Circles Of Possibility: Approaching The Art Of Mikala Dwyer

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At the edge of the circle, there might be a moment of hesitation, a second or two of sudden, irrational uncertainty. On the threshold of this portentously demarcated space — a series of pillars, variously adorned with handmade and found objects, serve as peculiar markers of a loosely enclosing circumference — you might pause to consider whether or not to enter. You might ask whether it is appropriate, or perhaps *wise*, to cross the implied boundary. You might wonder what special significance has been granted to this elaborately separated and decorated zone. You might even sense an evocation of the spiritual or the sacred in the selection of (possibly) totemic objects and the configuration of (potentially) charged symbols; you might intuit suggestions that the complex staging of this scenario relates to some unidentifiable, surely unsettling, ritual purpose.

You *might*... But then you might also stand at the edge of one of these apparently mysterious and orderly arrangements — assemblies of objects that are variously remade and reconfigured in Mikala Dwyer's ongoing and ever-altering *Additions and Subtractions* series — and contemplate an eccentric, junky *dis*order. Rather than seeing these evolving, shape-shifting works as unified, formal spaces, conceivably designed to maximise mystical resonance or symbolic potency, the irregular, unpolished characteristics of these strange enclosures could have a distracting and defining impact. For despite the imposing theatrical presence of these sculptural circles, much of what they have contained at different times has looked incomplete and unresolved, or precarious and preposterous. The pillars used by Dwyer are sometimes sleek, lanky pyramids or witch-hat cones — austere imposing presences, perhaps, but also perversely over-sized, excessive gestures towards 'magical' promise. (Looking back, a miniature version of the charged circles, entitled *Swamp Geometry* (2008), also has some of this pronounced absurdity.) *Additions and Subtractions* has included slender gallery plinths that support a miscellany of odd objects, many of which have been, for instance, roughly crafted one-of-a-kind clay ornaments: lumpy painted blobs packed with multiple copper coins; bulbous oversized baubles dangling from coloured threads; bundles of imprecisely rendered clay rings, clusters of small circles proliferating within the larger, grander circle of display.

But there is also little that is standardised about this *system* of display. Frequently, as in a version at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane in 2012, plinths have here and there been dispensed with altogether and replaced by antique tables or other, weirder, 'found' supports. Often, the standard practical principle of the plinth is rejected or inverted, with groups of unlikely objects — glass jars in the IMA version, bottles of Bushmills whiskey in a Dublin manifestation — put to absurd use as vulnerable supports for bulky sculptural objects, or indeed, for other heavy pedestals. Generally, though, each member in Mikala Dwyer's family of plinths, at each variously well-attended family gathering, has its own idiosyncratic personality: each is a different height, each is distinctly accessorised. And yet there are several at these esoteric gatherings, that despite the evident effort, could be dressed with just a touch more refinement. Some of these *Additions and Subtractions* installations involve a notable lack of decorum and propriety, no doubt acknowledging their roots in the punky glamour of Dwyer's earlier practice. More than one, as already noted, keeps bottles of booze close at hand. Others have packs of cigarettes taped crudely to their sides. The overall effect is of an underlying subjective unruliness within the 'objective' layout — recalling other, obviously linked, though less ominously paranormal work, such as the health-and-safety flouting *Smoking, Drinking Sculpture* (2006), a zone of temporary vodka-binging delinquency facilitated by Dwyer within a tightly demarcated space. The tone of this latter piece is notably contrary to the 'spells' she has cast in special sections of other exhibitions (such as at ACCA), creating very different spaces of intensity in galleries. But Dwyer repeatedly plays on such contradictory suggestions of the 'spirit' world within her evocatively ritualistic scenes, pairing apparently 'straight' ghost-hunting with gestures of determined unruliness and untidiness, by turns displaying organisational discipline and sustaining a desire for material imperfection and unpredictable action.

The *Additions and Subtractions* series combines decorousness with inventive chaos.

Speculative allusions to regulated modes of ceremony clash with a manifest attitude of committed, highly considered half-heartedness. Something is proposed and at the same time undermined. Something is added; something is taken away. We could describe this incessant push and pull as the basis of a necessary artistic tension, or as a style of mischievous play. But Dwyer might also be said to have drawn us into her long-term process of endless artistic circling. She is first of all propelled towards a vague possibility of out-of-the-ordinary discovery, towards revelatory otherworldly experience. Then gradually she is forced to veer in a new direction, as she is drawn towards the powerful gravity of material actuality, towards empirical fact. Yet somehow a degree of mystery continually reasserts itself in the effort to apprehend the actual, and so her art swerves back once more towards the search for an elusive, deeper knowledge of our awkward, resistant reality. Dwyer sets up situations in which she seems to be always 'orbiting' something that cannot quite be approached. She has spoken of how her interest in forms of occult ritual arises from the manner in which 'they articulate or frame voids'. What might emerge from contact with these voids, she confesses, 'keeps me on edge — they offer the poetic possibility that just maybe something will appear'.[1] The ideal circle that is central to such 'organising systems' is valued as 'a tight form of geometry, a completely closed system — a psychic fortress that can hold together disparate thoughts and objects'.[2] Her own circles, however, seem more open: they are made from broken lines and they have multiple points of entry. They are more 'provisional' as spaces than the reference to geometry might imply. In Dwyer's work, circles become 'holding patterns',[3] zones of possibility, but also of delay. They are zones of simultaneous anticipation and frustration.

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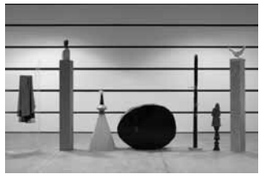
In the introduction to *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve writes of art as having 'perhaps… no other generality than to signify that meaning is possible'.[4] Considered as a set of distinctive 'symbolic exchanges', art is described by de Duve as 'nothing but the empty square that sets them in motion'.[5] Swap 'square' for 'circle' as an organising system and a neat correspondence opens up with Mikala Dwyer's spaces of 'poetic possibility'. For de Duve — who at the opening of his book reflects on the construct of art as if he were 'from outer space'[6] — it is of fundamental importance to note the 'autonomous place' granted to art, by at least some societies, is a sphere of culture pitched 'with magic and religion on one side and science on the other'.[7] Art is understood to inhabit a designated though indeterminate locus 'at the intersection of magical *action* and scientific *knowledge*'.[8] Within this space, de Duve argues, 'artistic *making* attributes a symbolic power to the things it names, at times gathering together, at times dispersing, human communities'.[9]



Hesitating at the threshold of Dwyer's *Additions and Subtractions*, or moving around the shifting edges of installation such as *The Silvering* (2012) — a hovering, shimmering constellation of circular, silver-foil balloons — is to experience a moment when, in terms comparable to those applied by de Duve, we might recognise art itself *as* a threshold zone. (De Duve writes of art as 'marking one of the thresholds where humans withdraw from their natural condition and where their universe sets itself to signifying.')[10] De Duve's alien observer would no doubt take note of Dwyer's tendency to envisage ambiguous realms between the rational and the irrational. He would surely pick up on the way she designs strange situations that point both towards and away from reality. He might enjoy, for instance, the way *The Silvering* seems to suggest an aspirational loftiness — as the inflated, shining circles float upwards, escaping earthly bonds — *and* an acceptance of physical laws and limits, as over time the balloons begin to deflate, sinking steadily back towards solid ground. (There's a knowing nod too, of course, to the casual, commercially attuned airiness of Warhol's *Silver Clouds*.) In any case, faced with these dual, contradictory messages, such an observer might, like the rest of us, hesitate about how to 'perform' or 'understand'. Performance, and dressing up, it might be added, are further features of Dwyer's ambiguous occult stagings: frequently, she creates ritualistic, hooded garments for strange, collective acts — one such returns us to a moment of communal, infant defecation, allowing us within the institutional

setting of a formal gallery space to explore the unsettling implications of what our rational civilisation pushes to the margins of thought and 'decency'.

But if the presentation of paradox is a conceptual priority for Dwyer, it is important to stress the wild, wonderful ludicrousness with which she brings extreme opposites together. We could here take note, for instance, of how much is packed into the title of the installation work *Panto Collapsar* (2013). Here the theatrical genre of pantomime — a highly coded type of 'low' comedy, one that regularly turns towards its audience for fourth-wall-breaking, call-and-response participation — is paired with something that exists outside human experience, well beyond our capacity for potential contact. This is a 'collapsar', a collapsed star, a *black hole* — a point in space of unimaginable density and destructive force. It is something that can barely be detected, but that reveals itself through its influence on surrounding systems. It is something, just maybe, that could only ever be circled — never entered. What happens, then, when Dwyer forces these radically unlike concepts to collide? Are we asked to imagine a variety of pantomime's lighthearted fairy-story entertainment that has taken on the unbearable internal dynamics of a massive imploded stellar object? Or should we comprehend the final collapse of a vast heavenly body as an occasion of commonplace comedy? Dying stars have, of course, a definite and distant relevance to our eventual human fate. But Dwyer puts forward the head-spinning proposition that this future could be described as a kind of ordinary, predictable comedy. Such cosmological catastrophe is too much for human consciousness — and human comedy — to grasp, but Dwyer nevertheless seems to call out, panto-style, '*Look out, it's behind you!*'

Vladimir Nabokov once wrote admiringly of how Nikolai Gogol's stories have a way of giving one 'the sensation of something ludicrous and at the same time stellar, lurking constantly around the corner'.[11] It was a delightful, telling accident, in Nabokov's view, that 'the difference between the comic side of things and their cosmic side depends upon one sibilant…'[12] Mikala Dwyer's art seems similarly intent on encouraging a close association between the comic and the cosmic, much as it plays on the improbability of this relationship. The connections and disconnections of her work could force from us a slightly nervous form of laughter, but in their tendency to highlight paradox they may also trigger unfamiliar forms of thinking, a premise perhaps akin to Alain Badiou's argument that philosophy takes place in situations of radical incommensurability between opposing ideas.[13] In the various parts of *Panto Collapsar* we can, here and there, see implied *connections* to real-life issues. When staged in Dublin at the Project Arts Centre, the lurid gold paint and excessive adornment of *Additions and Subtractions* seemed to have unavoidable associations with the desperate downturn in the national and global economy: the conspicuous 'wealth' was rendered pathetically, chaotically ridiculous. But Dwyer also *disconnects* us from these recognisable concerns. As in *Goldene Bend'er* at ACCA — a filmed performance of gold-clad bodies from BalletLab — the preciousness of this colour is powerfully highlighted as the central, obsessive focus of alchemy, a practice and belief system that, like art as de Duve sees it, sits somewhere between magic and science. At the same time, crucially, gold is a precious metal that has its material origins in the intense heat of exploding stars. It is a substance that functions as a marker of economic shifts in human societies, and it has associations with much that lies beyond immediate, organised, observable human reality.

If there are stories about the modern world in Dwyer's art (and her art often alludes to the violent realities of modern, rational civilisation) they are composed in a manner that both anxiously complicates our relation to the world and frustrates our expectations of stories. Jorg Heiser has written of how contemporary art is often thought to be 'the sort of culture that could tell us a story about a better life, or at least about better home decoration'.[14] But its real power, he says, is to be 'nothing but a black hole — nothing but embarrassing pauses, comic stumbling blocks, silent intermezzos'.[15] As we might similarly discover with Mikala Dwyer's compelling 'voids', if we don't turn away dissatisfied 'or flee into feigned approval' at the disconcerting event horizon of art, then just maybe, as Heiser suggests, 'something happens'.[16]

[1] Mikala Dwyer, '500 Words', Artforum, 15 March 2012, http://artforum.com/words/id=30502; accessed 26 April 2013.
[2] ibid.
[3] ibid.
[4] Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp. 5–6.
[5] ibid., p. 6.
[6] ibid., p. 3.
[7] ibid., p. 5.
[8] ibid., p. 5.
[9] ibid., p. 5.
[10] ibid., p. 5.
[11] Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, Penguin Classics, London, 2011 (first published by New Directions, 1944), p. 120.
[12] ibid., p. 120.
[13] See Alain Badiou & Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009.
[14] Jorg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2008, p. 16.
[15] ibid., p. 16.
[16] ibid., p. 16.