

Nell Tenhaaf

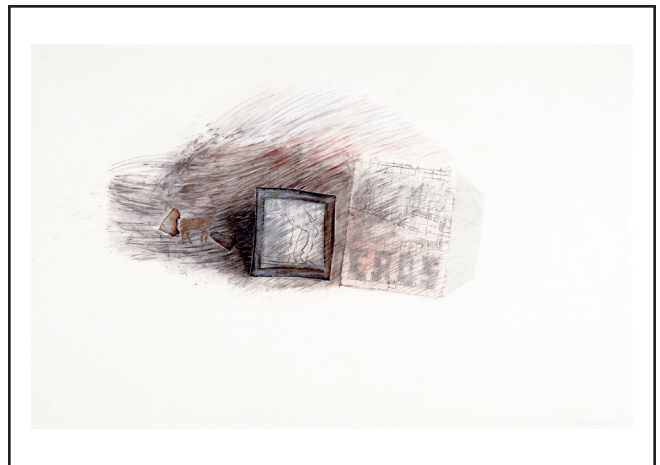
EROS & LOGOS

Eros and Logos: Two Drawings by Nell Tenhaaf

BY BRIAN GRISON

Artist's Statement (2006)

NELL TENHAAF



Eros and Logos: two drawings by Nell Tenhaaf

By Brian Grison, 2008

In 1999, Nell Tenhaaf described her art practice as a reflection of her interest in the “cultural assumptions hidden in the supposedly neutral representations of biology”.¹ At that time she was concerned with the language of biological representation. In the late 1980s, she applied similar critical thinking to representations of body and gender dualities as indicators of the manipulation of language for political power, in both historic and contemporary cultures. In the two drawings *Eros* (1988) and *Logos* (1988) that

Nell Tenhaaf
Eros, 1988

graphite and coloured pencil
drawing with ink and collage on
paper
(66 x 101.6 cm)
SAG 2004.08.04
Gift of Bill Jeffries

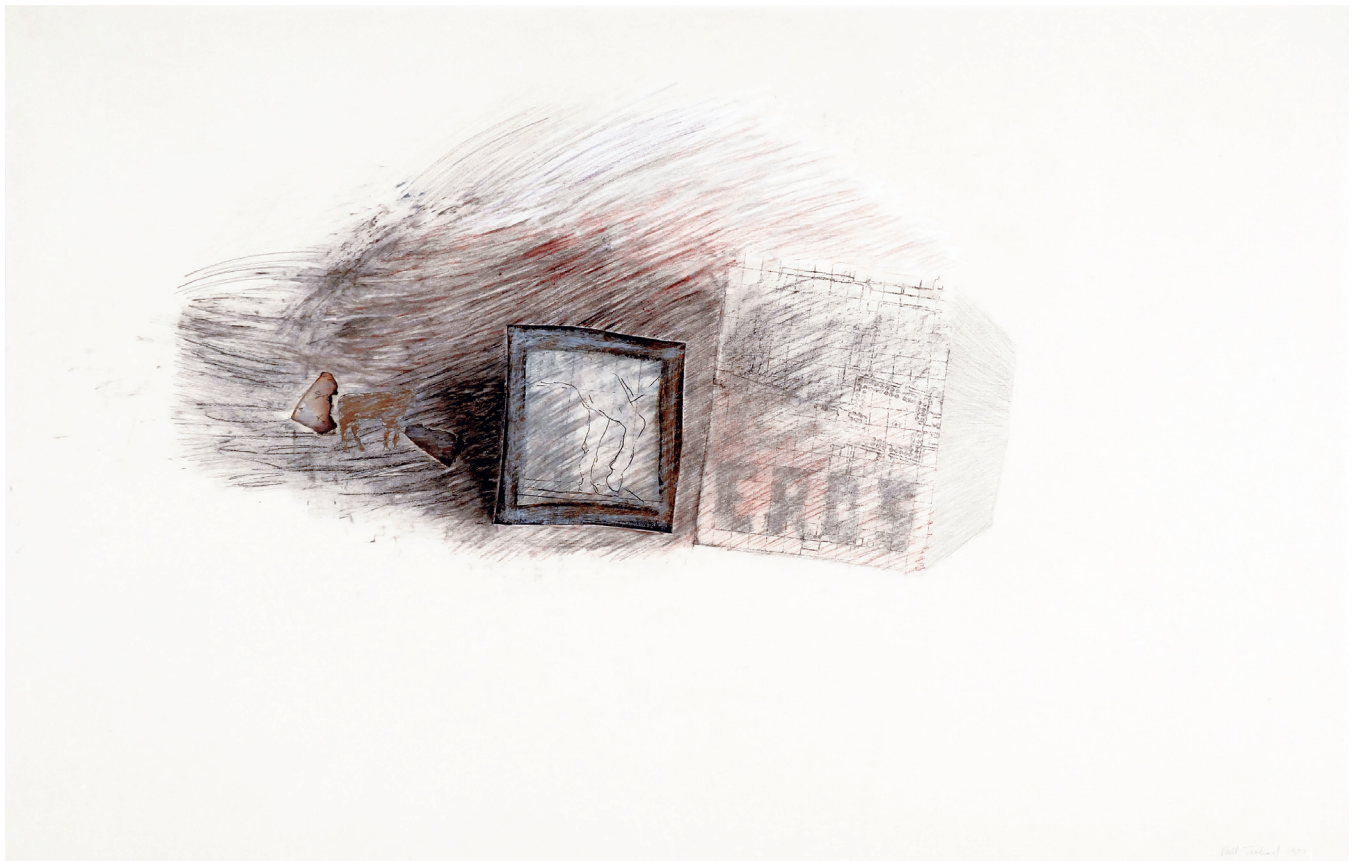
Photographs by Scott Massey

Tenhaaf produced during this period, she focused on some of the problematic dualities that pervade contemporary Western culture's self-construction.

According to Tenhaaf, some of the common conceptual dualities are emotion versus thinking, nature versus culture, knowledge versus power and the constructed polarities of the feminine and masculine, as represented by eros and logos. In her 2006 Artist's Statement, Tenhaaf described these dualities as the conceptual framework for theoretical deconstructions "which was the prevailing mode of the time," in the late 1980s.² By inferring that modes of critical discourse shift over time, she implies that the ways of imagining one's self and the world are

not permanent; they suggest the possibility that the oppressive social and political conditions of the time have diminished.

Tenhaaf's interest in this theme of apparent contradictions in self-imaging processes resides specifically in the Judeo-Christian political dimensions of these concepts rather than in pre-modern, or in indigenous cultures' ways of describing the world. She qualifies this rather sweeping claim by referring to "what was generally excluded from rational discourse: the mythical origins of both images and language," an idea which, in itself, recognizes two dualities.³ These are the matriarchal and patriarchal as well as the image/word problem of semiotics.

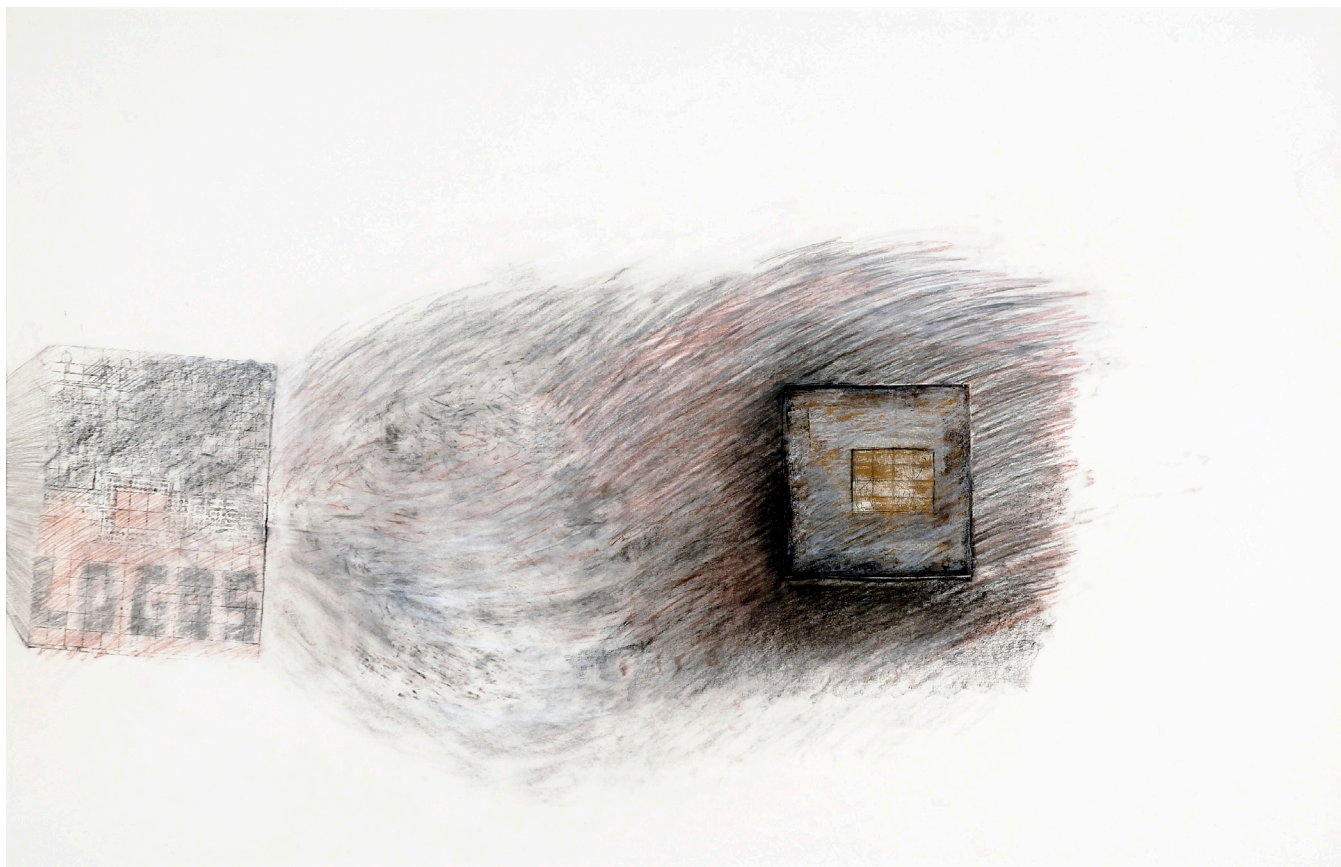


Nell Tenhaaf, *Eros*, 1988, graphite and coloured pencil drawing with ink and collage on paper (66 x 101.6 cm) SAG 2004.08.04
Gift of the Bill Jeffries. Photograph by Scott Massey.

The specific “rational discourse” she refers to was the agenda of *The Great Pharaoh Ramses II and His Time: an Exhibition of Antiquities from the Egyptian Museum, Cairo*, an exhibition of Egyptian art at the Palais de la Civilization in Montreal in 1985, in which the significance of matriarchal concepts and representations in Egyptian art was suppressed in the component of the display that focused on the god Ramses, the dominant representation of the ‘masculine’ in ancient Egypt. Tenhaaf responded with ... *believable, but not necessarily true*, an installation presented at the Galerie J. Yahouda-Meir in Montreal 1987. This solo exhibition, with its several sculptures and an interactive videotex database, was intended

to introduce “the viewer to the matriarchal presence in Egyptian culture.”⁴ Although not included in the exhibition, the drawings *Eros* and *Logos* deal with the same themes based on Egyptian imagery. These drawings, on large sheets of cream paper, could easily have been made as tools of visualization as Tenhaaf developed the concepts of her installation. In fact, the drawings loosely resemble storyboards, a common visualization tool employed by directors in the film industry, and this could have been their unconscious purpose.

Eros is drawn with graphite, charcoal, white and sanguine conté, collage, transfer drawing, pen-and-ink and gold pencil crayon or watercolour. Its

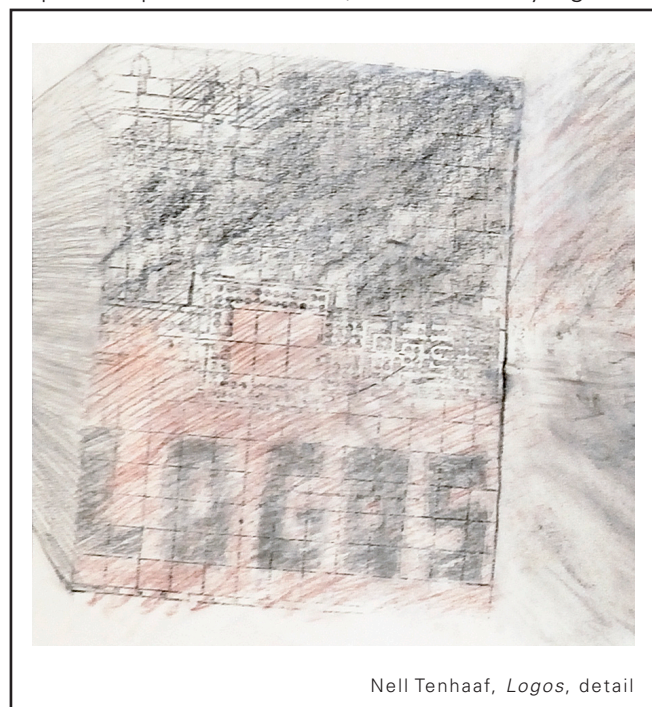


Nell Tenhaaf, *Logos*, 1988, graphite and coloured pencil drawing with ink and collage on paper (66 x 101.6 cm) SAG 2005.07.01
Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Scott Massey.

subject is esoteric, and the content is arranged in an apparent chronology of mysterious events. The narrative unfolds from the left. Two small pieces of paper, possibly with burnt edges, and possibly torn from a personal hand written letter, tumble about in a kind of dusty whirlwind on either side of an image of a gold-coloured cow facing toward the right. To the right of this cow and the scraps of a collaged letter, a rough collaged drawing of a nearly square picture frame contains a pen-and-ink sketch of the front legs of a cow, the right leg raised as if the animal is slowly walking forward. Unlike the smaller cow to the left, this one appears to be standing on a low rectangular plinth, suggesting that it is a sculpture rather than an actual cow. From behind the framed drawing, a long shadow reaches to the left, suggesting the illusion of pictorial depth. The frame is black and brown, with white smeared over it. To the right of the framed drawing, a larger rectangular shape leans over at the same angle. This rectangle contains a collaged copy of an old map of Pompeii, perhaps cut, traced or photocopied from a book, and overlaid by a grid. At

the base of this rectangle, the grid becomes a matrix for the word EROS in capital letters toned with graphite. Some of the gestures on the left, which suggest a kind of whirlwind, reach across the sheet of paper, pass behind the image of the picture frame, and encroach on the map.

Logos, continues this parable of esoteric metaphoric content floating in, or being blown along, by some kind of storm. Tenhaaf has placed the drawing, the same image of a map of Pompeii, near the left edge of the drawing. Behind the map, pencil lines converge toward a vanishing point off the left edge of the picture plane to suggest extreme depth of field. This also implies that the map is applied to the front of a cube-like form. At the bottom of the gridded map, the word, LOGOS, toned with graphite, has replaced the word EROS. To the right of this cube-like form, the storm of indefinable raging elements swirls off to the right. On the right half of the drawing, Tenhaaf has collaged a small square of darkly toned paper with a window draw in its centre. The window is carefully gridded, or barred. The same cow, drawn in pen-and-ink with gold and white washes, stands behind the window facing right. The implication of the confined cow as a symbol of matriarchal power, in the control of a masculine culture is obvious. To the right of this cell-like shape or structure, the storm ends abruptly, leaving the right quarter of the sheet of paper blank – and expectant.



Nell Tenhaaf, *Logos*, detail

Tenhaaf probably based the image of the cow from one of the Egyptian murals images of the goddess Hathor in the form of a cow. The cow that Tenhaaf draws does not have Hathor's identifying symbols of V-shaped horns rising to the sky which support the disk of the masculine sun god Ra. For the artist, her cow drawing nevertheless represents Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love, joy, motherhood,

music and dance. According to Tenhaaf, “the special focus that I reserved for the cow is due to its ancient veneration as mother goddess... Although it is harder to imagine today, at the time of these drawings it was somewhat risky for a feminist artist to celebrate female goddesses.”⁵

Tenhaaf is also aware of the dual characteristic of Hathor. In the guise of the Sun Goddess Sekhmet, and depicted as a woman with a lion’s head, Hathor represents the destructive forces of nature. As Sekhmet, also known as the Eye of Ra, Hathor was sent down to the Earth to punish humans who were ignoring Ra.

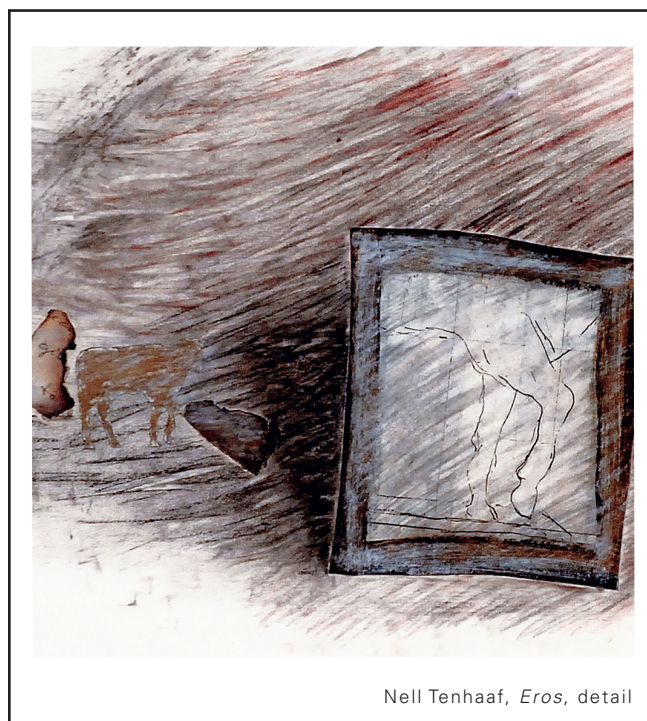
There are four representations of the same cow in *Eros* and *Logos*. In both drawings the cow is represented by an image within an image in two of the three representations. The cow is twice represented as an image inside a frame suggestive of a television screen, an image from the digitized world of masculine dominance of nature through technology. In one drawing, the cow is represented as a sculpture, an object of worship that evokes a more ancient feminist paganism that the Jews experienced as they wandered toward Israel from Egypt. The gold coloured cow is a direct reference to pagan worship of matriarchal energy. In *Eros* the golden cow is free, but in *Logos* she is not.

Eros and *Logos* might be examples of a kind of meditative doodling on a particular feminist theme set within a time-line from prehistory to the present. Despite having no direct relationship to ...*believable, if not always true*, Tenhaaf must have felt compelled to work in a manner that was more intuitive, more magical, and more personal than her pedagogic and political projects.

Twenty years after she made these drawings, it is paramount that humans acknowledge and honour the dual reality of nature that Hathor represents. Increasingly, nature is defending itself against human exploitation of the planet. Are modern humans living out the Egyptian myth of the dialectic of Hathor and Sekhmet? Humankind must relearn to nurture and protect the planet, as a kind of worship of the matriarchal energy of a nature that sustains us.

Notes

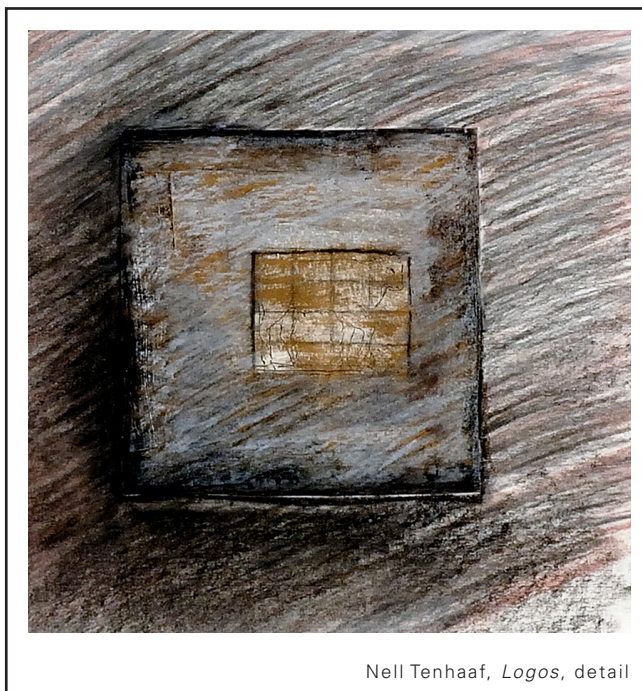
- 1 Nell Tenhaaf, “Nurturing the Artificial.” *So, To Speak* Ed. Gilbert, J. P., Sylvie Gilbert and Lesley Johnston. (Montréal: Artex Editions, 1999) 97.
- 2 Nell Tenhaaf, “Artist’s Statement (2006),” *Nell Tenhaaf: Eros and Logos* (Open Book), (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 2011), 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 4 A video tour of the ... *believable, but not necessarily true* installation is available on the CCCA website (accessed July 14, 2011).
- 5 Tenhaaf, *op. cit.*, 6.



Nell Tenhaaf, *Eros*, detail

Artist's Statement (2006)

The two drawings *Logos* and *Eros* came out of a period in the late 1980s when I was preoccupied with the many polarities that underlay our sense of ourselves as humans: emotion/thought, nature/culture, knowledge/power, female/male. I wanted to address these binary constructions not so much by deconstructing them, which was the prevailing mode of the time, but by foregrounding what was generally excluded from rational discourse: the mythical origins of both images and language. The special focus that I reserved for the cow is due to its ancient veneration as mother goddess in various cultures. Although it is harder to imagine today, at the time of these drawings it was somewhat risky for a feminist artist to celebrate female goddesses.



Nell Tenhaaf, *Logos*, detail

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13750 88 Avenue
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
Phone: 604-501-5566
artgallery@surrey.ca
www.surrey.ca/arts
www.surreytechlab.ca



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