

To Diagram without Stilling: On Maud Cotter's Sculpture

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Maud Cotter's work sets up an exchange between the most humble and rudimentary of everyday objects and far-reaching abstract and conceptual models. The simplest domestic tools and containers – sieves, waste-paper baskets, cups, lampshades, and filters – provide a first lexicon of forms to be enlarged, augmented and distilled into spare and lively 'drawings in space'. The resulting linear, diagrammatic sculptures are large enough to orient and articulate the rooms in which they are installed, and combine apparent simplicity with a powerful sense of emergent complexity. Their simplicity derives from the compression of their formal means, with Cotter often employing geometric, symmetrical, concentric, and modular structures to order her elements. The complexity is produced both in the process of making by hand, whereby 6mm mild steel rods are bent over the knee and welded together, producing inevitable irregularities, and in the responsiveness of the sculptural drawing to the movements of the viewer's body, which in turn has its bearing on the movements of the mind.

The design of the centerpiece of the current exhibition at DOMOBAAAL, *matter of fact* (2016), is loosely based upon that of an air filter. The three-metre-long cylindrical form is composed of three concentric layers of welded and bolted mild steel rods. It is stationed on its horizontal axis so that the circular ends (one rounded, the other squared off) open onto the room, as if to charge, cool or cleanse the air that moves through it. This basic structure is complicated by the roseate curvature of each of the circumferential sections, and by the addition of small rings at each welding point, and the smaller fixtures used to bolt the sections together.ⁱ This armature houses a smaller hollow cylinder made from thin sections of cardboard. Cut from the correct angle, the corrugations of these tightly packed strips – of the simplest and cheapest of packing materials – create a visual effect of great complexity: beads of light peep through each of the corrugations, creating a moiré effect that is responsive to the slightest movement of the viewer's body: even the rhythm of the breath produces a perceptual shift.

matter of fact grew from a body of large-scale works that Cotter has been making since 2012, a number of which were exhibited at the MAC in Belfast in 2013.ⁱⁱ These consist of sculptural armatures – with parts often painted in striking artificial colours – which refer to the shapes of basic everyday containers. These frameworks serve to house modest, precarious but strangely elemental contents: in *Capture* (2012-13) a neon yellow mild steel lampshade-like frame supports a transparent plastic sack filled with water, presenting a humble yet beautiful light trap; *Once More With Feeling* (2013) holds the delicate movements of the thinnest of translucent plastic bin bags as it renders visible the movements of the air around it; and in *Measure* (2013) the form of a waste-paper basket, lifted by the vibrant pink of its upper section, energises the space it 'holds' within it. Introducing the current exhibition, the syncopated armature of *litter bin* (2012) supports a paradoxically lightweight but boulder-like object constructed from the same slender strips of corrugated cardboard. A kind of formal irony at play here, as the works play on the

conjunction of opposed qualities: solidity and emptiness, opacity and transparency, regularity and variation, lightness and weight.

The open linear frameworks and their variously porous and translucent internal elements articulate rather than fill the space they inhabit. Just as a drawing divides and rhythms the surface onto which it is inscribed, as opposed to covering it, Cotter's work charges space rather than sealing it. Writing in the 1930s, the French art historian Henri Focillon wrote vividly about drawing's particular relationship with materiality:

One might reasonably suppose that there are certain techniques in which matter is of slight importance, that drawing, for example, is a process of abstraction so extreme and so pure that matter is reduced to a mere armature of the slenderest possible sort, and is, indeed, very nearly volatilized. But matter in this volatile state is still matter, and by virtue of being controlled, compressed and divided on the paper – which it insistently brings to life – it acquires a special powerⁱⁱⁱ.

Although emerging from a very different historical moment, these sentences bear powerfully upon the logic of Cotter's sculptural language, which combines the presentation of emphatically everyday materials with distilled formal constructions. The proportional relationships developed in the labour-intensive process of production – excising unnecessary elements and adjusting the relationships of part to whole – aim at a structural integrity that will fortify the slightness of the material constitution with a strong but responsive compositional scheme, one that now organises our perceptual engagement with a three- rather than two-dimensional field.

Such work takes its place within well-established trajectories of 20th century art practice. The idea of sculpture as 'drawing in space' was first conceived in the late 1920s by Alexander Calder, Pablo Picasso and Julio González who each devised 'a means of sculpting volume without mass', as Anna Lovatt has put it.^{iv} Such developments themselves made contact with Picasso's earlier Cubist experiments, and with the Corner Counter-Reliefs of Vladimir Tatlin and the constructivist programme of Naum Gabo. In the 1960s in America, artists such as Richard Serra and Robert Morris produced works that directly engaged the scale, movement and explorative tendencies of the embodied viewer, presenting sculptural propositions that variously enticed, frustrated and threatened the body that negotiated them.^v The language of industrial fabrication and heavy, permanent materials of Serra's steel slabs, Judd's galvanised iron, and Morris's mirrored cubes, for example, would be reconfigured in the later 1960s by artists such as Eva Hesse, Fred Sandback, and Gego, to question the role of integrated sculptural form by way of lines literalised in space, which did away with the physically bounded sculptural object.^{vi}

Cotter's formal language plugs itself into a variety of such historical modes, inflecting them differently by way of a repurposing and re-synthesis. There is something of the extravagance of Judd's colour here, the element in his work that connects him to Pop's artificial surfaces. More significantly, perhaps, Cotter takes as fundamental both the integration of the artwork into the spatial conditions of its environment, so characteristic of Minimal and post-Minimal practice, and the centrality of an address to the scale and

mobility of the embodied viewer. Yet whereas there was often something of the formalist endgame about this kind of American art made in the 1960s, Cotter's approach has perhaps more in common with developments in post-war Latin American art, such as the Brazilian Concrete and Neo-Concrete movements emerging in the 1950s and 60s. Briony Fer has recently described the way in which forms of European geometric abstraction were reconfigured in Brazil, shorn of older associations with either universal themes or machine aesthetics. Instead, Fer writes, a number of experimental Brazilian artists were guided by

the idea that abstraction could be 'sensitized' to external circumstances and is highly receptive to lived experience. No less significant were their ideas that art could behave according to experiential models that were heavily charged by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Susanne Langer. Even more of a radical challenge to the mechanized vision was the sense that geometric abstraction was 'organic', more like a body than a machine.^{vii}

The specific nature of the address to the body in Cotter's work is difficult to determine, however. On the one hand, her emphasis seems to be upon an appeal to the body as conceived in phenomenological terms: on bringing attention to the shifting horizons of perceptual experience, of probing the friction between forms conceived by the mind and those negotiated by the perceiving body, and of encouraging the imagination to exercise itself in filling out the lively and condensed frameworks she presents. This body seems to have little to do with that which is subject to social construction (as raced, gendered, and otherwise positioned by way of categorical identities), or with a body operating under the sway of the desiring forces of the psyche. Yet there are moments when Cotter's exploration of new materials does reach into such fraught regions, when qualities of precarity, vulnerability and decay come to the fore.^{viii} *falling into many pieces / one* (2016), one of a series of wall-mounted works deriving from the form of a hayrack used to feed livestock, a more visceral and even abject dimension of the body is engaged. The piece is installed high on the wall so that the viewer peers up at the underside of an aeroboard disc supported by a curvaceous stainless steel frame. The underside of the disc is covered by a scatter of cotton wool balls covered with a thick, distressed coating of dental plaster. Sharing affinities with Eva Hesse's latex and cheesecloth work, *Sequel* (1967), the surface of this strange assembly is eloquent less of healing and repair, as the medical associations of its materials might suggest, and more of a worrying accretion of malign lumps, crackings, blisters and nodes. The clean curves of the steel frame foil the blistered and desiccated plaster's bodily associations take on particular potency as it puckers around a hole cut in the disc's centre. Indeed, such pieces make contact with a more explicitly psychologically loaded body of work that Cotter produced in 2006, which presented lava-like and rather abject liquid spillages and eruptions emerging from everyday china teacups (*So and So*, 2006, and *Soul Mates*, 2006).

It makes little sense to describe Cotter's work in terms of the outmoded binary of 'abstract' versus 'representational' visual languages. Rather, it is a question of the relative determination of the associations that her forms and materials evoke. Perhaps most insistently, many of Cotter's sculptures derive, initially at least, from the rudimentary but enduring forms of modest domestic containers and filters: bins, lampshades, cups, sieves, and holders. The sculptures retain more or less determined associations with these lowly

objects, but in a language that is distilled and abstracted so as to suggest more mobile formal and structural concerns. Indeed, we might say that Cotter's work virtualizes the forms and materials from which it is constituted. Material elements are rendered language-like and thought-like, released from their contingent particularity as much as grounded in it. In this they are made available to extensions and transformations of the imagination, that mode of thought which, as Canadian theorist Brian Massumi puts it, 'manages to diagram without stilling'.^{ix}

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ⁱ This cylinder is supported by a rectangular base below, made of the same mild steel, and each fixture was made by welding together three small circular perforation offcuts, drilled at the centre.

ⁱⁱ See Sarah Kelleher, 'Karl Burke and Maud Cotter: The Air They Capture Is Different', *Enclave Review*, Issue 9, Winter 2013, p.1. On Cotter's recent work, see also Joseph R. Wolin, 'All Stuff is Farce', and Matt Packer, 'To Begin with a Title?', in *Maud Cotter: All Stuff is Farce*, Dublin: Rubicon Gallery, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*. New York: Zone Books, 1992, p.100.

^{iv} Anna Lovatt, 'Drawing Across and Between Media' in *Drawing: Sculpture*, London: Drawing Room 2013, pp.5-17.

^v See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2000.

^{vi} Such explorations have been developed by a host of contemporary artists, from the spectacular and seductive installations of Lygia Pape and Ranjani Shettar, to the more modest and precarious explorations of Sara Barker, for example, or younger Irish artists such as Isabel Nolan and Aleana Egan. For a useful survey of such developments within the history of 20th century art see, for example, Catherine de Zegher and Cornelia Butler (ed.), *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

^{vii} Briony Fer, 'Foreward' in Paulo Venancio Filho, *Possibilities of the Object: Experiments in Modern and Contemporary Brazilian Art*. Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2015, p.32.

^{viii} The best account of the relationship between Cotter's work and questions of embodiment is that currently being developed by Sarah Kelleher in her doctoral thesis being written at University College Cork, provisionally entitled *Sculpture's Metamorphosis: On the Work of Maud Cotter, Dorothy Cross and Alice Maher*.

^{ix} Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, p.134.