

Mikala Dwyer, Daniel Malone
Dane Mitchell, Peter Robinson

12 April – 11 May 2013

Damn deflection or subtlety! Let's move beyond the silence of the room and awareness of our bodies' movement from one work to the next, from the object's materiality, and from the singular force of one artist's thinking to the unification of them all. I invite you instead to leap with me into the heart of the matter... *Light Sweet Crude* produces an overwhelming sense that something far less concrete, more intuitive, non-empirical is chipping away at our sense of ease. In the bringing together of things, and the thingness of things, we are delivered to something quite primary and destabilising that arises with the recognition of the works' conceptual design. In our move away from purely formal or phenomenological considerations, and as intellectual concerns begin to corrode the sense of physicality of the objects, we are brought, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, to "the silence of the parcelling out of being, by which entities in their identities are illuminated and show themselves."¹

It would be valid on your part to ask why we've taken this abstracted route on way to discussing the work of four such diverse artists as Mikala Dwyer, Daniel Malone, Dane Mitchell and Peter Robinson? Even though all the artists in *Light Sweet Crude* enjoy the legacies of their minimalist and conceptualist progenitors, what seems more pronounced today is a concern for how a viewer might engage with the objects at a sensate level, and hence how this pushes the viewer to a more deeply felt relation with existence itself. Without trying to suggest that the earlier movements were any more cohesive or monolithic than today's messy, miscellany of practices, I am reminded nonetheless of the propensity for early writings on minimalism and conceptualism to engage with a narrower band of concerns. In 1967, Mel Bochner, the New York conceptual artist-theorist wrote:

If it can be safely assumed that all things are equal, separate, and unrelated, we are obliged to concede that they (things) can be named and described but never defined or explained. If, furthermore, we bracket-out all questions that, due to the nature of language, are undiscussible [sic] (such as why did this or that come to exist, or what does it mean) it will then be possible to say that the entire being of an object, in this case an art object, is in its appearance. Things being whatever it is they happen to be, all we can know about them is derived directly from how they appear.²

Leaning a little on Levinas for support is a way to readdress a missing dimension in the interpretative field of minimalist-conceptualist practices of the 20th century. It allows us to move not only beyond the phenomenological method as an interpretive tool in our experience of objects, but to better understand as well the sensate and ethical dimensions that properly belong to work itself. Even though Levinas placed ethics before all other considerations he has been described nonetheless as an aesthetic philosopher. As B.C. Hutchens points out, in Levinas' work there is "appreciation of the aesthetic quality of all human experience."³ A crucial component of Levinas' pursuit of an ethical-ontology is to reveal a pre-originary experience in our face-to-face encounters.⁴ This belongs properly to a realm prior to identity formation or thematic ordering, and it is an encounter with others that occurs only in the full temporality of life. Existence is thereby revealed in the face-to-face encounter with the Other whose presence reveals, as it is revealing.

By suggesting that *Light Sweet Crude* tells us something about this revealing is not merely to repeat the claim that 'Being' is at the foundation of all thinking (all philosophy). Nor is it to lead us down a path that denies the playfulness or humour in the works. Rather, *Light Sweet Crude* actively pursues a worldly, other-worldliness through the objects, with each in their own way severely threatening our fragile disposition in the physical world, while leaving us in the end with a bit of a laugh.

The ambivalence of being..

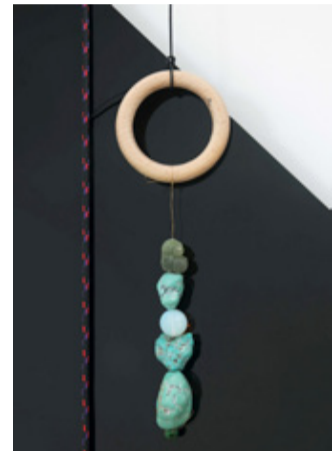
It's with such profound happiness, such a hallelujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic joy. Because no one can hold me back now. I can still reason—I studied mathematics which is the madness of reason—but now I want the plasma—I want to eat straight from the placenta. I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do I make it? Or does it make itself? We make it together with our breath. And with the flair of the bullfighter in the ring. [Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*]⁵

Mikala Dwyer's *Methylated Spiritual* (2012) is a reiteration of her necklace wall works. A chain is laden with found and crafted objects of colour, light and abstract form, hanging one on top of the other, and the translucent, richly coloured plastic catches whatever stray light is travelling through the gallery space. If minimalism hoped to contain works around certain experiential effects, and post-minimalism revealed the fruitlessness of this, then the works in *Light Sweet Crude* are far closer to the latter than the former. At the far end is Peter Robinson's *Ritual and Formation* (2013). These handmade felt poles, striped with colour at various heights, are leaning against the wall at body height. Small circular felt discs (production leftovers) leach towards the viewer on the floor in front. There are allusions to indigenous tribal poles (I see Australian Aboriginal burial poles), but the concept is loose and open and the viewer will see what she wants to see.

The artwork is an Other, or rather, it conjures the Other in an unmediated way that the mind of the viewer cannot fully thematise. This very obscurity of the image uncovers the capacity for exposure to the artwork in pre-originary ways that the mind has not chosen. Paradoxically, artworks conceal as much as they reveal. They are both more than and less than what they appear to be. They are more than merely a representation of an object and less than a universal theme of consciousness.⁶

When I look at Dwyer's work, I can't get *Atelier* (1965), a work by Eva Hesse, out of my mind, despite its sparser spacing and achromatic objects. Hesse too forged a playful distance between her work and hard-edged, minimalist modes. While her objects carried the barest allusion to anthropomorphic form, Hesse claimed they were emblems for the absurdity of life. Dwyer's own teasing with absurdity and sculptural scale in *Methylated Spiritual* anticipates a body of *Broddingnagian* proportions, mocking minimalism's insistence on the importance of scale to body (a relation explained as neither monument nor object by Tony Smith in 1966).⁷

In the recent past, Robinson's installations have exhausted the spaces they occupy, overwhelming the viewer. But in this latest work we are confronted with a space that is much more pictorial in scale and effect. We can't walk around *Ritual and Formation*, but we can face it, as a spectator might face a large painting in a museum. At points in the exhibition Robinson may alter the position of certain poles to jiggle the effect a little, but the small discs scattered across the floor, will protect the poles from any touchy visitors. In choosing to make the poles in felt, Robinson points to Joseph Beuys and his ritualistic use of felt in performance and installation. Replayed again and again throughout his life, Beuys used felt, along with fat, as totemic reminders of an earlier trauma. We should, therefore, take the title seriously for the way it humorously plays with ritual and form. If the tradition of formalism in art history was an attempt to separate (protect) art from the partisanship of social or political forces, then ritual embeds these concerns in the very materiality of the work, in its making and in its presentation. We might recall the way early minimalism (what was first called "Literalist



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1. Emmanuel Levinas, "Once again for the 'listening' eye a silence resounds about what had been muffled, the silence of the parcelling out of being, by which entities in their identities are illuminated and show themselves." *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, p.38

2. Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems and Solipsism", *Arts Magazine*, 1967, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimalism: A Critical Anthology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 92-93

3. B.C. Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York, London: Continuum, 2004, p.140

4. I use the term 'ontology' provisionally here. Due to the convention of separating ethics from ontology, it will become a pejorative in Levinasian thought

5. Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (1973), (trans.) Stefan Tobler (2012), Canada: *New Directions*, 2012, p.3.

6. B.C. Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York, London: Continuum, 2004, p.143

7. Robert Morris, Tony Smith responding to questions from Robert Morris in "Notes on Sculpture 1-3", *Artforum*, 1966-67

Images:
Mikala Dwyer
Methylated Spiritual, 2012
mixed media
2600 x 2400 mm

Peter Robinson
Ritual and Formation, 2013
felt, wood
2600 x 9750 x 500 mm

Art") laid claim to objects that did not signify, as though meaning and experience was something controllable, or even possible. As James Meyer notes, "An art that aspires to a state of pure abstraction does not speak directly to the world but, on the contrary, refuses to speak."⁸

Explaining how ideas are communicated and received is never simple. We understand that meaning is not found in the identification of the sign with its object in the 'real' world (the sign with its signified). Nor does a concept exist outside of a sign system (outside of language). As Michel Foucault noted: "it is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms."⁹ What opens up between what we see and what we say, therefore, is less about equivalence and more about the formation of a gaping abyss of signs, one slightly altered by the next, and all contained within an enclosed, textual space. It was Jacques Derrida who most famously expatiated on the space between the sign and signifier, discovering that the move from one to the other, as trace, is affected by *différance*, a term he used to indicate the effect of both difference and deferral.¹⁰ Since meaning is generated, through time, and in the space arising between signs, it is never stable, fully present, or found in one sign alone, but is scattered and dispersed along a chain of related signifiers. Despite their very different approaches, it is hard to think about the work of Dane Mitchell and Daniel Malone, without appreciating the way they mess with the effects of language in their practices.

Malone Meurt was written in 1951 in French by the Irish author, Samuel Beckett and then translated into English as *Malone Dies* by Beckett five years later. It was serialised in some versions, and in others it was slotted in as a middle section of a larger trilogy. The translator, as Walter Benjamin suggested, must find the intention of the original, even though in the end only "an echo of the original" will remain.¹¹ What is interesting in the case of Beckett is that in the carrying out of his own translation from French to English, it might be assumed that the intention of the author is secured. But this of course was never Benjamin's point. In the Beckett version there remain slight differences between the French version and two English versions that alter the lead character's wish to die.¹² It's not so much the intention of the author that makes translation an impossible promise, but the problem of language itself.

Daniel Malone's concern for authorship in *The English Teacher* (*Malone Dies*) (2009) began with him finding a copy in Polish of Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* in the Warsaw Public Library and borrowing it under his legally changed name, Billy Apple. He photocopied it; rebound it as a pirated version; added to the cover gold embossing (a symbol of great ceremony!) and reflective-glass (not only a way to catch the viewer's own image in the cover, but also a reference to Polish funerals convention). Malone, the artist, is especially conspicuous in this work, but he is also highly displaced, not only by his adopted pseudonym, Billy Apple, but also by the original author and the viewer who peers into the cover only to see himself.

The lead character of Beckett's book, elderly, institutionalised and on the edge of death decides to write stories as a way to regain some authority over his own life and identity. But this urge for control fails due to some simple measures of storytelling: most of Malone's stories struggle to establish a beginning, middle and end, hesitating or stopping short at unexpected moments, while the character, forgetting he is Malone takes on alternative identities. The back-story to *Malone Dies*—with its multiple translations and manifestations, its faltering identities, its slippages in language and intent—plays so beautifully into Daniel Malone's hands. It's as though, as a form of determinism, Beckett sent his book out into the world, into the future, to inevitably meet our own Malone.

Hidden a little away from the rest of the work in *Light Sweet Crude* is Malone's *AUTOPORTRAIT i* (2010), a blurry image of Malone reflected in a Brassai photo of Paris graffiti, with the distinctive 'i' of Brassai's portrait, appropriated and then the double dots split, to provide Malone with another alter ego. Both works, *AUTOPORTRAIT i* and *The English Teacher* align seamlessly with Malone's ongoing interest in the intersection of an artist's ego with conceptual art practices.

Invisible emanations are given physical form in Dane Mitchell's work, such as dreams, spells, and perfumes caught in vapour, captured in glass, or cordoned off in a corner of a gallery. In *Spectral Readings, Liverpool* (2012), Mitchell worked with a glass blower, reciting ghost stories into molten glass to form the sealed off containers. By encasing these stories of ephemeral spirits—neither human nor wholly inhuman, neither of this world nor wholly apart from it, not of our time but always belonging to the past—we are reminded that most of us only ever hear second-hand ghost stories. Perhaps this is their charm, to not only receive the story but also the vibrations of fear emanating from the storyteller. And what remains for us in Mitchell's strange, transparent-glass vessels? Not the frightening story itself, but the fearfulness of the encounter reproduced as an emotional affect.

And this fear, which is also an attraction, points as much to death, and thus to life, as it does to a realm outside of life. But is it purely fiction, merely a play with death, since most of us go on living as though death will never come? A little like Daniel Malone's Billy Apple's Beckett's Malone, we can mess with the dark as long as there's a joke at the end of it.

But it was not long before I found myself alone, in the dark. That is why I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with out stretched arms, hiding. Such is the earnestness from which, for nearly a century now, I have never been able to depart. From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play.¹³

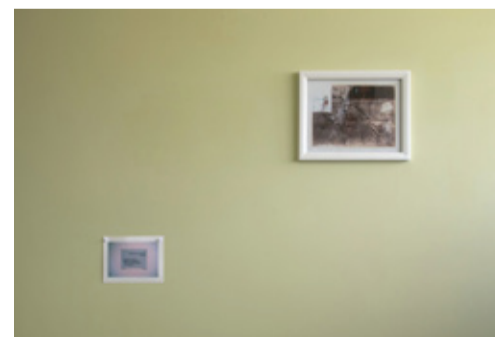
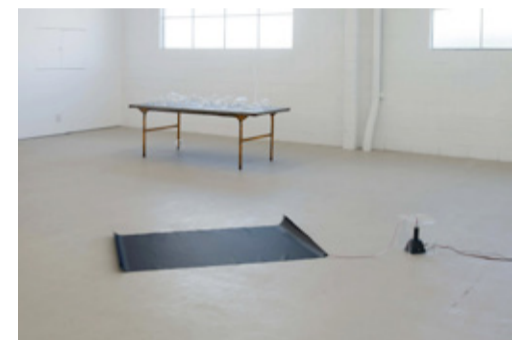
Laughter

As we look from Mitchell's glass vessels to his *Electrostatic Light Trap (Floor)* (2013), the sense of deathly otherness is doubled in this abyss-like sheet. It first appears as a blank nothingness, but its small, motorised attachment is suggestive of a life force, both funny and unsettling, as it pulses quietly away on the floor.

Each of the artists in *Light Sweet Crude* has infused her or his work with humour: some have humour unfolding discreetly, while the joke in others is a little more like slapstick. Dwyer's joke is very unlike Eva Hesse's reference to the absurdity of life, not a 'private' one between the maker and her object, but one Dwyer invites us all to share in: the effect is a little bit like 'the pie hitting the face', as we think of the giant decorative dig at the pretences of abstract, hard-edged modernism. Dwyer's play on the words 'methylated' and 'spirituality' (in this case Voodoo), and Robinson's re-fabrication of sacred objects introduce a whole other-worldliness, but both works appear more like a party than a solemn rite. Perhaps Robinson's humour, though, is far more circumspect. We need to spend a little time with his ideas to recognise the subtle jibes at the art world's conceits, particularly the reverence it affords certain people in art history, while ignoring others. Malone's humour is also directed at the serious, self-reflexivity of the art world—the figure of the conceptual artist who shuffles language and context around, only to bring these references closer to himself.

However, I have posed, through Levinas, the idea that there is something more than a laugh happening in the works, suggesting that they each approach ways to think about Being. Taking a close look at Levinas' life, I don't imagine anyone would see him as much of a prankster: his ethico-ontology is a mighty serious pursuit. Nonetheless, Laughter is one of the ways we know we're breathing, along with encounters with death, life, boredom, and so on...¹⁴

And if we accept that none of our artists take either the world, or their art history too seriously, then I leave the last thought to Adrian Piper. In a recent article she wrote on the ever-so earnest minimalism (a movement in which she was initially wholly immersed), she made an aside about the image of the minimalist artist—"think you'd catch a Minimalist artist pissing into the fireplace, drunk at a party", and in reference to Pop art—"think you'd catch a Minimalist artist wearing a platinum wig?"¹⁵



8. James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2004, p.185.

9. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970), London, New York: Routledge, 1994, p.9

10. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan, 1993

11. Walter Benjamin, "Task of the Translator", *Illuminations* (trans.) Harry Zohn, Fontana Books, 1992, p.77

12. See Peter Boxall (ed.) "Preface to *Malone Dies*", London: Faber and Faber, 2010, p.7

13. *Malone Dies*, (trans.) Beckett, Thomas, Grove translation (1956) taken from Faber print, 2010, p.30

14. Heidegger and Benjamin have both written about the connection between moods and our sense of being/non-being.

15. Adrian Piper, (no title), *Artforum*, September 2010, pp.269-270

Images: Daniel Malone, *The English Teacher (Malone Dies)*, 2009 photocopied pages of Samuel Beckett's 'Malone Dies' from Warsaw Public Library bound with gold emboss, membership documents and withdrawal slip from Warsaw Public Library in custom frame with mirrored glass 200 x 140 x 20mm and 430 x 530mm

Dane Mitchell, *Spectral Readings (Liverpool)*, 2012 (back) spoken word, glass, dimensions variable

Dane Mitchell, *Electrostatic Light Trap (Floor)*, 2013 (front) steel, vices, voltage units, acrylic, dust, 800 x 800 mm

Daniel Malone, *AUTOPORTRAIT i*, 2010, framed photograph and unframed archival inkjet print 320x 415mm and 180 x 240

Text: Jan Bryant MADA | Monash University Art Design & Architecture Photography: Alex North Design: Max Lozach

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