

# The Real Thing

## Linda Michael

*On the right side of the meadow a large cannon latrine has been built, a well-planned and durable construction... We look for something better. Scattered about everywhere there are separate, individual boxes for the same purpose. They are square, neat boxes with wooden sides all round, and have unimpeachably satisfactory seats... We move three together in a ring and sit down comfortably. For two hours we have been here without getting up... We feel ourselves for the time being better off than in any palatial white-tiled 'convenience'. There it can only be hygienic; here it is beautiful.*

— Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Mikala Dwyer thinks of her exhibition *Goldene Bend'er* as articulating a two-way passage through the body. Whether a human body or an architectural body, it is gravity-bound, tied down just as plumbing ties our buildings to the earth. It also moves between painting, performance and sculpture, between base matter and gold, between parent and child.

The exhibition's essential and related components — the circle, shit and gold — take different guises in the three linked galleries. In the first is a wall painting in gold and silver, a target of concentric colour rings marking a hole in one corner. In the second we encounter the residue of a performance — costumes, sculptural elements and a video. The costumes, from brown hessian to gold lamé, with nuggety golden and brown headpieces, hang on one wall. Six white cylindrical stools set in a circle are plinths for sealed perspex cylinders, inside of which is the residue of a shitting performance, one incarnation of which we can watch on the video. It depicts six people sitting on the stools doing a communal shit, under the watchful eye of two circumambulators and to a tense, droning circle of sound. In the third room is a family of three sculptures: one small, shiny and silver, a replica of the artist's mother's ring; the next a larger version in rusty cor-ten steel; and a daddy sculpture, also a giant ring but this time with hideaway compartments out of which spill objects made of clay, glazed in gold or studded with coins.

The first gallery is like an entranceway, empty except for the huge wall painting radiating from one corner, a target set within an even larger silver diamond shape that extends over three gold-painted walls. Its concentric colour rings reach from the floor and cross the ceiling, an intuitive mix of alternating dark and pastel shades, from sunny yellow to black, that together create a room-sized pull into the vortex. Its title, *Spell for Corner* (2013), suggests it may be trying to heal the corner, or to make it act in a magical way, as a kind of portal. By focusing our gaze into and beyond its black centre — 'the butthole' in Dwyer's words, but also conceivably a mouth or an eye — this painting loosens architectural boundaries.

It is a gentle preparation, a 'colour bath' that softens our encounter with the work that follows and later washes us back into the world. Compared to the live performance the painting seems strangely inert, though its metallic flatness highlights the room's imperfections, the history of human activity on its surfaces. It recalls the ocular targets painted on or protruding from the garments in Dwyer's *Hanging Eyes* (1999), and the central letter in her numerous versions of *I.O.U.*, the nothing and everything in the middle of subject and object.

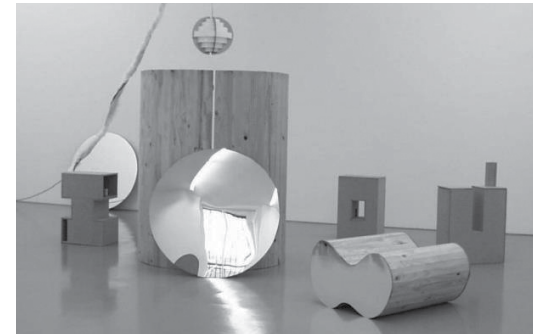
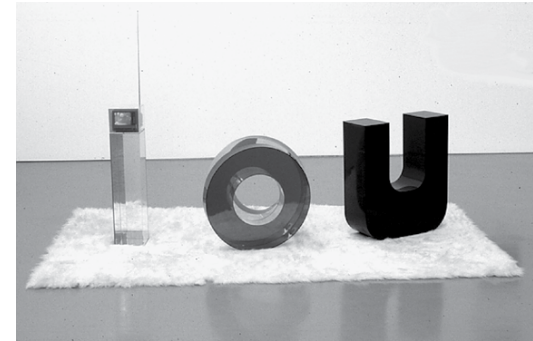
We can see through the gallery doorway to other circles: a circle of stools and a sculpture with a large hole in the far room. The painting is an anticipatory, preparatory work. Circles are everywhere.

A shitting performance took place in the following room on opening night, a curious mix of the literal and metaphorical, base and heightened, abject and formal. In a darkened gallery, six people — naked beneath sheer gold costumes, with large rock-shaped, gold-coloured headpieces — sat on low stools in a circle with their backs to the audience, defecating into plastic canisters set into the stools, or trying to. Two masters of ceremony, high priests, shamans or fascists (take your pick) — one dressed in a hessian robe with a high, elongated headpiece smeared in brown, the other in sequined gold lamé with a gold headpiece — walked around and through the circle, both in protection of and lordling over the sitters. (Dwyer's art has been described before as acting out both the parent and the child.)

All participants were anonymous, and the focus was not drawn to their nakedness as much as to their inner workings. The event was a literal embodiment of performance anxiety, at its most fundamental. Some sitters were restless, others barely moved for the two-hour duration, several got results. Unlike Wim Delvoye's digesting machine at *Mona, Cloaca Professional* (2010), people don't shit on cue. Yet *Goldene Bend'er*'s very communality loosened anxiety — at least the anxiety of the viewers — by publicly displaying what in our society is private and unacknowledged. In being there, viewers were effectively drawn into the performance; participating by proxy, we could not deny what is usually washed away, or our familiarity with the act. Many viewers stood looking quietly, mesmerised by the ritual and its mysteries; some circled periodically, keen to inspect the offerings and to check on progress. It was a strangely religious ritual, intense and quiet, and reminded one viewer of an experience recounted fondly in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, of soldiers defecating together. It was generous and brave and shocking. We were offered the real thing. The truth of its product could not be negated or aestheticised: 'There is this to be said for the muck-heap, that it does not lie', as Victor Hugo wrote.<sup>2</sup>

To shit in public is to do something very much out of place. But here, a formal, sober ritual became the containing architecture within which it and we temporarily belonged. It created a space wherein we could recognise our basic interconnectedness and ordinariness. Dwyer has set many collections of objects in circular formation, somehow drawing out their associative power; as with those, this living, breathing circle prompted both a disinterested spectatorial stance and a more primitive response.

Following the opening, the costumes worn by the performers and the soiled canisters — now emptied (but not cleaned), sealed and set atop the stools — were presented as sculptures, accompanied by a large video projection documenting an earlier version of the performance. Dwyer did not leave the waste out, turning the shit into a fetish, instead there was residue of affect; material vestige allowed imaginations to



run from the missing object to the much cooler objects in the following room. Like Manzoni's invisible shit in its can, its meta-phorical potential was given full rein.

In retrospect, the performance could be seen as a logical step for Dwyer's art. Twenty years prior she had filled a wall with second-hand, and doubtless smelly, shoes in sealed plastic containers. Here she presented sealed plastic containers, emptied but not entirely cleaned of fecal matter. As fellow artist Gail Hastings wrote of the earlier work, the shoes 'were sanitised for society's sake... all God-forsaken smells of rotting flesh, of living flesh, extinguished, saving our nostrils the distaste of life and its death'.<sup>3</sup> In another work, a basic will to form was visually described by a line of sculptures thumbed out of clay, awkward renditions of the numerals 1 and 2 that anticipated Gelitin's font made of bodily waste, *Das Kakabet*.<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, Dwyer's work has always drawn our attention to what society has banished from view: the plumbing behind the white walls; the abject body, even if until this work it has been 'filth in name' only and so 'far nobler than the thing it signifies'.<sup>5</sup> For example, in *iffytown* (1999) brightly coloured PVC tubes in the shape of periscopes and s-bends intimated a world of plumbing and made us imagine another, less inert world beneath the gallery floor; in *Primavera* in 1992 bedpans and bandages were the stuff of her installation; and in *Perspecta* 1993 she set a toilet seat atop a marble plinth, as the equivalent of the adjacent portrait busts, and draped the intervening sandstone columns in the vestibule of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in sequined fabric.

The third gallery is painted brown and contains three sculptures titled *Hollowwork (ringing)* (2013). All are scaled-up replicas of silver rings regularly worn by Mikala, which were designed and made by her mother, jeweller Dorothy Dwyer. The two simplest forms provide a counterpoint to the performance; they have the precisely articulated, clean lines of modern design, purged of ornament, unsullied by Mikala's characteristic formal corruptions or elaborations. It is as if, in this exhibition, she has separated her work into its opposing component parts

— gold and shit, minimal and excessive, mother and child — and let them stand, for a while, separated and alone. Presenting these forms cold was as brave to her as the shitting performance: one was seen as challenging (to shit in public) the other too easy (to re-present, or channel, work by someone else). Rather than attempt to reconcile her own subjective experiences with the seamless Danish design she grew up with — a driving force behind much earlier work, such as *Hollowware and a Few Solids* (1995) — here she allows her mother's creativity to breathe.

What this paradoxically allows is the recognition of a shared legacy; the ring forms are organic rather than geometric, designed for the body and inspired by natural structures such as bones. Their contours align with 1960s organic abstraction by artists such as Inge King and Barbara Hepworth, although unworn, as here, the pure geometry of the circle dominates. By scaling the rings up and having them industrially made in hard materials, Dwyer pushes them towards minimalism, making them more impersonal — one relates through its material to the body of the ACCA building rather than to human flesh. Thus they bring her mother's work closer to hers, as well as the reverse. Dwyer sees the three sculptures in this room as pelvic bones, as a chain of bones linking generations.

Nonetheless, the performance and these sculptures sit at the edges of Dwyer's practice: in one there were moments in which viewers were confronted by literal, unsublimated shit; and the others are highly finished, industrially produced and formal. Both are portals of a type, one physical, the others imaginative. Most art sits somewhere in between, the product of a sublimated anal drive, according to Freud, and indeed Dwyer's work has always alerted viewers to the mechanics of containment. Or, as artist Martin Creed put it: 'Nearly every day, whether you like it or not, you make shit... Shit happens, and you cannot ignore it. Working is a matter of trying to come to terms with, to face up to, what comes out of you'.<sup>6</sup> (Of course, the same idea is often given a negative spin, characterising art as a waste product worth no more than a pile of manure, other than as manipulated by capitalist institutions.)

The third sculpture returns us to a more familiar Dwyer. Shiny gold nuggets and clay lumps — a child's primordial gifts — spill out of a parent form, a giant wooden ring painted black with a little shelf on one side and a trapdoor in another. Disparate vintage porcelain items have been covered in clay so that their shapes are lumpen, though still recognisable — as bowls, platters, birds, and so on — and unified into a set through Dwyer's application of 'Crackle Goldene', an contemporary-looking bronze-gold glaze. The modernist impulse to remove ornament, to clean up — a homage to her mother's modernism — has been counteracted by the reintroduction of glitz in a new form, and cracks in Dwyer's covering allow parts of the original decorative items to show through. The objects compress layers of time and generations of taste and value; ordinary objects from deceased estates and junk shops become art, another transmutation of shit into gold. These two materials were assigned equal value in several lumps of unfired clay studded with gold coins.

Mikala Dwyer's art is often perceived as messy or grungy, an interpretation that misses its essential reliance on good form. Both qualities are clearly apparent in this exhibition, wherein shit becomes gold becomes art, though the relationship is always unstable and circular, and value never sticks. The geometry of the circle — ancestral, bodily and geometric — abounds. It contains the production of that enlivening substance, shit, which sets language in motion and here becomes transformed in the process, to several finely articulated modernist forms with large holes at their centre, to nuggety forms made of clay and metal, and to ocular targets, among other works. The exhibition thus describes a body that conjoins the material of the earth (grounded-ness) with its movement (rotation), an identification of things that might characterise an alchemist's fantasy.

<sup>1</sup> This essay will focus on the live performance in the gallery, not on the video shown as part of the subsequent exhibition. It is a very different work on video, more confronting: the camera zooms in on the acts of urination and defecation, and circles around at a low level — the arch potty monitor — to a slightly threatening but compelling circular soundtrack ('Circle Piece' by Laurie Scott Baker, performed by Scratch Orchestra, 2009). And the two walkers seem to have more control over the sitters.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by N. Denny, Penguin Books, London, p. 1065.  
<sup>3</sup> Gail Hastings, *Wall to Wall: Ceiling to Floor*, exhibition brochure, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1991, n.p.  
<sup>4</sup> This book presents a defecated alphabet, a new, 'organic' font — stools in the shape of letters, numbers and signs, photographed in the toilet bowl. Gelitin, *Das Kakabet*, Verlag de Buchhandlung Walter Konig, Cologne, 2007.  
<sup>5</sup> Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. by Rodolphe El-Khoury and Nadia Benabid, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 10.  
<sup>6</sup> Martin Creed, quoted in 'Exhibitions: Martin Creed', *Hauser + Wirth*, <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/6/martin-creed/view/>; accessed 1 June 2013.

