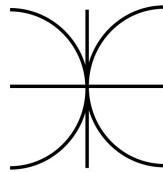


Polley & Woodman
Nature Reconstructed

Mundus Imaginalis

Robert Williams



Keywords: Alchemy; Chance and Structure – underlying patterns; Circular Forms; Contemplation; Cosmology; Cruciform; Gestalt – the whole in the detail; Grid; Layering – stratigraphy; Phenomena; Structure; Symmetry; Repetition (facets); Sacred; Sequences; Spirit; Theosophy; Time; Transformation/Transmutation; The Whole and the detail (as above so below).

I have known and admired the work of Polley and Woodman for more than twenty years and have often felt that it was too simple a matter to place it within the usual classifications of landscape or land art, or contemplative art, slow art; or latterly within the purview of the recent interest in bucolic psychogeographies¹ and the re-investigation of land in the context of the environmental crisis, eco-criticism, place, folk revivals and so on. Yes, there are elements in these remarkable works over time that do point to such categories, and to those which often directly respond to phenomenal processes: change, transformation and chance. However, I have a sense that underlying the work is also something deeper, and whilst certainly reflecting the imagery of place, environment and the processes and qualities of something that we might call nature, nonetheless speaks of the numinous or transcendent emerging from this. I don't mean this in the Romantic sense, there is no need to invoke Burke, but rather a more contemplative or even meditative frame. Here, I have in mind the idea of the numinous from Rudolf Otto (1973) but filtered and secularised psychologically *via* Jung, well expressed by Yoon (2010:26).

Given that this present volume is something of a retrospective view of a collaborative partnership that has lasted more than forty years, it is worth recognising that such relationships in art-making are rarely simple or prescribed – elsewhere I have observed and remarked² that collaboration in art-making is a complex thing, a constantly shifting dynamic of an evolving series of gestures, decisions and negotiations. Not that this suggests anything of conflict or competition, rather the necessary oscillations of activity that seeks to find equilibrium rather than stasis, a working relationship which remains in the flux of creation and re-creation. In many ways, one might think of such collaboration involving a meditative

¹ I am thinking of writers such as Mabey (1994), Sebald (2002) MacFarlane (2012), Parnell (2019) and Prince (2019), and for example, and artists such as Hamish Fulton, Phil Smith and Tim Brennan.

² Williams, R (2013) *Dissecta Membra: Themes, pre-occupations and strategy within a collaborative art practice*. Lancaster University. Lancaster.

dialogic – my own experience of working closely with others³ always has the voice of the other in my mind during a given project. I am thinking of Jung's (1986:65) observation of the dialogic inner voice of the soul, *aliquem alium, internum*⁴ acting as an alchemical interlocutor, here externalised in practice as the affect of a reciprocal call and response between participants of the collaborative process.

The brief for this text, was to discuss Polley and Woodman's collaborative work in relation to alchemy. Given their stated interests in phenomenal processes of transformation or transmutation⁵ as both method and subject, perhaps initially at least, leads to a conventional default when thinking about alchemical matters, which is to invoke, for example, the cosmologies of the English Rosicrucian Robert Fludd⁶, or the rich and often impenetrable illuminations of *Splendor Solis* (Skinner *et al.* 2019), or the silent but busy practical hieroglyphs of Altus' *Mutus Liber* (de Rola 1997:266-284); or even of the belief in the folly of the alchemist as doomed to failure in the search for the Philosopher's Stone (MacKay 1841) – but in looking at and thinking about Polley and Woodman's work, I see little within the majority of these elaborate and often theatrical images of alchemical allegory that leads me to their work. Nor does their work suggest much of the practical elements of alchemical experimentation, transmutation for them is more the consequence of processes of elemental phenomena – water, tides, seasons, light, time, and so on. Such may be what Jung (1986:64) refers to as *Natural Transformation (Individuation)* in relation to his ideas of cycles of transformation/rebirth (in natural phenomena) as an archetype. Individuation, here related as it is to Jung's ideas concerning what he thinks of as creativity (Jacobi 1989:206)⁷, is also by which that there is an integration of different elements (sometimes conflicted) to bring equilibrium (or harmony, as he puts it) – a neat way of understanding both the workings of the phenomenal world as well as that of a collaborative art process.

By the way, I am still looking at and thinking about their work from a macro perspective, the range of artworks, books, films and exhibitions, and considering again the formal arrangements, the repetitions, sequences, the grids, stratigraphies and symmetries, the large and the small; but even though I am not yet considering the specific subjects or the themes in the work, there is something about these different elements that prompts me to think about the mystic alchemist Jacob Böhme⁸ (1575-1624). My plan then, is to consider

³ Mark Dion, Bryan McGovern Wilson, Hilmar Schäfer and Jack Aylward-Williams.

⁴ A certain other one, within.

⁵ Roger Polley email: 21.11.21 'Change, transformation and chance have all featured prominently in our work and the changing seasons and elements, Earth, Fire, Air and Water have also been a source of inspiration to us.'

⁶ Given Polley and Woodman's focus on nature – and myself as a Fludd admirer, his post-Aristotelian version of The Great Chain of Being, *Integrae Natura Speculum Artisque Imago – The Mirror of the Whole of Nature and the Image of Art*, seems appropriate to invoke. Frontispiece from *Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* 1617. Oppenheim.

⁷ "Every creative person is a duality or synthesis of contradictory qualities'.

⁸ Various also known as Boehme, Behman, Bohmen, – in a print by Dion and myself, *Summum Bonum Quod est Magiae, Cabalae, Alchymiae et Artis* (2004), he appears as BOHMEN in our list of European Alchemists see Wismer *et al.* 2014:6. I shall use the contemporary spelling of Böhme unless specified differently in a reference.

Polley and Woodman's work through the lens of his mysticism and in relation to images and text from his followers.

Böhme's⁹ thought has been incredibly influential within European history – informing through non-conformist, free-thinking and mystical discourses, much that we may think of as early modern ideas interfacing with the Enlightenment mind. First translated into English from Dutch by John Sparrow (1615-1670) in the mid-seventeenth century, and later. Promoted by Jane Leade (1624-1704) and the Philadelphian Society in England, these Beheminsts informed directly or indirectly such mystical luminaries as William Blake (Ackroyd 1995:149-151; Harpur 2002:204-210; Gettings 1978:11), Sir Isaac Newton (Burland 1967:2), George Fox and the rise of the Society of Friends (Quakers) (Szulakowska 2016:18), Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1888:494 Vol.1) and the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner (1910) and Wassily Kandinsky (1911/2000; Gettings 1978:127-185).

I find myself drawn to Jakob Böhme's mysticism *via* his disciples William Law (1686-1761) (McLean 1983; Hobhouse 1944), Dionysius Andreas Freher (1647-1725) (McLean 1983; Roob 1997) and Johan Georg Gichtel (1638-1710). In the images of Gichtel (1682 in de Rola 1997:308-317), for example, we see rather Fludd-like geometries and rather pictorial representations to envision Böhme's cosmos. This is one different to that of the more conventional conception of human and nature existing within the cosmos, yet each separate from each other, and both separated from god, who occupies a realm beyond. Böhme's world view is not so Platonic in this sense, but rather essentially alchemic, in the conception of transmutation as a spiritual process to both create and to maintain a cosmic unity – rather akin to Jung's *Natural Transformations*. In this, Böhme's theosophy, it might be argued is very similar to, and indeed manifestly influenced that modernist project leading to the perfection, absolute stasis and unity that is abstraction. I have in mind a teleological procession of nodal points¹⁰ reflecting the revolutions and convulsions of the twentieth century, *via* the integration of intellect, matter and spirit inherent in *The Realistic Manifesto* of Gabo and Pevsner of 1920 (Harrison & Wood 2003:298); Itten's colour theory; Malevich's black square, to Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman's black and white paintings; the ontological formalist Minimalism of Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, William Tucker, Sol le Witt and Larry Bell. The end-point of this procession to abstraction might be considered to be nothing at all, a dematerialised, unified absence that refers only to itself¹¹. Of course, such a linear and reductive schema is largely inaccurate (and contested). I raise the point as a segue into a discussion of Böhme's mystical, alchemic ideas. I am minded, therefore, to further reflect on Sol le Witt's famous paradoxical aphorisms from *Sentences on Conceptual Art* in 1969, they are theosophical and alchemic in their own terms: 'No.1. Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach'; and my favourite, a guiding principal in my own work: 'No.5. Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely

⁹ Most of my references to Böhme's texts are *via* the excellent transcriptions available at <http://jacobboehmeonline.com> accessed 12.7.22

¹⁰ More or less selected at random from a remembered canonical art history.

¹¹ See E.C. Goosen's famous introduction to the 1969 exhibition of American Minimalist work, *The Art of the Real*: 'Today's 'real', on the contrary, makes no direct appeal to the emotions, nor is it involved in uplift. Indeed, it seems to have no desire at all to justify itself, but instead offers itself for whatever its uniqueness is worth – in the form of the simple, irreducible, irrefutable object. Also see Colpitt (1990:106-108).

and logically'; 'No. 18: One usually understands the art of the past by applying the conventions of the present thus misunderstanding the art of the past'.

We know that Böhme's mysticism informed modernist thinking *via* the development of Theosophy, and it would be easy to assume that the idea of universal equilibrium, had not Böhme also included the idea of what Gentzke (2017:103) describes as a sort of performative spatial *embodiment* that vivifies and energises creation, along with the idea of wisdom (*weisheit*) as a catalyst for imagination (*einbildung*). This nullifies the sort of equilibrium of emptiness that Böhme envisages as a pre-state of the deity: *Ungrund*¹², literally the abyssal state of *unbeing*, described as 'All and nothing'¹³ – Eastern-like in eschatology¹⁴, the nothing that has the potential to be everything¹⁵. This is activated by the personification of the feminine principle *Sophia*¹⁶ (Wisdom), for Böhme an intercessor who becomes the 'eye' in the mirror by which the *Ungrund* can *imagine* itself into self-consciousness. This action, *Imaginatio*, is the creative force for and of god itself. All this because it is necessary for god to know itself – rather like Barrow and Tipler's (1986) teleological *Strong Anthropic Principal*¹⁷ in which humans are considered to have evolved in order to become the sensory organs of the Universe as it struggles to know itself, with self-conscious life bound to develop in order to satisfy this determinant; so too with Böhme's conception of the relationship between god, the material world and humans as an eternal dynamic unity within the cosmos expressed in alchemical terms¹⁸.

Polley and Woodman emerged from the late modernist intellectual context (as did I) and in some ways we all inherited and reacted against the modernist project as it fragmented into plural and contingent approaches to art, thinking and culture. So far so good for the broad procession of recent art. However, to understand the context a little more, and mindful of

¹² Unground or Groundless, it also appears as the *Matrix*, or *Salitter* (god-essence as potential) in other texts – 'Ausser der Natur ist Gott ein Mysterium, versteht in dem Nichts; denn ausser der Natur ist das Nichts, das ist ein Auge der Ewigkeit, ein ungruendlich Auge, das in nichts stehet oder siehet, denn es ist der *Ungrund*; und dasselbe Auge ist ein Wille, versteht ein Sehnen nach der Offenbarung, das Nichts zu finden.' Translated in the 1781 William Law Edition: *The Works of Jacob Behmen, Volume IV*: '2. We give you to understand this of the Divine Essence; without nature God is a mystery, understand in the Nothing, for without nature is the Nothing, which is an eye of eternity, an Abyssal Eye, that stands or sees in the Nothing, for it is the Abyss; and this same Eye is a will, understand a longing after manifestation, to find the Nothing; but now there is nothing before the will, where it might find something, where it might have a place to rest, therefore it enters into itself, and finds itself through nature.' See Krauss 2010. For a detailed discussion see: Herd, Van Alan (2003).

¹³ See also Gussin, G and Carpenter, E (eds.)(2001) *Nothing*. Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art. Sunderland.

¹⁴ See Madziarczyk 2017:4

¹⁵ The nanosecond before the Big Bang, perhaps? See <https://www.quantamagazine.org/physicists-debate-hawkings-idea-that-the-universe-had-no-beginning-20190606/>

¹⁶ σοφία - Divine Wisdom: *Sapientia*. See Sophia's song in *Proverbs* 8:22-36. See also Harpur 2002:166-7.

¹⁷ Now rather undermined by recent Post-Human discourses.

¹⁸ See The *Clavis*, or 'Key' of Jacob Boeme, translated by William Law 1764.

Polley and Woodman's holistic view of the phenomenal world through their work¹⁹, it is useful to consider a central conception in Böhme's cosmology. Here I am thinking of the Paracelsian derived idea of the Human as a microcosm of creation. Böhme develops this into the *Mundus Imaginalis*, in which god exists *within* the cosmos along with humans, nature and spirits²⁰.

To return to the imagery addressing Böhme's inclusive theosophy from artist/alchemyists such as Gichtel and other followers, particularly the conceptual aphorisms of Freher (Anon 1856; Roob 1996) and Law (McLean 1991:11). Dionysius Andreas Freher, a German who settled in London (McLean 1991:10; Madziarczyk 2017:56) offers both visual and conceptual interpretations of Boehme's mystical writing which avoid Gichtel's literalism. In his *An Illustration of the Deep Principals of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Theosopher in Thirteen Figures* (1700) (McLean 1983:55-81) Freher explores the integration of the three Behmenist principles of creation – *Darkness:God; Light:Jesus*; and made up as a consequence of these two, the Material world of the four elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water, making up the *Mundus Imaginalis*. Here we see formal, geometric, sequential and visionary transactional schemata that speak of cosmic and alchemic processes (Böhme invokes the alchemical principles of Mercury, Sulphur and Salt as manifesting in the three realms). It is in these images of Freher's that I recognise why, in my mind, I link the work of Polley and Woodman to Böhme – back to that observation of geometry, formal repetitions, grid structures, and the very large indicated by the very small. Of course, these images do not *look* like each other, but that does not mean that they don't speak of similar things – enough for me to make the imaginative leap from one series of images to another. The formal structures of Polley and Woodman's composite images similarly reflect more the balances, unities and equilibria of elegant conceptual schemas which help to consider complex philosophical and visionary thinking in relation to their chosen subjects and themes. In their photographic installations we see in macrocosm, the symmetries, grids, and geometries of the cosmos imagined by the alchemists, with fractal-like microcosmic details seen simultaneously, and which make sense of the whole – the Microcosm echoing the Macrocosm – As above, so below. In this, we can easily apply similar formal and conceptual constructions that help to lead the imagination. Interesting to reflect that Faivre (Hanegraaff *et al.* 2019:83) considers that Böhme 'gave the creative imagination an ontological foundation'. For Böhme, Nature is in continual state of creation and re-creation, and this is revealed to us too in the work of Polley and Woodman as they interact with cyclical planetary processes, whilst leading us through their art to meditate on the cosmos and things spiritual. The focus on material and matter both in and of the work is significant. That the work is clearly *made* by the manipulation of physical materials, reminds me of Böhme's belief of the *Handwercker*

¹⁹ Some aspects of which chime well with Woodman's interest in the philosophy of eastern religions and of the contemplative.

²⁰ 'Denn die sichtbaren empfindlichen Dinge sind ein Wesen des Unsichtbaren; von dem Unsichtlichen, Unbegreiflichen ist kommen das Sichtbare, Begreifliche.' '4. For the visible sensible things are an essence of the invisible: from the invisible and incomprehensible the visible and comprehensible is proceeded: the visible essence is come to be from the expression or spiration of the invisible power: the invisible spiritual Word of divine power works with and through the visible essence, as the soul with and through the body.' Preface to *Mysterium Magnum*. See Krauss 2010.

(craftsman) who develops a greater understanding of meaning through awareness of natural phenomena, which in turn leads to an enhanced sense of the spiritual in creation (*ars imitator naturam*), clearly because of his own background as a shoemaker (Smith 1994:40). As in the *Signitarum Rerum* (Law 1781), Polley and Woodman's work reminds us that there is *meaning* in the cosmos, and it is through the consideration of the workings of the microcosm that we come to recognise the bigger picture.

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