

“Why is this art?” In many ways this is the paradigmatic question surrounding modern artistic practice and its public reception. Contemporary museum-goers have seen it all: paintings made from seemingly accidental drips, urinals and snow shovels, basketballs and animal carcasses floating in vitrines, and even blank canvases and empty rooms. All of these things and many others have been presented as objects worthy of critical if not aesthetic appreciation. Within such a heterogeneous understanding of art, Melissa Dyne’s installation of an approximately 5 × 11 foot industrial multi-paned window



balanced upon a gallery wall and ever so gradually bending on either end from its own weight needs no justification as a work of art. Yet its placement in a museum dedicated to craft – even contemporary craft – might appear problematic to some viewers. How can such industrial materials and process-oriented work be considered a work of craft? Isn't craft about traditional (rather than industrial) practices and, moreover, practices that utilize specifically manual skills?

These questions are not new to the world of craft. From the moment artists working within what are considered traditional craft media – clay, glass, fibers, wood and metal for instance – began to demand that their objects receive the sort of consideration given to painting and sculpture, the definition of what makes an object a work of craft rather than a work of art has been both contentious and vital to the development of craft practice. These questions first obtained a degree of urgency in the years following the Second World War, when painters and sculptors in the United States were beginning to receive international acclaim. Their work was often celebrated in the very terms which defined traditional craft practices, namely its emotional immediacy and material integrity. For defenders of craft at this historical juncture, what differentiated craft practice from “high” art was simply a matter of materials and medium, and to them a Peter Voulkos pot or an Anni Albers rug could be appreciated with the same aesthetic criteria used to understand a painting by Jackson Pollock or a sculpture by David Smith.

Yet beginning in the early 1960s, with the emergence of Pop and minimalist art, such medium-specific criteria was increasingly seen to be less crucial in determining the significance and artistic value of a work of art. In the past forty years, as artistic practice has moved into the less materially-driven realms of installation, performance and video, (all the while continuing to sustain the more conventional practices of painting and sculpture), a work of art's meaning – let alone its designation as a work of art – can be determined by its mere placement within a museum or gallery, or simply the artist's assertion that it is indeed a work of art. While this expansion of possibilities for artistic practice might seem to make the concept of craft obsolete (after all, many contemporary artists utilize traditional craft techniques in their work, just as many contemporary craft artists utilize non-manual technologies in theirs), it can also be seen as a way to redefine the meaning of craft with a new degree of specificity and purpose. In fact, it could be argued that craft practice has taken up the mantle of material integrity disregarded by art in a post-modern and “post-medium” era. That is to say, craft can be considered a form of modernism after the fact, maintaining the movement's attention to materiality while dispensing with its truth-to-materials dogmatism.

Dyne's installation operates within this nexus between modernist art and modern craft by specifically referring to this crucial moment of transformation in the history of art when some of the fundamental values of high art practice were left to be reclaimed by craft. Most obviously, the two large scale photographs on the surrounding walls which depict



the Portland-based Benson Industries warehouse evoke one of the most characteristic and well-known examples of the sort of art which initially emerged in the early 1960s as a critique of modernist medium-specificity and authorial intentionality: Donald Judd's minimalist works, or "stacks." Using industrial and decidedly non-art materials like Plexiglas and aluminum to create objects of geometric austerity, Judd and his defenders considered such works as a means to provide a viewer with what he called a "credible" aesthetic experience, one without external connotations or preconceived imagery, which was otherwise unavailable in what was deemed to be an untrustworthy world of image-overload and technological mediation.

While historical distance has diminished the rhetoric of impersonality and immediacy Judd intended his use of anti-hierarchical compositions and industrial materials to carry, what can be considered the larger perceptual project of minimal art – its attempt to produce an aesthetic experience which sharpens the eyes and minds of a harried viewer who is constantly bombarded by images – seems even more compelling today than it was when such works were first exhibited. By displaying an industrial window pane used for numerous skyscrapers in an unfamiliar context – horizontally and removed from its supporting architectural support – Dyne allows us as viewers to consider the technical ingenuity and sheer force of a material component of everyday experience that would otherwise most likely go unnoticed by most people (even those who spend a good deal of their waking lives in buildings with such glass). Moreover

by allowing the force of gravity to fracture the pane over time, Dyne's work suggests the intrinsic transience and vulnerability of such seemingly impersonal and impenetrable objects, an aspect of all technology that is characteristically repressed in our ever-accelerating and progress-driven society.

It is perhaps paradoxical that Dyne's work invites such perceptiveness by defamiliarizing one of the most conventional symbols for visual representation: the window. By taking something we typically look through and, by rotating it on its horizontal axis, turning it into something we look at, Dyne's work suggests how we must pay attention to objects normally considered outside the realm of visual significance, in other words how we must perceive the many things we all too regularly merely see. Recognizing the technical and even expressive complexity of materials in a world in which everyday experience appears increasingly dematerialized and mediated is a project particularly suited for contemporary craft practice. Craft, in whatever manifestation it might appear, is work that draws our attention to how we interact with the various materials – both natural and manufactured – with which we surround our bodies. Melissa Dyne's installation, like all good works of craft (and like all good works of art), allows us see aspects of the world with a new sensitivity and understanding, even for those of us who might think we have seen it all.

Robert Slifkin, Professor of Art History and Humanities, Reed College, May 2008

Dynamics

Man does not make structures out of materials; we make large structures out of small structures. A regularity of patterning that must always link man made and nature devised or visible module associations.

—R. Buckminster Fuller and Robert Marks¹

Melissa Dyne is both a mad scientist and a skillful artist. Initially trained in physics, she loves problem solving and experimentation with materials. She likes to ask *how* – *how* matter works, *how* energy and forces change matter/mass, and *how* this all evolves over time. Familiar with collaboration and working hand-in-hand with scientists, engineers and designers, Dyne is an artist who brings together technology and physics with cultural analysis, questioning our involvement with the material world.

Dyne employs a *processual* approach to her projects.² This idea of process comes from her interest in seeing what happens when you set certain things in motion. Dyne reworks the appearance of something, its physical form, and draws our attention to the process of change. Through *Glass*, Dyne uses the *body* of glass, the material, to affect the actual space of the Museum, as well as the viewer's experience of it over time. The Museum becomes charged, tense, even explosive, and the audience can come to understand the material of glass and space very differently from how we know it in our day-to-day life.

Melissa Dyne and I have collaborated in the past. Together, we produced an installation during the summer of 2005 called *Big Tools/Small Tools* at the Para/Site Art Space in Hong Kong.³ I worked with digital video and electronic surveillance technology, exploring the cultural influences and meaning of these tools. Dyne revamped old optical devices and developed a hand-crafted lens technology for a *camera obscura*. Our combined pictures in the installation revealed different systems of viewing – one older optical system which is closer to the workings of the eye (the *camera obscura*), and one comfortably similar to the digital barrage we see daily (surveillance camera images) – to expose how we view things as opposed to what they represent.

Dyne's *camera obscura* projection was a live image of what was happening on the street outside the gallery projected onto a wall inside the gallery. This constantly moving picture in real time had no grain, needed no development and had no permanence. My video provided details through pixilated images of the live projection. These various images of the landscape were a collapse of the inside-outside observation we encounter regularly through mapping systems, surveillance panels, baby monitors, telephoto lens – bringing together different spaces with enhanced modes of observing and sensing them. The viewing devices we employed created an urban eye on the street outside the gallery, asking the viewers to participate in a meditative view on their own community.

When Melissa came to start the project with me in Hong Kong, she limped off the airplane because she had broken her ribs just prior to her trip. Because of her fragile state, we worked through the project slowly. We spent a lot of time talking about how to proceed. But as we worked together a kind of synergy also began to build and gain momentum. Hong Kong was an incredibly frenetic place. Maybe partially because of her physical state, we found ourselves wanting to use the *Big Tools/Small Tools* installation to slow things down, to ask the audience to think about the perception of time and how we see the world.

Collaborating on this installation, I also began to appreciate Dyne's method of working and her interest in phenomenology. She begins with a subjective understanding of something; in our collaboration it was how the various camera lenses can be used to translate light and time. Dyne then molds a space into her "canvas" – creating a place to understand



her interest in the material, and to share an experience of it with a viewer – as if you could enter a painting as it was being painted. There is no final object, but a continuum that is revealed.

Like a sculptor, Dyne wants to get to the point of fragility and tension through the physical properties of the material with which she is working. She constantly asks questions, wanting to learn more. She conducts research with her work, pushing technology and materials in ways that are totally impractical – something which artists are able to do.

Dyne deals with materials that have "hard to hold" properties. In our collaboration, we focused on bending light, refracting light, and light's radiant energy as translated through our different but combined camera tools. Our project also dealt with time: the passing of time, slowing time down, mapping time, and tracing it all through light.

For this project at the Museum of Contemporary Craft, Dyne focuses on another kind of material. Glass is amorphous. It is not necessarily just a liquid or a solid; like cotton candy, it can exist in very different states. Dyne wants to test those various states of being. And it is almost as though our own being and metaphysical state is questioned here, too. Dyne's work is about extracting how things exert force on each other – as we all do – all the time.

A *processual* approach like our collaboration in Hong Kong is precisely how Dyne executes this new project, *Glass*. It is a continuum of her work into a new arena, taking new risks, and inviting the audience to investigate critical questions. How do we, as cultural producers, question the most basic material production? How does a process of making any product mirror our use and production of material goods? How does it reflect our engagement with urban environments, architectural design and our technological advancements in these areas? Dyne's work becomes critically important to rethink our use and misuse for these contemporary metaphoric materials.

Kathy High, Chair of the Arts Department, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York

1. R. Buckminster Fuller and Robert Marks, *The Dymaxion World of Buckminster Fuller*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1960.

2. This term *processual* was developed by a video art critic, Yvonne Spielmann, in discussing early analog video and image processing works from the 1970s. (Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*, MIT Press, 2008). These early video art works were by artists who were keenly interested in experimenting with machines, tools, systems and devices to play with the video electronic signal and affected the end result of their work. They were interested in the way the machine became a collaborator, authoring part of the video, allowing the work to perform and evolve over time, more like a performance as opposed to finished film.

3. <http://www.para-site.org.hk>

Craft is often defined in terms of media. Glass, a relative newcomer to the American Craft Movement and studio practice, entered the pantheon of clay, fiber, metal, and wood in the early 1960s when technological changes enabled artists to work with glass outside of the factory environment for the first time. Today, studio glass is perhaps one of the most sought after and collected craft forms in the contemporary art market.

Melissa Dyne's own experiences do not include any of the studio glass processes one might expect from an artist exhibiting in a museum dedicated to craft. She does not blow, kiln-form, flame-work, or sand-cast glass. Nor does she hire glass artists to fabricate work for her installation. In fact, her only physical experience with manipulating glass by hand involves grinding and fabricating lenses for optical systems.

For this project, Melissa Dyne uses one of the most common forms of glass in daily life – the window pane – as both object and the subject of a site-specific installation. Dyne turns to industry, employing specially engineered skyscraper glass produced by Benson Industries, a Portland-based company founded in 1923. Glass producers for some of the largest skyscrapers in the world, Benson has developed a method of “skinning” a building where the glass supports its own weight. This allows architects to create new building forms; for example, a structure that resembles a crushed piece of paper or the latest iteration of a “crystal palace.” Dyne rotates a piece of this Benson Industries-produced glass in opposition to its normal and intended vertical position. Draped over a wall, a pane

of 5 × 11 foot glass is being pushed to bend by its own weight. The glass will move until it reaches stasis or ruptures. If, and when, it breaks, the shards will remain part of the exhibition, and a second piece installed to continue the process.

Dyne's installation draws parallels between the warehouse as a site of industrial production, and the culturally charged contemporary art space (the “White Cube”). This exhibition turns the Museum into a laboratory for open ended questions – which is not unlike the process engineers, architects and designers engage during product research and development for industry.

Unlike most exhibitions at craft museums, Dyne's project is non-commercial and open-ended. The glass is a performer in a shared experience, not an object to take home, which raises critical questions. In commissioning this site-specific installation from Melissa Dyne, the Museum challenges the media-specific categorization that happens in the craft arena. Is this a valid way to continue to define craft? How can non-studio glass be considered “craft” – and if so, why? Through *Glass*, the Museum seeks to open dialogue and provoke new language about contemporary visual practice across art, craft, design and industry. Must craft result in an object, or is it possible to engage ideas about craft through a process-oriented art practice?

Namita Gupta Wiggers, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Craft, May 2008

RELATED PROGRAMS

PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Noontime Chat

Wednesday, April 9, 12 PM, Pacific Northwest College of Art, 1241 NW Johnson
Curator Namita Gupta Wiggers leads a conversation with Melissa Dyne and discusses past projects, including public art work in Mexico City and a collaborative installation in Hong Kong.

DISCUSSION GROUP

Kaffeeklatsch

Tuesday, May 6, 12 PM, The Lab
Bring your lunch and join artist Melissa Dyne for a casual gathering of coffee and conversation. This month's topic: How do concept and craft merge in contemporary art practice?

PANEL DISCUSSION

From Idea to Production: Craft in Conceptual Art Making

Thursday, May 29, 7 PM, The Lab
Moderator: Stephanie Snyder;
Panelists: Melissa Dyne, M.K. Guth, Kathy High, Namita Gupta Wiggers.
Dyne's installation serves as the point of departure for a discussion about the relationship between concept-driven art, industry and craft.

EXHIBITION TOUR

Robert Slifkin on *Glass*

Thursday, June 5, 11:30 AM, Tour convenes at front desk
Robert Slifkin, professor of Art History and Humanities at Reed College, leads a discussion on minimalism and its connection to Melissa Dyne's installation.

LECTURE

Vicki Halper

Contrasts: A Glass Primer

Thursday, June 26, 6:30 PM, The Lab
Vicki Halper, a guest curator at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, WA, presents a lecture delineating the distinctions between craft and art in the studio glass movement. Halper argues for a deeper appreciation of the use of glass in art and provides a framework through which to view Melissa Dyne's installation.

ARTIST'S TALK

CRAFT PDX EVENT

Melissa Dyne

Sunday, July 13, 1:30 PM, The Lab
Melissa Dyne presents a lecture on her boundary-pushing installation *Glass*. Breaking down her artistic process, Dyne will show slides of her past work and describe the greater context for her installation.

PANEL DISCUSSION

CRAFT PDX EVENT

Glass in Portland

Sunday, July 13, 3:30 PM, The Lab
Get a firsthand account of Portland's studio glass scene from three local makers. Join Gallery artists Andy Paiko (recently chosen as a Searchlight Artist by the American Crafts Council), Jeremy Newman and Lynn Everett Read for a panel discussion moderated by Kristin Shiga, Extension Program Director at Oregon College of Art and Craft.

ON THE WEB

A dialogue between Melissa Dyne and Namita Gupta Wiggers from the April 9 Noontime Chat is online at www.MuseumofContemporaryCraft.org

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IMAGE (INTERIOR LEFT)
Melissa Dyne
Warehouse 1, February 2008
Chromira print
61¾ × 49¾ inches

IMAGE (INTERIOR RIGHT)
Melissa Dyne
Warehouse 2, February 2008
Chromira print
61¾ × 49¾ inches

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MuseumofContemporaryCraft.org | Tuesday–Sunday 11 AM–6 PM and Thursday 11 AM–8 PM

Museum of Contemporary Craft