

# *SPHERE*

PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

2003

# Circumnavigating SPHERE

*“Just as white light, though uniform in appearance, may be broken down into a spectrum, space likewise decomposes when subjected to analysis; in the case of space, however, the knowledge to be derived from analysis extends to the recognition of conflicts internal to what on the surface appears homogeneous and coherent – and presents itself and behaves as though it were.” from Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space**

*“This bleak scenario contains a singular silver lining ... This silver lining is a golden thread. This golden thread leads out of the labyrinth (Manfredo Tafuri’s labyrinth) to a sphere outside, in the air, in the imagination, in the spirit of every thing ‘useless’ (not yet subjugated, or dying to be reborn out of subjugation). This vast sphere is Idealism Itself ... It involves the collapsing of subject-object dichotomies....” from Gavin Keeney, *The Infernal Machine*, in the August 2003 issue of *CounterPunch*.*

The idea of space and the idea of the sphere were inextricably linked in the pre-modern world. Plato was arguably the first theorist of spheres, and he was clearly aware of the contradictions between surface and ‘inside’ as well as between symmetry and surface variability. Hence the human head, somewhat symmetrical but not smooth, is a major part of Plato’s musing on ‘the sphere’. The Platonic revival in the early Renaissance saw a return to spherical interests in a book called *The Sphere (Tractatus de Sphaera)*, written in 1220 by John of Holywood (aka Sacrobosco). It was still in use over 500 years later and is claimed to be the most successful textbook ever written, based on the longevity of its use. Spheres began to appear in art during the book’s heyday, notably in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, where spheres appear as bubbles enveloping the citizens of his barely post-feudal world. If the theoretical interest in the special status of spheres can be traced back to Plato’s *Timaeus*, dating from around 360 BC (see extract at end of this essay), it is also clear that the relation between the sphere as object and as abstract idea is already contained in Plato’s text. He also positions the human cranium in its unsurprising place as the sphere of primary interest to humans – a claim that the history of art has perhaps borne

out through its endless stream of portraits. Plato’s cosmological analogue, however, placed the human head in the context of celestial forms. He saw the human head as an ideal spheroid, a concept that stands in partial opposition to our contemporary and popular association of portraiture and individualism. The ‘portraits’ in this exhibition could be seen as a counter to the valorization of the individual tendency that has characterized so much contemporary art over the past fifteen years. These portraits are ‘about’ something other than individualism and identity.

Johannes Kepler’s notion of ‘the harmony of the spheres’ was developed a hundred years after Bosch’s paintings, at a time when the sciences were seeking unifying theories to explain ‘everything’. As the sciences fragmented into specialty research areas in the period from 1750 to 1950 the idea of ‘the sphere’ as a separate subject almost disappeared. Yes, there was a periodical in England called *The Sphere* c.1900 (*An Illustrated Newspaper For The Home*), and the meditations of poets such as Francis Ponge in the 1930s kept the idea of the sphere alive, but the once-broad focus on spheres was superseded by the separate subject areas of the ‘hard’ sciences. The rapidity of subject-area separation can be seen in the way Hegel’s quasi-scientific texts of the early 1800s were instantly outmoded owing to their attempt to unify ‘everything’ based on deduction rather than induction.

Philosophy, however, went where science wouldn’t, especially in relation to the concept of *Being*. In *Being and Time* Heidegger suggests that reality transcends consciousness by entering “the sphere of the real”, an idea that we can see mirrored in Slavoj Žižek’s *Desert of the Real*. The merging of notions that a sphere existed as an object as well as a concept or model was already in the air in the 1940s when Karl Jaspers, echoing Heidegger, stated that “every being seems in itself round”. It

is this type of thinking that allows abstractions such as ‘spheres of influence’ or ‘the social sphere’ to seem perfectly normal to us today; and this critical thought recovers some of the pre-modern idea of the sphere as “the key to everything”, to quote Sacrobosco.

In 1958 the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard published an enigmatic book called *La poétique de l'espace*. Its English translation, *The Poetics of Space*, came out in 1964, by which time the book had achieved minor cult status. It reestablished the forgotten link between ‘the sphere’ and the problematics of space. The last chapter of the book is titled *The Phenomenology of Roundness* and in it Bachelard quotes Van Gogh as having once said, somewhat uncertainly, “Life is probably round.” Bachelard recalls that the novelist Joë Bousquet, having been told “that life was beautiful”, replied, “No! Life is round.” Bachelard’s book is about ‘reading space’, with chapter-titles such as ‘nests’, ‘corners’, and ‘shells’; he tries to sensitize his readers to the image of roundness, the image of the sphere.

Bachelard cites Michelet’s connection (in *The Bird*) between spheres and mystical unity: “a bird is almost completely spherical” and “The bird...is certainly the sublime and divine summit of living concentration. One can neither see, nor even imagine, a higher degree of unity.” For Michelet, it is the ‘way of the world’ for material to reach its natural state of concentration in the spherical form. He called it “the great personal force of the bird.” This has been said another way by Arif Babul, whose video of colliding galaxies is shown here: “In the absence of any specific constraints, very big gravitationally sculpted structures will tend to evolve into spheroids. An object’s gravity tries to pull all of its material, be it rocks, stars, or dark matter, as close to its center as possible. The outcome is a sphere.”

Cézanne, who admired Michelet, implored his listeners to think of picture-making in terms of the sphere, cylinder and cone – his recipe for pictorial structures that reflected the order of things in the world. Bachelard’s idea was that a new area that he called “concrete metaphysics” would be catalyzed by art (for him perhaps, by writing) that revealed spheres to be “a victory over accidents of form”.

Long before Bachelard, scientists such as Kepler had seized upon the idea that the mathematics of spheres might have the potential to explain or reveal something to those who paused to think about them. They knew that spheres were interesting even when not perfect; that ellipses, for instance, were part of a large group of forms that we might call quasi-spheres. Similar imperfections attend Kepler’s ‘harmonies of the spheres’, once a bastion of modernist constructed knowledge, and now appearing to be more like a passing phase in cosmological evolution (as Arif Babul’s video on the fate of the Milky Way reminds us). It is the idea of the quasi-sphere that provides the latitude to exhibit so many photographs of things that are not exactly spheres – they are near-spheres, almost perfect spheres, and spheres with limbs (see Laurie Simmons/Allan McCollum’s *Actual Photos*).

The renewed interest in spheres in non-scientific fields by the 1950s did not transfer to the sciences. Early on in the research for the exhibition I asked several scientists if they knew anyone who was ‘into’ spheres. The answers I received resembled the jokes about fish not knowing about water – spheres were so omnipresent that no one paid much attention to them. Spheres were not on scientist’s agendas as ‘spheres’; they seemed to have slipped away from hard science and into the realm of the symbolic.

Writing fifteen years after Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, in his *The Production of Space*, attempted to create a “science of space” – a “unitary theory” or “system” that would allow us to see the world differently, a la Borges. Now, as ‘global’-ization and ‘spheres of influence’ have had an increasingly large impact on the public sphere, and some forty-five years after Bachelard, a Dutch/German philosopher has taken up where he left off.

Peter Sloterdijk has recently staked out the new subject-area of *Spherology*. Sloterdijk’s neologism is the subject of his three contentious books, titled *Sphären*, the first volume of which is titled *Blasen*, or *Bubbles*. These books have generated much debate in Europe, in part because he has extended and emphasized the notion that the fundamental importance of spheres reaches beyond science and into philosophy and art. Sloterdijk has written some 2400 pages on the subject to date. In the introduction to *Sphären* he provides a hint of what is to come: “The idea that life is a thing of shape – such is the thesis we associate with the old and respectable expression of the sphere, borrowed from the ancient philosophers and geometers. This idea suggests that life, the constitution of spheres, and thought, are different expressions that designate the same thing.” Human thought, especially in its relation to planning, is for Sloterdijk an extension of the child’s experience of blowing an ideal bubble, only to have it perish.

*SPHERE* may be a speculative foray into the Sloterdijk’s world of *Spherology*, but it is also meant to raise questions about how humans choose, and overlook, subjects in art and in science. Spheres, as a separate subject, have been outside the current paradigms in both areas, taken for granted, perhaps, as part of the background noise of the universe. It could be proposed, for instance, that the history of ideas itself,

as a ‘working around the subject of knowledge’, can be seen as a spherical entity in which the accumulation of information enlarges the size of the bubble of knowledge. For Sloterdijk the surface of the sphere, the shell, with its rind, or its skin, is as rich with potential meaning as the existence of the sphere itself.

A Sloterdijk sphere, of sorts, is cited by Bachelard in the story of a character in a deVigny novel reading Descartes’ *Meditations*: “Sometimes he would take up a sphere set near him, and after turning it between his fingers for a long time, would sink into the most profound daydreams of science.” The child’s marble here becomes a source of knowledge, even if it is daydream knowledge. Sloterdijk’s sphere program has irritated many of his readers, perhaps because he needs to have fun, to play with the idea and the text: “When one doesn’t want to know anything about the formation of spheres, one obviously stays clear of dramatic love affairs; and, those who cross to the other side of the street when encountering Eros exclude all efforts to elucidate the vital shape.”

The *Sphere* exhibition takes cues from many of the above sources, but its origins were in the practice of several artists whose works are shown here and the way that those works undermined, for me, the cult of personality and emphasis on the individual in art today. The exhibition brings viewers a range of spheres and spheroids that have appeared in contemporary artistic practice, from the cosmological, downward in size to the human head and beyond. The exhibition is about the potential meaning and mystery of spheres as material objects, as forms, as representations and as ideas. The separate works in the exhibition are about the subject that each artist pursued in that work; in most cases it had little or nothing to do with spheres specifically or as I have theorized them in this text.

In the exhibition the sphere as a two-dimensional image, always an illusionistic circle, is referenced here especially in the bottle caps by William Eakin. The virus images shown here, developed at the University of Wisconsin, represent the idea of the 'blow up' and lower limits of spherical size in the microbiological world. The viruses are hypothetical constructions rather than images 'of' viruses. Their existence and form may be known with some certainty, but their form as image is truly an act of 'picturing'. Physiologically, it is interesting that one of Plato's spheres mentioned below feeds on its own waste, even though it has no orifices. This 2,500 year-old idea is very close to a post-modern conception of the closed loops of fluid transfer that characterize the work of artists such as Paul McCarthy, whose *Mutant* is shown here.

The ubiquity and seductive simplicity of the sphere-as-idea did provide an organizing principle for the exhibition once the first works had been chosen. Taken as a group, these artists have mapped out some of the analytical possibilities in art for the fundamental strangeness, mystery (Lindsay Seers) and beauty of spheres. The spheres presented here are cultural artifacts (William Eakin) as well as meta-physical phenomena (Holly Armishaw). The links between the lost ideals of Renaissance Humanism (Geoffrey Smedley) are explored and contemporary ironic concerns (Laurie Simmons/Allan McCollum) are mirrored; links between decay (Lynda Gammon) and entropy; between mutation (Daniel Lee, Paul McCarthy) and evolution's crooked arrow are here given unique forms.

The human cranium as a constructed sphere is examined in the works by Deanne Achong, Paul McCarthy, Michael Euyung Oh, and Geoffrey Smedley. McCarthy's *Mutant* is a counter to Plato's "sphere without limbs". The cranium with its 'limbs' becomes, perhaps, a

mutation on the ideal sphere form. The sphere as an artifact of natural forces is at the basis of Susan Coolen's practice, and Lisa Klapstock works with found holes that, as images, are spheres formed from negative space, a kind of dark matter formed in Toronto's residential fences. Bruce Nauman's late 1960s conceptual work *Untitled, 1969 (Body as a Sphere)* instructs the performer to return to a primordial ball-like state. It will be performed for the first time as part of this exhibition.

What sphere is it that is the subject of this exhibition? The exhibition surveys a very small percentage of the existing contemporary work containing spheres. I have had a continually moving frame of reference during the making of the exhibition, with the result that the 'subject-sphere' is potentially not only the universe of all the millions of spheres that exist in the world, but the set of theorized spheres that are not as obvious as well. Its subject could be said to be all spheres, imagined or real, or 'Idealism itself' as represented by the spherical form. As the idea of space and the idea of the sphere were once linked in the pre-modern world, we may now see the 'new sphere', the subject of Sloterdijk's *Spherology*, becoming linked with a new phase in the history of ideas. Sloterdijk's books are contentious, but because there is no prospective publisher for them in English as of this writing, the debate surrounding them may not reach North America for some time. In any event, it is never clear that a new subject is truly new at the time when it appears, and nor is it possible to predict which ideas will have the strength to live on for future generations – with regard to spheres, we will wait and see.

Bill Jeffries

This text is a draft of the curator's essay for the catalogue of the exhibition.

## From Plato's *Timaeus*

*It is a sphere, without organs or limbs, rotating on its axis.*

For shape he gave it a fitting shape that matched its nature. For the living creature that was to embrace all living creatures within itself, the fitting shape would be the figure that comprehends in itself all the figures that exist; accordingly, he made its shape round and spherical, equidistant in every way from its center to its extremities – a form the most perfect and uniform of all; for he judged uniformity to be immeasurably better than its opposite. He made the outside perfectly smooth for several reasons. It had no need of eyes, for nothing visible was left outside; nor of hearing, for there was nothing outside to be heard. There was no surrounding air to require breathing, nor yet was it in need of any organ by which to receive food into itself or to discharge it again when drained of its juices. For nothing went out or came into it from anywhere, since there was nothing: it was designed to feed itself on its own waste and to act and be acted upon entirely by itself and within itself; because its framer thought that it would be better self-sufficient, rather than dependent upon anything else.

It had no need of hands to grasp with or to defend itself, nor yet of feet or anything that would serve to stand upon; so he saw no need to attach to it these limbs to no purpose. For he assigned to it the motion proper to its bodily form, namely, that one of the seven which above all belongs to reason and intelligence; accordingly, he caused it to turn about uniformly in the same place and within its own limits and made

it revolve round and round; he took from it all the other six motions and gave it no part in their wanderings. And since for this revolution it needed no feet, he made it without feet or legs. (from section 33b-34a)

### *Structure of the human body: head and limbs*

Copying the round shape of the universe, they confined the two divine revolutions in a spherical body– the head, as we now call it – which is the most divine part of us and lord over all the rest. To this the gods gave the whole body, when they had assembled it, for its service, perceiving that it possessed all the motions that were to be. Accordingly, that the head might not roll upon the ground with its heights and hollows of all sorts, and have no means to surmount the one or to climb out of the other, they gave it the body as a vehicle for ease of travel; that is why the body is elongated and grew four limbs that can be stretched out or bent, the god contriving thus for its traveling. Clinging and supporting itself with these limbs, it is able to make its way through every region, carrying at the top of us the habitation of the most divine and sacred part. Thus and for these reasons legs and arms grow upon us all. And the gods, holding that the front is more honorable and fit to lead than the back, gave us movement for the most part in that direction. So humans must needs have the front of the body distinguished and unlike the back; so first they set the face on the globe of the head on that side and fixed in it organs for all the forethought of the soul, and appointed this, our natural front, to be the part having leadership. (from section 44d-45b)

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