: 22-24). *Children of the Stars* refers obliquely and directly to this tradition of venerating sacred stones.

The greatest symbols of the ancient traditions of magic and religion in Western Europe “are the mysterious megalithic monuments such as Stonehenge” (Sharkey 1975:24). Stones such as these at Stonehenge as well as Carnac and Glastonbury, are believed to have been used by druids to ritually re-enact cosmic dramas, and “like certain trees, such stones were considered by the Celts to have special energy properties” (Sharkey 1975: 6). Stones heaped into cairns “are also evocations of the central mountain, and together the integrated symbolism of the stone-mountain-tree links the noosphere, the biosphere, and the lithosphere – that is to say, the psychic, the organic and the inorganic dimension of existence” (Stevens 1998: 114).

It is in this tradition that Boshoff has conceived *Children of the Stars*. The similarity is clearly visible in this image of the Stonehenge heelstone (figure 5). In 1993, Boshoff’s druidic inclinations, or calling, led him to study the stone circles in England and Wales *in situ*, intuitively as well as academically. Boshoff admits “he would run around the circles, collecting plant material and acquiring a feel for how a druid worked” (Boshoff 2007: 85). Druids are historically associated with sacred Celtic sites and rites, and were seen as keepers of secret wisdom and divine knowledge. They were highly revered as spiritual leaders and their function combined the roles of “priest, administrator, poet, shaman, judge, physician and prophet” (Sharkey 1975: 24). Associated with oaks, mistletoe and the annual outing at Stonehenge, they had an extensive knowledge of plants and homeopathic medicine (Sharkey 1975: 16). Furthermore, druids were known for their “riddles and sophisticated word play” (Sharkey 1975: 17), and are associated with the invention of Ogma, a mystical “system of inscribed letters, examples of which are found carved on standing stones through the Celtic world” (Matthews 2006: 15). According to Matthews (2006: 16), druids possessed “the trickster qualities of unexpected, unfathomable reasoning” which correlates with yet another dimension of Boshoff’s discipline. Without going into further detail, we can identify a definite intention on the part of the artist to engage in a neo-druidic discipline that brings these mystical aspects of site, stone and text into play in this work and various others.



Figure 5
Heelstone, Stonehenge
(www.megalithia.com/%2Fstonehenge/%2Fstonehenge_heel_2123.jpg).

Thus, the site-specificity as well as the use of granite, which contains traces of iridium, an alien material that quite literally comes from the stars, is a druidic device used by Boshoff to produce some kind of subliminal therapy, to create a sense of standing on holy ground, of being connected to the cosmos, to our ancestors, to the gods themselves. Thinking of ourselves as star stuff, as embodiments of universal forces is very different from seeing ourselves as lowly creatures of the earth or ground (Ross and Kiesler in Korp 1997: 139). In fact ‘putting our noses in the air’ was quite literally an evolutionary development, as we left the ground for the trees. As focal points, the monumental and minimalist forms of these rocks, their polished black mirror-like surface is certainly conducive to accessing this cosmic perception. Thus the spiritual and meditative aspect of a sacred place also forms part of its domain or genius loci.

In these ways, this artwork reminds us of that we are fundamentally linked to Africa, to each other, to the earth and to the stars. The textual references to Babel sandblasted on the rocks, continue the metaphor of our evolutionary journey, in this instance symbolised by the tower and language which both represent the human impulse to reach from the earth, to return to the sky or to connect with God. This mythic reference to the origins of language does not serve here to contradict the scientific explanation but rather to provide an alternative account for the diversity and richness of evolving humanity and caution against human hubris, grand aspirations and certainties. While language in Babel was used to halt communication, it also has a long history of illuminating our awareness and preserving human memories and culture. But, whatever glorious human achievements are ascribed to language, the artist has chosen to relate a tale of hubris, punishment, chaos and confusion, which I would lastly like to examine in the light of what I consider to be Boshoff’s dada streak.

Bergius (in Sheppard 1979: 30) sums up the main aspects of dada relevant to this case study. Dada elevates chance to creative principle. Chance is seen as “the correlative of the uncertainty in which we find ourselves relative to the real causes of events.” This use of chance points to the arbitrariness and inadequacy of reality. By abolishing perspective, artists like Arp, Grosz and Heartfield, refused the viewer an unambiguous point of view by “envisaging the relativizing diversity of a chaotic universe and the principles of indifference” (Bergius in Sheppard 1979: 28).

The dada metaphor finds expression particularly in the new scientific paradigm with its uncertainty, falling rocks, catastrophes, random mass extinctions and irrational quantum behaviour. As uplifting as it might be for humans to realise their connection to the stars, a dada attitude helps to keep us grounded. Whether deliberate or not, the absurdist, catastrophic and

random aspects pertaining to the origins of life, and of this site in particular are embedded in this artefact. The stone and the site point not only to proud lineage and evolution of man, but also to our being forged, possibly, by pure chance, in the shadow of ten million nuclear explosions. By putting the artefacts here, the artist recalls not only our defiant evolution but also points to what I like to think of as the ‘ur’ dada moment.

Influential palaeontologist, Stephen Jay Gould’s description of the nature of evolution, as punctuated equilibrium, certainly has a quirky dada flavour to it. Challenging the intellectual hegemony of gradualism and uniformitarianism, he paved the way for a much more dynamic view of evolutionary history. His emphasis on the random and catastrophic aspects of evolution, is summed up in the following two quotations by him: namely “whoever we are, we owe our existence to a series of chance occurrences that have happened in the history of life since the beginning” (Gould in Eco et al. 1999: 21) and “our vaulted ladder of progress is really the record of declining diversity in an unsuccessful lineage that then happened upon a quirky invention called consciousness” (Gould in Stringer 1996: 11). In the 1970s Gould was instrumental in shattering the uniform certainties of the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm, in which nothing much changed and evolution happened gradually. Based on fossil records he concluded that evolution had occurred in a punctuated manner (Calder 1997: 271), meaning in short unpredictable spurts rather than over long periods of time. Thus uniformity was supplemented with catastrophe as a key factor in the evolutionary process. This view was furthered in the 1980s by Walter and Luis Alvarez who, based on their study of iridium deposits in the clay at Gubbio and the crater at Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, claimed an asteroid was responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago (Calder 1997: 278). These theories, and by association this site and these artefacts serve then not only to remind us of our shared cosmic origins, but also of the precariousness and absurdity of existence, and of our fragility and powerlessness against the unpredictable forces of nature.

In conclusion, *Children of the Stars* brings together some of Boshoff’s main areas of interest, namely: language, history, religion, science and ecology. This monumental installation of granite rocks inscribed with multilingual texts serves as a key, a clue to the catastrophic and pivotal history of this place, and our relation to it. It is a microcosmic reconstruction of a macrocosmic event. Like all monuments, it serves to honour and commemorate something, in this case of our common ancestry and shared future. From the perspective of worldcentricism, this artifact is about and for all of us. This much is evident in Boshoff choice of site, material and text. The reference to Babel might be read as a cautionary tale against hubris, which is seen as the cause for the chaos, strife and miscommunication that has become the hallmark of humanity. It’s a myth that has clear relevance to our own times, as human beings take on the role of god, technologically and otherwise. Boshoff thus prompts us to meditate on our connections, our triumphs, our achievements, but also the dangers of hubris and certainty in a world marked by bolts out of the blue.

Clearly Boshoff’s conception and production of *Children of the Stars* is integral in that it addresses physical, intellectual and spiritual components. In addition, he has brought together ideas from various fields of knowledge and experience. The particular physicality of this piece, the ancient rock standing in this special place serves to facilitate what might be a profound existential experience of our common roots and shared heritage: cosmic, planetary and evolutionary. The remarkable zen like simplicity facilitates a meditative state and direct experience through reading, touching and perambulating. In keeping with his perennial philosophy and discipline, *Children of the Stars* is an artifact that expresses a worldcentric consciousness by honouring our multiplicity as well as our oneness.

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