Encountering Mikala Dwyer's Art With Eva Hesse And Minimalism

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This essay will link a spectator-centred trend in art history and cultural criticism of the 1980s and 1990s to a particular reading of the legacy of minimalism. Art theorist Stephen Melville describes this way of interpreting cultural forms as preoccupied with the 'positionality of the interpreter', a mode of speech that has become typical of feminist writings about art.[1] The positional approach supposes that, having consciously staged the viewing position from which she speaks, having seen herself in the very act of seeing, the interpreter/spectator claims to interpret works of art from her specific point of view, according to her knowledge, wishes and intentions. A number of theoretical and artistic developments since the 1980s could be said to converge in the logic of positionality, but it is minimalism that is regularly identified as the forerunner of spectator-centred criticism in visual art. The following investigates the ethical and theoretical implications of this tendency, and argues that the work of Mikala Dwyer, which has often been understood in the terms summarised above, invites another mode of engagement

In a recent appraisal of the legacy of minimalism, Hal Foster writes that minimalist art marks a shift from the objective emphasis of formalism to the subjective focus of phenomenology.[2] As many commentators have attested, although minimalist installation adopted geometric forms, serial structures and industrial materials, these features operated in a way that reflected the bodily presence and participation of the viewer. Foster concurs with what others say of minimalism: it insists on the viewer's active role in the production of meaning and makes phenomenology's stress on the contingency of perception a primary factor in aesthetic reception. This reorientation, which replaced any notion of artworks and artists as self-governing entities with a viewer aware of the contingency of perception, coincided with 'death of the author' debates that also emerged in the late 1960s.[3]

Foster goes on to assert that feminist art practice of the 1970s extended the privilege assigned to the spectator by minimalism, while also bringing to light what minimalist art had apparently kept under wraps. He argues that despite the subjective, phenomenological focus of minimalism, 'it tended to position artist and viewer alike not only as historically innocent but as sexually indifferent'.[4] This assessment is partially correct, but it occludes the way in which the spectator's performance, as proposed by minimalism, was not simply innocent. Rather, the reflexivity of perception staged by minimalism implied a viewer who is conscious of their limitation, their finitude, the contingency of their perceptual engagement with the world. I am concerned with how this premise has been translated in cultural criticism to mean that the purview of the viewer/interpreter is *the* primary factor in encounters with works of art.

Rosalind Krauss also stresses minimalism's commitment to a phenomenological conception of the subject, a subject constrained in its perceptual range by the anchor of its body, effects of senses other than sight and physical immersion in the world.[5] This insistence on embodied perception sought to displace the de-corporealised, optically inclined subject of formalist approaches to modernist abstraction. Foster's claim that minimalism presupposed an ahistorical and pre-theoretical interface between subject and world also intersects with Krauss's account of the utopian dimension of minimalist art. She explains this utopian impulse as seeking to reground the viewing subject in a 'richer, denser, subsoil of experience', to maintain a locus of bodily plentitude protected from the stereotyping, abstracting and virtualising tendencies of advanced commodity culture.[6] Thus, as Foster and Krauss indicate, minimalist practices relocated art's meaning from the interiority of the work or the mind of the artist to the body of the spectator.

I will return to the embodied viewing subject of minimalism, but for now I want to outline some commonalities between the finite subject foregrounded in minimalist installation and feminist criticism of the 1970s and beyond, which aimed to question the universal status of the masculine, or phallic, gaze. Specifically, accounts of minimalism as imagining a viewer aware of their perceptual limitation coincide with a feminist insistence on the 'perspectivism' of all speaking or viewing positions. However, the irony of a feminist thinking of the subject as finite, context-bound and sexed is that it generated a tendency in

cultural commentary of the 1980s and 1990s to highlight the finitude of the interpreter only to subsequently and surreptitiously discharge this limitation.

I am speaking of the aforementioned style of interpretation identified by Stephen Melville, which renders transparent the 'positionality of the interpreter'. For Melville, the positional approach has proven particularly attractive to feminist art historians and visual theorists. To reiterate Melville's analysis, positional interpretation unfolds as follows: having reflexively staged the interested position from which she speaks, having seen herself in the very act of seeing, the critic disclaims any 'objectivity' in order to endorse her freedom to interpret the other — the object of her scrutiny — according to her own preconceptions, desires or political interests.

Melville cites Linda Nochlin's feminist interpretation of Gustave Courbet's famed painting *The Studio* (1854–55), published in the catalogue *Courbet Reconsidered* (1988), as an example of a positional approach.[7] Having made a point of laying her feminist cards on the table, Nochlin undertakes an imaginary re-painting of *The Studio*; Courbet is discharged as the painter shown in the picture, supplanted by Rosa Bonheur, a woman artist working in 19th-century France. Nochlin also imagines Courbet standing nude behind the artist's chair in place of the female model in *The Studio*. As Melville contends, Nochlin's positional interpretation is a revenge fantasy, a compelling one perhaps, but an avenging fantasy nonetheless.

The logic of positionality played out in Nochlin's feminist re-imagining of *The Studio* is not confined to art history or criticism. It has also become symptomatic of the historicism that frames cultural studies. An example is found in Catharine Lumby's book *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*, which presents a feminist and libertarian defence of the right of individual women to judge for themselves whether various media images qualify as sexist. The justification for this is typically positional; Lumby claims there is no 'true' or definitive reading of any representation, only multiple, situational points of view.[8] Such thinking echoes that which minimalism is credited with inducting into visual art, the idea that meaning is not inherent to works of art but arises from the placement of the work within a given situation and the particular perspective of the viewer. While I might accept Lumby's adoption of the historicist premise that a complete, epistemologically grounded description of any cultural phenomenon is unavailable to a finite subject, it is her next step that concerns me. Having posited the contingency of all points of view, Lumby writes that in her interpretations of media images: '… my description is largely an account of what I want to see… Like all viewers I've simply interacted with what I see — interpreted the image on the basis of what I know and what I want to know'.[9]

In response to the theoretical and ethical suppositions of Nochlin and Lumby, I want to pose a number of questions. The first pertains to Nochlin's approach and asks what point of view it is that claims to survey its own context, to reflect back on itself to see from whence it comes, to know for certain what it knows? This is hardly a provisional perspective; rather, it enacts a specular logic that locates certainty in the reflexivity of consciousness. It prolongs the Enlightenment ideal of a self-transparent act of interpretation, one that is wholly aware of and in control of its origins and implications. In other words, the positional stance here is belied by the very site of enunciation occupied by the critic, by the neutral, disengaged ground from which she claims to know the objective truth about her being.

The second question bears on Lumby's interpretive method in *Bad Girls*: what point of view it is that, upon encountering the other, sees only what it wants to see, or what it already knows? As Lumby says, 'I alter the image in line with my desires'.[10] This suggests the terms of any encounter with otherness are sealed in advance by the desire of the spectator or interpreter. Although Lumby's statement reflects the general libertarian tenor of *Bad Girls*, when approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, her speaking position is somewhat narcissistic. By claiming independence from the object of her analysis, the critic presents herself as all knowing. No third term interrupts the enclosed loop between the feminist interpreter and her desires, or the pre-existing repertoire of her knowledge. To put this another way, the object of interpretation is treated as inconsequential, offering no resistance to the self-recognition (self-love) of the interpreter.

To conclude this section, I want to pose two further questions: if the interpreter becomes the sole agent in interpretation, how are they to encounter something not encompassed by their point of view, something that is not simply a mirror of their subjectivity, their political position or their way of seeing? How is such a mode of criticism to acknowledge what is not itself, what disrupts the self-satisfaction of the interpreter's prior knowledge?

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Having raised issues regarding the theoretical legacy of minimalism and positional feminisms, I want to turn to the art of Mikala Dwyer. I do this because of my long-standing interest in her work and because, in speaking of her art, another way of configuring the interpreter's position will emerge. This way of conceiving the relation between artwork and critic does not result in a voluntarist vision of the interpreter's freedom.

Although the production protocols of Dwyer's practice — the collection, arrangement, accretion and dispersal of objects and materials — are reasonably consistent, the atmospherics of her installations are remarkably varied. There are notable shifts in register from the sober, funereal and haunting *Henle's Loop* (1993), for example, to the slapstick exhibitionism of *Woops* (1994) and the muted colours and formal restraint of *Recent Old Work* (1996). Also notable is the way in which respondents to Dwyer's art regularly place it within the extended family of minimalism. For example, when addressing *Woops*, critic Robert Schubert speaks of this pageant of lamé, sequins, satin and pantyhose draped and stretched over indeterminate objects as flaunting an understanding of 'the body as the base organizer for visual experience'. He writes of this eye-grating clash of fabrics as transforming the pure, disembodied canvas of high modernism into the 'brazen display of toes and fingers'.[11]

Schubert's description of a viewer whose eye is struck forcefully by the impress of texture is wonderfully appropriate to the interplay of visual and haptic registers in *Woops.* But I want to question his remarks about the reprisal in Dwyer's art of an embodied subject of perception derived from minimalism. To date, no direct or 'brazen display' of human bodies has entered Dwyer's practice. It doesn't matter where you stand, what point of view you might take up within her installations, visual access to a primal, organic or literal body that precedes all else is lacking. In part, this is because Dwyer's works are made up of forms, objects and spaces that are variously clothed, covered, layered, shrouded, bound, wrapped and packaged. In short, the question of dress is central to her work's mode of address. This orientation includes a concern with the protections and exclusions of socio-cultural clothing.

Dwyer's *I.O.U.* (1996) provides one instance of the many permutations of dress staged by her works. Here the decorative saturation of the gallery space that distinguishes *Woops* transmutes into extreme rarefaction. But even so, rather than enacting a meeting of two independent, unrelated entities in wall and work, the precise drape of the black and white organza monochromes in *I.O.U.* become ornamental pendants to the white walls. The absence in Dwyer's art of a literal, unadorned body or ground, which coexists with an incessant evocation of bodiliness, indicates a possible art historical addressee of the *I.O.U.* clay sculptures that tag many of her works. The addressee I am thinking of is Eva Hesse.

Hesse is well known for adopting the serial structures and geometric forms of a minimalist vocabulary, while also shifting the terms of minimalist uses of industrial materials. As *Augment* (1968) and *Aught* (1968) indicate, Hesse's work displays an acute sensitivity to the signifying potential and material properties of industrial media. This facility ensures her works evoke a fleshy, mortal and touchable body without recourse to an explicit symbology of the human body. As Anne M. Wagner has observed, the body in itself, in a pre-edited state, is permanently out of reach here, as material evocations of carnality are mapped onto, and therefore transformed by, the remnants of form and structure.[12] Hesse's working process, according to Wagner, shows bodily substance to be irrevocably caught up in the signifying systems of the social field. She writes: 'The body is there somewhere, at the intersection of structure and reference. Though that somewhere may seem close, it is permanently out of reach.'[13] This aspect of Hesse's art notably defers or displaces the plenitude minimalism invested in the viewer's body.

In Dwyer's art a withholding of visual access to a primal body beneath the apparel of the symbolic field also occurs. Yet, there are some marked differences between the materials and processes adopted by Hesse and Dwyer. Dwyer's materials are more likely to issue from fabric and haberdashery stores than from drums of industrial-strength chemical compounds, and the fabrics and domestic objects she arranges, even if new, imply the touch of human hands prior to their exhibition. They emanate a second-hand or hand-me-down quality; see, for example, *New Work* (1996) or *Tubeweight* (1996), which combine modelling clay, organza tubes, and pre-loved teddy-bear parts.

For these reasons, even at its most personal and insouciant, Dwyer's art is more heavily weighted than Hesse's practice with familiar values, clichés and sentiments of femininity, with house and home, with costume, furnishing and dress. Dwyer's works thus allegorise a subject pinned or glued to the prosthetic props of the cultural field. In such a scenario the unveiling of any substantial subject is postponed, whether conceived as an embodied subject or a consciousness able to see through its interpretive acts. This returns us to the positional argument that the viewer's agency and context are determining factors in interpretation.

Linda Michael has observed that Dwyer's art prolongs the positional legacy of minimalism by revealing that any 'imagined presence is not inherent to the object but to our perception of it'.[14] Michael also speaks of an assiduous concern with surface and texture in Dwyer's work that displaces depth or interiority as the primary locus of attention. Additionally, the geometric shapes Dwyer sews together in yielding fabrics, such as organza and neoprene, result in soft sculptures that droop, squash or cave in under the external force of gravity, for example, *Neoprene Shapes* (1995) and *Untitled* (1995). Again, it could be said that this shift from the interiority of the work to external relationships, including the contingent perspective of the viewer, recalls minimalism.

The abovementioned features of Dwyer's practice suggest that no substantial foundation or presence exists behind the public face of surface appearances. The interior being of the forms she creates registers as empty or absent, or as only transmissible through surface effects. For example, in *Untitled* (1995) the diaphanous quality of organza allows us to glimpse, through the blue-toned veil of the fabric, the emptiness within the sagging sculptures pinned to the wall. All of this might suggest that Dwyer's art simply reflects back at the viewer the literal fact of there being nothing to see within the art object, that it is their point of view, their preconceptions that direct their apprehension of the work. Yet, I find this reading unconvincing, in particular because Dwyer's practice seems committed to fostering encounters between artwork and viewer based on relations of desire. By this I mean that the artist invents scenarios aimed at eliciting rather than terminating the desire to interpret.

The link I am proposing between desire and interpretation is derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically from Lacan's reflections on transference. In his analysis of the structure of transference, Lacan describes the point of attachment between analyst and analysand as activated by the latter's *mistaken* belief that the analyst holds the key to the mystery of the analysand's symptoms. Although this fantasy of the analyst knowing something the analysand not is epistemologically unfounded, Lacan claims its activation is necessary for analysis to begin. It is precisely this point of attachment that links analyst and analysand as participants in a relation of desire.[15] As literary theorist Shoshana Felman has argued, when the structure of transference is transposed to the analysis of literary texts or art objects, the interpreter occupies the mystified position of the analysand and the text is imagined to contain knowledge unavailable to the critic in the first instance.[16] It is important to stress, however, that although the Lacanian interpreter's attribution of hidden knowledge to cultural texts activates the desire for interpretation, this enabling fantasy disguises the radical uncertainty of identifying the other's true meaning or intention.[17]

Since I am asserting Dwyer's art operates within the register of desire, we may conclude that it does not suppose our encounters with others, whether art objects or other subjects, are determined solely by the prior knowledge or viewpoint of the critic. With relations of desire, the objectivity of the artwork does not simply register positively as a set of definable qualities, formal or situational, but is marked by inaccessibility. Here, the other's meaning or being is not immediately transparent to consciousness, but is encountered as enigmatic or impenetrable. It is precisely this indeterminacy that motivates the desire to interpret — that fascinates, captivates and implicates the interpreter within the field of appearances choreographed by the artwork. How does this captivation occur? Through encouraging the viewer's initial suspicion that the artwork knows something that the spectator cannot grasp or control from the outset.

How is this process instigated by Dwyer's art? First, there is the concatenation of fabrics, veils, layers and enclosures, the surfaces of which are punctuated by disguised elements that appear to emerge from beneath the surface. It is only after fostering an imagining that something portentous is located within the work that this belief is rendered hollow and ungrounded. Second, many of the objects included in Dwyer's installations set up a somewhat modernist tension between the intrusive substance of the materials she employs and their capacity to transmit meaning. The TV-aerial sculpture that forms part of the installation *Holloware and a Few Solids* (1995) is a case in point. Here the white sealant crust the artist applied roughly to the found aerial suggests the immaterial, virtual signals we expect this common household appliance to relay are swallowed up by the opaque, wrinkled surface of the sealant. This now dysfunctional conduit of *tele*vision intimates that some enigma is trapped within the medium, that some hidden message lies just out of reach. In this respect, the medium registers an indeterminate or unknown other, one that is not simply a mirror of the prior knowledge of the viewer. It is this imagined, rather than verifiable, mark of enigmatic difference that involves and intrigues the critic. It is the point of engagement that obliges the interpreter to assume a posture of blind curiosity, of non-knowledge.

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The positional theories of interpretation earlier discussed tend not to imagine for a moment that the artwork's address to the viewer might involve something that the interpreter doesn't already know. The possibility of encountering something that fails to immediately surrender itself to the viewer's vision and knowledge is rejected from the outset. The ethical importance of this is that while sensitivity to difference — sexual or otherwise — may be the stated goal of positional approaches, genuine recognition of the other's difference is evacuated from positional modes of interpretation. Mikala Dwyer's art is generous in its incarnation of an otherness not wholly determined by situation, context or the interpreter's prior knowledge. But, of course, this conviction is only open to a finite and desiring subject.

[1] Stephen Melville, 'Positionality, Objectivity, Judgment' in G+B Arts International, Amsterdam, 1996, pp. 80–83. See also Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, 'Feminism and the Exquisite Corpse of Realism', vol. 4/5, pp. 250–52.
[2] Hal Foster, MIT Press Cambridge, Mass., 1996, p. 59.
[3] Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' was first published in English for a special 1967 issue of the American art magazine , nos. 5 & 6. This issue of was dedicated to Stéphane Mallarmé, and was edited by conceptual artist Brian O'Doherty.
[4] Foster, op. cit.p. 59.
[5] Rosalind Krauss, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', 54, fall 1990, pp. 8–9.
[6] ibid.p. 9.
[7] Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin (eds), The Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1988.
[8] Catharine Lumby, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. xxv.
[9] ibid.
[10] ibid.
[11] Robert Schubert, 'Restaging Abstraction', 49, 1994, p. 37.
[12] Anne M. Wagner, 'Another Hesse', 69, summer 1994, p. 76.
[13] ibid.
[14] Linda Michael and Mikala Dwyer, catalogue, BARBERism, Newtown, 1994.
[15] Jacques Lacan, , ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, Introduction David Macey, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p. 253.
[16] Feminist and psychoanalytic literary theorists Jane Gallop and Shoshana Felman have asserted that while a prevailing conception of interpretation based on the 'death of the author' conflates the position of the critic with that of the knowing analyst, in the 'relation of transference' the critic is situated in the place of the psychoanalytic patient. In Felman's words: 'The text has for us authority — the very type of authority by which Jacques Lacan indeed defines the role of the psychoanalyst in the structure of transference. Like the psychoanalyst viewed by the patient, the text is viewed by as '"a subject presumed to know" — as the very place where meaning, and of meaning reside'. Shoshana Felman, 'To Open the Question', , 55–56, 1977, p. 7, cited in Jane Gallop, , Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1985, p. 27.
[17] Lacan, op. cit., p. 253.

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