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From Rock Art to Vertical Forests

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Introduction: Since the creation of rock art in caves 12,000 years ago, human art forms have told an evolving story about our relationship with space and time, with our environment, with the divine and with ourselves. Gebser was the first to develop a comprehensive narrative for the evolution of consciousness spanning thousands of years and observable in human artefacts (Gebser, 1949). More recently, Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2007) have developed the concept of a ‘consciousness contract’ (p. 37) to investigate what social, political and religious constructs can be read into works of art and architecture. Gebser’s structures of consciousness used in combination with the consciousness contract provide a useful framework to explore how shifting cosmologies and structures of consciousness can be understood through art objects and the built environment. I will use a range of images to explore the evolution of consciousness and artistic form from rock art to vertical forests, illustrating how beginnings and endings of these structures are not easily defined. Whilst wholeheartedly agreeing with Settegast (2001) that there is not a single way of looking at the world today that can make sense of it (p. 1), I will propose an understanding of three works of twenty-first century art and architecture that suggest a fluid integration of Gebser’s structures of consciousness through the form of monumental elementalism, an exploration of the human relationship with nature as a divine force.
The Consciousness Contract

Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2005) first introduced the concept of a consciousness contract to provide a framework for their deep inquiry into the nature of Neolithic consciousness. As archaeologists, one of their interests is to move beyond the recent tradition in archaeology of treating every culture as unique. They seek commonalities in the human experience which enable a much deeper understanding of past societies and which can provide a bridge through shared experience to contemporary consciousness and culture. They propose that the neurological functioning of the brain is a human universal like language and that the human brain is constantly experiencing different states of consciousness, on a spectrum ranging from highly alert to the deepest altered states. These states are generated by the nervous system and are given culturally-specific interpretation by the society of the time. The role of consciousness and the alteration of consciousness is so important in human society that it is not possible to explore human experience, beliefs and practices without reference to it. As societies come to terms with the range of experiences of consciousness that humans have on a daily basis, different states of consciousness are valued differently depending on social and political context. In Western society, for example, a very alert state of consciousness is highly valued whilst dream states are not valued. The attachment of value to different states then drives the development of a society’s cosmology. Archaeological records illuminate the shifting cosmologies of a society by showing what states of consciousness on the spectrum were sought after, valued or owned by one class or another.

It is not my purpose here to discuss whether the Lewis-Williams and Pearce position that there are universals of consciousness is in conflict with Gebser’s view that human consciousness has evolved over time. Both approaches can be relevant to the exploration of how the art of a society reflects its consciousness. Gebser acknowledges that multiple structures of consciousness can be present at any one time. It is the predominant structure which varies. On the face of it, this does not appear inconsistent with the Lewis-Williams and Pearce contention that human consciousness is universal. As Walter Truett Anderson says, ‘all explanations of reality are human constructions, useful but not perfect’ (Settegast, 2001, p. 126).

The Archaic Structure of Consciousness

Originating deep in the myths of time past, Gebser describes the archaic structure of consciousness as being like a state of dreamless sleep (Combs, 1995, p. 85). It is the time when all consciousness arises, a time before any known or documented time. It is almost impossible to put dates on the archaic consciousness – it is rather a state of being, pure oneness with nature and the universe when human consciousness was dreamless. There are no artefacts from this period of existence before the earliest humans made tools and created pictures on the walls of caves. Nonetheless, this concept of oneness with the universe and human origin out of water are depicted in later art forms, suggesting a contemporary cosmology that is able to recognise and incorporate an ancient consciousness.
The iconography of Vishnu in the Hindu tradition, for example, shows Maha Vishnu, reclining on Shesha, one of the primal beings of creation, lying in the cosmic ocean of bliss. Shesha is shown as a multi-headed serpent, where the heads represent the planets of the cosmos. Intriguingly, Shesha means ‘that which remains’ in Sanskrit, the serpent’s presence indirectly recalling a universe even before the beginnings of human consciousness.

Above, Vishnu sleeps on Shesha in a pool of water. This image refers vibrantly to our archaic past and our origins in the cosmic ocean. It is alive, draped in gifts from ceremonies and offerings. Here, our origins in the cosmic ocean are honoured, and the power and importance of this deep structure of consciousness acknowledged.

The serpent is often used to represent the primal, elemental nature of archaic consciousness. It is intimately connected to the earth itself, living between land and sky and having extraordinary medicinal properties. In Western art, the serpent is found in the image of the ouroboros, where she represents a unity of self with self and unity with the infinite and cyclical nature of the cosmos. Whilst Wilber calls
the ouroboros ‘narcissistic, paradisiacal but reptilian’ (Combs, 84), I interpret this image as symbolic of a profound archaic non-duality, the integration of all aspects of the self and with the universe. Taschen (2010) agrees that the serpent ‘has always conveyed power over life and death, making it everywhere a form of the ancestral spirit, guide to the Land of the Dead and mediator of hidden processes of transformation and return’ (p. 196).

The Jungian analyst and researcher, Robert Romanyshyn, seems to be referring to archaic consciousness when he describes the deepest level of the unconscious as the place where the unconscious is nature. He says that ‘as the psychologist probes deeper and deeper into the psyche, he or she descends into the soul of the world. He or she discovers that at the psychoid level of the archetypes, psyche matters as a matter of the soul of the world. He or she discovers that the unconscious is not just in us, but that we are in the unconscious of nature, and that at the deepest level of our psyches, we retain some dim remembrance of once, very long ago, having been a part of the world's dark-light’ (Romanshyn, 2007, p. 38-39). He makes the point that we retain archaic consciousness deep in our unconscious and that it is the place where we connect most deeply with nature and the universe.
The Magical Structure of Consciousness

Little survives from the earliest magical period of consciousness. This was a time of group identity, of life interwoven with nature, no delineation of space and time and magical practices (Feuerstein in Combs, 1995, p. 88). The Patagonian cave paintings above from 13,000-9,000 BCE provide a record perhaps of ceremony or ritual activity of a group. Using Lewis-Williams and Pearce’s principles of the consciousness contract, we see that what mattered to the artists and participants was creating a record of many hands. Above, an ensemble worked together to produce this manifestation of contemporary consciousness. The identity of the artist or artists is not important. Moving beyond unity and oneness, there is a distinct separation between the worlds of human and animals.
The animals in the Chauvet cave are closely observed suggesting a deep relationship between humankind and the natural world. These paintings demonstrate an accurate naturalism in the features, shapes and actions of the animals. Yet accurate representation in space is not important. The animals fold over each other, capturing multiple moments in time and space bringing the animals to life rather like early cartoon images. These images perhaps reflect an ease with states of consciousness in which merging with animal spirits is carried out by shamans or the whole group. They hint at magical practices and belief systems, ecstatic dance deep inside the caves or shapeshifting and calling in animal spirits. If we allow ourselves to be drawn in, there is a delicate excitement behind these images, pulling us in to the word beyond the material. We cannot know how these early humans went about their lives or what their minds were like. Yet they appear to be valuing states of consciousness in which there is physical movement and consciousness shifting along the spectrum of altered states.

Whilst much later in historical terms than cave painting, the frescoes of Minoan painting show a similar sense of the magic of nature on a human scale. Here, birds, animals and people are shown accurately yet with a light grace and often at play. The multi-textured depiction of swallows below, for example, is a reminder of the layered animal imagery in the caves. The paint almost acts as a veil which can be lifted, suspending time and space to allow us to move into a magical dimension.
Although later by several millennia, Romanesque elementalism demonstrates a similar magical play with nature. On the capital at Maria Laach Abbey, life and nature are vibrantly interwoven, figures weaving into and emerging from nature inside and outside the fabric of the building. There is a fluid closeness of association with nature, perceiving humans as emerging from and in play with natural forces. These are elemental forces on a human scale, with which we can work, to transform and be transformed by. Humans can take on animal form and vice versa. This is a world of magical consciousness, ‘a revelation of the same world the medieval alchemist experienced in his/her laboratory’ (Richter, 1901, p. 139).

Minoan frescoes and Romanesque sculpture were created long after the emergence of the magical structure of consciousness that Gebser describes and are over 2,500 years apart in time. Minoan fresco painting was contemporaneous with the Middle Kingdom in Ancient Egypt in the second millennium BCE. Early rational consciousness emerged in Greece over one thousand years before these Romanesque figures were carved in northern Europe. This underscores the point that Gebser’s structures of consciousness are not a linear progression; multiple structures can co-exist and there has been an interweaving from one state of consciousness to another, even in the few millennia for which we have an artistic record.

### The Mythic Structure of Consciousness

Mythic consciousness was born out of the dual processes of waking up to one’s earthly body (Richter, 1901) and diving into one’s inner world to create meta-narratives to explain the mystery of existence (Combs, 1995). Richter describes the development of consciousness in Ancient Egypt as a ‘loss of cosmic consciousness’ (Richter, 1901, p. 26). For him, the representation of gods and animals in human form reflects the memory of an existence when humans were intimately connected to both – what Gebser would later call magical consciousness. Now humans are shown as separate and developing an inner world of imagination. The cool gaze of Egyptian figures, completely still in their contemplation, reflects this awareness, a dignified and powerful knowing. These figures occupy a monumental space which is more sacred in scale than it is secular, hinting perhaps at the ego-consciousness soon to come. Statues of the pharaohs manifest what Steiner called ‘the ability to sense the working of the stars and of cosmic forces in one’s very body which some people in the Egyptian period still possessed’ (Richter, 1901, p. 33).
Mythic consciousness is ‘absolutely unable to create a ‘system’ of thought, a canon or a dogma. There is as yet no need for it to prove the unity of the world to itself in some abstract way. Things stand side by side in it that seem completely contradictory to modern thinkers, and as a way of thinking, it often enough drives such thinkers to despair’ (Richter, p. 29). Not surprising, perhaps, that Feuerstein would write that ‘The mythic consciousness moves and unfolds in sacred space and sacred time. It knows nothing of secular space-time (Feuerstein, 1987, p. 85-86).

Our human relationship to divine space changes throughout the shift of consciousness in Gebser’s structures. Using the Lewis-Williams and Pearce formula, the construction and use of divine space can be read as illuminating our human relationship with divinity – be it on earth, above, below or in human form.

When the Giza complex of pyramids was built in Ancient Egypt, these monumental structures were covered in polished limestone tiles. Glittering in the bright sunlight, the pyramids would have shone like massive crystals in the landscape, not a symbol but a manifestation of the divine above and also on earth. This mythic consciousness was separate from the divine cosmos yet conceived of the scale and grandeur of it and was empowered to represent it on earth.
Later, in the Gothic period, for example, the separation between human consciousness and the cosmos would become deeper. We see this in the architecture of the period: in the soaring naves and buttressed walls of Gothic cathedrals, we do not experience an attempt to bring divine forces to earth. Rather, the search is upward, intending transcendence of the material world to reach the divine realms in the heavens above.
The Rational Structure of Consciousness

The beginnings of rational consciousness can be seen in the art of Ancient Greece. The emphasis on the human form is transformed from the monumentalism of Egypt to the freedom and aliveness of Greek sculpture. Human connection to the sacred is no longer visible – the silent gaze of the Egyptians now becomes action and reaction in Greece. The human is centre stage, the cosmic connection now lost. In the Discobolus below, not only is the human body revered in art form, the young man is also at play, about to throw a discus. This representation is fully in the round, anatomically accurate and shows that the artist or patron was interested in selection of a moment in time, just before the Discobolus swings his arm down and releases the discus. There is a new multi-dimensionality here, suggesting a facility to explore and play with notions of space and time in art and consciousness.

![Discobolus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discobolus)

The emphasis on the materiality of the body is lost during the medieval period in Europe. In the portal at Moissac, for example, figures are stuck to the wall, interwoven with beasts and foliage, firmly placed in the spiritual hierarchy of the Catholic church. Here is the remembering of magical consciousness before the re-emergence of the human figure in full three-dimensionality in the Renaissance.
Almost two thousand years after the Discobolus, Leonardo’s work on perspective was key to the start of the technological age. In his Last Supper, we can see his use of linear perspective as well as colour, light and shade to create a deep representation of three-dimensional space. This rational consciousness is dualistic in nature and understands and represents the human as distinct from the surrounding environment in ways that represented a break with previous ages. Gebser writes that ‘a new psychic awareness of space, objectified or externalized from the psyche out into the world, begins – a consciousness of space whose element of depth becomes visible in perspective’ (Gebser, 1949).
In Renaissance architecture, we see the renewed interest in perspective, in mathematically precise shapes and forms and greater precision inside the divine space. These spaces speak less about the relationship to divinity and more about the beginnings of human control and manipulation of our environment. San Lorenzo extends horizontally in contrast to the verticality of Bath Abbey, bringing awareness to the ground and the human scale of the construction. From a consciousness contract perspective, the human experience has now become the central point of reference for both the material and the divine in art as well as in religious space.

Post-Rational Structure of Consciousness

Towards the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, a changing perspective began to emerge in painting, reflecting the beginnings of another shift in consciousness. Combs describes post-rational consciousness as having ‘not only an increased sense of concrete time and space, but, paradoxically, a transparent, or diaphanous, experience of reality, one in which perspective, no longer anchored to the perspectival ego, becomes fluid’ (Combs, 1995, p. 101). This diaphanous quality can be seen in the paintings of the Impressionists who started to explore how a single moment in space and time could be captured on canvas.
Artists utilized a technique called ‘en plein air’, fully in the moment, in order to capture subtle and momentary changes of light. Below, Sargent captures Monet painting outside.

After World War I, the breaking down of rational consciousness in art forms continued apace with Picasso and Braque exploring the combination of multiple perspectives of a figure or object on a flat canvas. Writing about Picasso, Gebser says that time becomes a fourth dimension, rendering the essence of a person or object visible to the viewer. Breaking down form allows the artist to show what an object really is in the present moment. For Gebser, the ‘quintessence of time’ radiates from Picasso’s drawings (Gebser, 1949, p. 12). In the portrait above, multiple perspectives combine to create a whole. It is impossible to view the painting from a single viewpoint – the painting demands presence from the viewer in order to fully take in the essence of the portrait. The human is the subject of the painting and yet no longer the single reference point for the artist or the consciousness of the time.
Looking back at these developments almost a century later, I find a significant rational element to this body of work. Whilst they marked a radical change in style, Picasso and Braque worked with the two-dimensional geometry of a rectangular canvas and their work was essentially figurative. In the context of the art and consciousness that followed, the Cubists and Surrealists perhaps played a role rather like the Mannerists in relation to the High Renaissance in the sense that they took the perfection of existing forms and started to exaggerate and manipulate them before the real breaking away came about later.

The Abstract Expressionists would take this post-rational exploration much further. Jackson Pollock, in his action painting, entered a deep altered state in order to create his art.
Recognisable objects are completely removed in the pure abstraction of colour field painting. Rothko brings the divine onto the canvas, even using his paintings to create a non-denominational chapel which is now used for international peace meetings and philosophical discussions. What we see with Pollock and Rothko is something new: this is art which puts the consciousness of the artist and the viewer at centre stage. Their art is secular yet brings the divine onto the canvas and into the space around their work and on a monumental scale. By working in an altered state of consciousness, Pollock rejected rational consciousness (although he still worked inside the confines of a rectangular canvas) and brought earlier structures of consciousness into the public domain. In moving into a trance state, he created the potential to reconnect with an archaic consciousness which was expressed through the magical weaving and curving of his paint. His canvases were mythic in scale for the post-war period. Many of Rothko’s canvases have a mythic monumentalism. His colour fields take away the capacity to apply perspective or think rationally about his art. The movement in the colour of the paint is almost water-like at times, inviting a return to deep contemplation and profound archaic consciousness. There is mystery in his work and a deep godless spirituality. It is these combined aspects of the divine and monumentalism which for me link Pollock, Rothko and the Abstract Expressionists to some of the art and architecture being created today and illustrative of a further shift in consciousness.

**Twenty-first Century Consciousness in Art and Architecture**

Writing at the start of the twenty-first century, Settegast makes the case for there being no single pattern or narrative that can explain today’s world in a meaningful way. Over the course of the twentieth century, the human-centred rational perspective underpinning the creation of art was taken apart piece by piece and replaced with new and often very personal explanations of reality. For Settegast, the most ambitious and perhaps productive attempts at this are those that ‘try to see the world from all sides as well as inside out’ (Settegast, 2001, p. 3). In the search for meaning in the three works below, I will take for granted the emphasis on dissolution of form and the search for multiple and changing viewpoints. It is the exploration of our human relationship with nature that is distinctive about these pieces. These artists and architects create outside or in vast internal spaces in order to fully express the scale and force of nature. Human smallness and vulnerability is highlighted by juxtaposition with the mythic proportions of nature. These divine spaces gently require that we contemplate the human condition for a moment. Whilst not proposing a comprehensive narrative for contemporary art or society, I use the term ‘monumental elementalism’ useful to capture the expression of these ideas.
Another Place, Crosby Beach, Antony Gormley, 2007

This work is made of 100 cast iron figures, facing out to sea at Crosby beach, near Liverpool in the UK. Each figure is 6’2” tall and weighs 650 kg. As the tide ebbs and flows, the figures are submerged and reappear. Visitors to the beach pose and play with the statues and some have been decorated.

Here, the archaic is represented by the presence of the ocean, not as a drawing or symbol but as part of the work. This human figure emerges from the water and exists as part of its ebb and flow. His cool, vacant gaze is mythic, reminiscent of the Egyptians, experiencing cosmic forces through the body as he contemplates the infinity of sea and sky. The first point of reference is the human figure, yet he is not perfect. These are casts of the artist himself in all his flaws and imperfections. Our hyper-rational world is referenced by the passing ships crossing the globe in grid-like shipping lanes. Yet the figure is all too human in scale and realism. As the sands shift and the tides move, this work is constantly changing, a magical ongoing transformation of perspective and experience. The playfulness of the magical is evident in how visitors respond to the statues, decorating them, painting them and making their own works of art with the figure as an extra. The figures stand in a group, underlining our collective experience yet the message is perhaps about our human vulnerability when confronted with the nature and the cosmos. These structures are integrated into an experiential whole and nature herself is the new divine.
Gormley captures eloquently the monumental and cosmic aspects of his work. He says about the exploration of the human relationship with nature: ‘The seaside is a good place to do this. Here time is tested by tide, architecture by the elements and the prevalence of sky seems to question the earth's substance. In this work human life is tested against planetary time. This sculpture exposes to light and time the nakedness of a particular and peculiar body. It is no hero, no ideal, just the industrially reproduced body of a middle-aged man trying to remain standing and trying to breathe, facing a horizon busy with ships moving materials and manufactured things around the planet’ (visitliverpool.com, 2018).
The Weather Project, Olafur Eliasson, 2003-4

In ‘The Weather Project’, Eliasson used the Turbine Hall of the Tate Gallery, formerly the Bankside Power Station, to create a space where visitors could lose themselves in an experience of sun and sky. Mist filled the hall, creating light, blurry clouds that moved and disappeared. Looking upwards, the ceiling dissolved into a mirror reflecting the floor and the people below. The lights in the sun arc made no colours visible except for yellow and black, leaving the visitor in an unknown and magical world of experience.

The experience of stepping into ‘The Weather Project’ was like moving from one world to another: from the densely-packed, noisy landscape of central London into a place that exists outside time and space. Bankside Power Station, built in 1947 in the post-war rebuild effort in London, serves as a reminder of the rational, industrial society that Britain was at the start of the twentieth century and the post-rationalism that would transform it into a world-leading art gallery. Walking into the space, like most visitors, I dropped to the floor, looking up into the mirrored roof of the Turbine Hall, sinking into the warm and cavernous emptiness of the installation. My human body became diaphanous, the veil between other realms lifted momentarily. Perhaps, Eliasson intended the suspension of rational consciousness.

Lying down, receptive to something distantly familiar but essentially unknown, this was the remembering of the archaic void. There was magic, too, in the mist and play of colour and space and time. Yet walking through the space, the construct of the lighting and the mist were exposed, like a magician revealing his sleight of hand. There was no trickery intended, only perhaps to cause a moment’s pause and reflection.

Eliasson talked about elementalism in relation to this project: ‘The weather has been so fundamental to shaping our society that one can argue that every aspect of life – economic, political, technical, cultural, emotional – is linked to or derived from it. Over the centuries, defending ourselves from the weather has proved even more important than protecting ourselves from each other in the form of war and violence. If you cannot withstand the weather, you cannot survive’ (tate.org.uk, 2018). For Eliasson, our relationship with nature is paramount to our own survival. He puts nature at the heart of his work and shows us in the experience of ‘The Weather Project’ how powerful a force it is. I read this as a challenge to the values of rational and post-rational consciousness and an invitation to rethink our social, economic and political priorities. Perhaps he is also suggesting that only nature can bring us to fully integral consciousness.
Bosco Verticale, Milan, 2014

In the ‘Bosco Verticale’ in Milan, architects Stefano Boeri Architetti set out to create a sustainable building that was also an example of urban reforestation. Although a strikingly Modernist building, this vertical forest encapsulates integrated consciousness in urban architecture. This is a rational, apartment block, compact and designed to enable dense urban dwelling. Its verticality is part rational common sense in that it makes the most use of expensive city real estate. And it is part Gothic cathedral reaching for the heavens, striving to elevate our twenty-first century selves above the daily grind on the streets below. Yet these blocks have become magical. Trees, shrubs and plants wrap themselves around the vertical concrete, curling and weaving in elemental patterns. This forest literally flies high above the cityscape. There is a mythic quality to the appearance of these blocks, standing immense in the middle of the city landscape. This is nature on a monumental scale, not undisturbed and left to ebb and flow as with Gormley or recreated with technical expertise like Eliasson. Here, nature is crafted to suit human purposes yet left to thrive and grow. The building’s situation between earth and sky is perhaps a reminder of the ancient archaic as Romanshyn describes it, unifying the dark-light (Romanshyn, 2007). Here, the ground is connected to the heavens, the human combines with the elemental and hard, straight lines of concrete co-exist with vibrant greenery.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosco_Verticale
Location: Porta Nuova, Milan, Italy
Conclusion

What I have described here is a consciousness emerging in the twenty-first century which is fluid, moving from alert, rational states to introspective contemplation, from a sense of archaic oneness, to magical playfulness and alchemy, and on to mythic proportionality. In the art and architecture of monumental elementalism, there is a strong sense of the emergence of divinity in nature, of the universal need for earth’s medicine particularly now, as we enter into an ecological crisis on our planet. Our awareness of human smallness and vulnerability is acute. This art is situated in nature yet created with advanced technology to carry its message. The products of rationalism are used in functional ways, no longer celebrated as achievements in human development but used to underpin the creation of art that raises profound questions: how can we live on earth? how do we survive in climate chaos? what is illusion and what is reality? where is the divine?

I believe that we are now in a threshold period in which the principles and predominance of rational consciousness are being dismantled. We could move forward or backwards from this point. In this liminal place, we have a heightened awareness of the entire spectrum of human consciousness.

We understand the importance of living in this range in order to fully experience and survive life on earth. Feuerstein says that the integral worldview will be accessible and understandable through ‘direct participation’ (Combs, 2001, 103). The more we experience art and architecture that asks that we engage with it directly either by living in it, lying under it or walking around it, the closer we will come to understanding and living in integral consciousness.

References


