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Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience
In Contemporary Art

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Thesis

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Abstract

A number of historical philosophical theories relate to materiality in contemporary art and the role of art objects as an extension of ontology, or the study of the nature of being. The Kantian idea of the “aesthetic experience” is the point of departure, tracing philosophical discourse of how art functions via its materiality through the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Maritain to the post-modern considerations of David Hickey and Arthur Danto.

The research for this thesis focuses on how contemporary art, in all its various forms, functions via art’s material qualities or materiality. The objective is to ascertain the significance of materiality in contemporary art within the notion of temporal proximity and to establish the importance of the physical experience of works of art irregardless of whether the artwork manifests as an object, as in the case of painting, or as an experience as in performance art. The aim is to establish the fundamental relationship between the viewer and the work of art as it originates from material experience in all its manifestations.

Considerations of materiality can be universally applied in the aesthetic assessment of diverse contemporary art forms that range from traditional, low-tech media to conceptual, ephemeral works. Examples here include works by Richard Tuttle, Eva Hesse, Marina Abramovic, Tara Donovan, Agnes Martin, Cecily Brown, Tony Fitzpatrick and Bill Viola.

Materiality: What It Is, What It Isn't

Materiality, as an aesthetic concept, has evolved out of formalism's interest in the purely visual aspects of art and structuralism's interest in context and communication. Following on the heels of Post-Modern theoretical discourse which acknowledges the relative nature of truth, materiality provides a theoretical approach that is time and situation-based. It is a means for understanding the wide scope of contemporary art production the function of contemporary art in the digital age. Materiality in works of art extends beyond the simple fact of physical matter to broadly encompass all relevant information related to the work's physical existence; the work's production date and provenance, its history and condition, the artist's personal history as it pertains to the origin of the work and the work's place in the canon of art history are all relevant to the aesthetic experience. The artwork's physicality, those aspects that can be sensed and verified by viewers, is a first consideration; physicality impacts content and, subsequently, meaning.

Another aspect of materiality as a theory is that art locates viewers within their corporeal selves by engaging the senses; such experiences are, naturally, unique and individual to each viewer. The aesthetic experience is evoked first through art's physical components, and then through an intellectual engagement with materiality in the broad sense, through time. Art provides a bridge between ordinary experience and concepts that transcend the seemingly static nature of the work of art's physicality. Our relationship to works of art develops over time. The means of production and the degree to which process is evident in the final work also impacts how viewers experience the work. Similarly, the fact of whether an object is hand-made or

machine-made are significant aspects of materiality. Perception is further affected by other signs of process such as degrees of refinement and the limitations inherent in materials.

The material aspects of works that have an essentially immaterial nature, such as conceptual or performance works, provide a foil for the more obviously tangible artifacts such as sculpture or painting. For example, video art requires electricity and so cannot be viewed and does not, in fact exist in many environments. This material fact impacts fundamental aspects of video art's content. Painting, on the other hand, stems from an established and more archaic tradition. The most successful contemporary work exploits those limitations and extends beyond known conceptual territory in order to heighten aesthetic response in the viewer.

Artists throughout history have given expression to ideas through art making as a means of expressing the uniquely human desire to transform ordinary materials into works of art or what is primarily mutable and intangible; thoughts and feelings, both bodily and emotional. In a contemporary context, materiality is particularly relevant in that contemporary art is understood to be a relic of the artist's process of investigation into the nature of things, via objects' materiality and artists' work to reframe meaning through aesthetic juxtapositions. Just as art forms a nexus between imagination and reality, the current notion about materiality in art is that materiality is how art's material qualities are sensed, interpreted and understood. An aesthetic experience ensues once art materials are transformed, via an individual's imagination, into thoughts and feelings that are, first, expressed by the artist and, then, received by the viewer.

Our ability to interact with the world in general, and with art in particular, cannot be separated from the conditions of our lives. Just as a body is the vehicle for life, itself an energetic form, art objects embody ideas and experiences. Individuals sense the world and interpret what is sensed. We construct meanings that shift and change through the course of time. Each encounter with a work of art, from both the artist's and the viewer's side, is influenced by context, mood, circumstance, location, state of mind and innumerable other internal and external factors. The material manifestation of works of art, though, provides the most essential aspect of art's function and meaning.

Materiality is not to be confused with materialism. Art is not merely a commodity. Though influenced by the economics of exchange that fuels production of art, materiality, "the quality or character of being material or composed of matter," is distinct. On the other hand, materialism is "a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values; the doctrine that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications" negates the complexity of art.

The Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), widely acknowledged as one of the first abstract painters, spoke of internality in art. He held the belief that art, from the artist's perspective, must stem from an authentic internal source in order to move human consciousness forward. He asserted that true artists articulate subtle, even paradoxical, emotions, rather than crude, more obvious ones such as fear, joy and grief. In every case, these things are communicated through the materials present in the work, in the body of work, through character and form, yet the work of art is

more than the sum of its parts. In 1914 Wassily Kandinsky wrote,

Only just now awakening after years of materialism our soul is infected with the despair born of unbelief, of lack of purpose and aim. The nightmare of materialism, which turned life into an evil, senseless game, is not yet passed; it still darkens the awakening soul.¹

A firm believer in the transformative power of art, Kandinsky quoted the German composer and critic Robert Schumann (1810-1856) who made the famous statement, “To send light into the darkness of men’s hearts—such is the duty of the artist.” For such artists, according to art critic Suzy Gablik, vision is not defined by the disembodied eye, as we have been trained to believe. Vision is a social practice that is rooted in the whole of being. Also addressing the idea of a personal, internal framework, art critic David Hickey writes:

Finally, it seems to me that, living as we do in the midst of so much ordered light and noise, we must unavoidably internalize certain expectations about their optimal patternings — and that these expectations must be perpetually satisfied, frustrated, and subtly altered every day, all day long, in the midst of things, regardless of what those patterns of light and noise might otherwise signify.²

Hickey, like Gablik, grounds responses to art in a personal, organic matrix that originates from within the individual viewer. This is a distinctly contemporary view, devoid of the larger moral implications of most historical philosophical discourse. Hickey addresses the origin of an aesthetic sense through the senses of sight and hearing that relates to patterning based on prior experience. His idea implies an attraction to known systems including natural, cultural and social forms that provide

¹ Wassily Kandinsky. *Art Creativity and the Sacred*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Art Creativity and the Sacred*. New York, New York. Crossroad Publishing Company. 1984, 4.

² David Hickey. *Critical Reflections*, *Art Forum* 1995, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n10_v33/ai_17239568/pg_1 (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

individual points of reference for any given viewer.

With materiality, the experience of the viewer is essential, providing completion of art through bodily perception, the senses; closing the loop, so to speak. Yet no aesthetic theory can thoroughly address the untenable nature of art's shifting reality, the least of which is its location in history. Perception shifts continually as we relate to works of art in different contexts. While works of art are established within their materiality, the material circumstances of the viewer will, by necessity, continually change. From one position, once it is complete, the art work's materiality is defined and fixed, from another position, that of the viewer and the object's location in the environment of the physical world, materiality will continue to shift, altering how the work is perceived, thus informing content.

Presence and Absence in the Digital Age

The rapid technological change of the current digital age is dramatically impacting the nature of how art is physically manifested and perceived; perception requires that some thing engage the senses and provide a corporeal experience. It stands to reason that the tools of the digital age might distance one's perception of art objects, stripping away qualities necessary to art's function while also presenting other as yet unrealized potentialities for art production and experience. Subsequently, the role of art in society is in flux. For example, while seeing an art performance in person is not the same as looking at a black and white reproduction of it in an art history book or "zooming in" on a virtual digital image on the internet, the distancing effect of so much second-hand or mediated experience, can mean we are both closer

to and farther away from art in our lives.

In an ontological sense, our relationship to objects in our environment is that objects act as allegories for understanding. We attach meaning to things that are experienced. With regard to the aesthetic experience, the experience, not the artwork, is the allegory; it is one step removed from actual experience. As such, art is an open proposition in which the value of art is enhanced by the requirement that viewers be physically present in order to interact with the work. Artwork engages the senses, thus effecting embodiment in the viewer, providing an experience of being present as it locates the viewer within a bodily experience based in sense perception. Embodiment becomes more complicated in the digital age as more and more experience and interaction takes place in the nebulous space of the internet and cellular phone networks.

Considerations of materiality do not require that specific meanings be assigned to various materials in that we do not need to make absolute determinations about specific materials' meaning. And yet materials do significantly inform the content of contemporary art. Degree of refinement that gives a sense of being in process, employment of traditional or non-traditional art materials that align works with either a past tradition or with concepts of the new and the artist's personal story or circumstances out of which the art arises, ground this discussion of materiality.

While, at this point in history we are simultaneously closer to and further away from art in the public sphere, questions of actual experience versus virtual experience come to the fore. Can a work of art be experienced as art when the medium that conveys it is a computerized surrogate? Does the essence of a work of

art prevail when it is filtered through computer technology? Art making processes and the role of digital technology in the making of art also surface in this context in a way that is not unlike photography's impact on painting at the end of the 19th century. If we primarily view art remotely or in reproduction we lose a sense of scale and the experience of the presence of the work of art. Does it follow, then, that we lose the aesthetic experience?

Just as painting was set free from the bondage of representation with the advent of photographic technology's ability to document and record versions of reality, art is now liberated from expectations of labor-intensive processes and the demand that works of art display levels of material mastery. Artists are now freer than ever to draw on a variety of techniques that further their objectives. Along with that freedom comes the complexity of visual saturation and simultaneity; the unprecedented awareness of so much information and the growing need to reconcile so many concurrent realities.

In this way, contemporary art has become a symbolic representation of cultural ethos. Post-modern perspectives have leaned away from the notion of strict hierarchies and become more inclusive so more a part of ordinary people's perception of the world. Art engages our senses via materiality. In this way, works of art provide a much-needed anchor during what could be described as an age of disembodiment, this digital age. Counter to what one might presume would be the result of digitization of media, the devaluing of works of art in all its forms, this moment in history provides an example of the importance of art's material qualities in our lives.



Richard Tuttle, *Waferboard 4*, acrylic on waferboard, 1996

Imagination: Unreal Objects and Allegory

Heidegger suggests that art has the potential to activate the imagination and thrust it into imaginative realms that transcend materiality:

A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness. ‘To make space for’ means here especially to liberate the Open and to establish it in its structure. This in-stalling occurs through the erecting mentioned earlier. The work as work sets up a world. The work holds open the Open of the world.³

This statement is paradoxical in that it implies a “structureless structure”. In this sense, the open of the world exists in an imaginative space; not a true world, but an ephemeral arena of space, open and free, extending out of, but not truly part of the World.

Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must first be set aside. Only then do we yield ourselves to the undisguised presence of the thing. But we do not need first to call or arrange for this situation in which we let things encounter us without mediation. The situation always prevails. In what the sense of sight, hearing, and touch convey, in the sensation of color, sound, roughness,

³ Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Albert Hofstadter, trans. (New York, New York. Harper Collins Publishers. 1971), 44.

hardness, things move us bodily, in the literal meaning of the word. The thing is the aistheton, that which is perceptible by sensations in the senses belonging to sensibility.⁴

Richard Tuttle's painted wall pieces illustrate this whimsical and, arguably, open interpretation with their crude construction, elementary school colors and spatial awareness. Bound up in Tuttle's complex intellectual framework, his work investigates the edges of what constitutes legitimate art (think of his infamous 1975 Whitney Museum exhibition which led to curator Marcia Tucker's departure to form the New Museum); his work explores formal relationships even as it undermines them. The material nature of Tuttle's work argues primarily for curiosity, spontaneity and joy requesting that it be accepted at face value. It is no less aesthetic for lack of visual seriousness; the artist's conceptual rigor leads to work that gives the sense of making sense though it might not be obvious why. This could be stated as the overt intention; to subvert the leadenness of plain materials and direct treatment in order to exploit the viewer's desire to transmute art objects through interaction. The works' materiality becomes something akin to alchemy.

Richard Tuttle's waferboard wall pieces illustrate how the manipulation of materiality activates the aesthetic effect Heidegger refers to when he states:

The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made.⁵

⁴ Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Albert Hofstadter, trans. New York, New York. Harper Collins Publishers. 1971, 25.

⁵ Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Albert Hofstadter, trans. (New York, New York. Harper Collins Publishers. 1971), 19.

The thing that is made public is the artist's point of reference or assimilation of thought and feeling, of experience. Through the artwork, allegory is created, built or made, and then, finally, surrendered to the world beyond the studio. The artwork then extends a potential for resonance by suggesting an idea or impression. It provides a point of departure for the imagination. Martin Buber, writing in 1937, addressed a similarly nuanced reflection in *I And Thou* when he wrote of men's fundamental need to be in wholehearted relationship to the world.⁶ According to Buber, there is a small sense of things encapsulated in simple, limited facts, and a large sense that extends out into relationships that activate everything with profound meaning. It is the engagement, the interaction, that gives the large sense described by Buber.

Other traditions emphasize the essentially formless nature of reality while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of form to communicate. The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. Some resist using overt symbols, providing non-symbolic or non-iconic expression of emptiness realization. The idea of the necessity of form to communicate is reiterated to some degree in every culture. Visual allusion and language function similarly in that they stand for what they cannot fully represent. As with religious concepts, it is understood that though "God" is named the idea of god encompasses something that naturally overwhelms any attempt to contain or describe it.

The function of the name, in such a case, is similar to the art concept. It is useful, though inaccurate. What we talk about when we suggest an experience of

⁶ Martin Buber. *I and Thou*, (Edinburgh, Great Britain. T & T Clark). 1953.

God, just as in the case of an experience of art, is something else entirely. Such experiences exist in an immaterial realm.

By making asymmetrical pieces or pieces that may appear physically imperfect, the artist is offering an opportunity to get involved in the piece and to help complete the picture, or to even reflect on the seemingly imperfect nature of life itself.⁷

Stated another way, what is encountered in art is merely the suggestion of the thing and should be understood as such. We talk around it and confirm it in small ways, but do not have absolute confirmation of the existence of an aesthetic affect. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre refers to the problem of the “other mind”. We cannot ever truly know what lies within the mind of another individual. We infer, we wonder, but can never confirm.

American art critic Arthur Danto (1924—) holds a pragmatic view. His view is in contrast to Wittgenstein’s who saw the concept of art, like Heidegger, as an “open” one. According to Danto, art is always about something which it represents; it expresses the attitude or point of view of the artist with respect to whatever it is about; it does this by means of metaphor; metaphorical representation and expression always depend on a historical context; the content of artistic representation and expression are largely constituted by interpretation. Danto rejects the view that art is mimesis or imitation and the view that art is a language with special conventions. Danto references Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* and describes the “method of indiscernibles” whereby two objects identical to perception are shown to have distinct identities, differing either in ontological status or meaning.

⁷ Andrew Juniper. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese art of Impermanence*. (North Clarendon, Vermont. Tuttle Publishing. 2003), 157.

The most striking contribution to have been made to our understanding of art by the art world itself has been the generation of objects, ones in every manifest regard like perfectly ordinary objects, things like bottle racks, snow shovels, Brillo boxes, and beds. We are (1) to regard these “things” as artworks, and not as the mere real objects from which they are indiscernible; and (2) to be able to say what difference it makes that they should be artworks and not mere real things. Indeed, I regard the matter of furnishing answers to these questions the central issue in the philosophy of art.⁸

The work of Eva Hesse provides an early example of artwork that is tangibly based in materiality and yet clearly not a “real thing” in Danto’s sense. Unlike Tuttle, who explores more formal concerns, Hesse explored a strong quality of allegory. Upon returning to Germany after the end of the Second World War, Hesse drew on her experience to inform a story that is both personal and universal. Initially, her work was influenced by working in a studio that had previously housed a wartime German machine shop. Many of the metal objects represented in her work were cast away, forgotten. As a Jew, Hesse was acutely aware of the implications of machinery; its role in the Holocaust and the industrial processing of human beings. She eventually came to assert the value of humanity through the transformation of industrial materials such as rubber hose and latex. The biomorphic quality of her work and its apparent fragility exaggerate the intersection of organic principles and industrial society.

All works have this thingly character. What would they be without it? But perhaps this rather crude and external view of the work is objectionable to us. . . . But even the much-vaunted aesthetic experience cannot get around the thingly aspect of the art work. There is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition. The thingly element is so irremovably present in the art work that we are compelled rather to say conversely that the architectural work is in stone, the carving is in wood, the

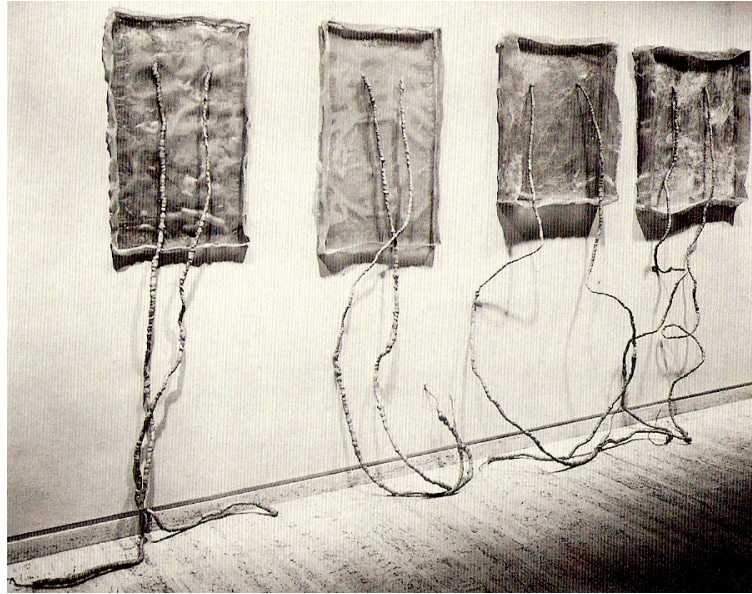
⁸ Arthur Danto. *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. 1999), 212.

painting in color, the linguistic work in speech, the musical composition in sound.⁹

As Heidegger suggests, the art work's "thingly" character is inarguably persuasive; in Hesse's work, it is essential. In her drawings from the period of 1945-47 Hesse explored the nature of precision, systems and symmetry. Her later work shows an evolution toward bolder, indeterminate forms, again through its material nature. In this later work, Hesse utilized resin, gauze and gravity to convey the vulnerability and the folly of humanity. Furthermore, it is a challenge to separate appreciation of her work from the knowledge that the materials that she used were the likely cause of her death. In her case, Hesse's life itself became degraded by the materiality of her work.

However, it would be a mistake to ascribe the value of Hesse's work solely to its autobiographical resonance. Hesse painted through and off the canvas, first extending objects beyond the traditional ground and then discarding the wall as a platform. She made objects that shared space with the viewer. Her textural and visually tactile work stresses biology and humor. Sensuous by nature, Hesse's mature work typifies embodiment in art.

⁹ Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Albert Hofstadter, trans. (New York, New York. Harper Collins Publishers. 1971), 19.



Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, fiberglass on rope armature, 1970

Through such materiality, works of art take on lives of their own, and by extension, dynamically engage viewers. Sartre addressed materiality's potential to elicit this sense of embodiment when he wrote:

This leads us to believe that there occurred a transition from the imaginary to the real. This is in no way true. That which is real, we must not fail to note, are the results of the brush strokes, the stickiness of the canvas, its grain, the polish spread over the colors. But all this does not constitute the object of esthetic appreciation. What is “beautiful” is something which cannot be experienced as a perception and which, by its very nature, is out of the world . . . The fact of the matter is that the painter did not realize his mental image at all: he has simply constructed a material analogue of such a kind that everyone can grasp the image provided he looks at the analogue.¹⁰

In Hesse's art, the simplest forms come to represent the most complex realities. The imaginative component of beauty, as it is described by Sartre, is understood to come as much from the process of its unfolding as it does the intuitive

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Psychology of Imagination*. (Seacaucus, New Jersey. The Citadel Press, 1972), 177.

material choices of Hesse. The degree to which objects embody a sense of physicality, what might be described as their link to a sense of existing in their own right, is also the degree to which they call attention to the art-making process and how that informs content. What characterizes the experience of her art is the vascillation between the real and the imagined.

And it is the configuration of these unreal objects that I designate as Beautiful. The esthetic enjoyment is real but it is not grasped for itself, as if produced by a real color: it is but a manner of apprehending the unreal object and, far from being directed on the real painting, it serves to constitute the imaginary object through the real canvas.¹¹

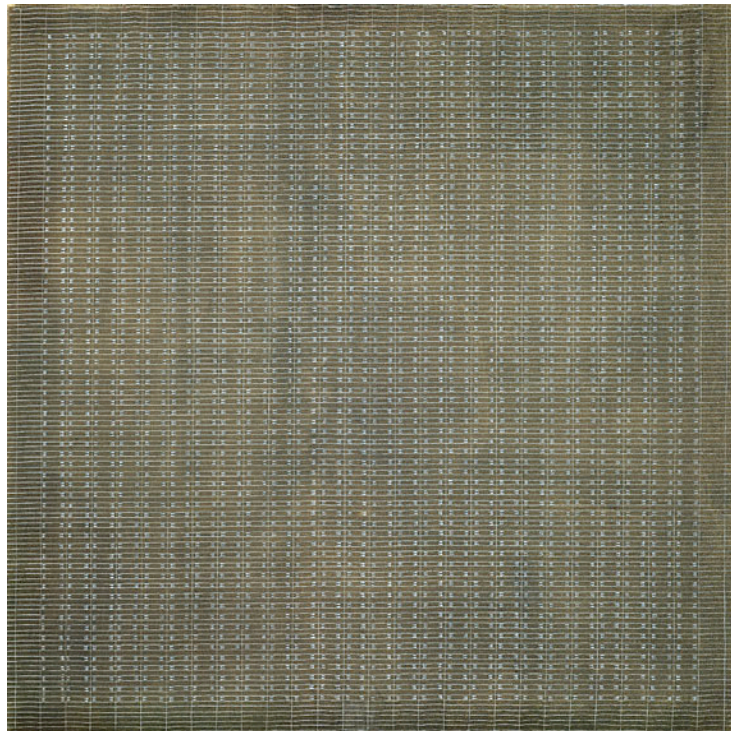
So the aesthetic experience allows us to “apprehend” the ideas art points to. In his essay “Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry”, French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) wrote about the idea of the inner quality in art, defining it with the following three stages. Maritain asserts that first, art transforms nature in order to disclose a reality. Second, art liberates us from conventional natural language. And third, art is ultimately a rejection of reason and logic, an obscuring of plain meanings. In these ways, Maritain suggests, art exits ordinary realms and provides access to extraordinary truth. As has always been the case, the degree to which we are familiar with a subject determines its ability to impact us.

The Sacred and Profane: Contemporary Painting

Through allegory and allusion, technique and execution, works of art transform material into forms that aim to transcend their simple states. Jacques Maritain wrote, “What the artist seeks to experience, the mystic seeks to transcend.”

¹¹ Ibid, 277.

Considerations of materiality and its coexistence with spiritual concerns, as is described in Kandinsky, for example, call into question Maritain's statement. It is not that simple. Almost universally, attitudes exist about the incompatible intersection of physical and spiritual reality. The tendency is to align things, as opposed to thoughts and feelings, with quotidian and worldly concerns as a means of simplifying culture. Similarly, spiritual concepts are mostly identified as non-material. Yet art can be a manifestation of philosophy, of belief systems. This tendency toward dichotomy extends to how we view contemporary art as well. It explains why such a variety of forms exist simultaneously at this point in history, presenting so many representations of thinking in absolutes while simultaneously hovering as near as possible to paradox.



Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, oil on canvas, 71 7/8" x 72", 1960.

In some cases, viewers see works of art as sacred objects made by people with special mystical status. These art objects are viewed as reflecting pure or transcendent states or profound human knowledge. The work is thought to access an elevated or transcendent reality and elicits a sense of truth. Agnes Martin's art, often intuitive and austere, exhibits both mastery of the materials and a depth of commitment, evident in her biography. The work she produced while living alone in Taos, New Mexico, arose from her isolation and a desire to bring forth personal truth. Martin's mature work typifies the high value placed on extremely limited means; singular, decisive marks, limited palette, lack of narrative or explanation, mathematical precision. This work can be seen as manifesting purity or perfection. Her work typifies the idea of internality as it is brought forth from an inner source.

In Martin's painting on linen from 1960, *white flower*, the restrained, simple means project a calm denial of the chaos of the world; a turning toward the sacred, or ideal. In this painting there is a sense of the artist subsumed by the practice of art making. Martin did not seek subject matter from external sources. Rather, for her, the work was a meditation on perfection. Her approach was constant and unwavering over the course of more than thirty years. Derek Whitehead emphasizes how works of art are able to transmit meaning through form:

In human creativity the work of poiesis may be sensed as a kinetic gesturing: the stroke of a brush, the shaping of a poem, the dexterous skill of a musician. Such activities have a determined symmetry of parts and a distinct temper of being. Poetic activity signals the emergence of a figure or rhythm — a transmissible figuration — from the hand of the painter, poet, or musician. Genuine producing requires the work of 'the head' and 'the hands.' Working with raw materials constitutes the kind of producing which places itself in and through the created thing that is let be.¹²

¹² Derek Whitehead. *The Artist's Labor*. Contemporary Aesthetics, Vol. 5, 2007.

While the artist makes deliberate decisions to utilize particular materials in a particular fashion, there is an acknowledgement that an ineffable quality of “letting be” must come through to the viewer in works of art that we want to return to again and again as they reveal that mysterious sense of embodiment and the perpetually surprising ability of inert material to encompass more than empty form.



Cecily Brown, *The Fugitive Kind*, oil on linen, 229 cm x 190.5 cm, 2000

On the other end of the spectrum is work that expresses the profane. It reflects the view that truth is in everything, rather than its representation. Such work expresses recognizable subject matter, gives freedom to the expression of the senses, and explores the world. Cecily Brown’s sybaritic painting *The Fugitive Kind* is a counterpart to Martin’s *White Flower*. Brown’s work is indulgent, excessive and sensual. Her work reflects our “lower” drives back to us. We are invited to dive into

the pleasure of sense memory and the entertainment of pure form given force through spontaneity, originality and surprise. We experience a sense of reckless abandon and are drawn to recognize the power and absurdity of the primal forces that move us in our lives. The way the paint is handled reflects the spontaneous force of the subject matter. It provides a charge.



Tony Fitzpatrick, *The Other Sister*, mixed media, 10" x 13", 2005

In a contemporary context, Brown's painting is "smart" because it draws on abstract expressionism's history but is made edgy by the fact that Brown is a young woman painting representations of what might be considered pornographic imagery. Another example of work that has external sources is that of Tony Fitzpatrick. In his work entitled, *The Other Sister*, a work that reads like a love letter, Fitzpatrick mines

his personal history through artifacts of American popular culture in order to assemble collages of impressions and dreams. He embraces symbols of personal iconography and urban life. Fitzpatrick's passionate work embraces nostalgia for the bygone era of mid-twentieth century blue-collar experience: of fistfights and going to the races, dice games and carnivals, of pretty women and romantic love.

In all these types of painting, the minimalism of Martin, the expressionism of Brown and the fetishism of Fitzpatrick, materiality is the single most important component to consider. It is the material form of the work that provides the means by which ideas are embodied. What and how the work is made are the fundamental considerations in understanding contemporary art's effect. This is true regardless of content or style. Materiality has primacy over and informs all other methodological considerations.

Physical Constructs: Performance & Installation Art

Materiality's significance in art is well established in the writings of the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804). According to Kant, viewers must funnel their responses to art objects through their corporeal understanding in order to arrive at points beyond their physical selves. In other words, physical sensations help establish understanding of art. Peter De Bolla describes Kant's ideas here in the article, "Toward the Materiality of Aesthetic Experience".

These judgments of taste have a number of distinct qualities. In the first place they are grounded in feelings of pleasure or pain. Secondly, they are immediate, which for Kant signifies that they are not based on a process of reasoning. Thirdly, these judgments are particular; they are the result of an individual experiencing subject responding to a specific object. Fourthly, the judgment is nonconceptual, not based upon our cognitive judgments, which in

Kant's critical philosophy would make reflective judgments equivalent to determinant judgments. For this reason aesthetic judgment is said to be imaginative. Fifthly, aesthetic judgments are subjective, in spite of the fact that they must also have universal validity by which they not only apply to the person making the judgment but to all other persons.¹³

Kant's system for arriving at criteria for the aesthetic experience could be summarized as follows: judgments are grounded in feeling and they are immediate; they are particular; and they are not conceptual and are subjective. From the viewer's perspective, the effect that stems from engaging with the work of art is based in something concrete as a reaction or response. Kant further claims that part of the process includes states of seeking and finding the subjective sense of the thing. As viewers we ask ourselves, does it please or displease and why?

From the artist's perspective, the experience of making the work stands in contrast to the viewer's experience in the following ways. It is deliberate and evolves over time. It is general in that many forms could suffice. It is conceptual and it seeks objectivity. The artist funnels what is amorphous and indeterminate into something concrete with material form, the work of art. This leads to the realization that the aesthetic experience, grounded in works' of art materiality, is the meeting point of the viewer's experience on one pole and the artist's experience on the other pole. It is the point of relationship to employ a term of Martin Buber.¹⁴ Simply put, I as a construct represents the small, definitive and limited sense of a thing whereas Thou encompasses the largest and most infinite interpretation whereby there can exist a sense of transcendent interconnectivity, of divinity.

¹³ Peter De Bolla. *Toward the Materiality of Aesthetic Experience*. *Diacritics*, Spring 2002, 19-37. <http://2390.muse.jhu.edu/journals/diacritics/v032/32.1bola.pdf>. 27 (accessed Aug. 15, 2009).

¹⁴ Martin Buber. *I And Thou*. (Edinburgh, Great Britain. T & T Clark). 1953.

Performance art, as an immaterial form of visual art, capitalizes on the idea of the viewer's aesthetic experience by positioning the viewer within the work as it occurs. In no other form of visual art is the audience more aware of its role in the completion of the piece. The performance, temporal and ephemeral by nature, inserts the viewer into the piece, requiring a level of engagement with the work that is difficult to generate in two-dimensional, non-experiential works. Confronted with the art "situation", the audience's response arises as the work is performed and demands an element of spontaneity to provides completion. Giving a sense of "real" experience, which is by nature unpredictable, the performance exposes the artist and thrusts her into a realm of immediacy.

Performance artist Marina Abramovic creates work that questions fundamental assumptions related to the limits of personal boundaries, both the artist's and the viewers'. Her work explores the bodily experience of physicality in the world, probing and seeking a visceral response in the viewer and pushing at the limits of viewers' willingness to engage with works of art. Her work also challenges the limits of endurance and safety, blurring the lines between private and public spheres. The materiality of the work, expressed through corporeality, that is bodies, eyes, hands and voice, becomes analogous with experience itself—it is fleeting and immediate.



Marina Abramovic, *Imponderabilia*, performance, 1977

By locating the viewer within his or her personal experience, Abramovic's performances provide a heuristic experience, an experience of learning through doing. In *Imponderabilia*, 1977, she and her partner, Ulay, stood opposite one another in a hall leading into the gallery hosting their exhibition. The artists, a man and woman, were nude. The close quarters of the hall required that those entering the space in order to view the "show" squeeze past the artists, choosing which to face, ostensibly confronting their internal responses to the unpredictable, even anarchic, situation. In the case of Abramovic, as with much performance art, the work's materiality is an extension of the artist's willingness to transform her body into the object or vehicle of meaning. Abramovic seeks a visceral, emotional response. In most cases, she is unsure of what will transpire in the course of the performance.



Marina Abramovic, *Lips of Thomas*, performance, 1975

Peter De Bolla, in his writing on Kant's aesthetic theory as it pertains to what can be called "thingness", the art object's intrinsic versus extrinsic qualities, expressed a significant consideration. He wrote,

So we extrapolate from an experience qualities which are then deemed to be inherent to the thing we have experienced—it is "as if" the beautiful or the sublime were a quality of the object itself.¹⁵

And yet we must admit that determination of beauty or sublimity is relative to other states and wholly open to interpretation. Nothing, then, can be deemed objectively beautiful or objectively sublime. Whether through the verbal exploration or documentation of artwork, descriptive language calls for viewers to label works. Those are loose associations, however. The artworks themselves evoke responses and ask to be considered and verbal expression is the most frequent manifestation of those

¹⁵ Ibid, 25.

responses. According to Danto's contemporary aesthetic theory and, as Heidegger had observed years before, works of art are open propositions and not easily amenable to verbal interpretation. This is certainly the case with most performance art and its documentation.

Works of art even remain open despite the intentionality of the artist. The work's meaning is suggested, supported and expanded by its material form, or in the case of performance art, its lack of material form. Artists, ultimately, strive to connect and empathize; to emphasize and illuminate ontological constructs.

Expressing a different viewpoint on the same subject Kant writes,

To be happy is necessarily the desire of every rational but finite being, and thus it is an unavoidable determinant of its faculty of desire. Contentment with our existence is not, as it were, an inborn possession or bliss, which would presuppose a consciousness of our self-sufficiency; it is rather a problem imposed upon us by our own finite nature as a being of needs. These needs are directed to the material of the faculty of desire, i.e., to that which is related to a basic subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure, determining what we require in order to be satisfied with our condition.¹⁶

In either case, the act of engaging with the work of art as it was intended, to be physically in the presence of the work and so willing on some level to be moved by it, puts the viewer in the frame of mind that makes the experience of the work, the aesthetic experience, available. Stated another way, acknowledgement of the importance of artwork's materiality, of its ability to engage physically with the material presence of the viewer, is what makes art possible. Without physical proximity, the art event does not occur. When we look at secondary sources, that is, representations of works of art, what we experience is merely an exchange of

¹⁶ Lewis White Beck(Ed.). *Kant: Critique of Practical Reason*. New York, New York. Macmillan Publishing Co. 1993, 24.

information; this is not the aesthetic experience per se.

The idea of interiorization, of taking into oneself what one experiences, is also important with regard to materiality in art. How accessible the work seems influences the viewer's sense of being able to enter into the work and thereby access its meaning. Works of art can function as ritual objects, opportunities to meditate on thought and feeling and on meaning itself. As is so aptly described by Eknath Easwara,

Ritual is the attempt, usually a group attempt, to control power, and sacrifice in particular is the control of that most imposing power which is the life-force. Now interiorization does not mean giving up on external struggles and satisfactions—very difficult for the mind to do, when the external field is all it can “see”—but rather reaching the centre of the field, beyond what the whirling mind can dream of, where all satisfaction is achieved for human beings.¹⁷

It could be argued that by locating abstractions of thought and feeling in material objects or notable experiences, as in the case of performance or film, we gain a better understanding of the world beyond our immediate selves—like ritual, we channel beliefs and understanding through things. This ability can function as an antidote to solipsistic tendencies. By sensing and recognizing what we value in the artwork as a relic of the artist's experience, we are provided a mirror to ourselves. Without considerations of “what is it” and subsequently, “what it means” this would be impossible. The continual questioning required of the artist in order to engage with and produce her work can result in the work of art being exceptionally refined and focused while maintaining the vitality of being indeterminate and evolving.

The degree to which the artist is required to engage with the material becomes

¹⁷ Kaswara, Eknath. *The Upanishads*. (Tomaes, California. Nilgiri, Press. 1987), 273.

another aspect of meaning. Art provides a unique means by which we can explore these intangible realms *with no immediate consequence*. Works of art, though they provide reference points and impressions, exist outside of ordinary experience.



Marina Abramovic, *The Conditioning of Gina Pane*, 1973

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them and seek them as though obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence. The heavens begin at the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and broaden the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of the periodic motion, their beginning and their duration. The latter begins at my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity but which is comprehensible only to the understanding—a world with which I recognize myself as existing in a universal and necessary (and not, as in the first case, merely contingent) connection, and thereby also in connection with all those visible worlds. The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a

little time provided with vital force, we know not how.¹⁸

Kant, in writing of “unbounded magnitude of worlds” highlights how aesthetic considerations function as a means by which we define areas of attraction and repulsion. They also allow artists and viewers, alike, to isolate concepts for consideration, and produce exchanges of encapsulated experience. Because the work of art possesses a sense of embodiment via material qualities, it provides a link between being and meaning. Kant’s writing dances around the edges of metaphysical discourse, expressing the basic human desire to exist individually in the world while also celebrating the experience of interconnectedness.

Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) wrote something similar about the essence of seeing in the idea of pure seeing; he argued the difference between interpretation, which implies a hypothesis and seeing as a state.¹⁹ He suggested that philosophy is the elimination of nonsense and that aesthetics and the mystical are shown, not said, because they are about one’s relationship to the facts. In this way, art exploits and transcends its own material bounds.

According to Wittgenstein, works of art, in all their forms are bound by an aesthetic that surpasses the simple requirements of beauty. We must ask, is that true? Is it beautiful? The object will speak and reply if it is true. If it is true it will resonate with us; it is therefore beautiful. This sense of beauty, via the art object, is also transferred through the object’s material aspects.

Consider the work of Tara Donovan: she gained acclaim for her work entitled

¹⁸ Lewis White Beck (Ed.). *Kant: Critique of Practical Reason*. (New York, New York. Macmillan Publishing Co. 1993), 169.

¹⁹ B.R. Tilghman (Ed.). *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity*. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press. 1991), 132.

Haze, 2003, an installation of plastic straws, the kind you would find at any generic fast food restaurant in America. Lilly Wei described the work, (*Art in American*, July 2003) “. . . it looked like a wall-to-wall cloudbank, extending forty-two feet laterally and climbing twelve-and-a-half feet, its ruffled upper edge incandescent, rimmed by light. . . between the audacity of the scale and the simplicity of the concept, something uncanny occurred.”²⁰ Donovan’s work typically utilizes an accumulation of unaltered ordinary objects to draw on the recently established legitimacy of the readymade object while referencing meditative processes of repetition.



Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Cups)*, installation of plastic cups, 2006

The installation encompassed an expanse of wall at the far end of the gallery, an undulating form, a luminous vertical topography. Donovan, utilizes expendable

²⁰ Lili Wei. *Materialist. Art in America*, July 2003.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_10_91/ai_109667932/print (accessed Jan. 15, 2009)

materials to create works of formal, pristine beauty. The forms echo sublime natural realms of desert zones, geologic time, natural beauty on a grand scale encapsulated in the finite space of an exhibition and comprised of materials we understand to be destined for the land fill. Consider, as an exercise, the utilization of #2 pencils instead of plastic straws. We can imagine the strong presence of the institution, the reflection of flat yellow instead of the luminous white light filtered through thin white plastic. The effect, though formally similar, would be entirely different.

Digital Art

The subject of materiality in art is interesting to consider in the context of the digital era, a period of time characterized by almost instantaneous remote communication via e-mail, cellular telephone and instant messaging and by an unprecedented ease in the exchange of vast amounts of information. The abundance of sensory stimulation in the contemporary world and the speed of its transmission have created a new environment for art. As a result, viewers are increasingly located in a liminal space devoid of physicality in a usual sense.

Viewers have adapted to the temporal nature of film, video and television and highly mediated, temporary experiences largely associated with entertainment versus high art. Yet in a fine art context, our immersion in a popular culture that is rife with moving images, makes temporal work accessible to a larger number of people in a non-art audience. Furthermore, film and video in particular are fixed as art objects that can be revisited from time to time for durations of time. They simulate a looping reality. In an excerpt from Arthur Danto's writing in *Philosophizing Art*, he wrote,

A way of viewing the world is revealed when it has jelled and thickened into a kind of spiritual artifact, and despite the philosophical reminders our self-conscious cineastes interpose between their stories and their audiences, their vision—perhaps in contrast with their style—will take a certain historical time before it becomes visible. In whatever way we are conscious of consciousness, consciousness is not an object for itself; and when it becomes an object, we are, as it were, already beyond it and relating to the world in modes of consciousness which are for the moment hopelessly transparent.²¹



Bill Viola, *The Crossing*, synchronized color video installation, 1996

This view is illustrated in the installation work of video artist Bill Viola. Because it is a temporal form, video art, as with other forms of moving pictures, emphasizes time as a setting. In Viola's work the viewer experiences an implied distance from the

²¹ Arthur Danto. *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. 1999), 231.

object; the glowing image, be it projected or contained within a monitor. The overarching religious themes of surrender to life as an energetic form in Viola's video installations are enhanced by the ephemeral nature of flickering light on a screen. Viola's work explores Buddhist and Christian religious philosophy in work that, through his thirty-year career, has become increasingly direct, formally, while emphasizing the ephemeral quality of video. The light image is the material aspect of the work in this case. Projected light points to the transitory nature of phenomena in general, and to mind states, in particular. Relating human emotion to elemental forces like water and fire, Viola invokes symbols of transmutation such as baptism and emoliation.

The quality of the image that results from use of film or digital video, respectively, impacts both the meaning and the look of the work as do methods of installation and scale. As a medium, film is a non-object that is inherently empty; a representation of light touching the surface of things. This material aspect serves Viola's intention well. Danto writes,

Perhaps films are like consciousness is, as described by Sartre, with two distinct, but inseparable, dimensions: consciousness of something as its intentional object and a kind of nonthetic consciousness of the consciousness itself—and it is with reference to the latter that the intermittent reminders of the cinematic processes as such are to be appreciated.²²

This high degree of self-awareness, described here by Danto, has manifested since post-modern discourse came to center around relative states of truth and means by which self-referential forms of art augmented the intellectually perceived

²² Arthur Danto. *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. 1999), 231.

conceptual aesthesis. In the last decade, considerations of art's material qualities have become germane to developments in photographic art-making practices and the general acknowledgment of equality between images developed by traditional means, with the use of film and darkrooms, and images that are digitally produced and printed with the use of computers. There is a difference in the feeling of the work. For one, it exists in time, more like performance. It is also developed through the requirements of technological processes that impact its final look. There is an inherent difference in objects that originate through different processes, yet the removal of the artist's hand in the work does not categorically lead to a distancing effect. These aspects of materiality are available for interpretation upon viewing as visual effects that bring awareness to the art-making process and establish the link between what the work is, and what it means.



Bill Viola, *The Crossing*, synchronized color video installation, 1996.

Most recently, this discussion is relevant to developments in photographic art-making practices that posit equality between images developed by traditional (100 year old) means in darkrooms and digitally produced and printed images. The methods by which art is produced also impacts meaning via the experience of process by artists in its production; there exists innate differences on several levels between stone objects carved by hand versus ones made with power tools. Modes of production are understood to influence volume of work, states of mind of the maker and what is required in order to use particular technologies including limitation of scale and output. Material considerations also influence numbers of people that can view or experience works of art.

Significant shifts in visual art in the wake of conceptualism displaced key aspects of Kantian-derived aesthetic theory. Premised on a positive and disinterested pleasure in the play of formal appearances, Kant's articulation of judgments of beauty as rejected in anti-aesthetic polemics because of its perceived complicity with vested institutional and market interests. Idealizing notions of beauty were dismissed as offering a fraudulent escape from institutional and social determinations. At the same time, sublime feeling, which, writes Kant, arises from the perceptual disorder of an encounter with something that exceeds representation, was also downplayed in anti-aesthetic postmodernism.²³

While conceptual art took a step away from the high value placed on mastery of materials and the exaltation of the materiality of the object, the fact remains that art is inherently aesthetic. Art is, by nature, concerned with an expression or exploration of value, and cannot be understood outside of that context; while we may choose to "reject" aesthetics as an aspect of expression in art, it is undeniable that the idea of

²³ Toni Ross. *Art in the "Post-Medium" Era: Aesthetics and Conceptualism in the Art of Jeff Wall*. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Duke University Press. 2002. http://z3950.muse.jhu.edu/journals/south_atlantic_quarterly/v101/101.3ross.html, 2 (accessed Jan. 15, 2009).

the aesthetic is primary in all considerations of artistic production. Furthermore, aesthetics are expressed exclusively through things and events, namely, through materiality.

Conclusion

Materiality significantly informs the content of contemporary art and forms the cornerstone of its conceptual ground. The significance of material choices is exaggerated in the current digital age as we become more accustomed to interacting in immaterial digital realms. At present, art provides a much-needed anchor for embodiment—a manifestation of human touch, of recognizable effects of human endeavor—during a time that could be largely characterized as an age of disembodiment, a time when many of us are disconnected from the vast amounts of information to which we are privy, the very information that, from a distance, informs our world.

While in the past, viewers were assumed to be present in order to experience the mediated form, now viewers are themselves mostly mediated through digital technology. Viewers, as well as the many works of art they can encounter at the click of a computer mouse, exist in a non-physical state, a state of disembodiment in relationship to the work of art. The viewer and artwork, in this situation, manifest as analogues of themselves. Information is exchanged, but not understanding, not experience. Consequently, art occupies a frontier of experience and understanding; what Sartre describes as an indeterminate and constantly shifting zone between the real and the imagined. The common means of exchanging information and modes of

interaction are changing as a result of information technology. As a result, the ways we related to things like works of art, will, inevitably, change.

By actively engaging the senses, art locates individuals within their corporeal selves and, subsequently, evokes the aesthetic experience. In this way, art provides a bridge between material and immaterial realms. The aesthetic experience itself, not the artwork, is the allegory. As we encounter objects in the world, we see that generally what is made exists to fulfill a clear, functional purpose. Art, on the other hand, particularly in a contemporary sense, is functionless. It exists only to embody ideas and does this through materiality. The aesthetic experience that results from a face-to-face encounter with art in all its forms, has the potential to shift the viewer out of ordinary thinking and into a primarily reflective mode. Materiality in art leads, always, to a sense of “feeling” that is embodied in the viewer’s imagination and the unpredictably abstract aesthetic experience.

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