Agaaba Skaven 2013

Art and Magic and Real Magic

MICHAEL TAUSSIG

Strap yourself in tight! Men at work! Mikala Dwyer at work too. With all her stuff. She takes truckloads of magical stuff from show to show. Piling it up. Trimming it down. Getting the circle right so the void speaks, so the void attracts, like a soul catching up with itself in this our disbelieving age—an age all too ready to believe as well. Our quandary. In her installations we find faith and scepticism in equal measure, with more than a pinch of viscerality (or 'thingness'). So, is there a necessary connection between faith and scepticism on the one hand and ' viscerality' on the other? Do Dwyer's objects, her things, stand at the meeting point of faith and scepticism? (She freely admits to both.)

The space Dwyer's objects occupy or mark out is usually symmetrical and orderly—for instance, a circle or the corner of a gallery—yet the objects themselves are anything but. When you look at any one collation or 'gathering' of hers, you see the objects differ greatly, even disturbingly, from one another. The overall impression is one of rampant, excessive heterogeneity, as if testing our tolerance for chaos and disorder held barely in check by the circle or the right-angled corner.

Looking at her work, I thought of the profusion of objects that make up the therapeutic collections of the ***sangomas*** (traditional healers) I have seen in Soweto in South Africa, the altars of healers in northern Peru, and the ***portales*** (gateways) on the magic mountain of Maria Lionza in Venezuela. But what, then, is a collection?

Walter Benjamin understood the true collector's collection as a 'magic encyclopedia'. Such a collection is animated. It acquires a life of its own. What is more, when objects are added to it they undergo a rebirth as they are placed in this new context. As much the product of chance discoveries as deliberation, a true collection is an evolving mix of chaos and order, of memories and hopes, in dialectical tension. In a true collection, then, fate and chance come together in a manner resonating with magical potential, such that Benjamin—an avid collector of books, especially children's books—could even suggest that it may serve as an instrument of divination, although he failed to provide examples of this. Dwyer's collections share many of these characteristics and do so, most strikingly, in terms of their remarkable heterogeneity, dedicated, it seems, to the rampant thingness of things, hovering over the disorder of the world.

In the old days before there were art galleries and museums, and 'art' meant something different, the practice of magic was invested in things, principally the human body, and it was from the human body that the magician or shaman would extract other things—small animals, worms, splinters, even the devil. Great was the art, then, the sleight of hand, the song, the witchcraft too, when stones could walk, and tides and moon spoke to man.

The question must be not only whether things have souls, but why things—like those we witness in Dwyer's work—are necessary in magical practice? All these things. She says she can't get enough of them. But that's not enough. Not by a long shot. These things need us too, we who come to look and maybe more than look. We stand by them, size them up from different angles and walk around them, a little disconcerted perhaps, hungry for meaning. Some are as big as us or bigger. There we stand, shoulder to shoulder, person to person, thing to thing.

Could it be that magical practice through the ages needs things so as to maintain a relationship with the non-human, thing world? Or, put it this way: magic is a way of manifesting the human -thing relationship necessary to life and always present in it. In other words, magical practice is undertaken not only to achieve riches or good health or to soar to the stars and under the seas (all that, and pushing back against sorcery too), but also to maintain a family—familiar—relationship with non-human entities. This familiar relationship is usually assumed in magical practice. Because the magician is supposed to inhabit an animistic world replete with networks of sympathetic force and meaning, she or he can proceed because nature is alive and has something like a human or spiritual character.

But what I am saying is different. Let us assume that animals, wind, silver zeroes, stars, boxes, whatever, are in constant need of conversation with us, and good conversation at that. Things want this. We need this. That is what is primary. The other stuff is more like an

excuse to nourish that conversation. What other stuff? Wanting to win the lottery, fly to the moon, attract a lover, get rid of your enemy, let the envy flow, and so on. All that magic stuff.

There is a story about this, which says that, with enlightenment and modernity, mankind broke with things and pronounced them dead on arrival. The conversation was brought to an end. The convoluted networks of thing-person-thing was unstitched and in its place a simple binary model of people and things was imposed. People over here. Things over there.

Is this what we see when we gaze at Dwyer's constellations of objects and walk around them, not quite knowing what to say or what to do? How close can we get? Can we speak to them? Are they listening, by chance? What are they saying to each other? What are they saying to us, if anything? Or is it all over between us and them?

'Great Pan is dead.' Is this what Dwyer's silver zeroes are telling us, or we them? Is this art homage to what once was, before the conversation came to an end with the advent of the so-called 'domination of nature'? Do the things of the world today stand lost and forlorn, shorn of human companionship? Is this what's going on here with Dwyer's 'gatherings'; muted objects mourning their alienation from the ***socius***? Here in the gallery, their final resting place, their cemetery, these objects then are like gravestones memorialising what was once the vibrant world of person-thing hybridity (as Bruno Latour might say).

But there is some hope, for surely the dead can return, recycled by the artist. In which case, what we may find in the gallery with this art is something akin to spirit possession. The cemetery that is the gallery propitiates things, appropriating their animate past as human-thing couples. Possessed by the spirits of the dead, these possessed objects become endowed with a certain grace, and even the power to relieve misfortune, as happens to persons possessed by the ancestors.

Art and real magic know subtler paths still. What if the human-thing couple actually persisted all this time despite centuries of confident pronouncements as to its demise? What if subjects are also objects and vice versa, like Karl Marx's fantastic world of commodity fetishism, in which things in our capitalist culture are like people and people are like things? What if, in Latour's phrase, we were never modern, and, apart from heated verbiage, there never was a mechanical universe with dead objects on one side and lively humans on another? What if that picture of reality is stupendously false and silly, yet we adhere to it same way as people—so we are told—once thought the Earth was flat? In which case, Dwyer's 'gatherings' are there to remind us what it is like to inhabit a flawed universe, a fake world, a flat Earth in which, however, objects may appear to be mute, yet are anything but.

Michael Taussig is a Sydney-born anthropologist. He teaches at Columbia University, New York. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Nervous System*, ***My Cocaine Museum***, and *What Colour Is the Sacred?*