

# Enigma Machines

•

Pamela  
Hansford

Mikala Dwyer's work responds to the impact of contemporary contexts, where rapid adaptation to complexity, relentless change and the threat of unseen risks has become a norm. Fluid and swift adjustments are hallmarks of this 'camouflage culture',<sup>1</sup> and disguise, mimicry and disruption have become the adaptive strategies employed to avoid detection. In Dwyer's work, the changing relations between things, people and animals are parlayed into the realms of enigma, experiment, humour, haunting and surprise. Her installations construct a space for dialogue between the artist, the spectator and the multitude of things that comprise her so-called 'gatherings'.<sup>2</sup>

The logic of camouflage necessarily involves the eradication of various stages of awareness, observation and identification required to connect with elements in our environment. Camouflage destabilises these bonds, and it can be a condition or a strategy, sometimes both. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of Dwyer's art is the way in which it reminds viewers of art's capacity to give voice to what is other — the invisible, the obscure, the other-worldly — such as the calling of ghosts in her séance performance *Alterbeast* (2011), designed to attract the ghost of Margo Lewers (1908–1978).<sup>3</sup> This makes 'them' (the ghosts, or whatever the gathered-together things are or aspire to be) visible to both the artist and the viewer — or rather through the artist to the viewer, or, better still, thanks to the artist the spectator can see. In Dwyer's work, both artist and spectator find a way to connect with the camouflaged elements through a second skin in the artistic layer itself.

In Dwyer's gatherings, TVs and other common objects are strangely not themselves. While this increases the difficulty of understanding, it also heightens an awareness of artistic devices themselves.<sup>4</sup> Concealment of one sort or another is, clearly, a feature of the artist's work. It is tempting to reject this quality of strangeness outright — on the one hand because interpretation proves to be too difficult and time consuming, and on the other because it is a reminder of our own relative ignorance, coming to the gatherings, as we do, as outsiders. But if we submit to the peculiarity of this distance — 'distantiation' in

Brechtian terms<sup>5</sup> — it becomes present to us as a kind of double. This is the space of lingering, where we come to apprehend the object as part of a larger continuity: 'A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the object of our present enquiry is twofold: concealment as a condition and a strategy, and registers of camouflage (mimicry, disruption, disguise etc.) analysed as the artist's realisation strategies.

\*\*\*\*\*

The qualities of otherness, obscurity and concealment at the core of Dwyer's art are consistent with camouflage culture, and they can be located on a continuum of a dynamics of disguise. Imagine that animal powers of active invisibility — the conditioned control over real-time strategic concealment possessed by certain fish and chameleons<sup>7</sup> — are located at one end, while at the other are those fantasies of semblance — the sci-fi world of replicants, aliens and phantasmagoric shape-shifters, whose subterfuge translates the logic of camouflage into the realms of the supernatural and horror. Think H.P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, or Ridley Scott's *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, where the low squeal of abandoned dreams and chattering nightmares have become trapped. Lacking the naturally proscribed boundaries and fierce integrity of animal being, these inventions have the capacity to relentlessly drill into the column of reality.

Between these extremes lies a middle ground, where one finds more awkward attempts to harness transformational modes of invisibility. This is the location of those clumsy examples of concealment found in the history of technologies of surveillance and its spoofing: *Dad's Army* comes to mind, as a quaint dress-up attempt at hiding, which typically involved grease paint, leaves, netting, twigs — old-fashioned, ready-to-hand cloaking; and then there are *Inspector Gadget*, *The Pink Panther's* Inspector Clouseau, *Get Smart* and *Benny Hill*, in which the angles on disguise incorporate a grab bag of cross-dressing,





prosthetics, false moustaches, wigs, the ubiquitous trenchcoat and other props of low-tech faking. Given the title of this essay, the comedy war film *All the Queen's Men* deserves special mention. Four World War II Allied soldiers are parachuted into Germany, where, disguised as women, they attempt to steal an enigma machine, the code-breaker famously used by British intelligence to decipher secret documents camouflaged by the Nazi military into meaningless lines of scrambled letters.

Dwyer's work has more than a pinch of such tongue-in-cheek spoofing, and a natural affinity with the middle ground on the spectrum of disguise. Think of the artist's penchant for flaccid geometric shapes — limp cubes, drooping oblongs, flabby triangles, slack squares — and their persistently impoverished, grotty demeanour. Seen from this perspective, her gatherings can be read as a clumsily camouflaged critique of modernism's failed tilt at crisp perfectibility. Alternatively, the intractable ordinariness of the work brings to mind a mimic — Arte-Povera meets Warhol — albeit Warhol without any of the camp, lacking even five minutes of fame and with no gloss.

Another take on the gatherings is to imagine them as channels for the paranormal, or extra-terrestrial. Erich Von Daniken re-invented? Although the artist has, clearly, placed all objects in the gallery space, the 'placement' itself appears quite provisional. The gathered objects give the impression of having accumulated themselves — in circles, in corners or against the wall. Do these cryptic sequences and circles suggest activity surreptitiously enacted behind our backs? Are we being spooked? Are the gatherings really something else? And if so, what is being camouflaged — gathered and transformed into relative invisibility — and why the disguise?

\*\*\*\*\*

At one of its most accessible levels, the artist's work democratically facilitates a dialogue between things: whiskey bottles, semi-precious stones, junk, take-away food containers, tat, knitted fabric, plastic buckets, panty hose stretched, painted and stuffed, upturned garden pots doubling as plinths, light bulbs, TVs and their antennae, home-

made clay numbers and letters ('basic signs in base materials'), flaccid cubes and a multitude of other singular and sagging creations that recall failed school projects. Dwyer's heterogeneous installations bury us under the thick mantle of our own inventions. This is, undoubtedly, an oeuvre speaking to us in different ways about 'stuff', and the artist's take on these things simultaneously encompasses a variety of types — from the clumsy failure of one-off inventions (*The Collapzars* 2012) to things as signifiers of the mystical (*Panto Collapsar*, *The Additions and Subtractions*, 2012) and to commodities so perfect and numerous they can withstand the gaze of innumerable pairs of eyes and survive beyond any articulating gesture.

The latter is quintessential Jeff Koons territory, and it is reflected in *The Silvering* (2012). This work comprises a large number of silver, highly reflective, doughnut-shaped, helium-filled balloons suspended above a swathe of silver foil. It embodies the reflected glory of the machine-made, commodities multiplied to become Legion parading down the aisle of history. In this space there is no place for a cynical glance because such a look will never discover anything as precious as itself. But the paradox of this vanity is that nothing remains of the poor hand that traced them, or the anxiety that sought appeasement in them. In this instance, our presence as the maker of commodities is camouflaged beyond the point of invisibility. Perfect products have left us speaking only in machine and it is a struggle to appear, even as a trace. In the absence of tangible presence, the solipsistic reflections in *The Silvering* and their ilk are strangely arrogant.

As a lasso for things, and as a circumference constructed from them, the circle occupies a special point of reference in Dwyer's practice and the literature on it. Commentators have alternatively seen the circle as a site of activation,<sup>9</sup> as a conduit for and a checkpoint of the void,<sup>10</sup> as a signifier for modernism's occult implications,<sup>11</sup> and as a possible marker of the artist's (and art's) feminisation.<sup>12</sup> From our vantage point, the circle is a method for provisioning an occasion. It signals the space for a dialogue-event between stuff and us. This event reanimates the 'convoluted networks of thing-person-thing' unstitched by a hasty rationalist overlay: 'People over here. Things over there.'<sup>13</sup>

In the use of the circle, Dwyer's work suggests that for better or for worse we recognise all this stuff as ours, from the most basic and embarrassing (things as failures) to the most glorious (things perfected). This insight injects the gatherings with an uncanny ambiguity consistent with one or several event interpretations: as a final resting place for the failed, failing or awkward; as the temporary containment for activities camouflaged as enigmatic others; as gatherings of the heterogeneous itself; as haunts for ghost-whisperers; as holding patterns for us as the redundant inventors of things; as metaphors for radical (Kantian) non-productivity, art's art; as life-buoys in *The Silvering*, or as enigmatic life forces in *The Additions and Subtractions*; and as thing-playgrounds that can, unfortunately, double as sites containing nothing more than dull consumer detritus.

Whenever the trash of consumer culture threatens Beauty and the Good, there will be a space (both metaphorical and literal) for its concealment and the radical adaptability of camouflage culture has come up with numerous so-called solutions to this conundrum. Dwyer's work signals this in the inventive recycling of low-tech, cheap and rubbishy stuff that finds itself miraculously re-provisioned and re-signified. *The Collapzars* as the name suggests, could well describe the disguises of an aristocracy on the wane, thoughtfully hung up waiting for the return of erstwhile wearers. On the camouflage continuum they are definitely not invisibility, the conditioned control over real-time strategic concealment, nor are they the phantasmagoric shape-shifters chittering away in nightmare-land: the column of reality remains intact. *The Collapzars* suggests there is another bent form of camouflage: not camp, *Benny Hill*; not corny, *Dad's Army*; not dumb screwball, *Pink Panther*; not cartoon, *Inspector Gadget*. Perhaps it is best described as, well, sad. In the context of camouflage culture, camouflage inflected in this poignant direction is a response to a world moving too fast for us to keep up. *The Collapzars* represents adaptability caught out — a fancy dress of failure but also a poetic reminder of the all too human pace of change — camouflage for this world.

<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'camouflage cultures' is the title of an international conference and exhibition, University of Sydney, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The term is the artist's for what would typically be called 'installations'.

<sup>3</sup> From 1950, Margo Lewers worked in a variety of mediums, including painting, textiles, sculpture and mosaic. She won recognition as a leading post-war abstract expressionist, showed extensively in Australia and in several international travelling exhibitions, and received numerous public commissions.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar"... because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object...' from 'Art as Device', in *The Theory of Prose*, Benjamin Sher (trans.), Dalkey Archive Press, Bloomington, Ill., 1991, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> For Brecht, this continuity was explicitly political, and the spectator an active participant in the construction of meanings in an art-event recognised both as representation and as referring to and shaping contemporary social realities: 'Distantiation is not a style or an aesthetic gambit but an erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption.' Griselda Pollock, 'Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice — the Brechtian Perspective' in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Amelia Jones (ed.), Routledge, London, 2003, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', at <http://www.vahidnab.com/defam.htm>, p. 4; accessed 17 April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*, Zone Books, New York, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Michael, 'Inside Out', in *Hollowware and a Few Solids*, Barberism and ACCA, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> <http://rebeccaodwyer.wordpress.com/2012/02/15/this-must-be-the-place-mikala-dwyers-panto-collapsar/>

<sup>10</sup> Michael Taussig, 'Art and Magic and Real Magic', 2013, unpublished manuscript supplied by Mikala Dwyer, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> 'Realigning the formalist values of early twentieth century art with their spiritualist... origins', Anthony Byrt, 'Prism Break', 2013, unpublished manuscript supplied by Mikala Dwyer, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> R. Butler, 'This is Not a Cigar: On the Feminising of Mikala Dwyer', in *Hollowware and a Few Solids*, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Taussig, op. cit.

