



Chiara Corbelleto

The Space Within

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What is the task for art? In a period in which any presupposed rules or established conditions of practice, object, reception or meaning are moribund, it can seem as though art is cast adrift, detached from any predefining requirements or objectives. Assured notions of its purpose or value fall away as utilitarian tasks (serve morals, be beautiful, delight and instruct, advance thought or feeling, reflect identity) appear less certain, less valid as motivating concerns or goals. In this respect art shares the principal characteristics of the age—a period that has witnessed the dismantling of numerous social, ideological and epistemological certainties.

Like many of her generation, Chiara Corbelleto's experience as an arts and architecture student in Italy in the late 1970s coincided with those shifts. It was an intense period of social, cultural and political upheaval in what was (and perhaps remains) a profoundly conservative country. Change promised challenge to a wide range of established principles: socially, the centrality of the church in social life; politically, the apparatuses of state; intellectually, the notion of a shared knowledge that is consistently organised. As a formative experience it shaped her world-view—both in its refusal of incontestable structures and its promise of new ways of understanding and engaging with the world.

Similarly, contemporary creative practices reflect a boundless capacity, a refusal of fixed points of view—a radicalism that offers, necessitates even, the constant challenge of continually attempting to

understand the world afresh. Art's core condition is void of any predetermined purpose, effect or character. It comes to have relevance, effect or meaning through the ways in which it both initiates and responds to radically pluralist engagements or experiences with other physical and metaphysical phenomena in the world.

For Corbelleto, this suggests a characteristic of seeking, of embedding in her practice an underlying condition of questioning and exploring conscious experience in ways that respond to and extend the opportunities presented by radical pluralism. The condition contains the task.

An instructive example is her most recent solo exhibition *Probability Cloud* at Auckland's Bath Street Gallery. It presented three suites of sculptures developed over the past three years. These extended her reputation for exquisitely crafted, rigorously abstract compositions that explore ideas of space, form and materiality. *Fields of Energy* are modular works constructed from sequences of undulating laser-cut wooden segments that create what Corbelleto calls a 'wavelength membrane' to enclose internal spaces. *Bio.structures* investigate the structural elements that define form; the three-part geometry of the compositional units explore the multiple variations available from their simple underlying principle. *Habitats* are studies in continuous surface objects that condense abstract mathematical thinking.

The sculptures respond in part to the implications of or possibilities afforded by string theory and M-theory. These are developing theories of particle physics that seek to reconcile quantum mechanics and

(opposite) Chiara Corbelletto in her Henderson studio, with *Habitat* February 2011. (Photograph: Studio Guidon)

(right) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Frame of Mind* 2009
Laser-cut MDF timber & stainless steel 1800 x 550 x 1010 mm.

(below left) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *An ocean of silence glides endlessly from an unknown beginning* 2008
Urethane coating on internal metal structure, 720 x 1200 x 350 mm.

(below right) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Suspended Field* 2009
Laser-cut polypropylene & foam-bounded fabric hand stitched over metal, dimensions variable

the general theory of relativity. Perhaps the defining element of string theory is to posit that at a subatomic level (smaller than electrons, smaller than quarks) matter is made up not of zero-dimensional objects but one-dimensional vibrating lines or strings. What this suggests is that the core of the atom is made up not of matter but of vibrational filaments of energy. Instead of any thing at the centre of matter there is activated space.

Importantly, string theory is not an abiding law. It remains in the domain of unproven theory even though its effects are actual (if unperceivable). It attempts to come to terms with a fundamental truth of the make-up of existence in a manner that critically unravels assumptions about the limitations of physical laws and their perception. Its elegance and pertinence for contemporary artistic practice is that it posits change and mutability, a central, fundamental uncertainty. It is propositional and mutable, which immediately suggests that it shares some of the characteristics we might expect to witness in contemporary art.

There are at least two ways in which this is of immediate interest to Corbelletto's sculpture. First, the consequence of string theory is a complete inversion of an accepted view of matter; it emphasises insubstantiality, draws attention to space. This extends what has long been an abiding interest of her practice. It provides a platform from which sympathetically to extend her inquiry of the physical observable dimensions of internal/external space to a materialised metaphorical investigation of space as a multidimensional unified field. The synchronicity of her long-held focus on membranes and the leading



development of quantum physics in M-theory (M for membrane) suggests its pertinence to her work.

Second, and in direct relation to the first, the vibrating character of the string conveys that the emptiness of the space is not a void strictly speaking but an energy field. A pertinent analogy is the sound created by the vibrating string of a musical instrument, which is differentiated from other strings by its length and tension. A position Corbelletto adopts in response to this radical reconception of the physical universe is to register that the core of the atom is inhabited by tendencies, possibilities afforded by the vibrating strings; different 'notes' in the energy field to pursue the musical analogy. This expands the condition of her work that presents highly attuned, almost ineffable experiences to our encounters with the sculptures. Phenomena in proximity to one





(left above) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Bio.structure blu&bianca* 2010
Laser-cut zincked steel, industrial paint system & polypropylene,
1100 x 1200 x 1400 mm.

(left below)

CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Numbers are the Language of Nature* 2005
Silicon bronze cast, 4000 x 2500 x 400 mm.

(Permanent public sculpture in the Auckland Domain.)

(opposite above) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *String Theory* 2008

Satin lacquer on hand-modeled urethane foam, 440 x 540 x 560 mm.

(opposite below) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Delta 7* 2008

Automotive lacquer on hand-modeled fibreglass on metal
530 x 930 x 560 mm.

another are affected by simultaneous vibrations within the unified field, meaning that to contemplate the sculpture is to be open to a conscious experience of the tendencies of matter/energy.

A witnessing consciousness is not simply an intellectual conceit of presentation or audience engagement. It is intimately reflected in the making of the work. In the *Bio.structure* series, for example, the interconnected freestanding forms in powder-coated steel are not the result of digital drawing and rapid prototyping. Rather, they are editioned from 1:1 models hand-made in light-gauge galvanized steel. This accounts in part for the particular experience of the sculptures, which hold an extraordinary corporeal intimacy. The fine balance and torsion of the components result directly from Corbelletto's



physicality in working with the materials in the realisation of the sculptures. The forms, intellectual playfulness and complex variation of rhythms arrived at hold an immediate, bodily appeal that is as approachable and warm, as it were, as it is rigorous.

Similarly, the hand-modelled compound and fibreglass membrane of *Habitat* (2009). The intuitive responsiveness of working and the refinement of the form and its soft, folding surface simultaneously calm and excite. The abstract form is more akin to an invitation for consideration, interaction and influence than it is a statement of specific content considerations or formal or substance properties. Much as the work may be experienced as an architectural or biological object or model it may also be experienced more lyrically, as a floating emanation of non-Euclidean geometry. It is not simply an object around which to form an encounter with matter.

It is important for Corbelletto's project that the sculptures retain autonomy. As much as they evince intellectual heft (their complex mathematics), acute spatial understanding (their dynamism) and avowed sensuality (their corporeality), her concern is less about establishing a binary separation of the physical and intellectual but much more about the possibility of oscillation or vibration of the two. It is important to register other, unstated and, as likely, incommensurable and ineffable qualities of feeling or of unknown universal field.

It might seem from such an interpretation that there are monist tendencies in the work. This is to say that while the mind and body are not reducible, they may yet be considered essentially part of the same thing. This conceives of the universe (or multiverse) as a dynamic, indivisible whole wherein the error of the mind/body split is akin to the mistake of separating matter and energy—each are intrinsically entangled.

Corbelletto's project is the challenge truly to reconsider what it is to be in the world. The sculptures argue for the mutuality of possible influences of phenomena, which are rendered complex and unpredictable by the durational experience of people, spaces, objects, materials and ideas. Hence, it might be more helpful to suggest her work is situated within a web or network of tendencies and influences—energy flows or transformative fields.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that the constant potentially for change or the simultaneous presence of differing vibrations necessarily results in a cacophony or ceaselessness that prevent quietude. Corbelletto's work is not only propositional but



aspirational and a condition that it aspires to is beauty. Beauty in this context is not a condition received, a socially constructed version of taste. It is explicitly non-utilitarian and amoral. It is a condition that is arrived at through contemplation, by opening up our conscious and unconscious experience to the tendencies of material, object, situation or experience rather than by asserting a wholly subjective determination or declaration. Complex beauty, in this sense, is arresting to us partly because it makes

manifest the fundamental dynamism of existence.

Autonomy of beauty in Corbelletto's work announces particular experience of the encounter with the sculptural object and its situation—which is to say its autonomous meaning is neither in the object nor in what we might propose for it but in the resonance or 'note' that occurs between object and subject. This, in part, is how her sculptures expand beyond the immediate implications of aesthetic intersubjectivity (the reconfiguring of the subject/object relationship





(left) Chiara Corbelletto in her Henderson studio, holding one of her *Bio.structures*, February 2011. (Photograph: Studio Guidon)

(below) CHIARA CORBELLETTO *Habitat* and *Habitat*—detail 2009 Hand-modelled compound on fibreglass 210 x 430 x 620 mm.

metaphysical experiences that reflect contemporary scientific inquiries. Its capacity to transform (or to be transformed) is a reflection of that central concern. It affords opportunities for free contemplation—which is to say the contemplative tendency that arises out of calmness and alert consciousness, open and specific to the actual encounter rather than external impositions.

The proposed level of interconnection is not humanly perceivable, just as we cannot see the strings of matter/energy. It is easy to position a piece such as *Numbers are the Language of Nature* (2005) as illustrative of aesthetic disclosure of hidden truths; Goethe's notion of beauty, for example, which reveals secret harmonies of the universe. It is harder to claim that it is not only affected by phenomena but affecting; less autonomous than implicated; less the passive record of harmonic dimensions than an active participant in a range of metaphysical (and electromagnetic) vibrations.

My claim here is that if her consideration of largely ineffable concerns positions Corbelletto's practice in relation to a specific ethical task for art and the artist who seeks to embark on a search for meaning. It is suggestive of a productive withdrawal of her self in order to make room for the world and its discovery. In prioritising the world over the self she makes knowing the world possible. In a significant variation to such a possibility, her inquiry is specifically oriented toward current fundamental theoretical propositions that countermand previous assumptions about the material characteristics of that world.

String theory, to emphasise the point, changes our understanding or what we are at a subatomic level—it is that essential. The importance of its vibratory condition irrevocably refutes any notion of an isolated, atomistic basis of existence. To present this possibility in her sculpture Corbelletto offers the opportunity for us to remake the world and to be remade by it.

where the personal experience may be recognised as shared). They arrive, instead, at dialectical aesthetics (the mutual implication of subjects and objects). Of pertinence here is that dialectical aesthetics is commonly deployed in relation to the sort of universal vitalist or mystical propositions, which extends art's or beauty's significance beyond an autotelic self-fulfilment.

Given her experiences of and participation in social change in Italy, it is perhaps unsurprising Corbelletto posits a question: what is the current task of art, sculpture and public sculpture? In a very broad sense, she positions her work as providing opportunities for

