



BETWEEN SENSUOUS AND MAKING-SENSE-OF: AN INTRODUCTION

Tilo Reifenstein

Abstract

In seeking to position the Open Arts Journal's special issue 'Between sensuous and making-sense-of' the introduction opens by probing notions of binarity that are instrumental to the commonplace division of affect and meaning, sensing and intelligibility, material and discursive, and sensuous and sense-making. Subsequently, a variety of philosophical approaches that have sought to recognise the metaphysical underpinnings of such oppositionality are presented to indicate why this special issue has sought to explore the shared spaces of these terms as a fruitful arena of enquiry. Writing itself, whether art-historical writing or any other, is presented as a practice that inevitably partakes in material contingencies that engage the writer sensorially and sensuously. The epistemic trajectory of writing is thus already embroiled in the contingencies of material encounters. The introduction therefore indicates how writerly approaches that break down the binaries of intelligibility and the sensible fit into the historically shifting understanding of knowledge. Finally, a brief sketch of discourses around materiality and précis for all contributions are provided.

Keywords: materiality, sense, writing, oppositionality, meaning, discursivity

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-0>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s00>

Biographical note

Tilo Reifenstein is Lecturer in Critical Studies at York St John University. Recent publications include 'The graphics of ekphrastic writing: Raymond Pettibon's drawing-writing' in *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (David Kennedy and Richard Meek, eds, MUP, 2018) and 'Drawing the letter' in *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice* (2018).

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

BETWEEN SENSUOUS AND MAKING-SENSE-OF: AN INTRODUCTION

Tilo Reifenstein, York St John University

In the opening paragraphs of his essay 'The gesture of making', Vilém Flusser grapples with the idea that our hands impose on us, in their two-ness and symmetry, a 'basic human constitution' of oppositionality (1994, p.49; author's translation). He holds up two hands as if to behold them as a manifestation of a dialectic our bodies oblige on us. Flusser's hands – 'condemned to mirror each other endlessly' (1994, p.49; author's translation) – may be used mutually, but even here, as they grip and caress each other, the gesture incurred only brings two sides together. Through hands, Flusser appears to grasp why we think the way we do. In his hands, he forms and wields a conception of knowledge that converges body and thought. It is through our two hands that the world has two sides for us. And even when we try get a handle on the whole, we only produce the congruence of two opposites (1994, pp.50–1). Imagining the thought of an octopus with a humanoid brain, Flusser attests that the tentacled creature would never be able 'to get' things the way we do, unless it would use its eight arms in a manual gesture comparable to ours (1994, p.50; author's translation). What may sound fanciful is merely the playfulness of a posthumanist philosophy that refuses to anthropomorphise the world and yet knows of the impossibility to detach from one's own body (Flusser & Bec, 2002). Yet, Flusser does not merely want to think (about) something different, he wants to think differently (Krtilova, 2014, p.186).

And as Flusser 'grapples', 'holds', 'beholds', 'grasps', 'forms', 'wields' and 'gets', he thinks as if with hands, groping in the dark to mould and shape a thought that is, for him, unavoidably human. As if the connection between body and mind was not already explicit enough, Flusser reminds us of the terms we use to address our thinking, noting that 'we often forget, that the meaning of these concepts has been abstracted from the concrete gestures of our hands' (1994, p.50; author's translation). It is with them that we explore the world and through them our thoughts are formed. Setting aside the question of whether we eventually want to follow Flusser down this teleological impasse or not, he manages to demonstrate the convergence of bodies, materials, language and thought while keeping them apart. In Flusser's separation of the

two hands – of one body – is also reinscribed the two-ness and division between the body's concrete sensory encounter *out there* and the mind's abstraction *in thought*. For the philosopher, typewriter and loose sheets of paper are the equipment of choice to give an exact (outer) form to these thoughts (1994, pp.32–40, 2002). However, the equipment is not only the accidental detritus of 'occidental' culture but 'in-forms' the 'accidental structure' of its 'historical, logical, scientific and progressive form' (1994, pp.33–4; author's translation). Flusser imagines the possibility of a different gesture of writing and concludes that from it would follow 'another way of being in the world' (1994, p.34; author's translation). He recognises that linearity, spacing, sequentiality, typicality and so on are structured by and structuring the way we write, and thus how we think verbally and construct histories and paradigms of knowledge. However, he is less interested in breaking open the relations he attributes to typed alphabetic writing and its effects. En passant and problematically, he thus marks 'the other' and the way that 'they' write through his assigned connections between attributed characteristics of typed alphabetic writing and knowledge, as well as his unapprised preference for them. It is the typewriter, not the fountain pen, which frees his gesture of writing, because it makes *the rules* – and *their* history and knowledge: linearity, logic, scientificity – more obvious. Flusser's writing therefore recognises its intimate imbrications in material contingencies and their, for him, inevitable effects, yet he also refuses to write, know and think differently. What is at stake, if we give up the ease and speed of typing – a material encounter with the world that structures our thoughts and makes them accessible to others – in lieu of another way to make the marks that 'write' us in turn? Whether through a putatively anachronistic return to the longhand manuscript or plugging ourselves into a future artificial intelligence that 'reads' our mind, both shape, in their way, how we consider us and our selves. Moreover, our sensory encounter with (our) thoughts is not homogeneous or consistent. Thumbing a phone, scribbling on a piece of scrap or typing into a word processor are already distant from Flusser's encounter with a typewriter (Flusser, 2002). A swift segue to another historical episode that manifests the appearance of a new way to think may therefore provide sufficient impetus to energise how we think about the way we write.

In a letter to his friend and secretary Heinrich Köselitz dating from the end of February 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote from Genoa (2003, p.18; author's translation): 'YOU ARE RIGHT – OUR WRITING TOOLS TAKE PART IN THE FORMING OF

OUR THOUGHTS. WHEN WILL I BRING MY FINGERS TO PRINT A LONG SENTENCE!

Nietzsche was writing on a Malling Hansen writing ball, a mechanical typewriter he had received only weeks earlier. Despite his enthusiasm for the device, the vicissitudes imposed by the machine's constant need for repair frustrated him (cf. Disser, 2006, p.48). Nietzsche's particular turn of phrase in the original German is noteworthy, and a more awkward but also more revealing translation is possible. In the writing ball's capitals-only script he notes that our 'Schreibzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken', our equipment 'co-works on our thoughts'. Though 'mitarbeiten' may be translated as 'work with', Nietzsche does in fact not write 'arbeitet mit uns an unseren Gedanken', 'works with us on our thoughts.' The tool is here already a co-worker, not merely a support for the work done by someone else. And equally the philosopher's fingers are invoked as though apart from the rest of the body, as tools that require persuasion and coaxing to mediate the flow from thought to word and head to paper. Nietzsche, who had adopted the typewriter because of his failing vision and difficulty to produce legible copy without headaches, incidentally misprints precisely the word 'Gedanken', 'thoughts', as if it were another way to highlight the direction and potency of the proposition. There are 17 further typographic errors in this one-page letter (Eberwein, 2005, p.122; cf. Windgätter's typology, 2005), many of which Nietzsche attends to with nib and ink. His correction on the word 'thoughts' seems to confuse things further, seemingly inserting the missing letter in the wrong space. Below the farewell, he adds by hand (2003, p.18; author's translation): 'Devil! Can you actually read this?!'

In the serendipitous typo of 'Gedanken' Leander Scholz recognises that it 'reads, at least from the current vantage point, like the menetekel of a media philosophy to come' (2013, p.155; author's translation). He notes that like speaking and writing, pressing the buttons of a machine is a learnt act that already indicates the ruptured relations between thought and its notation or enunciation. Scholz's simile works on two levels. Firstly, menetekel identifies an ominous warning, an idiomatic use that is more common in German than in English. Nietzsche's lapsus clavis is for Scholz prophetic of a discipline's laden future. Secondly however, the term's use is particularly potent for the linkages it creates – seemingly in passing – to the ominous 'writing on the wall' at Belshazzar's feast, as recounted in chapter 5 of the biblical Book of Daniel. As the Babylonians drink and feast, a bodiless hand appears and writes a message on the palace's plaster. Neither the alarmed king nor his wise men can read the handwriting on the

wall and thus Daniel is sent for to make sense of it. Daniel recounts how God deposed Belshazzar's father, Nebuchadnezzar, when he had become arrogant and proud. Having desecrated sacred vessels during the feast and proven his lack of humility, Belshazzar's fate has been inscribed on the wall. Daniel reads the 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN' on the wall for Belshazzar, pronouncing the end of his reign and the division of his kingdom. Interpreting 'TEKEL' as '[t]hou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting', Daniel proclaims God's verdict which is ostensibly enacted when the king is slain during the night (Dan. 5:25–27 KJV). As Nietzsche's excorporate fingers have to be brought to type out a long sentence, so God's message, too, does not merely appear but has to be written by fingers onto a substrate. Even God's words have a body and are the product of Schreibzeug. That Belshazzar's wise men are unable to decipher the inscription is however, commonly explained as a failure to make sense of the words, rather than to read them (Dan. 5:8; cf. Platt 1993; s.v. *Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin*). The unity of the menetekel is thus preserved, and God's word remains the self-communicating divine presence of logos. Yet it is precisely the presumption of the creative and originary power of God's word that leads Sonja Neef to recognise the menetekel's logocentrism (2000, p.68). The menetekel is on the one hand an image that can be seen not read, and on the other, it purports to be the word as unitary language that cannot be misunderstood. Neef therefore returns the menetekel to Jacques Derrida's examination of writing in the 'Western tradition', which considers the inscription 'as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos' (1976, p.35). What is found wanting in the writing of the menetekel is its reduction to language in a procedure that seemingly disregards or externalises the bodies and materials of its inscription. Where Nietzsche and Flusser recognised the import of material affordances in the sensing and sense-making of writing, the menetekel delivers once again the hierarchical binarism of the sensible and the intelligible that is at the heart of Derrida's critique of Saussure's sign. Split into signifier and signified

– the very idea of the sign – [... relies] on the difference between sensible and intelligible, certainly, but also [...] retain[s ...] a signified able to 'take place' in its intelligibility, before its 'fall,' before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below. As the face of pure intelligibility, it refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united.

(Derrida, 1976, p.13)

Writing necessarily partakes in the bodily and material, though not in opposition to or as a counterpoint of intelligibility, rather as an inevitable requirement for it to be writing. This is not to suggest a truth in *the material* or the 'materiality of the signifier' as 'the *meaning* of the signifier, the grand transcendental signified' (Readings, 1992, p.21; italics in original). Rather, as Bill Readings asserts emphatically in his reading of Jean-François Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure* (2011), 'it is not by virtue of its "materiality" that language participates in the sensible, it is by its figural quality that it may come to the same level' (Lyotard quoted in Readings, 1992, p.21). Lyotard's materiality is not attribute-heavy objecthood but 'a resistance to conceptual representation' (Readings 1992, p.21). The written marks on the page, imposed by the dispositions between head, hand, pen, typewriter and paper are not 'pure objecthood outside language, a simple beyond of representation. Rather' (p.22) they are the acknowledgement of the concurrence of representation and its inevitable failure, the impossible embrace of the other, the infinite linkage between a mark's signification and its asemic irreducibility. Yet here again, too, the pairings are necessary and necessarily already misleading, for are they not reinforcing a two-ness and division that is out of step with the intervolution of sense, sensing, sensuousness, sensitivity, sensorium, sensuality, sensibility and so on of an encounter.

If Nietzsche's typo is the 'writing on the wall' for media philosophy, the contributors to this special issue pursue the menetekel in their encounters with artefacts, objects and materials, and their attempt to stay alert to the inextricability of their sensing and making-sense-of them. Confronted with the work of art (object, environment, performance), our contributors are both granted access to, and rebuffed from, the material at hand. However available the material may be to touch, gaze, taste, smell or aural perception, it still exceeds comprehensive reduction to a particular sense. Conversely – facing the viewer (participant, maker, historian), the work's material both offers itself to, and resists, sensory assimilation. Vision becomes vertiginous imbalance, a sound's fragility approaches the tactile and aqueous smell is enmeshed with its own colour. Or differently, the grating touch of rough stone recalls the inequality of privation, the limpid glitter of precious stone cannot be unbound from its gemological description and a glimmer of flickering light opens a philosophical space of poetry.

Already inscribed in this encounter – between work and viewer, material and maker, individual senses and their somaesthetic and interpretative contiguity – is a

consolidation of the mutual, productive and multiple 'between'. The 'between', like the body that connects Flusser's two hands or Nietzsche's inscribed sheet, facilitates the (scholars') enmeshing of historical, social, theoretical and cultural discourses with their inseparable bodily encounters, and opens a trajectory of interpretative productivity and multiplicity that seeks to respond to the indivisibility of head and hand, object and context, and thinking and feeling. In utilising rather than relegating the uncategorisability of the 'between', the contributors to this issue committed themselves to be not only disciplinary navigators, travelling between certain shores, but also wayfarers, whose destination remains uncertain and whose route stays uncharted (Ingold, 2007, pp.15–16, 2015, pp.147–53).

Rather than focussing on the extremities of Flusser's injunction of two-ness and division, this issue seeks to identify the spaces and bodies connecting them, or, moreover, it aims to unsettle the neat binarisms and geometries that structures approaches to boundaries and difference. The writing that follows thus perhaps *becomes* more than it *is*, because it is a *response* that also aims to hold back some of the limits and regulations – disciplinary and institutional – that usually, and in the same gesture, sanctify and predetermine *answers*. This emphasis on material and bodily qualities and their sensual, intelligible and distinctly irreducible encounters is not a (re)turn to the kind of mysticism, immediacy and presence that Janet Wolff (2012) detects latently in some work of W.J.T. Mitchell (2005), Michael Ann Holly (1996) and James Elkins (1997), and more explicitly in that of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004), Georges Didi-Huberman (2005) and Frank Ankersmit (2005). Wolff is concerned that notions such as agency, materiality and the 'power of images' as well as perceived excesses of emotion and sensation evoke the (re)introduction of presence that may make social, historical and cultural relations explored in culture theory redundant. She asserts that everything can be addressed, explored or, better, interpreted discursively, it is just a question of using and finding the right scheme or concept.

So other meanings hover at the edges, sensed but not articulated, suggesting a certain ineffable presence. In fact, they may be perfectly graspable within the framework of a different conceptual scheme. It is in the nature of such schemes that they make visible some things and are blind to others. The non-discursive may simply be the not-yet-discursive, which new critical machineries may bring forward [...].

(2012, p.11)

Yet the necessary vigilance to abate the lure of immediacy and presence, is not only achieved by insisting on the application of a correct conceptual scheme. (In particular, as this emphasises the ungainly framing characteristics that schemes themselves provide, i.e. they permit a view *through* themselves but not, as such, *of* a subject.) Presence and immediacy are also not to be confused with multiplicity, flexibility and irreducibility. Wolff is seemingly suggesting a future interpretability as an ultimate one, rather than as one that is always *to come*. The proper scheme will provide the right words to parse and dissect ‘an experience (including an emotional one)’ (2012, p.14). The world becomes a decipherable text whose texture and body are, in the end, reducible to discursivity. The fitting scheme will seemingly exhaust, enumerate and interpret all there is to say. Yet, interpretative approaches, including those in this issue, can be expressly supple and diverse without the need to enclose their subject, and yet they can preserve their rigour as academic discourse. They act as propositions in the strong sense. They put themselves out there to *put forward for consideration* a multivalent text that knows (of) its own participation in its subject. They propone to *put something in a place*, but not at the exclusion of another. Moreover, they recognise their own opacity because they and their language also already partake in the figural and material. They, like their subjects, remain open, interpretable and inexhaustible.

Wolff’s not-yet-discursivity, honed in the search for the proper scheme by a researcher who is a ‘(fundamentally linguistic) being’ (2012, p.14), is expressive of and perhaps epiphenomenal to what Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp lament in the persistent ‘discursivation of our understanding of culture’ (*‘Diskursivierung des Kulturverständnisses’*) (2003, p.12; author’s translation). Language (*Sprache*), so their argument, has become the key paradigm and crux of cultural interpretation, and concomitantly the epistemic potential of other practices is derogated. Overall, the effect of discursivation is a separation of practice from interpretation, material(ity) from symbol(ism), non-verbal from verbal phenomena and, more broadly, cultural production and art from research and knowledge. Krämer and Bredekamp are similarly quick to attest, too, that even the understanding of writing itself is reduced to a discursive phenomenon, à la Flusser’s paradigmatic understanding of typewriting and without the *différance* or figure of Derrida’s and Lyotard’s deconstructions. The authors, however, remain optimistic, because they identify four divergences that erode the trope of cultural

discursivation. Firstly, the emphasis on “‘performance” and “‘performativity”” (2003, p.14; author’s translation) has invigorated an understanding of culture as action and practice as opposed to text and representation. Secondly, an increased understanding and valuation of non-verbal knowledge has led both art and science to uncover the significance of ‘technical and symbolic practices’ (p.14; author’s translation) that may also enable propositional, verbal knowledge. Thirdly, the turn to materials, processes and functions has seen a ‘willingness for dehermeneutisation’ (*‘Bereitschaft zu Dehermeneutisierung’*) (p.14; italics in original, author’s translation). And finally, recognising the ‘epistemic dimension of iconicity’ (*‘Erkenntnisdimension der Bildlichkeit’*) (p.14; italics in original, author’s translation) opens categorical distinction around different epistemes.

The divergence between Wolff’s and Krämer and Bredekamp’s position is already part of a larger and developing understanding of the historical formation of knowledge from stable and authoritarian to multiple and changing. Harald Tesan (2007) has traced this tug and pull from the renaissance to the enlightenment and on to an enlightenment unveiled as dogmatic, ideological and hegemonic, and further towards an uncertain and contested postmodern position. Tesan, not unlike Flusser, who envisaged a shifting ‘historical conscience’ in the transition from linear writing to image-generating technologies and finally mathematical code (1988, p.17, author’s translation), also identifies a move away from the discursive and reading to a new technological kind of knowledge (2007, pp.282–7). The changing formations exemplify rather effectively the exigencies that bodies and materials afford our understanding of knowledge. It deserves emphasis that technology is not the only, or even most significant, aspect of epistemic change. The recognition, accommodation and valuation of different bodies, practices and materials, especially those that have historically been marginalised and derogated, is crucial for this development.

Scholz notes that more than a century after Nietzsche circumscribed the extraordinary scope of a media philosophy he never knew, that the same thoughts remain doggedly ‘marginal or fashionable’ as philosophical themes, without being able to attain a ‘systematic place in the disciplinary field of philosophy’ (2013, pp.155–6; author’s translation). A variety of strikingly similar observations may be made concerning this issue’s focus on materials and their sensuous/sense-making encounters. More than half a century after Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* (1967) the relations between speech and writing may have been

repositioned, yet the distinction between the outside and the inside, the body and the essence still appear irreconcilably drawn. Or, by way of Lyotard, almost half a century after *Discours, figure* (1971) the figural opacity of writing has yet to find its productive, affective and epistemic place. Or, differently again, after wide-spread assertions of a material turn, is the pervasiveness of special issues, special networks with new acronyms, special conferences and the attempt to graft the word 'material' to other named forms of enquiry not also a tacit acknowledgment that no turn has been made, since the material has merely found its *special* place? Perhaps the material is still finding its place – not proper and static, but enmeshed and changing – and the enormous amount of writing under its name is testament to that. Even in the pages of this journal, Helen Hills' most recent issue (2017) examined how considerations of material transformation can open up baroque Naples as a place of difference, change and heterogeneity. What informs her work and is crucial to the wider discourses around *materiality*, and specifically in this issue, involves the repositioning of *material* itself, especially its relation to us. One of the possible entry point is perhaps Martin Heidegger's writing about the thing (*Ding*) and the broadening of its understanding towards a concept beyond physical attributes (1962, 1977, 1979). Subsequently, the material constitution of the thing becomes demonstrably questionable and intertwined with the abstraction of the thing itself, and 'materiality' as an attempt to contain the escalating discourse evolves. More recently Bruno Latour (2005), Alfred Gell (1998), Jane Bennett (2010), Christopher Tilley (2004), Daniel Miller (1998, 2005), Tim Ingold (2000), Bjørnar Olsen (2013), Graham Harman (Harman 2010) and others (e.g. Malafouris and Renfrew 2010) have been instrumental in shaping our understanding that the object is not merely a brute clot awaiting its manipulation by intelligent humans. Rather, objects and materials shape our practices and subjectivities. Material things and humans have become interwoven in a broader fabric that refuses earlier ontological distinctions. Object-oriented ontologies, one of the developments propelled by the idea of material agency, thus aims to address the privilege that humans commonly attribute themselves in relation to objects (cf. Harman, 2002; Morton, 2010; Bryant, Srnicek & Harman, 2011). Concomitantly, the interest in the material object has also energised enquiries into our material bodies and practices. Particular attention is here given to non-verbal knowing, skills acquisition and transmission, and artistic intelligence (cf. Polanyi, 2009; Adamson, 2007, 2013; Ingold, 2011, 2013).

As Nietzsche's thoughts are shaped multiply while they are imbedded in the writing ball's paper, the contributors to this volume have similarly taken the process of writing as one of the contingencies to the scholarship of their *subject*. Writing is a practice. It involves the bodies, materials and processes that shape not only *writing* itself but also knowledge. Writing is slow, too, and institutional settings that promote speed, flexibility and outputs do not always recognise this. The following essays embrace the epistemic dimensions of the encountered materials and explore their irreducible imbrications in a variety of contexts and discourses, from the art-historical and artistic to the technological and philosophical, and from the geological and affective to the ephemeral and temporary. They analyse the practices of making and viewing and come to recognise the performativity of the material. And elsewhere, they consider the materiality of performance and its capacity to move maker and viewer. Approaching the non-verbal knowledge of materials, they do not seek to impose a unitary language that encloses its object but aim to indicate how maker and viewer sense and make sense of the work and its context positions. The aim is to leave a gap that accommodates the material to *come*, not in order to mystify or deposit a placeholder for immediacy and presence, but to recognise the continuing transformation of the work and its irreducibility to meaning and discursivity.

In the first essay, 'Striking textures, sensuous surfaces in photography and film', Gabriele Jutz encounters the surface textures of photographic and filmic images as sensuous spaces that appeal not only to vision but a wider register of sensory experiences. Jutz's analysis of media images in textural and textual terms probes not only their divisibility but also manifests the inevitable participation of materials in the meaningful production and construction of images.

Subsequently, Ellen Handy demonstrates how the materiality of photographic objects induces a bodily experience and performative practice in maker and viewer in her essay 'Dancing with images: Embodied photographic viewing'. Handy utilises the difficulty involved in 'seeing' early photographic images in an analysis that witnesses a lessened emphasis on the photograph's indexicality. Using Dewey's transactional understanding of art, object and viewer here become engaged in an embodied and experiential dance.

Paying close attention to her own sensory and physical encounter with the setting and sculptures of the Sacro Bosco, Thalia Allington-Wood explores an immersive approach to the sixteenth century. 'Rocky encounters in the Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo' offers a

material, geological, art-historical and yet also deeply sensuous account that opens up the history and understanding of sculptures, formed from rough, earthy grey-brown rock, to their contemporary local viewers.

At microscopic scale, Alan Boardman investigates the use of carbon pigment in the artistic practice of Onya McCausland and Frederik De Wilde. 'Carbon monochrome: Manuel DeLanda and the nonorganic life of affect' uses the philosopher's new-materialist ideas as a framework to exceed phenomenological enquiries and proposes human–non-human affect relations to rethink art's making and viewing in the anthropocene.

Similarly indebted to new-materialist modes of enquiry, Sara Buoso investigates light as a matter in James Turrell's artworks to articulate a materiality of difference. 'Outside the spectrum: Poietic encounters of light-matter' uses the notion of poiesis to think about light – between visible and invisible, and beyond the logic of a linear representation – as a matter of experience in its becoming. Processes, formations and practices gain a new articulation as experience through a consideration of the space between the actualities and potentialities of light as a material.

In 'When words falter' Sara Davies reflects on her artistic practices which explores her own 'hyphenation' as an Anglo-Swedish artist moving between two cultures. Focussing particularly on touch, Davies assembles material from established cultural narratives and reconfigures it in a gestures that give expression to her own status in diaspora. The practical repetition of haptic encounters as a form of making thus becomes a practice of sense-making for the artist.

Julie Boivin also pursues the relations between the body and the object in her 'Rocaille ornamental agency and the dissolution of self in the rococo environment'. Focussing on eighteenth-century rocaille ornamentations, Boivin argues that their viewer becomes a participant in the environment and is incorporated into its organic shapes. The network of rocaille forms becomes an extension of the participant whose boundaries are dissolved between furniture and space.

The final essay, 'Paperchase', looks closely at the substrate common to the practices of drawing and writing. It traces philosophical and historical descriptions of paper to show how it has regularly been rendered as an ideal version that does not carry its material characteristic. Considering the inseparability of paper from its 'acts' and the convergences of different graphic practices, the article emphasises how the cognitive and sensuous work of drawing and writing is also paper's work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to the many people who have made this special issue of the *Open Arts Journal* possible. Leon Wainwright offered the kind and consistent encouragement and direction without which there would be nothing to look at. Alice Sanger's generous guidance and indefatigable work steered the entire production. Peter Heatherington's patience and diligence have been indispensable in achieving the beautiful copy of this issue. Our anonymous peer-reviewers' insightful and vital expertise lead our investigations with a gentle hand. Thanks also to all those who, unnamed in institutions, worked with us by drawing up contracts, received and sent emails and forms, and, in general, keep the machine running. Finally, thanks to the contributing authors for their excellent scholarship and enduring commitment to the project.

Bibliography

- 1 Adamson, G. (2007) *Thinking through Craft*, London, Bloomsbury.
- 2 Adamson, G. (2013) *The Invention of Craft*, London, Bloomsbury.
- 3 Ankersmit, F. (2005) *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- 4 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- 5 Bryant, L., Srnicek, N. and Harman, G. (eds) (2011) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne, re.press.
- 6 Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology* (trans. G.C. Spivak), Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 7 Didi-Huberman, G. (2005) *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (trans. J. Goodman), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania State University Press.
- 8 Disser, M. (2006) 'Friedrich Nietzsche und das "Experiment Schreibmaschine"', *Archiv für Stenografie, Textverarbeitung, Informationstechnologie*, vol.48, no.2, pp. 47–51.
- 9 Eberwein, D. (2005) *Nietzsches Schreibkugel: Ein Blick auf Nietzsches Schreibmaschinenzeit durch die Restauration der Schreibkugel*, Schauenburg, Typoskript Verlag.
- 10 Elkins, J. (1997) *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, New York, Harcourt Brace.
- 11 Flusser, V. (1988) *Krise der Linearität*, Reihe um 9, Bern, Benteli.
- 12 Flusser, V. (1994) *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer.
- 13 Flusser, V. (2002) *Die Schrift: Hat Schreiben Zukunft?*, Göttingen, European Photography.
- 14 Flusser, V. and Bec, L. (2002) *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis: Eine Abhandlung samt Befund des Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste*, Göttingen, European Photography.
- 15 Gell, A. (1998) *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon.
- 16 Gumbrecht, H.U. (2004) *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- 17 Harman, G. (2002) *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago and La Salle, Open Court.
- 18 Harman, G. (2010) *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Winchester, Zero Books.
- 19 Heidegger, M. (1962) *Die Frage nach dem Ding: zu Kants Lehre von den transzendentalen Grundsätzen*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.
- 20 Heidegger, M. (1977) 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes' in F.-W. von Herrmann (ed.) *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe: I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, pp. 1–74.
- 21 Heidegger, M. (1979) *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.
- 22 Hills, H. (2017) 'Introduction: directions to baroque Naples', *Open Arts Journal*, no.6, pp. 1–20.
- 23 Holly, M.A. (1996) *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.
- 24 Ingold, T. (2000) *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London and New York, Routledge.
- 25 Ingold, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*, Oxford, Routledge.
- 26 Ingold, T. (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Oxford, Routledge.
- 27 Ingold, T. (2013) *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, London and New York, Routledge.
- 28 Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines*, Oxford and New York, Routledge.
- 29 Krämer, S. and Bredekamp, H. (2003) 'Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur' in S. Krämer and H. Bredekamp (eds) *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, pp. 11–22.
- 30 Krtilova, K. (2014) 'Gesten des Denkens: Vilém Flussers "Theorie der Gesten" als Medienphilosophie' in U. Richtmeyer, F. Goppelsröder and T. Hildebrandt (eds) *Bild und Geste: Figurationen des Denkens in Philosophie und Kunst*, Bielefeld, Transcript, pp. 183–202.
- 31 Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 32 Lyotard, J.-F. (2011) *Discourse, Figure* (trans. A. Hudek and M. Lydon), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 33 Malafouris, L. and Renfrew, C. (eds) (2010) *The Cognitive Life of Things: Recasting the Boundaries of the Mind*, Cambridge, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- 34 Miller, D. (ed.) (1998) *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, London, UCL Press.
- 35 Miller, D. (ed.) (2005) *Materiality*, Durham, Duke University Press.

- 36 Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005) *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- 37 Morton, T. (2010) *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- 38 Neef, S. (2000) *Kalligramme: zur Medialität einer Schrift: anhand von Paul van Ostaijens 'De feesten van angst en pijn'* (trans. S. Neef), Amsterdam, ASCA Press.
- 39 Nietzsche, F. (2003) *Schreibmaschinentexte: Vollständige Edition, Faksimiles und kritischer Kommentar*, Weimar, Bauhaus-Universitätsverlag.
- 40 Olsen, B. (2013) *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Lanham, AltaMira.
- 41 Platt, J.H. (1993) *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- 42 Polanyi, M. (2009) *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 43 Readings, B. (1992) *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, London, Routledge.
- 44 Scholz, L. (2013) 'Hegel und das leere Blatt Papier' in L. Engell, F. Hartmann and C. Voss (eds) *Körper des Denkens: Neue Positionen der Medienphilosophie*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, pp.150–71.
- 45 Tesan, H. (2007) 'Form ohne Wissen - Wissen ohne Form: die Schrift, das Bild und die Unmöglichkeit absoluten Denkens. Nebst Überlegungen zur Ordnung der Dinge bei Maciunas, Beuys, Derrida' in W. Oechslin (ed.) *Wissensformen: Sechster Internationaler Barocksommerkurs Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin, Einsiedeln*, Zurich, gta Verlag, pp.282–311.
- 46 Tilley, C. (2004) *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Oxford, Berg.
- 47 Windgätter, C. (2005) "'Und dabei kann immer noch etwas verloren gehen!'" Eine Typologie feder- und maschinenschriftlicher Störungen bei Friedrich Nietzsche' in D. Giuriato, M. Stingelin and S. Zanetti (eds) *'SCHREIBKUGEL IST EIN DING GLEICH MIR: VON EISEN'*. *Schreibszenen im Zeitalter der Typoskripte*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, pp.49–74.
- 48 Wolff, J. (2012) 'After cultural theory: the power of images, the lure of immediacy', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol.11, no.1, pp.3–19.

Critique d'art

52

The International Review of Contemporary Art Criticism Spring/Summer 2019



Print journal – 180 pages – Bilingual (French / English) – 16 €

345 reviews on books and catalogues available at <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart>

Semi-annual publication – 47 € the individual subscription / 57 € the institutional subscription (libraries, universities, institutes...) combining the print and the electronic journals

In order to subscribe or just buy an issue, please simply write to aca-editions@univ-rennes2.fr

Contents

Articles / Portraits / Translation / Essay / Revisiting History / Archives / Reviews



Created in 1993, “Critique d’art” is the result of the collaboration between the Archives de la critique d’art and specialized publishers. The magazine is both a tool for research on art of the 20th and 21st centuries and a reading guide.

For subscription and back issues,
Critique d'art
 4 allée Marie Berhaut – Bât. B – FR-35000 Rennes
 France
 Tel: 33 2 23 22 58 06
sylvie.mokhtari@univ-rennes2.fr
<http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart>
 Published by the Archives de la critique d’art –
www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org



STRIKING TEXTURES, SENSUOUS SURFACES IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Gabriele Jutz

Abstract

*This article examines materiality as a surface condition and as inscribed in the texture of photographic and filmic images. First, it discusses examples where surface textures become striking due to various, frequently combined factors, such as image transfer, enlargement, the exigencies of the machinery involved and the properties of the film stock. Here, image resolution is the main focus. Second, it deals with the case of camera-less photography and film, where apparent surfaces are caused by directly acting upon the photo paper or the film stock. The third part offers close-readings of three exemplary artworks to be apprehended as poignant and exciting examples of how a photograph's or film's materiality determines its meaning, how textuality and texturality match. These readings include Steven Pippin's series of photographs *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997), Alison Rossiter's works with expired silver gelatine photo papers (2007-ongoing) and David Gatten's film *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). Finally, in my concluding remarks, I will briefly address the critical potential of textures that foreground their materiality.*

Keywords: texture, textuality, surface, photography, film, low resolution, art, materiality

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-1>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s01>

Biographical note

Gabriele Jutz is full professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria. Her current research interests include the history, theory and aesthetics of experimental cinema and film sound as well as media obsolescence and media archaeology. At present she is also participating in an international research project entitled *Reset the Apparatus! A Survey of the Photographic and the Filmic in Contemporary Art* (project leader: Edgar Lissel), which deals with so-called 'obsolete' media technologies in contemporary art (<http://www.resettheapparatus.net>). Her most recent book *Cinéma brut: Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde* (Springer 2010) discusses films that reject the usual tools of filmmaking, such as films made without the use of a camera, found-footage-films, and expanded cinema performances.

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

STRIKING TEXTURES, SENSUOUS SURFACES IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Gabriele Jutz, University of Applied
Arts Vienna

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the material dimension of artworks and their processes of production. This turn to materiality is in no way confined to artistic practices that result in solid, three-dimensional objects that obviously display their materiality. 'Planar objects' such as photographs or films, that is, images produced by technical media and that seem to have little or no substance, are light or have no weight, can also draw attention to their objecthood. A photographic print has a distinct material existence that differs from a projected image. A print possesses a physical presence, due, largely, to its haptic material support. A projected image, however, is more ephemeral and seems to lack substance. The conventional mode of projection easily makes us forget that its source is a material object, be it a slide or a film reel, which can be touched, has weight and even at times a characteristic odour. Where the physical presence of a slide projector and its continuous clicking might function as an acoustic reminder of the image's material base, a typical film screening, with a pacified, even 'sedated' projector hidden in a booth contributes considerably to the screening's seeming immateriality. Though concealed to the average consumer of moving images, film in its material existence – the filmstrip travelling through the projector – plays a decisive role in certain artistic practices.

Relating to a photographic or filmic image in terms of materiality means above all to approach those objects' *surface condition*: the textural surface where the material of photographic and filmic artefacts manifests itself. But what exactly constitutes a photograph's or a film's materiality? And when does its texture become apparent? There are various technological and temporal factors that have an effect on the appearance of the surface. These are the film stock and the emulsion, the recording medium (photo or film camera), the medium of presentation (the print, in the case of photography; projector and screen in the case of film) and finally factors caused by the use, distribution and age of a print, like signs of decay, wear and tear. It is interesting to note that the industry's aspiration to achieve absolute fidelity is, as Andy Birtwistle rightly remarked,

'grounded in a technical and aesthetic tradition of denial and concealment' (2010, p.59). The reduction of visual noise to zero results in crisp, smooth surfaces, characteristic of consumer goods, which are antithetical to a version of materiality based on the visibility of the technological process and the touch of time.

Conceiving materiality as a surface condition of photography and film goes far beyond the question of the represented object and its surface. In order to elaborate more nuanced concepts of surface materiality, it is absolutely vital to consider the technologies and techniques of the representation itself, in particular hardware (camera/projector) and software (the support). The activity of the artist as 'producing subject' (Drucker, 1994, p.112) and the question of his or her bodily involvement plays a decisive role, too. Only if we understand the surface as a complex, interlocking system arising from these three distinct components – the machinery, the support and the artist's mode of operation – does it become possible to grasp its materiality in its myriad of appearances. In her remarkable book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Giuliana Bruno focuses on the very topic of textural surfaces in film, architecture and clothing. Opposed to the tendency in our culture to denigrate surfaces, Bruno underlines the idea that 'in visual culture, surface matters and it has depth' (2014, p.5). However, when it comes to film, Bruno deals to a large extent with the texture of the pro-filmic object, whereas a focus on the technology itself remains surprisingly rare. In her discussion of *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), for instance, Bruno highlights the heroine's patterned *cheongsam*, a popular Chinese women's dress, and the weathered and textured walls of the alleyways (2014, pp.35–51), all of which are part of the pro-filmic event. How richly textured these objects might be, Wong's cinematic representation of them results in pristine images that bear no obvious trace of their production process. Bruno's example shows that there seems to be a reluctance among art historians and theorists of visual culture to address the medium's materiality in its own right. But concentrating on the texture of the represented item is only one way of addressing surface materiality (and, by the way, not the most interesting one). What seems more intriguing is to dig into the textural – or rather *textured* – surface of media images in order to reveal the medium's physicality in all its bareness, free from the slags of representation. What we need is to hew to the concrete, where, as Craig Dworkin reminded us, "concrete" is what the street is made of' (2003, p. 5).

As opposed to the projected image, the printed image obviously not only appeals to the eye, but to touch, too. It invites the viewer to respond bodily to the feel of the support and its surface: is it rough or smooth, glossy or matte, cool or warm? Unquestionably, a photographic print is a material object that can be explored in a dual sensorial way, whereas a projected image seems only available to the eye. Nevertheless, the most interesting debates about a possible haptic dimension of visibility have emerged from cinema studies (Shaviro, 1993; Marks, 2000; Sobchack, 2004), and not from photography, simply because in the latter the haptic image is standard fare. Of course, moviegoers¹ cannot really make contact with the screen, let alone with the filmstrip running through the projector. The screened image is open to the non-visual register of touch in a larger sense. In *The Skin of the Film* Laura U. Marks examines how audio-visual media can create non-audio-visual sense experiences within their own constraints. Marks argues that '[f]ilm is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole' (2000, p.145). This 'embodied vision', as Marks terms it, is able to awaken a personal and cultural memory of touch. Drawing on nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between haptic and optic images, Marks explains: 'Optical visibility depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture' (2000, p.162). It is in no way surprising that noticeable textures are often paired with imperfect, substandard surfaces, whose grittiness, blurriness, degeneration or decay affects their representational dimension. These images' refusal to make themselves only accessible to vision compels the viewer to resort to haptic visibility.

This article will examine materiality as a surface condition and as inscribed in the texture of media images. It is not confined to a discussion of classical photography and film, though its focus lies on imagery based on photochemistry. First, I will draw on examples where textures become apparent due to various, frequently combined factors, such as image transfer, enlargement, the exigencies of the machinery and the properties of the film stock. Here, image resolution will be my main focus, because it serves as a strong marker of textuality. Second, I will discuss the case of camera-less photography and film, where striking surfaces are caused by directly acting upon the software (the film stock, the photo paper), whether by hand or with the

¹ Unless they are rubes like *Uncle Josh* in some examples of early cinema or the hero in Jean-Luc Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (1963).

support of exterior agents such as chemistry, biological or thermic processes, to name just a few. Third, I will offer close-readings of three exemplary artworks to be apprehended as poignant and exciting examples of how a photograph or film's materiality determines its meaning, how textuality and textuality match. Finally, in my concluding remarks I will briefly address the critical potential of textures that foreground their materiality and try to reframe my discussion within our contemporary media culture.

Low resolution as a marker of texture

In her manifesto *In Defense of the Poor Image* Hito Steyerl situates the discussion of low resolution within the context of contemporary digital capitalism. As a matter of fact, digitalisation and its possibilities to upload, download, share, reformat and edit has dramatically increased the circulation of what she calls the 'poor image'. As Steyerl declares, the class society of appearances and its hierarchy is 'not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution' (2009, p.3). Despite the growth of a digital *Lumpenproletariat*, most people, especially in advanced countries, would assume that bad image quality and low resolution has more to do with 'old' analogue media than with 'new' digital ones. If one considers, however, that images change physically as they circulate, that every transfer from one format or platform to another diminishes their quality, the supposed superiority of digital imagery in material terms is more than questionable.

The possibility to shift formats in order to produce legal or illegal copies was already fundamental for videotape. In his video installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Douglas Gordon utilised a customary video player and a remote control to slow down a video of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Psycho* (1960) to a duration of twenty-four hours. In the gallery, the video is projected onto a large screen, measuring three by four meters. As Erika Balsom argues, it has to be emphasised that Gordon's point of departure was not a print of *Psycho*, but a video-based copy of the film, recorded off the television and hence a 'copy of a televised copy of a 35mm film, already two steps removed from the original format' (2013, p.141). According to Balsom, the home video technology and its inherent bootleg aesthetics are central to the appearance of Gordon's installation: 'The use of the VHS format causes a significant degradation of the image when compared to a 35mm print, made especially evident by the large-scale projection of the image, a scale for which VHS is by no means suited' (2013, p.141). Beside its agonising slowness and excessive duration, *24 Hour Psycho*'s poor resolution and diminished image quality due to transfer

and enlargement are equally important aesthetic factors.

Though it is true that projection multiplies the original image size and hence represents a kind of enlargement in scale, enlargement in photography and its potential for creating visual noise deserves separate consideration. The classical example is, of course, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where the protagonist, a photographer, tries to solve a murder by magnifying the photos he captured by chance at the supposed crime scene. But, as we know, the more the footage is blown up (the technical term for photographic enlargement), the more it evaporates into mere pointillist abstraction. What are not so widely known are Antonioni's own blow-ups of tiny abstract watercolour paintings entitled *Le Montagne Incantate*, which, when blown up, look like mountains and visionary landscapes. Presented for the first time in 1983 at the Museo Correr in Venice, the mechanical transformation of the paintings leads to the revelation of their material life and a dramatically enhanced texture (Imponente, 2007).

Generally speaking, resolution refers to 'the capacity of a means of reproduction to describe detail, which can be quantified by measuring the amount of smallest distinguishable elements in an image' (Fossati, 2009, p.75). As far as classical photography and film are concerned, these elements are grain, consisting of light-sensitive silver particles of variable dimension and shape, which are randomly distributed in the gelatine emulsion on top of the base. The higher the number of grains per frame, the better an image represents detail. Far from defining the image carrier or support, grain can be regarded, beside light, as the proper physical substance of the photochemical process from which the representation emerges. One of the best-known examples of a low-resolution format is Super-8, which had its heyday during the 1980s. This narrow-gauge format was appreciated by experimental filmmakers for its quasi-tangible graininess, which soon became a trademark of low-budget independent filmmaking. The limits on resolution for Super-8 are determined by grain structure as well as by the screening environment. Originally conceived as a home-movie format, the projection of Super-8 imagery is intended for the scale of the living room. When screened in a movie theatre, the appropriate projection distance can only be ensured when the projector is placed in the middle of the auditorium. However, this diminutive film stock, when highly increased in scale through projection, results in a more or less swirling granularity. To summarise how Lenny Lipton puts it (1975), this continually changing granular pattern corresponds

with the actual background noise of human vision. Film projection aside, these scintillations can also be experienced when one applies pressure on one's closed eyelids, or when a person's visual activity decreases because of age or under the influence of drugs like LSD, as commemorated by The Beatles' *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* (Lipton, 1975, p.14). Moreover, the projection of Super-8 entails that not only the grain becomes more perceptible than in larger formats, but also traces of the production process or use, such as splice bars, dust particles, scratches and scrapes.

A tremendous use of Super-8 can be found in Luther Price's *Sodom* (1989), mostly based on found footage of gay male porn. Its rapid editing rhythm seems to parallel the acts of intercourse and acknowledges the repetitive splices as well as the scratches and dust, which have gathered on the print's surface. *Sodom* clearly demonstrates that materiality and meaning are inseparable. Fred Camper summarises this intimate connection between semantics and technology in Price's film:

Peering through splice bars and rapid cuts at genitalia and fucking and sucking, the viewer begins to suspect that for Price, if not for us, splice bars are themselves erotic. Trapped in the film's surface, this paean to sex becomes a paean to the qualities of Super 8 film as well.

(1998, p.30)

An almost forgotten, but no less remarkable low-resolution format, is pixelvision video. Released by toy-maker Fisher Price in 1987, the PXL2000 camera was originally conceived as a children's toy, before artists such as Sadie Benning, Michael Almereyda and Peggy Ahwesh discovered it as an experimental analogue video-making tool (Jutz, 2017). Pixelvision's unique feature is that it makes use of a standard audio support in an unexpected way: it captures video on an audio tape. The limited information capacity of an audio cassette not only results in a lack of colour, but also in a reduced image size and substandard image resolution. Gritty, hazy imagery with a washed-out look contributes to the format's visual identity. As based on pixels and not on grain, the resolution of a digital system like pixelvision is hard to compare to a photochemical one. Despite its different form of representation, pixelvision is nevertheless able to encourage haptic vision.

Small-gauge film or video formats, such as Super-8 (Price's *Sodom*) and pixelvision, photographic enlargement (Antonioni's *Le Montagne Incantate*) or the use of already transferred images in combination with large-scale projection (Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*) are

just a few examples of how low resolution as a marker of textuality can be achieved. But even if there is no machinery involved in the production of the image, there are a great many possibilities to release the potential of the surface and to enhance its textuality.

Haptic images through camera-less photography and film

The impulse to go against the grain of accepted technical procedures in photography and film can also result in camera-less practices, based either on corporeal interactions between artist and material (a mode of contact) or external factors (a mode of distance or concept). From early on in film history, numerous artists have put their trust in so-called 'direct' methods. They started to draw, paint or scratch onto the film stock or let external agents, such as light, water, heat, erosion, chemistry or biological processes take command. The former option can be called 'hand-made' and is exemplified by Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna's lost hand-painted films from 1911, made at the dawn of the futurist movement, as well as by Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), where the artist left his fingerprint on the film's final frames. The latter option, termed 'automatic' or more precisely 'auto-generative' (Jutz, 2010, p.13), includes

the photogram and was utilised by Man Ray in *Le retour à la raison* (1923). This version of direct filmmaking or photography neither depends on the intervention of a machine nor on the artist's hand. The wide terrain of camera-less practices between hand-made and auto-generative had been staked out as early as the mid-1920s.

The difference between these two practices also identifies two contrary ways of how the artist's body interacts with a medium or material, one based on closeness or even contact and the other on physical distance. Though starting from opposite premises, both models of artistic authorship represent a radical critique of the traditional photographic/cinematic paradigm. The point of the contact mode resides in the fact that, within the very framework of a technical medium, the artist returns to hand-made procedures, while the distant or conceptual mode rejects the gesturality and subjectivity that defined the classical artwork. In the realm of photography, the former mode is demonstrated by the body imprints of Edgar Lissel's *Myself* (2005–10), where the artist presses different body parts into nutrient solution and then the body's bacteria are transferred to the substrate, proliferate and successively reproduce its contours (Fig. 1.1). Opposed to this very elemental form of self-expression are other, more conceptual works by

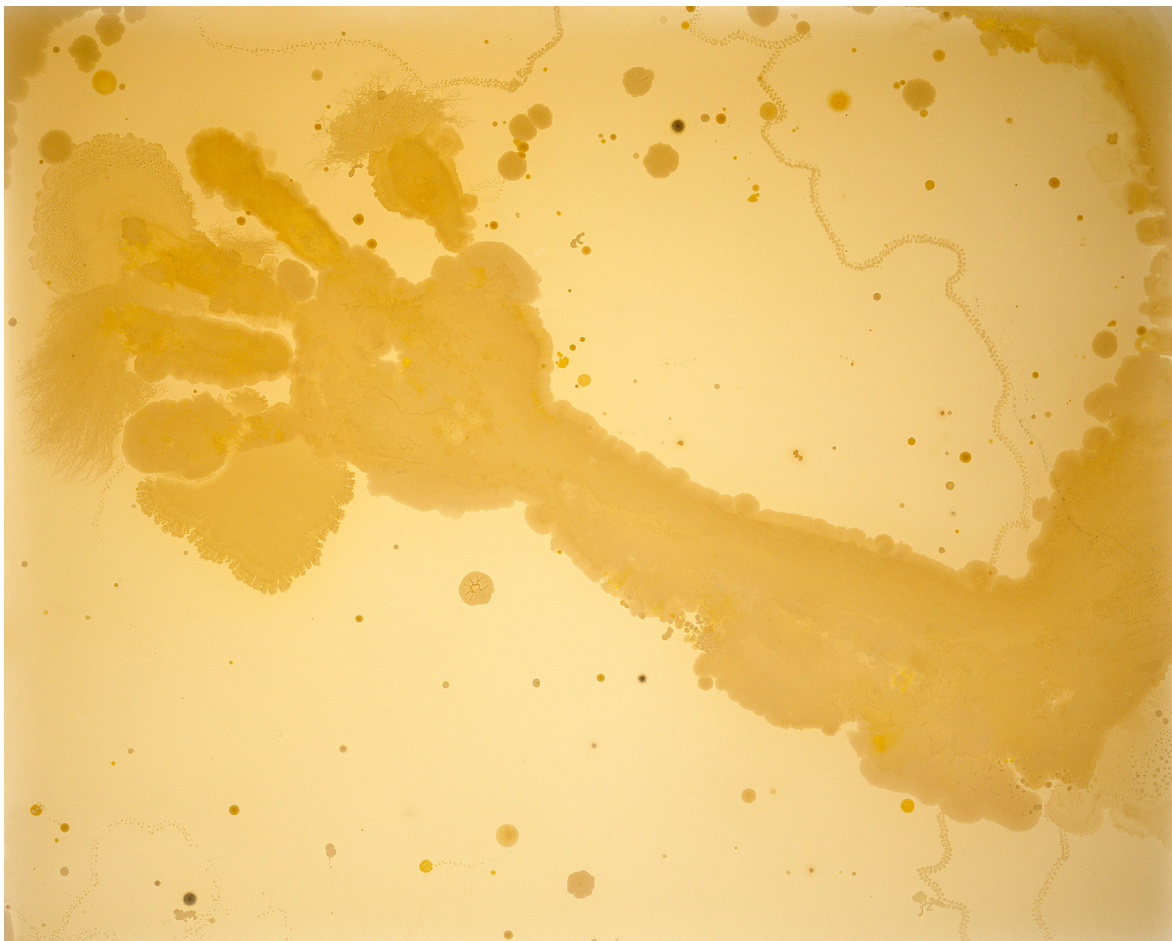


Figure 1.1: Imprint of the artist's arm on agar solution in Edgar Lissel's *Myself* (2005–2010). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)



Figure 1.2: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

Lissel, in particular his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). For *Bakterium – Vanitas*, Lissel grew photosensitive cyanobacteria in petri dishes and exposed the bacteria culture to a light source – a projector's beam – as it came into touch with changing life forms such as maggots, and which over the long creation process of days or even weeks first turned into larvae and then mutated into flies. The insects' bodies warded off light and caused the bacteria to migrate to and finally settle in light-filled areas. This example shows that the artist only makes the necessary conditions within which to start and stop the process; the actual creative work itself is done by microorganisms (Fig. 1.2).²

Camera-less practices, if hand-processed or auto-generative, have a long tradition in experimental filmmaking. Examples include the hand-painted films of Len Lye and Harry Smith, Stan Brakhage's numerous explorations into hand-made film (even using his fingernails to leave marks), Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) with hand-scratched words or,

² Edgar Lissel also leads an international research project titled *Reset the Apparatus! A Survey of the Photographic and the Filmic in Contemporary Art* (co-researchers Nina Jukić and Gabriele Jutz). The project is based at the Department of Media Theory of the University of Applied Arts Vienna and is funded by the Austrian Science Fund. (See www.resettheapparatus.net)

more recently, *Blutrausch* (*Bloodlust*, 1998) by German filmmaker Thorsten Fleisch, who imprinted the blood from a self-inflicted wound on to the filmstrip using it as an agent for the production of image and sound and, finally, David Gatten's *What the Water Said* (1997–2007), where unspooled rolls of film stock were submerged inside an underwater crab trap, so that the resulting film can be seen as a collaboration between the filmmaker, the Atlantic Ocean, sand, rocks, shells and aquatic fauna.

Increasing texture in photographic or filmic works can also be due to the fact that the artist appropriated already impaired footage. In this case, distortions like blisters, stains or blotches are not traces of artistic manipulation, but tell-tale signs indicating a film stock's age, its storage conditions, its use and neglect, in short, its material history. Examples of this variant of an auto-generative process include Eric Rondepierre's large-format photographic prints based on decayed 35mm-film frames, Peter Delpet's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1990) as well as Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), both based on pre-1950s decayed nitrate film stock, a material that is particularly sensitive to temperature, moisture and chemical alteration. As Marks observes, '[e]very time we watch a film, we witness its gradual decay: another scratch, more fading as it is exposed to the light, and

chemical deterioration' (2000, p.172). According to Marks, all of these temporal marks increase texture; film becomes more haptic as it dies.

Both the hand-made and the auto-generative process attest to a *pre-normative* engagement with the medium, what Pavle Levi, building on a term introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, calls 'retrograde remediation' (2012, p.42). Bolter and Grusin's concept of 'remediation' (1999) focuses on the ways in which an older medium (such as film) may be contained within a newer one (such as television). 'Retrograde remediation', however, takes the reverse path: it concentrates on the ways in which a newer medium or device, in this case photography or film, by definition based on a camera, may be represented through older, camera-less means (Jutz, 2011, p.79). The act of withdrawing from the technical apparatus stands for the desire to minimise the distance between the world of objects and the world of signs and representations. Although camera-less – or direct – filmmaking, be it by a finger's imprint or the process of making a photogram, is not able to completely abolish the distance that irreducibly separates object and sign, it nevertheless brings the object to the closest possible proximity to its representation, because it is the object itself (and not merely its emanation of light) which touches the film stock (Dubois, 1998, p.87). Emerging from a haptic gesture, camera-less practices are fundamentally textured because of their production process; their striking surface textures bear testimony to the history of their material life.

How the past materialises into the present

The following close readings will focus on works of three contemporary artists who distinguish themselves by highly unorthodox means of production: Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997), Alison Rossiter's manipulation of expired photographic papers (2007-ongoing) and David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). Each of these attest to a fascination with pre-digital photography and/or film. Pippin's repurposing of a household appliance into a camera, Rossiter's camera-less explorations into gelatine silver papers and Gatten's bringing film splices to the fore, open multiple lines of inquiry. The wider context of these projects are 'expanded photography' (Baker, 2005) and/or 'expanded cinema' (Walley, 2011). By stepping beyond the bounds of standard practices these works provide insights into the contingent nature of their apparatuses. They are also engagements with history and the past in that they include the restaging of pre-cinematic experiments and deal with the dormant potential of dated photo materials or

the rewriting of a chapter of American history via elementary cinematic means. Deliberately provoked or assisted by chance and happy accident, all three examples result in striking surface textures.

Muybridge in the washing machine: Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997)

The photographic works (which also include performative elements) of British artist Steven Pippin (born in 1960) revolves around transforming everyday objects so that they function as cameras. Unexpectedly, some of his experiments culminate in stunning surface textures fully in line with the respective subject matter and his *modus operandi*. For example, he once repurposed a refrigerator into a camera and took pictures of its contents. Another time, he converted a train lavatory into a photographic studio, with the toilet itself functioning as a camera. In the mid-1980s the artist discovered a number of similarities between a camera and a commercial washing machine. By comparing a front-loading type washer and a single-lens reflex camera, he noticed parallels not only between the two machines' visual appearances – the large glass door of the machine resembling the camera's optical lens – but their functioning and their 'ideology', too. As Pippin points out in his notes on the project *Laundromat-Locomotion* washing clothes and the process of photography both involve a chemical process, require time and are motivated by the desire to reach ever better results: 'The continued trend for washing powders to try and obtain whiter whites equates to photography's constant search for better definition and higher quality of image. Higher resolution, sharper definition and better colour saturation versus whiter, cleaner and more sterile clothing' (Pippin, 1998, pp.156–7).

Only slight mechanical and chemical interventions were necessary to start his series of *Laundromat Pictures* (1991). Pippin soon abandoned attaching Super-8 cameras to the interior of the washer drum, as in earlier projects also involving washing machines, because he found out that the machine already possessed all the relevant characteristics to function as a camera by itself, and that he only had to modify its glass front as a lens and shutter device and add the proper chemicals. There was also the benefit of being able to process the negative picture afterward by pouring the chemicals directly into the machine's powder drawers and then run it through its cycles: 'The development and the fixing processes perfectly aligned themselves to the wash, rinse and spin cycles of the machine's normal programme' (Pippin, 1998, p.152). After having completed an initial series of photographs using a single washing machine,

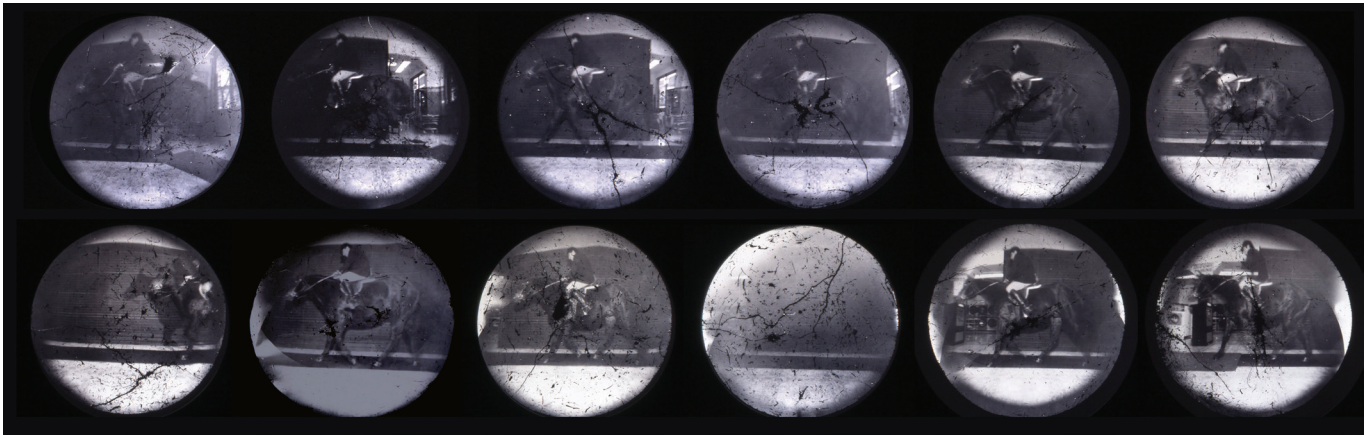


Figure 1.3: Steven Pippin, *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Sequence Horse & Rider, 1997. (Courtesy Steven Pippin)

Pippin decided to realise his series *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997) in a public laundromat with twelve converted washers aligned in a row.³ In order to shoot a sequence of photographs he attached cotton trip-wires to each of the machines; these activated the camera whenever something passed it. As the title suggests, *Laundromat-Locomotion* is a homage to the pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge and his analysis of human and animal motion, in which he examined movement through sequential images using multiple cameras furnished with mechanically tripped shutters. In 1887, his animal motion studies were published under the title *Animal Locomotion*. It was Pippin's aim to pay tribute to Muybridge's work, 'perhaps even taking it a step or two further by making some studies which Muybridge forgot, or at least overlooked' (Pippin, 1998, p. 153). Pippin's 'restaging' of the motion studies in the environment of a laundromat portray the artist in profile and range from walking backwards to passing in front of the machines wearing a suit or naked, and even included a rider on a galloping horse in reminiscence of Muybridge's research on equine locomotion (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4). The artist's concern with clothes (or their absence) is a critical element of *Laundromat-Locomotion* in that it points back to the laundromat's original function.

Each series consists of twelve sequential images, captured on circular paper negatives. These were the result of carefully cutting out by hand a circle with a diameter of 24 inches from the originally rectangular sheets in order to fix them to the back of the washers' drums, opposite the machines' 'eyes'. To Pippin's surprise, the resulting circular pictures, developed and fixed in the washing machine, looked like beautiful Muybridge originals. It is worth quoting Pippin's experience at length:

Later, on looking at one of the developed pictures of the horse and rider it seemed

³ Thanks to *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Pippin was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1999.

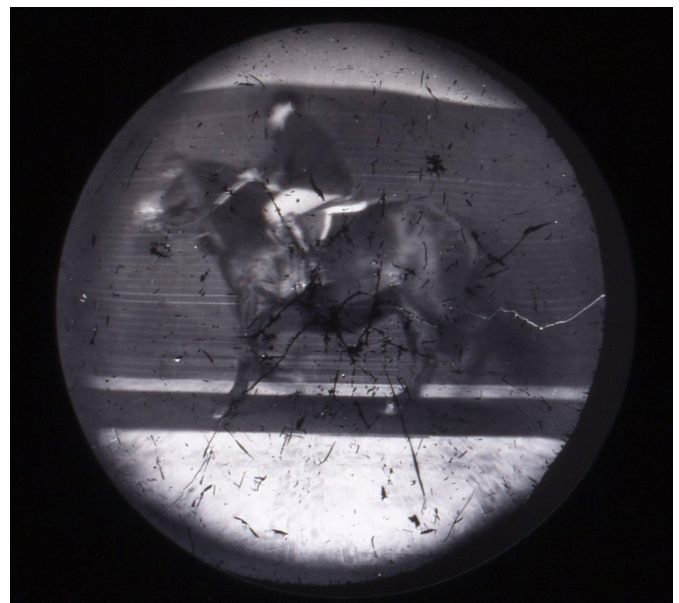


Figure 1.4: Steven Pippin, *Laundromat-Locomotion* (detail), Sequence Horse & Rider, 1997. (Courtesy Steven Pippin)

peculiar to note that the photograph, with excessive scratching caused by the negative being processed inside the machine, appears to look just like an original Muybridge. A result caused by the vigorous agitation of the washing cycle combined with the high speed spin of 500 rpm, which not only damaged the emulsion but in some cases completely destroyed the negative.

What was originally conceived as a problem arising from an inferior method of loading and attaching the film to the interior of the washer drum then turned into an effect that gave the photograph some degree of authenticity by making it look like an original Muybridge photograph from one hundred years ago. The scratches on the negative surface becoming a substitute for time, an artificial ageing process lending the pictures an accidental air of authenticity.

(Pippin, 1998, p. 154)

Though Pippin was originally concerned with re-performing Muybridge's experimental setting within the framework of a Laundromat and never planned to produce a 'vintage look', the primitive form of motion capture in his *Laundromat-Locomotion* series created the effect of instantly aged photographs with an unexpected patina. The re-use of a very specific piece of machinery, the washer and its 'misuse' as an optical device not only revealed the connections between photographing and cleansing, but also expanded the idea of the photostudio to include the humble laundromat. Despite the fact that the photographs' highly telling texture does not carry the actual weight of time, it undeniably bears the marks of its production process, the photo papers' passage through the washing cycles. That the resulting images look like old Muybridge prints is an unexpected surplus, which nevertheless transmits meaning through material.

Forgotten silver: Alison Rossiter's works with expired photographic paper

Before committing herself to making photographs without the usage of a camera, Alison Rossiter (born in 1953) was a well-trained photographer, holding degrees from two prestigious universities, the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts in Alberta. Her career as a regular photographer took a decisive turn in 2007 when she became interested in old sheet film,⁴ purchased on eBay, and began to work with expired, unused and unexposed silver gelatine paper. What initially captured her attention was the fact that all sheet film had a notch code in the upper right-hand corner, which allowed photographers to identify specific film by touch in the darkroom. For Rossiter, this code represents a kind of braille (Enright, 2011, p.72). One of her early purchases included a box of Eastman Kodak Kodabromide E3 paper, expired in May 1946. Here is how Rossiter describes her accidental discovery of the visual potential of these old materials:

The box of 500 sheets was divided into two packets; one had been opened and one had not. So I went to the unopened one and pulled out one sheet from the centre of this 250 pile and sent it through the black-and-white developer. If it were still viable it would come up as a clean white sheet of paper, and if the emulsion had failed, it would be totally black. What came up was an image that looked as though someone had rubbed graphite over a rough piece of paper, like a rubbing on a gravestone. I was astonished and dancing in the darkroom because I knew

⁴ Sheet film is photographic film that comes in sheets rather than rolls.

there was something to pursue in expired papers.

(quoted in Enright, 2011, p.73)

Rossiter prefers materials manufactured prior to 1950, because these early silver-gelatine papers offer – unlike more recent papers – a broad variety of choices with regard to the emulsion's silver content, the added dyes, coating, tonality and contrast grade, which all have an influence on the texture and appearance of the image. According to their handling, Rossiter distinguishes two categories of images. On the one hand, there is what she calls the 'found-photograms', or 'latent images', where the artist simply develops and fixes (or only fixes) what is already there in the unexposed paper. On the other, there are her 'processing experiments', which require more calculated procedures (Heckert, 2015, p.17). Latent images may result from a number of imponderables that have affected a package of paper or a single sheet. These range from physical damage such as accidental light exposure, oxidation, introduction of moisture, spores or mold, to impressions of protective wrappings or traces of handling. Quite often Rossiter finds fingerprints from previous photographers who had cut the paper in order to prepare test strips and then put it back in the package. A slightly greasy finger is enough to disturb the photographic emulsion. For Rossiter, these imprints represent 'a communion with the last person to hold the film. There can be a 50-year hiatus from that person opening the package and my opening it, and that time gap is one I don't really have words to describe' (quoted in Enright, 2011, p.74). While the found-photograms bear testimony of an auto-generative process that brings the latent image to life, Rossiter's processing experiments, in which she handles the paper in the darkroom, demand much more decision-making and manipulation by hand. The actions she performs are simple and consist of 'immersing or dipping a sheet of paper in developer or of pouring or pooling the developer on the sheet, followed by stopping and fixing the print' (Heckert, 2015, p.16). Thanks to her extensive knowledge of photographic processes and papers and her long-time experience in handling silver-gelatine materials, she achieves a rich array of results.⁵

The only other intervention Rossiter makes with her photo papers is to title them. Interestingly, Rossiter

⁵ The art world has recognised Rossiter for her unconventional method of image-making. Her works are in the collections of major public institutions, including The Art Institute of Chicago, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, The Milwaukee Art Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and the Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.



Figure 1.5: Alison Rossiter, *Eastman Kodak Solio, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1910, unprocessed, 2013, 2013*. Gelatin Silver Print. (© Alison Rossiter, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York)

resists poetic titles, despite the rich associative potential of her works, and instead draws attention to their production history by carefully labelling them in a way that reflects their situation and provenance. The work titles thus include the name of the paper's manufacturer and the brand, the expiration date, and the date when the paper was subjected to various processes. So, for example, the note 'unprocessed' in her *Eastman Kodak Solio, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1910, unprocessed, 2013* (2013) means that the print falls into the former category of found photographs or latent images (Fig. 1.5). 'Processed', however, accounts for her processing experiments, such as *Defender Argo, expired September 1911, processed 2014 (#5)* (2014) (Fig. 1.6). Rossiter's titles reference crude objective facts and are purely descriptive. They are central to her project, as she explains: 'I need to know what it is. [...] For me, exactly what the material is, is its strength conceptually, because it suggests a time line' (quoted in Heckert, 2015, p.18). The papers' often curious names such as 'Defender Argo,' 'Solo Gaslight' or 'Haloid Military' and the indication of their expiration date prompt the observer to speculate about their circumstance, maybe even to time-travel to their place and year of origin, or wonder why their production designers might have chosen a specific name. All these 'hints' are able to evoke a wide variety of connotations that are

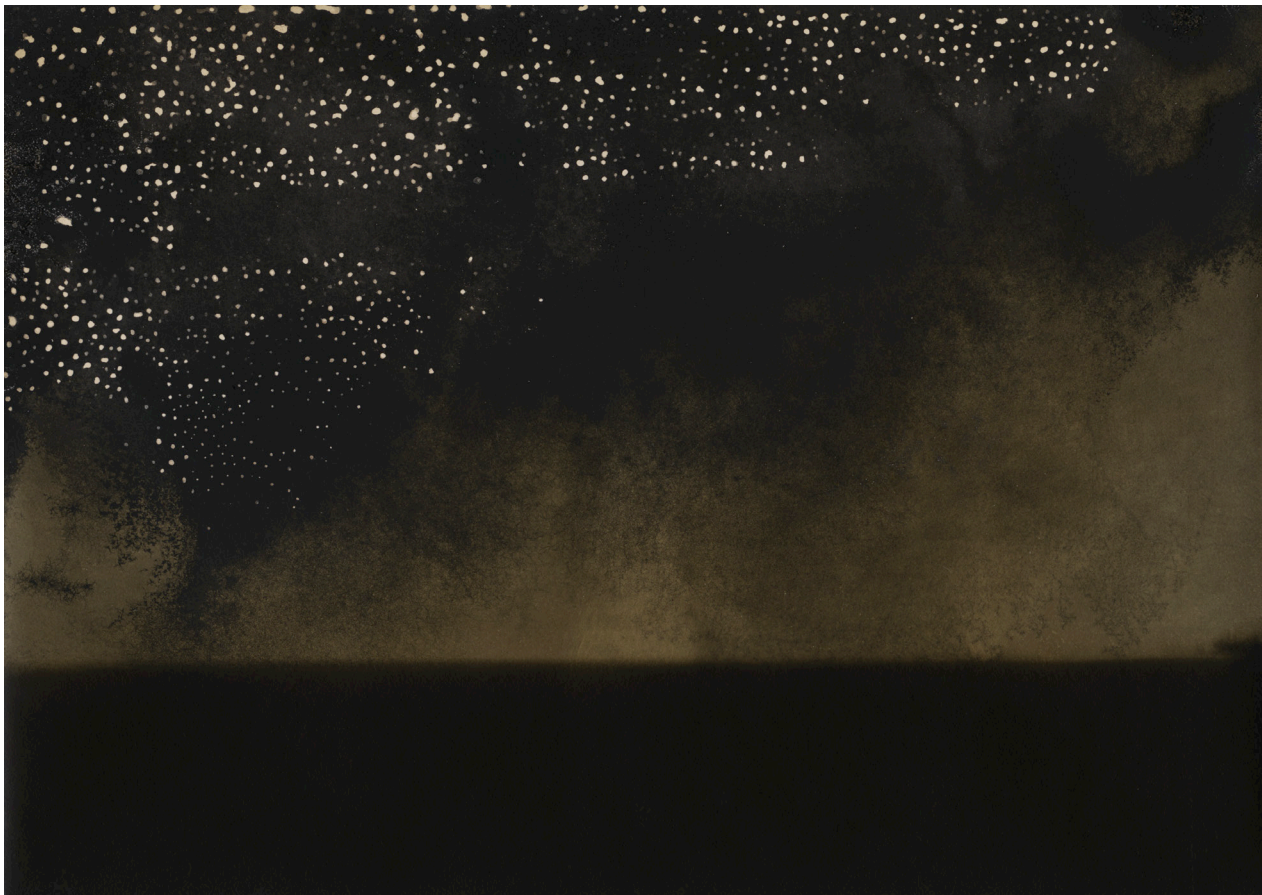


Figure 1.6: Alison Rossiter, *Defender Argo, expired September 1911, processed 2014 (#5)*, 2014. Gelatin Silver Print. (© Alison Rossiter, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York)

immediately connected to photographic history as well as to twentieth-century history at large and its flow of goods. Rossiter's sober record of objective technical data, acknowledged by her titling, provides a contrast to her series or exhibition titles such as 'Lament', 'Expiry' or 'Paper Wait', which often allude to the demise of analogue photography in the face of the digital and one's regret over this. Intimately related to the history of their production and use, these vintage papers, nowadays devoid of commercial usefulness, have tales which are materially registered in their surface.

Tears, splices and cement: David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002)

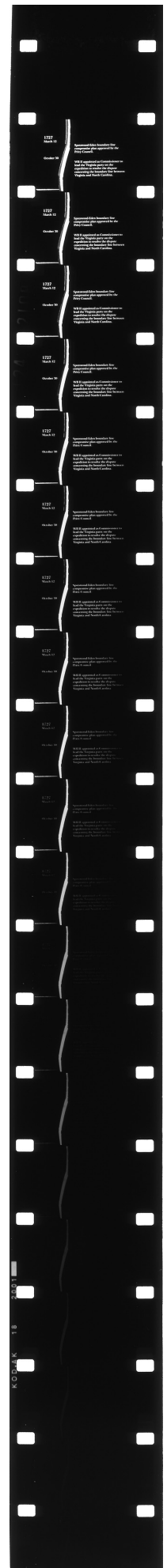
American experimental filmmaker David Gatten (born in 1971) explores the edges of film as a medium. His 16mm films often employ cameraless devices and illuminate a wide array of historical, conceptual and material concerns. When Gatten was a graduate student in filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, his reading of Susan Howe's *Early Poems* (1996), which include a section called 'Secret history of the dividing line', made him curious about the title's source. He found out that it came from two texts written by William Byrd II from eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. Byrd was the owner of one of the biggest colonial libraries at that time as well as the leader of a survey-expedition in 1728 to establish the border between Virginia and North Carolina. Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* is the official account of the survey; his *The Secret History of the Line* is his private account. From that moment on, Gatten decided to learn as much as he could about Byrd and his family (McDonald, 2009, pp.308–9). His multipart film project *Secret History of the Dividing Line, a True Account in Nine Parts* (1999-present) draws inspiration from events in the life of William Byrd. Shifting the focus from the broader narratives (the history of national settlement, on the one hand, and processes of writing, dissemination of knowledge and print culture, on the other) to Byrd's dual commitment as a surveyor and a collector of books, offers the advantage of making history 'tangible' (Faubert, 2016). Moreover, as Gatten found out, there was a thematic connection between the actions of the surveyors and the destiny of Byrd's library: both were deeply marked by division. Obviously, the government-sanctioned survey expedition's declared aim was to divide the two states, Virginia and North Carolina. But Gatten realised that Byrd's library has been subject of division, too. After its owner's death, the collection was auctioned and the books physically dispersed all over the world.

Secret History of the Dividing Line (2002), the title film and first part of Gatten's nine-part project, focuses

specifically on Byrd's two accounts of the survey expedition. As its overarching theme is 'division', Gatten was looking for a cinematic equivalent of the 'dividing line' and found it in the film splice, the physical splitting and rejoining of film strips. *Secret History's* disruptive aesthetics not only calls attention to the splice, usually repressed, but also to other unconventional procedures, such as tearing the filmstrip in two, then taping it back together. Translating his subject matter into cinematic terms is revealing of Gatten's sense of the project and of his identity as an experimental filmmaker.

Secret History of the Dividing Line is twenty minutes long, silent and filmed in black and white. Though the investigation of the splice is its central aesthetic device, the first section begins with a vertical tear, itself a form of splice, which splits the black screen at the middle. This short initial sequence leads, over the continued tear, into a time line, consisting of important historical dates and texts, hardly legible because of the rapid editing rhythm. The selected dates and short verbal descriptions of the corresponding events were each printed on a piece of paper, then shot a single frame at a time, with a number of frames in between (Fig. 1.7). As Gatten explains, the time line was meticulously crafted by hand: 'I got the strip of film processed, and then I ripped it in half. I didn't want to rip through the texts, so I had to be very careful to keep the tear in between the dates and the texts. Then taping the strip back together also took quite a long time' (quoted in McDonald, 2009, p.315). The first dates and texts are clearly not on screen to be read, because they

Figure 1.7: Timeline with vertical tear through the film strip in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)



flash for only one or a few frames. Only as we get to the crucial events of Byrd's history, the time line moves more slowly and even stops for a moment. After the sequence of dates and events, the film gives similar formal treatment of Byrd's two accounts of the survey expedition, presenting passages from the official history on the left side and passages of the private, secret history on the other, both printed in different typefaces as scrolling texts and divided by a deep, jig-sawed scar, right down the center of the screen.

The middle section of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* investigates the film splice at length. For nearly ten minutes we see fifty-seven enlarged cement splices made of black leader. These splices are first presented at high speed, so that a flicker effect occurs (Fig. 1.8). Then the editing pace slows down and freeze frames of the enlarged splices are exhibited one by one, for up to ten seconds each. As Gatten's splicer was slightly out of alignment and as he used cement instead of tape, the black strip of leader, enlarged by an optical printer, is filled with tiny white lines, anything but invisible. As Gatten expounds, '[t]he white area on screen is the area where the blade irregularly scraped off all the emulsion or into the celluloid base itself. Also, the cement forms bubbles, which you can see' (quoted in McDonald, 2009, p.309). Magnified as they are, the splices are incredibly varied and stimulate the viewers' imagination as if they were looking at a Rorschach test (Figs. 1.9 and 1.10). According to Gatten, they are supposed to evoke the terrain of North Carolina-Virginia in accordance with the expedition's move from east to west; for each of the splices the filmmaker was trying to find a connection to one of the fifty-seven landmarks, as described by Byrd. Combined with Byrd's descriptions, it was Gatten's own familiarity with most of these places that allowed him to assign each splice a location (McDonald, 2009, p. 317). After this substantial section, the final Appendix, without splices or tears, consists of a rolling text that lists the names of the fifty-seven locations used for camp sites and mile markers during Byrd's expedition, indicating in miles their respective distance from the ocean.

As Patrick Faubert has elaborated (2016), Gatten does not only shift the focus from macrohistory (the larger historical and cultural developments) to microhistory (Byrd's life), but also from history to historiography, the very act of writing history. Gatten's aesthetic devices in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* such as tearing the film and in particular foregrounding the splice mark involve basic elements of the filmmaking process, but not for their own sake. The return to the medium's physical properties and their expressive potential negotiates the question of how a filmmaker,

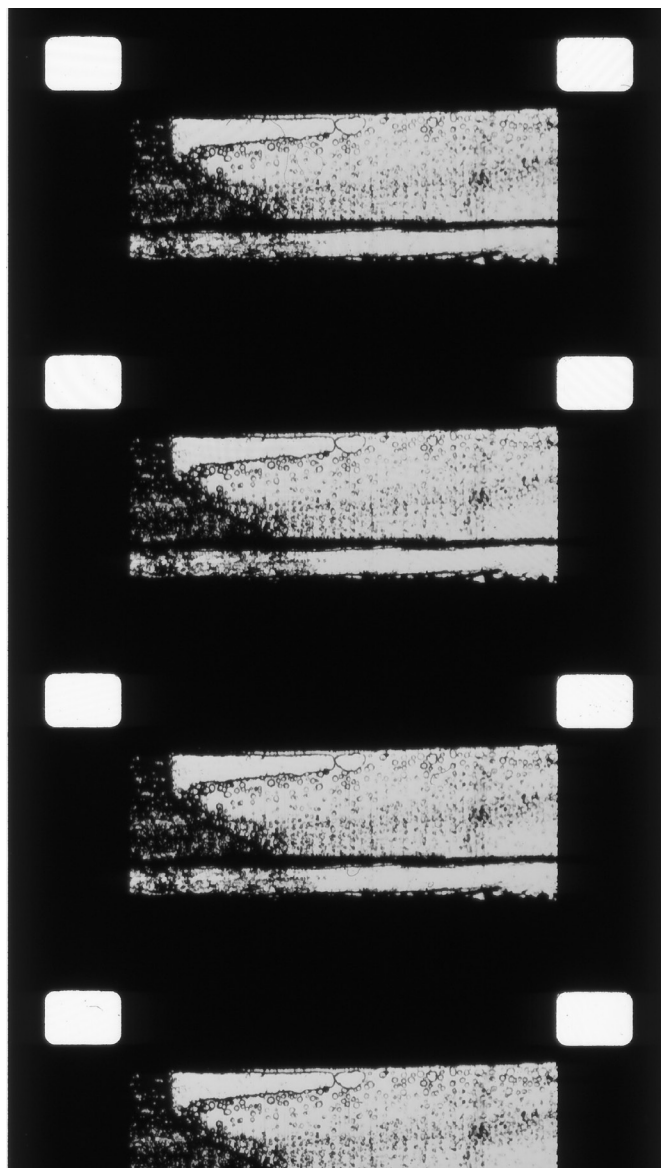


Figure 1.8: Filmstrip with enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

within the constraints and non-constraints of his medium, 'writes' history. So, for example, the deep tear that separates Byrd's two accounts of the expedition is an expressive means and reveals the inconsistencies between the official and the private view. Similarly, to offer the shape of the enlarged splice bars with their torn edges and their smears of cement as a visual equivalent for the expedition's landmarks and their landscapes is a very inventive way to combine filmic materiality and meaning. Gatten's film, which unleashes the hidden potential of tears, splices and cement, discourages a purely referential deciphering of its texts and dates, and encourages the viewer to appreciate its textuality in all its viscosity.⁶

6 Despite the fact that Gatten's films are not distributed on DVD and can only be seen in the theatre, he is a regular guest at landmark exhibitions and film shows around the world and won over twenty acclaimed awards, including the Grand Prizes at Ann Arbor, Media City and Black Maria.



Figure 1.9: Freeze-frame of enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)



Figure 1.10: Freeze-frame of enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate, the surface texture of media images reveals information about the object's material history, its trajectories in time and space and the forces of production at work. The emergence of striking textures is dependent on various factors and results in sensuous surfaces that escape the optical register alone and appeal to other sense experiences too, in particular to touch. Enhanced texture is not only due to the artist's performance, but also to matter itself, which has a performative quality and plays an active, at times even dominant role in artistic practices. As Barbara Bolt has pointed out, matter should no longer be regarded as "dumb", "mute", "irrational" stuff on which humans act' (2013, p.5), but as an active co-producer, bringing its agency to the fore. Photographic and filmic materiality, not to mention agential matter, is neglected or even ignored by most film and photo theories. The signification paradigms that have come to dominate the study of film and photography and their emphasis on questions of signification and representation disguise the fact that materiality contributes considerably to the production of meaning. As I hope to have made clear, artworks like Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Rossiter's work with expired photopapers and Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* would be hardly comprehensible without knowledge of the artistic gestures performed in conjunction with the materials' own agencies at work. Thinking of media in textural – rather than textual – terms, invites us to consider the critical value inherent in provocatively salient textures.

There are several points where the critical potential of striking textures comes to the fore. Let me briefly evoke two possible issues. My first point raises this question: can the refusal of unequivocal visibility (as is inherent to all the works discussed here) be regarded as a political strategy? Thinking of Marks' brief remark that 'haptic images are not very useful for identifying people' (2015, p.275), one could speculate in how far images that escape clear representation function as a means of resistance, in particular in our contemporary context where surveillance and control become ever more pressing. My second point focuses on the still present 'otherness' of striking surfaces. Despite the fact that enhanced textures are gradually migrating into mainstream culture – think, for example, of the popularity of 'degraded' materials that give clothes a 'used retro look' or the recreation of vintage effects on digital devices – 'well-behaved' surfaces still dominate our consumer culture and lure our eyes. Enhanced surfaces and their increased tactile qualities, however, can be seen as a devotion to the 'the drive-invested underside of representation that comprises the matter of films [and photographs]' (Chare and Watkins, 2013, p.76). The haptic image, often undesired, represents the other side of the dominant optical image and bespeaks, in the words of Marks, a 'respect for otherness' (2002, p.20). Far from being formal exercises for their own sake, artworks foregrounding the materiality of their surface can be mobilised for critical purposes and even be a site of resistance. In any case, they constitute an important corrective to the dominance of the slick and glossy images that surround us.

Bibliography

- 1 Baker, G. (2005) 'Photography's expanded field', *October*, no. 114, pp. 121–40.
- 2 Balsom, E. (2013) *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
- 3 Birtwistle, A. (2010) *Cinesonica: Sounding Film and Video*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press.
- 4 Bruno, G. (2014) *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, London, University of Chicago Press.
- 5 Bolt, B. (2013) 'Introduction' in E. Barrett & B. Bolt (eds) *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, London, I.B. Tauris, pp. 1–13.
- 6 Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. (1999) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- 7 Camper, F. (1998) 'The qualities of eight' in A. Kilchesty (ed.) *Cinematograph vol. 6. Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films*, San Francisco, San Francisco Cinematheque, pp. 26–30.
- 8 Chare N. and Watkins L. (2013) 'The matter of film: Decasia and Lyrical Nitrate' in E. Barrett & B. Bolt (eds) *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 75–87.
- 9 Drucker, J. (1994) *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- 10 Dubois, P. (1998) *Der fotografische Akt: Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv*, Amsterdam and Dresden, Verlag der Kunst.
- 11 Dworkin, C. (2003) *Reading the Illegible*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- 12 Enright, R. (2011) 'Paper wait: The darkroom alchemy of Alison Rossiter', *Border Crossings*, no. 119, pp. 69–79.
- 13 Faubert, P. (2016) 'Extensions of the Avant-Garde: David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 57, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-FaubertGatten/index.html>, accessed 28.9.2018.
- 14 Fossati, G. (2009) *From Grain to Pixel. The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
- 15 Heckert, V. (2015) 'The photograph as assisted readymade' in V. Heckert (ed.) *Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, pp. 16–19.
- 16 Howe, S. (1996) *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979*, New York, New Directions.
- 17 Imponente, A. (ed.) (2007) *Michelangelo Antonioni: Le Montagne Incantate*, Rome, Gangemi Editore.
- 18 Jutz, G. (2010) *Cinéma brut: Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde*, Vienna and New York, Springer.
- 19 Jutz, G. (2011) 'Retrograde technicity and the cinematic avant-garde: Towards a new *dispositif* of production', *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry: Cinéma & Technologie / Cinema & Technology*, vol. 31, nos. 1–3, pp. 75–94.
- 20 Jutz, G. (2017) 'Man, there ain't no film in that shit! Matter, meaning and politics of Pixelvision Video', *Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*, no. 61, pp. 54–71.
- 21 Levi, P. (2012) *Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.
- 22 Lipton, L. (1975) *The Super 8 Book*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- 23 Marks, L.U. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Surham and London, Duke University Press.
- 24 Marks, L.U. (2002) *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
- 25 Marks, L.U. (2015) *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press.
- 26 McDonald, S. (2009) 'Interview with David Gatten' in *Adventures of Perception. Cinema as Exploration: Essays/Interviews*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, pp. 296–329.
- 27 Pippin, S. (1998) *Laundromat-Locomotion: Mr. Pippin*, San Francisco, SFMOMA.
- 28 Shaviro, S. (1993) *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 29 Sobchack, V. (2004) *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press.
- 30 Steyerl, H. (2009) 'In defense of the poor image', *e-flux journal*, no. 10, <https://ninebyten.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/poor-images.pdf>, accessed 28.9.2018.
- 31 Walley, J. (2011) 'Identity crisis: Experimental film and artistic expansion', *October*, no. 137, pp. 23–50.



DANCING WITH IMAGES: EMBODIED PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWING

Ellen Handy

Abstract

This essay discusses nineteenth-century photographs by Nicéphore Niépce, Joseph Saxton, and Gabriel Lippmann, made with processes that render the images literally difficult to see. It argues that these images impose protocols of fully embodied seeing upon viewers. Their difficulty of viewing slows down what is otherwise immediate and automatic, rendering that process accessible to analysis. By attending to the experience of seeing, we necessarily engage directly with the images as objects, privileging the viewer's and the object's materiality while de-emphasizing the photograph's indexicality. These image-objects embody a photography that refuses to operate within traditional categories of representation and invites material, embodied, experiential approaches. Contemporary photographers' return to these archaic processes emphasizes their materiality's call for an embodied viewing. In this essay, John Dewey's description of art as transactional process incorporating viewer as well as artwork provides a useful model for such engagement, and offers an opportunity to satisfy James Elkins' call for genuine discussion of materiality of works of art.

Keywords: photography, daguerreotype, heliograph, Lippmann plate, Nicéphore Niépce, Joseph Saxton, Gabriel Lippmann, embodied viewing; photographic objects, art as experience, vision, materiality, John Dewey, James Elkins

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-2>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s02>

Biographical note

Ellen Handy is an Associate Professor of Art History at The City College of New York, and curator of the College's Art Collection. She previously held curatorial posts at the International Center of Photography in New York and the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas. As both curator and historian of photography, questions of the materiality of images have been central to her work. She is presently writing a book entitled *Histories of Photography*.

Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

DANCING WITH IMAGES: EMBODIED PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWING

Ellen Handy, The City College of New York

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

John Keats, 'On First Looking into
Chapman's Homer', 1816

Introduction

Is looking at early photographs like astronomical observation, or similar to reading an inspired translation of a classic text, or like exploring in challenging terrain? What embodied aspects do those types of perceptual experience share? How does the perceiver's situation in place and space shape embodied perception? Keats' poem about the revelation of encountering a work of literature mediated through translation epitomises romantic sensibility regarding aesthetic experience. Poetry, translation, and the natural world are all conflated and held as equivalent, because what matters most is the experience of the reader/perceiver. Though the poem argues that looking into a translation of an ancient text is *like* being an explorer or astronomical observer breaching the unknown, Keats is actually speaking about turning pages in a well-bound text, an experience whose importance to him demands that he employ the force of heavy metaphor to honour it. But is it possible to convey an experience of such power through direct description of the encounter and to redirect attention from the subject matter to the experience of the perceiver? What are the perils and possibilities implicit in such attempts?

Susan Sontag (1966) famously called for an 'erotics' of art rather than a hermeneutics, a directive indicative of radical style more than a workable method she (and others) could actually employ (p.14). John Dewey's

1934 treatise *Art as Experience* argues that art is neither concept nor material entity, but rather a highly conscious and complex transaction between object, maker, and perceiver. Although Tim Ingold's more recent response to object-oriented-ontology helpfully emphasises the status of the materials of which objects are comprised, Dewey's presentation of experience rather than object as a primary affords the most useful basis for making sense of how we make sense of artworks with our senses. Yet as a philosopher rather than an art critic, he failed to concern himself with analyses of the experiences which constitute individual artworks.

James Elkins (2008) has argued that art historians typically recoil before the object when it comes to sustained engagement with its materiality. He writes: 'It is relatively easy to build theories about materiality, but relatively difficult to talk about materiality in front of individual objects' (p. 26). His argument goes on to oppose what he calls 'the slowness of the studio' with standard art-historical practices, making it clear that it is painting and other traditional studio art media he is imagining. His descriptions can hold for photography and historians of photography as well, although many photographs and photographic practices lack that slowness. This article discusses several photographs, each of which is difficult – and thus slow – to see, and each of which mandates more embodied viewing protocols than do most images or texts. I attempt to place the materiality of those image-objects at the centre of the analysis by describing the experience of viewing them in somatic terms, or, in other words, treating the experience of the works as the art, in Deweyan terms. In particular, the spatial, geographical positions of both maker and perceiver of the image-objects that I discuss are key aspects of their embodied perception.

Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826) is the earliest surviving successful photographic image in history, Joseph Saxton's *Central High School, Philadelphia* (1839) is the oldest surviving daguerreotype made in North America, and Gabriel Lippmann's *Untitled [spectrum]* (1891) is an example of the first successful direct colour photographic process. All are somewhat uncharacteristic photographs: unique images on weighty yet delicate metal or glass plates requiring complex alignment of image plate, hand, eye, and light source to be visible at all. Work, performance, and bodily participation are involved in looking at them. Their qualities flout today's entrenched presumptions about photographic images' miraculous clarity, detail, and ease of decipherment. The heliograph is like a mirage, without defined contours; viewed in person,

the Saxton plate appears more negative than positive; and Lippmann plates are dark monochromes until the viewer is correctly aligned with them, when their blast of colour appears. The elusiveness of these images elicits spectatorial embodiment which becomes part of the works.

From the 1850s to the beginning of this century, a photograph was most often a replicable image on paper, generated from a common matrix (negative) in potentially great number, portable and easily viewed. Perhaps paradoxically, today's digital photography has in a sense returned to its roots, with the majority of photographs taken residing in cell phones and (when not being 'shared' via social media), viewed on the small screens of devices held intimately in the hand, legible only in specific conditions of lighting, and oriented to the viewing posture of one or two people at a time. Passing a phone hand to hand to display a digital image today is an experience not unlike viewing daguerreotypes and other early photographic images on plates, a type of looking that engages more than just mind and eye.

One merit of Niépce, Saxton, and Lippmann's plates is that they direct our attention to the activity of looking. Art historians typically concern themselves with images more than with the experience of seeing those images, but both the practice of the very earliest photographers and the choices of some artists working today prompt consideration of the viewing process required by their photographs. What exactly is the experience when we gaze at unique images on metal and glass plates? And how is that experience involved with the meaning of the images? In the act of viewing these three photographs, we cannot over-estimate the importance of touch and of alert body posture, the focus of a viewer's eyes, the presence or absence of corrective lenses, the positioning of the image in relation to the viewer's face, the arrangement of the viewer's centre of gravity to make this happen, and the necessity for examining the image one person at a time. Ingold's conclusion that '*the properties of materials, in short, are not attributes but histories*' prompts the reflection that the properties of sensory experience of works of art are histories as well, with the implication of change over time (2007, p. 15; italics in original)

Despite its much-discussed transparency, indexicality, and reduction of image to content, photography is a medium with ties to the corporeal aspects of perception, often presented as a metaphor for vision itself, through association of the camera's mechanics with those of the eyeball. In particular, photographers' framing of images is equated with the selectivity of human visual attention. Claims for photography

as impersonally indexical documentation *and* as instrument of subjectivity in representation abound, though positions at both extremes fail to engage with the materiality of images and somatic perception of their viewers. Considering specific instances of photographic images that are difficult to view, facilitates close observation of that process of viewing, particularly in its somatic aspects. The difficulty of viewing slows down what is otherwise automatic, and unconsidered, rendering it accessible to analysis.

Niépce's *View* is radiant but without defined contours. It is displayed in a darkened, shrine-like room. Both the distance from its vitrine at which one stands to view it and the angle of one's sightline to the plate are strictly prescribed. By moving out of position even slightly, one loses the image. The Saxton plate (like most daguerreotypes) must be held in one's hand and tilted until the image resolves, but it is apt to appear more negative than positive under normal viewing conditions. More demanding still, the Lippmann plate remains an inscrutable dark rectangle until correctly aligned with the perceiving eye and illuminated, whereupon a blaze of colour appears and the image leaps from the darkness. Photographic process historian Mark Osterman calls the kind of postural alignment these photographs require of the viewer 'dancing' with the image.¹ An unnamed early critic of photography described just such embodied viewing as problematic, and characteristic of the infancy of the medium:

In the early days of Daguerreotype, our readers will remember what fragile and unsatisfactory things sun portraits were; how they needed to be always kept snug in Morocco cases safe from the action of the sun and the air, and how the spectator was obliged, before he could catch the proper light and see the likeness at all, to turn and twist it, and look sidewise, and at every possible angle, and with every practicable species of squint and visual contortion, like a magpie peering into a marrow bone.

(Anon, 1851, p.61)

Such acrobatic looking is required not only by daguerreotypes, but also by the heliograph, and by Lippmann plates.

Returning to Keats, we might wonder what it would have been like if his poem was about the smell of the

¹ Mark Osterman's vivid characterisation of such photographic viewing as 'dancing with' the images is description, not metaphor. When he used this phrase in conversation with me in the George Eastman Museum's Gannett Foundation Photographic Study Center on 7 April 2015, I was immediately struck by its literal accuracy.

calfskin binding of his copy of Homer, the spacing of type as arranged on the page, the phantasmagoric patterns of the marbled endpapers, the sound of turning leaves and the texture of their paper against the sensitive skin of his hands. The sky watcher and stout Cortez might have been left on the cutting room floor in the writing of that poem, because itemising the operation of the sensorium does not require narrative simile. But imagining Keats writing a different poem is just as fanciful as his poem's description of the wrong Spaniard viewing the Pacific – Vasco Nunez de Balboa having been the actual conquistador to struggle through jungle to look upon a new sea with wild surmise. One purpose of this article is an attempt to address Elkins' critique through sustained attention to several early photographic images whose material qualities are stubbornly emphatic, with engagement akin to that of Keats reading Chapman.

Niépce

Nicéphore Niépce's heliograph is a unique positive on a polished pewter plate (Fig. 2.1). In the summer of 1826 (or possibly 1827), Niépce coated his plate with a form of asphalt, called bitumen of Judea, and placed it inside a camera obscura set in the window of his workroom on the second floor of his country house near Chalon-sur-Saône in France. During an exposure of at least eight hours, the camera faced the courtyard, trees, and outbuildings opposite Niépce's house, and slowly the light entering the camera hardened those portions of the bitumen which corresponded to the light areas of the image. When Niépce removed the plate from the camera, he washed it with lavender oil and white petroleum, which softened and removed the bitumen not hardened in exposure, revealing the surface of the plate in the darker areas of the image (Gernsheim & Gernsheim, pp.58–9).

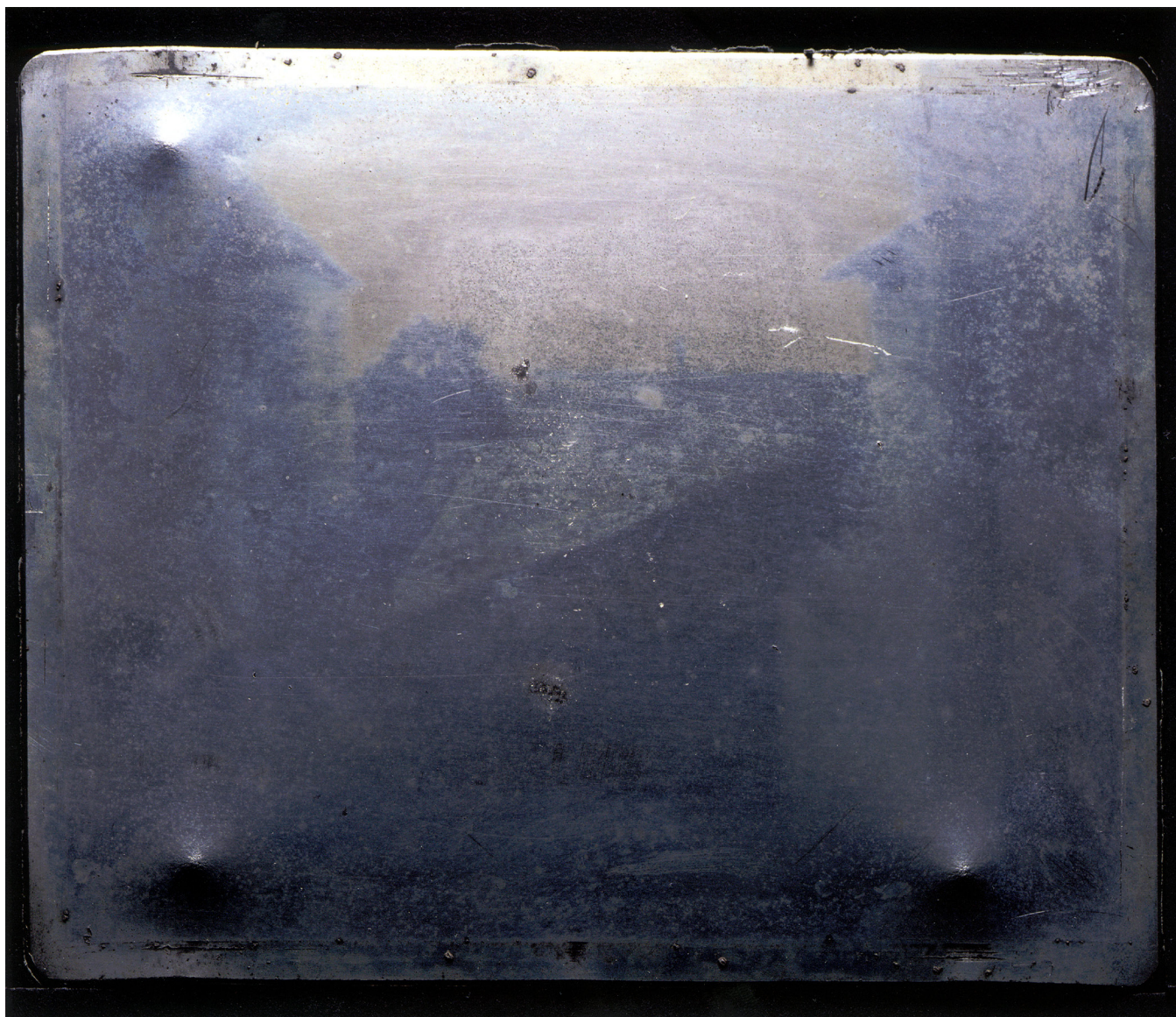


Figure 2.1: Nicéphore Niépce, *View Out The Window*, 1826. Heliograph, 16.2 × 20.2cm. (Gernsheim Collection, The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin)

The first image of the world drawn by light itself is thus a perfect romantic image of a view from a window, opposing the wide world to the realm within and commemorating a process of observation. But it is by no means what is often meant by 'photographic': it is not minutely detailed or instantly legible. Indeed, the image is extremely unclear, owing to the relative insensitivity of the materials Niépce employed and the day-long exposure. The highly reflective plate further resists decipherment, and during the course of the day, the sun travelled across the sky, first casting shadows in one direction and later in the other, causing the image to lack definition.

The heliograph is 16.2 by 20.2cm. Originally it would have been examined by candle or lamplight in a shadowy salon; its inconstant image responding to the glow of the light source. Approaching it today, one instinctively seeks spatial location and finds not a horizon per se, but an imprecise division of lighter sky and darker framing elements. A pale triangle hovers near the centre of the plate, while at left and right architectural elements bulk. A cursory scan of its surface can be disrupted by one's movement before its reflective surface, dimming the hazy image that appears to float within the plate. Like many paintings by Turner, it gives an initial impression of veiled form amidst light and shadow. Several factors create a tension with Niépce's gauzily immaterial image. Three prominent dents or protrusions break the plane of the plate to give evidence of its three dimensionality. The rather ornate period frame of the plate is pitched at a 45-degree angle within a formidable vitrine enclosed by an elaborate, bunker-like setting. Approaching the plate is something like the ritual procession into the temple of a cult object's sacred precinct. Or perhaps it only seems so to a dedicated historian of photography, making a pilgrimage to Texas to encounter the *fons et orrigo* of the medium.

Moving closer, one loses the image; as one steps away, it flashes brighter. The flickering suspension of the image makes it unstable in relation to the viewer's gaze. An intake of breath moves one's body slightly backward and disarranges viewing the orientation. Since the plate is fixed within its vitrine, one cannot compensate for that motion by adjusting the plate's angle and distance to the eye as one could if holding it in one's hand. Its protective immobilisation neutralises the experience of viewing it, like encountering a fish behind glass in aquarium rather than diving into its waters. So in seeing the thing we almost cannot see, we become intensely aware of the power and the work of looking, as much as we attend to what is actually visible. The photograph, which stands at the earliest point of

origin in the history of the medium, is so elusive as to seem all but anti-photographic, and the viewing distance of two feet or so from the plate underscores the remoteness of the hazy image in space and time even as it emblematises Dewey's triad of art as experience: Niépce's alignment of camera in space and time, the metal plate acted upon by light, and the spectator's bodily orientation before the object are inseparable elements.

For Proust, the memories of a lifetime were available via a tea-soaked cake. For Niépce, a whole summer's day was inscribed on small metal plate. The sun rose, it arced across the sky, shadows fell first to the left, disappeared, then fell to the right, muddling the definition of forms. The inventor set up his camera and then went about his business. Surely luncheon, if not more than one meal, must have been served during the exposure, as Niépce came and went from the upper chamber where the camera was positioned and his household went about its business. Birds sang, breezes blew, and, I would like to think, the perfume of new mown hay suffused the air. The heliograph mingled bitumen of Judea and local lavender oil, the earth and its flowers, in its substance. Yet despite that specificity of terroir, the subject of the photograph is almost abstract: the presence of light in the world, or perhaps we could say the revelation of the world to us by light, and the extraordinary power of our vision as a means of perception. Indeed, Niépce's plate tells us little about its subject, less about the materials of which it is composed, much about our own somatic engagement with it, and more about the trope of the view from an open window. The earliest and greatest extant invention of photography, the heliograph nevertheless was a process immediately superseded by technical improvements: a beginning without a conclusion, an invention with almost no history of its own other than that of its evolution.

Saxton

The direct descendent of the heliograph, a daguerreotype is made by meticulously polishing a silver-plated copper etching plate, sensitising the silver mirrored plate with iodine fumes, exposing it in a camera, developing it with mercury vapour, fixing it with salt, and protecting it behind glass in some kind of frame or case. The process is named for Niépce's collaborator Daguerre and nicknamed 'mirror with a memory'. The daguerreotype's surface is fragile, and its image can be permanently smudged or erased by contact, so its protective package is an essential part of the object. One normally holds a daguerreotype in the hands, tilting it to find the optimal viewing angle

in relation to one's eyes and available light source. As with the heliograph, some angles of viewing return the viewer's reflection, while at others the image reverses itself tonally to appear negative. Daguerreotypes improved enormously upon the heliograph's ability to represent the world.

Central High School, Philadelphia was made in October 1839 by Joseph Saxton, a watchmaker, engraver, and inventor in Philadelphia, by pointing an improvised camera out of an upper-story window of the United States Mint (Fig. 2.2). No longer the first city of the nation by 1839, Philadelphia was nevertheless to become a great centre of daguerreotypy in America, boasting upwards of 100 daguerreotype studios by 1856 (Weatherwax, 2010). According to Beaumont Newhall (1961, p.28), word of the invention of the daguerreotype process first came to the United States via the steamer *British Queen*, which docked in New York on 20 September 1839. Daguerreotypes were immediately attempted in New York by painter and inventor Samuel Morse and D.W. Seager, but none

of their early successes survive today. The Saxton plate is thus the oldest surviving photographic image known to exist in the United States, and a celebratory local history marker stands on the city street at the approximate site of its making to commemorate his accomplishment. Nevertheless, Saxton's photograph is relatively obscure within the history of photography, and it is a humble object. Residing in the Pennsylvania Historical Society, it is paged to a reading room by request for readers like any other historical document. Sealed in an archival mat that expands its modest dimensions (5.7 by 7.2cm) and makes handling possible, but conceals some of its qualities as an object, it is quite heavy in the hand. Probably the plate was never enclosed in one of the Morocco cases which quickly became ubiquitous for commercially produced American photographs.

An unusual coppery colour, *Central High School, Philadelphia* has less flash and sparkle than most daguerreotypes. More readily appearing negative than positive, it is an unusually recalcitrant photographic



Figure 2.2: Joseph Saxton, *Central High School, Philadelphia*, 1839. Daguerreotype, 5.7 × 7.2cm. (Cased Image Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia)

image. This obstinacy raises an interesting question. Daguerreotype is normally described as a 'direct positive process', meaning that what is produced in the camera is the final image and not a matrix. But it could just as well be considered a direct negative process, if by negative we simply mean an image tonally reversed from what our eyes see, and not a tonally reversed matrix for producing tonally correct 'positives'. This in turn prompts speculation that the fundamental binary of photography, positive/negative, is less than absolute.

In my initial viewing of this object, the image did not appear as positive at all, though as reproductions show and as my second viewing under better-directed lighting confirmed, the image can indeed assume its proper form. When I tried to find myself mirrored in it, the only resulting reflection was actually from the modern archival plexiglas sandwich in which it is encased. An instinctive response to daguerreotypes' elusive flicker is to tip them closer, angling the top toward oneself and the bottom away. But with the Saxton plate, the reverse gesture works better, with the image consenting to turn positive when the top is tilted to be lower than the bottom edge and further from the viewer. Achieving this viewing posture is tricky, especially given the weight and fragility of the object. The counter-intuitive tilt of the photographic plate away thwarts a myopic viewer's close-up scrutiny; one cannot advance one's face and eyes too close to it before it reverses. Like Niépce's *View Out The Window*, the image appears to be floating beneath the surface of the plate, rather than sitting atop it. Surprisingly, small dings and nicks in the plate become more apparent on the positive-reading image than when its reversal to negative shadows appears.

The bare plate margin surrounding the image frames and organises the composition as a dialogue between two buildings: on the left, the gable end of a dark building with a semi-circular window like a winking eye, and on the right, the little turret of the paler building animate its mass. It is a casual glimpse of rooftops, almost randomly framed out the window by a camera hastily improvised from a cigar box. Because we do not see the ground from which the buildings rise, it is not a cityscape in the normal sense, and the small rectangle suggests a space one cannot enter. Because the sky is a horizon-less screen behind the buildings whose jostling forms the subject of the picture, it is less a landscape than a notation. But are those buildings the subject of the image? The photographer seems to have been so little interested in them that this image is the visual equivalent of a pre-performance sound check with the singer of a band speaking into the microphone: 'testing – one-two-three.' We could say the pragmatic subject of this photograph is 'does this invention really work?'

The plate's exhibition history is not well documented, but it does not seem to have been intended for public display. Neither its subject nor its composition would have impressed contemporary audiences, and we can hazard a guess that its meaning and purpose was simply the making of the photograph. Twentieth-century photographer Gary Winogrand famously said 'I photograph to see what something looks like in a photograph' (quoted in Diamondstein, 1982, p.57) and Saxton could have said 'I photograph to see whether it is possible to photograph.' In this sense, the photograph depicts the coming of photographic imaging to North America as surely as it does the irregular roofline of two undistinguished Philadelphia buildings.

Lippmann

Viewing a Lippmann plate recalls the moment in the film of *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy's house reaches Oz: suddenly colour blossoms in the monochrome world. More so even than the other processes discussed here, Lippmann images are dependent on a precise viewing alignment of image, light, and eye. Yet they possess the illusion of life, almost of movement, when the dance of viewing aligns viewer and plate to produce the burst of colour. Incorrectly aligned, a Lippmann plate is either flat and solid dark gray or else resembles a very dark ambrotype which has lost its backing: a murky, tonally reversed image seeming to lurk beneath the surface of a glass plate.

Lippmann plates are small sheets of glass, often cemented to prisms, wedges of glass that tilt the plates' viewing orientation. As a result, the extent to which one must look *into* the image to see it is not unlike a viewer's physical relationship to viewing tools like microscopes or telescopes, recalling Ines Nicole Echevarria De Asis's (2016, p.2) argument that 'photographs are not just ontologically similar to microscopes and telescopes, but also epistemically akin to them'. The prisms – and the images' nature – prevent the Lippmann plates from hanging on the wall, or being held in one's hands for viewing. Ideally, they sit on a table and a light source is arranged directly above them while the viewer arranges – dances – into place. Arriving at that correct viewing orientation has the effect of flipping a switch to turn on the lights in a darkened room: suddenly illumination and colour blaze forth. But unlike experiencing the effect of electrical light in darkness, viewing a Lippmann plate requires the bodily discipline of a strict adherence to a particular spatial orientation. Moving even slightly out of alignment causes the images to go dark and dead in an instant.

As the first successful direct colour process, Lippmann plates introduced a new level of reality to imaging, fulfilling the desire of those ungrateful early critics of the daguerreotype who wanted that miracle to take place in full living colour. Part of the power of the medium lies in its purity of concept and effect. In a sense, we could say the Lippmann plate is the first complete attainment of the promise of photography. It is also a virtually extinct process today, little practised and less discussed. Technically difficult, able to produce only unique images, and demanding in its viewing protocols, a Lippmann plate is more like a heliograph or daguerreotype than a print from a colour negative or a colour Polaroid.

Gabriel Lippmann, a physicist, received the Nobel Prize for this invention in 1908, a greater distinction than achieved by any other photographic inventor to date. As a scientist solving a problem, he succeeded completely, though as an inventor of photographic technology, he seems to have presided over a dead end in the evolution of the medium. Ross Knapper, Collections Manager of the George Eastman Museum, points out that the Lippmann process is the purest possible imaging of colour, dependent not on pigment, dye or other secondary materials, but rather is a phenomenon of selective reflection of light.² The interference effect of the light itself makes the image, which essentially represents nothing but the process itself: the action of light on emulsion on plate, and a challenge to expectation and to vision. Lippmann (1908) explained his process in his Nobel Prize lecture:

The method is very simple. A plate is covered with a sensitive transparent layer that is even and grainless. This is placed in a holder containing mercury. During the take, the mercury touches the sensitive layer and forms a mirror. After exposure, the plate is developed by ordinary processes. After drying the colours appear, visible by reflection and now fixed.

This result is due to a phenomenon of interference which occurs within the sensitive layer. During exposure, interference takes place between the incident rays and those reflected by the mirror, with the formation of interference fringes half a wavelength distant from each other. [...] When the shot is afterwards subjected to white light, colour appears because of selective reflection. The plate at each point only sends

back to the eye the simple colour imprinted. The other colours are destroyed by interference. The eye thus perceives at each point the constituent colour of the image. [...] The print in itself is formed of colourless matter like that of mother-of-pearl or soap film.

(Lippmann, 2018)

The image on a Lippmann plate is analogous to the proverbial unheard tree falling in the forest – until a viewer is precisely aligned to see it. The colour in this particular Lippmann plate glows in a horizontal band like a stained-glass window, cool blues at one side, a surprising zone of darkness in the centre, and the brightest sectors at the right, where yellow yields to orange and reds before the spectrum ends and darkness is restored. Approximately 6.5 by 9.0cm, it occupies a surprisingly solid little package for such an immaterial-seeming image of light broken into its constitutive parts like an image inside a kaleidoscope, and preserved, like a fly in amber. The difficulty of seeing the image – its exigency as a dance partner – de-emphasises its indexicality of representation and privileges the roles of viewer, perception and object materiality.³

Labouring while dancing: The fascination of what's difficult

The Cortes of Keats' poem stood silent upon the peak in Darien, and a travelling photographic historian making secular pilgrimages to view these three photographs stands silent with emotion before them, both spectators having laboured to attain a view of what is very difficult to see. The explorer trekked through the jungle, the historian 'danced' into position for viewing the elusive images, macrocosmic and microcosmic journeys respectively. For the romantic poets, entangling experience in imagination for poetic effect was a given, perhaps because texts necessarily operate at some remove from sensory experience. We master the code of reading, we translate the marks on the page to the sense of the meaning, we check our emotions for a response. Although we are trained to read photographs, on the other hand, as more direct representations of a reality, not as translations of a text, these three photographs demand work in viewing them. They presume that looking is labour, if also pleasure, and the reward of that labour in each of these cases is an image singularly pure, abstract, and free of association, an image which surprisingly seems

2 I am indebted to Ross Knapper for introducing me to the Lippmann plates in the George Eastman Museum collection, and sharing his understanding of these remarkable objects with me in conversation on 7 April 2015.

3 My thanks are due to Carole Sandrin and Pascale Pahud of the Musée de l'Élysée, Lausanne, who facilitated my viewing of the Lippmann plates in the museum's collection.

to speak directly of the medium that produced it more than of a subject. In some sense, however, the images return to the status of difficult texts even as we strive to encompass their material object-hood.

Not purely indexical or expressive, documentary or fine art, these objects each embody a photography that refuses to operate within traditional categories. Having little content other than the processes which produced them – and so their own existence – they represent varied relationships to the question of photograph as substitute for the object of research. Niépce's image is proof of concept more than replica of the world beyond his window, Saxton's image is confirmation of replication of Daguerre's results, and Lippmann's image depicts light itself as a pure scientific experiment. These images are antecedent to the kind of image 'atlases' that Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison (2007) speak of in *Objectivity*; they represent critical early stages in the evolution toward fully developed photographic/scientific representation of subjects. Examining these first attempts at the imaging systems eventually used to build extensive archives of images illuminates the photographic medium's journey towards objectivity. But these images are also antecedent to claims for the fine-art status of their medium, and so stand apart from the hurly-burly of aesthetic posturing and conflict within the emerging art history of photography.

Standing apart is what each one does best. Photography, a medium sometimes considered indistinguishable from its subjects and the real world it represents, and often considered the most universal pictorial language, here shows itself to be challenging and prone to withdrawing itself from the viewer's eye. As described, these photographs are literally difficult to see. The viewer's dance of alignment with the plate emblematises the physicality of viewing, and the images' lack of subject matter allows the simple fact of their existence (and the potentiality of the medium at whose origins each is positioned) to assume centre stage. But if no one dances with these photographs, they are like the tree falling in the forest with no one there to hear it make a sound. To speak of an embodied viewing process is both to emphasise the materiality of the objects perceived and to talk about subjectivities. That is, such seeing is necessarily emotionally responsive seeing and not merely the panoply of sensory experience. Since we cannot get outside our own skins, we might as well use our sensory corporeality to engage with an artwork's materiality. Levi Bryant's (2011) object-oriented ontology argues that objects maintain their reality regardless of their relations with people, a quality he calls 'withdrawal', though of course this quality is precisely what makes the works available

to be experienced, and so could be considered a kind of presence.

Contemporary analogues

What do we learn from the dance with these three early photographs? Are they anything more than curiosities? What epistemic value do they possess? How do their difficult and complicated processes relate to the imaging practices of today? In the age of social media, to make an image as restrictive as a Lippmann plate is an unexpected choice; to employ the daguerreotype process in recording a cityscape is equally remarkable; to return to the pre-photographic device of the camera obscura is daring, all three operating where the intensely reactionary meets the vanguard of artistic practice. Like Niépce's, Saxton's, and Lippmann's images, many contemporary works utilising anachronistic processes are intelligible as self-reflexive commentary upon process, vision, and medium. Those images, which are so difficult to see, remind us that photography is not exclusively a hall of mirrors in which infinitely reproducible images become simulacra of the world, nor is it necessarily what William Ivins called an 'exactly repeatable pictorial statement' (1953, p.1). Though these photographic processes fell out of favour with nineteenth-century viewing publics, they and other early or pre-photographic techniques have been rediscovered by contemporary artists, like Filipe da Veiga Ventura Alves (Lippmann plate), Binh Danh (daguerreotype), and Zoe Leonard (the room-sized camera obscura). In an increasingly digital world, and despite Elkins' claims about visual culture's fear of the material, contemporary engagement with the materiality of images flourishes to an extent that demands scholars' engagement with that materiality.

Filipe Alves is one of the finest practitioners of the arcane art of Lippmann interference photography today. He first made a Lippmann plate because he was curious about the process but was not able to find an example of the process to see for himself – a motivation not unlike Saxton's. Alves' Lippmann plates are sumptuous, evocative in imagery, and so most unlike Lippmann's austere spectrum. They seem dreamily poignant, evidently artistic musings rather than laboratory experiments. Looking at *Travessa da Arrochela* (2014) is a bit like studying a landscape by Cézanne (Fig. 2.3), yet with one's own bodily movement and re-alignment jarring the perspective of the representation as the image comes in and out of full-colour alignment rather than the artist's eyes' shifting perspectives forming the challenging *faktura*.

The daguerreotype, by contrast, is a medium widely practised today. Both nineteenth-century photographic



Figure 2.3: Filipe da Veiga Ventura Alves, *Travessa da Arrochela*, 2014. Lippmann plate, 6 × 6cm. (Courtesy of the artist)

re-enactors and emphatically contemporary artists embrace daguerreotypy, typically choosing portraiture, figure studies, and still life as subjects, which also were the most common original applications for the medium. Binh Danh's cityscapes which subtly address the layering of history, time, and experience in San Francisco are unusual contemporary daguerreotype subjects. In *B and C Laundromat Barbary Coast Trail, Chinatown* (2014) (Fig. 2.4), a plethora of mirror-reversed signage jostles for position in the composition, complicating the reading of the image and calling attention to the fundamental principle of lateral reversal that is inherent to all camera images, though corrected in most photographs. The lacy patterned ironwork on the buildings' façades contributes another calligraphic element to this image of 'old' Chinatown buildings, which date to just after the great fire of 1906. The daguerreotype presents the passage of time, the rise and fall of architecture, and changing patterns of immigration and ethnicity in the urban palimpsest. Packed with visual incident and subject matter, Danh's daguerreotype also claims attention for the material



Figure 2.4: Binh Danh, *B and C Laundromat, Barbary Coast Trail, Chinatown*, 2014. Daguerreotype, plate: 8 × 10in, frame: 12.75 × 14.5in. (Courtesy of Haines Gallery, San Francisco)

qualities of its own medium and of the optics of the camera obscura which is the basis of all photography.

Unlike Lippmann plates and daguerreotypes, no one makes heliographs today, presumably because of the process's difficulty and shortcoming as regards visual acuity. But artists today do engage with the very foundations of photography as Niépce understood it. Zoe Leonard's *945 Madison Avenue* (2014) exemplifies such a return to origins. The work, a room-sized camera obscura constructed within the museum, is viewed from inside. Entering the space and adjusting of one's eyes to the darkness are whole-body actions. The subject outside the covered window – the ordinary world, the street you walked down minutes ago in order to enter the museum – delineates itself in perfect clarity, colour and motion on the wall of the room opposite, albeit upside down and laterally reversed. Later, when you go outside, you experience the world differently, more aware that it is all a succession of images, and noticing the brightness of daylight rather than taking it for granted. Leonard's work, not dependent upon studio time for its production, epitomizes unbounded durational attention, turning Elkins' observation on its head by allocating immersion in the *longue durée* to viewers at the museum rather than to artists in the privileged space of the studio.

945 Madison Avenue operates in a languorous, expansive timeframe. No real end point of the viewing experience is indicated since in no two moments is it identical, but to spend a day observing it would be an experience much like watching the exposure that created Niépce's heliograph *View*. Leonard substituted a corporeal viewing process for a discrete art object, and for the rhetoric of art by inviting viewers into the camera chamber. In this piece, the world dances with you rather than you dancing with the image, but its association of the radiant world outside the window and the mediated experience of viewing it nonetheless recalls Niépce's image. We cannot recapture the experiences of those who looked upon photographic images for the first time when the medium was new, but we can experience a similar and parallel sense of wonder.

Though Niépce's view of the exterior world is framed through a window, we nonetheless gaze *into* it like a crystal ball rather than having the illusion of looking out the window ourselves. Saxton's image is an informal hieroglyph, a flat scrap of architecture delineated simply in attempt to employ Daguerre's method, with little evidence of any purpose beyond registering an image on the plate, a matter-of-fact recreation of a miracle of imaging. Lippmann sought a tool for rendering subjects in colour, but in photographing the spectrum itself, he redirected the

image from the work of representation to become a simple stimulus to perception. Alves recuperates the possibilities implicit in Lippmann's invention and puts them to work imaging the world, finding potential rather than anachronism in a nearly forgotten process. Danh makes the specificity of the daguerreotype process part of the meaning as he exercises it in new contexts, continuing the history of its practice in North America nearly 170 years after Saxton commenced it. And Leonard replaces concept with experience and image with (mediated) reality. All use the experience of wonder, the sheer sensory impact of direct experience of their work, the physicality of spectatorship demanded by their unusual mediums to underscore the power of the experience of perception.

Ontology, priority, accuracy/indexicality, epistemology, reproducibility, materiality

Many views of photography emphasise its mechanical nature and indexical rendering of the world before the lens; among these are André Bazin's (1960) conception of the ontology of photography, those of Jerrold Levinson (2014), Catherine Abell (2010), and Roger Scruton (1981) as well as Vilem Flusser's (2000) insistence that the important aspect of the medium is the camera as an apparatus. Long the dominant paradigm in theorising the photographic image, these views presuppose the importance of the relation of photographic image to referent. Such analyses exclude narratives of viewer experience and disregard the substances of which the images are made. Art historians' approaches to photography are more likely to concentrate upon the place of individual images in the unfolding development of the medium; in the case of Niépce's, Saxton's, and Lippmann's images, their various claims for priority might assume centrality. Art history and visual culture studies have also been much preoccupied with the status of the image in the age of mechanical (or technical) reproduction so influentially discussed by Walter Benjamin (1939) but also rather differently identified by print curator Ivins (1953). Flusser, an increasingly influential critic of photography, told us less about photographs and viewing photographs than about digital culture in a larger sense, while Roland Barthes (1981), by far the most influential theorist of photography of the last century, told us less about photographs than about certain kinds of immaterial experiences of viewing images. Judging from these examples, philosophising photography seems to require ignoring the materiality of images and the specifics of their making.

Treating photographic images as *Ding an sich* affords considerable benefits. Doing so for the three photographic objects discussed here shines a light

on elements of the prevailing episteme within which the images were produced. It refutes the premise of photographic reproducibility, raises questions about photographic indexicality, and complicates the significance of priority and origin. The existence of contemporary works in the same or related mediums suggests that these objects have ongoing significance in and continuity with contemporary culture; it also suggests that reproducibility of images may not be of exclusive importance in the digital age, and that the indexicality of the medium is inflected by subjectivities and overshadowed by its materiality in the embodied viewing experience the images require.

Comparing contemporary images in anachronistic mediums with these nineteenth-century works helps make clear how much our response to their elusive, fragmentary, and demanding qualities depends upon the history of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century art. Minimalism, conceptualism, installation, performance, post-modern imaging, and the universe of the digital image all provide frameworks for the appreciation of images which might previously have seemed imperfect, incomplete, or illegible. Thus, we can cherish Niépce's, Saxton's, and Lippman's plates both as engaging with the scientific and technological discourse of their own day and as visually expressive works congruent with twentieth-century/twenty-first-century aesthetics of abstraction, conceptualization, improvisation in art.

Art as experience, vision as poetry, prophecy and religion

The adoption of early photographic processes by contemporary artists serves as a reminder of the importance of the materiality of the photograph, and thus of the spectator's viewing of that object. The resulting image-objects require a practice and awareness of an embodied and even enplaced viewing that actively engages the sensorium. Given this, in what ways can a 'new materialism' shape appropriate approaches for art historians and critics? Also, just how material is the 'new materialism'? Despite earnest debate among philosophers and anthropologists, the answer is probably not very material at all. Framing postulates for new materialism is an endeavour dissimilar to weighing the heft of an image-bearing metal plate, studying the prism wedge cemented to a glass plate, or considering the once-fragrant lavender and sticky asphaltum from which an image is produced. Sontag's (1966) now venerable demand for an erotics of art opened space for a sensory, materialist challenge to theorisation, and John Dewey's (1934) even earlier aesthetic position offers further productive foundations

for analysis. Dewey's *Art as Experience* has largely fallen out of today's aesthetic discourse, but its groundbreaking designation of art as transactional experience deserves reconsideration as a starting point for discussion of embodied spectatorship and the inherent materiality of artworks – which are most knowable through the physicality of a viewer's experience.

In a seeming paradox, materiality in art is most fully accessible to consideration when art is addressed as a process of experience rather than as an object. Instead of de-materialising the art object by emphasising process over thing, this approach incorporates human bodily perception as an integral aspect of the artwork. Starting from within embodied human experience, analysis proceeds immediately to the material qualities of the work itself. Only by so categorising art as experience does the role of the viewer receive parity and become available for analysis. Dewey's emphasis on the complex transactions between art object, artist, and viewer activates the category of the aesthetic, making it experiential and therefore human, and – by implication – sensory as much as conceptual. In this sense, the sensuous and the making-sense-of may be seen as related, or as forms of each other rather than as opposed terms.

In the preparation of this special issue, Tilo Reifenstein and Liz Mitchell posed the question: 'If the sensorium of seeing, tasting, feeling and hearing exceeds the rationality of disciplinary categories and the systematisation of knowledge, how can thinking about and through art access affective objects? Is this what constitutes meaning?' In answer, perhaps it does not so much exceed that systematisation, as represent another form of it: embodied perception constitutes meaning. Sontag's erotics of art and Dewey's categorisation of art as experience are process-oriented conceptions which direct historians and critics of art toward analysis of the experience of encounter with works of art. Both Sontag and Dewey thus invite the embodied viewer into the centre of the definition of art. Visual art inevitably privileges the sense of sight above the operation of other forms of sensory perception, often without recognising the engagement with the work of art as a form of somatic perception. Shifting our understanding of the significance of the eye as an organ opens new ways of discussing the process of aesthetic experience. Or does it? Without undue emphasis on the importance of embodiment in the equation, John Ruskin nevertheless proclaimed a credo which anticipates today's preoccupation with the action and significance of vision: 'thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion – all in one' (1903–12, p.333).

Bibliography

- 1 Abell, C. (2010) 'Epistemic value of photographs' in C. Abell and K. Bantinaki (eds) *Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 2 Anon (1851) 'Gossip', *Photographic Art-Journal*, vol.2, no.1, 60–4.
- 3 Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. R. Howard) New York, Hill & Wang.
- 4 Bazin, A. (1960) 'The ontology of the photographic image' (trans. H. Gray), *Film Quarterly*, vol.13, no.4, pp.4–9.
- 5 Benjamin, W. (1939) 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (trans. H. Zohn), New York, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- 6 Bryant, L. (2011) *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press.
- 7 Daston, L.J. and Gallison, P. (2007) *Objectivity*, New York, Zone Books.
- 8 De Asis, I.N.E. (2016) *The Epistemic Province of Photography*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of St Andrews.
- 9 Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as Experience*, New York, Minton, Balch.
- 10 Diamondstein, B. (1982) 'An Interview with Garry Winogrand,' in *Visions and images: American photographers on photography*, New York, Rizzoli.
- 11 Elkins, J. (2008) 'On some limits of materiality in art history', *31: Das Magazin des Instituts für Theorie*, no.12, pp.25–30.
- 12 Ingold, T. (2007) 'Materials against materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol.14, no.1, pp.1–16.
- 13 Flusser, V. (2000) *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London, Reaktion Books.
- 14 Ivins, W. (1953) *Prints and Visual Communication*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- 15 Gernsheim, H. and Gernsheim, A. (1969) *The History of Photography*, New York, McGraw-Hill.
- 16 Levinson, J. (2014) 'Paintings, photographs, titles' in D. Freeman and D. Matravers (eds) *Figuring out Figurative Art: Contemporary Philosophers on Contemporary Paintings*, London, Routledge.
- 17 Lippmann, G. (2018) 'Nobel lecture', *The Nobel Prize*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1908/lippmann/lecture>, accessed 28.8.2018.
- 18 Newhall, B. (1961) *The Daguerreotype in America*, New York, Duell, Sloan & Pearce.
- 19 Ruskin, J. (1903–12). *Modern painters*, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, vol.5, London, G. Allen.
- 20 Scruton, R. (1981) 'Photography and representation', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.7, no.3, pp.577–603.
- 21 Sontag, S. (1966) *Against Interpretation*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- 22 Weatherwax, S. (2010) 'Catching a shadow: Daguerreotypes in Philadelphia, 1839–1860', *Library Company of Philadelphia*, <http://librarycompany.org/catchingashadow/section7/index.htm>, accessed 29.8.2018.



ROCKY ENCOUNTERS IN THE SACRO BOSCO OF BOMARZO

Thalia Allington-Wood

Abstract

The sculptures of the Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo (c. 1550–80) are all made from one type of stone: peperino. It is an unusual substance for sixteenth-century sculpture, yet the physical makeup of the Sacro Bosco is rarely discussed in detail. This essay brings the material of these statues into focus through an art-historical consideration that deliberately embraces the author's physical encounter with the objects. The immersive experience of Bomarzo is thus investigated through the indivisibility of scholarly and sensory engagement. Exploring contemporary contexts that would have informed how the matter of these sculptures was understood by a sixteenth-century visitor – from natural history to geology and topography – it will be argued that the Sacro Bosco's rock would have invited the historical beholder to engage imaginatively with the generation of stone and the region's local history.

Keywords: materiality, material, sculpture, geology, topography, natural history, Bomarzo, stone

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-3>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s03>

Biographical note

Thalia Allington-Wood is a Ph.D candidate in the Department of History of Art at University College London. Her research is supported by the AHRC, along with awards from UCL, the London Arts and Humanities Partnership, and the Society of Architectural Historians. Previously she has been a fellow at UCLA and Dumbarton Oaks. She has experience in museum education, research and publishing at the Design Museum, the V&A, Tate Etc. and the RA Magazine, and currently teaches at UCL and Sotheby's Institute of Art.

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

ROCKY ENCOUNTERS IN THE SACRO BOSCO OF BOMARZO

Thalia Allington-Wood, University College London

Preface

11 October 2016. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I am standing under *Levitated Mass* (2012), a 340-ton lump of diorite granite that rests, as if dropped from the sky, over a corridor cut into the ground. This pathway, the dense boulder directly above, pens me in. The rock seems strange, almost flat, against the cloudless Californian sky. In the afternoon light, its uneven and chipped surface is the same creamy grey as the polished concrete walls either side of me. It appears so much smaller than I know it to be, diminished by the expanse of blue. It could crush me, but it feels distant – physically, emotionally, I cannot reach this monolith. But as I look up, I think of different stone. Memories flood back of touch and surface. I remember Italy and rough rock carved centuries before.

Touching stone

The Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo (c. 1550–80) is an Italian sculptural site nestled in a wooded valley roughly 55 miles north of Rome, commissioned by Pier Francesco (Vicino) Orsini. It is a space that contravenes many expected conventions of Italian renaissance sculpture gardens: comparatively informal, wooded, detached from the villa and filled with colossal, monstrous statues – fighting giants, dragons, sirens and harpies, three-headed dogs and open-mouthed sea creatures (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2).¹ To wander its paths is to enter a different spatial and temporal register; a fantasy made of ‘tante meraviglie’ (‘many wonders’).² It is also to walk in a site dominated by rock. Every sculpture in the Sacro Bosco is hewn from one type of stone: peperino, a dark tufo that is mottled with flecks of basalt, minerals, limestone and black peppercorn-like scoriae that give it its name. Many are carved from boulders

1 The pervasive formal construct of an ‘Italian renaissance garden’ has been questioned in recent years and linked with the nationalist political agenda of early twentieth-century Italian fascism. See, for example, Dümpelmann (2005), Lazzaro (2005) and Giannetto (2011).

2 This quotation comes from an inscription found within the Sacro Bosco which reads: ‘You who enter here, put your mind to it part by part, and tell me if these many wonders were made as trickery or as art’.

as large, if not larger, than *Levitated Mass*. At the Sacro Bosco stone surrounds you, towers over, accosts and entreats you.

Few critics touch the Sacro Bosco’s peperino in their writing, especially not in depth (a recent exception is Morgan, 2015). But in contrast to *Levitated Mass*, the rock at Bomarzo beckons the touch. Brushing my hands over their forms, I trace the grooves where unknown artists’ chisels chipped away rock, press palms against surfaces and brush fingers along carved shapes. The last time I visited the Sacro Bosco it was a hot and thunderous day in September. Rain made the forest leaves glisten and the stone deepen until almost black. The air smelt wet and earthy. Reaching out for the sculpted surface, my fingers met damp, rough rock. I closed my eyes – the world was cool and coarse.

This paper is about this meeting with stone. How am I to register this rock? Or rather, how would this rock have been understood in the sixteenth century? The two are connected but separate. I seek the possible visceral and intellectual response felt by a humanist-educated cinquecento beholder, historically specific and distanced from my own reaction by centuries, while also wishing to acknowledge the personal context and experience from which art history is invariably researched and written.

My answer to these questions, my grasping at the Sacro Bosco’s rock, and for a period eye and body, has been shaped by new materialism, and the agency – or better, life – it gives to substance (Miller, 2005, pp.6–15; Ingold, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Cole, 2010).³ Lorraine Daston writes that things ‘communicate by what they are as well as by how they mean’, ‘their utterances are never disembodied’ (2007, p.20). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that ‘when matter exerts its right to be the protagonist of its own story, epistemological frames shift’ (2015, p.39). Caroline Walker Bynum, writing from a historicist view, asserts that materials can allow an object to refer beyond itself (2011, p.30).

In this story, the principle character is stone. Peperino hogs the lines and takes centre stage. It is an attempt to think with and through materials, to move art-historical discussions beyond what these sculptures depict, into territory less concerned with iconography (e.g. Tilley, 2008). In doing so, despite a propensity to see the lithic as unchanging and passive, I draw upon renaissance natural history to see the rock at Bomarzo as mutable and the Sacro Bosco as materially concerned with geological forces. If in scholarship

3 It is important to acknowledge the feminist roots of the material turn in critical theory and the humanities, see Ahmed (2008) and Alaimo (2010, pp.6–11).



Figure 3.1: Two Fighting Giants, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.2: Fighting Dragon and Lions, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

today there is a material turn, a wish to acknowledge that things have lives, it is a turn that, touching stone at Bomarzo, connects us with those who, no doubt, reached out to feel the same stone over 400 years ago.⁴ These peperino sculptures of the sixteenth century offered an imaginative and physical encounter with

⁴ On touch and early modern sculpture see Johnson (2002, 2013).

rocky movement, growth and generation. Like my touching of the Sacro Bosco's sculpted stone, these words are geophilic.

Source

Have you ever looked into a quarry? Felt the vertigo? Seen the ground ruptured into a cavernous crater as giant pieces of stony matter are wrenched from it?

A quarry makes you realise how ‘the lithic inhabits the secret interiors of the earth’ (Cohen, 2015, p.19). The chipped rock of *Levitated Mass* travelled 106 miles to reach LA. It journeyed at night to avoid traffic disturbance, at a speed slower than walking pace – a colossal, nocturnal pebble. People camped out to watch it pass, as its epic, snail-paced, journey became part of its mythology (*Levitated Mass*, 2013).

In sixteenth-century Italy a statue’s natural source could similarly capture people’s imagination. Cosimo Gaci, writing about the twisted bodies of Giambologna’s marble *Rape of the Sabine* (c. 1579–83), felt compelled to construct a transportation myth for its marble block in which Hercules used a magic rope to carry the precious stone from Seravezza all the way to Florence (1583, pp.23–40). Families, including the Medici, owned their own quarries, where sculptors would select marble for their commissions, lithic lumps that would then, in the words of Bartolomeo Ammannati, be ‘quarried and transported with the investment of much time and not a little expense’ ([1582] 1962, p.118; trans. Cole, 2011, p.93). When visiting renaissance ‘sculpture gardens’ writers would comment on where materials came from. Agostino del Riccio, describing the stony fountains at the garden of Pratolino, spoke of how one saw ‘spugne quarried from the Radicofani region’ along with others ‘that form in the underground conduits at Siena’; at the Boboli gardens, he noted stalactites that had been collected from as far away as Hungary ([1597] 1996, pp.129–30). In the grotto of Villa di Castello near Florence, carved animals made from a dazzling array of stones were installed: a lion from ancient Sienese marble, a rhinoceros from grey granite, a monkey from a veined marble only recently discovered. Just as these exotic animals symbolically travelled from Africa and Asia, their many different stones had travelled from various quarries, their different lithic beginnings displaying their patron’s wealth through material diversity (Lazzaro, 1995).

In an illustration from Jacques Besson’s *Theatrum instrumentorum et machinarum*, first printed in 1571, the connection between stone sculpture and source is made visual as a group of men drag colossal relics – part of a capital, a classical column and an obelisk – out of a mountain covered in craggy stone (1578, plate 30). But you will not find this divorcing of material from its source, required for the sculptures of Villa di Castello, Pratolino and the Boboli gardens, at the Sacro Bosco. At Bomarzo there is no quarry, no painstaking journey. Instead the sculptures are carved directly into colossal boulders naturally embedded into the landscape. The garden is designed using these giant local stones as and where they occur; their size and location determining,

or at least influencing, what was sculpted and where. Rock ‘exerts its right to be the protagonist’. This use of un-quarried stone is striking. I know of only one other sixteenth-century Italian site that uses rock in this way, another Orsini garden, this time at Pitigliano, constructed after work on the Sacro Bosco had begun (Portoghesi, 1955). One of the only surviving sixteenth-century texts to reference the sculptures at Bomarzo focuses on this unusual element. In an agricultural treatise written in the final decades of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Vittore Soderini states:

Nor should one forget to mention that in some palaces of India, in the meadows which surround them, issue out of the earth some lumps of natural rock from which they have carved their idols and some figures of statues of their very fantastic animals ... as at Bomarzo are seen those carved out of natural rocks of more than a huge pebble.

(Soderini, [c. 1580–90] 1902, p.276)

Soderini finds the statues remarkable, even exotic, because they are carved from rocks that are ‘huge’ (‘grandissimo’), ‘natural’ (‘naturali’) and that ‘issue out of the earth’ (‘escono fuor della terra’). The stone in the



Figure 3.3: Mask of Madness, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author).

Sacro Bosco is extraordinary because it is rooted, still connected to its source.

The sculptures emphasise this material groundedness. There are numerous moments where parts of the boulders are left visible and un-carved, where the sculptures are refused plinths and emerge directly from the ground: the ‘mask of madness’, carved from a rock embedded into a grassy slope (Figs. 3.3 and 3.4), the female figure that doubles up as a bench, whose body turns into rough boulder (Fig. 3.5), the gaping ogre (also known as the hell’s mouth) where you can sit inside a hollowed out stone (Figs. 3.6 and 3.7), the wide-mouthed sea creature by the stream (Fig. 3.8) and the harpy, whose wings remain attached to rock, appearing in relief (Fig. 3.9). Even the often overlooked boat fountain, with its dolphin-like creatures at either end, morphs visibly into the raw moss-covered stone from which it is carved (Figs. 3.10 and 3.11). These moments puncture the visitor’s experience. Michel Jeanneret was also stuck by how the statues in the

Sacro Bosco, are ‘carved right in the rock as if they were just emerging’ (Jeanneret, 2001, p.126). From the sculpture’s subject matter, attention is drawn to material, to the rock’s physical properties, to the fact that these stones are rooted to the earth.

When thinking of Bomarzo’s sculpted, anchored rock, the work I return to repeatedly is the reclining woman (Fig. 3.12). Walking around her you can see where her boulder arises out of the earth, where her body merges with this hunk of matter – stone turning into carved form – where her left hand becomes the rock it grasps (Fig. 3.13). There is something particularly touching about her shapely forms appearing out of this lithic mass ‘of more than a huge pebble’. Perhaps it is that she is human, compared to the fantastical beasts of the other sculptures. Or that, unlike statues such as the two-tailed siren, which meet the gaze with dispassionately staring eyes, the reclining woman throws her head back, face turned towards the sky. Her body curves on its hard resting place, knees bent,



Figure 3.4: Mask of Madness (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.5: Female Bench, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.6: Ogre (exterior), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

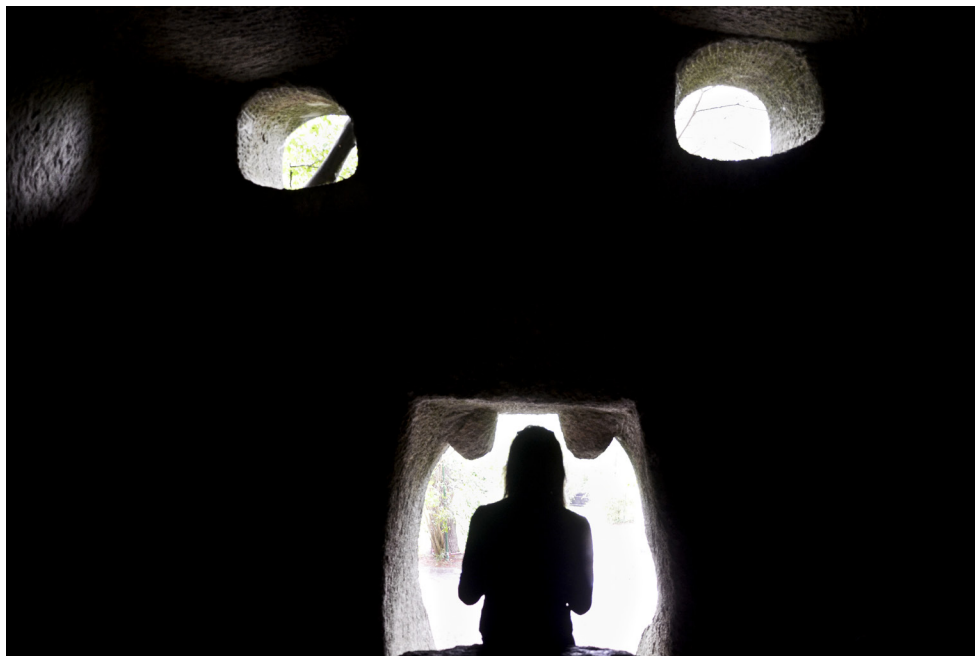


Figure 3.7: Author seen standing in the Ogre's interior in front of the entrance, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo: Benedict Mortimer)

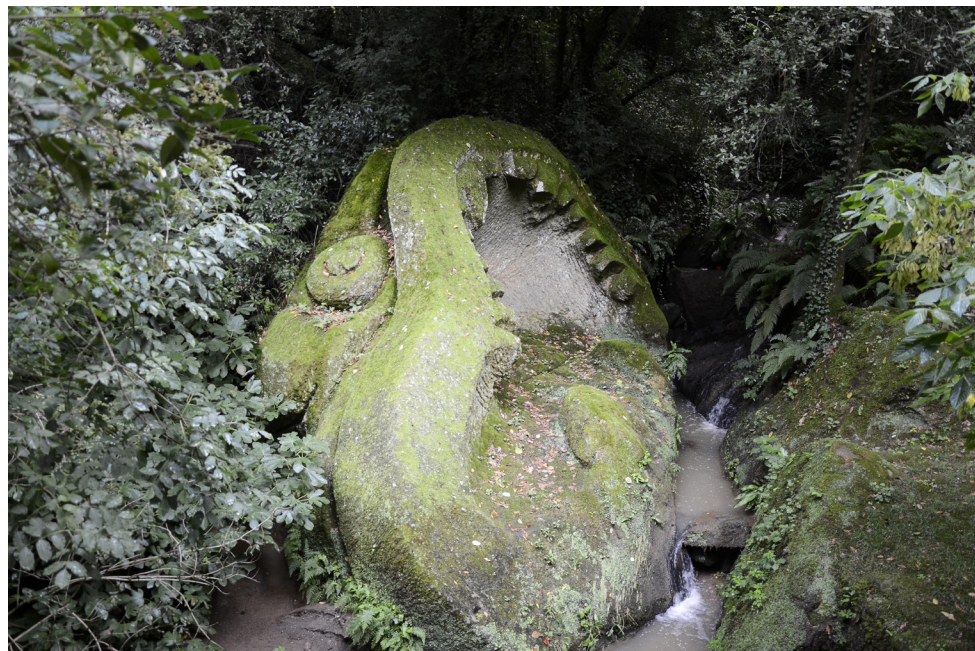


Figure 3.8: Sea Creature by the natural stream, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.9: Harpy, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.10: Boat Fountain, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.11: Boat Fountain (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.12: Reclining Woman, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.13: Reclining Woman (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.14: Reclining Woman (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

right hand clutching the fabric that begins to fall from her lower body. She appears, like the other sculptures that admit their rootedness and natural stone, to be in transformation. I reach out and hold her rocky hand, as if to steady this change from boulder to body, but she is so large I can only grasp one cold, rough finger (Fig. 3.14). At such proximity stone comes to the fore: earthy and mottled with different greys and the dark greens and pale mints of dry lichen. The surface hurts my skin.

Growth

According to dominant theories in renaissance natural history, the rootedness of the Sacro Bosco's sculptures meant its stones were considered 'living'. A rock was alive until removed from its source. Albertus Magnus, in his *Book of Minerals* printed in at least six Latin editions between 1476 and 1569, wrote that 'the specific form of individual stones is mortal, just as men are; and if [stones] are kept for a long time, away from the place where they are produced [*extra loca generationis*], they perish' ([c. 1250–60] 1967, p.66 (II:1:4)).⁵ Echoing this sentiment at the end of the fifteenth century, Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote that while many animals 'remain alive even when they are not in contact with the earth, stones and plants (deriving life as they do from the soul of the earth, not their own) do not' ([1482] 2001, pp.264–5). Stones in renaissance Europe required the earth and its ecology to remain animate. Quarried rock was dead. In Los Angeles, I stood beneath a corpse, its graveyard an urban sprawl. The Sacro Bosco's sculptures, on the other hand, thrum with life. Touching them a sixteenth-century visitor met stone that was fertile and dynamic.

This adds a vital layer to the theme of metamorphosis in Italian renaissance gardens. Metamorphosis in the Sacro Bosco is not just the changing seasons – the autumn leaves falling off branches, the scent of flowers in spring; it is not just Ovid's transformations as iconographical source. That the sculptures consist of living rock means that their very material takes part in a physical transformation, a stony process of growth.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Natural history, a fast-growing field eager to collect, study and outdo its ancient forbears, held different theories of rock formation for different types of stone during the renaissance (see Rudwick, 1985; Findlen, 1994; Ogilvie, 2006; McHam, 2013); and it is here that the Sacro Bosco's peperino becomes important. One concept, for example, linked to the then popular pumice-and-*spugne*-filled garden grotto, was that slow congealing

water drops created rock. Scipione Capece's *De principiis rerum* (1548) described a cave where 'we may observe that the moisture oozing there has turned to hard stone' (quoted in Szafranska, 1989, p.79). This petrification formed the brittle matter of pumice and *spugne*. The grottos that installed these rocks in elaborate decorations and fountains could therefore be seen as a 'staging of mineral nature's generation' (Morel, 2006, pp.127–8). But peperino is not *spugne* and you will find no grotto at Bomarzo. We need to look to other theories of lithic creation to understand the use and presentation of rock in the Sacro Bosco.

If the peperino is 'living', how was it born? When, in 1482, Marsilio Ficino presented the earth as a mother that gave birth to rock it was more than a metaphor. 'We even see the earth grow stones like teeth', he wrote, 'and plants like hair as long as they stick to their roots, but stop growing if we pull them out. How can it be said that the womb of this female is not living? This womb that spontaneously gives birth and cares for so many offspring, that sustains itself and carries teeth and hair on its back?' (quoted in Jeanneret, 2001, pp.43–4). In this image the surface of the ground is a soft, fertile gum from which sharp protruding rocks emerge: the earth a birthing and growing body, forming stones in its womb-mouth. Accordingly, renaissance natural history understood stones to be created deep within the earth, as well as by water drops.

Central to this idea was Aristotle. In *Meteorologica* (printed in more than 125 editions across Europe before 1601), Aristotle argued that the earth produced metals and stones (along with various other natural effects) via underground 'exhalations' (Martin, 2011, pp.1–20). The movement and changing characteristics of these subterranean winds produced metals when vaporous and stones when smoky. That stones were formed from smoke explained why many of them could not be melted (Eichholz, 1949). This theory was widely adopted in the sixteenth century (Mottana, 2006; Schmitt, 2013). Soderini, who noted Bomarzo's natural rocks, argued in his *Trattato di Agricoltura* that dry hot exhalations trapped beneath the earth turned mixtures of mud into stone when heated by fires further below (1902, pp.192–3). Georgius Agricola likewise positioned himself in relation to Aristotle in *De ortu et causis subterraneorum*, one of the first treatise dedicated to geology in the sixteenth century (see Morello, 2006). Initially printed in Latin in 1546, and then translated into Italian in 1550, Agricola stated that 'all these things [stones] are in a certain way made of a dry and smoky exhalation' (Agricola, 1550, p.40v). Mixing Aristotelian theories with those of ancient author Avicenna, Agricola posited that stones were generated from a

⁵ For early theories on living stone see Plumpe (1943).

mixture of earth and water, either dried by the hot air of subterranean fire or cooled to solidity (pp.32v-34v).

It is this mix of rock theory that is encountered materially in the Sacro Bosco. The fact that the peperino sculptures protrude naturally out of the earth implies an extension of rock below. Looking at and touching these sculptures, left grounded, raw and at points uncarved, a sixteenth-century visitor was invited to imagine how far each sculpture sank and the forces at play beneath their feet – the mud and water deep underground, the fire and smoke. Beholding the peperino of the Sacro Bosco, its craggy surface dappled with different minerals, a cinquecento spectator would have been reminded of, would have encountered, nature's stony generation.

Look for descriptions of peperino in sixteenth-century printed texts and consider the topography of Bomarzo, and this subterranean theory of rock formation only becomes more assertive. Take Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*: one of the most influential ancient authorities in the renaissance and translated into Italian in 1561 by Lodovico Domenichi, a friend of Vicino Orsini. Under the heading of tuff (a broad category of stone that included tufo/peperino), Pliny writes:

The best silex [hard Italian tufo] is the black variety, although in certain localities it is the red that is best, and in several places even the white, as in the Anician quarries round Lake Bolsena near Trachina, or, again, in the neighbourhood of Statonia, the stones from these two places being immune even to fire. The same two varieties are, moreover, used for sculptures on monuments, where they offer the added advantage of remaining untouched by the ravages of time.

(Pliny, 2012, p.200 (XXXVI:49))⁶

To find peperino in this passage we must turn to geography (for as we know, the source of a stone is important). Pliny mentions Statonia, an Etruscan city identified with Bomarzo (Landfester et al, 2008, p.861). The description of stone at Statonia is thus a description of peperino. It is fitting that Pliny notes these rocks are perfect for use in monuments, and, significant in relation to rock formation, that they are 'immune even to fire'. A point that suggests this lithic material was heated within the bowels of the earth. This possibility is bolstered by a second source:

6 It can be a tricky task to pin down particular materials in renaissance and classical natural-history texts as names for different rocks alter and are interchangeable. Peperino is a tufo, but it is also found in books from the period under tufa, tuff, tofu and silex.

chapter seven of Book Two of Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*.⁷ Discussing 'Stone for concrete masonry', Vitruvius writes:

Several quarries in the territory of Tarquinii called Anician, about the same as the Alban stone in colour, whose workshops are mostly around the Lacus Volsiniensis and the prefecture of Statonia. Now these have endless virtues. For neither freezing storms nor the touch of fire can hurt them, they are firm and last to a great old age because they have ... a moderate amount of water and a very great deal of earth. Thus consolidated by dense texture, they are harmed neither by harsh weather nor the power of fire. This can be concluded especially from the monuments around the town of Ferentum.

(Vitruvius, 1999, p.39 (II:7:3-4))

Vitruvius, like Pliny, talks of Statonia, as well as 'Tarquinii' (Tarquinia), also near Bomarzo, and 'Ferentum' (Ferento), now an archaeological site. In fact, Ferentum is a mere 12.5 miles from Bomarzo. If we are trying to find out how the peperino would have been understood by a sixteenth-century visitor in the Sacro Bosco, it is this rock, described by ancient sources: rock that was quarried and so came from *within* the earth, rock used for monuments and rock that was resistant to fire and thus created by hot and smoky subterranean geological forces.

But enough of texts about stone. Let us now cast our gaze beyond the parameters of the Sacro Bosco, remove our hands from its rock and lift our heads from the pages of aged books. Bomarzo is in the region of Alto Lazio. Mario Praz, introducing the Sacro Bosco in 1949, describes its setting as 'bathed by the golden dust of the October sky, profiled against the distant mountains that seem engraved in a sweet sapphire ... the brown houses line up along the cliff shining here and there like venturine' ([1949] 1975, p.81). It is hard, surveying this landscape, not to fall into such poetics. The mist rises like a gauze veil each morning, revealing hazy blue mountains that slumber across the horizon. The forests are deep and tangled. The rock faces that the towns cling to and the boulders that pepper the woods are truly monolithic (Figs. 3.15 and 3.16). The Dutch painter Bartholomeus Breenbergh, who provides some of the most detailed surviving depictions of the Sacro Bosco, captured this lithic topography in pen, brown ink and wash in 1625. In a drawing held in the

7 When referencing Vitruvius it is of note that Vicino Orsini was associated with the Accademia della Virtù and its study of Vitruvius, as were many of his friends and acquaintances.



Figure 3.15: Author in the forest on the way to the Etruscan Pyramid, Bomarzo (Photo: Benedict Mortimer)



Figure 3.16: The town of Bomarzo, with rocky cliffs (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.17: Stairwell, Palazzo Orsini, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)

National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the Orsini castle can be seen in the central distance, while the left foreground is entirely dominated by a colossal cluster of peperino boulders. These giant stones reach high into the sky, their pockmarked surfaces cast in sunlight, as they tower above two minuscule figures that walk on scrubby ground next to a small gabled roofed structure on the other side of a wide dirt path. To the right of this building the view gives way to an expanse of sky and undulating hills covered in loosely sketched trees. This landscape can be surveyed from the Orsini castle at Bomarzo captured by Breenbergh. Standing at the corner staircase of Vicino's residency, an incredible panorama of tree-cloaked hill mounts and valleys reaches into the distance (Fig. 3.17); the tall trunks, branches and leaves of the trees are also hiding the sculpted forms of the Sacro Bosco from view.

When considering the kinetic material of the Sacro Bosco's sculptures, however, there is more than

poetic description at stake. The land of Bomarzo has a visibly violent geological history that correlates to the theories of rock formation discussed above. The lakes – Bolsena to the northwest, Lago di Vico to the south – fill extinct craters, and the ground spurts boiling water. Drive around the region today and signs point to thermal baths, where springs gush sulphurous steaming water into large pools in which humans loll, their skin slowly turning prune-like. In the sixteenth century, Leandro Alberti knew these thermal springs. In his *Descrittione di tutta d'Italia*, in the section 'Terra falisci': another name given to Alto Lazio, Alberti mentions that '[t]here are many rivers in this territory' and 'no shortage of fountains nor bubbling springs of hot water' (1553, p.70r). Visited by disorderly crowds for their healing properties (Bacci, 1571, p.80), including Michel de Montaigne (Montaigne, [1581] 1774, p.336), these boiling natural waters, bursting out of fissures in the ground, provided physical evidence of the burning fires and hot vapours that created stones such as peperino beneath the earth (Vermij, 1998). Vitruvius stated that hot springs 'are created by nature in the following way: when fire is stirred up deep within the earth ... its burning warms the earth above it to a white heat. And thus if any sweet-water springs arise in the places above, when struck by this vapour they boil within the pores of the earth and flow forth' (1999, p.99 (VIII.3.1)). Agricola in *De Ortu* similarly argued that thermal springs were proof of 'hidden fires [*abstrusi & reconditi*]' which heat the waters' (quoted in Vermij, 1998, p.336). The topography of Bomarzo speaks of subterranean stone-making, flames and gusts.

Remembering these warm waters and the smell of sulfur, I see tendrils of steam connecting them with sixteenth-century theories of rock formation and the sculptures of Vicino Orsini's wood. Or perhaps it is better to think of them as mineral veins – the geography of Alto Lazio, peperino and theories of underground lithic creation – coursing through rock and meeting in the Sacro Bosco's artworks: rooted and connected to their source, and carved roughly from living stone. Allow the site's peperino to take centre stage and a story of mutable matter and rocky generation emerges. It is a haptic narrative that would not have been lost on sixteenth-century visitors. They would have thought of these lithic forces at play deep within the ground and felt the sculptures' vitality.

Touching time

Stones are old. How are we to comprehend their vastness? As Cohen states: 'If a stone could speak, what would it say about us? Stone would call you transient, sporadic' (2015, p.30). Paleobiologist Jan Zalasiewicz

(2010) shows the almost boundless past contained in rock when he traces the earth's history in a small disk of gray slate collected on a beach in Wales; in this single stone, Zalasiewicz finds a history of 13.7 billion years.

A sixteenth-century visitor to the Sacro Bosco, their hand pressed against carved peperino, might not have had the scientific context to comprehend the time we see in rock today, but they understood the lithic to contain truly epic history. Thomas Aquinas stated that stones 'have something in them of the nature of the stars' (quoted in Murphy, 2010, p.67). Albertus Magnus looked into a sapphire and saw a story of the 'sand banks in ancient India and mines in Provence' (Cohen, 2015, p.15; for Magnus on sapphires see, 1967, p.115–16 (II.2.17)). Although Christianity dictated that the world began with God's creation, and many found shells discovered on mountains to evidence the biblical flood, this did not stop scientists and writers conceiving of a stony past that stretched across deep, almost unfathomable, history (Connell, 2011; Dal Prete, 2014). In his *Meteorologia* (1542), Fausto da Longiano explained the origins of mountains (the very largest of rocks), describing how they were continually changing – growing, eroding and being reformed by winds, earthquakes and water over 'so to speak, an almost infinite length of time' (1542, p.33v). Explaining that the mortality of stone was not always visible to the human eye, Magnus, too, turned to this idea of extended lithic time. Only after 'a long drawn out change', he wrote, does a rock or mineral suffer death, 'grows dull and begins to disintegrate' (*Meteora* (III:4:7), as quoted in Magnus, p.66 (II.1.4n7); see also Riddle & Mulholland, 1980). To touch the living stone in the Sacro Bosco, then, was to touch a metamorphosing substance that belonged to deep time. It was to touch history.

One historical territory that a sixteenth-century visitor beholding rock at Bomarzo would have recalled is ancient Etruria. The use of peperino for sculpture is surprising in view of artistic treatise of the period, which describe it as a common and functional building material (Vasari [1550], 1907, p.55), but not when considered alongside the region's Etruscan past. Journey into the woods immediately beyond the Sacro Bosco and you will soon find a historic precedent for this material. The land is littered with ancient mausoleums, tombs and crumbling edifices carved into the local tufo (Figs. 3.18 and 3.19). Within a forty-minute walk from the Orsini castle at Bomarzo and within Vicino's territory, a giant structure known locally as the *Piramide Etrusca* rises out of the earth (Fig. 3.20). Formed from one colossal peperino boulder about two stories high the *Piramide* is a triangular mass covered in incised steps and channels or drains, topped by a



Figure 3.18: Boulder with remnants of carved basins and steps. Etruscan: date unknown. Peperino. Near the ruins of Santa Cecilia, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.19: Etruscan Ruins, Santa Cecilia, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.20: *Piramide Etrusca*, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.21: Author standing before a Fake Etruscan Tomb, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.22: Tomba a Fossa, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.23: Faux-Etruscan stair fragment, near the Giant Tortoise, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.24: Faux-Etruscan carved boulder, with recess and basins, near the Mask of Madness, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

flat, levelled surface that provides a viewing platform over the treetops. In sixteenth-century Italy there was huge interest in this lost civilization, revived with the unearthing of treasures such as the Chimera of Arezzo in 1553 (Cristofani, 1979; Pallottino, 1977; Collins, 2001, pp. 113–15). This passion was especially strong in the region around Bomarzo, with authors such as Giovanni Nanni (Annio of Viterbo) writing fictional Etruscan histories for the area (Baffioni, 1981; Grafton, 1990; Collins, 2000; Stephens, 2004). It seems highly likely, given this context and their physical proximity, that the giant ancient structures and many smaller Etruscan remains around Bomarzo would have been known to Vicino and his guests.

The Sacro Bosco is also teeming with Etruscan references: a faux half-buried tomb (Fig. 3.21) (see Oleson, 1975), the ‘*Tomba a Fossa*’: a rectangular hole, edged with a carved linear trim, that suggests an Etruscan sepulchral pit (Fig. 3.22), along with a host of indentations, fragments of stairs and abstract fissures that paraphrase the remains of ancient dwellings and structures found nearby (Figs. 3.23 and 3.24). When peperino is used in the Sacro Bosco, it is the same living material as found in the local Etruscan monuments. This means that the site’s fictitious Etruscan sculptures are playful objects of trickery, but also that there is a deeper doubling taking place in their physical substance. The material is, in itself, a historic relic of the very past the sculptures echo.

The Etruscans were bound to the mythical historical origins of the Sacro Bosco’s surroundings. Nanni’s fictional origin story for Alto Lazio, first published in 1498, was presented via a collection of (forged) ancient manuscripts. Translated by Vicino’s friend Francesco Sansovino in 1583, these texts claimed

that the Etruscans who founded nearby Viterbo were descended from a race of giants born of Noah (Nanni, [1498] 1583, ‘*Delle Antichita di Beroso Babilonico, Libro Primo*’, pp. 1r–4r). While in his 1565 *L’Historia di Casa Orsina*, Francesco Sansovino claimed the Orsini were one of the oldest families of Etruria, from ‘the paternal blood of King Lycaon of Arcadia’ (Sansovino, 1565, bk. I, p.2v) – ruler of a colossal race of men spawned from the blood of giants that had assaulted Mount Olympus (Ovid, 1979, bk. I, pp.33–5). To add physical weight to such stories, fossilised dinosaur remains discovered in the area – including a gigantic skull near the church of Santa Rosa in Viterbo – were frequently thought to be the bones of giants (Feo, 2008, p.24). There is even talk of Vicino displaying a gigantic bone at Bomarzo (Calvesi, 2009, p.143).

These giants, recalled literally in the two colossal figures locked in mortal combat found on the lower level of the site (Fig. 3.1), tell important stories about temporal vastness. Giants represent beginnings, the time of Noah, the Flood and Arcadia. If the Etruscans were also bound to this deep and gigantic past then so too, it follows, were the living rocks used to carve their dwellings and tombs. The ancient lithic remains found in the woods of Bomarzo, as such, bear witness to how old these living boulders are, binding them by myth as well as geological theories to the Sacro Bosco’s landscape. When a visitor wandering through Bomarzo in the late sixteenth century saw sculptures still strangely tied to their source, they encountered an ancient substance. The artists having carved into a living material history of a colossal timescale. This material duplication is poignant, creating a space where a sixteenth-century beholder physically interacted with a kind of temporal merging, where real Etruscan

ruins and those of the sixteenth century shared physical matter, as well as iconographical content and geographical context. Touch the rock at the Sacro Bosco and you travel in time. It is a tactile encounter with temporally epic, geological metamorphosis, as well as a local history contained in stone.

Conclusion

From Bomarzo to LA and back again, I recall another contemporary artwork. Deep in the forest hills of Brazil, in the expansive Instituto Inhotim, a privately owned park, is Doug Aitken's *Sound Pavilion* (2009): a round, enclosed glass room, accessed only by an isolated trail. Once inside, however, the visitor hears noises strange and unfamiliar. In the middle of the room is a narrow circular shaft covered by glass. This hole travels deep into the ground, where microphones pick up the slow groaning of the Earth's interior, its shifting forms found hundreds of meters below. These reverberations then lead me to sounds heard in an operatic adaptation of a novel set in Bomarzo, composed by Alberto Ginastera and which premiered in 1967. In this opera, the Sacro Bosco's stone sculptures have inarticulate, mournful voices, as the chorus produce guttural sounds using the consonants L, J, G, K, P and N (Hume, 1967). In both rock sounds ancient, painful and slow. At the Sacro Bosco you might not be able to actually hear the shifting growth of stone, but the constant lithic change happening beneath the ground, and the history and epic time contained within rock, is evoked through other means: through the use of living, rooted peperino, through its presentation: left raw and with rough carving, and through texture and touch. It is a site materially concerned with its local topography and geologic forces, entwined with history and myth as well as natural science, and which offers an encounter with stony metamorphosis that would have been palpably felt by a sixteenth-century visitor. Peperino as protagonist of the Sacro Bosco infers haptic contexts beyond subject matter.

Note

Renaissance is uncapitalised throughout this article as per *Open Arts Journal* style.

Bibliography

- 1 Agricola, G. (1550) *Di Giorgio Agricola: De la generatione de le cose, che sotto la terra sono...* (trans. M. Tramezzino from *De Ortu*, Basel, 1546), Venice.
- 2 Ahmed, S. (2008) 'Open forum imaginary prohibitions: Some preliminary remarks on the founding gestures of the "new materialism"', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 15, pp. 23–39.
- 3 Alaimo, S. (2010) *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- 4 Alberti, L. (1553) *Descrittione di tutta Italia*, Venice, Giovan Maria Bonelli.
- 5 Ammannati, B. ([1582] 1962) 'Lettera agli Accademici del Disegno' in P. Barocchi (ed.) *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma*, 3 vols, vol. III, Bari, Giuseppe Laterza e Figli, pp. 115–23.
- 6 Bacci, A. (1571) *De thermis*, Venice, Vincentium Valgrisium.
- 7 Baffioni, G. (ed.) (1981) *Annio da Viterbo: Documenti e ricerche*, Rome, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche.
- 8 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- 9 Besson, J. (1578) *Theatrum instrumentorum et machinarum*, Lyon, Apud Barth. Vincentium.
- 10 Bynum, C.W. (2011) *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York, Zone Books.
- 11 Calvesi, M. (2009) *Gli incantesimi di Bomarzo: Il Sacro Bosco tra arte e letteratura*, Milan, Bompiano.
- 12 Cohen, J.J. (2015) *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 13 Cole, M.W. (2010) 'The cult of materials' in S. Clerbois and M. Droth (eds) *Revival and Invention: Sculpture through Its Material Histories*, Oxford and New York, Peter Lang, pp. 1–15.
- 14 Cole, M.W. (2011) *Ambitious Form*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- 15 Collins, A.L. (2000) 'Renaissance epigraphy and its legitimating potential: Annius of Viterbo, Etruscan inscriptions and the origins of civilization', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, vol. 44, no. 575, pp. 57–76.
- 16 Collins, A.L. (2001) 'The Etruscans in the renaissance: The sacred destiny of Rome and the "Historia viginti saeculorum" of Giles of Viterbo (c. 1469–1532)', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 107–37.
- 17 Connell, W.J. (2011) 'The eternity of the world and renaissance historical thought', *California Italian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, n.p.

- 18 Coole, D. and Frost, S. (eds) (2010) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- 19 Cristofani, M. (1979) 'Per una storia del collezionismo archeologico nella Toscana granducale: I grandi bronzi', *Prospettiva*, vol.17, pp.4–15.
- 20 da Longiano, F. (1542) *Meterologia, cioè Discorso de le impressioni humide & secche generate tanto ne l'aria, quato ne le caverne de la terra, non per via di tradottione, ma di scelta*, [Venice].
- 21 Dal Prete, I. (2014) "'Being the world eternal ...": The age of the earth in renaissance Italy', *Isis*, vol.105, no.2, pp.292–317.
- 22 Daston, L. (ed.) (2007) *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, New York, Zone Books.
- 23 del Riccio, A. ([1597] 1996) *Istoria delle Pietre*, ed. by Raniero Gnoli and Attilia Sironi, Turin, Umberto Allemandi.
- 24 Dümpelmann, S. (2005) 'La battaglia del fiore: Gardens, parks and the city in fascist Italy', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, vol.25, no.1, pp.40–70.
- 25 Eichholz, D.E. (1949) 'Aristotle's theory of the formation of metals and minerals', *Classical Quarterly*, vol.43, no.3–4, pp.141–6.
- 26 Feo, G. (2008) *Giganti Etruschi: Storia e leggende dei 'figli della terra'*, Viterbo, Stampa Alternativa/Nuovi equilibri.
- 27 Ficino, M. ([1482] 2001) *Platonic Theology: Books 1–4* (trans. M.J.B. Allen with J. Warden, Latin ed. J. Hankins with W. Bowen), The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press.
- 28 Findlen, P. (1994) *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press.
- 29 Gaci, C. (1583) 'Egloga' in M. Sermartelli (ed.) *Alcune Composizioni di Diversi Autori in Lode del Ritratto della Sabina. Scolpito in Marmo dall'Eccellentissimo M. Giovanni Bologna*, Florence, Nella Stamperia di Bartolomeo Sermartelli, pp.23–45.
- 30 Giannetto, R.F. (2011) "'Grafting the edelweiss on cactus plants": The 1931 Italian garden exhibition and its legacy' in M. Beneš and M.G. Lee (eds) *Clio in the Italian Garden: Twenty-First Century Studies in Historical Methods and Theoretical Perspectives*, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, pp.55–77.
- 31 Grafton, A. (1990) 'Invention of traditions and traditions of invention in renaissance Europe: The strange case of Annus of Viterbo' in A. Grafton and A. Blair (eds) *The Transmission of Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.8–38.
- 32 Hume, P. (1967) 'Bomarzo: A modern masterpiece', *The Washington Post*, 20 May, n.p.
- 33 Ingold, T. (2007) 'Materials against materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol.14, no.1, pp.1–16.
- 34 Jeanneret, M. ([1997] 2001), *Perpetual Motion: Transforming Shapes in the Renaissance from da Vinci to Montaigne* (trans. N. Poller), Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 35 Johnson, G.A. (2002) 'Touch, tactility and the reception of sculpture in early modern Italy' in P. Smith and C. Wilde (eds) *A Companion to Art Theory*, London, Blackwell, pp.61–74.
- 36 Johnson, G.A. (2013) 'The art of touch in early modern Italy' in F. Bacci and D. Melcher (eds) *Art and the Senses* (2nd edn), Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp.59–84.
- 37 Landfester, M., Cancik, H. and Schneider, H. (eds) (2008) *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, 5 vols, vol.III, Leiden, Brill.
- 38 Lazzaro, C. (1995) 'Animals as cultural signs: A Medici menagerie in the grotto at Castello' in C. Farago (ed.) *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450–1650*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp.197–228.
- 39 Lazzaro, C. (2005) 'Politicizing a national garden tradition: The Italianness of the Italian garden' in C. Lazzaro and R.J. Crum (eds) *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, pp.157–69.
- 40 *Levitated Mass: The Story of Michael Heizer's Monolithic Sculpture* (2013), film, directed by Doug Pray, 88 minutes. USA: Electric City Entertainments.
- 41 Magnus, A. ([c. 1250–60] 1967) *Book of Minerals* (trans. D. Wyckoff), Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- 42 Martin, C. (2011) *Renaissance Meteorology: Pomponazzi to Descartes*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 43 McHam, S.B. (2013) *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the 'Natural History'*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- 44 Miller, D. (2005) 'Materiality: An introduction' in D. Miller (ed.) *Materiality*, Durham, Duke University Press, pp.1–50.
- 45 Montaigne, M. de (1774) *Giornale del Viaggio di Michel di Montagna in Italia, Per gli Suizzeri, e per*

- l'Allemagna, nel 1580 e 1581, Con qualche Annotazioni di M. Bartoli*, 3 vols, vol.III, Rome and Paris, Le Jay.
- 46 Morel, P. (2006) 'Mannerist grottos in sixteenth-century Italy' in M.W. Cole (ed.) *Sixteenth Century Italian Art*, Maldon, Blackwell, pp. 115–34.
- 47 Morello, N. (2006) 'Agricola and the birth of the mineralogical sciences in Italy in the sixteenth century' in G.B. Vai and W.G.E. Caldwell (eds) *The Origins of Geology in Italy*, Boulder, Geological Society of America, pp.23–30.
- 48 Morgan, L. (2015) 'Living rocks and petrified giants in Vicino Orsini's Sacro Bosco', *Architectural Theory Review*, vol.20, no.1, pp.7–29.
- 49 Mottana, A. (2006) 'Italian gemology during the renaissance: A step toward modern mineralogy' in G.B. Vai and W.G.E. Caldwell (eds) *The Origins of Geology in Italy*, Boulder, The Geological Society of America, pp.1–22.
- 50 Murphy, R.G. (2010) *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 51 Nanni, G. (Anno of Viterbo) ([1498] 1583) *Le Antichità di Beroso Caldeo Sacerdote, Ed d'altri Scrittori, Così Hebrei, come Greci, & Latini che trattano delle stesse materie. Tradotte, dichiarate, & con diverse vtili & necessarie annotationi, illustrate, da M. Francesco Sansovino*, Venice, Presso Altobello Salicato.
- 52 Ogilvie, B.W. (2006) *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- 53 Oleson, J.P. (1975) 'A reproduction of an Etruscan tomb in the Parco dei Mostri at Bomarzo', *Art Bulletin*, vol.57, no.3, pp.410–17.
- 54 Ovid (1979) *Metamorphoses* (trans. M.M. Innes), London, Penguin.
- 55 Pallottino, M. (1977) 'Vasari e la Chimera', *Prospettiva*, vol.8, pp.4–6.
- 56 Pliny (2012) *Natural History: Books 33–37, vol.V* (trans. H. Rackham and D.E. Eichholz), London, Folio Society.
- 57 Plumpe, J.C. (1943) 'VIVUM SAXUM, VIVI LAPIDES: The concept of 'living stone' in classical and Christian antiquity', *Traditio*, vol.1, pp.1–14.
- 58 Portoghesi, P. (1955) 'Nota sulla Villa Orsini di Pitigliano', *Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura*, vol.7–9, pp.74–6.
- 59 Praz, M. ([1949] 1975) 'I Mostri de Bomarzo' in M. Praz *Il Giardino dei Sensi: Studi sul manierismo e il barocco*, Milan, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, pp.76–81.
- 60 Riddle, J.M. and Mulholland, J.A. (1980) 'Alberti on stones and minerals' in J.A. Weisheipl (ed.) *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences, Commemorative Essays 1980*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, pp.203–34.
- 61 Rudwick, M.J.S. ([1972] 1985) *The Meaning of Fossils: Episodes in the History of Palaeontology* (2nd edn), Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- 62 Sansovino, F. (1565) *L'Historia di Casa Orsina*, Venice, Apresso Bernardino & Filippo Stagnini.
- 63 Schmitt, C.B. ([1983] 2013) *Aristotle and the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- 64 Soderini, G.V. ([c. 1580–1590] 1902) 'Trattato di Agricoltura del Sig. Gio. Vettorio Soderini' in A. Bacchi della Lega (ed.) *Le Opere di Gio. Vettorio Soderini Vol. I*, Bologna, Romagnoli Dall'Acqua, pp.1–282.
- 65 Stephens, W. (2004) 'When pope Noah ruled the Etruscans: Annus of Viterbo and his forged "antiquities"', *MLN*, vol.119, no.1, pp.S201–S223.
- 66 Szafranska, M. (1989) 'The philosophy of nature and the grotto in the renaissance garden', *Journal of Garden History*, vol.9, no.2, pp.76–85.
- 67 Tilley, C. (2008) *Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology 2*, Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press.
- 68 Vasari, G. ([1550] 1907) *Vasari on Technique: Being the Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, Prefixed to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, ed. by G. Baldwin Brown (trans. Louisa S. Macle hose), London, J.M. Dent.
- 69 Vermij, R. (1998) 'Subterranean fire: Changing theories of the earth during the renaissance', *Early Science and Medicine*, vol.3, no.4, pp.323–47.
- 70 Vitruvius (1999) *Ten Books on Architecture*, ed. by Ingrid D. Rowland and Thomas Noble Howe (trans. I.D. Rowland), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- 71 Zalasiewicz, J. (2010) *The Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth's Deep History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.



CARBON MONOCHROME: MANUEL DELANDA AND THE NONORGANIC LIFE OF AFFECT

Alan Boardman

Abstract

This paper focuses on the new-materialist philosophy of Manuel DeLanda and its application to visual-art theory through the material of contemporary monochrome painting. It asks: can the monochrome act as a ‘material of thought’ to orient DeLanda’s new materialism toward theorising the materiality of art in the context of the anthropocene? The raw-earth pigment monochromes and landscape interventions of Onya McCausland and the lab-grown nanotube pigment monochrome and sculpture works of Frederik De Wilde provide iterations of the monochrome for this analysis. An analysis of carbon through these artworks as a ‘material of thought’ facilitates access to the materiality of artworks more generally. This article proposes a new-materialist interpretative framework that goes beyond the parameters where meaning is produced through a phenomenological approach, through artistic intention or viewer interaction, and instead locates the artwork within assemblages constituted by human and non-human affects. It provides the basis for a new-materialist theory of art that is grounded in materiality, that constitutes the contemporary art object as a nonorganic life and one that opens up new territories for thinking art in the anthropocene.

Keywords: new materialism, Manuel DeLanda, materiality, affect, contemporary monochrome painting, nonorganic life, anthropocene

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-4>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s04>

Biographical note

Alan Boardman is an artist and researcher based in Ireland. His practice is engaged with painting and the materiality of art in the context of the anthropocene. He makes objects that evoke the affects of our ‘becoming-geological’. Alan is also engaged in a research project on the new materialism of Manuel DeLanda and its implications for a theory of visual art.

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel’s *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

CARBON MONOCHROME: MANUEL DELANDA AND THE NONORGANIC LIFE OF AFFECT

Alan Boardman, National College of
Art and Design (Dublin)

Introduction

This article addresses the issue of accessibility of the materiality of artworks. It aims to go beyond James Elkins' (2008) criticism of those accounts of materiality as abstract and general, and produces a framework for 'material thinking' through engagement with particular artworks. It uses contemporary monochrome painting as a material to orient the new-materialist philosophy of Manuel DeLanda (1992, 2002, 2016) toward the issue of materiality in contemporary visual arts and its relation with the material world in the context of the anthropocene.

Elkins proposed that the difficulty for art historians, such as himself, in addressing and accessing the materiality of the art object lies firstly with the theoretical tools which art historians yield, namely that phenomenological and art-historical terms are too detached from one another to be deployed to open up particular material concerns. Secondly, art historians have inherited a fear of materiality, for instance, always seeing paintings, pictures or images rather than material objects. According to Elkins, they have become allergic to the materiality of the artwork, circumnavigating it in general terms but always keeping a safe distance. The third force preventing the art historian from fully getting to grips with materiality is due to what Elkins calls the 'slowness of the studio'. Elkins proclaims that the artist studio is a place of chronic, low-level pain, in which the art historian is denied quick and direct assimilation of material processes into discursive meaning, in short 'materiality gets in the way of thinking as well as looking' (Elkins, 2008, p.30). This article explores how materiality can inform thinking to better facilitate how we interpret what we see.

Elkins' claims are an interesting, if brief, articulation of the issue of accessing the material object from the art historian's perspective and is a helpful starting point for this article. As an artist, rather than an art historian, writing about the materiality of art, I will focus on the artworks' materiality first and foremost. This is done in order to propose a continuum between materiality and meaning; a continuum that is always present and which flows both ways. This article therefore advances that the meaning of an image is always tethered in some way

with its materiality. The particular objects of my focus are recent iterations of contemporary monochrome painting, specifically black monochromes, or, what I am calling 'carbon monochromes', from artists Onya McCausland and Frederik De Wilde. Furthermore, this focus will be grounded, not in a phenomenological methodology, but in a new-materialist one, specifically drawing on the philosophy of Manuel DeLanda. Influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, DeLanda's thought shifts the human-centred approach to one with an emphasis on the independence of the material world from human conception.

My aim is not to show how the monochrome and its materiality can be re-thought through new-materialist concepts, but instead to deploy the materiality of carbon as a basis for thinking art in the contemporary world. Interpreting the art object in such a way activates a dialogue with the material world, a dialogue that is admittedly one sided, but one that opens to a possibility of speculating the non-human or non-organic realm. The 'carbon monochrome' is a material that reorients DeLanda's thought for an art-theoretical context. An analysis of 'the life of carbon', its multiple temporalities and its significance as a marker of both organic life and non-organic life addresses accessibility not just to the materiality of contemporary visual art but also to the world beyond the human, a world dramatically transformed by humans.

Methodology

New materialism is a methodological approach that draws on interdisciplinary knowledge production, bringing together philosophy, ecology, economy, politics, technology and art with a focus on how matter and meaning are entangled. Largely disavowing a representational framework, new materialisms ask not only 'how discourses come to matter' but also 'how matter comes to matter' (Barad, 2003, 2007). New materialism is concerned with materiality in all of its complex manifestations and interconnections. Even when the material world appears to fall away to the immateriality of ideas, new materialism holds that there are always degrees of materiality, nothing is ever immaterial, all is on the spectrum of matter and energy. The term 'materiality' itself is one that is widely used but often remains undefined. Tim Ingold (2007) has expressed frustration with the term, deployed to invoke the physical nature of things, only to become wholly conceptual as a place holder obscuring the lack of engagement with actual materials. While DeLanda does use the term, often interchangeably with phrases like 'material expressivity', it cannot be argued that he does not engage with the properties of materials. Throughout his career, DeLanda has explored the

properties, tendencies and capacities of matter in everything from geological processes to artificial intelligence.

The limits of phenomenological detail and its consequence for art writing emerges, for Elkins, between the gaps that detach the particular from the general and vice versa. Where phenomenology or aesthetics 'depend[...] on the particular as a counterpart to its interest in the universal and the general', art history 'depends on the general to create meaning for its investigations of the particular' (Elkins, 2008, p.27). This article investigates the materialities of particular artworks, not through phenomenology but through DeLanda's new-materialist philosophy in which the gaps between the particular and the general are navigable through incremental movements in scale, up and down, following the materials and their relations. For DeLanda, the existence of the general is contested and supplanted by the idea that in material terms there is only the particular (DeLanda, 2002). In the context of art writing and aesthetics, this methodology demands that we begin with the particular historically produced material configurations of the artwork from which we build meaning, finding relations with other artworks, affects and modes of thought.

Elkins' proposes that art historians have demonstrated a 'fear of materiality', relegating the physical or material conditions of artworks from the more important realms of historical, theoretical and critical accounts (Elkins, 2008, p.26). He boils this fear down to a divide maintained by the habits of writing and thinking, and the reluctance to explore beyond the point where writing becomes difficult. Looking to DeLanda, we can begin to cut through this imposition of a fear affecting the habits of art historians. He proposes that the phenomenological and broader idealist modes of thought, incorporating the presumption that the world is a product of our minds, have dominated academic departments resulting in a forgetting of the material life and a concentration on textual hermeneutics (DeLanda, 2010, p.29). Furthermore, this amnesia has led to a confusion between the discursive and the non-discursive where historical, theoretical and critical accounts of artworks became predominantly discursive practices. For instance, when an artist's studio practice or process was connected with a particular theoretical or critical interpretation it became discursive, the specific physical or material conditions taking place in the studio became insignificant and subsumed into the discursive art-historical context. The fear, to which Elkins refers, is actually an amnesia concerning the materiality of art.

Phenomenological and new-materialist methods also have differing approaches to art theory's primary

means of conceptualising the impact of the artwork, what Elkins describes 'as being attentive to what [...] bodies tell them about artworks', this is the notion of *affect*. From the phenomenological perspective, affects are the sensations in the human body, in the flesh, that give rise to state of feeling and emotion. While some accounts propose that affects are pre-subjective, pre-linguistic and autonomous (Massumi, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2001), others proclaim that affects are embedded with emotions and remain characterised as something that happens in human bodies alone. In recent accounts of affect in new materialism (Bennett, 2010), affect is expanded as a perturbation that is not limited or unique to humans alone. Affects erupt in a variation of bodies, organic, but also inorganic. Affects or 'capacities to affect and to be affected' can also be geological, technological or climatological. In some cases, humans are plugged into an assemblage where they are open to its affects, such as those occurring in environmental systems, but such affects also occur without human presence. In the DeLandian reading, affects are not just material bodily responses to a sensible and perceptible world but are intensive indeterminate events that animate matter itself.

In characterising affect in this way, new-materialist thought conceives of an array of affects not limited to those of purely human origin or significance. The accessible vocabularies of affect in new materialism are vast in comparison to those for the phenomenological outlook. Art is said to capture affects within its materiality, as a result, the way we can think about materiality is expanded beyond the abstract and general into the world of particular material affects. Accessing this repertoire of affects, however, remains both experimental and intuitive. This rest of this article will focus on how iterations of the contemporary monochrome capture affects and help to open up new perspectives on the materiality of the artwork.

The monochrome

Allied to a new-materialist methodology and informing its material thinking is contemporary monochrome painting. The carbon matter of the black monochrome, in two particular iterations from artists Onya McCausland and Frederik De Wilde, will be the intuitive and experimental materials working, alongside concepts of DeLanda's new materialism, to open up the issue of materiality in contemporary visual art and its relation to the material world.

Contemporary monochrome painting has a genealogy formed from two main threads. Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), *White on White* (1918) and *Suprematist Composition* (1916) and Alexander Rodchenko's *Black on Black* (1918), *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure*

Blue Colour and *Pure Yellow Colour* (all 1921), introduce the monochrome with metaphysical and materialist intention respectively (McEvelley, 1996). Malevich's metaphysical monochromes were envisioned as portals to the absolute, into the void, to a new realm beyond form, beyond the post-World War I ruin of Europe, producing an image of nothing more existent than any image of something. Rodchenko's monochromes were opposed to the new spiritual aspirations of the time, instead he proposed his series to be the last paintings as plainly stated material objects with sculptural overtones (McEvelley, 1996, p.56). While their intentions differed, they both had radical social change in mind.

This genealogy remained largely dormant for a generation until monochrome painting reemerged in both Europe and North America after the second World War. Artists such as Yves Klein, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman produced new iterations to open up the metaphysical, while Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg and Alberto Burri created variations on the materialist theme. The monochrome, specifically in its black-and-white examples, became a 'rite of passage' or 'a transition' for artists at the end of their careers or those just starting out (Rosenthal, 2007, p.73). In other interpretations, the monochrome became the 'central

icon of the sublime in the twentieth century' (McEvelley, 1996, pp.48–9)

These genealogies shared the premise of a perceived liberation from representation and that the historical meanings of art generally and painting in particular would be supplanted by a radical present (Staff, 2015, p.2). While both the metaphysical and materialist forms failed to realise their respective ambitions, Malevich's 'messianic utopian faith in art as an instrument for social change' (McEvelley, 1996, p.71) never manifested. Rodchenko's last paintings were repeated and painting never really went away, the monochrome endured as a form re-imagined within a divergent range of contemporary practices (Staff, 2015, p.3).

Carbon monochromes and the fear of materiality

Onya McCausland's practice situates the monochrome within a range of activities that connect studio processes with the landscape and its geological processes. A work from 2014 entitled *Attachment* is composed of a uniform and dense application of coal-black pigment in an asymmetrical geometric shape on a panel of aluminium (Fig. 4.1). Accompanying the sooty black pigment panel is a mirror image of



Figure 4.1: Onya McCausland, *Attachment*, 2014. Coal black pigment and aluminium panel (pigment sourced from Bideford, UK), plywood panel: 47.5 x 26cm, aluminium panel: 47.5 x 26cm. (Image courtesy of the artist)

the same pigment applied with a lighter density on a plywood panel. The two forms meet at the centre point of the work, conjoined to form a single incomplete circle. Alternatively, in a kind of visual trickery, we see two larger cropped circles coming into contact with one another. Two bodies coming into contact, one composed of densely packed matter and one an ephemeral fleeting mist of colour. In reference to her monochromes, McCausland explores how 'images have become separated from the material site of their production, from the world of things' and proposes that in her paintings 'images are inseparable from the physical properties of their material carrier' (McCausland quoted in Cornish, 2014). McCausland's works aim to reattach and make visible this connection between image and its physicality, between colour and the matter of the earth to reveal not just cultural significance but also the environmental significance and cost of an amnesia that separates them.

Viewing this work on the gallery wall, isolated in the white space, initially gives the impression that this work is primarily formal. Various geometric shapes coupled to their ghostly twin float in a vacuum. However, this is not the case as these paintings are components of broader invisible practices. McCausland describes her paintings' relation to other practices in the following way.

My paintings are just fragments, they are just as connected with the landscape they originate in as they are to the wall of the gallery space, they are fragments that belong with other fragments; of journeys in my car to places, collecting materials, the lengthy processes of turning the materials into usable pigment, and then paint, writing and films recording these processes. The paintings are a mark along this trajectory. In this way the monochrome painting is simultaneously a fragment of landscape.

(quoted in Cornish, 2014)

McCausland produces her own earth pigments from materials sourced directly in the landscape. Making journeys to sites across England, the raw materials that she uses are entangled within personal, social and geological histories. Sites include Oxted Quarry in Surrey, Todmorden Moor in Lancashire and, for the pigment used in *Attachment*, Bidford in Devon. The raw black rocks that McCausland sources from the sites she visits, become a material with which the artist negotiates through grinding, washing and filtering into a fine dust. The dust material is left to settle where it finds its uniform consistency ready to be bound with a medium and applied to a surface. There is a

sense of patient ritual in this work, of a considered relation and sensitivity to the materials and their sources. *Attachment* is a work that speaks to the deep interactive relations between human and earth in an age when humans are becoming a geological force.

Just as McCausland's practice reattaches the image to its materiality, Elkins bemoans how art historians have historically shown preference for the image, picture or painting discrete from its materiality. Further extending the critique into the context of the anthropocene is the narrative connecting the contemporary world of digital media and the mineralogical materials on which it depends. Jussi Parikka explores the material foundation of the 'dematerialized' images in his *Geology of Media* (2015). Parikka addresses the way theory and the visual arts respond and reveal the mechanisms through which the hardware of digital media relies on mineral excavation of the earth and how the aftermath of obsolescence is creating new geological layers of e-waste.

Not only does McCausland's carbon monochrome reattach the link between image and materiality in an art-historical context, producing compelling affective capacities between artwork and viewer, it also reveals the unique structural nature of carbon itself, bringing to the fore new awareness of carbon's ability to demonstrate affect in and of itself. There are several allotropes of carbon, meaning it has the ability to exist in various structural forms. Diamond, graphite, amorphous, fullerene and nanotubes are examples of carbon arranged into its different forms, producing seemingly different materials. The amorphous carbon materiality of McCausland's monochrome emerges from the deep time of the geological, making it a material common to cave painters in prehistoric times, a material that sat for millions of years only shifted under the slow geologic forces of plate tectonics. This form of carbon became the basis not just for industrialisation in the 18th century, but, more specifically, it is the material from which human endeavour uncovered the capacities of coal tar (Leslie, 2005). Dyes, pigments and later synthetic plastics and polymers would unfold from the curiosity that amorphous carbon inspired. Chemistry made carbon a material to transform, but it was messy and often accidental in its innovation.

A comparative form of the monochrome to McCausland's earth-pigment piece is provided by Belgian artist Frederik De Wilde, who, in 2014, produced the world's first blackest black artwork. De Wilde's blackest black monochrome consists of a square measuring 1500 x 1500 x 15cm consisting of 0.1% carbon nanotubes and 99.9% air. *NANOblck-Sqr#1*

is a painting that is grown on a surface from the atomic scale rather than painted through the application of pigment (Fig. 4.2). The 0.1% carbon is a material of structural colour rather than a traditional pigment. The nanotubes are the result of a process in which catalyst seeds or atom-sized particles are ‘sputtered’ across a substrate onto which a chemical vapour is applied, creating a “forest” of vertically aligned carbon nanotubes (De Wilde, 2014). The geometry of the tubes absorbs almost all visible light as well as some invisible light producing a void surface appearing as the blackest black.

The blackest-black is a poetic thought, an artistic concept and research project, a concrete series of artworks that are ‘born’ out of necessity, reactionism, subversiveness. The blackest-black concept and artwork help us to question our perception and reality. Additionally, the blackest-black holds potentially a ‘key’ to our survival as a species. So, the blackest-black is not just a nice coating with a nice effect, it’s the ultimate celebration of the unknown. It’s pure horizontal depth and a space of boundless immateriality.

(De Wilde, 2014)

De Wilde’s nano black monochrome is painting at the edge of scientific developments in nanoscale engineering and materials science. Within its boundless black surface, it captures light, it sucks light in and traps it in the attractive and repulsive forces that hold the forest of tubes together. As light is absorbed into the surface, it is transformed and dissipated as heat. The artist has remarked, the work is an expression of both extreme light and darkness together referencing the idea of quantum-world superposition in which light is both wave and particle at the same time.

De Wilde’s monochrome is made from a structural form of carbon known as C60 or Buckminsterfullerenes, named after their likeness to the geodesic domes designed by Buckminster Fuller. The structure was discovered and manufactured by scientists in 1985. The fullerene molecule can take a cylindrical, ellipsoid or tubular form. It was not until 1992 that fullerenes were found in nature in carbon rich Precambrian rock from Russia (Buseck, Tsipursky & Hettich, pp.215–17). This complex carbon structure provides a contrast to the structure of carbon used in McCausland’s practice. The earth pigments she produces are made from a form of amorphous carbon. Amorphous carbon is a free, reactive carbon without



Figure 4.2: Frederik De Wilde, *NANOblack-Sqr#1*, 2014. 99.9% air and 0.1% carbon nanotubes, 1500 x 1500 x 15cm. (Image courtesy of the artist)

crystalline structure, although it rarely occurs in pure form, often being mixed with polycrystalline materials such as graphite or diamond.

De Wilde's monochrome encapsulates both a metaphysical and a materialist tendency. It is a flat, horizontal surface composed of a material that is



Figure 4.3: Onya McCausland, *Charcoal Measure*, 2016. Charcoal compressed into trenches in the Forreest of Dean (UK), variable dimensions. (Image courtesy of the artist)



Figure 4.4: Onya McCausland, *Charcoal Measure*, 2016. Charcoal compressed into trenches in the Forreest of Dean (UK), variable dimensions. (Image courtesy of the artist)

darker than any material that came before it, but, at the same time, it is almost not even there. While the surface always remains a material, it is on the tipping point of Malevich's and Klein's proposal for an absolute void. However, McCausland's monochrome also encapsulates both the metaphysical and the material but in a much different way. More pre-modern than 21st-century and technology-inspired, *Attachment* is attuned to a different materiality and a different sense of time. The brute materiality of the coal-black pigment, produced over millions of years of organic deposition and decay, coupled with McCausland's subtle and time-consuming refinement, brings with it the resonance of the metaphysical implications of the deep time of the geological.

Works from both artists that complement the context of the monochrome, McCausland's *Charcoal Measure* (2016) and De Wilde's *MIne #1* (2015) respectively, further expand the relation between the materiality of carbon in art and its significance in designating the epoch of the anthropocene. These carbon works evoke the beginning of the anthropocene – in the form of excavated and exhausted carbon leaving its residues in the earth and atmosphere – to the contemporary world, in which carbon has become

a material of the technologies that re-structure and manipulate matter's capacities.

McCausland's *Charcoal Measure* (2016) was a site-specific installation in the Forrest of Dean, Gloucestershire, UK (Fig. 4.3). The work was initiated through an exhibition of commissioned artworks produced from the charcoaled remains of an iconic oak sculpture that had stood in the forest for almost 30 years. In October 2015, a charcoal clamp burned the remains of the sculpture on the site where it had once stood. *Charcoal Measure* is a line of charcoal in the forest that draws and maps out on the surface the scale of the coal excavations beneath. The cavities below are drawn up and onto the surface by the charcoal measure. A linear grid of charcoal runs through the site of the clamp and the surrounding forest highlighting the invisible cavities 1,000ft below (Fig. 4.4).

A complimentary work by Frederik De Wilde also deals with the legacy of coal mining. *MIne #1* (2016) is a 3D-printed sculpture in titanium with the same nanotube coating as his monochrome (Fig. 4.5). The sculpture, on a much smaller, gallery-suitable scale, was made with custom software to visualise data points from seven coal mines in Belgium. The data was rendered into a geometric form. A spherical branching



Figure 4.5: Frederik De Wilde, *MIne #1*, 2016. 3D-printed sculpture in titanium with blacker-than-black, nano-engineered coating, variable dimensions. (Image courtesy of the artist)

shape emerges from the process, a mine within a mine within a mine resembles a bird's nest or plant-like structure. The final aim of the project is to develop a 'sculpture that appears to be flat, a cut out, a perfect "black body" that acts as a super photovoltaic cell rendering sunlight directly into DC current' (De Wilde, 2016).

Nonorganic life of the monochrome

A concept that DeLanda uses to engage with the material world beyond the human is the idea of inorganic or nonorganic life (DeLanda 1992). The term is taken from Deleuze and Guattari, which in turn reference art historian Wilhelm Worringer's characterisation of the line in gothic art 'as the only perceptible expression of the non-living or the absolute' (1920, p.30). In his *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* ([1908] 1953), Worringer writes:

the first geometric abstractions appealed not to the intellect, but to the deepest physical and mental constitution of the observer. If one follows those physical and mental roots deep enough, one finds that they do not even belong to a body or a soul anymore, but rather to inorganic nature: static, inexorable, eternal.

(Worringer, [1908] 1953, p.246)

Worringer's idea of an inorganic life posits an underlying inorganic force that is tethered to the processes and structures of organic life, 'the morphological law of inorganic nature still echoes like a dim memory in our human organism' (1953, p.247). For Worringer, inorganic life is a manifestation of the will toward abstraction and with it spiritual agoraphobia, entropy and death, while organic life is the will towards rationality, empathy and familiarity. Joshua Dittrich (2011) offers a critique of Worringer's concept and its relation to philosophies of life and expressionism in which he outlines how the concept is a flight from reality, oscillating from mystical intuition into rational understanding without foundation or reason. In this initial incarnation 'inorganic life' does suffer from Elkins' criticism of materiality in that it is abstract and general.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) Deleuze and Guattari take up the term, expanding the context of abstraction through their analysis of the practice of metallurgy. They propose that metal has a privileged status as a conductor or catalyst of matter itself. Metal, they say, is 'the consciousness of matter-flow' or 'the non-organic life is the intuition of metallurgy' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.411). Metals exists everywhere, in organic and inorganic life. More recently, DeLanda has expanded

on this idea of a metallurgical life beyond the organism by defining the concept of nonorganic life as 'the mathematics of self-organization' (1992, p.140). In his essay 'Nonorganic life', DeLanda gives an account of the paradigm shift in scientific research that reveals how systems in nature are not closed, linear and predictable or, to use Worringer's terms, 'static', 'inexorable', 'eternal', but are instead subject to flows of matter energy that continuously move through them at varying speeds giving them potential dynamism and a state open to change (1992, p.129).

The significant development for DeLanda in his account of nonorganic life and materiality is the ability to follow such matter energy flows, to visualise or map the 'viscosities' or structures of these flows and to capture the affects that they produce. This requires what DeLanda calls intensive thinking (DeLanda, 2002). This is the study of materials or systems that are far from equilibrium with self-organising dynamics typically governed by singularities such as attractors and bifurcations. Materials far from equilibrium are characterised by differential relations and coupled rates of change in rapidity and slowness being cancelled over time. Intensive physical properties, such as temperature or pressure, produce extensive physical properties, such as length, area, volume or entropy. The material world emerges from morphogenetic processes structured by a realm of virtual multiplicities defined by 'zones of indiscernibility' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p.173). It is, I am proposing, in these zones that affects emerge and disappear, leaving a residue of their intensity in material form.

DeLanda shows how 'stratometers' reveal the previously hidden self-organizing flows of matter energy and the ridged, supple and chaotic strata they lay down. The means through which these maps of self-organizing matter are produced is mathematical. However, DeLanda proposes that such measurements performed by a 'stratometer' need not be mathematical but can be intuitive and experimental (1992, p.155). The arts can operate as 'stratometers', capturing affects that emerge from matter energy flows that produce the various structures of the material world. Just as metallurgists developed sensual knowledge of the nonlinear and catalytic nature of metals prior to formal reasoning, so, too, do contemporary artists when probing the nonorganic life to reveal the novel affects embedded in their materials.

The black monochrome resonates with the concept of nonorganic life. Its evolving metaphysical and materialist genealogies act as a model of reference for the evolving notion of the nonorganic life. It has mystical and iconographical connotations in its

attempts towards presenting the unrepresentable. The monochrome and nonorganic life are forms of abstraction that seek out the possibilities of life beyond the organism. The carbon materiality of the monochrome is the most common element in organic life, more adaptable than any other in the periodic table in that it forms more compounds than any other element and is the most abundant element after hydrogen, helium and oxygen. Inorganic carbon sources include limestones, dolomites and carbon dioxide while organic sources of the element are found in coal, peat and oil. It is the element that designates the divide between organic and inorganic chemistry, effectively defining what is characterised as life or nonlife. Both McCausland's and De Wilde's iterations of the monochrome and their relation with the materiality of carbon and the carbon cycle are excellent examples of how contemporary art encapsulates the nonorganic life of affect. They summarize what Elizabeth Povinelli has called the 'Carbon Imaginary' which 'seeks, iterates and dramatizes the gap between Life and that which is conceived as before or without Life' (2016, p.32).

Mining the 'slowness of the studio' and the anthropocene

With regard to the practices of McCausland and De Wilde, the slowness of their respective processes is central to their relationship with the material conditions of their work. The difference between buying readymade pigment off the shelf and producing your own from materials sourced in the landscape would be an issue of irritation for the visiting art historian, let alone that this process does not account for the production of the painting. Equally for De Wilde, the studio is more a laboratory, where experimental trial and error eventually results in a material grown from atomic scale. It seems that issues of time are bound up with our ability to access and conceive of materiality. For McCausland, we have excavations in the deep time of the geological, but also the human time journeying the geography of England and the time taken to refine the earth's materials into pigments. For De Wilde, time is more future oriented, lab-time experimenting and growing material from the atomic level is more like a discrete quantum time, where materiality is produced rather than refined, where time is a continuous present rather than one that seeks out the past. Elkins highlights the slowness of the studio as a barrier for art historians and writers to engage with questions of materiality, I argue that tuning into the particular temporalities of artistic practices and processes is key to conceptualising and accessing the materiality of art.

The material world is a continuous transformation of matter in time, and the materiality of carbon plays a significant role in human relations with time. Radiocarbon dating is the method for measuring the age of an organic material through the dissipating properties of radioactive decay. Moreover, carbon's relationship with time has become more complex as humanity becomes a geological force itself. Radiocarbon dating has become more complicated with the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal and oil, and through the impact of nuclear testing. The altering of the carbon cycle in the age of the anthropocene further contextualises the carbon monochrome as a 'stratometer' for art's relationship with the shifting conditions of the temporal and material world. Kathryn Yusoff has investigated human entwinement with a 'geologic life' as 'a mineralogical dimension of human composition [...] crucial to modes of subjectification in the Anthropocene' (2013, p.780). She outlines how the 'material, temporal and corporeal conceptualisation of fossil fuels' are a platform for a 'more expansive inhuman thought' (2014, pp.779, 780). To this end, Davis and Turpin have attempted to respond to the entangled agencies of both the political and social implications of the anthropocene as well as the material transformations that such 'geological reformation of the human species' brings about (2015, p.3). They argue that living in a diminished and toxic world is a sensorial phenomenon. Equally it is a visual phenomenon where 'data visualisation, satellite imagery and climate models' frame our conceptualisation of humanity as a geological phenomenon (pp.4–5). This article has sought to evoke the materials of the anthropocene, through the investigation of carbon, in order to push beyond the sensorial and the visual. Contemporary art's engagement with materiality can activate its recognition and characterisation as a 'non-organic life'.

Conclusion

The evolution of the concept of 'nonorganic life' from mystical abstraction to metallurgical vitalism to self-organising flows of matter energy provides a conceptual tool to probe the issue of materiality in contemporary art. Such probing leads to the uncovering of more particular material conditions, the example in Deleuze and Guattari was metallurgy, a vitalist and catalytic capacity within matter itself. In my analysis, this was carbon, the materiality of the black monochrome, a material with the capacity to take on many structural forms. Furthermore, a new-materialist methodology allows us to unfold meaning through the self-organising flows of matter energy that give us insight into the material conditions of carbon.

Perhaps the black monochrome is a figure for the space between life and nonlife, a figure for Povinelli's 'Carbon Imaginary', a material surface on which a static, frozen encapsulation of past and future is suspended in the present. At the same time as providing a liminal space between life and nonlife, it enables the possibility for a map of the nonorganic life. The black monochrome, encapsulating its historical context from Malevich to Reinhardt to Stella and to contemporary iterations, is a map or 'stratometer' in the DeLandaian sense. It is not just a spatial map of topographies but also a map of temporalities. This combined presentation of spatial and temporal structures through the monochrome is a measure of the viscosities of stratification. The stratification of the variable structures of the material world from the ridged to the malleable to the fluid points of transition. From Malevich's original black monochrome to McCausland's geologically inspired carbon-chromes to De Wilde's chemical nanotube monochrome, the carbon surface in art is a material that opens up new understandings of and relations between visual art and the material world. In the contemporary moment, the carbon monochrome resonates with the designation of the anthropocene, where conceptions of visual art defined in material terms provide important insights for our changing material world. The monochrome is a stratometer for the nonorganic life of affect, uncovering the relation between the materiality of contemporary artworks and the material world as it is continually transformed.

DeLanda's conception of nonorganic life based on the physical processes of the material world, coupled with the artwork as a material that captures dissipating affects, provides an experimental method for probing the materiality of art. This method can reawaken our relation to the nonorganic world. With these new insights, there need no longer be 'fear of materiality' for if we can only attune ourselves temporally to the flows of matter energy, we may be able to respond more fully to our new geological agencies and their impacts.

Bibliography

- 1 Barad, K. (2003) 'Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter', *Signs*, vol.28, no.3, pp.801–31.
- 2 Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- 3 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- 4 Buseck, P.R., Tsipursky, S.J. and Hettich, R. (1992) 'Fullerenes from the geological environment', *Science*, vol.257, no.5067, pp.215–17.
- 5 Cornish, S. (2014) 'Questions for Simon Callery, Lawrence Carroll, Angela De La Cruz, and Onya McCausland: Enantiodromia part I and II', Fold Gallery, <http://www.foldgallery.com/press/questions-for-simon-callery-lawrence-carroll-angela-de-la-cruz-and-onya-mccausland-enantiodromia-part-i-and-ii/>, accessed 23.8.2018.
- 6 Davis, H. and Turpin, E. (2015) *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London, Open Humanities Press.
- 7 DeLanda, M. (1992) 'Nonorganic life' in J. Crary and S. Kwinter (eds) *Incorporations (Zone 6)*, New York, Zone Books, pp.128–67.
- 8 DeLanda, M. (2002) *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney, Bloomsbury.
- 9 DeLanda, M. (2010) 'Materialism and politics' in W. Schirmacher (ed.) *Deleuze: History and Science*, New York and Dresden, Atropos Press, pp.29–50.
- 10 DeLanda, M. (2016) *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- 11 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
- 12 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1994) *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- 13 De Wilde, F. (2014) 'NANOblck-Sqr#1', *Frederik De Wilde*, <https://frederik-de-wilde.com/project/nanoblck-sqr/>, accessed 9.12.2016.
- 14 De Wilde, F. (2016) 'MIne #1', *Frederik De Wilde*, <https://frederik-de-wilde.com/project/mIne/>, accessed 9.12.2016.
- 15 Dittrich, J. (2011) 'A life of matter and death: Inorganic life in Worringer, Deleuze, and Guattari', *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, vol.33, no.2, pp. 242–62.

- 16 Elkins, J. (2008) 'On some limits of materiality in art history', *31: Das Magazin des Instituts für Theorie*, no.12, pp.25–30.
- 17 Ingold, T. (2007) 'Materials against materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol.14, no.1, pp.1–16.
- 18 Leslie, E. (2005) *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry*, Reaktion Books.
- 19 Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- 20 McEvilley, T. (1996) 'Seeking the primal through paint: The monochrome icon', in *Capacity: The History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*. Amsterdam: G & B Arts International.
- 21 O'Sullivan, S. (2001) 'The aesthetics of affect: Thinking art beyond representation', *Angelaki*, vol.6, no.3, pp.125–35.
- 22 Parikka, J. (2015) *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 23 Povinelli, E. (2016) *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- 24 Rosenthal, S. (2007) *Black Paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz.
- 25 Staff, C. (2015) *Monochrome: Darkness and Light in Contemporary Art*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris.
- 26 Worringer, W. (1920) *Form Problems of the Gothic*, New York, G. E. Stechert.
- 27 Worringer, W. ([1908] 1953) *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, New York, International Universities Press.
- 28 Yusoff, K. (2013) 'Geologic life: Prehistory, climate, futures in the anthropocene', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol.31, no.5, pp.779–95.



OUTSIDE THE SPECTRUM: POIETIC ENCOUNTERS OF LIGHT-MATTER

Sara Buoso

Abstract

The paper proposes a re-think of the poiesis of materiality in contemporary arts through arguments about the agency, processuality and ethics of the material and its supplements. Informed by new materialisms, the essay contributes to the repositioning of the practice of poiesis in an artistic context by establishing a new modality of Althusser's 'encountering the material' from proximity to matter to the mastery of techniques. By investigating the etymology of the term 'spectrum', the paper sidelines the logic of classical materialism that encounters affective dispositions in the milieu of materiality, which reaches into the space of language, re-presentation and experience. The paper focuses on the poiesis of light's matter by introducing James Turrell's artistic practice, which explores the epiphany of a materiality of difference. Poiesis comes to identify a disposition toward the potentialities and actualities of the material, where the sensorium of experience coexists with the logic of techné. While the frames of material practices interrogate both the originary system of materiality and the virtuality of technologies, poiesis draws on these differences to cultivate a horizon of meaning and experience.

Keywords: poiesis, materiality, light, spectrum, sensorium, framing

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-5>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s05>

Biographical note

Sara Buoso is a PhD candidate in Art History and Theory at the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins. Her research focuses on investigating a materialism of light in contemporary artistic practices. Her research studies emerged from art-writing (*Juliet Art Magazine*, *LYL Blog*, *Domusweb*, *Ars-key/Teknedia*, *Exibart*), curatorial practices (*The Collector*, The Camera Club, London, 2017; *Tending to Infinity*, Carousel, London, 2015) and museums' learning experience (Royal Academy, London, 2015–17; MACRO, Rome, 2007). Recent papers and presentations include 'Plastic aspects of the light's material between poiesis and experience' at the Association for Art History's annual conference (Loughborough, 2017), 'The parergon: Towards horizons of experience' at the Derrida Today Conference (London, 2016) and 'Light-matter: The interplay of practice and experience the Encountering Materiality Conference (Geneva, 2016).

Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

OUTSIDE THE SPECTRUM: POIETIC ENCOUNTERS OF LIGHT-MATTER

Sara Buoso, University of the Arts
London, Central Saint Martins

The cultivation of *poiesis*

The ways in which materiality encounters language and experience have followed diverse routes since the question of the very nature of the artwork was posed (Heidegger, 1971). Beyond the transcendental ego of classical materialism, modernity marked an aesthetic shift in the modes of understanding material practices, acknowledging how the artwork has fulfilled 'its own autonomous formal law' as discussed by Theodor Adorno (1992, p.53). Away from the optics of metaphysics, contemporary understandings of materiality have posed questions about the 'material encounter' (Althusser, 2006) with an interest in investigating the interplay between material events and material relationships, aiming to recuperate an 'originary' attitude towards materiality and simultaneously reflecting on the system that determines the actualisation of presence. The disclosure of ontology that has underlined the philosophical thought in the twentieth century has culminated in poststructuralist and new-materialist discourses which from the critique of 'being as presence' revealed affirmative connotations of materiality beyond the classification of binary categories. In particular, in contemporary arts, Barbara Bolt, in her attempt to move away from philosophies of the enlightenment, proposes an enquiry into the agency, the processuality and the mutability of material practices (2007a).

Among these routes, this essay intends to recuperate the ancient practice of *poiesis* that, since Plato in the *Symposium* (385–370 BC), has identified the practice of making, which resists the time of the lived-experience by establishing an empathic relation with the material. In the *Symposium*, the voice is given to Diotima who introduces the practice of *poiesis* by arguing:

Everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry; and so all the creations of every craft and profession are themselves a kind of poetry, and everyone who practices a craft is a poet.

(Plato, 1997, p.488)

Diotima's interest is to describe a practice that draws on lived experience through creation and

making, analogous to the art of poetry which cultivates the rhythm of the muses. As Diotima suggests, the etymology of the verb '*poieo*', from which both '*poiesis*' and 'poetry' stem, highlights a rooted association between making and language, materiality and thinking, further reinforced by Martin Heidegger, who, by laying the foundations of modern ontology through the essence of language, suggests a modality of thinking through poetry (1971, p.194). Thus, *poiesis* describes a practice that entangles the rhythm of making and knowledge, understood as the ethics of existence within the horizon of material becoming.

A metaphor drawn from nature may help to describe the dynamis involved in the poietic process, anticipating the modern understanding of material agency by focusing on the articulation between potentialities and actualities. Hegel discussed (2012, p.14) and Heidegger elaborated (1977, p.10) the metaphor of the blossom in which the 'breaking through' of the material reveals a process of creation and uncovers the 'false form' of fixed categorisation. *Poiesis* configures a mimetic practice of material becoming, showing its highest manifestation by adhering to the very nature of experience: as a blossom bursts into a bloom, an artwork (a silver chalice in Heidegger's words) is dependent on the approach of the craftsman towards the material (1977, p.10). By rejecting the hierarchy of matter-spirit or matter-form, *poiesis* establishes a modality of material encountering that concentrates the friction between differences, by which subject and object are understood, through a unilateral relation.

While contemporary approaches suggest renegotiating this distance as displaced in the *milieu* of heterogeneous encounter, the gesture of *poiesis* intends to cultivate the proximity within the material interplay by acknowledging the encountering of differences, formations and experiences. Following the path inaugurated by Heidegger, the art of making entails a redefinition of subject-object's relations by attributing value to the material so that through sensory, perceptual and affective experiences, *poiesis* comes to be understood as a mode of apprehension (Bolt, 2007a).

However, in the context of contemporary art practices the encounter between subject and object is often mediated by the disruption of modern technologies, further problematising the articulation of material processes and the mastery of techniques. How do practices of *poiesis* and technology correspond to the manifestation of a material expressivity? If it is true that both describe practices of making, what is their difference? How do both *poiesis* and technology rethink the relationship between materiality and meaning?

As Heidegger argues, the mode of 'bringing-forth' pertains to the practice of both *poiesis* and technology. In particular, he describes the process of disclosure and the revealing of nature (Heidegger, 1977, p.11). Through an insight into the ontological horizon of matter and practices, Heidegger anticipates the discussion about the autonomy of the material by distinguishing between material presence and the standing-reserve of all virtualities (1977, p.17). It follows that by examining the materiality of experience beyond phenomena, Heidegger draws attention to practices that allow an investigation into the very essence of material encountering. Between the ontological horizon of becoming and the manifestation of presence, the bifurcation between *poiesis* and technology shows a difference in the mode of articulating the intentionalities of practices. While *poiesis* emerges with the aim of making the material present, technology questions the truth of the virtuality of the material. Thus, the two practices are understood as a double reversal within material encountering, showing, on the one hand, the bringing-forth of *poiesis* in relation to the sensory aspects of materiality and, on the other, technology's reflection of the potentialities hidden beyond the actualisation of presence. As Heidegger further discusses, this distinction lies in the understanding of the term *techne* which denotes both practices but while in *poiesis*, *techne* describes the processes of artistic creation and making, in technology, the word defines a mode of *episteme*, reflecting on the truth of the material standing-reserve.

In order to recuperate the aesthetic aspects of both *poiesis* and technology, in the context of contemporary arts, despite the risk of instrumentality (Heidegger, 1977, p.12), Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly introduced the notion of '*meta-poiesis*' (2011). It describes the state of poietic processes better, repositioned within the horizon of material encountering outside the transcendental ego of metaphysics. According to the authors, *physis*, *poiesis* and technology reflect practices that gather the manifold of the material world (p.274) and interrogate the resistance of the material beyond the logic of subjective domains so that the potentialities of matter can be brought out at their best.

From these understandings, this essay argues for the cultivation of *poiesis*, understood as a disposition and a system, with the aim to fulfil the active potentiality of the material. Drawing on the disclosure of ontology and the affirmative aspects of the material, the movement of *poiesis* resembles the deferral chain of poststructuralist discourses between presence and absence, actuality and virtuality. While acknowledging

the affirmative aspects of matter, the article examines how *poiesis* describes an artistic practice favouring a material encountering, lying in the proximity of differences. Beyond the logic of subjectivity and the instrumentality of technology, *poiesis* follows the material articulation, contributing to the processes of meaning-making and experience.

By introducing propositions on the materiality of light, the essay considers a choice of works by the artist James Turrell (b. 1943), who employs a poietic practice for materialising light. In his words:

No, I use it (*light*) as a material and the medium is perception. Others use light to dematerialize physical material and I just take light in space to materialize it, to make it feel as material, something you comprehend and confront as something physically there and present. I am interested in the 'thingness' of light. Generally, we use light to illuminate things. And for that reason the only object will be light objectified or occupying space. I use material light to materialize this material presence as opposed to dematerialize that.

(in Gehring, 2006, p.254)

Between the thingness and presence, Turrell advances propositions for the materiality of light. By side-lining the idea of light as a conduit of vision and reason, the artist enters the field of poietic practices to explore light's standing-reserve emerging from the encounter with space and perception. From this encounter, *poiesis* and technology are understood as complementary aspects of light's material, characterised simultaneously by sensory and affective qualities. While matter and energy reflect two modes of expressing the material, Turrell is interested in the poietic process that allows light to be manifested and experienced through sensory perception. The cultivation of a *poiesis* of light follows the renegotiation of the processes of meaning-making focused on the disruption of an expressivity of light.

A materiality of light

Light is a significant example for the understanding of the transition from classical to new materialisms, underlining the necessity to rethink materiality and meaning beyond the metaphysical metaphor of the heliotrope. In the contemporary context, light is displaced within the horizon of practices and experiences. From the late 1960s, artists began to explore the potentiality of light's material, advanced by the development of practices and technologies expressive of a significant transition in the modes

of representation, as argued by Peter Weibel, who examined how in modern and contemporary discourses light has been fundamental for challenging the metaphysics of symbolic meaning in relation to modes of configuring presence (2010, p.12). By interrogating light-matter beyond its vexed association with reason and optics (*lumen*), light recuperates a sensory matter (*lux*) by establishing a specific relation with the sight of perception and human experience, as observed by Martin Jay (1993) in the analysis of the scopic regime in Western culture. As Jay suggests, opposed to the rationality of metaphysical categories, *lux* entails an unmediated assimilation of perceptual stimuli, an objectified perception or embodied vision (pp.29–30). Beyond the rationality of metaphysical categories, light is a materiality articulated through the interplay of agential, processual and heterogeneous determinations, entangled with the horizon of experience. Between presence and absence, the materiality of light describes not only a material of sensory and perceptual manifestations but also a matter of inherent qualities and agencies. Drawing on Bolt's proposition, 'shedding light for the matter' (Bolt, 2000), a materialism of light exceeds optics and visible phenomena to recuperate the movement of its internal qualities.

From these propositions, some contemporary artists acknowledge the necessity of exploring a system of multiplicity which, by replacing the foundations of linear representation, lies in 'a nucleus of opacity within a network of transparent significations' (Derrida, 1978, p.283). A materiality of difference entails reconsiderations of the modes in which artistic practices and meaning are articulated, as has been extensively proposed in poststructuralist and postmodern discourses (Lyotard & Chaput, 1985; Derrida, 2015). According to these positions, while the foundations of language – traditionally epitomised by the metaphor of the heliotrope (Derrida, 1982, p.251) – have been analogously displaced towards the horizon of the material becoming, meanings and representations are articulated through the interplay of differences (Derrida, 1976, p.203). Thus, materiality and meaning are understood as practices of renegotiating differences in material becoming, showing how the symbolic and expressive registers coexist as complementary aspects of experience.

From these presuppositions, *poiesis* becomes a privileged mode of approaching the material world, embracing both the materiality and language of light, focusing on the interplay within proximities. *Poiesis* – which defines the disposition and the mastery of practices, techniques and poetic language – prospects

a modality for the 'primacy of positivity' (Althusser, 2006, p.189) focused on the affirmative aspects of the material despite the domain of form and transcendental thinking. In the *milieu* of the material encounter, the very essence of *poiesis* is reflected in the framing of experience, which describes an operation of gathering-together the heterogeneity of the material standing-reserve, as proposed by Heidegger through the notion of 'enframing' (*Gestell*) (1977, p.17). In the framing of material becoming, we encounter the difference and the double reversal of poietic and technological practices.

As a materiality of difference aims to recuperate a naturalization of meaning and experience, Turrell argues for a *poiesis* of light-practices, beyond Euclidean geometry and Cartesian coordinates, by recuperating 'a primordial connection' with light's matter that is as powerful in its agency, as it is fragile in its presence (Turrell, 1985, p.22). By superseding the object and the form of the artwork, the artist inaugurates a *poiesis* of light, developed through plastic articulations of differences, expressed in the fluidity of its qualities, oscillating between translucency and opacity, weightlessness and gravity, atmosphere and volume. Not interested in the classification of natural and artificial light, Turrell concentrates on renewing the encounter with light's material through the mastery of techniques, with a distinct interest in exploring how human experience is enveloped in these processes. By rejecting the mimesis of representation, his practice becomes a juxtaposition of poietic and technological techniques in relation to the grace of light's natural phenomena. By orientating the viewer's attention toward the apparent simplicity of light's material, the artist problematises the modes in which things are given to experience. His argument suggests that a rational, mechanical understanding of light's phenomena, does not convey the virtual hidden in the material's standing-reserve. In order to re-establish a primordial connection with it, Turrell argues for a *poiesis* of practices and experience, moved by the desire to fill the distance between the artist and viewer with an originary materiality of light. Turrell does not intend to conform to the canons of aesthetic judgement, rather his interest lies in the palpable experience of encountering light. In his work, light is displaced within the horizon of material becoming. *Poiesis* describes the practice of recuperating a materiality of light through the making of art and reflected in spatial and perceptual strategies aimed to re-invent the encounter with light-matter. Drawing an analogy with Henri Moore's sculptural language, it could be said that the practice of *poiesis* entails being 'truth to material' (cited in

Hiller, 2015, p.53), i.e. to its own specific qualities and compositional elements. Poetic practices are modes of expressing the varied and fertile processes of form inventions (Moore, 2002, p.104). In the contemporary context, the potentialities of poetic practices are informed by technology which opens to the horizon of the virtual. Influenced by the Art and Technology programme at the LACMA Museum (1967–71) as well as by the statements of the Light and Space movement (1960s), the aim of Turrell's artistic research lies in the exploration of light's materiality between the visible and the invisible. Focused on the encounter of light, perception and space, his practice is pivotal in proposing a *poiesis* of the sensory, corporeal, affective and experiential aspects of light.

Outside the spectrum: Material presences

Among his first works, the series *Mendota Stoppages* (1969–74) is significant for the articulation of a

materiality of light in conjunction with a *poiesis* of practice beyond the logic of rational thinking. A *poiesis* of light emerges as mode of recuperating the material and the possibilities of configuration. The works, conceived just after the experimental series *Projection Pieces* (1966–9) and before the performative drawing *Music for Mendota* (1970–1), consist of a number of spatial apertures through a sequence of chambers in the artist's studio in Santa Monica. It comprehensively prospects an immersive and performative experience of light in space. With reference to the archetypal image of Plato's Cave, Turrell masters a space by exploring plastic aspects of light's material, investigating the frictions between the inside and the outside of chambers which convey a *sensorium* of light's material phenomena (Fig. 5.1).

In Adock's analysis of this work (1990, pp.89–99), the site-specific installation is rendered through a series of ten stages, counterpointed by the alternation



Figure 5.1: James Turrell, *Mendota Stoppages*, 1969–1974. Black-and-white photograph, framed 12 ½ x 13 ½ x 1 in, unframed 6 ½ x 8 ½ in. (Courtesy: Karen Comegys-Wortz and Edward Wortz Collection Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA)

of apertures and windows which, by filtering the light from outside the studio, simultaneously activate an inclusion-exclusion mechanism of the light entering the space. Anticipating the practice of 'sensing spaces' via negativity, Turrell directs the intervals between these apertures by closing off and opening light's natural system. In so doing light's material qualities – ranging from opacity, transparency and de-focused stages to soft, dramatic, coloured, textured, distorted, diffracted, synesthetic and shadow effects – become apparent. Insisting on the limits of the architectural space, Turrell interrogates the coordinates of Cartesian geometry – represented by the gallery's walls, windows and artificial fixtures operating in a system of intervals and differences that excludes vision – in order to make room for the expressivity of the light's material. From the darkened spaces of the studio's interior, Turrell develops a performativity of light's material, enveloping spaces and the viewer by showing the expressivity of material becoming. By rethinking the relationship between light and darkness not as an opposition but as a process, the *Mendota Stoppages* work to elaborate light's visible spectrum – traditionally understood as a vexed bond of metaphysical interpretations that unify logic, vision and truth under the metaphor of the sun – as only one side of the light's representation. As a Janus-headed figure, the term 'spectrum' can etymologically describe an apparition or an image, marking both the domain of the visible spectrum and a ghostly appearance (*spectre*). From Latin *specere*, 'to look', this figure questions the perceptual faculty of vision between conscious and unconscious conditions of visibility and invisibility. Thus, spectrum carries with it, its difference expressed through the notion of 'spectrality', a term extensively examined by Derrida in the context of historical-material discursivities (2006). Previously introduced by Goethe in his introduction to the *Theory of Colours* ('phantoms', [1810] 1970, p.1), this duality informs Derrida's speculation on the origin of materiality in modernity, which is underpinned by the inheritance of binary categories such as matter/form and matter/spirit, and leads him to argue for the displacement of materiality in the discourse of formations, processes and immediate experiences. By addressing Derrida's arguments through artistic research, Turrell's work configures the *mise-en-abyme* or the theatricality (Fried, 1998) of poetic practices. He interrogates the abyss beyond presence and the bringing-forth through poetic practices of light. Turrell's work supersedes the traditional dichotomy between light and shadow in which darkness becomes vicarious of light's material virtuality. Instead, the artist rethinks the opposition between light and darkness by making

the experience of light an objectified perception so that the limits between the visible and the invisible become a process of cultivating senses and affects. Derrida further elaborates on the term '*spectre*' to highlight the limitations of a linear representation when compared to the disruption of material differences:

What is the time and what is the history of a specter? Is there a present of the specter? Are its coming and goings ordered according to the linear succession of a before and an after, between present-past, a present-present, and a present-future, between a 'real-time' and a 'deferred time'?

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it [...].

(2006, p.48)

By reading the opposition between light and darkness through the notions of 'spectrum', the conventional aspects of this categorisation are revealed. However, it is by acknowledging the existence of such categories that the resonance of materiality enters the contemporary discourse prospecting an investigation of material qualities beyond actual presence. While in the discourse of classical materialism, spectrality could be seen as a response to the metaphysical opposition between matter and spirit, this intermediary phenomenon acts as a remainder of the standing-reserve of the material. In Turrell's work, the disruption within the manifestation of presence is sufficient to demonstrate the agency of materiality, as extensively examined by Fredric Jameson in his analysis of 'ghostly demarcations', when he argues that 'spectrality is not difficult to circumscribe, as what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage' (2008, p.38). Thus, the agential aspects of the material act through this resonance, questioning the potentialities of the material and augmenting its expressivity. Given a materiality of the '*spectre*', the poetic approach is one that is capable of re-establishing this naturalised connection with the very nature of light. It simultaneously draws on the performative aspects of matter through practices of making. By confronting an originary materiality of light with the development of practices, Turrell configures a *poiesis* of light, withdrawn from technology and projected outside the picture plane in the field of experience:

But it's this idea of inside to outside and where the picture plane is and whether there is flatness or this transparency in the space beyond, or it seems to be like something painted in front of the wall. That play is always inside to outside.

(Turrell, 2010, p.156)

By acknowledging light as *parergon*, Turrell elaborates a *poiesis* of light that frames the material field between the inside of spectrality/virtuality and the exteriorisation of material encountering. In this regard, Derrida points out how in parergonal systems, the distance between interior and exterior is marked as well as simultaneously joined in the interlacing of material traces: 'What's at stake here is a decision about the frame, about what separates the internal from the external, with a border which is itself double in its trait, and joins together what it splits' (1987, p.331). According to Derrida, the interplay of the *parergon* moves towards the intertextuality of the image between materials, subjects and contexts. In *Mendota Stoppages*, the framing-operation exceeds divisions through difference, initiating a process of making and experiencing the work. Analogously, as the framing of space disrupts the Euclidean geometry by affecting the picturality of light, so the system of signification is given by the interplay of presences and latencies. While the existing architectural space of the artist's studio is re-framed by looking at surfaces rather than spatial coordinates, the focus of Turrell's work lies in the articulation of light-apertures within continuous spaces. Both the artistic practice and the viewer's experience are thought as processes of making light express dramatic and sensory aspects. Turrell, intentionally, does not impose a focal point or predetermined vision but is interested in underlining the arbitrariness of such interventions, which conforms with the articulation of light's materiality. Turrell's frame differs from traditional window-techniques – with emphasis on the perceptual and prosthetic qualities of light – through its abyssal displacement of material spectrality. In his practice, surfaces, processes and apertures are thought to render the proximity of material differences. While the use of technologies of space helps in exploring a difference in the material articulation, Turrell proposes a *poiesis* of exteriorisation by cultivating light's material in the meeting points of contiguous spaces, allowing light's matter to resonate through chance and encounters. The artist suspends the aesthetic judgement to prospect an immediate experience of light, understood in terms of affective experiences, focused on 'faciality' (Bolt, 2000; Deleuze, 2009) or the proximity to expressive significations. This

aspect displaces the processes of representation and meaning-making towards the horizon of experience. By reinventing the logic of light and darkness, Turrell seems to suggest that while darkness is subjected to representation because it is anchored to the presence of an object, light reflects a precondition of vision, as if it were configuring a mode of being. Analogously, the meaning of the work is not founded on a priori categories imposed by the transcendental ego, but by allowing the symbolic to coexist with expressivity. The *poiesis* of language becomes a practice of cultivating light's inscriptions within the becoming of experience.

The 'bringing-forth' of light

While in *Mendota Stoppages* Turrell introduces a materiality of difference, analysed between the latency and the difference of light's material, the installation *St. Elmo's Breath* (1992) focuses on the 'bringing-forth' of *poiesis* (Heidegger, 1971, p.11). It shows aspects of revealing and challenging that pertain to the production of material encounters and meanings. The varied and fertile processes of form-inventions of Turrell's work emerge as entangled in material articulation. The installation, exhibited in the Georgian water tower at Houghton Hall in 2015, belongs to the series *Space Division Constructions*, in which the artist continues an investigation into light's perceptual qualities in relation to dark spaces. The work consists of an unlit space, a gallery room that gradually reveals a horizontal surface and a canvas-shaped aperture modulated by the LEDs (Fig. 5.2). From the experience of a dark space – better defined by the artist as a 'blind sight' to mark the difference between spaces (in Euclidean geometry) and sights (focused on the filiation between spatial fields and perception) – after 10 to 15 minutes, having adjusted both visual and other perceptual faculties, the viewer begins to materialise light as if emerging from the front-surface. Turrell rethinks vision through an embodied experience of light in space so that the materiality of light emerging from darkness becomes an objectified perception. The major aperture reveals another dimension of space and material, configuring what the artist defines as a 'sensing space' or a contextualised situation where two spaces share their sensibility. While there are no references to framing devices or architectural components, the viewer faces a field enveloped with light, emitting material intensities and simultaneously suggesting volumes and depth. Extending the latency and manifestation of light's material traces, Turrell exteriorises a *poiesis* of the experience of light by asking the viewer to cultivate a materialisation of light from perception in space which culminates in the vision of a nimbus of light,

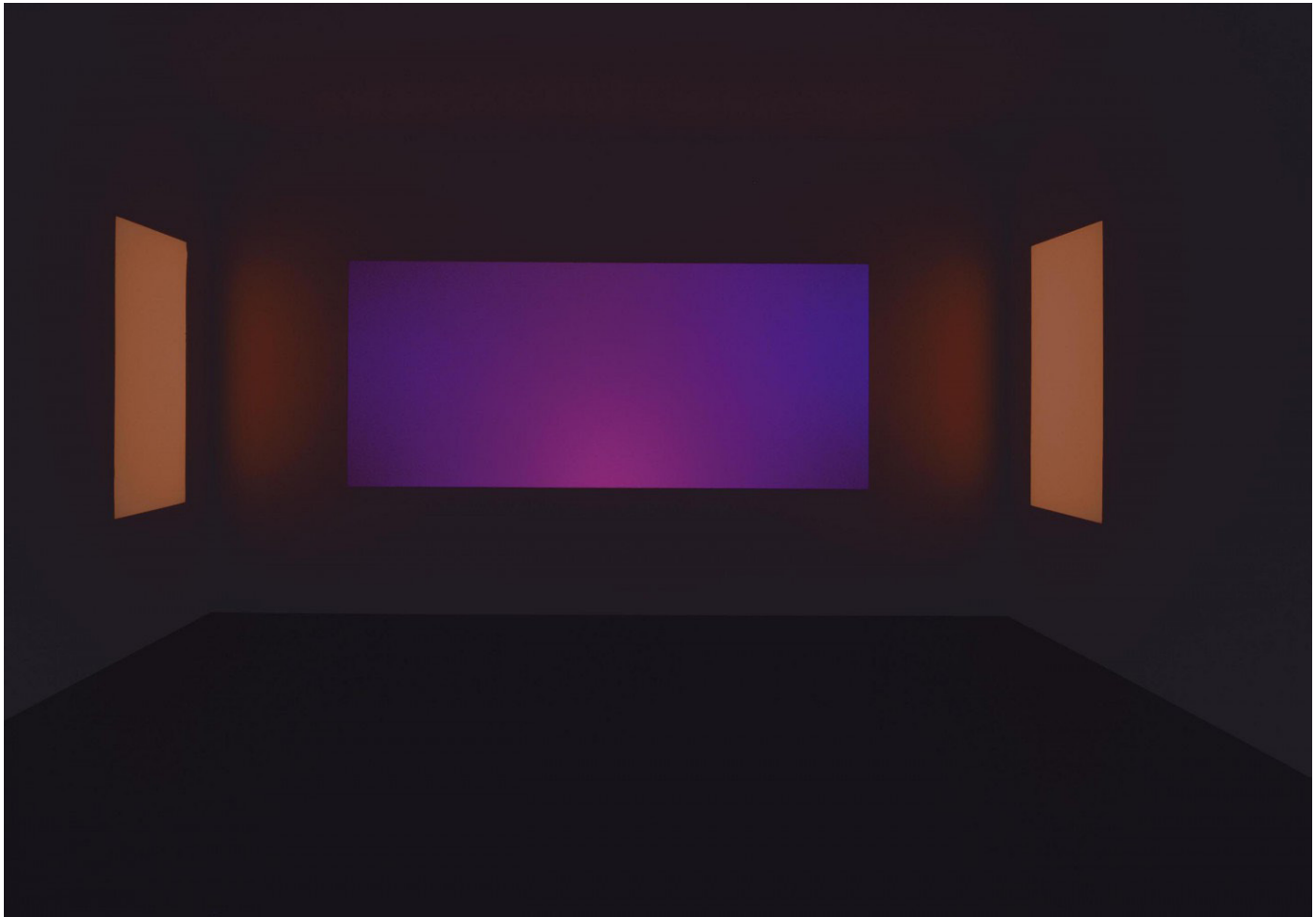


Figure 5.2: James Turrell, *St. Elmo's Breath*, 1992. (© James Turrell, Photo Peter Huggins)

recognised by the viewer as a pre-existing vision. In *St. Elmo's Breath*, Turrell focuses on the bringing-forth of *poiesis* through an experience of revealing a materiality hidden beyond presence and vision. This practice involves the creation of an experience by investigating both physical and psychic engagement. In the making of sensing-spaces of light, Turrell emphasises the disclosure of phenomena that from the 'standing-reserve' of nature move towards processes of production. When describing the experience of the work, Turrell argues:

In working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought, to make the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile. It has a quality seemingly intangible, yet it is physically felt. Often people reach out to try to touch it. My works are about light in the sense that light is present and there; the work is made of light. It's not about light or a record of it, but it is light. Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself revelation.

(1985, p.43)

The experience of light in *St. Elmo's Breath* is poetic as it describes a process that brings forth the material

between the visual and the tactile. Catherine Vasseleu, who extensively discussed a phenomenology of light through sensory experience, suggests that away from the traditional metaphysical differentiation between vision and touch, light describes a texture that gathers together both tactile and visual perceptions (2005, p.12). In Turrell's work, this phenomenon, simultaneously intangible and physical, describes a process in which light beyond the visible light, becomes tangible, sensory, material.

By privileging the sensory aspect of light's material, Turrell contributes to the rediscovery of an originary dimension in the material world. It follows that the systems of signification and representation are not necessarily related to the inscription of the signifier, but that the process of meaning-making is expressed throughout the interplay of material formations. While Turrell's vocabulary belongs to the sphere of phenomenology and existentialism with a focus on investigating the essence of light's phenomena and their articulations into the material, the space between the material and the viewer becomes also a poetic process. The inscription of signification requires to be mediated through an expressive register grounded in the experience of light. Thus, between light's material and

the viewer, the space of language is the site of arbitrary connotations, implying the absence of a centre and the anonymity of these intersubjective operations. The *poiesis* of such material encounters aims to recuperate a naturalised relation between matter and language, lying in the horizon of becoming. By discussing the possibility of a 'worldless thought', Turrell partakes in a position that Derrida defines as the 'nameless act' of the sensory sun (1982, p.251): while no other language is given to describe the sun apart from metaphors, its action in the world is perceivable but not describable. Analogously in Turrell's work, the material configuration of light does not refer to literal or metaphoric representation, but the agency of its material is sufficient to state its virtual presence.

As other contemporary light-practices have pursued the reduction of the artistic field in order to pursue the experiential aspects of artworks set out by minimalism and conceptual arts, Turrell uses a *poiesis* of material encounter by understanding his work through the exteriorisation of the *sensorium* of experience. The *poiesis* of light's material is also a *poiesis* of experience. It asks the viewer to create the work in the material encounter. By repositioning the material and the human on the same horizon of becoming, Turrell applies a *meta-poietic* process for the interplay of material differentials. Opposing the entropy of after-image phenomena, Turrell interrogates the resistance of the light's materiality in relation to spatial and perceptual exteriorisations. In this process of delays, desires and expectations, light expresses sensory and affective aspects which, while naturalising the experience of light in relation to life, prospect a discursivity grounded in the specificity of events and relations. The bringing-forth of the material resists any conceptualisation or representation. *Poiesis* becomes a strategy entangled in the affirmative aspects of the material and – while exploring the etymon of its originary figure – pursues the exteriorisation of the virtual.

The *poiesis* of mind

While drawing on the material, *poiesis* informs discursivity and artwork by elaborating the unilateral relations within processes. Analogously to the articulation of forms, meaning and experience are practices of making informed by material encounter. Turrell's light-painting *Sensing Thought* (2005), part of the *Tall Glass/Wide Glasses* series, introduces an enquiry on top of a *poiesis* of meaning and experience, by investigating the notion of 'sensing space' which opposes the transcendental ego of metaphysics in favour of the material (Fig. 5.3). Turrell describes the term as follows:

This is a situation where the space opens into another space from which it gets its light. That light passes through the opening and is diffused in volume. Because it takes all its light from another space, the sensing space is in some manner an expression of that space.

(1985, p.22)

Turrell continues:

The space I make looks out onto the space from which it gets light. I make the aperture, or opening, in relation to both. That opening dictates whether or not the light energy is diffused throughout the space or is imaged in part of it. Then I form the space to accept the incoming light. I form it in relation to the color that enters it, as certain volumes will hold certain color tones. When the volume of space is correctly formed to receive the color that enters it, it fogs up. When it isn't, the space seems empty.

(1985, p. 23)

The light painting employs an LED technique that was developed through to modulations of intensities and colours of the light. While the window display refers to traditional painting techniques, the technological medium employed by the artist disrupts the logic of the pictorial surface, understood as a field of material encountering, by being both the source and the content of the artwork. The painting is not intended to be seen as a perspectival frame, thus rather than projecting an optics of the world, it aims to produce an immersive experience by affecting body and mind simultaneously. In Turrell's works, light is not the medium of the visible, but rather the material of an immersive sensory experience. The rejection of any geometrical reference is expressed through a series of wall-interventions. Similarly, the exhibition display is modulated according to convex and concave surfaces that suggest to permeate an atmosphere of light within space. If the loop of computerised neon settings modulates light according to slow-motion, the simulation of the natural qualities of light is emphasised by a high-level of intensity within the chromatic scale, producing a dramatic effect that contrasts the use of sophisticated technologies with the transparency of the glass's surface. The notion of 'sensing' is significant for describing Turrell's *poiesis*, replacing the rationality of Cartesian coordinates with the material encounter between two spaces. In *Sensing Thought*, the artist draws on two perceptual dimensions, given by the light-painting and the light-space, and withdrawing from the differences between the two. Poietic practices open

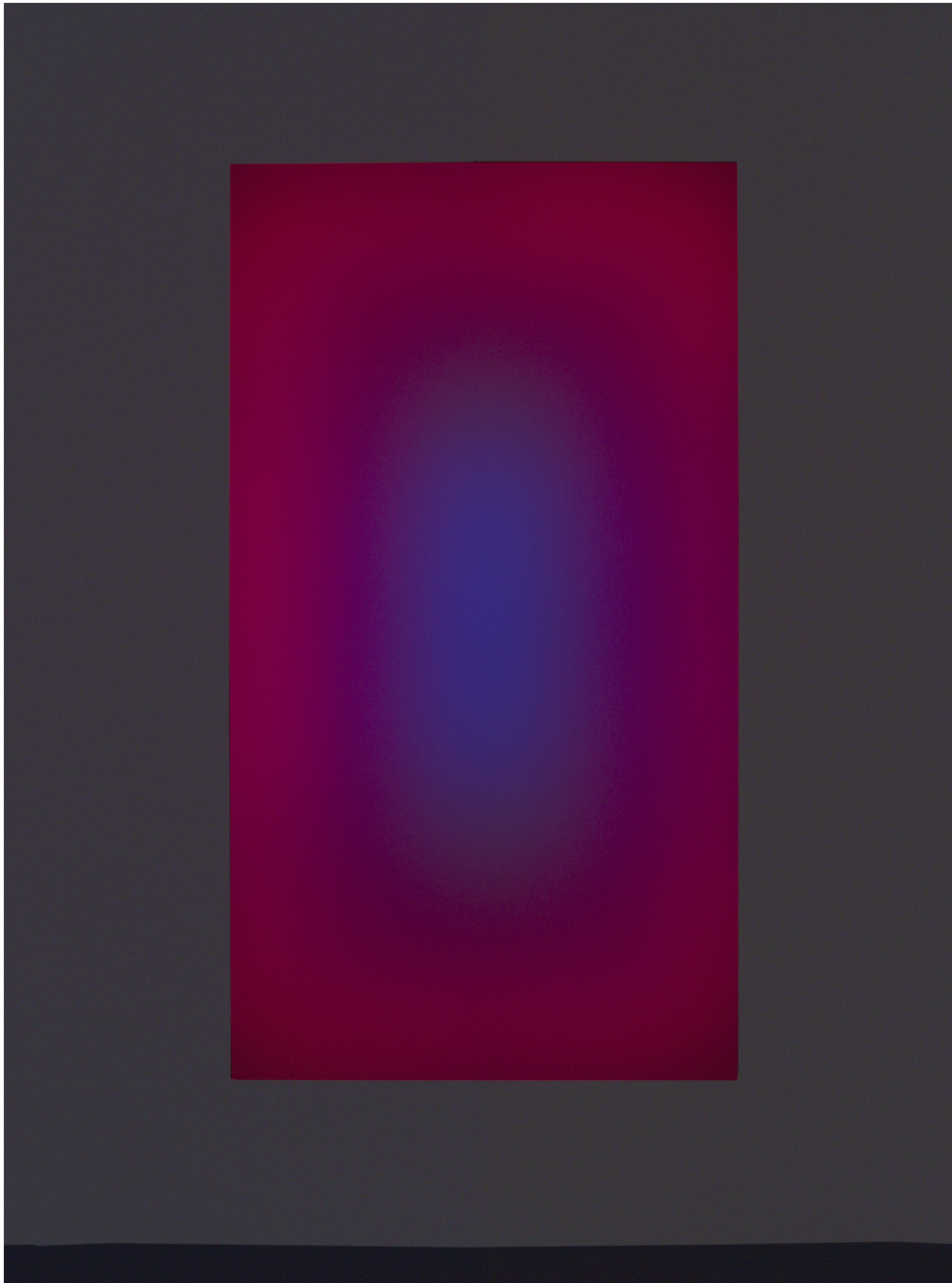


Figure 5. 3: James Turrell, *Sensing Thought*, 2005. Wood, plexiglass, computerised neon settings. (© James Turrell Photo, Courtesy Pace Gallery)

to the *sensorium* of experience, a term employed by Bolt who, elaborating on Leibniz's organon of sensation (Leibniz & Clarke [1715] 2000), argues that the corpus of material forces, such as bodies, perceptions and affects, constitutes a mode of cultivating knowledge, despite the binary category of body and mind. By reintroducing the entanglement of these two aspects, the system of metaphysical representation challenges 'by undermining the nihilist reception of art through representation, moving it towards a focus on matter, affect and sensation' (Bolt, 2007b, p.xv). Similarly, the processes of meaning-making adhere to the entering of sensory and material aspects within the field of language. The *poiesis* of light's material carries meaning by looking at the specificity of material determinations as immersed in the experience of the work. As analysed

by Miwon Kwon (2011), the idea of refusing to conform to the artistic object, is an intentional *manoeuvre* that allows the artist to develop the processuality and mutability of the viewer's experience in the space. In *Sensing Thought*, Turrell shifts the phenomenological perception of space by confronting the frontality of the pictorial space which, rather than representing a metaphor of vision, becomes understood as a vertical horizon of consciousness and memory, enveloping the sensory perception with the articulation of language and thinking. In Turrell's words: 'Light has a regular power for me. What takes place in viewing a space is wordless thought. It's not as though it's unthinking and without intelligence; it's that it has a different return than words' (1985, p.46). Through this statement, Turrell reinforces his attempt to investigate a naturalisation of

knowledge beyond the transcendental ego. In *Sensing Thought*, the bond between materiality and meaning does not necessarily involve the linguistic signature, but it can relate to the modes of existence. Opposed to abstract models of representation, the meaning hidden in processes of making, procedures and formations is in itself sufficient to validate an experience of knowledge. Analogously, Heidegger stated: 'poetically man dwells' (1971, p.213), arguing that the very essence of poetry lies in the acts of measuring and questioning, which constitute modes of thinking the horizon of becoming. By rejecting the teleological purpose of metaphysical thought, poietic thinking reconciles the very essence of the material world and the practices of making. These processes sit at the core of Turrell's practice, pointing the viewer towards an originary materiality of light and the mastering of experience.

Frameworks of poietic encounters: Materiality, language, experience

In this analysis the dynamis of *poiesis* has shown how a materiality of difference, lying between the potentialities and the actualities of the material, disrupts the logic of a linear representation of light, expressing simultaneously the spectrum and the spectrality of material traces. Through these frictions, a *poiesis* configures a practice of creation, intended to articulate material encounters. The work of the artist James Turrell is paradigmatic for the development of a *poiesis* of light, focused on recuperating an originary relationship with it outside the logic of the transcendental ego. Between presence and absence, the artist develops a poietic approach to explore performative, sensory and affective practices of encountering light.

The analysis of the site-specific installation *Mendota Stoppages* shows how *poiesis* escapes the logic of Euclidean geometry and the optics of metaphysics to focus on the rendering of light experiences. By introducing asymmetric modes of perception, the cultivation of *poiesis* reveals the potentialities of the material, framed within a *milieu* of heterogeneous encountering. The differences between material formations show the epiphany of light's material between presence and absence, articulated through the encountering of space and perception. In *St. Elmo's Breath*, Turrell aims to investigate an originary condition of signification by looking simultaneously at light in relation to human sight and the development (bringing-forth) of mastery and experiences. By focusing on the plasticity of this process, *poiesis* becomes a parameter of the artist, the viewer and the interpreter. In *Sensing Thought*, Turrell considers the *sensorium* of light's

material which informs ways of meaning and thinking. By acknowledging these affinities, *poiesis* introduces new modes of understanding, superseding the binary category of body and mind.

The cultivation of *poiesis* reflects a modality of mastering the material by recognising the potentialities – lying in the horizon of all virtualities – hidden beyond presence. Technology shares with *poiesis* the condition of 'bringing-forth' and 'challenging' the nature of the material through practices, but while technology focuses on the 'standing-reserve' of material virtuality, *poiesis* concentrates on the exteriorisation of the light's material encounter, expressed in the interplay of practices and experience but beyond instrumentality. From the cultivation of this mastery, the relationship between materiality and signification is reconsidered beyond rational thinking, arguing for a naturalisation of practices and experience. The metaphor of the sun, central to metaphysical thinking, is displaced towards a material horizon of becoming wherein meaning is drawn from events and relationships. While recuperating the truth of material, *poiesis* inaugurates a discursivity of light, informed by the entanglement of matter, practice and experience.

By looking at a *poiesis* of light, the essay discussed a materiality of light between the visible and the invisible. Not limited to the spectrum of presence, this materiality of difference lies in the articulation of processes, formations and practices. Through the sensory and affective aspects of material, light is understood as a matter of experience in its becoming. *Poiesis* articulates the reinvention of its own manifestations in the material world.

Bibliography

- 1 Adcock, C. and Turrell, J. (1990) *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 2 Adorno, T. (1992) 'Letter to Walter Benjamin' in P. Brooker *Modernism/postmodernism*, London, Longman.
- 3 Althusser, L. (2006) *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, London, Verso.
- 4 Bolt, B. (2000) 'Shedding light for the matter', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 202–16.
- 5 Bolt, B. (2007a) 'Material thinking and the agency of matter', *Studies in Material Thinking*, no. 1, pp. 1–4.
- 6 Bolt, B. (2007b) *Sensorium: Aesthetics, Art, Life*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars.
- 7 Deleuze, G. (2009) *Cinema 1: The Movement-image*, London, Continuum.
- 8 Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 9 Derrida J. (1978) *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 10 Derrida, J. (1982) *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 11 Derrida, J. (1987) *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 12 Derrida, J. (2006) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York, Routledge.
- 13 Derrida, J. (2015) 'Dematerialisation: Matériau and matériel' in P. Lange-Berndt (ed.), London, MIT Press.
- 14 Dreyfus, H. and Kelly, S.D. (2011) *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, New York, Free Press.
- 15 Fried, M. (1998) *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 16 Gehring, U. (2006) *Bilder aus Licht: James Turrell im Kontext der amerikanischen Kunst nach 1945*, Heidelberg, Kehrer.
- 17 Goethe, J.W.V. (1970) *Theory of Colours*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- 18 Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, Routledge.
- 19 Hegel, G.W.F. (2012) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York, Digireads.com.
- 20 Heidegger, M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, Perennial Library.
- 21 Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question concerning Technology, and other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row.
- 22 Hiller, S. (2015) 'Truth and truth to material' in P. Lange-Berndt, P. (ed.) *Materiality*, London, MIT Press.
- 23 Jameson, F. (2008) 'Marx's purloined letter' in M. Sprinker (ed.) *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, London, Verso.
- 24 Jay, M. (1993) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 25 Kwon, M. (2011) 'Rooms for light, light on its own' in J. Turrell *James Turrell*, London, Gagosian Gallery.
- 26 Leibniz, G.W. and Clarke, S. (2000) *Leibniz and Clarke: Correspondence*, ed. and with an introduction by Roger Ariew, Indianapolis, Hackett.
- 27 Lyotard, J.-F. and Chaput, T. (1985) *Les immatériaux*, 2 vols, Paris, Centre Pompidou.
- 28 Moore, H. (2002) *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations*, ed. by Alan Wilkinson, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 29 Plato (1997) *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, Indianapolis, Hackett.
- 30 Turrell, J. (1985) *Occluded Front: James Turrell*, ed. by Julia Brown, Los Angeles, Lapis Press / Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 31 Turrell, J. (2010) *James Turrell: Zug Zuoz*, ed. by Matthias Haldemann, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz.
- 32 Turrell, J. (2011) *James Turrell*, London, Gagosian Gallery.
- 33 Weibel, P. (2010) *Rosalie Lichtkunst*, Zurich, Scheidegger & Spiess.



WHEN WORDS FALTER

Sara Davies

Abstract

When words falter in translation I feel a desire to touch, to form my life story in artworks, letting visual images express my movement between cultures. I examine issues of belonging in the Swedish diaspora in the north of England, bringing a minority discourse into the public realm. In my art practice I articulate the embodied experience of negotiating two cultures, transforming Homi Bhabha's notion of 'third space' into visual forms. Using my art practice as an example of haptic experience and this essay as a platform to reflect, I examine the relation between making and making sense in diaspora.

When words falter, I encounter things haptically. Diasporic touch is a conceptual idea naming a reiterated gesture in my practice which gathers cultural material from established narratives and reassembles them into visual forms. Diasporic touch is a performative gesture that opens up an imaginary space where closeness disrupts linear time and making art generates a sense of being at ease. Using Nikos Papastergiadis' ideas of 'hyphenetic energy' and bridging, and Julia Kristeva's theories of signification and subjectivity formation, I will analyse my Anglo-Swedish diasporic sliding motion between two cultures.

Keywords: belonging, diaspora, Scandinavian studies, materiality, haptics, affect, art practice, performativity, photography

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-6>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s06>

Biographical note

Sara Davies is a Associate Lecturer and a Ph.D. student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research project, 'Creating images of belonging through diasporic touch', is investigated through art practice. She uses performance, photography, moving image and creative writing to explore belonging in diaspora. After completing a BA(Hons) in Fine Art at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design Davies relocated to Manchester and completed an MA in Visual Culture at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2003. Davies has disseminated her research at conferences such as: Association for Art Historians' New Voices conference *Image Matter: Art and Materiality* (2015) at Manchester Metropolitan University, *Writing Between the Lines* at Cardiff Metropolitan University (2016), Nordic Research Network *Bridges Between* at University College London (2016), Nordic Research Network *The North as Home* at University of Aberdeen and the international conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, *Heritages of Migration: Moving Objects Stories and Home* organised by Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, University of Birmingham and UNTREF Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (2017).

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

WHEN WORDS FALTER

Sara Davies, Manchester Metropolitan University

I slide. The lantern is spreading forest green across my bedside table. It is wrapping surfaces with images of pine needles; it is scattering memories of Sweden across my folded legs and the ruffled duvet. I move my hand through the branches, imagining them heavy and prickly. Through touch I internalise the culture I left behind in the present moment. I find comfort in the soft shade under the tall pine tree. The red-painted croft environment in the pine forest is an idyll, an imagined Sweden. A place I long for but that I know never really existed. In the light of the faint projection, pine needles are blending with the folds and fine lines of my skin. I move my hand and the pattern changes. As I lift my thumb, the shadow creates a dark shape in the projected pattern; it allows me to recall the scent of a warm forest, the feeling of bare feet on granite doorsteps and how the powdery red paint leaves traces on my fingertips. The light of the lanterns draws me closer, I search for the forest path, following the pattern of pine needles, imagining home.

The texture of the fabric in my bed linen brings me back. I am again aware of the Victorian furniture in my bedroom. The traditional cast iron fireplace, the dark brown chest of drawers, the water stained romantic prints picturing English countryside. As I sit on my bed focusing on pine needles there is a sense that the Victorian furniture disturbs my reverie, the rounded corner of the bed frame disrupts my memories of back home in Sweden. I long to see past my brown furniture to avoid forgetting. When experimenting with the lanterns in my bedroom, when seeing the images that remind me of Sweden projected on the furniture, boxes with make-up, curtains, bottles of hairspray, the Victorian-style interior of my current house in Manchester and debris of my life, I feel a lingering sense of discomfort. Embedded in one visual form, the two cultural narratives pull in different directions. I sense ambivalence. Is this what faltering words look like?

Making and making sense

In my art practice I constructed a series of 'memory lanterns' for a performance by adapting traditional candle-powered portable lamps so that they projected images that reminded me of back home in Sweden. I attached images to the glass panes so that the lanterns simultaneously lit up the interior of my present home, a Victorian terrace house in Manchester and projected images that reminded me of back home in Sweden. Through projecting onto the interior of the rooms, the architectural features and Victorian-style furniture, the lanterns created environments where elements

from one culture were superimposed onto things from another; they created cultural double exposures (Boym, 2001). In the process of making art I encountered the 'memory lanterns' through touch. The reflective writing in this article emerged from my physical encounters with the lanterns. It derived from my experimentation as I developed the lanterns into props for a performative piece of work, into a live art event. By using this article as a space to reflect on my art practice, I will address how making and making sense are interwoven in my particular diasporic situation. What feelings are linked to this process? What kinds of images emerge? Using my diasporic art practice as an example of sensuous making and this article as a platform to reflect on my making, I will examine how they interact. Rather than treating them as separate entities I intend to explore how they are entwined.

I am Anglo-Swedish. I have spent half my life in Britain and simultaneously feel British and Swedish but am neither and both. My practice-based research examines issues of belonging in the Swedish diaspora in the north of England, bringing a minority discourse into the public realm. Through my art practice, I am articulating the embodied experience of having two cultural narratives. Homi Bhabha (1994) considers cultures not as separate entities but as overlapping, intersecting and merging. He suggests that new cultural forms emerge in an indeterminate 'third space' between languages, cultures and associated historical discourses. This is a space of translation where gaps and overlaps in meaning give rise to a sense of uncertainty. In my art practice, I am giving Bhabha's notion of 'third space' between cultures a visual and tangible form that emerges from my embodied diasporic experience. In the lantern piece, I am superimposing images of the Swedish ideal home, the red-painted croft environment, onto the Victorian furniture in my house. I re-arrange linear time associated with national histories into a visual form that derives from my diasporic memories and becomes a piece that works across the space between cultures.

Art practice is a way of finding out about the human experience in the world, how we evolve as subjects in a changing environment, how we become. To develop a more detailed understanding of Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience I make use of Paul Carter's (2004) idea of material thinking. I think through the process of making art, studying how the workings of mind, eye and hand are interwoven. It is a process that derives from a physical engagement with the surrounding environment; rather than producing a linear narrative it materialises time. It is non-linear and occupies a particular position in space. As art practices sediment they retain the intricacies of human experience in the world (Carter,

2004). I use my art practice to give rise to Bhabha's third space in order to find out about the particular complexity of my Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience. As my practice unfolds I examine how I re-assemble materials, how I alter tone, shade, colour, texture and composition. My engagement with the materiality of things feels as if it has particular significance in my life, it is as if it leads me home.

Belongings

In my memory I return to the croft, not far from a lake, surrounded by tall conifer trees. The main wooden house was painted red and the barn was grey and weathered. The forest formed a dark green backdrop. A path with bilberry borders connected the yard and the meadowlands where the oxeye daisies, bellflowers, chervil and meadow cranesbills were waist high. I repeatedly imagine myself in this environment, my childhood seems to be lived by red, wooden walls but I also know that my memories are partial. This type of environment is a cultural symbol (Nora and Kritzman, 1996) that is deeply embedded in Swedish culture and linked to the notion of home. It is part of the Swedish national narrative, a symbol that is still important today (Davies, 2015). The red-painted croft by the lake in the forest has, over many years, been the subject matter and the source of inspiration in my art practice. I collect photographs, postcards, napkins, key rings, posters and many other things that depict the red-painted croft environment. I gather pictures, stories and fragment of the ideal Swedish home as keepsakes. In the process of making art, I use fragments of many red-painted houses, by many lakes, in many forests. They are from many different times and places. Yet, the fragments are all 'that croft', the idyll. The environment is a romantic, diasporic access point to my former culture (Cohen, 2008), it is how I imagine the home I left behind.

As I became aware of the recurrence of the Swedish red-painted croft environment in my art practice I began to explore how and why it was of importance in Swedish culture. How did it become connected with the idea of an ideal home? How did it become part of narratives of Sweden? The red paint used on wooden houses in Sweden, both past and present, was discovered at the copper mine in Falun. It is a by-product from the mining industry and a paint that preserves wood. The paint was cheap and therefore historically used by small-scale farmers in the rural parts of the country. The iron-oxide red is still the most common colour of houses in rural Sweden (Edenheim, 2005). It is popular with both permanent residents and summer guests. The red-painted wooden-

croft environment and the surrounding forest were during the national romantic era incorporated into the Swedish national narrative. It was often painted by Nordic national romantic painters such as Carl Larsson, Anders Zorn and Christian Skredsvig (Davies, 2015). They transformed the rural, small-scale farm environment into an idyll. This idyll was widely distributed by illustrators such as Maja Synnergren and Martta Wendelin. It was reiterated in literature by, for example, Astrid Lindgren in her books *Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn* ([1946] 2003) and *Emil i Lönnerberga* ([1963] 2004) and more recently by Sven Nordquist in his book *Pettson och Findus: Pannkakstårtan* (1984). The strength of the symbol in contemporary society is illustrated by a personal find at Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. In the tourist gift shop I found a colouring-in book for children titled *Sweden*. The picture on the cover displayed a red-painted house, the Swedish flag and the forest behind.

There is a historic presence of Swedish migrants and their descendants in the north of England. These settlements are distinctly different from Nordic migration to the country's capital (Davies, 2015). Robert Lee (2008a, p.8) explains that following the early Viking settlements, more recent Nordic immigrants to Liverpool and the north of England were seafarers and emigrants on their way to America that failed to complete their journeys or made a conscious decision to stay. The Nordic Church in the docks of Liverpool is the historic and contemporary centre for Nordic migrants and seafarers in the north of England (Lee, 2008b, p.13). I migrated to England in 1994 and my move was made possible by legislation permitting 'freedom of movement' within the European Union. At the time the power relationship between my minority culture and the host country seemed fairly equal. When I arrived in England I assimilated well, sometimes forgetting the culture I left behind. I moved from London to Manchester in 1999 and experienced decreased contact with Swedish culture. Small, temporary gatherings of Swedish people seemed to appear in my life and then disperse. There is instability in the Anglo-Swedish community in the north of England. It is going to be interesting to see, in the shifting post-Brexit political climate, if the fragility of the Anglo-Swedish community will transform into something with a firmer and more organised structure.

Since I arrived in England I have developed a passion for Victorian furniture. Perhaps it was the urban environment and the type of houses I lived in, Victorian and Edwardian terraces that triggered my interest in Victoriana. Reading books about Victorian architecture and décor became a way for me to find a new past, to

learn about my new culture and its history (McCoy Miller, [1993] 1997; Galloway, [1991] 1996; Chris, 1996). The Victorian style interiors displayed in the books were from wealthy people's homes. The books portrayed rooms from much grander properties than mine. They showed idyllic interior environments, which avoided discussing the poverty and harsh conditions that 19th-century British subjects lived under, and the industry that made the wealth possible. The desire to find out more about England was hopelessly linked with the awareness that I was choosing to encounter another romantic national narrative, another problematic notion of home. This time, perhaps arising from my urban location, the idyll was linked an upper- and middle-class way of life rather than being a romantic version of Swedish rural life.

Bridging

In my artistic practice I make my embodied diasporic experience of belonging visible. I examine the movement between cultural narratives that give rise to a sense of temporal incoherence. Nikos Papastergiadis ([2000] 2007) claims that diasporic subjectivity is not the sum of two compounded nationalities, in my instance Anglo and Swedish, but a sense of self that emerges from the area of tension between the juxtaposed categories. He offers a way of thinking about cultures in an embodied way. He states that '[i]n many recent applications of this concept, the figure of the hybrid is extended to serve as a "bridging person", one that is both the benefactor of a cultural surplus, and the embodiment of a new synthesis' (p.15). He opens up a possibility of locating Bhabha's notion of 'third space' within a person of dual heritage. He suggests that inconsistencies in translation create excess energy; it evokes creative responses. Artists and writers of dual heritage make use of this energy to creatively assemble elements from different cultures into new forms (Papastergiadis, 2007). They try to articulate the shift in meaning arising from translation. They try to bridge faltering words.

Oxeye daisies, bellflowers and cranesbills: these words feel unfamiliar to me. When reading the names of these flowers in English I translate them into Swedish. It takes a moment for the new word to register and connect with a mental picture of a specific flower. Prästkragar, hundkex och midsommarblomster, on the other hand, immediately reach my gut. When I describe memories from Sweden to others here in England, I often transform experience known in one language into another. When translating I feel the new words and sentences sometimes fall short in describing

my past. I sense the fissures and confusing slippages. The English language is unable to fully capture my Sweden-memories. The process of translation shifts my understanding of self and life. When words falter in translation I feel a desire to touch, to express my life story in creative ways, letting visual images express the gaps and overlaps in translation.

In the visual double exposures I can simultaneously see my two cultural narratives. The pine forest is converging with the lines of wardrobes, ornate skirting boards and Victorian corbels. They blend with flowerpots, patterned curtains and an ornate Victorian fireplace. Shapes are unclear; outlines are confused, bright colours transforms into greys and browns. Superimposed my homes collapse into complexity. Sometimes they seem to blend and sometimes one disrupts the other. As I slide between lanterns and the furniture in my bedroom, my focus shifts away from the meaning that arises from the work to a more haptic space. Attracted by the greys and browns I move closer. I want to be close to their texture, so close that my nose nearly touches the lantern glass. I leave the branches and pinecones behind. As I follow the shades, shapes and patterns there is no need to belong, there is no need to translate. Being in close proximity, being with the materials of the artwork is comforting. Amongst the converging lines, dark shadows and unusual shapes, I temporarily feel at ease.

Thresholds

The sense of comfort I experience when temporarily shifting focus to the shapes, patterns and shades in my artworks can be partly explained by Julia Kristeva's (1980) theory of semanalysis that allows her to reconnect the physicality of the body with language. She argues that language has two interwoven elements which are dependant on each other but at the same time compete in the construction of meaning. One element is the semiotic which encompasses the way bodily impulses are manifested in rhythm, tone and movement of writing. The other element is the symbolic which relates to the grammar, structure and linguistic conventions (Kristeva, 1980). She outlines that the semiotic is linked to the maternal; how it is a remnant of pre-linguistic experience. It is connected to the haptic and material, and unfolds in a non-linear way. Arising from our affective experience it fills language with life (Kristeva, 1980). She describes how the symbolic is linked to grammatical structures, shared meaning and conventions in society. It makes understanding possible. The symbolic without the

semiotic is text without emotion and the semiotic without the symbolic is incomprehensible chaos. The two entwined elements form a threshold from which meaning emerges (Kristeva in Keltner, 2011); it is how we come to understand ourselves as subjects.

How are these bodily impulses manifested in creative practices when there is partial identification with two symbolic systems? Kristeva (1980) connects the workings of language with the formation of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not fixed but a transformative process that develops through a movement between the semiotic and the symbolic. It emerges from a threshold between the inner psychic life and the outer structures in society (Kristeva, 1980). She suggests that the semiotic sphere is prior to the symbolic, but it cannot be known without the other, without language. The two elements are necessary in the process of becoming a speaking subject, they help form an 'I' that is knowable. According to Kristeva (1980) we identify through the symbolic at the same time as the semiotic challenges this identification through creative impulses; bodies disrupt language structure. In people with dual heritage there is an uncertainty associated with a sense of self that affects the characteristics of our body's creative impulses: it alters the performance of the semiotic. In diaspora, the relation to languages is complicated by translation and the gap between competing cultural frameworks. My lived experience is one of roaming and difficult to define.

Fractures

For a person with dual heritage belonging can be complicated by the pull of two languages, two cultural frameworks; it can be undermined by slippages of meaning, lack of correspondence and misunderstanding. Bhabha (1994) expands Kristeva's notion of semanalysis exploring life experiences of people in minority cultures. He agrees that bodily impulses establish themselves poetically in art and literature, but his theoretical approach functions differently. He (1998) suggests that bodily impulses manifest themselves in a creative underlying gesture, a bodily movement that arises from gaps and overlaps in translation. The gesture, rather than emerging from a gap between society's symbolic system and lived experience (Kristeva, 1980), arises from a sense of confusion and ambivalence. The self, instead of developing from the movement between identification with and rejection of a symbolic system (Kristeva, 1989), wanders without clear anchor points. Affected by the tension and uncertainty that characterises life experiences between cultural frameworks, the recurrent bodily

gesture reiterates: it haunts (Bhabha, 1994). For me, these returns are of specific importance in my artistic process and life.

In dual-heritage life experiences there are flaws in the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic, between becoming and belonging, inside and outside. The fractures in the process that forms subjectivity leads to a sliding sense of being placeless. It leads to a sense of loss (Kristeva, 1989). Bhabha (1998) suggests that life experiences that incorporate more than one cultural narrative result in an 'I' that roams between two symbolic systems, two cultures. It gives rise to an uncertain sense of self with partial and multiple senses of belonging, a free-flowing signifier between multiple signifieds. He writes from a postcolonial perspective that identifies significant tensions between host country and minority. He speaks of a gesture that disrupts. My diasporic experience is different; it leads to a milder gesture. As belonging is complicated by translation, the rhythms of the semiotic become more persistent (Kristeva, 1989). The rhythms return endlessly, and creativity becomes necessary. Is it possible for somebody with dual heritage to find a place of rest in the haptic experience of rhythm, tone and shade? Is it possible to dwell in the materiality of art making?

When meaning shifts and language hesitates, I encounter things haptically; I make visual forms. Diasporic touch is a performative gesture that opens up an imaginary space where I can internalise – in the present moment – the culture I left behind. It is a conceptual idea that names a reiterated gesture in my art practice, a bodily movement that gathers and reassembles cultural material from the two dominant cultural narratives in my life into complex composite forms. Through my art practice, I am making visual forms that articulate the temporal incoherence often experienced in diaspora. Linear time is disturbed as fragments from different times and places are re-assembled into artworks. My diasporic gesture makes the things that fall to the side when one language is turned into another visible. As an artist, I write descriptively about the relations of diasporic touch to Julia Kristeva's theories of signification and subjectivity formation in order to understand how making and making sense are entwined. Diasporic touch is an artistic gesture that arises from the gaps and overlaps in translation, aiming to bridge cultures in visual forms. When my words falter, I slide with the rhythm of tone, colour and shade of the red-croft environment to be at ease.

Making visible

There is an ambivalence in dual-heritage experiences in relation to the idea of home as tied to place. Instead, there is a conscious understanding that it is impossible to fully adhere to one cultural framework. Svetlana Boym (2001) emphasises the visual and haptic in the transformative process that characterises diasporic experience. She claims that people in diaspora approach the cultures they left as tourists collecting mementoes. The mementoes tend to have both personal significance and be part of established cultural narratives. She outlines how people in diaspora actively engage with the mementoes by displaying them in their homes. When arranging the treasured things in their new homes and discussing them with visitors, they remake the life they left behind in a new location: they reform their subjectivity (Boym, 2001). This transformative process encompasses touch, rearrangement and the visual experience of display. She

outlines that in diasporic experience it is important to be able to make things visible. She describes how the complexities of belonging can be shown and how home can be re-constructed through touch. Writing for people in diaspora still encompasses an encounter with the difficulties of translation. In making visual forms, it is temporarily possible to bypass the tension of two competing linguistic structures. Making visual images makes it possible to find rest.

I make visual images that articulate my position between cultures. They form a bridge between the Anglo and Swedish, the dominant cultures in my life, in a way that matches Paul Carter's (2004) and Estelle Barrett's (2013) descriptions of how creative practices use performative and material strategies to articulate the complexity of our experience. Barrett provides a detailed account of how these kinds of practices can generate new information that extends beyond established knowledge. Haptic experience, she argues,

gives rise to internal images that precede the emergence of language. The images arise in our mind as we handle the surrounding environment; they capture heterogeneous experience. If artists make use of these internal images in their artistic processes, they can generate new understandings about our experience and offer information that is positioned between languages and historical discourses (Barrett, 2013). As I am handling the red-painted croft environment in my art practice, I am thinking *through* this handling, I am making and making sense of my diasporic experience between histories (Fig 6.1).



Figure 6.1: Sara Davies, *Memory Lanterns*, 2016. Performance, work in progress.

Through touch I am sliding between cultural frameworks, moving between languages and different ways of making sense of experience. I slide, I reach and I touch. I move closer. Temporarily there is no need for translation. I touch the tall skirting board interrupting the image of pine needles. I feel the glossy, smooth paint and see pine needles on my hand. In diasporic touch I reach the conifer forest and it reaches me. I touch the narrow attic staircase in the Victorian terrace and it touches me. There is change, there is transformation. Up close I am revelling in the textural grain of the image, the curved wood, the gradual change in shades, the inky dark green, the glossy blue paint. In this haptic space, temporarily forgetting the ambivalence of translation, I am becoming, the world is evolving and I feel a sense of self-fulfilment.

Resting

I can express my diasporic experience in writing. The texts can be sensuous and expressive, yet it is still closely connected with translation. Through my art practice, I can make my two cultures visible at once. Through double exposures I can blend them into composite spatial forms. My visual artworks emerge from this sense of ambivalence caused by the gaps and overlaps of translation between English and Swedish; they nestle between cultural frameworks. Translation is always there in the background but when I make visual images, I am able to temporarily reduce the pain of loss. They create a bridge between cultures and in touch I feel at ease. I can temporarily move beyond the problems with belonging into a space of transformation and becoming. When focusing on the semiotic elements in image making, the non-linearity of tone, shade, colour and composition, it is possible to temporarily find a place of rest. Through the process of making artworks, beyond the ambivalence of translation their heterogeneous qualities bridge cultures, languages and histories. Visual images bridge cultures and their materiality leads me home.

Beside the 'memory lanterns' I write my tales, letting their light and faint projected images shape the narrative. I approach the lanterns, I write about here, there and everywhere, trying to find a position between cultures, always slipping to the side of one language or another. There are some things from Swedish culture the English language cannot convey. It changes the pace, tone and the feel of the culture I left. There is always translation in my writing, there is always loss. When trying to make sense of my making

through reflective writing, I still feel the rhythm of my diasporic gesture. The texts move beyond the journey from beginning to end – from the first capital to the final full stop – and instead loops and returns. There is a faint impression of disjointed time. I craft tales of many times and many places, without sharp detail but powerful in their repetition. I write of connecting, holding and touching. But above, below, around and between the words, sentences and paragraphs there is also always more.

The making and making sense in two languages is a sliding movement between translation and haptic closeness, between a sense of ambivalence and touch. The ambivalence of translation provides the energy that steers the persistent creative impulses (Papastergiadis, 2007) and the underlying diasporic gesture (Bhabha, 1994). Diasporic touch is a gesture that emerges from my embodied Anglo-Swedish diasporic experience and aims to bridge cultural frameworks by rearranging linear time into visual forms. It is a gesture that rearranges a journey through texture, tone, composition, shape and shade; it is a sliding movement that engages in materiality. Diasporic touch is linked to Kristeva's (1980) notion of the semiotic; it is my bodily impulses discharged into writing and visual artworks. It is similar to Bhabha's (1994) underlying, insistent and haunting gesture arising from translation. It returns and reassembles cultural material in particular ways. It differs in how it does this, as it arises out of my Anglo-Swedish diasporic situation. This time the artworks emerging from this process are cultural double exposures where my two belongings are visible at once. They are complex and composite visual forms that show my urban terrace house, romantic Victoriana and a rural Swedish idyll, the red-painted croft environment. They form a visual bridge between my two dominant cultural narratives and between two languages. The grain, tone, shade, colour and composition offer a space that provides a temporary shift away from the ambivalence of translation, problems of belonging and the sense of loss. In closeness, I am touching and am touched by the materiality of my visual images as I find a place of temporary rest.

Bibliography

- 1 Barrett, E. (2013) 'Materiality, affect, and the aesthetic image' in E. Barrett and B. Bolt (eds) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, pp.63–72.
- 2 Bhabha, H.K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, New York, Routledge.
- 3 Bhabha, H.K. (1998) Anish Kapoor: Making emptiness in *Anish Kapoor*, Los Angeles and London, Hayward Gallery and University of California Press, pp.11–41.
- 4 Boym, S. (2001) *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books.
- 5 Carter, P. (2004) *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Publishing.
- 6 Chris, T. and Russell-Lawrence, R. (1996) *The Period House: Style detail and decoration*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- 7 Cohen, R. (2008) *Global Diasporas*, Oxon and New York, Routledge.
- 8 Davies, S. (2015) *Reconstructing Home in the Scandinavian Diaspora*, M.A. Dissertation, Manchester Metropolitan University.
- 9 Davies, S. (forthcoming) 'Dalastugor: Examining diasporic touch through art practice', *Heritages of Migration: Moving Stories, Objects and Home*, conference proceedings, University of Birmingham.
- 10 Edenheim, R. (2005) *The Red Houses*, Malmö, Bokbolaget/Byggförlaget.
- 11 Galloway, S. (ed.) ([1991] 1996) *The Elements of Style: An Encyclopedia of Domestic Architectural Detail*, London, Mitchell Beazley.
- 12 Keltner, S.K. (2011) *Kristeva: Thresholds*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- 13 Kristeva, J. (1980) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Colombia, Colombia University Press.
- 14 Kristeva, J. (1989) *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- 15 Lee, R. (2008a) *From Scandinavia to Liverpool – a History of Merseyside's Nordic Community*, Liverpool, s.n.
- 16 Lee, R. (2008b) *History and Heritage: The Scandinavian Seamen's Church in Liverpool*, Liverpool, s.n.
- 17 Lindgren, A. ([1946] 2003) *Barnen i Bullerbyn*, Stockholm, Raben Sjögren.
- 18 Lindgren, A. ([1963] 2004) *Emil i Lönnerberga*, Stockholm, Raben Sjögren.
- 19 McCoy Miller, J. and Miller, M. ([1993] 1997) *Victorian Style*, London, Mitchell Beazley.
- 20 Nora, P. and Kritzman, L.D. (eds) (1996) *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past: Conflicts and Divisions*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- 21 Nordquist, S. (1984) *Pettson och Findus: Pannkakstårten*, Bromma, Opal Bokförlag.
- 22 Papastergiadis, N. ([2000] 2007) *The Turbulence of Migration*, Cambridge, Polity Press.



ROCAILLE ORNAMENTAL AGENCY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF IN THE ROCOCO ENVIRONMENT

Julie Boivin

Abstract

In current and past art-historical studies, there has been almost no consideration of the haptic qualities of rocaille ornamentation. By considering the agency of this type of ornamentation, the potential affect it has on its participants and the relations created between it and its viewers, this essay presents a materialist reading of 18th-century rocaille ornament in which a bodily form of knowledge is recuperated. Describing the type of matter depicted in the ornaments as one of heterogeneous organic shapes and analysing how these forms create visual networks that incorporate the participant, it is argued that boundaries between such a binary as subject-object are rendered fluid and that the conception of separate entities, such as furniture-viewer, disintegrate. Using Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh, the essay advances that rococo ornamentation can be considered both radical and also thought of as prosthetics extending the notions of a circumscribed body and self.

Keywords: ornament, rococo, rocaille, mirrors, 18th-century visual culture, François-Thomas Mondon, Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, Jean-François Bastide, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, affect

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-7>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s07>

Biographical note

Julie Boivin holds a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Toronto. Her thesis addressed ornamentation, particularly of 18th-century French rococo visual and material culture as viewed through the lens of contemporary body-horror visual culture. She has written articles and catalogues on contemporary art and is interested in the ontology of ornament, relations between space, identity, and perception.

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

ROCAILLE ORNAMENTAL AGENCY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF IN THE ROCOCO ENVIRONMENT

Julie Boivin, Independent Researcher

The rococo period is now considered a legitimate period style, but for a long time there was doubt that it could even be viewed as such, being considered rather as a late phase of the baroque. One of the main reasons why rococo is now recognised as a style of its own is because of the particular visual qualities of its ornamentation found on everything from interior decoration to objects and textiles (Kimball, 1943; Minguet, 1966). This ornamentation is described as light, airy, made of 'c' and 's' curves, and often includes shells. But although it is the ornamental aspect of this style which gives it its distinctive flavour, these ornaments, from a materialist standpoint, have suffered from a neglect of scholarly consideration. In fact, since its inception this ornamentation has largely been perceived as marginal and condemned by commentators of the period.¹

There are several reasons why such ornaments have been disregarded. Firstly, because ornamentation itself, since Adolf Loos' 'Ornament and crime' ([1908] 1998), was relegated to the sidelines of art history in favour of 'less is more' modernist interests.² It is only recently that ornament has made a comeback in works such as *Histories of Ornament: From Local to Global* (Necipoğlu & Payne, 2016).³ Secondly, one prime quality of rococo

1 Scholarship prior to the work of Marriane Roland-Michel, Peter Fuhling, and Katie Scott was spent arguing for the legitimacy of discussing the rococo as a separate style in its own right. See the work of Kimball (1943), Minguet (1966), Park (1992) and Brady (1984).

2 For a summary of the rise and fall of ornament, see Massey (2013). In recent years, this tale of the modernist banishment of ornament has been challenged. Alina Payne (2012), for instance, acknowledges the loss of architectural ornaments during modernism but proposes it was replaced by a relationship between architecture and the objects chosen to fill its interior.

3 The two major contributions in the late 20th century that questioned the ornamental and the decorative are E.H. Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* (1979) and Oleg Grabar's *Mediation of Ornament* (1992). Recently there is Debra Schafer's *The Order of Ornament, the Structure of Style* (2003), Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Philosophie de l'ornement d'orient en occident* (2008), Jonathan Massey's *Crystal and Arabesque* (2009), the works of Thomas Golsenne (Golsenne et al. 2010; Golsenne, 2012), Alina Payne's *From Object to Ornament*

ornaments and decoration is that not only are they inspired by naturalistic themes, they also look and are arranged in an organic manner. Ironically, Alina Payne suggests that it is precisely these organic physical features, which are found in the ornamentation of various historical periods, that are responsible for the neglect suffered by a close study of rococo ornaments. Payne remarks that while ornament functions not only to create order, critical focus has been on ornaments that do just this, to the point of overshadowing other types (2012).

More recently, some art historians, such as Michael Yonan (2010, 2012) and Mimi Hellman (2010), have paid attention to the material presence of these ornaments and their impact upon viewers.⁴ But the general practice has been to consider the socio-cultural context, viewing the decorative style as a product of class dynamics.⁵ It is precisely this lack of interest in this type of object that drew my attention as a researcher. This essay therefore attempts to meet the challenge of discussing rococo ornamentation's material presence by considering its visual qualities and the impact they may have on their viewers. Unlike scholars who focus on the cultural meanings of visual culture (the cultural turn), I am interested in this ornamentation's material presence and the sensorial possibilities of what I will argue is a radical form of ornament. This type of analysis aligns itself with what Keith Moxey (2008) has named the 'pictorial' and 'iconic turn', or what Jenni Lauwrens (2012) has called the 'sensory turn' in art history. These types of analyses emphasise the physical properties of art objects rather than their social function and meanings (Lauwrens, 2012). This analysis of rococo ornamentation subscribes to this emphasis on the physical presence of objects over their social meaning since it is the affective power of the materiality of these ornaments that is key to understanding their potential radicality.

In order to understand the potential effect and impact of the physical presence of these objects upon

(2012), Antoine Picon's *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* (2013), and the edited volume *Questions d'ornements: XVe-XVIIIe siècles* (Dekoninck, Heering & Lefftz, 2013).

4 In discussing the materiality of rococo ornaments and their material presence, I am referring here to the reality of their physical form in the physical world, not the materials out of which the ornaments themselves are made. The term materiality therefore here alludes to this physical presence and not the various materials the ornaments are made of.

5 Scott's book *The Rococo Interior* (1995) was seminal in establishing a social context for the consumption and production of rococo decorative arts. However, Scott (2009) has also considered the haptic qualities of these ornaments by using Alois Riegl's theories of haptic-optic space in order to explain the illusion of *rocaille* ornament.



Fig. 7.1: Ensemble of a Chinese room from *hôtel de la Ribouisière*, 1755–70. Interior decoration. Musée Canavalet, Paris, France. (Originally located at 62, rue de Bondy, Paris, France.) (Photo: Julie Boivin)

viewers, it is important to spend some time assessing and describing some of the physical qualities of these objects. We will thus begin by first summarising the general physical aspects of this ornamentation and the type of system these form.

The first observations that can be made lead to the identification of a recognisable lexicon of elements comprising rococo ornaments. These recognisable categories include marine life, the organic vegetal world, and exotic animals, such as monkeys, elephants, a variety of birds, and mythical creatures like dragons. Taken together, these animals all shared the trait of being strange, exotic, and relatively unknown to the Western observer. It is important to stress that the overwhelming presence of such animals in the decorative lexicon of the rococo not only represents the strong contemporary interest in zoology but also the general appeal of all things *étrange*, that is, things originating from outside Europe.

There was also a marked penchant for Oriental scenes, what is now called *chinoiserie* or *turquerie*, as well as the inclusion of architectural structures such as stairs, arches, cascades, and fountains (Fig. 7.1). While many of these items can be named and do form loose categories, it is important to recognise the extent to which these are exotic and originate outside the assumed European centre, whether this 'outside' was real or imaginary. It also does not necessarily follow that these examples were well known or understood, nor even experienced first-hand. In the sense that these elements were not yet well known since they were either exotic or imaginary, we can state that much of the identifiable rococo lexicon was comprised of new elements. In other words, most *rocaille* ornaments, if at all identifiable with a signified, were ones that were unfamiliar.

Many *rocaille* shapes are also abstracted from organic, marine or vegetal forms. The 's' and 'c' shapes

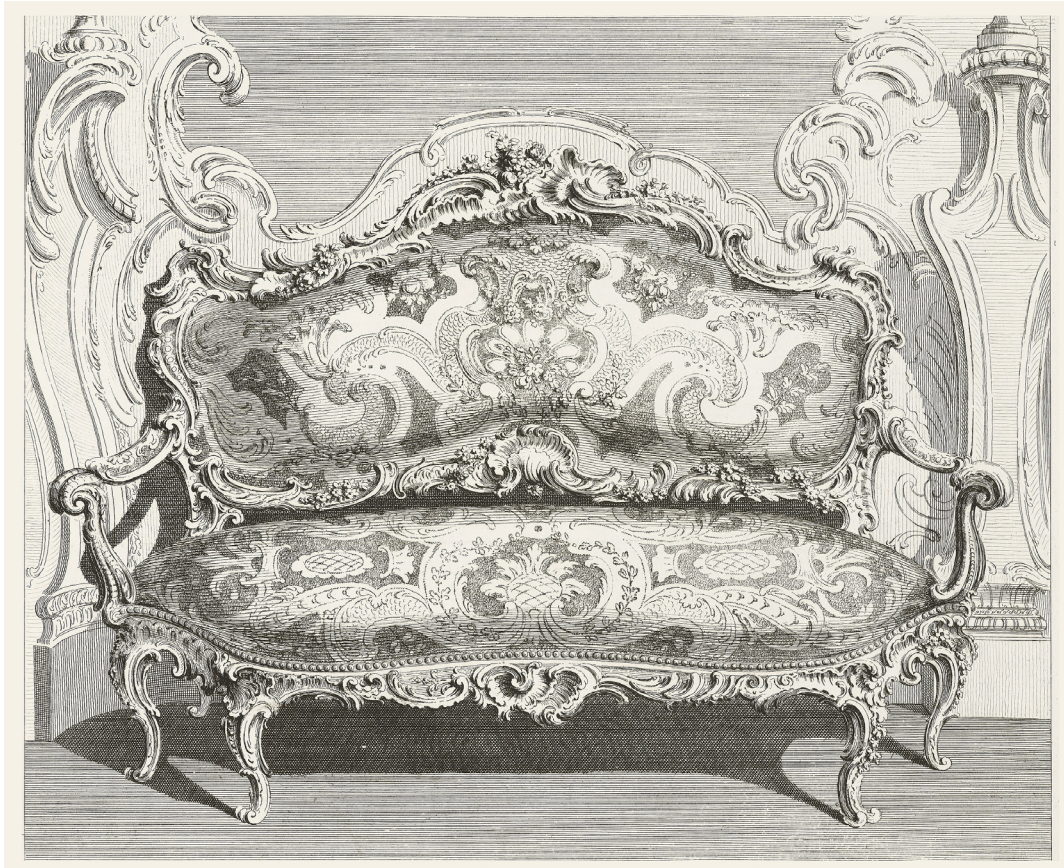


Fig. 7.2: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski*, 1735. Print, platemark: 31.7 x 36.3cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921-6-212-52))

are two predominant abstract derivatives, which have been recognised by art historians as the major forms composing rococo ornaments. We see this overwhelming 'c' shape in *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski*, a print of Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's design (Fig. 7.2). What is interesting and particular to both these forms is that they invariably distort, convulse, and deform shape, while creating a rhythm of curves and counter-curves. It is also important to stress that these shapes cause asymmetry and create irregular contours, which in turn deform the regular rectilinear order found in other types of decoration.

Porous boundaries and an open framing system

Other than the general types and forms of *rocaille* elements, another particular aspect of this ornamentation is that the manner in which its elements are arranged in space creates a framing system that has porous boundaries. This can be observed in *rocaille* ornamental prints, sometimes known as *morceau de fantaisie* or *caprice*, as well as models for cartouches or *cartels*. Specific to these types of ornamental prints is the depiction of a fantastical space with, for instance, fountains and trellises intermingled with nature and odd structures; in this fantastical space, one does not know the beginning from the end, and the foreground and

background intermingle. This type of spatial confusion is found in, for example, Mondon's *Le content villageois* and his *Les heures du jour* series, or Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's designs for watch boxes (Figs. 7.3–7.5).⁶

Because there are porous boundaries we can also qualify the type of framing system that *rocaille* forms as an *open framing* system, since it does not frame to retain or contain, but rather loosely assembles together. This particularity is due to boundaries dissolving between what is framed and the frame itself, and between the outer boundaries of the frame and what lies beyond. Specifically, the lines of such a framing system do not delineate and contain because the linearity of the system is broken by the irregular, curvilinear edges and the forms sprouting in opposite directions. Shapes grow organically out of each other, which causes a lack of pattern coherence, and, since elements are in disequilibrium and at a diagonal axis, a disorderly appearance is created. The 'c' curves respond to each other, like an echo, as though they were complementary pieces of a puzzle, filling each other's creases and gaps, yet not fully connecting.

Such correspondence between elements is found extensively in *rocaille* space and is seen particularly well in the architectural details of wall decorations for

⁶ See Roland Michel (1979) for a clarification on the proper name of the artist.



Fig. 7.3: François-Thomas Mondon, *Le content villageois*, c.1736. Print. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–531–15))



Fig. 7.4: François-Thomas Mondon, *Le Temps de la Soirée* in *Les Heures du Jour*, 1738. Print, 55.7cm. (Public domain via Collection numérisées de la bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art)

the *Cabinet of comte Bielinski* (Fig. 7.6). The end of the painted panel in the *Cabinet* interacts with the bottom dado panelling in a corresponding fashion. The shapes



Fig. 7.5: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Differents desseins de Tabatières, et pomme de canne, cinquième planche, 1748*. Print, platemark: 22 x 15.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921-6-212-20-a))

forming the delineation of the putti panel at the very bottom left respond in motion to the curve of the other delineation. Each line in the space of the *Cabinet of comte Bielinski* responds to another element. Either the element is placed to receive the other's movement or to contradict it with a counter-curve. This counter-curve disposition of the elements creates further counter-movements which in turn can contradict each other. In effect, this causes the shapes to seem slippery, gliding between the spaces, which engenders a visual commotion, sending the viewer's sight in one direction and then in the opposite. The overall effect is either one of wave-like movement, where curves unfurl and crash through the space, or one of growth, achieved through the sprouting of foliage and organic decoupling.

The result of having such open boundaries in *rocaille* space is to create visual connections between entities that would otherwise not be connected. Connections between elements belonging to disparate systems occur because the curves in any given system not only respond to each other but also indicate various directions beyond their own system. Consequently,



Fig. 7.6: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Vue d'angle du même cabinet montrant à gauche une grande fenêtre et à droite le tableau de zéphyr et flore in Quinzième livre de l'oeuvre de Meissonnier, 1742-8*. Print, platemark: 51 x 34.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921-6-212-46))

the sight of the viewer can travel from one end of a system to another by, so to speak, connecting the dots. More precisely, our gaze follows an invisible web that visually connects curves and counter-curves to each other, whether or not these are meant to connect. Because we see curves continually responding to each other at the micro level, the level of individual elements, we continue to observe responses between curves at the macro level, the level of interaction between distinct systems or objects. While similarities united in repetitive relationships could be called a pattern, those patterns that do emerge within *rocaille* systems are continually broken once their unity opens to connect with other systems. This global connection between various systems at the macro level creates a fluidity in the visual field, which indicates once more the visual presence of a constant movement or commotion.

In Meissonnier's print *Un Projet de porte pour madame de Besenval*, we observe in another room beyond an open door the glimpse of a chair and desk (Fig. 7.7). Since these elements are lightly etched, they recede in the background in contrast to what is in the foreground, giving the viewer an illusion of depth. Yet the curves of the chair and desk respond with counter-movements to the 'c'-shaped ornaments at the bottom

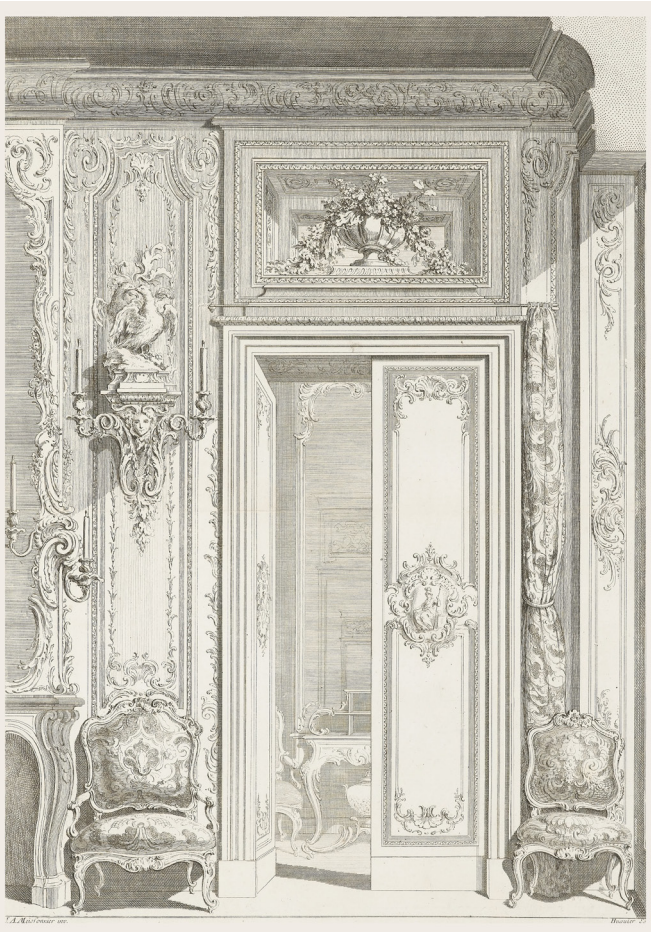


Fig. 7.7: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Projet de porte pour Madame de Besenval*, 1740. Print, platemark: 50.2 x 33.6cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–212–49))

of the right door panel, thereby negating the division between foreground and background. We also notice that the shape of the chair on the left foreground fits with the curves and form of the adjacent mantel as well as the ornamentation on the panel above. These visual connections cause the individual system of the chair to open up and connect with other systems, such as the mantel and the wall panelling. Again, such connections between various wholes create a visual commotion, one that is amplified, in the case of architectural ensembles and prints depicting them, by the presence of large pier glass mirrors, typically included in rococo decors. Mirrors repeatedly reflect the whole decor at different angles, or sometimes simply recursively, as in the example of the *Salon du prince* at Soubise, and therefore augment the presence of curves and counter-curves, enabling further connections and visual movement (Fig. 7.8). Visual connections such as these can create the perception of a unified and harmonious space. Such an effect, however, does not negate movement or connectivity. To the contrary, it reaffirms how individual systems morph into another and create a sense of a macro whole. Wend Kalnein substantiates this argument when he writes:

Curves were everywhere. Unity was no longer based on structure but on the interconnection



Fig. 7.8: Germain Boffrand, *Salon du Prince*, 1735–8. Interior decoration. Hôtel de Soubise, Paris, France. (Photo: Julie Boivin)

of all the parts through a network of lines. Even the firm separation between wall and ceiling disappeared. Decoration began to flow, and the eye no longer found a point of repose.

(1995, p.119)

Meissonnier's print of a *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski* is a prime example of individual objects morphing into space. Here we see the *canapé* function not only as a sofa, but also as a further outward extension into the space of the wall ornaments (Fig. 7.2). While the sofa remains an individual entity, the ornaments that constitute its frame nevertheless relate, correspond, and connect to the surrounding wall ornaments. When speaking generally on the rococo style, Patrick Brady in *Rococo Style Versus Enlightenment Novel* agrees that the distinction between entities erodes when

table and wall are no longer distinguishable, each separately and each from the other, for the table is grafted onto the wall, the table is part of the wall, the table is the wall: who is to say whether a two-legged rococo console is a table or a wall-ornament?

(1984, pp.42–3)

Despite the asymmetrical and heterogeneous aspects of *rocaille* shapes, these ornamental elements can still find echoes of one another through such connective strategies. These examples demonstrate how *rocaille* connections break the independent unity of each part, system, ensemble or even identifiable entities (signifieds), reaching beyond spatial boundaries to reassemble these and create new and momentary chimeric ensembles. Elements and systems of the *rocaille* are not closed and separate entities, but rather they are moments of conjoining during which elements are constantly dismantled and re-assembled. We see, then, how the individuality of forms and signified can be lost when the parts morph with different systems.

On the other side of the looking glass

The special and spatial qualities of rococo ornaments we have just enumerated – their heterogeneous novel and exotic shapes, their connective potential and the open systems they form – have the capacity to transpierce physical space in order to make visual connections and create visual networks. These visual networks also incorporate the viewers within them, thus connecting not only their body to the space around them but also connecting with their imagination to create new spaces. Such ornamental connections or relations occur, as I will detail below, due to the

cumulative effect of the actions of these ornaments throughout various levels of interaction.

The first such level of interaction is between the body of the viewer/subject and the real physical ornament in three-dimensional space, such as the sculpted ornaments in the lambris of the *Salon du Prince* at Soubise (Fig. 7.8). Here the ornaments can even be considered sculptural, since they literally project from the walls and are three-dimensional. Such objects can physically be touched and consequently occupy three-dimensional space. But three-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments are not only found as part of wall-panel decorations. These were also present as the legs of elaborate side tables, the frames of pier mirrors, candelabras, firedogs, the toilette service, snuff boxes, *surtout de table*, porcelain figures, bronze casings, and frames that held wall paintings. Three-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments were everywhere and often located in close proximity to the body itself. People literally touched *rocaille* ornaments when resting a hand on a sofa's arm, picking up a snuff box or brush, or re-arranging porcelain trinkets on the mantle. It is understandable why, then, the first link between a viewing subject and *rocaille* ornaments is the three-dimensional realm they both inhabit.

The three-dimensional ornaments also act as a bridge between the body of the participant and the two-dimensional ornaments depicted within the frames of the wall decoration, as those of the *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine* (Fig. 7.9). Such two-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments were also found in prints, paraphernalia, porcelain decoration, painted on furniture, wall hangings, and all kinds of furniture fabrics or clothing. In the case of wall-panel decorations, these small, painted two-dimensional ornaments literally connect to their three-dimensional counterparts, which also frame them, as we see in the *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine* (Figs. 7.9 and 7.10). However, since, as explained earlier, the *rocaille* framing system is one of permeability, the spaces between three and two dimensions are not clearly delineated. These spaces can be breached by the connective arrangements of the ornaments, such as the 'c' and 's' shapes. In one of the only restored Dangé panels, we clearly see the interaction of the two levels at work (Fig. 7.10). Looking at the bottom left of the panel, we see one of the twisted three-dimensional ornamental leaves encroach upon the frame, almost touching the painted ornaments. While it appears as though emerging from the sculpted frame, the painted illusory ornaments are in fact laid against the frame, so that, in effect, the third dimension extends into the second, illusory one (Fig. 7.9). The shapes of the painted ornaments also follow the contours of the



Fig. 7.9: Close-up of *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine*, 1750–5. Interior decoration. Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, France. (Originally from Hôtel Dangé, 9 place Vendôme). (Photo: Julie Boivin)

sculpted frame, extending the illusion that it is the outer, three-dimensional ornaments that have deployed and bloomed into two-dimensional, multi-coloured ones. More precisely, the ease with which the glance of the viewer may glide into the two-dimensional space is achieved by the echo of the curves and counter-curves seen at the bottom corners of the panel. The frame is here infected by these unknown organic shapes, vegetal grafts that simultaneously attach to, transgress, and transform the frame, in effect rendering it permeable and obviating its function of delineating and separating spaces.

Lastly, in the case of the *Cabinet des fables*, the painted two-dimensional ornaments also surround the central piece of narrative action, a moment in *Les fables de La Fontaine* (Fig. 7.10). The leaves and twigs of grass jut out in arches at the very edges of the vignette, connecting and touching the *rocaille* ornaments. If we follow the curves of the blades of grass which lead us into the vignette, we perpetuate the circular movement of the blue arabesque ‘c’-shaped ornament. In this case, *rocaille* ornaments gently interact with the vignette’s fantasy to lead us into its narrative imaginary space. These ornaments come to infringe, pierce, enter, and ultimately even constitute a third level of space, that of the imaginary narrative.

But the viewer’s involvement within the fantasy goes a step further as the transformative operations of *rocaille*



Fig. 7.10: *Cabinet des fables de la fontaine*, 1750–5. Interior decoration. Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, France. (Originally from Hôtel Dangé, 9 place Vendôme.) (Photo: Julie Boivin)

continue. For even the central narrative panels, which at first appear to be the main visual narrative, act as a secondary framing device to the ultimate narrative: that of the viewing subject. This fourth spatial effect is not so much caused by the fictitious narrative of the decor, when such painted narratives are present, but rather by the reflections of large pier glass mirrors. Since reception rooms or cabinets with decors could contain up to three pier mirrors, this made it inevitable to see one's own reflection or that of another person.⁷ The mirrors not only served to reflect the light and render a room brighter and more luxurious but also to permit the indirect gazing of oneself or others and, I propose, to incorporate the viewer into the decoration. Since it was deemed improper to stare directly at another, Hellman (2011) demonstrated how an elite type of gazing developed, one that was coy, covert, and indirect; pier mirrors aided greatly in this task. In his entry in the *Encyclopédie* on the *cheminée* (fireplace), Jacques-François Blondel (1751–65) remarks that the correct height for a fireplace in salons or rooms for entertaining is less than three and a half feet 'so that those sitting in circle formation around a fireplace may see themselves in the mirrors as well as note what is happening.'⁸ Jennifer Milam also explains that the 18th-century architect Charles-François Daviler 'notes that mirrors enabled the viewer to check his appearance while at the same time observing others as they entered and exited the apartment' (2011, p. 178). Another useful source, albeit fictitious, is the architectural romance *La petite maison* written by Jean-François de Bastide in 1758. This story provides two noteworthy examples of mirrors being used in the interactions of its protagonists, the Marquis de Trémicourt and the object of his affection, the charming Mélite.

The day was drawing to a close and the light waned; a valet came to light the thirty candles held by a chandelier and by girandoles of Sèvres porcelain artfully arranged in their brackets of gilded bronze. These thirty candles reflected in the mirrors, and this added brilliance made the salon seem larger and restated the object of Trémicour's impatient desires.

(Bastide, [1758] 1996, p.70)

Bastide points out that the use of mirrors is not only to contribute in lighting the room and in creating the illusion of its bigger size but also to reflect its

⁷ For the use of mirror reflections in salons, see DeJean (2009).

⁸ 'afin que ceux qui forment cercle autour du foyer y étant assis, puissent se voir dans les glaces & y remarquer ce qui se passe.' (Translation by the author).

occupants, in this case Trémicour's object of affection – Mélite. In another example, Bastide is more direct in illustrating the deflected, coy glances Hellmann argues the elite would practise:

To dispel this fearful thought, Mélite moved away from the Marquis toward one of the mirrors, pretending to readjust a pin in her coiffure. Trémicour stood in front of the opposite mirror, and with the help of this trick was able to watch her even more tenderly, without her having to look away. In seeking a moment's respite from Trémicour's charms, Mélite had fallen into an even deeper trap.

'Marquis,' she snapped, realizing her mistake, 'Please stop looking at me! This is becoming quite tiresome.'

(Bastide, 1996, pp.78–9)

These excerpts from *La Petite Maison*, alongside Blondel's comments in the *Encyclopédie* and those of Daviler, demonstrate it was probably common practice to stare at the reflection of others or oneself in the decor's pier mirrors. The very large number of mirrors made such reflections omnipresent, with the result that we must question how these could contribute to, or change, the decorative vision offered to the subject viewing the whole environment. I would like to suggest that mirrors not only served as observational devices, but also helped to incorporate the reflected images of the occupants of a room within the décor, which were in turn observed by the occupants. We can understand this last level of cumulative spatial effects as the insertion of the viewers or participants of the space within a virtual fantasy created in the reflections of mirrors.

Such a virtual fantasy is created by reflecting and flattening real space and participants into another dimension mediated by the ornaments that constitute the frame of the mirrors. The *Chambre de parade de la princesse* at Soubise is a good example of mirrors reflecting and flattening the ornaments within the room, as well as any participant who might stand in the right spot (Fig. 7.11). In this example of a mirror reflection from the *Chambre de parade de la princesse*, we see first that the pier mirror reflects the ornaments of the room. Once captured within the reflection, the ornaments are removed from a three-dimensional space to a two-dimensional image. Subsequently, we note the reflection of the photographer. The distance between the person and the wall ornaments is no longer important, as both are flattened into an image encapsulated within the frame of the mirror.



Fig. 7.11: Mirror reflection of part of body in Germain Boffrand, *Chambre de parade de la princesse*, 1735–8. Interior decoration. Hôtel de Soubise, Paris, France. (Photo: Julie Boivin)

Consequently, the real ornaments in the room, along with those in the mirrors, re-frame the participants to become part of a merger between the real space of the room and the reflected, imaginary space in the mirrors. We can consider such reflections as illustrating imaginary space, since they are flat and become images removed from real space. Reflected bodies thus assemble with the ornaments and, just as in the Mondon prints of *Le content villageois*, *Le tems de la soirée*, and *Puzza tenant son fils Horus*, merge with *rocaille* ornaments (Figs. 7.3–7.4, 7.12–13). We see this in the *Chambre de parade de la princesse* where part of the photographer's body is captured and severed by the ornaments (Fig. 7.11). Its reflection is merged with the outside ornaments of the frame as well as those of the background ornaments. Just as in Mondon's print *Le content villageois*, the reflected body recedes into the planes of space and its only anchors to the seemingly real space are the *rocaille* ornaments of the mirror frame with which the body interacts (Fig. 7.3).

The ornaments' capacities to create effects that merge different levels of space together, such as the three-dimensional space, the two-dimensional, the fictional, and the reflective, is literally illustrated by Mondon in his *Le tems de la soirée* (Fig. 7.4). Here



Fig. 7.12: François-Thomas Mondon, *Livre de trophée*, c.1736. Print. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–531–12))



Fig. 7.13: François-Thomas Mondon, *Puzza tenant son fils Horus Divinité que préside aux grains et fruits Chez les Chinois*, 1736. Print, platemark: 23.3 x 17.8cm, sheet: 31.9 x 23.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–366–13))

Mondon depicts quite explicitly how *rocaille* forms can seamlessly transition without any visual interruptions from their position as framing structures to being part of the narrative vignette. By exposing a flexible ornamental framework that fuses different levels of space, the print demonstrates how it is possible for pier-glass mirrors to reflect the daily, real-life activity of the elite and recast it as part of the decorative whole. In a real rococo environment, the ornaments of the room frame the reflected bodies, offering real-life tableaux of the events unfolding in these spaces, exactly like the *rocaille* ornaments in *Le tems de la soirée* (Fig. 7.4). What is particular about Mondon's prints is that they represent visually how it is possible for these ornaments' actions to establish pathways and means of communication that act as a transit system for the viewing subject to access various levels of spaces.

By re-framing viewing subjects so that they become flattened decorative characters themselves, the mirrors remove viewers from three-dimensional space and transform them into active participants of the ornamental environment. Like the painted characters that are integral to the decorative scheme, such as those that are found in the work of Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1720–3) for the Château de Voré, the reflected subject, en-framed by the reflected ornaments, becomes a participating character integral to the ornamental scheme. In such painted decorative panels, characters occupy a particularly central position framed by delicate arabesques that interweave between the space of the panel and that of the fictional, illusory scene. In a similar manner, the reflections of the room's occupants are also ensconced in ornament. As such, they become part of fictional vignettes, in which characters are set apart from real space and yet, by way of the ornaments, are nonetheless still connected to it. By means of the reflections and ornaments viewers are sutured to a fictional space, where they become the main narrative subject within it. Through this process, we understand how the reflected images of the mirrors become like films watched by avid, elite participants, who coyly gaze at them from distant and hidden angles, just as the Marquis de Trémicourt connivingly watched Méliette's reflection. Through the reflections of the mirror, the viewing subject is not only the new subject matter of the decoration but also becomes another object in the decor.

As we have seen, once spatial boundaries collapse, ornaments can slip into different systems, while subjects can become part of networks. Such a collapse of spatial boundaries suggests the potential for a new type of space or new types of relations to space. In his many prints, Mondon, like other artists such as Jacques

Lajoüe or Juste-Aurèle Meissonier, proposes a type of space which illustrates the interconnectivity of the body with *rocaille* ornaments. Mondon in particular made explicit the link between sociability and interior decoration by creating what we could deem a *rocaille* fantasyscape, where the living merge with *rocaille* space to become one and the same. Mondon's prints depict the subject merging with ornaments just as the real-life subject merges with ornaments in the fantasies that occur in the mirror's reflections (Figs. 7.3–7.4, 7.12–7.13). Consequently, such fantasy prints can serve to illustrate the merging of imagination with real space and show how such *rocaille* spaces might potentially be perceived when experienced as wholes through interconnection with the ornaments.

Flesh and prostheses

The concept of flesh developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty can help us further understand how the viewing subject comes to participate in the decor. First, we must understand that, for Merleau-Ponty (2004), sight has the capacity not only to see but also to palpate, envelope, and espouse visible things. In other words, sight touches. This is an important point as it implies that the viewing subject of *rocaille* can touch by the mere act of seeing. It is therefore also by seeing that the subject is linked to the three-dimensional ornaments. Merleau-Ponty explains that, by the simple fact that we are capable of seeing, we also have a corporeality that can be seen. Should one be capable of seeing implies that one participates in the real world, and that one is also a palpable entity that can be seen. For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, vision embodies us, and because we are embodied beings, made of a visible outer layer, we are linked to other bodies, other objects. Merleau-Ponty's concept of double visibility is key here because this inherent condition of being, this visibility, is exaggerated in rococo space. In the *rocaille* space, the mirrors transform the seer from seeing to being seen. Our reflections in the mirrors make explicit and exaggerate our condition of double visibility. By being incorporated within the decor through the mirror's reflections, the viewing subjects also become objectified.

The term Merleau-Ponty uses to express his concept of double visibility is flesh. He understands flesh as a sort of frame, a means of perceiving, both a lens that allows us to sense and see, and an outer surface materiality that allows us to be seen. A difficult concept to define, Merleau-Ponty's flesh is both sensing and sensed, visible and partly invisible; it links the subject to the object, embodies our minds into our outer material selves; it creates links to the outer visible world. Flesh

is not the degree of separation between things, but what unites us to things (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). It is the degree of closeness of communication. The radicality of *rocaille* is its ability to make us aware of the state of sensitivity and sensing by transforming subjects into simultaneous objects. It effaces the demarcation between the two. One of its effects is to make us aware of the double quality of flesh.

Because *rocaille* ornaments allow the subject to transit into an object, it can also be understood as having prosthetic qualities. Although a concrete part of certain people's reality, the prosthesis has also become a social trope, that can help us understand what it means to be post-human (Smith and Morra, 2006). What the prosthesis fundamentally questions is the integrity of an impermeable whole or closed unit. It demands that we question what can be integrated into the whole and yet not entirely subverted by it, what it means to be a closed whole, what it means to have an identity, and what can change and reshape that identity. It further questions the notion of origin and brings to the forefront the idea that we may all be assemblages – composite beings.⁹ Prostheses extend and stretch the definition of a unified identity into a multiplicity of beings (Wilson, 1995).

I would like to suggest here that prostheses are not only the replacement of a body's lack in the conventional sense, but can also be an add-on, an augmentation, and extension of the capabilities of the body. Prosthetics are elements capable of connecting the two distinct systems of subject and object, and are also capable of breaching the distinction between these. The prosthesis is not just a technological implement that is a go-between, it can also be heterogeneous and foreign matter capable of attaching itself to our private systems and rendering the oppositions of private-public and self-other more fluid. If one of the characteristics of a prosthesis is its ability to bridge and breach the boundaries of two separate systems, then *rocaille* ornaments are prosthetic, since these also create networks that bridge entirely separate systems. I propose, then, that we consider *rocaille* ornaments as go-between prostheses. However, I consider these not simply as replacements of other parts, but, rather, and more importantly, as extensions of the body that achieve mergers or connections.

If *rocaille* ornaments have the capacity to act as prostheses, perhaps we could consider them as more than objects that 'decorate'. They also have the agential power to act as transitional vehicles that help subjects or viewers perceive this new spatial

formation constituted of both real and imaginary space. In other words, *rocaille* ornaments act as a linking system between the observer and this 'potential space'. Hence, due to the very nature of these ornaments, the mergers or connections they initiate create links and bridges to, what Bittarello (2008) would label, virtual spaces. By connecting viewers to a virtual space, this visual linking system disrupts normal rational space, and, as a consequence, a new space is created where imagination and reality merge. Therefore, one means to understand rococo ornamentation is that it is a relation that can mediate between realities – those of the imagination and those of the physical exterior. The implications of such a view are that a rococo environment can be conceived of as an ensemble that does not fully exist physically, but that is rather partially articulated in the imagination of the viewer. I will even dare to suggest that the whole structure of a *rocaille* environment is not found in real three-dimensional space but rather at the juncture where space meets the imaginary projections of the viewing subject. The particular radical quality of *rocaille* space, I am arguing, is its creation of an environment full of devices that actively incite transitions in space. While the focus of this essay was not on the socio-historical aspects of rococo ornaments, it would be a fruitful path for future research into rococo decors to consider the relational potential of rococo ornament and see how it may have functioned in a time-specific environment with known viewing subjects.

⁹ See Bennett (2010) for a discussion of assemblages and agency of material things.

Bibliography

- 1 Ankersmit, F.R. (2003) 'Rococo as the dissipation of boredom' in C. Farago and R. Zwijnenberg (eds) *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art In and Out of History*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 2 Bastide, J.-F. ([1758] 1996) *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction* (trans. R. el-Khoury), New York, Princeton Architectural Press.
- 3 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- 4 Bittarello, M. B. (2008) 'Another time, another space: Virtual worlds, myths and imagination', *Journal of Virtual World Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1–18.
- 5 Blondel, J.-F. (1751–65) 'Cheminée' in D. Diderot and J. d'Alembert (eds) *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Paris, Briasson.
- 6 Bolt, B. (2011) 'Introduction towards a "new materialism" through the arts' in B. Bolt and E. Barrett (eds) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*, London, I.B. Tauris.
- 7 Brady, P. (1984) *Rococo Style Versus Enlightenment Novel*, Geneva, Éditions Slatkine.
- 8 Buci-Glucksmann, C. (2008) *Philosophie de l'ornement: d'orient en occident*, Paris, Galilée.
- 9 DeJean, J. (2009) *The Age of Comfort: When Paris Discovered Casual and the Modern Home Began*, New York, Bloomsbury.
- 10 Dekoninck, R., Heering, C. and Leftz, M. (eds) (2013) *Questions d'ornements: XVe-XVIIIe siècles*, Turnhout, Brepols.
- 11 Golsenne, T. (2012) 'L'ornement aujourd'hui', *Images Re-vues*, no. 10, pp. 1–31.
- 12 Golsenne, T., Dürfeld, M., Roque, G., Scott, K. and Warncke, C.-P. (2010) 'L'Ornemental: esthétique de la différence', *Perspective*, no. 1, pp. 11–26.
- 13 Gombrich, E.H. (1979) *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- 14 Grabar, O. (1992) *Mediation of Ornament*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- 15 Hellman, M. (1999) 'Furniture, sociability, and the work of leisure in eighteenth-century France', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 415–45.
- 16 Hellman, M. (2010) 'The nature of artifice: French porcelain flowers and the rhetoric of garnish' in A. Cavanaugh and M. Yonan (eds) *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, Burlington, Ashgate.
- 17 Hellman, M. (2011) 'Enchanted night: Decoration, sociability and visibility after dark' in C. Bremer-David (ed.) *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum.
- 18 Kalnein, W. (1995) *Architecture in France in the Eighteenth Century* (trans. D. Britt), New Haven, Yale University Press.
- 19 Kimball, F. (1943) *The Creation of the Rococo*, New York, Norton.
- 20 Laing, A. (1979) 'French ornamental engravings and the diffusion of the rococo' in H. Zerner (ed.) *Le stampe et la diffusion delle immagini e degli stili*, Bologna, CLUEB.
- 21 Lauwrens, J. (2012) 'Welcome to the revolution: The sensory turn and art history', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 7, pp. 1–17.
- 22 Loos, A. ([1908] 1998) 'Ornament and crime' in A. Opel (ed.) *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (trans. M. Mitchell), Riverside, CA, Ariadne Press.
- 23 Massey, J. (2009) *Crystal and Arabesque: Claude Bragdon, Ornament, and Modern Architecture*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press.
- 24 Massey, J. (2013) 'Ornament and decoration' in G. Brooker and L. Weinthal (eds) *The Handbook of Interior Architecture and Design*, London, Bloomsbury Academic.
- 25 Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004) 'Selection from the visible and the invisible' in T. Baldwin (ed.) *Maurice Merleau-Ponty Basic Writings*, London, Routledge.
- 26 Milam, J. (2011) *Historical Dictionary of Rococo Art*, Toronto, Scarecrow Press.
- 27 Minguet, P. (1966) *Esthétique du rococo*, Paris, Vrin.
- 28 Moxey, K. (2008) 'Visual studies and the iconic turn', *Journal of Visual Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 131–46.
- 29 Necipoğlu, G. and Payne, A. (eds) (2016) *Histories of Ornament: From Local to Global*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- 30 Park, W. (1992) *The Idea of Rococo*, Newark, University of Delaware Press.
- 31 Payne, A. (2012) *From Object to Ornament: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- 32 Picon, A. (2013) *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*, Chichester, Wiley.
- 33 Roland Michel, M. (1979) 'François-Thomas Mondon, artiste "rocaille" méconnu', *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, pp. 149–58.
- 34 Schaffer, D. (2003) *The Order of Ornament, the Structure of Style: Theoretical Foundations of Modern Art and Architecture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

- 35 Scott, K. (1995) *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- 36 Scott, K. (2003) 'Playing game with otherness: Watteau's Chinese cabinet at the Château la Muette', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol.66, pp.189–248.
- 37 Scott, K. (2009) 'Figure and ornament: Notes on the late baroque art industry' in *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts*, Leeds, Henry Moore Institute.
- 38 Smith, M. and Morra, J. (2006) 'Introduction' in M. Smith and J. Morra (eds) *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- 39 Weisgerber, J. (1991) 'Qu'est-ce que le rococo? Essai de définition comparatiste' in R. Mortier and H. Hasquin (eds) *Études sur le XVIII^e siècle: Vol. 28 Rocaille, rococo*, Brussels, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.
- 40 Wilson, R.R. (1995) 'Cyber(body)parts: Prosthetic consciousness', *Body & Society*, vol.1, no.3–4, pp. 239–59.
- 41 Yonan, M. (2010) 'Igneous architecture: Porcelain, natural philosophy, and the rococo cabinet chinois' in A. Cavanaugh and M. Yonan (eds) *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, Burlington, Ashgate.
- 42 Yonan, M. (2012) 'The wieskirche: Movement, perception, and salvation in the Bavarian rococo', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol.41, pp. 1–25.
- 43 Ziskin, R. (1999) *The Place Vendôme: Architecture and Social Mobility in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



PAPERCHASE

Tilo Reifenstein

Abstract

Paper is drawing's and writing's shared substrate. However, the anchorage of the drawn mark to the sheet, its instantiation as a stroke bound to its ground, is considered different from the detachability of writing's inscription. This essay seeks to pursue the power of writing and drawing practices as indissociable from their material affordances. Setting out from the phrase 'this paper here' it follows a trail of assumptions about paper that render it impossibly blank and infinitely inscribable. Though not limited to either practice, medial expectations of paper already orient the material encounter with it by designating it beforehand as 'for' drawing or writing. Following Derrida's writing on the inseparability of paper from its 'acts', media-philosophical discourses on the 'proper' relations between writing/drawing and its substrates are scrutinised. The essay consequently discusses the blind spots of drawing and writing vis-à-vis its surface and aims to articulate an approach to paper that accounts for the connections of its cognitive and affective power. In showing the intimate connections between drawing and writing acts on paper, the interrelations of gesture and material in any paperwork is explored. The essay ultimately emphasises paper's active role in the cognitive and sensuous work of drawing and writing.

Keywords: paper, material, writing, drawing, Derrida, media philosophy

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-7/article-8>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2019s08>

Biographical note

Tilo Reifenstein is Lecturer in Critical Studies at York St John University. Recent publications include 'The graphics of ekphrastic writing: Raymond Pettibon's drawing-writing' in *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (David Kennedy and Richard Meek, eds, MUP, 2018) and 'Drawing the letter' in *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice* (2018).

Banner image: Photograph of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

PAPERCHASE

Tilo Reifenstein, York St John University

If this is printed on copy paper, it will not be able to avoid talking about itself. Or again, if this is not printed on copy paper, it will neither be able not to itemise itself as a type of paper: now virtual paper, later reading paper, soon scrap paper, then waste paper of the future.

This paper here

Lothar Müller's history of the age of paper (2014) forgoes any such solipsistic statements, never navel-gazing at its own material construction, never self-reflexively imagining itself to be on a different kind of paper, instead it gets on with the job of talking paper. Yet, how can we talk of paper through and on paper without also writing an autobiographic entry of these sheets (virtual or otherwise) of paper? Are there then, different kinds of paper being written on and about? To give any historical account of paper is to speak of no sheet and of all sheets. It is to speak of paper in general through specific papers devoid of their specificity. It is to make sense of the fact that all sheets of paper are unique, but only in the way that every sheet is different from any other, as any object is necessarily different from its own reiteration by virtue of coming before it without being originary. Müller's project is therefore decidedly about the generality of paper through and despite of the specific. The following, on the other hand, is about a specificity of paper through and despite of its general notion. Of course, neither of these papers exist.

What is at stake when we talk about general or specific paper comes sharply into focus through paper's usual collocation with blank. Blank paper is not only void but also generally blanc (white). To demand a blank sheet of paper is not to want a red one, however few marks it has on it (OED, 2016 s.v. *blank* adj./adv.). A blank sheet of paper somehow marks itself out as a sheet that has not been written or drawn on. It does not carry inscriptions. Yet it neither denotes a bedraggled piece of scrap, the torn edge of a piece of millboard or the verso of an envelope, however little writing or drawing they carry. Although blankness refers less to a lack of characteristics – it may be lined or chequered – its void is not just the absence of written or drawn characters. Samuel Johnson's dictionary entry is illuminating in this respect. It notes that 'blank' designates '[w]ithout writing; unwritten; empty of all marks' (1785, s.v. *blank* adj.). The final clause is crucial in describing the impossibility of blank paper. Given the necessary characteristics of paper – with lines or

without, detergent white or ecru, rag or ground-wood, handmade or machine-made, deckled or cut-edge, long-grained or short-grained – the lack of marks seemingly refers to a rather arbitrary ascription, whether a particular type of characteristic or usage constitutes marks or not. Nonetheless, even the notion of prior usage is misleading here and merely the result of the implicit, oxymoronic phrase blank paper. Blankness describes an impossible ideal precisely because it evokes certain characteristics without allowing them to constitute (its own) demarcations of specificity. Blank paper is seemingly different from other paper because it is marked by certain qualities, which, however, do not mark it in return. All paper is prior paper. All paper has marks on it. There is no unmarked paper. There is no paper that does not carry the marks of itself as a singular bit of paper, with particular dimensions, colour, texture, tooth and so on. There is no 'pure white paper', no paper whose possibilities are entirely open, which is the proverbial blank canvas or *tabula rasa* that may be marked without restriction. Yet, in contradistinction to the actual use and encounter of paper, the ideal (blankness) of paper permeates our understanding of it. This ideal sheet, however, is not really paper as material but rather paper as materiality. A materiality that describes, as Tim Ingold remarked ironically, 'what makes things "thingly"' (2007b, p.9). It is a kind of materiality that, unhelpfully, says little about materials.

So, what then of this paper here? What can be said of its material? What paper addresses you directly; wants you to know what it is? What, or which one, is this paper? What does it mean to read here this paper? What does it want there? Does it interrogate its own – this – support, rhetoric, discourse? Is this (anaphoric) it, which reiterates but doesn't explain, the foregoing this paper, here? Like the store of heres, theres, thises and thats – the store of expressions that depend on the context of usage – is this paper here just a (deictic) reminder, like its it, that wants to show itself as cellulose surface, inky alphabetic symbols, phosphorescent (virtual) white or discursivity yet to come? And if every single one of these is analysed, which ones belong to the text. Can this paper, here, as empirical, tangible, desirable support ever be (endophoric,) inside the discourse, or will it forever remain outside, excluded, always the other, always external to the text. For if we did not print this paper, or if we had printed it on a different sheet, will it have been this paper, here? It will only have been this paper if – self-reflexively – it was never anything but its own discourse, an ideal discourse written onto ideal paper prior to this discourse on paper, written in a virtuality that submits it to any base without ever belonging to

it, the transcendental support for a transcendental logos. Yet, it is this paper, here, which requires itself to be tearupable, scrunchable, deletable, overwritable, divisible to make this paper, here.

What is it then that is meant here by this paper? Is it the desirable physical object, or the rhetorical idea and ideal, wrested from the encumbrance of empirical body? Or is it the ideal of any backing that could be inscribed (ideally) like paper?

It is to be feared (but is this a threat? isn't it also a resource?) that these three 'uses' of the noun *paper*, the word *paper*, are superimposed or overprinted on each other in the most equivocal way – at every moment. And thus overwritten on each other right from the figuration of the relation between the signifier and signified 'paper.'

(Derrida, 2005, p.52, italics in original)

Thus, to read the words this paper, here, in reminding us of the support of these words, we are encountering both ideal and material. As Christina Lupton puts it, to write this paper here is to complicate the relationship between pointing and the thing (2010, p.424). Through this simple phrase, we face the ideal and the material of writing, and the necessary forgetting of the page and the symbol *as material* to which we subscribe in order to get on with reading: this paper here. In the double negative of Paul de Man 'the definitive erasure of a forgetting that leaves no trace' that is taking place in the writing of this paper here (de Man cited in Lupton, 2010, p.424; de Man, 1986, pp.42–3), draws on the duplicity – both treacherous and doubled – of the material and materiality of writing. Or differently, to forget that you are reading literally, letter by letter, is a precondition of reading.

And yet it needs to be written in order for it to be writing and in order to be writing, it needs to exceed the singular mark, it needs to be (virtually) multiple, repeatable, iterable. There is then 'the obvious opposition[...] between the singularity of writing acts and the reproducibility of the written' (Lupton, 2010, p.410), a contest between writing here and now and the necessary repeatability that is key to language. Writing incorporates, in the sense that it both 'forms' a corpus and 'embodies'. That is, it forms 'a body' and takes on the body of another. In this double incorporation, writing is the mark's body, without being limited to it, and the ideal of the mark that must be repeated in alterity. Similarly then for this paper here, which needs to be there for writing to occur, it needs to deliver up its body for writing to have a body, but it will not unequivocally claim to be the text's body. Or differently, in order for this text here to refer

exclusively to this paper here, we require a writing outside of iterable language. A writing that does not repeat is, however, not a legible sign at all, because it does not offer itself up to re-cognition in and despite of its difference from notional self-identity (Derrida, 2001, p.310).

Hegel attributes the difficulty of talking about this paper here to the divergence between the sensory intricacy of this particular sheet and the generality that may be consciously approached through language.

[For instance,] they [those who speak of a reality of sensory objects] mean this piece of paper, on which I am writing, or better, have already written, this; but they do not say what they mean. If they really intend to speak of this piece of paper that they mean, and they do intend so, it is impossible to do so, for the sensory This that is meant, is unattainable by language, which belongs to consciousness, that is to the intrinsically universal. In the midst of their very attempt to say it, that This would moulder [...]

(Hegel, 1907, p.73, author's translation)

For Hegel, the attempt to claim the reality of this sheet of paper, to identify it (as itself) in language, is an infinite task that exceeds our capacity. Rather, the sheet of paper itself would alter, continue its material senescence, which would consequently establish a discord with any previous description of it. What may therefore be said of this sheet of paper is not a reality or truth but what is 'meant'. The reference to any real thing or external object itself is, for Hegel, merely to describe it as universal, because designating a unique object – This – makes the singular itself universal by flattening difference – everything can be This.

The difference Hegel draws between the thing, its sensory perception and the possibility of language to account for either comes into focus in the act of pointing. As the hand can point to an object so can language, yet the point of touch separates how something is laid hold of immediately or mediately.

But if I want to help out language, which possesses the divine nature of subverting meaning directly, transform it and thus hindering it to verbalise at all, by pointing this piece of paper out, I experience in this way what the truth of sensory certainty in fact is; I point it out as a Here, a Here of other Heres, or in itself a simple togetherness of many Heres, i.e. [I point it out] as a universal, I receive it just as it is in truth, and instead of knowing something immediate I perceive it.

(Hegel, 1907, p.74, author's translation and italics)

Leander Scholz argues that Hegel's choice to illustrate his point through a piece of paper is significant in view of the larger project of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The sheet of paper allows Hegel not only to move between sensory thing and medium but also to address the 'transfer of subject-object relation to one between subjects' (2013, p. 168, author's translation). Thus he can introduce an ontological framework in which things are unattainable and already medially exceeded in the processes of reading and writing, which makes things 'mere signifieds of signifiers written onto an empty sheet' (2013, p. 169, author's translation). In this way, the writing subject herself comes face to face with her own disappearance, and writing shows itself less a seamless transition from thought to verbal utterance than a medial challenge to the discussion of itself.

On the other hand, as Derrida may describe it, in the very act of pointing to this sheet here, the repeatability of the sign in its alteration – iterability – shows itself as structurally necessary for the possibility of pointing but also as a fortiori the impossibility to limit pointing to one thing (1988, p.20). Or, differently again, Jean-François Lyotard identifies two meanings attached to the same sheet of paper as a sign. Building on Émile Benveniste's (1971) and his own reading of Saussure (1966) he differentiates signification as a concept or meaning that is quasi-merged with the signifier (sound, inscriptions etc) from designation, which takes the sign as a whole to refer to an actual or imagined object:

the Hegelian difficulty [is in] the opposition between exteriority and interiority – in other words, on exactly what we referred to as the two definitions of meaning: meaning in interiority, which is signification (*Sinn*); and meaning in exteriority, namely designation (*Bedeutung*).

(Lyotard, 2011, p.41, italics in original)

Neither signification, nor designation, nor their combination sufficiently wear out Lyotard's meaning, rather, they introduce additional difficulty into discourse because the first also brings with it comparative value and the second thickness, an opacity that hinders clear identification and limits the perception and understanding of a sign (2011, pp. 129, 93). And equally, neither signification, nor designation, nor their combination may be interrogated to absolutely exhaust the figural of writing, because the figure already unsettles both discourse and perception. Though the signification-designation distinction appears useful in order to grapple with this paper here, Lyotard, in drawing on Gottlob Frege, is also very quick to point out that we cannot stop at signification alone, for we hardly refer to the 'sense' (*Sinn*) of something without

also referring to its 'reference' (*Bedeutung*) (Lyotard, 2011, p. 105; Frege, 1892, p.31).

The attraction of the various philosophical approaches to the relations between the deictic phrase and any actual paper lies not only in the richness of the complications they uncover at the heart of language. It is also in the shared indication that the difficulty to write about and describe this sheet of paper is illimitable to notions of polysemy in language. Instead of seeking to disentangle the divergent readings of the phrase – in order, perhaps, to homogenise a discourse – it is *here* rather important to note that they all question a putatively transparent communication through language even prior to interrogating any particular utterance. Whether in Hegel's universalising language, Derrida's illimitable context or Lyotard's sense and reference, the notion that the written mark may be stabilised if only the multiplicity of its meanings could be arrested is displaced. Writing and the contiguity of its meaning are rather found to proceed hand in hand.

The autographic inscription of any particular sheet of paper, which displays the indexical trail of a gesture unless the link is digital, here merely exacerbates the problem by highlighting the line's connection between verbal and pictural mark. And yet, the written mark may point ardently at its own physical and material constituents without ever belonging to them. In pointing to its substrate, it never ceases to be already detachable, virtually belonging to no sheet and all sheets.

Nevertheless, handwriting in particular has acquired connotations that strongly link it to its writer and the very substrate of its mark by reinscribing notions of *hic et nunc* into the process of writing as such (cf. Molchanov, 2012, pp.30–1). In this way, handwriting's gesture is perceived as establishing an affective, bodily and meaningful relation between writer and reader of a given sheet (cf. Hensher, 2012; O'Connell, 2012; Williams, 2012). However, as Müller points out, the notion of the handwritten word as coming from the inside, i.e. as having an indexical relation to the one who draws it, comes about in an age dominated by printed texts. He notes how the ancient (Western) world associated speech with the esoteric, coming from the inside, considering writing exoteric, coming from the outside (2014, pp. 90–1).

To speak therefore of *this paper here*, is to acknowledge that this sheet is beset with the multiplicity of being the thing, the name, the pointer and the pointed-at. Whilst we may attempt to cleave clear distinctions between discourse, substrate, ideality of the substrate and discourse on the (ideal) substrate – Which one? The one written physically/virtually

onto it or the one written about it? – the layering is already irreversibly part of the very expression chosen. Iterability marks the very possibility of writing as a practice of stolen and borrowed words (Derrida, 2001, pp. 223–4). They arrive and are animated with the burden and pleasure of their former and coming use. Failing to acknowledge the pre-scriptiveness that language use brings to writing, its objects of reference or the mechanisms of ‘communication’ would thus be to write off the distinction between the description of the phenomenon and the phenomenon.

Writing thus partakes in a number of non-exclusive spaces that overlap each other. On the one hand, it is shaped by any other language use and shapes it in turn, and, on the other, as Boris Groys has put it (2004, p.243), it positions itself in the literary spaces of the discourses it partakes in. Aside from these linguistic and literary spaces however, writing must leave its written mark somewhere. Again, it needs to be written in order for it to be writing. The jostling about the spaces writing inscribes itself in therefore returns to the page, whether cellulosic or virtual. How does the space of writing’s mark engage with writing’s other spaces? The contention here is that the sheet of paper is never a merely acquiescent ground on which inscriptive acts are performed. Rather, material characteristics of paper and implement inform the gestures of their own inscription. This interdependency of material and gesture is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon that affords affective relations, but also regulates the cognition of both writer-drawer and reader-viewer. The sheet of paper as sensory space is not closed and external to its inscription.

Blancness

The idea of the suppliant surface, conceding all marks but somehow separable from them, is linked to a perception of writing’s substrate as an unmarked and immaculate territory. The notion of blank paper as a limitless resource open for conquest or exploitation has seemingly wide appeal, however unfaithful this supposed blankness is toward any actual sheet of paper.

Observe the maiden, innocently sweet,
She’s fair *white paper*, an unsullied sheet;
On which the happy man, whom fate ordains,
May write his *name*, and take her for his pains.

(Franklin, 1838, p.64, italics in original)

Unsurprisingly, the complex characteristics of paper are commonly explored via analogy, which metaphorises the experience of writing and drawing on paper through other observations or practices. Yet in carrying the (mis)conceptions of one thing to another,

the metaphor also manifests particular cultural, societal and individual mores. Among the favoured tropes to describe paper are forms of spatial perambulation (exploration or construction on a surface) and linkages to the human body (touching or using paper like another body) (cf. Ingold, 2007a, pp.41–70, 74–103, 2011, pp.148–64, 178, 196–208, 210–19, 2015; Kandinsky, 1926, pp.54–6; Klee, 1925, pp.6–7, 1979, p.18; Petherbridge, 2010, p.116). In ‘Paper: a poem’ attributed to Benjamin Franklin from which the above stanza is taken – Müller introduces it as ‘humorous’ (2014, p.170) – nine different types of paper (e.g. gilt, brown, sinking, touch) are mapped onto characteristics of different kinds of people (e.g. fop, wretch, miser, squabbler). The crass sexism of the virgin sheet and the virgin body – because she is clearly not a person here, but something that requires d(en)omination – alone would merit a longer analysis, as would the implication of sullage of the non-virgin body, but the focus shall remain on the white sheet rather than the necessary readings this poem should undergo in view of a politics of the body. Franklin’s poem is interesting from a paper perspective, in the way that it is symptomatic for a seeming engagement with the material of paper without however saying much about the material at all. Paper is conceived as an ideality that a priori determines what it should be.

Mechanics, servants, farmers, and so forth,
Are *copy paper* of inferior worth;
Less prized, more useful, for your desk decreed;
Free to all pens, and prompt at every need.

(Franklin, 1838, p.63, italics in original)

Although copy paper is here one of Franklin’s nine different kinds of paper, it merely describes another impossible white paper. It is open to all marks and implements, though materially – not just nominally – it is quite different from the foolscap (politician) described elsewhere. Franklin’s, albeit farcical, description of paper classifies types rather than develop characteristics.

Naming and apparent use are more relevant for the poem’s description of paper than any sensory approach to the material. However, Franklin’s portrayal is not exceptional because our engagement with paper is already structured by a longing to encounter a particular kind of material, especially one that may stand in contrast to any actual experience of it. As Derrida describes it, we anticipate paper with a ‘nostalgia’ that makes it ‘both sensitive and impassive, both friendly and resistant, both very much on its own and coupled to our bodies, not only with every mechanical impression, but before any impression not

reproducible by my hand' (2005, p.62). Our hands' touch of paper does not arrive via impossible neutrality between subject and object. Rather, it is the confluence of bodies that already share an intimate history of caresses and blandishments.

It is nostalgia for the proffered page on which a virtually inimitable handwriting creates a path for itself with the pen – a pen which, not so long ago, I still used to dip in ink at the end of a pen holder; a nostalgia for the color or weight, the thickness and the resistance of a sheet – its folds, the back of its recto-verso, *the fantasies* of contact, of caress, of intimacy, proximity, resistance, or promise: the infinite desire of the copyist, the cult of calligraphy, an ambiguous love for the scarcity of writing, a fascination for the word incorporated in paper. These are certainly *fantasies*.

(Derrida, 2005, pp.62–3, italics in original)

Perhaps Derrida's characterisation appears overdrawn because not every sticky note is recognisable immediately for its swooning allure but the act of marking the page is not limited to a disinterested physical deposition of one matter on another. If this were the case, writing would not be readable and pictures could not be seen. Rather Derrida's description of paper points towards the inseparability of paper's sensocognitive appeal and the transmission of power and affection through papers. Though the intricately folded poulet sent between lovers, the parliamentary scroll determining obligations or the duplicate of the gas-repair bill are not bound to their singular substrate, they nonetheless partake in the economy of paper and spread not only their own message but also instantiate their power and affect in paper. The fantasies of paper, the intimacy it may offer and the power it may promise are not only on the paper but also part of it. The perambulatory gesture that explores paper or the intimacy between the nib's tines and paper's surface are consequently not only allegories of an extremely close physical scrutiny of a material but also already epiphenomenal to the wider effects of the uses of paper.

Freud's description of writing as a forbidden sexual act may be a point in case. On the one hand, it metaphorises writing as the sexual conjunction of pen and paper, and, on the other, it cannot avoid eliciting that any actual copulation may be the result of a courtship by letter.

As soon as writing, which entails making a liquid flow out of a tube onto a piece of white paper assumes the symbolic signification of coitus, or as

soon as walking becomes a symbolic substitute for treading upon the body of mother earth, both writing and walking are stopped because they represent the performance of a forbidden sexual act.

(1926, p.10, author's translation)

The writing analogy implicitly rehearses the shared etymology of pencil and penis but more importantly also represents a description of putative power relations between genders. Read in conjunction with the subsequent walking analogy, sex is here not only strictly heterosexual but also something done to a suppliant receiver. The comparisons drawn are precisely not reducible to close observation transferred between referents, rather they reiterate other conventions and cannot be limited to any singular context. Curiously, given the pithy nature of the description one adjective jumps out again. That the sheet of paper has to be 'white' comes as no surprise, for it seeks to typify the same object sought by Franklin.

Of the same class of typification, however in a reversal of the analogical direction, is also John Locke's oft-evoked trope regarding the intellectual pliability a child's mind offers to morality. 'White paper receives any Characters' (Locke, 1714, Bk.1, Ch.3, p.21) is not only interesting for what it professes to know about the human mind but also in its assumption about white paper. Müller, although writing about paper, is more fascinated with Locke's metaphorical description of the impressionability of the mind and its power to capture material than with the analogical implications for the sheet of paper (Müller, 2014, pp.177–8; cf. Vogt, 2008, pp.61–3, 79–82). Franklin's, Freud's and Locke's en-passant descriptions are indicative of a perception of paper that purportedly speaks to material experience but are incongruous with it. Of course, any paper has some potential to be marked, but material contingencies predominate the interaction. Make a pencil note on a heavily sized paper; use a fountain pen on unsized paper; write with a biro on a single 'uncushioned' sheet of copy paper atop a hardwood table; draw an energetic horizontal with a crisp italic on paper that is not hot-pressed; write with anything other than a waterproof pen on wax paper; draw on bible paper with a gushy pen and consider the verso; scribble small marks on laid paper with a fine-nibbed fountain pen; do a thick up-stroke with a sharp, pointed nib on any paper; take a crisp new sheet from a pad, halve it, leave one half on top of your desk, the other between the pages of a heavy book, after a week, write on both...

If such observations seem trivial and insubstantial then having and handling paper is trivial and

insubstantial for the discussion of paper. Maryanne Dever reminds us that the intimate practice of dealing with paper, whether as an archivist or another practitioner engaged in paperwork ‘suggests how it may be paper’s emergent capacities – what it can do – more than its basic properties that we seek to hold onto’ (2014, p.290, italics in original). Though it is easy to reduce paper to mere pliant ground beneath each stroke and between all letters, paper as a base is perhaps even more basic, has even more fundamental properties for the marks on it.

When it is not associated – like a leaf, moreover, or a silk paper – with a veil or canvas, writing’s *blank white*, spacing, gaps, the ‘blanks which become what is important,’ always open up onto a *base of paper*. Basically, paper often remains for us the *basis of the basis*, the base figure on the basis of which figures and letters are separated out. The indeterminate ‘base’ of paper, the basis of the basis *en abyme*, when it is also surface, support, and substance (*hypokeimenon*), material substratum, formless matter and force in force (*dynamis*), virtual or dynamic power of virtuality – see how it appeals to an interminable genealogy of these great philosophemes.

(Derrida, 2005, p.53, italics in original)

Derrida’s paper cannot be separated into paper as mere ground and the groundwork – that is: paperwork – supporting, authorising and legitimising power structures from bureaucracies to parliament and businesses to border controls. Paper is basic in the way that it is the base for writing, the potential of its force, the material sanctioning the acts inscribed on it and so on, *en abyme*.

[T]his fundamental or basic chain of the ‘base’ (support, substratum, matter, virtuality, power) cannot possibly be dissociated, in what we call ‘paper,’ from the apparently antinomic chain of the act, the formality of ‘acts,’ and the force of law, which are all just as constitutive.

(Derrida, 2005, p.54)

Despite the active force of paper, Michael O’Driscoll points out that it ‘is also curiously self-abnegating [...] as paper withdraws from view as the signs and markings command our focus’ (2006, p.224). This retreat of paper to become mere ground may however also be apparent in our own markings of it. Returning to the sheet long after having abandoned it, both writing and drawing adopt a solidity and plainness that they did not possess previously. As if the marks belonged to someone else or were never anything

but the original scores of the paper, their clumsiness or elegance is still more anchored and less tentative. When the identification of marks is replaced by the faint recognition of their underlying gestures, both drawer and writer accept a blindness at their origin. A blindness that is also an acceptance that to (re)turn to the sheet is always a (re)turn to a sheet that was never blank, void or empty. It is a sheet that had been written on before, prescribed, and thus prescriptive for what was to come. It is prescriptive not only as a text that comes before the text, but a prescription, a normative grammar that directs and instructs, that marks the passage and maps the way. And, on the other hand, it is a prescription that is the script for the composition of a treatment, the treatment of a (pre)text, eine *Vorschrift für eine Behandlung*, a prescript(ion) for a particular kind of ‘handling’. At once, it is a text that calls upon feet and hands to carry on and carry out the script.

This sheet, like all others, has never been merely just white ground, open and acquiescent. As substrate, it is neither indifferent nor compliant. It is not open to receive all possible marks. It is neither neutral surface to be drawn upon, nor a skin or membrane that permits all inscriptions. Its surface as topography and matter as geology mediate the wandering pen. Topographically, it has dimensions that arbitrate its traversal. Crossing and composition happen within and without this space, negotiated by this space, in it and against it. The exploration of this space occurs within it and despite of it. To mark the sheet is also to react and act on and upon it. The paper’s size and ratio already anticipate its immanent and contingent composition. The sheet seems thereby to be landscape and map of itself at once (cf. Borges, 1998, p.325). It is traversed and provides the route of its traversal. The tip of the pencil encounters it in proximity, dragging its graphite heel, and yet the territory is also seen from above, overseen, surveilled at great distance and surveyed in its own map. It is walked upon and through, creating new paths and routes, which are also charting their own inscription. Marks and inscriptions – as if already pre-empted – are negotiated according to the paper’s topography. These marks themselves then become part of the landscape and its contingency, already anticipating future marks. Every crease, watermark and splotch is another furrow, bog and tarn navigated by composition, construction and wayfaring. In texture and fibre, paper finds its geology: terrain and stratification. Both confer how to access and travel the territory.

The weathered book cover and its hinged flyleaf greedily drink up brushed ink until saturated. Their surface resists the navigation of the nib, which

scratches, stumbles, skips and often bleeds. Railroading tines cut into the paper, excavating short, friable fibres. They will draw up any liquid nearby, leading it into its channel, feathering its edge with a fringe. The surface seems to resist or subvert the pencil by emphasising its own texture. It becomes increasingly cratered and rugged. Only prolonged traversal levels it into an arid metallic trough.

On the other hand, like a terrene plain, the smooth hot-pressed sheet is deceptively easily crossed with any medium, yet, its traversal is seemingly inerasable, its surface so homogeneous that any trace appears infinitely visible. Its face is often so dense that it resists liquid which stays superficial, runs into pools, awaiting dispersion and evaporation, making it buckle.

On paper, ink from a nib appears liminal. It permeates, but sits on top; it is deeply anchored, but raises the surface. In inscribing itself, it engraves the groove that moors it and deposits itself in it and on it. It is both furrow and ridge. Is this seeming permanence its authority? In contrast, brushed ink seems subliminal. It penetrates and permeates. Its remains visible on the surface but cannot be felt. With pencil all depends on pressure. A fleeting step remains superliminal, it hardly engraves, smears graphene superficially. A heavy trudge troughs the paper, making it more than just surface, leaving a leaded furrow. Neither the written nor the drawn mark are two-dimensional, flat traces *on* paper, rather they possess a volume and body that disturbs any notion of their modality as merely visible.

To recognise (this) paper therefore as shifting between submissive substrate and controlling dominium is to acknowledge it as one of the phenomena of Derrida's subjectile (1994). A double, the subjectile is neither and both. It is, at once, a membrane whose subservient surface – mere ground – is energised by being acted upon, by being traversed, engraved, inscribed and penetrated. But it is also resolute resistance to the attempts to traverse it; it has to be tackled and its own characteristics assert themselves. It returns to a binary discourse, which wants to move beyond binarity, because the subjectile moves

between the intransitivity of jacere and the transitivity of jacere, in what I will call the conjecture of both. In the first case, jaceo, I am stretched out, lying down, gisant, in my bed, brought down, brought low, without life, I am where I have been thrown [...] thrown beneath. In the second case, jacio, I throw something, a projectile, thus, stones, a firebrand, seed (ejaculated), or dice – or I cast a line. [...]

because I have thrown something, I can have raised it or founded it.

(Derrida, 1994, p.169, italics in original)

Without ever belonging to either, paper moves between active operative and acted/operated on. It is at once the available open ground walked upon, the potential for a path, the possibility of the spoor, that which expedites the step, bidding to be marked and traced. But it is also the resistance to every step, it defies exploration and impedes free traversal. While setting feet free, it also shackles them. If then, both the line of drawing and writing are inseparable from their papery support, what of the substrate? It is a substrate that is no longer sub-, beneath, that is no longer mere backing, but must be found to constitute what is, both as act and inscription. And if it is a stratum at all, a stratum super stratum, it is the merger of two homonymous verbs, not merely a blanket that is 'spread out' and 'scattered' over another ground but also the force that 'knocks down', 'lays low' and 'overthrows' (OED, 2016, s.v. *stratum* n.). And equally the implement, whose tip is bearer of a mark that it partly comes to compose, leaves itself behind in the mark, even when it itself has left. The graphite trace becomes the non-originary remainder of a gesture that itself continues to act.

The question of the interactions on the page returns to the hand whose *traitement* of the sheet opens the abyssal gap that reaches beyond alphabet and mimesis, beyond the verbal and pictural of chirography. It is in the (con)fluence of hand, implement and paper that the body and landscape of the graphic shape themselves. Through the hand, graphic *traits* are incurred in the prescribed composition of the treatment of the prescriptive (pre)text. It executes *eine Behandlung* that draws lines blind to the distinction of text and image.

Yet, to speak of one hand is to speak against the gesture of drawing and writing. Who draws with one hand? How can one hand write? Surely, one neither writes nor draws with a hand only. Initially, there is (often) another hand, the *other* hand (cf. Richtmeyer, 2012), which, though not marking the paper with an implement, still supports it and the drawer, accommodating the body of the drawer in the complex relation between substrate, implement and drawer.

The drawer does not merely hover ethereally above the substrate, but occupies an infinite number of possible spatial relations to the other material. Moreover, the many advantages of paper – flexibility, portability, malleability – also require it, in the words of Hana Gründler, Toni Hildebrandt and Wolfram Pichler, to 'borrow another body' that can prop it up, acquire

it as detachable surface or skin (2012, p.17, author's translation).

Even in a very narrow understanding of the idea of gesture, the hand or arm movement leading to a mark on paper, writing and drawing cannot be categorically distinguished. Neither writing nor drawing is limited to one particular position or grip of the pen or to one particular restricted form of muscular movement that guides it. Though writing may sustain a particular grip along the section longer, because repeated marks tend to be of more uniform size, the implements and what is to be written shape the way the pen is held and its movement across the page. Or conversely, the grip and movement co-determine how something may be written. Especially writing with ballpoints and other hard tools requires an exertion of pressure close to the writing surface in order to facilitate the flow or rasp of matter onto the page. The resultant wrist or even just fingertip movement usually brings with it a reduction in writing scale. This is however not to suggest that drawing necessarily involves more of the body. Muscular-movement writing, for example, requires the writer to use the arm's musculature to guide the pen, often with wrist and forearm touching the writing surface and finger movement scorned upon. According to William Henning the method dates back to at least the Renaissance, though Ewan Clayton traces its origins to Joseph Carstairs in early nineteenth-century London (Henning, 2002, p.296; Clayton, 1999, p.13 n.10, p.18; cf. Carstairs, 1816). Though we may now consider muscular writing as entirely atypical, it became a standard American writing technique in the early nineteenth century when it was subsequently adopted in the correspondence and business-writing manuals of Benjamin Foster, Platt Rogers Spencer and eventually Austin Palmer, whose popular simplified Spencerian explicitly required the writer to use the muscular action of a rigid arm 'from the shoulder' – with the little finger making contact with the writing surface – to achieve a light, untiring motion across the page (Palmer, 1894, p.5; cf. Foster, 1836; Spencer & Spencer, 1868).

However, as Vilém Flusser observes in relation to the gesture of painting, we are used to dissecting the body of the artist and her gestures into separable body parts and aspects of movement, which are *the* parts and aspects that *make* the work (1994a, pp.88–9). (Though painting is not drawing or writing the comparison still holds as Flusser's explanation does not hinge on the oft-evoked differences – use of colour, surface coverage, potential for spatial dimension etc – between the processes.) He further suggests that there is a metaphysical exclusivity underlying these aims to 'fill'

gestures with body parts, as though the two existed separately.

The first thing we must do, in order to see the gesture of painting, is to forgo the whole catalogue of bodies moving inside of gesture. Such a catalogue is 'metaphysical', in the sense that it presupposes bodies which are somewhere outside the gesture and only later move within it.

(Flusser, 1994a, p.88, author's translation)

The gesture is here irreducible to a body part, material or particular aspect of the movement. Flusser seeks the description and explanation for this kind of gesture in its directedness towards a final object: an object to come. Any explanation of the gesture that brings it about therefore needs to address all movements in relation to their future, even 'the future of the gesture' (Flusser, 1994a, p.90, author's translation). Consequently, any attempt to describe the gesture at work should not be a conjunction of materials and creative subject synthesised into the work, but has to give up the division of material, support, maker, movement etc. Flusser's phenomenology is above all interested in overcoming the predetermination of, what is for him typical of, occidental thought: abstraction and distance from concrete, observable experience.

Were there a general gesture theory, a semiological discipline that would allow us to decipher gesture, art criticism would not be, as it is today, a thing of empiricism or 'intuition' or causal explaining-away of aesthetic phenomena, but an exact analysis of gestures frozen into paintings. Lacking such a 'choreographology', it is perhaps a better strategy to observe the gesture itself, in the way it concretely occurs in front of us and thus in us: as an example of freedom.

(Flusser, 1994a, p.99, author's translation)

Of course, Flusser is perhaps the first to avoid exactly such a gesture analysis where it is urgently needed and particularly easily foregone. What speaks against a choreographologic conception of writing? For Flusser, the answer is at once self-contradictory and straightforward: writing is typing. Writing by hand is for him too closely related to calligraphy and thus drawing. The availability of different writing implements (other than the typewriter) 'speaks against the being of writing and recalls drawing' (Flusser, 2002, p.116, author's translation). The typewriter is his ideal writing instrument because it does not restrict the gesture of writing but makes the rules of the available material more obvious. If an 'expressible virtuality' finds its

'expression' in writing (rather than music or painting) it still encounters the resistance of its material: words (Flusser, 1994b, p.36, author's translation). Writing is for Flusser a notation of speech that records terms not ideas.

Walter Benjamin had suggested that the typewriter may only replace the fountain pen were it to permit writers to engage directly and accurately with the conception of their books (1928, p.31). For Martin Heidegger similarly, the connection between word and hand was much more intimate. The typewriter constituted for him a breach between writing and the word, because the word was one of handwriting. Tearing the hand from writing, degraded the word itself in its reduction 'to "typed stuff"' (Heidegger, 1994, p.119, author's translation; cf. Leroi-Gourhan, 1993). As Derrida has indicated in relation to Heidegger's indictment of the mechanisation of writing through the typewriter, handwriting ensured a closer relation to speech and the body, as well as gathering letters together, which was for Heidegger strongly linked to the gathering gesture of reading (*lesen*) (Derrida, 1987, pp.178–80). Friedrich Kittler, on the other hand, has sought to emphasise that the typewriter brought an end to the 'metaphysics of handwriting' that had animated centuries of written philosophy (Kittler, 1985b, p.25, author's translation; cf. Stingelin, 1995; Günzel, 2002). While Michel Foucault acknowledges the material base of notation and the production, transmission and archiving of knowledge, his analysis remains premised on the internal structures of discourse, returning to structural formations, types and genres (1972, pp.79–131). Kittler goes further: any notion of the construction of knowledge needs be considered not only in its situatedness in time and place but also as determined by medial contingencies that structure the mechanism of its formation, retention and dissemination (Kittler, 1985a, 1986). The typewriter is only one of a number of technological changes (phonography, photography, cinematography) that fundamentally reorient notions of referentiality and the understanding of the written signifier.

Interestingly, Flusser also recognises the idea of gathering in the act of reading (*lesen*), though his gathering has the deliberation and selectivity of collecting, which allows him to read for particular recognisable characteristics of writing (2002, p.77). Flusser's gesture of writing is thus already removed from any necessary graphic qualities of the written word – not to mention the letter – and more concerned with the combinatorics of clearly defined and limited signifying units. A choreography of writing's gesture would merely encounter the verbleness

of words that is already separate from their plastic, i.e. written, instantiation. Given the aforementioned insistence of the danger of 'explaining away' actual phenomena, Flusser's logocentric – and Lessing-inspired – perspective is doubly puzzling. On the one hand, he deliberately seems to avoid the observational analysis of gesture as he encourages it elsewhere, on the other, he foregrounds physical, material and environmental aspects of (type)writing. For example, he part-bemoans and part-endorses that literary criticism is only interested in 'das Himmlische, nicht das Irdische' of writing. Its interest is in 'the heavenly, not the earthly', which carries the ambiguous connotations of 'the transcendental, not the physical' and 'the elevated, not the profane' (Flusser, 2002, p.125, author's translation). But then he adds that, though the writer is more than fingertips, his body has no place to be mentioned, except in extreme cases, like the writing in Gulags. He is demanding the context of the gesture of writing to be taken into account, a context whose physicality, however, he rescinds. Finally perhaps, much of Flusser's writing on writing often reads like a love letter to a typewriter whose shortcomings he has come to adore and require. In relation to the advent of computers on desks, he wonders if we perhaps need the dumb equipment of the past, in contrast to the unencumbered writing of the future, in order to be able to write (Flusser, 2002, pp.125–6).

As Franklin's absurd paper people are more concerned with paper type rather than character, so Flusser is more concerned with the type-ical of writing rather than its characteristics. Not only does he prefer to recognise writing in type, but writing as 'printed matter is a typical matter and not a characteristic, incomparable, unique one' (Flusser, 2002, p.52, author's translation). Writing for Flusser, like paper for Franklin and others, are interchangeable types that are devoid of idiosyncratic characteristics. The body of paper and the body of writing follow clear typologies. The former is flat, blank and open to any mark, its characteristics are background to the inscriptions they serve. The latter is clearly defined and limited; its transparent body appears indistinguishable from its verbleness and signification.

Paper blind

A consideration of the gesture and material of writing and drawing thus seemingly extends the understanding of the substrate in action and moves beyond the manual – and with it beyond any *maniera* – to evaluate the corporeality of the drawer-writer as only one of the acting subjects. The materials and subjects of writing and drawing exceed narrowly operational parameters, instead engaging the environmental and corporeal of both drawer and writer, and drawing and

writing. As Gründler, Hildebrandt and Pichler stress: 'No drawing is made by a human hand alone, but always includes the surface of the substrate and often also the invisible counter-support that was removed after the drawing process' (2012, p.18, author's translation). And yet again, whilst recognising and requiring the invisible support, we will continue to speak of someone's writing hand and seek the hand in the drawing and the drawing in the hand, in the 'reciprocal relationship of hand and graphy' (Gründler et al., 2012, p.6, author's translation). So, what is the point of such bradylexic creeping across the landscape and body of writing and drawing? Is this the pendulum swinging the other way, away from a generalised notion of the materiality of paper to one that indulges in the idiosyncratic detail of every single sheet, microscopically questioning every perceivable and imaginable characteristic of highly individualised substances? Or differently, is this a shift toward an inability to see the paper for its piddling minutiae? Propositionally and to intercept any quick responses, perhaps there is something to be gained in the kind of writing about art, pictures, images, visual perception and, above all, the practice of drawing and writing, that is highly vigilant in the observance of the materials and bodies involved. Though art-history, critical-theory and visual-culture discourses profess a deep-seated interest in the material, James Elkins still asserts that they are fearful and superficial in the manner in which they engage with it. He identifies three problems in particular: 'the fear of materiality and the slowness of the studio', as well as a broader issue, touching on the two others, 'the limit of phenomenological detail' (2008, p.26, original emphasis omitted). The first problem is grounded in a perceived incompatibility between close physical encounter with an object and its contextual framing (historical, theoretical, social etc.), as well as the potential derogation, vis-à-vis class consciousness, of what may be perceived as the detritus of manual labour. Secondly, the interaction and engagement with bodies, materials and gestures is inherently slow in comparison to cogitation that eschews them. And finally, though phenomenology provides perhaps the best possibility for an affective/effective attempt to come to terms with the experience of things, its scope within discourse remains questionable.

In the indexical gesture of the graphic mark, both drawer and writer scrutinise the landscape and body on the ground. Examining it thoroughly and closely as if by touch, they also survey it from the distance as a correlated map that constantly changes as a new path is drawn by the graphite-footed prowling on its territory. This shift between proximity and distance also reiterates the blindnesses of the drawer. The pen's

eye – the wayfarer's boot – obscures the vision of the drawer. As pen and boot traverse, they persistently blind the one spot of crucial importance. They always shadow the spot that they – in that moment – inscribe and describe. By necessity, the surveyor's inscription blinds the surveyor in the moment of inscription.

But the pen's shadow and body are not the only impediments to seeing drawing. Derrida differentiates three types of blindness in view of drawing. Firstly, he remarks on 'the *aperspective of the graphic act*', the umbrage given by the implement and the gap traced by the trait, which 'must proceed in the night' and which is at once said to be a stand-in – mimetic or representative – for the figure but does not form part of the figure's 'spectacle' (1993, pp.44–5, italics in original). Again, doubly so, the trait is tracing itself before it shows and sees itself, but also shares no aspect of the figure it apparently traces through itself. And the one who draws, doubly blind to the drawing and the figure, can only see the one or the other: marking the impossibility not only of the trace – the trace of what?: the trace of that which is not seen or the unseen trace – but also of tracing – tracing what?: tracing what is not there. Deanna Petherbridge's observation that the '[l]ine is a representational convention' that does not find a match 'in the observable world', chimes with Derrida's, though she approaches drawing's trace quite differently (2010, p.90). Derrida invokes the night a second time to characterise the gap between the figure and the stroke that traces it, noting that '[t]he heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing trait remains abyssal' (1993, p.45). The nocturnal depth of this abyss returns to the immeasurable distance and infinite proximity between what drawing sees and shows. Drawing is a process that happens on paper but is not limitable to it. The gesture of drawing begins prior to and continues beyond the graphic mark on the page though the force and affect of that mark are testament to the act beyond itself. As Derrida describes anecdotally, writing may similarly proceed blindly. When waking in the night or driving a car, we may write with eyes wide open in complete darkness or looking elsewhere. As in the drawing act, the 'hand of the blind [writer] ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight' (Derrida, 1993, p.3). Writing is guided by the pen's ferrule reading the paper's surface and the hand's rehearsed response to the touch of the page.

And yet the nocturnal tides all drawing not just the one called figurative. The pleasure in drawing,

which is the same as its pain, is its lateral procession at night. Drawing as a process aims to determine its own indeterminacy and, as artefact, presents its indeterminate determination. To draw is to eliminate, stroke by stroke, many drawings in order to arrive at one, not one previously determined, but one that in its drawing drew itself out of infinitely many. And as each confident slick and probing dash erases another drawing, the one that reluctantly urges ahead knows not itself but negotiates itself in every mark, especially those it does not make but which are still made and constitute it in return. It is precisely here then that the gesture neither fills the body nor imposes itself on a substrate, for without body and material there would be no such gesture. There would be no such strokes without the confluence of bodies, no such confluence of bodies without the gesture. In this erasure of drawings, drawing, as process, draws itself forth in order to draw itself out as consequence. It is a consequence of strokes that neither intended it, nor are reducible to it. Drawing's necessary inseparability from its background shows itself in the void space that is not void, that is just as drawn as the drawn space without carrying the pen's marks. Its marks are gestures of an implement that draws undrawingly.

Nevertheless the intention of drawing remains, although it is not one that is ever fulfilled. Nanne Meyer describes the beginning of her drawings as guided by a 'more or less clear intention [Ab-Sicht], which may be *imageless*, a specific kind of premonition, a something, which I can drawingly push off from' (2012, p. 141, author's translation and italics). The specific vocabulary, hyphenation and capitalisation are insightful here. *Absicht*, the commonplace German for the intention, purpose, aim or design, becomes a scopic intent, a fore-sight or fore-seeing that in translation cycles etymologically through the nightly depth that the obsolete fore-wit has to offer, from wit's *wissen*, to know, to *vidēre*, to see; and thus perhaps properly 'I have seen, hence, I know' (*wát*, *wást*, *witon*) (OED, 2016, s.v. *wit* v. 1). Notwithstanding, this fore-wit is without image, a vision that does not see. The scope of its intent feels its way nocturnally through the strictures of drawing. It opens up drawing despite and because of the 'blank' page, against it and through it (Newman & de Zegher, 2003, pp. 234–6). Drawing's frictions, offered and arising through the materials, supports and bodies in action, propel drawing in itself from its intent. Drawing pushes against intent, paper, graphite stick and self to arrive at itself. However, this pushing off from or pushing against is not a contrarian push, not a push that intends to overthrow the other. As in the prefix *ab-*, common to *Ab-Sicht* and *abstossen*, this push is but a frictional

desire of facing another, of rubbing against another, an attrition arising in attraction that gives rise because and despite of the drawer's intention. In this push against and within paper, representation, intention and gesture we however also recognise Derrida's push of language against silence. It is similarly a push 'against' an opposition and adversary who is also a counterpart and ground on which to stand. It provides the support and friction that propels the mark (visual, verbal, phonic).

[S]ilence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge – 'against' here simultaneously designating the content from which form takes off by force, and the adversary against whom I assure and reassure myself by force.

(Derrida, 2001, pp. 65–6, italics in original)

To disturb the notion of 'against' as merely antagonistic by demonstrating its supplementation and dependency on what it pushes off from is particularly meaningful because it addresses both material and medial aspects of drawing and writing practices. The art school bromide of 'working against the material' is here a point in case because it suggests an opposition to something that is not oppositional. If we take Ingold's assertion of material flux and transformation seriously (2007b), then there is nothing that can be done to matter that is not already a potential within the material itself. Burning a sheet of paper does not work against the material but shows it as combustible. This idea extends similarly to the contention of working against a certain medium. Gottfried Boehm argues '[t]hat a particular group of artists do not optimise media according to their immanent logic, but work against the grain, using them *inversely*' (2004, p. 109, italics in original, author's translation). Exemplarising Cy Twombly's and Stéphane Mallarmé's work, he notes that the former moves the trace of painting from its identifiable sphere into one of uncertainty, as well as releasing writing from the 'logic of *succession*', while the latter shows writing's material characteristics (Boehm, 2004, p. 112, italics in original, author's translation). Boehm asserts that particular artists inverse medial uses in order to expose and explore the rules governing them. This argumentation, though entirely plausible, is however also tautological. If the 'immanent logic' of a medium or practice can be inverted, this inversion is already part of the 'immanent logic' and thus not its inversion. The paradox returns to the assumption that there may be an optimal use of a medium, one that works optimally by not working against its grain. Consequently, the notion of 'working

against' shows itself as the incapacity of a category to describe its own object. The importance of the substrate or the affect and power of handwriting are only marginal or 'parasitic' in a closed system of writing that is a priori a phonocentric, auxiliary, secondary, representative combinatorics of speech and which thus considers 'the body of the written trace as a didactic and technical metaphor, as servile matter or excrement' (Derrida, 1988, p.16, 2001, p.248).

However, in the use of Derrida and Meyer materials are not optimally shaped into a preconceived notion of a medium or practice. Rather, material and gesture are constitutive of medial effects. The form of drawing does not arrive preformed, does not replicate that which is (not) there or that which is (not) imagined. In Jean-Luc Nancy's words, '[d]rawing is the opening [l'ouverture] of form', inseparable from its '[m]atter', which

is the name of form's resistance to its deformation. It is not a formless 'content' that form comes to mold or model but rather the thickness, texture, and force of form itself.

(2013, pp.1, 7)

Properly, as David Espinet reminds us, "l'ouverture" needs to be read multiply as well: drawing as the beginning of form, the 'opening' of the possibility of form but also drawing's 'persistent openness' which is never comprehensive or complete, always unclosably undetermined (2012, p.168, italics in original, author's translation; cf. Meskimmon & Sawdon, 2016). What (form) drawing shows is thus neither reducible to some referential thing, nor to the ideal of that thing, instead, it is the idea (ideated not ideal) of the thing offered as a (trans)formation in its unique and determinate stricture as drawing. Does that sound too much like hedging or tautology? If so, then the options Nancy offers are stark: on the one hand, an account – often art historical – that determines drawing as fixed information, drawing as note taking, its sensing, limited to sensory capacities, merely 'the simple perception of data'; on the other hand, drawing is persistently in formation, it also 'notes' but only to enable a sensing that 'exhausts and exceeds' 'sensoriality or sensibility', 'sensing, [as] a faculty of making sense, or of letting it be formed' (2013, p.21, italics in original). Hence, drawing as the opening of form, requires a differentiation between drawing as immanent, formative force, a will to form (*Formungswille*), a form-generative momentum, and drawing as fully formed, settled and complete object, sensed retrospectively as a modality of the image: *forma formans* as opposed to *forma formata* (Nancy, 2013, p.21; cf. Espinet, 2012, pp.169–70; Meyer, 2012, pp.138–9. Hildebrandt, 2014, pp.48–9). For Nancy, the

pleasure in drawing arises exactly in the persistent nascence that invents, forms, makes up, makes sense and in-forms. Drawing does not come to rest in a papery coffin, rather it continuous to unsettle itself in and beyond the paper, uncontainable by any gaze that aims to arrest it, *on paper* but not of it, determined but not determinable.

If the nocturnal advance of drawing and seeing drawing describes the first of Derrida's aspects of the powerlessness of the eye, then the second is named 'the *withdrawal (retrait) or the eclipse, the differential inappearance of the trait*' (1993, p.53, italics in original). Derrida asks, once the tracing of the trait has occurred, what is this trait? It describes what is not there, an outline that demarcates the line outside no thing, it is situated between inside and outside of the figure. And even as it relates to itself, as a re-trait of a trait, it divides itself, disrupting (in its divisibility) all identification of itself:

[O]nly the surroundings of the *trait* appear – that which the trait spaces by delimiting and which thus does not belong to the *trait*. *Nothing belongs to the trait*, and thus, to drawing and to the thought of drawing, not even its own 'trace.'

(1993, p.54, italics in original)

The withdrawal of the trait (*le retrait du trait*) is a retreat that accompanies the recognition of its mark as the limitation of the spaces that it inscribes. The trait is never itself, but the difference between spaces marked outside themselves. Drawing and seeing drawing become subject to 'the law of the inter-view', it draws the spaces between the lines together, 'a *jalousie* (a blind) of *traits* cutting up the horizon' (Derrida, 1993, p.55, italics in original). This kind of drawing circumscribes an interlinear vision that differs and defers from its own traits. Its spaces are not marked and its constituent marks do not inscribe themselves. Drawing hovers and shimmers between the marks it makes and the spaces it leaves unmarked. Or differently, as James Elkins reads it, to consider an individual mark of a drawing detaches it from the rest of the picture. The mark will sink into the surface it marks and its own edges will take on the force and potential of marks themselves, until 'that half-imaginary mark will begin to "wear itself out"' and so on (Elkins, 1995, p.837, italics in original; cf. Derrida, 1993, p.53). This same process of repetitive and ever-recursive deferral and difference again recognises the drawing of the blind.

As a potential effect of the withdrawal of the trait, Derrida notes 'the *third aspect* [of drawing's blindness]: *the rhetoric of the trait*' (1993, p.56, italics in original). The cession of the trait sees the emergence

of the discursive, for Derrida provocatively poses the possibility that the imperialist rule of rhetoric over images is granted, rather than imposed, by the retreat, deferral and diffraction of the line that marks drawing. Though Elkins argues that 'Derrida's is a repressive reading' (1995, p.838), what comes into view throughout is Derrida's profound reluctance to delimit drawing and the viewing of drawing verbally. In fact, the scope of Derrida's blindness is circumscribed by what can be seen and said with certainty about drawing. Both Derrida's and Elkins' projects, albeit in different ways, seem to recognise the potential usurpation of drawing by vision and words. Derrida, in considering the blindness of drawing, hence speaks of the powerlessness of the eye, not as an insufficiency but to mark 'the experience of drawing [as a] *quasi-transcendental* resource' (1993, p.44, italics in original). The power of drawing arises here in the eye's powerlessness to see drawing. A blindness that requires the blind to return to the drawing again and again, in order to see and be blind again, to see differently and yet still be unable to see totally.

Regarding the written mark, we noted that it averts exclusively pointing at its substrate, while the drawn one, on the other hand, cannot be entirely detached from it. Even when drawing seemingly approaches the transparency of writing, for example in architectural plans, typographic designs, medical illustrations etc. (cf. Voorhoeve, 2011; Lyotard, 2011, pp.195–6, 206), its line also always belongs to paper, though it never absolutely belongs to anything, not even itself. Drawing's line traces a boundary that cannot absolutely exclude its paper, whereas writing cannot entirely include it. The phrasing may be reversed to show that writing also occurs on a substrate and drawing in a space illimitable to one singular sheet, though that is not to say that the result of the reversal makes the two practices the same. Rather, while writing can never truly belong to the paper and drawing never truly be separated from it, their shared graphic traits ensure that the vacillation cannot be arrested.

The way that writing as script, i.e. writing as graphic marks on paper, needs to be turned into language and (inner) speech may be exemplified through Klaus Weimar's contention that reading is a 'linguaging [*Versprachlichen*] of writing on the one hand and the perception of speech [*Sprache*] on the other, though not in alternation but indivisibly at once' (1999, p.50, italics in original, author's translation). The German language permits Weimar to funambulate on the line of *Sprache* as language, as a shared and codified structure of linguistic patterns (*langue*), in the widest sense even human speech (*langage*) and speech as a use of language

in an individual utterance (*parole*) (cf. de Saussure, 1966, pp.9–10, 13). His assertion therefore cannot avoid seeking to designate reading as also a 'speechifying of writing' with its concomitant 'perception of language', as well as the all the other remaining combinations (cf. Renner, 2010, p.46). What is remarkable about this analysis in any case is that writing is not perceived as language, rather that the reader needs to turn it into language and/or inner speech. This inner speech itself, as Hans Lössner has indicated, is in a precarious position between language and non-language, too, because by definition it does not speak (its sound is not heard) but only rehearses a phoneme (its sound is perceived) silently (2006, p.49). 'Reading means to speak to oneself *in another's name* based on writing' (Weimar, 1999, p.56, italics in original, author's translation), which makes the reader both sender and receiver of an impossible translation based on written marks. There is thus no simple and self-evident automatism, mechanism or process that absolutely prescribes and limits how writing is encountered and read (cf. though Weimar, 1999, p.59). Why, however, would this reading be dissociable from the material constituents of writing? Even outside of the visual arts and in the most trivial senses we recognise the importance of particular physical characteristics of writing. The proposition to hand out university degrees scribbled with a biro on the back of a fag packet or as a virtual-paper PDFs does not offend because the former is defiled and the latter potentially fraudulent, but because the acts of writing are illimitable to a transcendent understanding of text. Writing's power issues as paperwork and paper's work. As the use of words and phrases is culturally, politically, socially, contextually, personally etc. encoded and shifting, so the co-importance of material actors needs to be called upon to explore why a word-identical condolence message sent via letter or WhatsApp can be read very differently. Conversely, the assumption that drawing is intimately bound to its singular sheet of paper appears overdrawn for it is quite imaginable that the subsequent one in the pad would have permitted a drawing whose difference is perceivable only in the sense of Nelson Goodman's distinction between the perfect forgery and the original, that is to say, we cannot discriminate between the two works now but we may in the future (1976, pp.105–6).

Derrida comments that there are arbitrary conventions of discourse – oppositionality, presence, genre etc – which are merely self-instituting and -legitimising, and arrive at the cost of the marginalisation of other phenomena. Instead, he suggests, it is necessary to consider the impact of temporal and material factors on the economy

of writing. Of course, this will disturb the existing graphematic and structural constraints.

Are we now going to integrate such fringes into the text, and take account of such frames? Are all these parasites to be incorporated into the economy of discourse? Must the surface of the paper, the contents of the time at our disposal, etc. all be integrated into our calculations? If so, what about the ink remaining in my typewriter ribbon? And yet: why not? That is the question.

(1988, p.45)

Moreover, the analysis of writing's signifiers will also need to include the gesture of writing. 'As concerns the forms of signs, even within phonetic writing, the catexes of gestures, and of movements, of letters, lines, points, the elements of the writing apparatus (instrument, surface, substance, etc.)' these are elements of a understanding of writing that does not arbitrarily include some graphic aspects while designating others as parasites or excrement (Derrida, 2001, p.290).

Conversely for drawing, which may just as easily be subsumed into a blind materialism as into a legible text constituted by transparent signifiers. It, too, is held in the abeyance of a mark that is also a gesture and material, whilst being and making visible. Elkins similarly supports the suspense of drawing in avoiding the reduction of it into either image or material:

Marks blur and fade into one another, and even the freshest drawing will have uncertain moments where the texture of the paper confounds the sense of a mark, or a group of marks converge into a dark confusion, or a mark moves so lightly across the page that it is not securely visible. No image is composed in any other way.

What is a figure? A faint webbing of paper fibers and remnants of chalk; a morass of sticky oil.

(1995, p.834, cf. 1999)

At least for writing, there now exists a growing amount of cognitive-psychological research that demonstrates how different technologies and materials impact the intellectual capacity of its users. For example, it has been shown that students taking lecture notes longhand have equally good factual recall as those typing along on a computer (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). However, the handwriters outperformed the typewriters in conceptual questions even when other computer-based distractions were eliminated. One of the assumptions is that increased ease of note-taking

does not facilitate the reformulation and processing of information required for the slower longhand writing (cf. Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2016). In fact, 'disfluency', reduced transcription fluency, has been shown to result in enhanced lexical sophistication, sentence complexity and cohesion of the writing, when the essays of skilled typewriters composing with both hands were compared to their one-handed efforts (Medimorec & Risko, 2016; Medimorec, Young, & Risko, 2017). Though the results are reversed when longhand writers are asked to write in an unfamiliar calligraphy, which also resulted in a less fluent writing process (Olive, Alves, & Castro, 2009). Similarly, the interrelations between 'better' handwriting and reading proficiency have been experimentally tested and confirmed (Gimenez et al., 2014). The exact disentanglement of temporal, material, gestural etc factors shall not interest us here, what is however important are that ergonomics, 'material affordances and sensorimotor contingencies' are of demonstrable importance to our intellectual history (Mangen & Balsvik, 2016, p.99).

Writing and drawing are gestural practices that rely on material and technological interactions which are not neutral to their intellectual and affective force. Neither paper nor instruments are inert tools but active constituents of our intellectual development. The separation of sensory matter and cognitive effect may not be erased but its continuous displacement towards a more integrated approach is required in order to account for the encounters with and practices of writing and drawing. In order to continue Foucault's, Flusser's, Kittler's and others' attentive project regarding the interactions of our material and cognitive life, we will need to think them further even if it uncomfortably expands the arbitrary limitations we have already imposed.

Bibliography

- 1 Benjamin, W. (1928) *Einbahnstrasse*, Berlin, Ernst Rowohlt Verlag.
- 2 Benveniste, É. (1971) *Problems in General Linguistics* (trans. M.E. Meek), Coral Gables, University of Miami Press.
- 3 Boehm, G. (2004) 'Gegen den Strich: Über die Arbeit mit Schrift und Bild' in C. Öhlschläger and G. Neumann (eds) *Inzenierungen in Schrift und Bild*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, pp.109–23.
- 4 Borges, J. L. (1998) *Collected Fictions* (trans. A. Hurley), New York, Penguin.
- 5 Carstairs, J. (1816) *Lectures on the Art of Writing* (3rd edn), London, W. Molineux.
- 6 Clayton, E. (1999) 'A history of learning to write' in T. Wilcox and E. Clayton (eds) *Handwriting: Everyone's Art (Lettering Today and Tomorrow)*, Sussex, The Edward Johnston Foundation, Ditchling Museum, pp.9–18.
- 7 de Man, P. (1986) *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 8 de Saussure, F. (1966) *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. W. Baskin) (3rd edn), ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, New York, McGraw-Hill.
- 9 Derrida, J. (1987) 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's hand' (trans. J. P. Leavy, Jr.) in J. Sallis (ed.) *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp.161–96.
- 10 Derrida, J. (1988) *Limited Inc.* (trans. S. Weber & J. Mehlman), ed. by Gerald Graff, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- 11 Derrida, J. (1993) *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins.* (trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- 12 Derrida, J. (1994) 'Maddening the subjectile' (trans. M.A. Caws), *Yale French Studies*, no.84, pp.154–71.
- 13 Derrida, J. (2001) *Writing and Difference* (trans. A. Bass) (2nd edn), London, Routledge.
- 14 Derrida, J. (2005) *Paper Machine* (trans. R. Bowlby), Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- 15 Dever, M. (2014) 'Photographs and manuscripts: working in the archive', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.42, no.3, pp.282–94.
- 16 Elkins, J. (1995) 'Marks, traces, traits, contours, orli, and splendor: nonsemiotic elements in pictures', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.21, no.4, pp.822–60.
- 17 Elkins, J. (1999) *The Domain of Images*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- 18 Elkins, J. (2008) 'One some limits of materiality in art history', *31: Das Magazin des Instituts für Theorie*, no.12/13, pp.25–30.
- 19 Espinet, D. (2012) 'Skizze einer Ästhetik des Entwerfens', *Rheinsprung 11*, no.3, pp.166–73.
- 20 Flusser, V. (1994a) 'Die Geste des Malens' in *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (ungekürzte edn), Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, pp.86–99.
- 21 Flusser, V. (1994b) 'Die Geste des Schreibens' in *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (ungekürzte edn), Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, pp.32–40.
- 22 Flusser, V. (2002) *Die Schrift: Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (5th edn), ed. by Andreas Müller-Pohle, Göttingen, European Photography.
- 23 Foster, B.F. (1836) *A Concise Treatise on Commercial Book-keeping: Elucidating the Principles and Practice of Double Entry*, Boston, Perkins & Marvin.
- 24 Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse of Language* (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith), New York, Pantheon.
- 25 Franklin, B. (1838) *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Comprising the Account of the Early Part of His Life, Written by Himself; and a New and Greatly Extended Narrative in Continuation Till His Death: The Whole Illustrated with Literary and Biographical Notes. Also, The Miscellaneous Writings of Franklin* (People's edn), Edinburgh, Chambers.
- 26 Frege, G. (1892) 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Philosophische Kritik*, no.100, pp.25–50.
- 27 Freud, S. (1926) *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*, Leipzig, Vienna and Zurich, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- 28 Gimenez, P., Bugescu, N., Black, J.M., Hancock, R., Pugh, K., Nagamine, M., Kutner, E., Mazaika, P., Hendren, R., McCandliss, B.D. and Hoeft, F. (2014) 'Neuroimaging correlates of handwriting quality as children learn to read and write', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, vol.8, art.155, pp.1–15.
- 29 Goodman, N. (1976) *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (2nd edn) Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett.
- 30 Groys, B. (2004) 'Versklavte Götter: Kino und Metaphysik' in C. Öhlschläger and G. Neumann (eds) *Inzenierungen in Schrift und Bild*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, pp.227–44.
- 31 Gründler, H., Hildebrandt, T. and Pichler, W. (2012) 'Editorial: Zur Händigkeit der Zeichnung', *Rheinsprung 11*, no.3, pp.2–19.
- 32 Günzel, S. (2002) 'Nietzsche's Schreibmaschine' in S. Günzel and R. Schmidt-Grépály (eds) *Schreibmaschinentexte: Vollständige Edition, Faksimiles und kritischer Kommentar*, Weimar, Bauhaus-Universitätsverlag, pp.8–14.

- 33 Hegel, G.F.W. (1907) *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Jubiläums edn), ed. by Georg Lasson, Leipzig, Verlag der Dürr'schen Buchhandlung.
- 34 Heidegger, M. (1994) *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge (1949/1957)*, ed. by Petra Jaeger, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- 35 Henning, W.E. (2002) *An Elegant Hand: The Golden Age of American Penmanship and Calligraphy*, ed. by Paul Melzer, New Castle, Oak Knoll Press.
- 36 Hensher, P. (2012) *The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting (and Why It Still Matters)*, London, Macmillan.
- 37 Hildebrandt, T. (2014) 'Die tachistische Geste 1951–1970' in U. Richtmeyer, F. Goppelsröder and T. Hildebrandt (eds) *Bild und Geste: Figurationen des Denkens in Philosophie und Kunst*, Bielefeld, Transcript, pp.45–64.
- 38 Ingold, T. (2007a) *Lines: A Brief History*, Oxford, Routledge.
- 39 Ingold, T. (2007b) 'Materials against materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1–16.
- 40 Ingold, T. (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (e-book edn), Oxford, Routledge.
- 41 Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines* (e-book edn) Oxford and New York, Routledge.
- 42 Johnson, S. (1785) *A Dictionary of the English Language in Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals, and Illustrated in Their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers: To Which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar* (6th edn), 2 vols, vol. I, London, J.F. and C. Rivington.
- 43 Kandinsky, W. (1926) *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*, Munich, Albert Langen.
- 44 Kittler, F.A. (1985a) *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink.
- 45 Kittler, F.A. (1985b) Nietzsche, der mechanisierte Philosoph, *kultuRRvolution: Zeitschrift Für Angewandte Diskurstheorie*, no.9, pp.25–9.
- 46 Kittler, F.A. (1986) *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, Berlin, Brinkmann & Bose.
- 47 Klee, P. (1925) *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*, Munich, Albert Langen.
- 48 Klee, P. (1979) *Paul Klee: Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre* (Faksimilierte Ausgabe des Originalmanuskripts von Paul Klees erstem Vortragszyklus am staatlichen Bauhaus, Weimar 1921/22.), ed. by Jürgen Glaesemer, Basel, Schwabe.
- 49 Leroi-Gourhan, A. (1993) *Gesture and Speech* (trans. A. Bostock Berger), Cambridge and London, MIT Press.
- 50 Locke, J. (1714) *The Works of John Locke*, 3 vols, vol. I, London, John Churchill.
- 51 Lösener, H. (2006) *Zwischen Wort und Wort: Interpretation und Textanalyse*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink.
- 52 Lupton, C. (2010) 'The theory of paper: skepticism, common sense, poststructuralism', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol.71, no.4, pp.407–27.
- 53 Lyotard, J.-F. (2011) *Discourse, Figure* (trans. A. Hudek and M. Lydon), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- 54 Mangel, A. and Balsvik, L. (2016) 'Pen or keyboard in beginning writing instruction? Some perspectives from embodied cognition', *Trends in Neuroscience and Education*, vol.5, no.3, pp.99–106.
- 55 Medimorec, S. and Risko, E.F. (2016) 'Effects of disfluency in writing', *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 107, no.4, pp.625–50.
- 56 Medimorec, S., Young, T.P. and Risko, E.F. (2017) 'Disfluency effects on lexical selection', *Cognition*, vol. 158, pp.28–32.
- 57 Meyer, N. (2012) 'Wiederholung und Widerstand – Zeichnung als Krisis', *Rheinsprung 11*, no.3, pp. 134–58.
- 58 Meskimmon, M. and Sawdon, P. (2016) 'Open' in *Drawing Difference: Connections between Gender and Drawing*, London, I.B. Taurus, pp.80–112.
- 59 Molchanov, V. (2012) 'Die räumliche Sprache der Erfahrung: Die innere Zeit und der innere Raum' in N. Plotnikov, M. Siegfried and J. Bonnemann (eds) *Zwischen den Lebenswelten: interkulturelle Profile der Phänomenologie*, Münster, LIT Verlag, pp.29–36.
- 60 Mueller, P.A. and Oppenheimer, D.M. (2014) 'The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking', *Psychological Science*, vol.25, no.6, pp. 1159–68.
- 61 Mueller, P.A. and Oppenheimer, D.M. (2016) 'Technology and note-taking in the classroom, boardroom, hospital room, and courtroom', *Trends in Neuroscience and Education*, vol.5, no.3, pp. 139–45.
- 62 Müller, L. (2014) *White Magic: The Age of Paper* (trans. J. Spengler), Cambridge, Polity.
- 63 Nancy, J.-L. (2013) *The Pleasure in Drawing* (trans. P. Armstrong) (pbk edn), New York, Fordham University Press.
- 64 Newman, A. and de Zegher, C. (2003) 'Conversation' in C. de Zegher (ed.) *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, New York and London, Drawing Center and Tate, pp.67–82, 165–174, 231–237.
- 65 O'Connell, J. (2012) *For the Love of Letters: The Joy of Slow Communication*, London, Short Books.

- 66 O'Driscoll, M. (2006) 'Envois / en soi / encore: Derrida's little letter', *Mosaic*, vol.39, no.3, pp.213–28.
- 67 OED. (2016) *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>, accessed 12.12.2016.
- 68 Olive, T., Alves, R.A. and Castro, S.L. (2009) 'Cognitive processes in writing during pause and execution periods', *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, vol.21, no.5, pp.758–85.
- 69 Palmer, A.N. (1894) *Palmer's Guide to Business Writing*, Cedar Rapid, Western Penman.
- 70 Petherbridge, D. (2010) *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- 71 Renner, U. (2010) 'Lassen sich Gedanken sagen? Mimesis der inneren Rede in Arthur Schnitzlers *Lieutenant Gustl*' in S.M. Schneider (ed.) *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, pp.31–52.
- 72 Richtmeyer, U. (2012) 'Ist Nachzeichnen ein Regelfolgen?', *Rheinsprung 11*, no.3, pp.110–26.
- 73 Scholz, L. (2013) 'Hegel und das leere Blatt Papier' in L. Engell, F. Hartmann and C. Voss (eds) *Körper des Denkens: Neue Positionen der Medienphilosophie*, Munich, Fink, pp.150–71.
- 74 Spencer, H.C. and Spencer, P.R. (1868) *Spencerian Key to Practical Penmanship*, New York, Ivison, Phinney, Blakeman.
- 75 Stingelin, M. (1995) 'Kugeläußerungen: Nietzsches Spiel auf der Schreibmaschine' in H.-U. Gumbrecht and K.L. Pfeiffer (eds) *Materialität der Kommunikation*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, pp.326–41.
- 76 Vogt, P. (2008) *John Locke and the Rhetoric of Modernity*, Plymouth, Lexington.
- 77 Voorhoeve, J. (ed.) (2011) *Welten schaffen: Zeichnen und Schreiben als Verfahren der Konstruktion*, Zürich, Diaphanes.
- 78 Weimar, K. (1999) 'Lesen: zu sich selbst sprechen in fremdem Namen' in H. Bosse and U. Renner (eds) *Literaturwissenschaften: Einführungen in ein Sprachspiel*, Freiburg, Rombach, pp.49–62.
- 79 Williams, L. (2012) *Kind Regards: The Lost Art of Letter Writing*, London, Michael O'Mara.