

Dirk Yates

SPEED BUMP SYSTEMS



This catalogue has been published on the occasion of the exhibition *Speed Bump Systems* by Dirk Yates.

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(above) *"I LOVE YOU"* (detail), 2007, acrylic on particle board and timber support, 297 x 420 x 37 mm.

(cover) *Spit Painting*, 2007, acrylic, masking tape and graphite on mirror, 610 x 400 x 4 mm.

(top, left – right) *Mirror Test Panel 3, Mirror Test Panel 2, Mirror Test Panel 1*, each: 2007, acrylic on mirror, 210 x 297 x 4 mm.

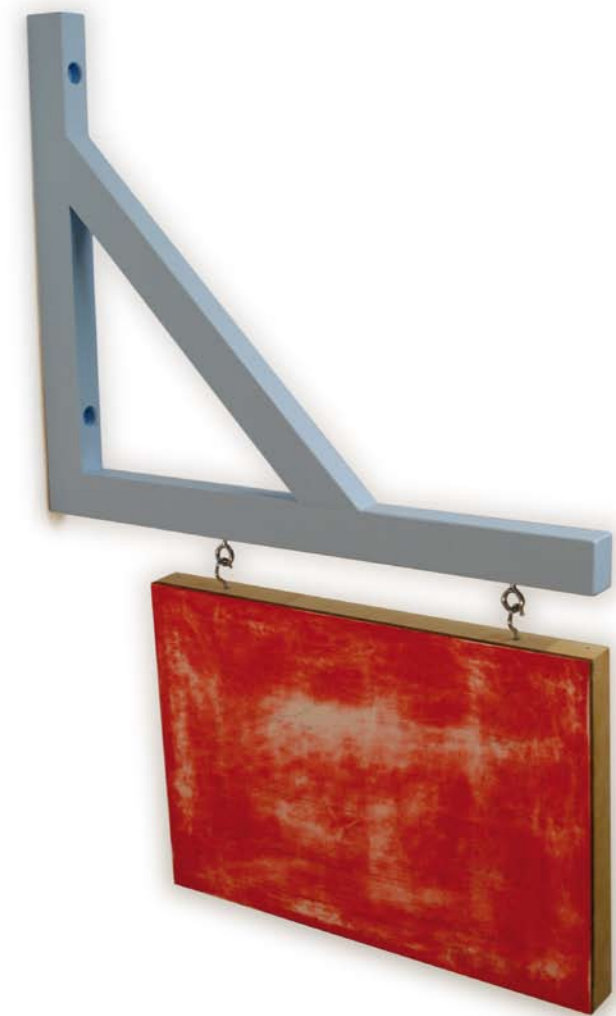
(above) *Performance Sequence of Spit Painting 1–10*, each: July 2007, digital image.

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Speed Bump Systems: Visual Tools for Locating the Viewer

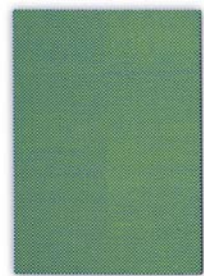
In the exhibition *Speed Bump Systems*, Dirk Yates creates a series of spaces that explore the physical relation of the viewer to painting. In particular, Yates is interested in the combined use of mirrors and the two-dimensional planar surface of painting, in works which operate as tools for locating the viewer in space. In doing so, these works initiate the spatial assessment of one's own body in relation to the works, and in proximity to the bodies of others.



(above) *Sign (Orthographic Drawing — Red)*, 2007, acrylic and graphite on particle board and timber supports, 550 x 800 x 37 mm.

Of course, this concern for the viewer and their physical relation to painting in space is not new. In Western art, Margret Wertheim suggests that this interest in physical space can be traced back to Giotto's proto-perspectival paintings of the early fourteenth century, where physical space is depicted for the first time with convincing depth, three-dimensionality and realism.¹ As Wertheim notes, these works contrast markedly with the previously flat, floating and scaleless representations of space in medieval art, which depict only the celestial realms of a spatial order defined by its division into two discrete spheres — the heavenly realms of the gods and the terrestrial space of man. Importantly, these symbolic depictions of spiritual space left no place for the viewer, forcing the recognition of oneself as located decidedly outside the depicted spatial structure, and in the material and physical realm of men. Giotto's focus on physical space must therefore be seen within the context of a late thirteenth century shift, not only in art, but also in religion, science and philosophy, towards a renewed investigation of the observable physical world.² This shift culminated in the redefinition of the very concept of space, and initiated a new centrality of the physical human body in Western art that was to continue for the next 500 years.³

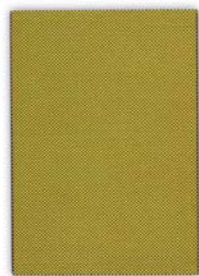
Arguably, the most significant development emerging from this new zeitgeist, was the formalisation of the rules and techniques of perspective later in the fifteenth century. This was to have an enormous impact not only on representation itself, but also on the physical relation between the viewer and painting. Necessarily, a perspectival image implies a single, fixed point in real space at which the viewer must stand in order to most accurately view the depiction of space. As such, the percipient is located in physical space, in a relationship dictated by the virtual space of that image.⁴ Perhaps the most striking example of this may be seen in Andrea Pozzo's often cited ceiling for the church of St. Ignatius in Rome (1691–94). Here, the perspective of the painted surface follows that which is formed by the architecture, and actually incorporates painted architectural features to



complete this amalgamation of real and virtual space. Here, the developed use of perspective directs the viewer to stand in a particular location on the floor below, at which this illusion is most powerful. John Macarthur suggests that in this way, Pozzo not only includes the viewer, but offers a space to inhabit between the celestial (virtual) realm, and the terrestrial (real) space of man.⁵ Importantly, and as Wertheim reminds us, this implication of the viewer only became possible with the invention of perspective which, for the first time, located the viewing body in spatial congruity with the painted image.⁶

While this example of the use of perspective is an old one, it describes a model of art's engagement with physical space and the viewer that has been reworked many times since the fifteenth century. In the early twentieth century for example, artists experimented with new spatial structures outside of perspective. Lissitzky, Malevich, the De Stijl group and others all sought new conceptions of space that anticipated a transformation of the viewer in relation to the work — often as a free, moving and dynamic subject, in contradiction to perspective's fixed viewing position. Later in the sixties, minimalism further expanded the spatial structure of the work to include the viewer and their subjective, corporeal and phenomenological experience. On this evidence, it appears that the location of the body in relation to the work of art has shifted in a trajectory from exclusion (as found in medieval art), to inclusion in a static location (defined by perspective), and later towards a liberated, subjective spatial experience that is physically engaged with the movement and perception of the viewer's body.

Yet, what does this mean for art within our contemporary spatial culture? Many recent cultural and new media theorists assert a reversal of this trend. Overwhelmingly, it is suggested that the saturation of everyday spaces with visual media and with spaces of virtuality — both greatly supported by new technologies — undermines the material, phenomenal, social and human aspects of our lived experience of space.⁷ Thus, these claims seem to suggest the re-emergence of a medieval spatial condition in which the body is detached and excluded by a binary opposition between physical space (that of the body) and virtual space (as a distinct, 'other' space).



In Yates' work, an alternative position is developed that challenges this return to a detached and anti-corporeal conception of contemporary space. Instead, these works insist on the physical engagement, subjectivity and movement of the viewer, and refuse their apprehension from any single or static view point. In this way, the works are grounded by a minimalist sensibility, and operate as physical obstacles that delay, or perhaps even get in the way of one's direct path to understanding.⁸ In a number of the mirrored works, viewers must move across their surface to fully comprehend them. Other works, such as the series of seemingly monochromatic panels, made by the optical mixing of two colours, require the viewer to alternate between close and distant positions. Such works slow down the process of understanding, like speed bumps on the road. And, just like speed bumps, these works also force us to look to our surroundings, and to proceed with a heightened awareness of the space — and people — around us. It is Yates' intention here to shift the focus from the works as objects, to the social spaces generated by them in his 'speed bump system'. Accordingly, when moving through the exhibition, not only are the works slowly revealed, but the viewer may also capture glimpses of themselves and others in the space, through the series of mirrored surfaces and transparent perspex frames. Emerging from this complex series of spatial engagements is a heightened consciousness of one's own body and its location in space. Arguably, Yates is therefore seeking to re-embodiment the viewer, and thus counter the body's disinvestment and detachment in so much critical discourse today.

Yet, what is most intriguing about Yates' work is its insistence on an explicitly visual system to construct this social space and viewer engagement — not with perspective, but through mirrored surfaces and two-dimensional painting. This engagement is understood as an inter-subjective process, or conversation, between the work and the viewer that is built upon agreed systems and rules for communication. For example, the orthographic drawing works use conventions of graphic representation to describe the unfolding of a three-dimensional form into a two-dimensional net. Similarly, the monochromes deploy retinal 'tricks' that engender their own internal rules requiring physical movement in order to engage the percipient.

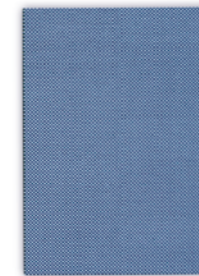
In the mirrored works, the rules of engagement are less defined. Yet, here again, these works require the animating presence of the viewer, and anticipate the perception of the image of oneself, and others, overlaid upon its painted surface grid. This interaction between the viewer and the work parallels Ron Burnett's recent discussion of our perception of images, which he describes in terms of reverie — an open, multiple, and multi-modal process in which our subjectivities interact with images in the co-creation of meaning, and thus facilitating interaction and communication.⁹ Similarly, the visual works in this exhibition operate as tools not only to locate the viewer in space, but to also actively facilitate our conscious, visual and physical engagement with them. It is not by coincidence that one of the works takes on the form of a shovel — a literal tool that anticipates direct engagement and physical action.

Therefore, while it is easy to propose a simple understanding of Yates' work as a series of minimalist strategies towards a dynamic, subjectively formed experience of phenomenal space, it does not fully account for the complex visual system of rules, codes and conventions that the works employ. Rather, these seem much more akin to our contemporary (visual) spatial culture. Thus, tensions emerge between these visual systems and the phenomenal aspects of the work — between the optical and material, the pictorial and the planar, and between Cartesian and social space — and it is these liminal spaces of tension that interest Yates, and that are key to the works in this exhibition.

As we have seen, art has always anticipated and constructed spatial relationships with the viewer. In 'Speed Bump Systems,' rather than simply locating the body in space, Yates has enabled an embodied viewer. In doing so, he also reveals the potential for a re-embodied visual and spatial culture, and its capacity to embrace the body as a site of active creativity — subjective, sentient and embodied — in an ocularcentric and image-saturated age.

Ashley Paine

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(left) *Dualchrome Series: Green; Orange; Purple; Sandy; Grey*, each: 2005-2007, acrylic and graphite on particle board and timber support, 210 x 297 x 37 mm.

(right) *Positive Absence — Dig It?*, 2007, acrylic on particle board and timber support with shovel handle, 210 x 1000 x 37 mm.

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- 1 Wertheim, M. 1999. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. New York London: W.W. Norton.
- 2 Wertheim, M. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*.
- 3 Wertheim, M. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. 109.
- 4 Wertheim, M. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. 110.
- 5 Macarthur, J. 2003. The Image As an Architectural Material. In *Medium Cool*, eds. Krapp, P. and A. McNamara. 673-693. Durham, N.C. London: Duke University Press. 682.
- 6 Wertheim, M. 1999. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*.
- 7 Elizabeth Grosz notes the polarised views of writers on digital technologies, and in particular on Virtual Reality, between those who desire its apparent potential for 'God-like status' and overcoming the physical limitations of the real, and those who the fear and condemn its 'transformation of relations of sociality and community, physicality and corporeality, location and emplacement, sexuality, personal intimacy, [...] and the loss of immediacy, of physical presence.' Grosz, E. A. 2001. *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 77.
- 8 Similarly, Maurice Berger has described the minimalist sculptures of Robert Morris, as seeking to 'prolong and intensify this [the viewer's] experience by confounding or confusing the spectator's perception of the objects in question.' Maurice Berger, *Minimal Politics: Performativity and Minimalism in Recent American Art*. Issues in Cultural Theory, 1 (Maryland: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Baltimore, 1997). 11.
- 9 Burnett, R. 2004. *How Images Think*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 40.

