Materialities

Mark Harris

Before I get into this talk on materialities let me show an example of contemporary artwork so we have some kind of studio orientation.

Gedi Sibony makes informal groupings of sheets of material, propped against one another, just about standing up, or he exhibits a found object, usually broken and nonfunctional. In either case these things are one step away from the skip. Teetering alongside each other, or casually left on the floor, they barely register as intentional. Here he is speaking about the window blind work that MoMA acquired–

Gedi Sibony, The Middle of the World, 2008

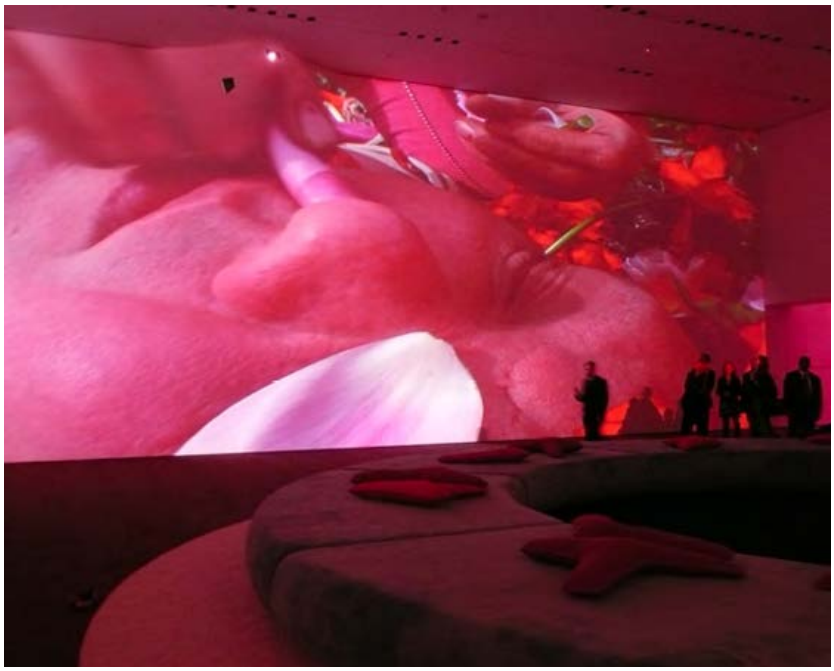
> The way this happened was the space across the hall from my studio became vacant. And at night I would go in there and the windows all had these vertical blinds in them. And one, in particular, had the air conditioner space cut out from it so the blinds hung shorter in that area.
>
> It triggered something and I wanted to take it but I felt a little bit frightened in that space. It was a little bit spooky and it was dark and in order to get it, I would have had to stand up on the edge of this window in a precarious position. So I waited till my friend Roy came over one night and we went over there and he passed it down to me and I carried it through the door and brought it into my studio and put it on the floor and was very careful.
>
> Sometime during that procession, I became deeply attached, sort of overcome with the feeling of, you know, what is this thing that I'm doing here? What is my life that I'm nervously detaching this object and nurturing it in this kind of way? It was a very

> loaded moment carrying this thing and gently placing it on the floor. I left it on the ground, in exactly this position.
>
> And I felt very much like I was taking this thing from the middle of the world this place that's so close that it's right across the hall but it's somewhere mysterious.

Sibony answers the call of things, hoarding massive amounts of unwanted materials in his studio. His labour comprises positioning fragments of things and lighting them to draw out overlooked qualities (perhaps the ones that summoned him in the first place) and to subject us to the same attraction. It's the pull of surfaces and edges of things that have all but faded from view, things that are frail, damaged and almost irrecoverable.

Remember Sibony's words: "I became deeply attached, sort of overcome with the feeling of, you know, what is this thing that I'm doing here? What is my life that I'm nervously detaching this object and nurturing it in this kind of way?" Those words suggest a relation to things that is a bit more charged than how we typically use stuff. He's bringing this inert thing into his life, "nurturing it", he says, in a way that suggests symbiosis with inorganic material. It summons him and he looks after it. This is the first materiality I want to point out. It may not be particularly new but in the context of recent preoccupations of young artists it seems unusual enough to single out.

I will try to thread a couple of questions through this talk on materiality. First of all, how do we measure, or how should we measure, the significance of our material encounters? Is there a gamut of prior experience that determines how we respond to the material call of an artwork, some reservoir of remembered affects with which we compare and grade all new aesthetic encounters? Intense memories of childhood holidays perhaps, or of adolescent sex. Or in place of the memory of past encounters does the quality of our responses to material intensify precisely when we can't correlate new with old, when the encounter is unencompassable and completely unfamiliar? It's unlikely such encounters are purely somatic, but insofar as they are embodied in this way, how do our sensory responses inform or change our conceptualizing of the world? As I reflect on the artists in this talk I can't reach any single explanation. While the somatic encounter is arguably fundamental to all, with some artists (Sibony, Pipilotti Rist) its evidence is accepted unreservedly as authentic and made central to their practice.



Pipilotti Rist, Pour Your Body Out, MoMA, 2010

With others (Marcia Hafif, Tom Holmes) it is something to be tested, to have its authenticity subjected to renunciation and abstraction.

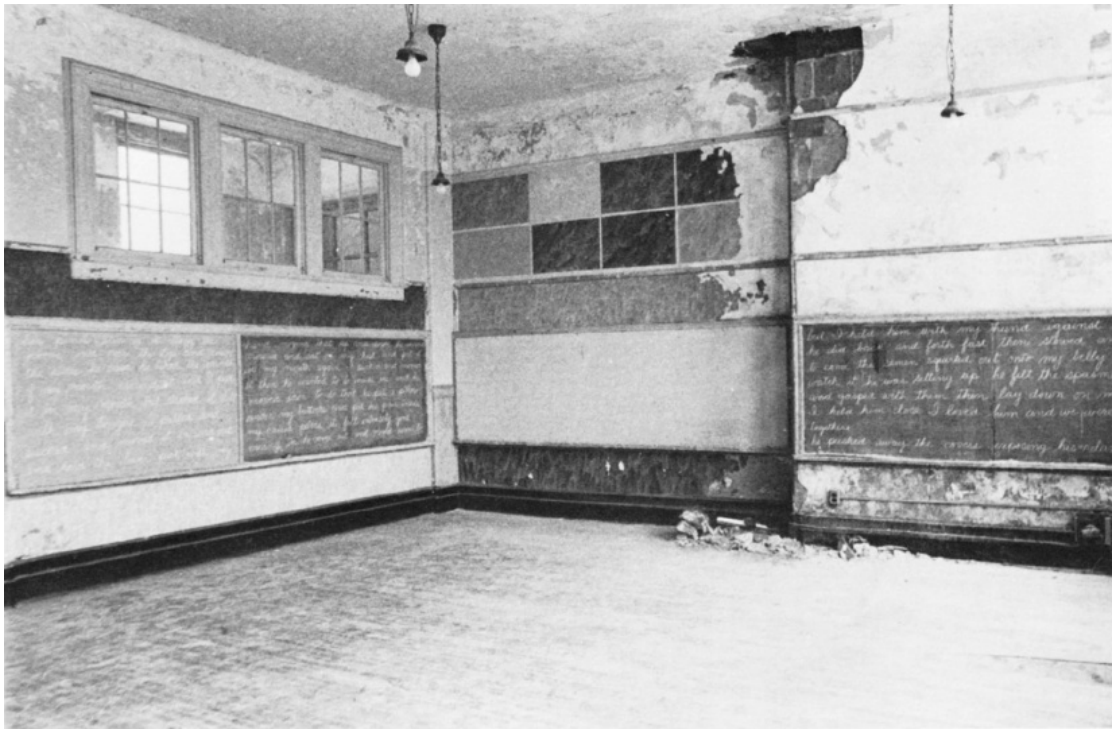
Marcia Hafif, Glaze Paintings,
Scheveningen Medium Yellow

Tom Holmes, untitled Plot, 2012
concrete, tinsel

I find a question from Walter Benjamin's 1929 essay on Surrealism provocative here. "What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips?", which I take to mean determined by the last "high". Benjamin's deep interest in many forms of intoxication, including drugs, sex, art, ideas, recognized a "profane illumination", as he called it, where the material impressions on our bodies interpenetrate with our consciousness of their impact to create an intense awareness of life, politics, and love. This is a utopian vision, where the world is transformed as we apply this carnal/conceptual illumination in our subsequent actions, and although we might expect to find something like this underlying the interest of contemporary artists in materialities we should

not be surprised to find artists suspicious that nothing remains of childhood, nor of sexuality, that hasn't been colonized by commercial and political interests.

In New York in 1976, painter Marcia Hafif startled her audience by writing a hardcore account of sex with Robert Morris in longhand on schoolroom blackboards for the opening show of PS1. It was startling for making something private public, and because Hafif's monochrome paintings were not inherently erotic. And yet in some way, even if only negatively, Hafif invited a comparison between the overwhelming sensations of sex and the sensations of making and looking at monochrome paintings, between the materiality of another person's body and the materiality of paint. Importantly, through this kind of juxtaposition Hafif enacted a radical abstraction of that sex act, that couldn't be anything other than sex, to the paintings, that couldn't possibly be about sex yet through abstraction try to enclose that unrepresentable sensuality within themselves.



Marcia Hafif, *Untitled*, paint and chalk on blackboards an walls, PSI

And this leads to my second question which concerns the reliability of intensely somatic experiences. These experiences are first of all intoxications, material encounters so profound that they temporarily cause us to lose our sense of separation from the world. Most of us return to earth dumbstruck, without the language to convey even to ourselves what has occurred and spending much of our lives trying to understand the event, trying to find connections, perhaps through literature, art, or relationships, that help us make sense of such experiences. But as intoxications they are highly subjective, evanescent, hard to share and to evaluate. They may seem elusive and may not be regarded as serious enough material on which to build a life of responsibilities, including intellectual and artistic ones. Perhaps Hafif was demonstrating this by

contrasting the concreteness of paint on a surface with the elusiveness of sensations of sex. If we use intoxications as a gauge for evaluating which material experiences count for us later in life then aren't these totally unreliable measures, and ones that no other individual can share? Perhaps instead they become a basis for social fragmentation rather than community, for the pursuit of subcultures, or the spark for dystopian disfunctionalism like Spike Jonze's vision in his new film *Her* where individuals become absorbed in their relationships with computer operating systems. Or is it just a question of degree, where some kinds of absorption in the world are deemed counterproductive while others are thought to be acceptable components of an achieving life?

In the 1960s many intellectuals regularly took LSD as a way of gaining otherwise unobtainable insights to serve as a standard for what should matter in the sober everyday world, to which all must return sometime. From late-Beat poet Belle Randall: "And yes, for people used to controlling experience with language…[LSD] was an enormous eye-opener, just by being so intense—showing possibilities in experience we hadn't known before. I wept, I felt that I died and was reborn. I came back to earth vowing to savor every moment and to love everyone from now on". Or from San Francisco poet Thom Gunn: "These were the fullest years of my life, crowded with discovery both inner and outer, as we moved between ecstasy and understanding". These moving comments were fairly common at that time revealing a standard for obtaining a measurement of value that seems inappropriate to us now. But if so, why are they inappropriate? Do we have anything better to use now than what they had then? Viewing experimental films from the 60s we can sense the drive for new visual vocabularies that would match the intense experiences of a world transformed by hallucination.

Bruce Conner–Looking For Mushrooms, 1967 (with Terry Riley soundtrack, 1968), step-printed (i.e. each frame repeated 5 times so that 5 images are seen each second)

In Bruce Conner's 1967 *Looking for Mushrooms*, we experience a trance-like effect enhanced by slowing down the film, by densely overlaying the imagery and by including a trippy soundtrack by Terry Riley. As with Hafif's paintings, what can't be represented or described (because it's a hallucination and because it's intensely immediate) can only be abstracted to remain present in the work.

I first saw Gedi Sibony's work in *Unmonumental*, the show that opened The New Museum's Bowery space in 2007. This massive survey show of new assemblage and collage–which as the curators put it "describes the present as an age of crumbling symbols and broken icons"– proposed a paradigm-changing look at new aesthetic possibilities. It's unlikely any show can satisfy such expectations, but by the end of its three-month installation when all the work was installed in an accumulative process of first sculpture, then collage, then sound, it was an impressive experience.

Gedi Sibony, installation in New Museum Unmonumental, 2007

The show claimed to focus on new approaches to the retrieval and use of material, with one curator Laura Hoptman explaining "Think of the do-it-yourselfer in a basement with a glue gun. Think of a DJ. Think of a search engine". It seems as good a place as any then to start a talk on materialities and I invite you (especially if you are interested to write on this subject) to make use of their online archive.

If we look now at a quote by Mario Perniola, taken from his book *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, we come across an idea related to Sibony's deep and nurturing attachment. "It is the installation that feels the visitor, welcomes him touches him, feels him up, stretches out to him, makes him enter into it, penetrates him, possesses him, overwhelms him. One does not go to

exhibitions to see and enjoy art, but to be seen and enjoyed by art. Voyeurism belongs to organic, formalistic and natural sexuality. In the inorganic world, instead, it is the sentient things who see us and desire us". If this makes some kind of sense, if we seek out and prefer those exhibitions which leave us feeling, let's say more intimate with the things on display, then it's reasonable enough to suppose that the materiality of those things will have been felt similarly to what Sibony recounts. Perniola's formulation suggests too that our encounter with artworks is immediate and mutually seductive, and not necessarily anticipated by prior experience. Perhaps to expect some pre-existing biographical standard of value or intimacy is to look in the wrong place after all. Perhaps our encounters with objects and artworks are unplanned, polymorphous, promiscuous and omnivorous, more a sign of the materiality we share with all things, animate and inanimate than of qualities that we suppose distinguish us as human.

Carol Bove, work in New Museum Unmonumental, 2007

Also showing in *Unmonumental* was Carol Bove who generally salvages objects with specific connection to her mother's counterculture youth when she was growing up in Berkeley, California. Secondhand books, tables, and bric-a-brac are assembled into evocations of a precise period. She has exhibited drawings of the pages of Playboy magazine and sound recordings of Zen gurus like Alan Watts for their evocation of the 1960s. Bove has spoken of her interest in ways of apprehending her work that are not analytical, that might be psychic or at least "non-

linguistic" (Sholis interview). This also suggests the kind of relationship where the artwork and artist (then artwork and spectator), establish an unusual bond. Bove explains

> "Almost everything I make has multiple parts and can be disassembled. Parts are never glued together. This is important to me–it gives the sculptures energy. When they are packed up in a crate I think of them as being off-duty, relaxed. When they are assembled or configured in an exhibition setting they are performing…I want to get at the animate quality of the sculptures–that they are not static objects, they are groups of individual parts that assemble into temporary configurations."

In what way then do these objects "perform" for us, as Bove puts it? Are they the kind of soliciting works that Perniola describes? They look like a bit like rhebus puzzles, coded images that spell out a message. The objects aren't trash like Gibony's. By contrast, Bove makes some things, finds others, buys particular books, seeks out period furniture. The objects have intrinsic value, before she assembles them. Bove's sculptures are never far from living room vignettes, improvisations on personal arrangements of stuff like we all make in our own rooms, with the difference that these psychically connect to the ethos of a 50-year old world, the 1960s.

Why, in the last few years, does there seem to be a new kind of attunement to materials from younger artists that would lead to the work I've been showing you? Have social and aesthetic conditions changed to make these materials visible and these assemblages meaningful to today's audiences? There is certainly a new awareness of global difficulties. Above all, the crash, recession and euro crisis have made it clear that the profit-driven, growth-focused priorities of governments, banks and businesses have been disastrous and often criminally exploitative. The 2005 Montreal conference on climate change presented undeniable evidence of irreversible damage unless CO2 emissions were drastically curtailed. That's when the Kyoto protocol for emissions reduction was established. The 2010 Deep Horizon oil spill, the 2011 Fukushima reactor disaster, and the fast-approaching limit to landfill capacity in the UK have shown the cost of growth and wasteful energy consumption. This recent history has stimulated a revaluation of salvaged produce and materials where their use in artwork is suddenly resonant, constituting a new practice with its own operations and codes.

In her book *Vibrant Matter* and her recent talks on the mentality of hoarding, Jane Bennett offers an explanation of the unusual connection that some people have to objects, so many of which they want to hang on to forever, in spite of not being able to locate or use them for the sheer quantity that piles up. Like Sibony and his blind, she notes that hoarders feel summoned by objects and develop deep bonds of attachment with them to the extent that these objects form part of their sense of self. They can't bear to part with them. Bennett feels this is less the result of an illness and more a special attunement to things that is a mark of our time, perhaps in concordance with our unparalleled surfeit of commodities for which these individuals feel a

sense of responsibility.

Bennett in fact goes so far as to assume a special capacity amongst artists for engagement with things and materials, as if they (we) respond to the material call more than do other people. She equates us with hoarders in this respect as some hoarders see their accumulations as art-like, or as extensions of their body and psyche. "The person who hoards and the artist who creates share a certain something of a perceptual comportment, one unusually aware of or susceptible to the enchantment of things". Our attachment to specific objects and materials as having potential value, she would say, is no different from the hoarder's recognition of value in the stuff they pull from skips. We are both attuned to qualities that mean nothing to whoever throws that stuff out.

In the 1930s, anticipating Bennett's and Perniola's perspectives, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was writing the disquieting novel *Nausea*. The book relates the existential crisis of Roquentin, a historian researching in the library of a small and dull French town. Roquentin starts to experience the intensification of objects where he becomes nauseated by the awareness of the seething materiality of what should normally be static things. It's like Perniola on overdrive as Roquentin becomes helpless before the strange power of invasive matter.

"Objects ought not to touch, since they are not alive…But they touch me, it's unbearable…just as if they were living animals". p22

This progressive loss of separation between his sense of self and external things reaches its nadir one evening in the municipal park. He becomes gripped by the sight of a tree root (of all things) whose twisted form escapes categorization.

> "I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction-pump, *to that*, to that hard, compact sea-lion skin, to that oily, horny, stubborn look…That root with its colour, its shape, its frozen movement, was…beneath all explanation. Each of its qualities escaped from it a little, flowed out of it, half-solidified, almost became a thing; each one was *superfluous in* the root, and the whole stump now gave me the impression of rolling a little outside itself, denying itself, losing itself in a strange excess". p186

Some kind of awful resolution occurs as he accepts that there is no purposefulness to things, nor to his own life–"The essential thing is contingency…existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it".

While Sartre's intense communion with matter is involuntary and destabilizing, what Perniola and Bennett are inviting us to do is to consider the work in its components as soliciting a benign engagement from us. We are one part of a two-way relationship but cannot act on the objects unilaterally. The objects must also reach out to us through their materiality, through

qualities which we may in any case share–colour, texture, vulnerability, potential for decay, for example.

So far we have been talking about properties of matter–its colour, size, shape etc.–which by and large are what as artists we are concerned with when we make and discuss artwork. The standard definition of matter as *anything with mass* is not particularly helpful as variations in mass can be extreme–from specks of dust to buildings. The work done by physicists to identify the fundamental components of matter is certainly fascinating, but few artists are working (in a way we can readily discuss) with atoms, protons and neutrons, let alone with quarks, leptons, and the Higgs Boson particle. However, Bennett's argument that matter is negotiated between us and the world of things, and that we are never discrete entities of thinking human tissue but instead have intimate connection to fundamental substances, should resonate at the sub-atomic level. For Bennett these shared properties make it even more likely that we are inherently attuned to the material of the world.

The carbon cycle has been written about from this perspective since carbon is the basic element of life on our planet. It passes into us as nourishment and leaves us as exhalations of carbon dioxide. Our proximity to the sources of carbon–carbon dioxide, fossil fuels–and our dependence on plants that process carbon through photosynthesis, suggests that our knowledge of matter, our capacity for attunement to matter, is in our DNA. I like Primo Levi's story of carbon, the final entry in his book on *The Periodic Table*. There Levi imagines one of his body's carbon molecules might have originated in the processing of limestone in 1840, been breathed in by animals, converted into cellulose, into wine, into the fiber of a cedar tree, ingested by a caterpillar before composting in soil as a dying moth, each time returning to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide to then be converted through photosynthesis into organic consumable material. He describes drinking a glass of milk whose molecules are broken down in the intestine so that carbon can be extracted into his bloodstream and passed on to a nerve cell.

> "This cell belongs to a brain, and it is my brain, the brain of *me* who is writing; and the cell in question, and within it the [carbon] atom in question, is in charge of my writing, in a gigantic minuscule game which nobody has yet described. It is that which at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on the paper, mark it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one".
> Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, London: Penguin Books, 2012, p194

Bennett's materiality that she calls *thing power*, is underpinned by Levi's chemistry but is really more aesthetic than biological. It appears as an excess of expression where objects inexplicably coalesce into forms that strike us as remarkable.

Francis Ponge's 1938 prose poems called *Things*, have been important to artists on account of the empathy they reveal for humble objects. Here is the piece called "The Crate"–

> Midway from *cage* to *cachot* (dungeon), the French language has *cageot* (crate), a simple slatted case devoted to the transport of such fruits as at the least shortness of breath are bound to give up the ghost. Knocked together so that once it is no longer needed it can be effortlessly crushed, it is not used twice. Which makes it even less durable than the melting or cloudlike produce within.
>
> Then, at the corner of every street leading to the marketplace, it gleams with the modest sparkle of deal. Still spanking new and a little startled to find itself in the street in such an awkward position, cast off once and for all, this object is on the whole one of the most appealing—on whose destiny, however, there's little point in dwelling.
> (translated by Beverley Bie Brahic)

Ponge imagines what might be called the emotional condition of the crate, its interior life. The poem is a strange mix of anthropomorphism, (reading human characteristics into things), and phenomenology (grasping and describing objects as they are encountered and as they appear).

Of the 32 poems "Rain" is one of the more complex –

> The rain, in the courtyard where I watch it fall, comes down at very different speeds. In the centre, it is a fine discontinuous curtain (or mesh), falling implacably but relatively slowly, a drizzle, a never-ending languid precipitation, an intense dose of pure meteor. Not far from the right and left walls heavier drops fall more noisily, separately. Here they seem to be about the size of a grain of wheat, there a pea, elsewhere nearly a marble. On the moulding, the window ledges, the rain runs horizontally while on the undersides of these same obstacles it is suspended, plump as a humbug. It streams across the entire surface of a little zinc roof the peephole looks down on, in a thin moiré sheet due to the different currents set in motion by the imperceptible undulations and bumps in the roofing. From the adjoining gutter, where it runs with the restraint of a brook in a nearly level bed, it suddenly plunges in a perfectly vertical, coarsely braided stream to the ground, where it splatters and springs up again flashing like needles.
>
> Each of its forms has a particular speed; each responds with a particular sound. The whole lives as intensely as a complicated mechanism, as precise as it is chancy, a clockwork whose spring is the weight of a given mass of precipitate vapour.
>
> The chiming of the vertical streams on the ground, the gurgling of the gutters, the tiny gong beats multiply and resound all at once in a concert without monotony, not without delicacy.

> When the spring is unwound, certain gears continue to function for a while, gradually slowing down, until the whole mechanism grinds to a halt. Then, if the sun comes out, everything is erased, the brilliant apparatus evaporates: it has rained.
> (translated by Beverley Bie Brahic)

Ponge wants to find new ways of using language to get as close as possible to what things experience, to what it would feel like if we were that thing, that material. The words aren't new, but even now 70 years on, the thinking behind the way they are combined feels very unusual. Where the poem ends with the thought of rainfall as a machine, of the performance of the rain as that of a "brilliant apparatus", we better understand the precision of Ponge's obsessively detailed account of falling rain. Returning to Perniola, I suggest that here the rain "stretches out to him, makes him enter into it" and Ponge responds to the summons like some of the artists we're looking at.

We'll look now at three other ways of thinking about materialities by discussing Luce Irigarary's notion of biological difference, Fredric Jameson's Marxist reading of art's materiality, and Georges Bataille's articulation of entropy and debased matter.

The French philosopher Irigaray writes about fluids to advocate a feminine materiality that she sees as devalued and sidelined by philosophical writing. Criticizing inveterate binary classifications which have female properties becoming object rather than idea, matter rather than form, fluid rather than solid, Irigaray turns this to an advantage by defining ways that this capacity for fluid materiality can constitute a unique aesthetic. She points to self-evident biological distinctions like women's role in childbirth, to menstrual blood and amniotic fluid. Whether or not you are sympathetic to this way of thinking it's worth recognizing that artists like Yoko Ono and Pipilotti Rist and musicians like Wendy Carlos and Annea Lockwood have significantly used or referenced water in their work in ways that resonate with Irigaray's thought. Lockwood's interest also relates to real bodily experiences–

> "…I was looking at how sounds and our bodies interact. I was trying to probe that as much as I could; the physiology of how sound affects our bodies…I was curious about how the sounds of moving water affect us. And so I decided to do this absurd thing of recording all the rivers of the world…"
> from Tara Rogers, *Pink Noises*

For Rist it is important that water provides a pseudo-utopian natural environment for immersive physical pleasure. Her videos engage with water as a substance in which the female body can experience an idyll of heightened sensory experience. It's as if she imagines Brian Eno's comment on his ambient work that "we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside".

Fredric Jameson's book *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, proposes a materiality that is redemptive by comparing the way that key modernist and postmodernist paintings appear. Jameson's is not a philosophical text but rather an aesthetic and cultural critique that more or less accepts that everything the world of art and popular culture produces can provide insights into political reality. He is critical of postmodern work (for what he calls the waning of affect), but nevertheless agrees to deal with it head on. For our purposes Jameson's discussion of Van Gogh and Munch in relation to Warhol is helpful as he evaluates the facture (the visual evidence of physical work and fabrication technique) of their paintings to get at their content. He explains how the effortful paint handling and intense colour of Van Gogh's landscapes stands as a kind of authentic encounter for their time as they envision the image of future utopian experience that at that point was denied the peasant and rural communities closest to Van Gogh's heart.

Jameson asks,

> "How is it then, that in Van Gogh such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color while his village stereotypes are suddenly and garishly overlaid with hues of red and green?…the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as a Utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses, or at least of that supreme sense—sight, the visual, the eye…"

This must then be compared with his remarkable description of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* as having none of the communicative tools of Van Gogh's painting but instead the presence of "some inexplicable natural object", a dead end of meaning that can't be reconnected to any larger world context.

> "Here, however, we have a random collection of dead objects hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips, as shorn of their earlier life world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dance hall".

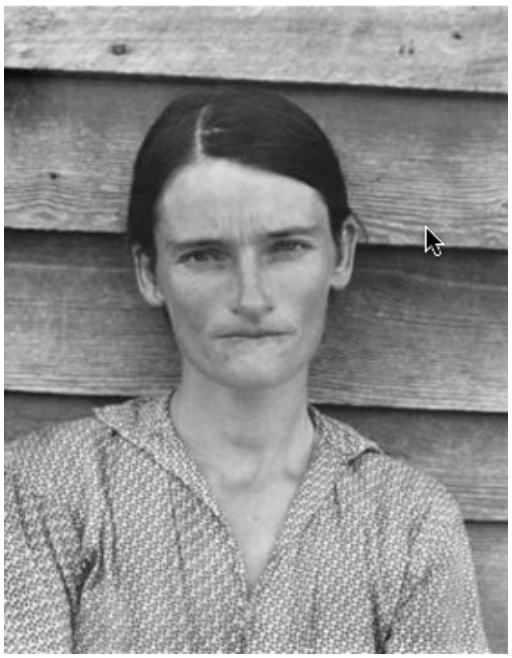
By contrast, the facture of Munch's paintings is linked by Jameson to what he calls a depth model, Freudian in one sense, of an interior, or unconscious, life that seeks outlets for expression back into the world. In *The Scream*, for example, painted bands of jarring colour radiate outward from the figure's head like an amplification of internal suffering.

Jameson's is what we can call a *materialist* account for anchoring an understanding of the material properties of artworks in the socio-economic reality of their time. He doesn't see these

artworks as products of independent genius that transcends its time, but as conditioned by and reflecting the living circumstances of the period in which they were made.

In a deliberate way on the part of the artists, we can see this imbrication of art and power happening with some mid-1980s New York artwork with interesting results for its materiality. In that period a group of fairly smart artists, drawing support from readings of Barthes, Baudrillard, Lacan and Foucault in particular, adopted a manufactured appearance, appropriated imagery and reduced evidence of authorship as a way to dodge signification and keep meaning unstable. The work of Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince often felt ungraspable or empty, with the artists' intentionality concealed beneath masks of detachment, textual density, rigorous marketing strategies, and irony.

Jeff Koons, Jim Beam J.B. Turner Train, 1986



Sherrie Levine, after Walker Evans 4, 1981

These art objects were not easy to love, nor were intended to be. Playing the market at its own game, some adopted the look of lavish commodities to make work that was as glamorously mute and inexpressive as department store items. Their materials solicited spectators with a certain ostentatious insolence, with the finish of polished steel, rolled on fluorescent paint and plastic housings. These artists changed the material of their work to comment on the Marxist theory that commodities read desires in us and reflect them back to us in our role as consumers. Like a disenchanted antecedent of Bennett's Vibrant Matter, much of the work exuded luxuriousness, as if mirroring the status and desires of their collectors.

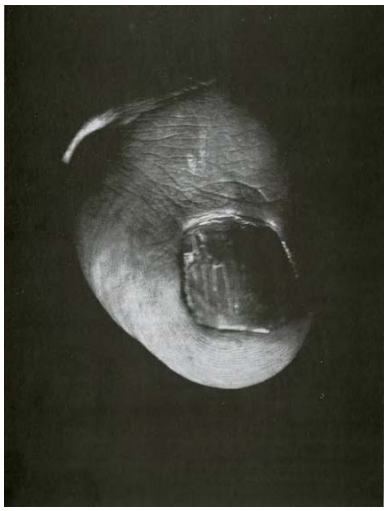
Tom Holmes, untitled Plot, 2012, concrete, 220x102x25 cms

We'll close by looking at a couple of artists whose works could not be more different from those preoccupied with commodification. Tom Holmes produces much of his work on a Radical Faeries commune, a gay community in Tennessee that has neither electricity, nor cell phone or internet connection. The Faeries were founded in Los Angeles and ended up caring for AIDS sufferers long before protease inhibitors become available. Much of Holmes' work takes the form of memorials, without commemorating anyone in particular. Grave markers are made of cheap breeze blocks or milk cartons cast in concrete. Painted imagery of floral bouquets lies awkwardly on top of garish cereal carton imagery. Holmes explains: ""I don't want the work to be reduced to the ideas that initiated it, but for me it pretty consistently begins with a scouring of culturally specific objects that I, in some way, associate with death—this chip bag as opposed to that brand of chips, this cereal box as opposed to that cereal…But again, it's a kind of smokescreen. My primary activity is that of abstracting information that resists abstraction—try

to abstract a fucking rainbow. It's quite difficult". This process of abstraction, of concentrating on material and form in confrontation with the most charged ideas, echoes Hafif's efforts with minimal painting in confrontation with sex. The process calls up Theodore Adorno's formulation "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form". Reality's negative counterpart *form*, or *abstraction*, only intensifies the content it seems at first to betray.

Tom Holmes, untitled Arrangement, 2012, acrylic paint, inkjet on paper, each 203x124 cms from exhibition at Kunsthalle, Berne, 2013

As a former Surrealist, Georges Bataille was inherently sympathetic to the idea of unconscious drives and desires being a key to understanding human nature. The concept of the Uncanny, the familiar become strange, was crucial for Bataille who took it into regions that Freud would have considered nihilistic or willfully scandalous. So the 1870 photo of the frozen River Seine, debris trapped in the ice, becomes an image for him of a decrepit human backbone supporting ruthless economic activity "as mean and filthy as lice", as Bataille puts it. The form of the universe is compared to a gob of spit or a crushed spider to dispel any human ambitions to turn it into something more structured and noble. The big toe, calloused and covered in mud, represents our crude origins from which we are always trying to escape, our heads held proud, far above the filthy ground. We imagine Sleeping Beauty waking in a pristine room when in fact dust and cobwebs would have buried her body. This fairy tale masks the real condition of entropy that we always imagine can be dispelled but which Bataille asserts will inevitably overwhelm us.



Georges Bataille, images from Critical Dictionary, 1929-30

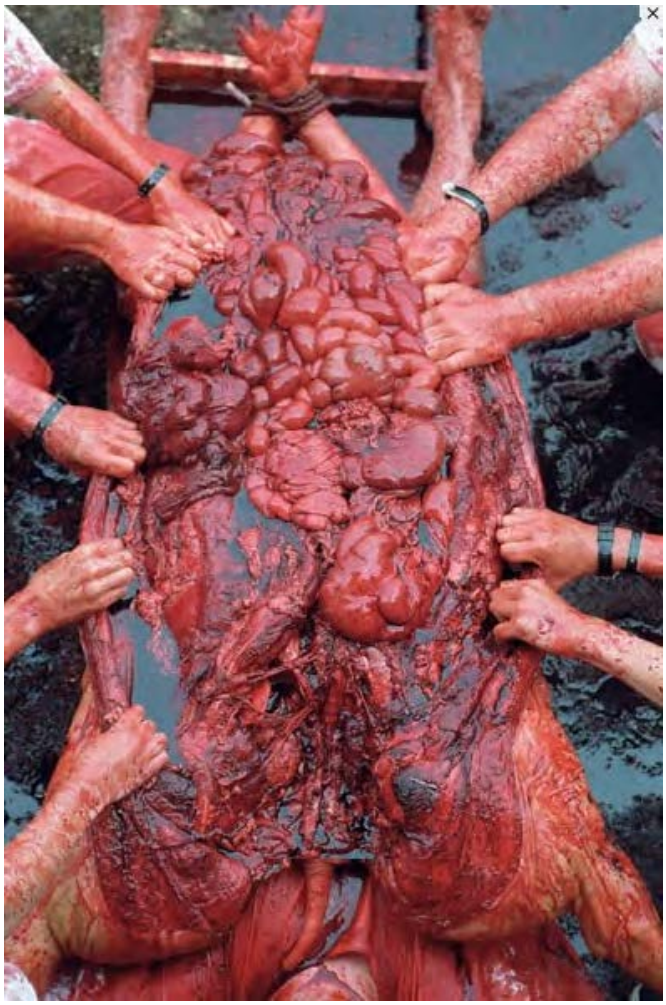
Cindy Sherman's "Disaster Series" photographs, made in the mid to late-80s, have been associated with Bataille's notion of *formless*. These are very different from the role-model impersonations for which Sherman is best known. The photographs show fragments of the artist's face or body–sometimes glimpsed in a mirror–amongst installations resembling leftover food, vomit and debris. The materials Sherman uses here reference absolute debasement of both material and self. Being made in the late 80s, perhaps they can be read as censuring the slick Neo-Geo work I showed earlier, where the materials are frequently luxurious and the subject matter a deadpan veneer. Holmes and Sherman, who look for imagery and materials resonant with death or self-debasement, cause the benign intoxicated subject living in relative harmony with things in the world to disappear. Their materials are complicated by a malevolence in relation to which it is hard to locate a stable subject or state of intoxication as a transformative principle.

Cindy Sherman, Untitled #167, 1986

What is the status of such images of intense materiality as Sherman's compared with the materiality of projects like Carolee Schneeman's or Hermann Nitsch's, from the 1960s, that actually incorporate brutally nauseous matter? One distinction is temporal where Sherman, making this work twenty years after Schneeman and Nitsch is adept at postmodern image manipulations using the artificiality of set construction to test the limits of photographic representation. In Sherman's case, the more extreme the photographic imagery, the more art's capacity for conveying meaning is placed in doubt. By comparison, the two 60s artists' preoccupations with the limits of authenticity drive them to a visual and olfactory assault using actual animal flesh. These are two different levels of representation bound to their respective periods. Schneemann explained "Meat Joy [from 1964] has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope brushes, paper scrap. Its propulsion is toward the ecstatic." http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html

Carolee Schneemann, still from Meat Joy, 1964

And Nitsch declaims "I shall disembowel, tear and pull to pieces a dead lamb…I am the expression of all creation. I have merged into it and identified myself with it. All torment and lust, combined in a state of unburdened intoxication, will pervade me and therefore you". Nitsch "The O.M. Theatre" (1962) p747, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Stiles/Selz, 1996



Herrmann Nitsch, The Orgiastic Mystery Theater first performances in 1962

We're really a long way from the attunement to objects that we saw with the *Unmonumental* artists. Here instead is a kind of impassioned domination of things that are not brought into their own potentiality so much as used to increase the potentiality of human agents.