

# Transitional fields: Empathy and Affinity

By Philip Beesley in collaboration with Jonathan Tyrrell

Beesley, Philip, and Jonathan Tyrrell. "Transitional fields: Empathy and Affinity." *All Our Relations*. Eds. Gerald McMaster and Catherine de Zegher. Sydney: The 18th Biennale of Sydney, 2012. Print. 379-381.



*all our relations*

18<sup>TH</sup>  
BIENNALE  
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What is the link, if any, between the material and emotional realms? When the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius watched motes of dust quivering and darting within the sunbeams of his window, he saw atoms at play. Rolling and wavering, the dust spoke of decay and loss; possibility, specious circumstance in flux: corrupted, damaged, and dying swerves, and also a vague, shaded shift of life arising – the quickening of living seeds.

‘Hylozoism’ is the ancient perception of life arising out of material. Lucretius followed earlier Greek thinkers in seeing life and spirit arising from the chaos-borne quickening of air, water, and stone. Implicit in this way of seeing the world is an oscillation, and it might be said a certain ambiguity, between the parts and the whole. Out of this oscillation emerges a spirit that is not fully transcendent of its material origins, and yet still somehow distinct.

Certainly this ancient idea resonates with the strand of generative ‘bottom-up’ thinking that gained momentum in the early part of this century. We might, however, see it as distinct from straightforward linear progressions of the element to the composite form. Hylozoism suggests a kind of contingent life energy, that Lucretius describes as motes of dust that boil out into higher order forms, registering in our perception for only an instant before unfurling back out into the particulates. Is it possible, we might ask, to inhabit this material state of flux between the figure and the ground? Can this kind of pregnant milieu be constructed and, if so, might it offer tangible strategies for achieving new forms of collectivity?

### Transitional Fields

Donald Winnicott, the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst, put forward his ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena’ hypothesis in 1951, which became a critical reference in the emerging field of object relations theory.<sup>1</sup> Winnicott saw an inadequacy in the polarisation of human nature into the opposing categories of ‘inner reality’ and the ‘external world’. Essential to this model, he argued, was the zone of exchange between these two realms. According to Winnicott, the early stages of infancy are marked by the emergence of this liminal zone which is negotiated by way of ‘transitional objects’ that the child recognises as not being part of his or her body, and yet, curiously, not belonging to the outside world.

<sup>1</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing & Reality: Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1971, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/winnicott1.pdf>

Opposite: Philip Beesley  
*Hylozoic Series (detail),*  
installation, 2010, materials??



Philip Beesley  
*Hylozoic Series (detail),*  
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<sup>2</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott,  
*Playing and Reality*, Routledge,  
New York, 2005, p. 7

Gradually the infant goes through a process of *decathexis*, an unbinding of libidinal energies from the transitional object, relegating it to a hibernatory space within the psyche. The child then begins to engage the cultural realm, entrenching the boundary between self and other. The transitional phenomena are not lost, but they have ‘become diffused ... spread out over the whole intermediate territory between “inner psychic reality” and “the external world as perceived by two persons in common”, that is to say, over the whole cultural field.’<sup>2</sup> While the transitional zone has not then fully disappeared, it has been reduced and in a certain way become impoverished with respect to its former fertility.

Returning to the transitional object itself, it is interesting to note that while it does not possess a symbolic character, it is far from arbitrary in its physicality. Winnicott observes that these objects tend to possess particular qualities of warmth and texture, a vitality in their material presence. Blankets are a particularly poignant example that act as transitional objects, not only in the phenomenological sense but in creating a corresponding intermediary physical zone between the child and the outer world. Acting in this way the blanket becomes a kind of expanded physiology. It is tempting to see this particular example as offering a nuanced extension of Winnicott’s thesis in that it seems to represent a more diffuse condition; the expanded tissue of the blanket functions more like a transitional *field* than a transitional *object*.

This field then implies a beautiful sense of the inner and outer worlds as sharing a fecund space of interaction where the sovereignty of the individual is found rather than claimed. We might in fact see decathexis, traditionally understood as a process for ‘coping’ or ‘getting over’ such a state, as an enabling condition where the suspension of judgment – about what is part of me or not part of me – creates a space of empathy, and perhaps even a space of desire, between the subject and its milieu. Furthermore, we might venture something of a reverse reading of Winnicott by suggesting that this transitional state of entanglement, rather than being something to pass through, could in fact be an alternate method for achieving subtle forms of collective identity.



## Fragility, turbulence and the collective

The work on the *Hylozoic Series* of interactive sculpture environments attempts to render this condition in physical terms, giving a designed anatomy to the transitional field. The hovering filter environments, composed of tiny, laser-cut acrylic elements, create diffusive boundaries between occupants and the surrounding milieu. These structures preference deeply reticulated skins, turning away from the minimum surface exposures of reductive crystal forms; they seek to maximise interchange with the atmosphere and other occupants. Like any ecology and any material system, these environments are partial, reacting only to certain excitements and evincing awareness of only certain things. They are not, after all, environments that readily increase human power and domain. Instead, one becomes aware of subtle impacts: air, moving around the body, perhaps charges in surrounding magnetic fields that one disturbs as they pass. Interaction renders legible the many presences and many dimensions latent in this field. Such strategies, rooted in an exquisitely deliberate weakness, increase the potency of these projects. By offering material turbulence as a primary design quality, these works move from objective performance back into cultural realms of iconography.

French philosopher Michel Serres describes this kind of productive turbulence as a key stage in the foundation of cities.<sup>3</sup> In a passage that resonates with Winnicott's transitional phenomena, Serres describes an incredibly tenuous and yet fertile space of primitive encounter just prior to the foundation of Rome. Early gatherings of people appeared in the wooded refuge, a densely thicketed grove-like space consecrated by an act of sacrifice. Entwined with this turbulent fauna, the group slipped back and forth between the undifferentiated mob and the individual citizen, as notions of the bounded city as yet unformed. Composite identities emerge, resisting sharp delineations between self, other and environment. The space of this flux – the grove – is a participatory milieu that acts as another kind of transitional field. Conventional myths about city-making suggest that the 'grove' condition evolved into the cultural artefact of the modern city through a process analogous to decathexis. Prior to this, a composite identity was present – the oscillating collective and the turbulent grove were not the same and yet are still not wholly distinguishable.

Could this kind of transitional field, fragile and turbulent as it may be, offer emplacement in the world? Certainly it does not claim the earth as a friable resource for the framing of human territory, nor is it a prosthetic apparatus for the extension of power. The transitional field is fraught with ambivalence and riddled with oscillation. And yet, in a time where the porosity of our own subjective boundaries and the composite nature of our identities is taken as a given, it might offer a fertile starting point for reimagining the shape of an ever-increasingly entwined public.



Philip Beesley  
*Hylozoic Series* (detail),  
installation, 2010, materials??

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres, *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 1991

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Citation for the above:

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