The Additions and the Subtractions 2012

Embodied Reason, Functionalist Magic, Animate Objects

Mikala Dwyer's Contribution to the Modern Sculptural Imagination

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Although Mikala Dwyer's work includes painting, performance, sound, and video, it exhibits a particular affinity with what art historian Alex Potts calls 'the sculptural imagination'. For Potts, this term encompasses the shifting concepts and manifestations of sculptural modernity that are underwritten by an ongoing concern with the experience of viewing three-dimensional objects or presences.[1] Various speculative possibilities radiate from this deceptively simple proposition. Making sculpture raises questions about the psychic and social dimensions of subject–object relations and proposes different models of space, embodiment, and vision. Dwyer's art broaches these questions, repeatedly intermingling forms, materials, and objects that symbolise the sacred, childhood, and the 'primitive' with those that suggest the art and thought of secular modernity. Such unsettling of ontological boundaries and distinctions comprises ***the*** organising principle of her practice.

Since 2007, Dwyer has made installations where eclectic collections of sculptures are arranged on the floor in a circle. The circle format and the sculptures that occupy it recall the sacred geometries and fetish objects favoured by ancient religions, many of which engage in ancestor worship, holding that the spirits of the dead inhabit the world of the living. But Dwyer's circle works indulge in another kind of ancestor acknowledgement, by reimagining the inherited forms, materials, and processes of sculpture. Her 2012 circle installation at the Institute of Modern Art, ***The Additions and the Subtractions***, incorporated more than twenty sculptures of widely varying scale, sculptural method, and art-historical provenance, activating multiple crossings between memories of sculpture from disparate art movements, epochs, and cultural sources. In the process, ontological separations between nature and culture, materialism and metaphysics, and the sacred and the profane were both conjured and revoked.

Even a small sample of these sculptures attests to the category confusions endemic to Dwyer's art. A small, wobbly, handmade structure, recalled a scientific molecular model. However, made from wooden cooking skewers and lumps of melted plastic and painted das, it was imbued with a childlike amateurism. Next to it sat a dark, towering pyramid. Its precisely delineated shape and imposing physical presence recalled the reductive geometry of minimalist sculpture, which art history has interpreted as avowedly secular and prosaic. However, the pyramid's base was a hexagon, an ancient occult symbol. Next to it, two bluntly carved, wooden, pseudo-primitive figures, suggesting a mother and child, were set on a rusticated wooden block. Next to them, a hefty lump of pink quartz rested on a cheap reproduction Queen Anne–style side-table, acting as a plinth. This comic convergence of a naturally occurring object and a standard item of domestic furnishing recalled the improvised constellations of low-grade objects typical of arte povera in the 1960s.

Critics have likened Dwyer's sculptural universe of intermediary relations and hybrid forms to basic patterns of children's play. Victoria Barker, for instance, identifies affinities between Dwyer's oeuvre and the object-relations branch of psychoanalysis developed by D.W. Winnicott, which seeks to explain how human infants form affective bonds with other people.[2] Winnicott's research assigns primary importance to the mother's role in developing such attachments and investigates the psychological significance of children's play with objects drawn from their immediate surroundings. Appropriated by infants, who have yet to master language, such affective objects might be toys, parts of blankets, the ubiquitous plastic dummy, or their own fingers and toes.

The kindergarten aesthetic often ascribed to Dwyer's practice incorporates familiar props of children's play, as well as objects and environments evocative of mother care and childhood training. Her installations have included walls and structures stencilled with bunny-rabbit nursery imagery and training potties wrapped in baby blankets (***Untitled***, 1992); the child's refuge from the adult world, the cubbyhouse (***IOU and Cubby***, 1999); abstract renditions of miniature model towns (***Iffytown***, 1999, and ***Spielewiese***, 2007); and preloved or store-bought toys (***The Additions and the Subtractions***, 2007 and 2012). Responding to such configurations, critic Edward Colless observes that Dwyer's works typically collapse the aetiology assigned to transitions between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.[3]

When aligning Winnicott's ideas to Dwyer's art, Barker references the psychoanalyst's description of the space of children's play as an intermediary zone between mother and child, where the infant negotiates the necessary, but painful, process of separation from its primary carer. This developmental phase demands that children gradually accept that their original love object belongs to an external reality independent of their own needs and desires. Barker, however, is particularly intrigued by two other Winnicottian propositions. The first is his idea that the attachments children form with playthings, which Winnicott calls 'transitional objects', are subsequently transferred to the cultural heritage transmitted to human beings by the social world into which they are born. The second pertains to the improvisational and imaginative qualities he attributes to the unconscious gestures of children's play, qualities Barker considers feature prominently in Dwyer's art.[4] In my view, however, Winnicott's 'transitional objects' concept provides more specific insights into the ontological primitivisations Dwyer unleashes. These cognitive regressions involve the construction of hybrid sculptural forms that fall back behind established categories of identity, whether applicable to the history of sculptural practice, human evolution, or subject formation.

I suspect I am not alone in my struggle to explain Dwyer's mixing of mystical references with profane objects and materials associated with modernity. Winnicottian object-relations theory allows us to understand this feature of the artist's practice, not as calling for restitution of ancient wisdom in opposition to secular modernity, but as directing art towards the creation of imaginary spaces where remnants of metaphysical thinking coexist with the modern, Western scientific worldview.

Like many Freudian analysts, Winnicott emphasises the lasting psychic impact of an 'original' state of vulnerability centred on the body that distinguishes humans from other animals.[5] Echoing Freud and Jacques Lacan, Winnicott describes newborn humans as imagining their needs and desires to be so completely merged with the responsive ministrations of their carers that they do not distinguish between their own inner impulses or drives and external reality. For Winnicott, this fantasy of symbiotic fusion ('primary narcissism', in Freud's terminology) continues into adult life, even while successful socialisation necessitates its overturning or repression. After all, survival in the adult world depends on being able, with the aid of language and our reasoning powers, to discriminate between inner and external realities, between ourselves and other beings, or between fiction and reality. For Winnicott, however, humans never entirely forget the trauma of detachment from the early childhood symbiosis, and the painful loss of physical and psychic security associated with it. He, therefore, understands children's play as having a double function. On the one hand, children's attachment to 'transitional objects' implies these objects' surrogate status for a mother who is in the process of being lost to external reality. Infants manipulate such objects, with the indulgent approval of their carers, to sustain fantasies of a primal connection between themselves and all that makes up their surrounding world. On the other hand, as Winnicott acknowledges, children do not always treat their playthings lovingly, often submitting them to their destructive urges—the child's home is as much a graveyard of broken and dismembered toys as a storehouse of tenderly loved playthings. Winnicott thus views 'transitional objects' as a symbolic bridge between fantasies of symbiotic fusion and an external reality beyond the child's command. They enable infants to rehearse, and, in their own minds, control scenarios of partition, while retaining imaginary purchase on an irrevocably lost symbiotic state, thereby ameliorating the pain of detachment from the maternal matrix. Put simply, 'transitional objects' reassure young children that they are not entirely alone in the world, deserted by other beings.

In ***Playing and Reality***, Winnicott characterises the interstitial zone of childhood play as continuous with the social role played by practices of art and religion.[6] Within these socially sanctioned domains, he suggests, human beings may occasionally reactivate a life-long desire to regress to an original state of symbiosis. In many religions, such regressive impulses are expressed by the blurring of boundaries between the kingdoms of the living and dead, as well as animistic illusions where nature or inanimate objects are imagined to

The Additions and the Subtractions, Speilhaus Morrison Galerie, Berlin, 2007

be living entities that possess souls, agency, mystical powers, and other human qualities.

Many of Dwyer's sculptural constellations channel the kind of psychic experiences—torn between symbiotic fusion and differentiation—that Winnicott associates with 'transitional objects'. A salutary example is a child-scaled sculpture Dwyer made for her 2007 iteration of ***The Additions and the Subtractions***.[7] This sculpture is so powerfully freighted with psychic resonances that, once seen, it is difficult to erase from one's mind. It is confected from a handful of 'transitional objects' one might find in a child's toy collection: a single cubic building block and miniature plastic models of dinosaurs and winged dragons. Models of the flesh-eating Tyrannosaurus Rex and serpentine-necked, herbivorous dinosaurs form part of the sculpture. These long-extinct creatures feature in stories adults tell children about the origins of the world and clearly exert a powerful fascination upon them. Small children should never play with matches; however, Dwyer went to town on the plastic toys with a heat-gun, one of her favourite tools of transformation. As a result, dragon and dinosaur models merge, becoming an undifferentiated melted mass, punctuated here and there by protruding jaws, wings, tails, and clawed feet. The creatures seem to writhe in agony as they struggle to free themselves from a primordial material realm of undivided being. This pint-sized sculpture thus allegorises an 'original' state of fusion while describing the separating impulses Winnicott assigns to children's play with affective objects. It also embodies a transitional phase between undivided being and the assertion of autonomous identity. Appointed in relative isolation, on top of the tangled mass of prehistoric and mythical creatures, a perfectly formed little cube is held up by a curled dragon's tail and a clenched dinosaur jaw.

To finish the work, Dwyer applied an oily coating of black paint to the whole construction, suggesting that this ideal cube is being excreted upward from the ontological chaos below, while remaining residually attached to or dependent upon it. For all of its unprepossessing size, this fantastically strange object attests to Dwyer's brilliance at making sculptures out of ordinary domestic items, and at giving physical form to scenarios of evolutionary regression or 'primitive' psychic states prior to ego consolidation. Compressed in the coal-black plastic sculpture are 'regressive' memories of an undifferentiated infantile world prior to separation from the mother, which is placed in tension with a cubic emblem of the impermeable edifice of the ego.

The blind dates Dwyer arranges between signs of cultural anachronism and advanced modernity are disconcerting. Raised in a world of scientific disenchantment with the religious superstitions entertained by our ancestors to cope with earthly suffering, we tend to live, for the most part, as rationalists. As German sociologist Axel Honneth recently observed, today's Westerners, whether claiming to be religious adherents or avowed atheists, cannot help but be influenced by the prevailing ***naturalism*** of a modern worldview. This means that we are less likely to view fateful blows experienced in life—illness, natural catastrophes, and finally death—as part of the grand designs of deities who promise redemption in the afterlife, and more as the relentless unfolding of natural processes of organic entropy. In this context, writes Honneth, we are seen to: 'suffer the same fate as all other natural creatures; at birth we are exposed to a life full of risks; we are constantly threatened by organic illnesses; and at the end of life, death awaits us. All our advances in technology and medicine have in no way been able to change this feeling of being exposed to nature.'[8]

These claims echo well-known commentaries, from Nietzsche to Freud, on the ambivalent situation of modern humanity. While scientific enlightenment has profited us greatly in manipulating nature, it has deprived us of the existential compensations offered by religious cosmologies. Dwyer's fascination with remnants of occult practice might be viewed as a response to this. Her art invokes primitive belief systems, which, contrary to schemas of historical progress, continue in modern times within the psychic life of adults who were once children. Take, for example, her ***Superstitious Scaffolding*** (2005), at Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington. Visitors were invited to enter a space loosely marked out by a precarious arrangement of suspended aluminium poles and skinny, prison-striped wooden posts. At various

points, modernist desk lamps and graphics of spiritualist concentric-circles adorned the skeletal architecture. Like many of Dwyer's installations, ***Superstitious Scaffolding*** appeared formally contingent, poised on the cusp of structural collapse. Those brave enough to enter the precarious installation could sit down with and consult Maria, a palm reader hired by the artist for the duration of the exhibition.

The spirit world makes numerous appearances in Dwyer's work. Her installation ***Alphabet for Ghosts*** (2012) is a life-sized Ouija game. The gallery floor acts as the game board, with painted panels inscribed with single letters, numbers, and the words 'yes' and 'no' propped against two intersecting walls. Rather than emulate the arcane script of toy-shop Ouija boards, Dwyer inscribes her panels with the geometrically styled alphabet devised by Herbert Bayer in the 1920s. Following the functionalist doctrine of Bauhaus modernism, Bayer's 'universal typeface' was designed in lower-case only and dispensed with ornamental serifs, both innovations being promoted as saving time in the printing process. Dwyer also substituted the game's original heart-shaped pointer with a minimalist planchette—a triangular pyramid, clad in Perspex, perched on steel casters.

By referencing functionalism, ***Alphabet for Ghosts*** raises a number of issues. In the twentieth century, functionalist premises influenced not only design avant-gardes, such as the Bauhaus, but also the study of history and the social sciences. As a social theory, functionalism views the behaviour of individuals as reflecting the ways of living and thinking authorised by social institutions—familial, educational, economic, religious, and governmental. For fundamentalist functionalists, a social system can only sustain itself if individuals share values. Functionalist premises also inform the characterisation of individuals, social groups, and other cultures cleaved to beliefs out-of-step with modernity as childlike, primitive, or anachronistic. Dwyer's art generally works against the grain of such thinking. While her sculptural configurations express a preoccupation with socialising systems, including religion, scientific thought, and child rearing, they telescope different phases of history, social evolution, and cultural practice into each other. ***Alphabet for Ghosts***, for instance, stages an absurd convergence of the rational, modular forms of Bauhaus design and minimalist sculpture with a medium of supernatural divination.

During World War I, Ouija boards were popularised as portals to the spirit world, being used to assuage the suffering of those left behind by a generation of young men killed in the war. The phenomenon dovetails with Winnicott's idea of 'transitional objects' as means for (adult) children to deal with an ontological divide between their inner desires and the harsh finality of death. Winnicott insists that even adults inducted into modern, irreligious ways of thinking may occasionally slip into such states of mind to reassure themselves, counter-factually, of the continuing presence of the dead among the living, or to diminish their fears in the face of an external world beyond their control. Dwyer frequently invites us to inhabit or pass through transitional environments, suspended between an imaginary world of mystical beliefs and rationally construed reality. While the modern naturalistic perspective may compel us to accept that, in time, those we love will certainly be lost to us, the cognitive regressions staged in Dwyer's works echo Winnicott's view that life would be intolerable if solely contoured by rationality.

In 2000, Dwyer described her works as 'little temples of love for the dead things'.[9] In the years since, the quasi-religious and animistic implications of these words have seemed increasingly applicable to her work, where borders between the living and the dead, and between animate and inanimate are insistently withdrawn. Take Dwyer's installation ***Lamps*** (2011). Approaching it, we see a small forest of tall, wooden scaffolds painted in red, black, or white, or in black-and-white prison stripes. Some of these structures support knotted lengths of multicoloured rope and modelling-clay chain formations, suggesting hangman's nooses and the ghosts of swinging bodies. As pylons, they relay power cords to hanging lightbulbs, which suffuse the environment in red and blue light. Throughout the installation, Dwyer perches cheap, ceramic ornaments of animals on blocks of wood, nailed like shelves to the scaffolds. They include an owl (emblematic of amateur pottery and human wisdom) and a drab, smooth, feathered creature supported by a lump of modelling clay moulded to an upturned drinking glass. In uncomfortably close proximity to the latter ornament sits a china figurine of a ginger cat.

As well as staging a surreal encounter between kitsch figurines (suggesting cozy domesticity) and signifiers of corporeal punishment, the installation exemplifies the animistic and anthropomorphic qualities Dwyer imparts to materials and objects, whether found or made. The found animal and bird ornaments dotting the installation remind us of Winnicott's view, shared by Freud, that young children do not strictly distinguish between animate and inanimate, or fiction and reality, and so imagine that their playthings are alive, even attempting to converse with the various 'dead things' they have formed emotional attachments to. Of course, adults are supposed to 'grow out' of such illusions, and yet, as Freud surmised in his reflections on the psychic effect of the uncanny, certain objects or impressions encountered in adult life may trigger the return of 'infantile complexes which have been repressed' or 'primitive' beliefs thought to have been surmounted in the process of subjective or social development.[10] Dwyer's art not only contrives to stimulate such uncanny sensations in beholders, but also implies that, far from being the preserve of children or so-called 'primitive' cultures, animistic fantasies may return to haunt enlightened adults.

Considering their interweaving of occult, animist, and secular references, one might be excused for attributing new-age sentiments to Dwyer's works. New-ageism has gained prominence in the West recently. It is often cast as a response to the perceived desiccation of spiritual values and human wellbeing under the onslaughts of Western rationalism and capitalist materialism. Composed of a hotchpotch of Eastern and Western mysticisms, scientific doctrines, and motivational psychology, the therapeutic cure it promises is ultimately focussed on the self: personal improvement, inner harmony, and psychic integration as protective armour against the psychological stress of contemporary life.

Although Dwyer's works may appear to entertain new-age attitudes, ultimately they have little to do with a vision of life or art striving for inner balance or harmonic resolution, whether naturally or supernaturally bestowed. The awkward, deliberately clumsy encounters she choreographs between object ciphers of rationalism and of the supernatural preclude any fantasy of cosmic equilibrium between them. Also absent in Dwyer's art is new-age subjectivity—the defensive assertion of the self's autonomy from all external impingements. Contrarily, the blurring of ontological boundaries Winnicott attributes to children's play with transitional objects involves the abolition of borders between self and other, subject and object, fantasy life and material reality. In this respect, the pleasure derived from the creative manipulation of transitional objects is fraught with danger for the individual's sense of separate existence. Rather than aiming to shore up the ego's integrity, as in new-age mysticism, the ontological hybridity of Dwyer's art points to a temporary dissolution of the judicious ego, which stands separate from the world and tries to view things objectively and rationally. Formally speaking, every sculptural constellation the artist assembles sustains an unresolved tension between spatial enclosure and its rupture or dispersal. Organic forms are broken, pierced, or punctuated; objects and formal structures are, at once, knitted together and broken apart.

These operations coexist in ***A Shape of Thought*** (2007). It is one of Dwyer's ***Empty Sculptures***, which she makes from sheets of heat-malleable, transparent plastic using a hot-air gun. Dwyer speaks of the strenuous physical tussle involved in directing blasts of intensely heated air to shape the thoroughly modern material into a sizeable, misshapen form—a quasi-organic, aerated mass of sharp points and edges, undulating surfaces, and jagged holes. Although the transparency of the material allows light to pass through, the application of heat to the plastic produces fibrous tissue reminiscent of the scarring of burnt skin—spiritual uplift and carnal pain are simultaneously evoked. Suggesting the lightness of balloons or soap bubbles, the plastic sculptures have been exhibited as stand-alone forms in outdoor and gallery settings, and as components of installations.[11]

Dwyer lists ***A Shape of Thought*** as a collaborative effort with her father, Peter. In a darkened room, a mass of inflated and wrinkled plastic is illuminated by a video she shot—an extreme close-up of her father's unblinking eye. The disembodied paternal eye is projected onto

Hanging Eyes 1999

the see-through form, bathing it in a glaring light that exposes its hollow centre and bounces off its surfaces to produce blinding and scintillating effects, while casting an amorphous shadow over half the gallery floor. Because the plastic mass acts as a prism, rather than a lens, the video image of the eye is refracted to either side of the plastic form, leaking onto the walls and floor. These effects result in an installation of both ephemeral beauty and threatening monstrosity.

A Shape of Thought extends Dwyer's earlier sculptural speculations on vision. ***Hanging Eyes*** (1999) is a row of nine vinyl shrouds, with sagging cylindrical protrusions, either painted with circles or indicated by contrasting colours of vinyl. Suspended from wall hooks, with their lower edges dragging forlornly on the ground, the forms bring to mind garments, body bags, and even carcasses studded with flaccid eye-shapes. Adopting the soft-sculpture idiom, ***Hanging Eyes*** implies an embodied, vulnerable viewing subject submitted to the natural force of gravity. Since the line of shrouds suggests standing human figures, one can easily imagine the tenuously upright spectres being unsecured from their architectural support to sink earthwards under the weight of gravity, becoming nothing more than formless pools and folds of inert material. As a sculptural allegory of vision, ***Hanging Eyes*** inverts Cartesian subjectivity, where ocular perception is indexed to a masterful consciousness abstracted from corporeal or environmental entanglements. Although I have always admired the slapstick deflation of idealist vision enacted by ***Hanging Eyes***, ***A Shape of Thought*** offers a more nuanced articulation of visual experience, one that echoes Lacan's late formulation of 'the *gaze*'—as split between conscious sight and that which eludes or escapes it.

Physically obtrusive, yet flimsy, the translucent sculpture choreographs visual experience as shifting between scopophilic satisfaction, expressed by the world-penetrating gaze of the paternal (rational) eye, and a blanking out of the spectator's capacity to perceptually survey that which lies before them, via blinding effects of illumination. In other words, we cannot find a place from which to view the whole installation with perfect clarity. Sociologist of science Bruno Latour links a human quest for perceptual mastery of the object world with the rational incline of modernity, which, he contends, expresses a certain 'hatred of intermediaries and a desire for an immediate world emptied of its mediators'.[12] Upon encountering Dwyer's ***A Shape of Thought***, one quickly realises that the sculpture's pellucid skin doesn't enclose anything solid or substantial, only the immaterial phenomenon of light. The containing and transmission of light voids the object of material substance. At the same time, the work's luminous scintillations fail to cohere as a simple idealist impulse to transcend the inconvenient materiality of the object world. Rather, on this occasion, translucency simultaneously facilitates and occludes our vision.

When describing ***A Shape of Thought***, words such as 'exhilarating', 'confusing', 'discomforting', and 'otherworldly' come to mind. One feels physically engulfed or threatened by the physical size of the sculpture squeezed into a small space, and by the blinding effects of both illumination and extinguished light. Stepping into the large shadow cast by the plastic form provokes a sense of being literally obliterated from the spatial and perceptual dynamics of the setting. The feeling of being lost in the space—or indistinguishable from it—is intensified by multiple leakages between inner and outer spaces. In a way, our experience of the work doubles the fate of the disembodied video eye, which, in the very process of 'seeing' the sheer plastic configuration, is fractured by the diaphanous object to fall in imagistic fragments at its 'feet'.

Like so many of Dwyer's installations, ***A Shape of Thought*** asks us to park our ego's habitual and, no doubt, necessary defences at the door, and enter a world of categorical chaos. Here, rational partitions between self and other, between inside and outside, and between objects, artistic currents, and beliefs of every kind are momentarily suspended. Many of Dwyer's works link this world to repressed memories of infantile attachments and experiences before definitive separation from the mother. And yet, she is no callow supporter of pure irrationalism or undiluted mother love as guiding principles of art making. I'll wager she is well aware that, having endured and enjoyed the experiences her works offer us, we need to put our thinking caps on to testify to what occurred there and articulate its significance for art

A Shape of Thought 2007

and an ethics beyond the self-protective impulses of the ego. There are numerous great creators of modern sculpture who have ventured into similar terrain—like Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Smithson, Claes Oldenburg with Coosje van Bruggen, Franz West, and Joseph Beuys. Dwyer's name should be added to this list.

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1. Alex Potts, ***The Sculptural Imagination: Figuration, Modernism, Minimalism*** (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 377.
2. Victoria Barker, 'Seeing a World through the Eyes of a Child on a Mountaintop', ***Mikala Dwyer: Black Sun Blue Moon*** (Berlin: Spielhaus Morrison Galerie, 2007), 4.
3. Edward Colless, 'Undone', ***Mikala Dwyer*** (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 12.
4. Victoria Barker, 'Seeing a World through the Eyes of a Child on a Mountaintop', 5.
5. Donald W. Winnicott, ***Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*** (London and New York: Karnac, 1984).
6. Donald W. Winnicott, ***Playing and Reality*** (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 18.
7. Made for her Berlin show.
8. Axel Honneth, ***The I in We***, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 232. My reading of Dwyer's grafting of metaphysical references onto materialist currents of modern sculpture draws on Honneth's sociological interpretation of Winnicott's object-relations theory.
9. Linda Michael quoted Dwyer for the title of her essay, 'The Little Temples of Love for the Dead Things', ***Mikala Dwyer*** (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 11.
10. Sigmund Freud, ***The Uncanny***, ed. A. Phillips, trans. D. McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 224.
11. One of the more surprising instances was ***Swamp Sculpture*** (2006), where a large plastic form was set loose to float on a weed-infested body of water at the Omi Sculpture Park in upstate New York.
12. Bruno Latour, ***We Have Never Been Modern***, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 143.