

JHANA MILLERS

Kāryn Taylor

Static Object Infinite Event

Scientists kind of hate it when we dip our toes in their pool. There's this impulse in the arts—literary, visual, whatever—to take scientific maxims and turn them into metaphors. Think Colin McCahon reading *Geomorphology* and turning contours into national character. For the scientifically minded, something always goes wrong in this act of transposition. We end up with two things that at best look like synonyms and, at worst, mistranslations. Art and science of course share roots but, in our post-Enlightenment enthusiasm for placing disciplines in discrete boxes, jumping between the hard edges of the two seems to risk coming up short for both. So why do it?

There's no origin for this kind of practice, and less point in searching for one. But there are moments across art history that might reveal a little of what lies behind this desire to make art from science, and what's at stake when we do.

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In 1936, the Gallerie Charles Ratton in central Paris hosted an exhibition of *Surrealist Objects*. In an accompanying catalogue/press release/mini-manifesto, André Breton—organiser of the exhibition and leader of the Surrealist group—assiduously categorised the different categories of object that had been brought together on the gallery's walls and housed in mock-museum display cases.

Always problematically on-brand, there were so-called *savage objects*: non-western artefacts fetishized by European artists like masks and sculpted figures from Africa and Oceania. There were *natural objects*: crystal geodes, animal eggs, and carnivorous plants. Further along Breton's taxonomy of objects came Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, along with Picasso's synthetic sculptures. And, joining this strange collection, inside the glass cabinets, was a collection of *mathematical objects*.

This group of sculptural forms was found by Max Ernst at the Institut Henri Poincaré, a research centre for advanced mathematics and theoretical physics. In metal, wire, plaster, and wood, the objects were designed to demonstrate complex equations and mathematical theorems in physical form.

There was a logic to the strange accumulation of objects at the Ratton gallery, or at least a theory. The Surrealists hoped to co-opt objects in their quest to re-enchant the Modern world, to bring reality and dreams into a resolved future state. The objects weren't necessarily surreal because of what they were, or what they looked like, but in how they might be estranged from their initial contexts and purposes—ripped from the rules that governed their ordinary use and environment.

You can see something of the Surrealist desire to fuse dreams and reality in the mathematical objects. They manifest a general principle of the abstract made concrete—intangible ideas given physical form. But there was also something more important at play. In this odd, cabinet context, the objects suddenly acquired new lives—meanings and functions that could be contrasted with the ones they were made for. Once, the forms had aided in the instruction of advanced

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mathematics to students who understood the relationship between their forms and the ideas they expressed. Now, their curving shapes and looping twists of plaster and wire were forced to communicate to a new audience on new terms.

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The mistake—if there's one to be made here—is to think about art inspired by scientific principle as if it's supposed to work like the mathematical objects did in their first and functional lives. It is possible to translate complex abstract thought into physical form, that's what the objects did. But that's not really the point. It wasn't for Breton and co. in 1936 and it isn't for an artist like Kāryn Taylor, who makes objects that are readily identified in this space of science-made-art. The art object, something with its own distinct life and history, offers something other than just the representation of a thought made concrete. The same potential for changed contexts and communication still exists.

It really hasn't been that long since art and science were one and the same. It's something that European thought lost just a few centuries ago but has been carefully retained by many non-Western cultures. In the Old World, the hermetic traditions of alchemy, astrology, and theurgy played balancing acts that propelled art and science forward together. But then, with the Enlightenment cult of rationality, we split them up, gave them different names and purposes, told them to stick to their own crowds.

It's a gap that can't be closed or reconciled, a sundering that can't be undone. Sometimes this distance is a tragedy, but sometimes it's space where interesting things take place. Taylor makes sculptures and installations derived from principles of quantum physics—one of sciences' newer and sexier boxes. They softly hum with light along quiet lines of geometry, always providing a little awe in the fact that they aren't internally lit, just making gentle and attractive use of natural light. I don't know a thing about quantum physics. And after spending time in contemplation of Taylor's work, I'm no more enlightened as to the technical interactions of sub-atomic particles or the mechanics of wave functions. Despite their origins, I don't think they're supposed to teach me that.

What they do achieve—like the mathematical objects in their glass cases—is to make something strange of both art and science. Taylor's sculptures aren't scientific objects, but in their quantum inspiration aren't entirely art objects either. They dance in between, in a middle space that isn't always comfortable, but is endlessly open to interaction and interpretation. There's an idea that crosses quantum concepts and metaphysics that the potential of an object is realised in its observation or use. That the space prior to materialisation is one of infinite possibility. I'm drawn to this concept for the implication that in shifting concepts into form, or vice versa, we don't only offer new context, but new potential.

The mathematical objects were all about exploring new potential. Taylor's sculptures are too. They are strange and estranged, concepts caught by an aesthetic that elicits curiosity but doesn't produce easy answers. Beautiful without becoming decorative, serious without becoming didactic. Scientists probably hate them.

Lachlan Taylor, October 2021