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Contextualizing the Developing Self in Helen Chadwick's *Ego Geometria Sum*

Imogen Racz

In *Ego Geometria Sum*, (*I am Geometry*) (1982-84), Helen Chadwick charted her childhood and early adulthood through ten, schematized, geometric sculptures that represented material objects that she had chosen to represent different stages of her development from her premature birth to the age of thirty. Onto these she printed transparent layers of photographic imagery that conflated her adult self, performing in relation to the objects and their symbolism for her, with scenes and objects from her past that conformed to the sculptural shapes, which she gained from her family album and through triggering memories by revisiting and photographing key sites.

This depiction of her adult self in relation to objects is a continuation of some of Chadwick's previous performance and performative works, including an early video work where she had explored the idea of incorporating herself into situations as a way 'back into [the] subconscious via room', and, echoing the transparency of the photographs on the sculptures in *Ego Geometria Sum*, her body was seen as 'traces left across room' like 'snail tracks'.¹ Jon Thompson aligned her work to a range of artists working in or basing their work on photography and film, including Gilbert and George who, like Chadwick, had their roots in performance and

¹ Helen Chadwick, *Further Notebook on Early Work*, 20. Available at

<http://hmi.onlineculture.co.uk/ttp/?c=7> Last accessed 4 October 2017.

self-presentation, and created a suggestion of autobiography that questioned the boundaries of different realities.²

For Chadwick, *Ego Geometria Sum* was an important investigation into and negotiation with her past. Throughout her research for this work she can be seen engaging with her material past as a way into understanding her adult feelings of alienation. The display, about which she devoted a lot of consideration, showed the sculptures softly lit in a hushed environment, enclosed by peach coloured curtains.³ It was intended to create an ambience that would help the audience to enter into her mind.

Initially called *Growing Pains*, *Ego Geometria Sum* drew on a broad range of influences. As well as being very active within the British and European artistic scenes, Chadwick was widely read. This included books about art, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and the spiritual and occult. While *Ego Geometria Sum* has been discussed as a self-contained entity in relation to architectural contexts, and as a 'biography', what has not been explored is the way that it combined postmodern ideas with classical, mathematical notions, and how these were underpinned by her reading of Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* and *Ghost in the Machine*.⁴

² Jon Thompson, 'Presenting Reality, in *The British Art Show: Old Allegiances and New Directions, 1979-1984*, (Arts Council: Orbis, 1984) 108-111, 111.

³ Richard Cork, 'A Splendid Case for Mixing Media', *The Standard*, (30th June 1983)

⁴ Stephen Walker, *Helen Chadwick: Constructing Identities between Art and Architecture*, (I.B. Tauris, 2013). Leonie O'Dwyer, '*Ego Geometria Sum*': *A Biography*, (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2012). Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the*

These influences helped her unite a subjective narrative of a fluid sense of self with ideas of the universal.

Initial Ideas

Chadwick's earlier works had been concerned with identity construction within the social world. These included *In the Kitchen* (1977), where she and three other performers satirized the expected roles of women through staging a performance of themselves dressed with kitchen equipment, including a cooker and washing machine. The initial idea of turning the focus towards her own life emerged while working on *Model Institution* (1981), an installation that invited the viewing audience to enter reconstructed DHSS booths (Department of Health and Social Security) and hear taped monologues of five benefit 'claimants', each of whom were heard reacting to their situation with varying forms of 'agro' in their voices.

Chadwick kept detailed notes of her projects in small notebooks, and on a couple of pages in the one dedicated to *Model Institution*, she had the heading 'About the Artist', and underneath she drew up plans for what should be put on the information panel for the exhibition. It listed details about her early life, starting with 'Born – hosp / Houses lived / School / Played in the house of my best friend / Grandma's flat'. She later returned to these pages, cramming further ideas into the spaces, including 'Bland impassive buildings passed through. Faceless yet loaded with memories [...] The cold hard unsentimentality of the camera – truth physical but

Universe, (Harmonsworth: Penguin Books, 1964). Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, (London: Arcana, 1989/1967)

mechanical. GOING BACK'.⁵ At the beginning of her next notebook, devoted to *Ego Geometria Sum*, she tidily rewrote most of the text from these two pages on a page headed "'About the Artist". Review of life up to present day'.⁶ She then wrote that her new project was to look 'at the past and upbringing – memories', and create a 'personal museum / archaeological presentations of fact ... metaphysical shapes – cones etc.' in an attempt to overcome her alienation with the world around her.⁷ These notes show that for her there were two important frameworks that she wanted to develop and reconcile: the emotional and the rational.

These ideas were crystallized through reading Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers*, which sought to bring together the two disciplines that Koestler believed had been wrongly separated in the European mind since the Renaissance – the sciences and humanities.⁸ He also wrote about the 'deadly' division between faith and reason, where on each side symbols had hardened into dogmas, and the common source of inspiration had been lost from view.⁹ This book plotted the

⁵ Chadwick, Notebook for *Model Institution*, 68-69. Available at <http://hmi.onlineculture.co.uk/ttp/?c=7> Last accessed 8 July 2017.

⁶ Helen Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 4-5. Available at <http://hmi.onlineculture.co.uk/ttp/?c=7> Last accessed 5 September 2017.

⁷ Ibid., 6-7.

⁸ Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*, (London: Hutchison/Penguin, 1959), 9.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

changing understanding of the universe over the centuries, which, as new scientific discoveries were made, came into conflict with Christianity.

The fourth section, of which ‘Growing Pains’ is the third chapter, considers Johannes Kepler’s (born 1571) discoveries about the geometrical nature of the universe, with his writings about his own life, development and relationships forming a leitmotif through the text. Like Koestler’s juxtapositions of Kepler’s life and work, Chadwick’s notebooks aligns her research, sketches and technical details with personal memories and to-do lists. This blurring of the artistic/everyday boundaries in her notebooks continues a tradition of the 1960s and 1970s American female and feminist artists like Ree Morton and Eva Hesse. It can be argued that notebooks that combine diary, research and the development of artistic projects are ways of plotting and constructing a sense of self. This reconstruction of personal narratives was important during the 1980s, when both postmodernism and feminism sought to destabilize universalizing narratives and suggest that identities are formed through complex relationships within social, intellectual and economic frameworks. As was being widely discussed, the notion of the ‘I’ is complex. Chadwick wrote of her need to rescue herself from ‘the severity and cruelty adopted to survive now’.¹⁰

Reading Koestler: The Universal and the Personal

The forms of the objects in *Ego Geometria Sum* were based on classical prototypes outlined in Koestler’s *The Sleepwalkers*. Likewise, there are many overlaps in ideas, narrative and presentation. Kepler was, like Chadwick, born prematurely – at thirty-two weeks. There are notes that he made about his health and particular events, which, like Chadwick’s notes for *Ego*

¹⁰ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 23.

Geometria Sum, are linked to particular ages – his ‘hands were badly crippled...1577 (aged six.)’, he lost a tooth ‘(fourteen–fifteen)’, and ‘was beaten in a drunken quarrel by Rebstock...1590’.¹¹ His introspection and objectivity about his poor health, lack of friends and pain in love would have been, as Koestler noted, unusual at the time.¹² Chadwick was also given to introspection. Early in her notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum* she heads a page ‘melancholic idlings’, and remembers ‘places + people... empty warmth + sense of loss + distance as images flood in... welcomed yet unconsoling...’.¹³

Kepler wrote about himself in the third person, suggesting the detachment of an onlooker. Rather than just presenting a subjective, indulgent account of her past, Chadwick also wanted to find a pattern underpinning her development and show ‘detachment from oneself + own past’.¹⁴ However, she also thought it was important to use sites related to her strongest emotional experiences, like love, trauma and friendship.¹⁵ She wanted to build up a picture of her past through ‘objects that a) contained me b) (re)orientated me c) moulded / shaped me’.¹⁶ After much musing, her final choice was the Incubator – birth, Baptismal Font – three months, Pram –

¹¹ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 233-236.

¹² Ibid., 239.

¹³ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁵ Box 18, folder 5/10 Research notes. Helen Chadwick Archive at the Henry Moore Institute.

All further references to boxes are from this archive unless stated.

¹⁶ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 54.

ten months, Boat – three years, Wigwam – five years, Bed – six and three quarter years, upright Piano – nine years, gym Horse – eleven years, High School – thirteen years, and Statue – fifteen to thirty years.

Although Kepler saw no conflict between his religious faith and science, he was working against the grain of orthodox thinking when he published his scientific discoveries in *Mysterium Cosmographicum*.¹⁷ He illustrated geometrical models of planetary systems and their relationship to the universe, and determined that although the pattern of men's lives was cosmically determined, individual events were not. Within this pattern, man is free.¹⁸ When Chadwick was thinking about how to 'validate' the installation, she decided that she needed to apply some 'code/rule/theory' to create an 'organizational model' of 'physical + emotional/perceptual' growth.¹⁹

Chadwick also took notes from this book about the ideas of Pythagoras, writing that the construction of order would show the 'release from alienation and angst', and how the work itself was creating form and order out of confusion.²⁰ Koestler wrote how Pythagoras thought that numbers were the highest form of philosophy, as 'all things *are* form; and all things can be defined by numbers'.²¹ As well as considering square and oblong numbers, which underpinned

¹⁷ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 255.

¹⁸ Ibid., 247.

¹⁹ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 82.

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 30.

both the harmonies of music and mathematical principles, Pythagoras generated pure-number, three dimensional, crystal shapes. This idea of uniting principles that brought together the micro with the macro was extended to the universe, where he conceived of an earth sphere, surrounded by the sun and planets that rotated around it, always in fixed positions, each of which created a musical hum as it swirled around its orbit.²²

What Pythagoras also developed was a religion that combined the rational and intuitive called Orphism. In this, science is perceived as both an intellectual delight and a way of spiritual release, leading to purification of the soul and its ultimate liberation.²³ Although Chadwick was also to consider the geometrical forms of Christianity with the circle suggesting eternity, perfection and the heavens, the octagon being part way between circle and square representing the universe, the square representing the earth, and the triangle representing God the Father, it is the uniting of spiritual release and the numbers and order of the universe that underpin the geometricized forms of the objects in *Ego Geometria Sum* and their arrangement in a spiral that emulated a planetary system.²⁴

Chadwick noted Pythagoras' ideas that the laws of metaphysical forms are universal and mathematical. Linked to this was the sacred relation of music to numbers that underpinned Pythagorean spiritual experience. Music and harmonies were based on ratios and proportions, and contemplation of both music and numbers were ways of enabling intellectual *ekstasis* and purging the soul of earthly passion. Chadwick was to write later in her notebook that her work

²² Ibid., 30-32.

²³ Ibid., 35-37.

²⁴ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 70.

was the Pythagorean ‘passage from chaos by purge to armonia, order, release from alienation and angst’.²⁵ As well as the proportions of the sculptures, Chadwick was aware that the harmonies of the atmosphere were embedded in the imagery of the chimes, triangle, and pylon hum that she incorporated into *Ego Geometria Sum*. While echoing universal factors, the photographic imagery was intended to represent the visible world and be the ‘detailed materialism of one individual’.²⁶

Another book that Chadwick read prior to making *Ego Geometria Sum* was Arthur Koestler’s *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967). In the opening section Koestler outlines findings from the previous fifty years of research into understanding human development: that mental evolution, like biological evolution, is the result of random mutations, which in this case are reinforced by rewards, and that man is essentially passive in the face of his controlling environment.²⁷ Koestler outlined the arguments of Behaviourists like Professor Skinner of Harvard University, who described how habits learned within social environments would predict particular patterns of actions.²⁸ This clinical way of measuring human achievement that develops alongside environmental and social reward systems had an impact on Chadwick’s thinking, where she wanted to show ‘the cold unsentimentality of truth’ about the places that housed her

²⁵ Ibid., 79.

²⁶ Ibid., 80 and 83.

²⁷ Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, (London: Hutchinson, 1967), 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 9-11.

development, and the ‘training’ of her developing self within the social and environmental systems.²⁹

Behaviourism was an attempt to create a grand narrative that aligned the responses of all living organisms, including that of man. However, Chadwick was constructing her own narrative within the fractured and contingent notions of identity outlined in postmodernist and feminist thinking. Like all autobiographies, Chadwick made choices about what was to be revealed and what hidden or forgotten.³⁰ The ten objects of *Ego Geometria Sum* demonstrate Nora’s notion of individuals creating a ‘scaffolding’ of memory: traces that tie the past to the eternal present in an attempt to materialize the immaterial.³¹ However, as will be discussed, rather than the photographs on the sculptures being documentary evidence that presented Chadwick’s past, the composite images conflate past and present, and staged poses combined with representational ‘facts’ into collages of fragments that undermine objectivity and instead lead to a fluidity of meaning.

When reconstructing his childhood in written form, Walter Benjamin wrote that his memories were given tone through repeatedly returning to them and, like ‘a man digging’,

²⁹ Artists Recordings from the Arts Research Archive 1989-1996, at the Henry Moore Institute archive. Cv-var. Helen Chadwick recorded 6 October 1989.

³⁰ Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines. Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), 1 and 11. See also Imogen Racz, *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, (I.B. Tauris, 2015), 134-139.

³¹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations*, (Spring 1989), 7-25, 19.

turning over the soil in search of collector's pieces, he could arrange them in the 'prosaic rooms of [...] later understanding'.³² For Chadwick also, this was to be an active reconstruction, requiring visits to the sites of memory, and hypnosis to 'regress' and rediscover the past. Far from being the post-enlightenment project of presenting a stable, rounded individual, the fractured, postmodern self was constructed against unstable contexts that called for a constantly evolving act of self-discovery and self-creation.³³ For Chadwick, this required an 'assertive retraining of my view of myself + my past'.³⁴

Geometry, Metaphysics and Experience

All the chosen objects from Chadwick's life were depicted using the geometrical forms closest to their normal shape and adhered to the symbolic forms that she had researched. The font was an octagonal prism, which Chadwick noted was linked to the heavens, the pram was a cylinder with quarter of the circumference removed, representing the 'oyster – earth', the wigwam a pyramid, and the school a cube, which showed 'increasing rationalization'.³⁵

³² Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle", in Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 314.

³³ Paul John Eakin, *Fiction in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3 and 5. Leigh Gilmore, "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography and Genre", in Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters, eds. *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, (Amhurst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 3-18.

³⁴ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 79.

Chadwick's ten sculptures were arranged in a spiral, suggesting the planetary formation of an imaginary galaxy, with the smaller sculptures representing the early years being closest, and the larger ones breaking away from the central pull.³⁶ In her notebook she also notes Bode's Law for planetary distribution, which states that the distances between each planet is always double that of the previous one, which she used to determine the spaces between the sculptures in exhibition.³⁷ However, this arrangement representing the gravitational pull of influences must have been considered after her initial application for an exhibition of this work at the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, as her sketch drawing of the proposed exhibition layout showed the sculptures arranged non-chronologically and distributed around a demarcated space, with an unknown shape, Boat, Wigwam and Font marking the corners.³⁸

An early decision was that each object should correspond with her size at each represented age. She had read a book on human development and growth from birth onwards, taking notes of standards of heights, weights and body measurements.³⁹ A drawing from November 1982 shows the geometric forms graded according to size and arranged in a line.⁴⁰ This was not just being systematic, as at the top of a sheet where she had written in arbitrary

³⁶ John Roberts, "Introduction" to *Summer Show I*, (London: Serpentine Art Gallery, 1983), n.p.

³⁷ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 104.

³⁸ See sketch in Helen Chadwick folder, Aspex Gallery archive.

³⁹ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 68-69. She took notes from J. M. Tanner, *Foetus into Man, Physical Growth from Conception to Maturity*, (London: Open Books, 1978).

⁴⁰ See image in O'Dwyer, *Helen Chadwick's 'Ego Geometria Sum'*, 21.

order ‘Incubator 17 ½” Font 22” Pram 27” Wigwam 1 metre Piano 50” Horse 54” Bed 45 ½” Book/desk 60” Statue 63”’, was her heading ‘Metaphysical Geometry’ – she clearly believed that scaling each object added metaphysical value.⁴¹

The importance of the work being seen as metaphysical rather than just being a documentation of her development is evident throughout her notebooks and the photocopies that she kept. One of the newspaper cuttings that Chadwick collected and annotated was a review written by Waldemar Januszczak on an exhibition of de Chirico’s paintings at the Tate Gallery in 1982. It discussed the artist’s use of classical forms that were simultaneously symbolic and emotionally charged.⁴² Always keen to read in relation to what she was making at the time, she underlined particular phrases, such as ‘Empty squares framed by sinister arcades’, and in the adjacent margin she wrote: ‘* Parthenon + desk’ ‘casting long menacing shadows’. Sometimes she just underlined phrases such as ‘all the objects have the authority of a symbol, but none of its clarity of meaning’. Across the top of the page she wrote: ‘hands repossess (objects of) the past, frozen fragments of time heavy + proud with meaning... pure melancholic sense of loss’.

This combination of subjective emotion, memory and classical forms underpinned her thinking for the work. In the catalogue to the Serpentine *Summer Show I* Chadwick wrote

Suppose one’s body [...] could be traced back through a succession of
geometric solids, [...] taking form from the pressure of recalled external
forces [...] and if geometry is an expression of eternal and exact truths,

⁴¹ Box 18, Folder 4/10.

⁴² “Waldemar Januszczak Reviews de Chirico at the Tate. Dreams of the Metaphysician,” *Arts Guardian*, August 4, 1982. Box 18, 5/10.

inherent in the natural law of matter and thus manifestations of absolute beauty, predestined, of divine origin [...] then let this classical model of mathematical harmony be infused with a poetry of feeling and memory to sublimate the discord of past passion and desire in a recomposed neutrality of being.⁴³

Finding and Constructing Memory

Objects experienced over time create a mesh of meaning for the owner that become part of their personal world, which, as Gaston Bachelard – a philosopher whom Chadwick read and admired – Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have all argued, is carried around within us, and is understood through bodily interaction, memories and imagination.⁴⁴ In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard wrote about childhood spaces in the home, and how particular nooks

⁴³ Helen Chadwick, *Enfleshings*, (Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1989), p. 9. This was also the text accompanying the invitation card for *Ego Geometria Sum* and for the exhibition poster for the Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth. See letter dated September 22 1983 from Helen Chadwick to Andy/John, and finished card in the Helen Chadwick archive of the Aspex Gallery.

⁴⁴ See for instance: Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas (1964; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2002); and Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: Allen & Unwin; New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1931).

and crannies where one had dreamed are inscribed into our childhood selves, and become places to which one can mentally return later in life to relive those memories.⁴⁵

Chadwick chose the objects and related images that were to be shown in *Ego Geometria Sum* after much research, both into her family archive and through revisiting key places. She collected toys, clothes, letters, school reports and receipts for the pram, which she arranged chronologically.⁴⁶ Echoing Bachelard's dictum that one should explore experiences actively and that perception was an imbrication of subject and object, Chadwick created an album that juxtaposed childhood photographs with those that she took in the same location.⁴⁷ Opposite a childhood picture of her, with her parents, playing in a wigwam in the garden, is the same bungalow that she photographed from the street, with a huge electricity mast behind. On another page is an old photograph from her junior school of young children arranged in lines, playing triangles and cymbals, with another child on a stool in front directing. Opposite this is the outside of the school in 1980s.⁴⁸

Whereas her family album would have acted – like all family albums, like a 'prosthetic' memory, capturing events to be activated in future presents, Chadwick's revisiting of sites from

⁴⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 14.

⁴⁶ Sue Breakwell and Victoria Worsley, "Collecting the Traces: an Archivist's Perspective", *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 6:3, (2007), 175-189. Viewed online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1386/jvap.6.3.175_1. Last accessed 8 July 2017.

⁴⁷ Mary McAllester Jones, *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 9–11.

⁴⁸ Box 58.1. Photograph album called Photographies.

her childhood and taking reels of film created an archive of the present. The childhood photograph showing Chadwick crouched in the wigwam in her best dress, with her father and mother seemingly casually standing on either side, grasping the wigwam, is a sun-drenched image, with doors and windows of the bungalow open, and everyone smiling. Although apparently about the everyday, it also encapsulates a particular social and intellectual world with its performances and negotiations, set against a material backdrop.⁴⁹

Both Marius Kwint and Daniel Miller have observed how objects and possessions are instrumental in the formation of consciousness and identity, through stimulating remembering, setting one within a set of cultural relationships and becoming analogies to living memory.⁵⁰ Chadwick found that when returning to sites she was an outsider. As Andreas Huyssen wrote, the past is not simply there in memory; there is a fissure between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation.⁵¹ Obviously Chadwick would not have remembered engaging with all of the objects, but when displayed in a gallery, for both viewer and Chadwick, they would trigger particular cultural resonances and personal memories.

⁴⁹ See Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000), 173-179.

⁵⁰ Marius Kwint, introduction to Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley, eds., *Material Memories*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 2. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, (Cambridge and Malden Mass: Polity, 2008), 287-293.

⁵¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.

The sites and objects that Chadwick documented were greater than those used in the final work. For instance, she took photographs of the houses where she lived in Bristol and Brighton, of the Hayward Gallery where she had a season ticket, and her grandfather's shed and allotments in Leyton, Essex.⁵² Chadwick's adult presence is evident throughout these, through her determined and searching eye seeking out the places of enactment, and once there, the perfect image. When visiting her high school, she photographed different pieces of gym equipment, as well as the library, notice boards and lockers, and the lectern was photographed from a number of angles.⁵³ When she was unable to photograph the original, she found objects of the same type. Chadwick's engagement with these objects from her past is evident throughout her photographic archive. Her hands open and close the Oxygenaire incubator. She sits smiling in the sand boat that she has built. She pushes a pram, and there are a number of photos of the wigwam with her hands coming out of the flaps at different heights and positions, and one of her sitting outside it fully clothed.⁵⁴

All of the final objects show Chadwick's adult hands touching or holding the objects. She wrote about the 'laying on of hands' as soothing, as a means of transferring energy between the past and present, and of recovering her past.⁵⁵ At the end of her notebook she writes about the hands playing the music of the spheres, with the objects as musical instruments.⁵⁶ Like the use of

⁵² Box 58.1. Ring-binder of negatives and contact prints.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 77, 76, 98.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 123.

metaphysical shapes, she joins the rational and classical with the emotional and spiritual. It is this duality that she wanted to suggest in the hands that ‘played’ the Piano, that touched the top of the Horse and that splayed out from the Wigwam flaps.

The Jugglers Table

The small, card maquettes that Chadwick made in 1982 were trials for the larger sculptures. Onto these she printed photographs from her childhood. One printed in the catalogue for the Serpentine Gallery’s *Summer Show I* had the wigwam with flaps closed and adult hands coming out, with Chadwick and her best friend to the left, and on the right she is in the wigwam with her parents.⁵⁷ When shown in exhibition at the Aspex Gallery, this table-top version of card sculptures combined with photographs from her family archive was called *The Jugglers Table*, and was set up in the niche of the gallery.⁵⁸ The small sculptures were made like the images that were printed on the back of cereal packets during her childhood, which could be cut out, folded and pasted into animal heads and small toys.⁵⁹ She offered to make ‘freebies’ of these objects ‘à la Weetabix box’, for the public to take away.⁶⁰

Chadwick saw herself as the figure of The Juggler – also known as the Magician, the Conjuror and Le Bateleur – in the tarot cards. There is a photocopied image of this ambivalent

⁵⁷ Roberts, “Introduction”, n.p.

⁵⁸ See exhibition pamphlet, *‘My Personal Museum’*. *Ego Geometria Sum from the Helen Chadwick Archive*, (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2004)

⁵⁹ See diagrams in Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 60-61.

⁶⁰ Letter from Helen Chadwick to Steve, n.d. Aspex Gallery archive, Folder ‘Helen Chadwick, 1983/4. Installations exhibition’. These were to be printed using a computer.

card from B. P. Grimaud's 1969 pack of cards, the *Tarot of Marseilles* pasted into Chadwick's notebook, and she also made copious notes about the underlying meanings from Fred Gettings' *The Book of Tarot*.⁶¹ On the one hand the Juggler is Everyman who juggles with everyday items like peas, a knife and a dice. However, these are symbolic of potentially more potent objects, symbolizing the idea that the Juggler has the capacity for development and spiritual vision within his grasp, but does not realise this.⁶² In Chadwick's notes she writes 'Why juggler acting to audience? Who is audience? [...] development of self as spiritual exercise within the framework of ordinary life. Reconciliation.'⁶³ This also draws out the continuum in Chadwick's thinking between the everyday and its staging as art, between her private world and that which she presented to the public. While *Ego Geometria Sum* is easily perceived as symbolic, the small arrangement of card sculptures set on a table with snapshots from her family album informally arranged, suggests the raw material in a domestic setting waiting to be transformed.

She appears as the Juggler in front of the *Juggler's Table* in the catalogues of the Serpentine Gallery's *Summer Show 1* (1983) and *Hand Signals* at the Ikon Gallery (1985). Whereas most of the photographs taken during the photographic shoot depict Chadwick behind the installation, the final version shows only Chadwick's hands on the table, with the camera angle and height suggesting that it is she who views the objects and considers their potential. The associated poem to the image in the Ikon Gallery catalogue reads

Poised in the act of entertaining

⁶¹ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 88-91., Walker, *Helen Chadwick*, 24-25.

⁶² Walker, *Helen Chadwick*, 32.

⁶³ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 90.

An invisible audience, the
Juggler stands before a
Table laid with the paraphernalia of time.⁶⁴

Ego Geometria Sum: Image and Truth

The imagery on the plywood sculptures is complex, layered and fractured. Chadwick noted the need to add a ‘ghost’ and double expose the photographs.⁶⁵ In this she was aligning her work with a major photographic preoccupation in Britain in the early 1980s: that of severing the binary opposition between photography as objective truth, and art as being the province of subjective expression. Like many artists of the decade, she looked back to photography from the 1920s and 1930s to create a different relationship between the image and the world, art and culture.⁶⁶

The images on the sculptures were tinted peachy-brown and blue to suggest old photographs. However, her family and childhood self have been removed, and instead, only the places and objects of experience are shown. Superimposed onto these are images of her nude adult body in poses that relate to the forms and that perform in relation to those objects, and her adult hands touching the objects in ways that suggest nurture.

⁶⁴ Conrad Atkinson, and Andrew Nairne, *Hand Signals*, (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1985), 30.

⁶⁵ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 84. For an interesting discussion about Chadwick’s composite imagery in relation to Hogarth and Boullée, see Stephen Walker, ‘Helen Chadwick’s Composite Images’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, (April 2015), 74-98.

⁶⁶ John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 146.

Chadwick had read and taken notes from *Psychic Photography* by Hans Holzer.⁶⁷ She noted ‘thought forms registering on photographic film’ and ‘Psychic photography can = record of past events somehow left behind in atmosphere during event itself’. She also notes how ‘multiple exposure types and patterns: suggests mirror-like reflections’.⁶⁸ When later asked which photographers she admired, Chadwick said Man Ray. She found his images very elusive - ‘suspended’ - and spoke of his photograms as seeming to ‘float like an aura, a presence left behind’.⁶⁹

The collaging of time and space suggests some surrealist photomontages. However, in Chadwick’s work there is less play with scale, and rather than the images being cut fragments with clear foci, the collaging is more subtle and images transparent. Unlike the decontextualizing of the disparate narratives in Dada photomontages, Chadwick’s composite images remain individually coherent, and are veiled over relevant objects. Later, in a way that echoed her reading of *The Ghost in the Machine*, she was to write about the images in *Ego Geometria Sum* that these ‘fugitive traces offer evidence of the passage of time, the effects and constraining influence of socialisation’.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Hans Holzer, *Psychic Photography: Threshold of a New Science?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969)

⁶⁸ Box 18, folder 5/10.

⁶⁹ “A Mirror to Yourself, Helen Chadwick Interviewed by Tom Evans, (June 1986)” in David Brittain, ed. *Creative Camera, Thirty Years of Writing*, (Manchester University Press, 1999), 145-149, 148.

⁷⁰ Chadwick, *Enfleshings*, 11.

The forms of her adult naked body – she refers to her nakedness as giving her the status of subject rather than object – were designed to conform to the shape of the objects and convey a mental state. Overall, the poses gradually become more rigid as her represented age increases, to show her ‘training’. The Incubator shows her adult body in a foetal position. The Font depicts her on her stomach, head to one side and legs bent outwards, resembling the pose of many sleeping babies. Those representing her older self are more active in their emotional content. On one side of the cuboid form of ‘School’, she is shown crouched, arms extended and head turned away, apparently in a gesture of rejection similar to that of Susanna in Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders* (1610). For the final sculpture, *The Statue*, she stands stiffly upright, a performing artist, head turned to face the door of 45 Beck Road – her home and studio.

Amelia Jones was later to argue that the inclusion of the artist’s body as a performing element can open up the interpretive exchange between audience and artist, as it becomes the site at which production and reception come together.⁷¹ Penelope Curtis wrote in an exhibition catalogue from the early 1990s that the depiction of artists’ bodies worked as a bridge between the art and spectator.⁷² The imagery of Chadwick in *Ego Geometria Sum* was part of the theatricality of much postmodern practice, where the body was frequently staged as contingent, fragmentary, and suggestive of absence rather than full presence.⁷³ The combination of her

⁷¹ Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14.

⁷² Penelope Curtis, ‘Introduction’, *Elective Affinities*, (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 1993), 6-12, 6. Helen Chadwick was included in the exhibition.

⁷³ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 241, note 3.

photographed, posed body and the ‘boxes’, ‘cabinets’, or ‘coffins’ as she termed the sculptural forms, which she felt encased and contained her past, brings together two ideas: that of the box as used by artists over the twentieth century and tableau vivant.

Aura Satz has pertinently written that in tableaux vivants, the performer camouflages her identity to assume different guises, and disappears while still being present.⁷⁴ She reveals something through interrupting of the flowing choreography of life, fixing and framing a moment in sculpture.⁷⁵ This idea of elusive and performed presence is also explored by Roland Barthes, when he wrote that a photograph of oneself represents a subtle moment when one is neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels that she is becoming an object. ‘The photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity’.⁷⁶

This play with the fluidity of identity where an identifiable person appears in another guise was explored in many feminist works from the 1970s and 1980s, including by Susan Hiller, Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke. Unlike Sherman or Wilke, Chadwick’s staged poses were not garnered from the gender codes of film or historic paintings. In *Ego Geometria Sum*, Chadwick turned her head away from the viewer, so that apart from *The Statue*, her face is not

⁷⁴ Aura Satz, “Tableaux Vivants: Inside the Statue”, in Aura Satz and Jon Wood, eds, *Articulate Objects*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 157-181, 179.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 13.

seen. Her poses do not suggest the non-reflexive, passive nude designed for the male gaze, and neither do her eyes confront or seduce the viewer. Chadwick resisted that objectification.

An example of this is the relation of Chadwick's body to the Piano. Chadwick wrote about her hostility and resistance towards the instrument, how she was forced to practice and how this gave her back pain. She used the metronome as a technique for hypnosis to regress to the 'unpleasant piano experiences of early days'.⁷⁷ On one side of the sculpture her kneeling, naked, adult body is depicted. The contact sheets of the photo shoot show her always kneeling, but she experimented with her arm gestures, looking defiant with arms on hips or crossed. In the final work her pose suggests her playing the instrument.⁷⁸ On the front, her disembodied hands engage with the keyboard, and staves of music are printed on the top. The ply grain shows through the imagery suggesting the *act* of remembering as much as the memories themselves. This transparency and complexity was only made possible by the improvements made to photographic emulsion. Chadwick was never afraid of using the latest technical developments, in this case Silver Magic by Barfen.⁷⁹

Ego Geometria Sum: Containing Memory

The perfection of the making of the industrial plywood sculptures, with chamfered edges held closed with tiny pins and the imagery that fits the forms exactly, helps the illusion that these are less worked sculptures and more a symbolic manifestation of memories, where her past and present are suspended within the context of the objects and places. Chadwick kept detailed notes

⁷⁷ Box 18. Folder 5/10.

⁷⁸ Box 58.1. Ring-binder of negatives and contact prints.

⁷⁹ Roberts, 'Introduction', n.p.

of her ideas about the way the work could be displayed, including a performance, holding conducted tours, whispered sounds coming from the sculptures and a video.⁸⁰

Surrounding and defining the extent of the installation in all its various configurations were long, sateen, peach coloured curtains. Chadwick later wrote that she used these to suggest a space beyond the forms associated with memory.⁸¹ This notion of hidden space together with the iconographic tradition of curtains proposing theatrical reality, combine with the sculptural 'boxes' that suggest repositories of memory. In her notebook she frequently questioned the relationships between outer surface and hidden lives, between the containing space and different forms that act upon the psyche, and between the tangible enclosing the intangible. She wanted the objects to suggest memories and trigger intuitive and contemplative thought in the audience.⁸² Her overriding concept was that 'the gallery becomes the memory / [the gallery] is the brain / a metaphor for the memory / Walk in space = getting inside artist's head.'⁸³

This chapter has considered how Chadwick instilled identity formation within the making and exhibiting of *Ego Geometria Sum*. Chadwick was a meticulous artist who researched widely, and through this was able to combine contemporary and classical ideas in ways that undermine a safe reading. Chadwick's use of visual language was constantly inventive; she always explored new techniques, and honed the aesthetic to be relevant for what she wanted to convey. As

⁸⁰ Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*, 9.

⁸¹ Unedited transcript of a dialogue between Helen Chadwick and Emma Cocker, dated 2 December 1995. n.p. In Women's Art Library, Artist's box: Helen Chadwick 1953-1996.

⁸² Chadwick, Notebook for *Ego Geometria Sum*. 98-9.

⁸³ Ibid., 12.

Marina Warner expressed it: ‘Helen Chadwick’s search was metaphysically ambitious...she believed that the objects of knowledge become part of one’s being, that you can metamorphose according to what you explore, how you express it, what you choose to inquire into and what knowledge you ingest’.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Marina Warner, “Preface”, in Mark Sladen ed., *Helen Chadwick*, 9-11, 10. See also her essay: “In Extremis’ Helen Chadwick and the Wound of Difference”, in Helen Chadwick and Marina Warner, *Helen Chadwick: Stilled Lives*, Portfolio Gallery and Kunsthallen Brandt Klædefabrik, 1996, n.p.

