



Meaning Giving Material through Artistic Practice

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Abstract

The position of material engagement within the artistic practice differs from that of scientific practice, be it ontologically or methodologically. In art, the relationship with various types of material could be a physical sensory and bodily touch or towards conceptual undertaking that references philosophical, spiritual, (quasi) scientific, historical, and illogical ideals, venturing into unknown territories that are mysterious, self-discovery, poetic and humorist which can become confrontational towards how we perceive reality. This paper will define and defend how materials are engaged in the artistic practice by giving a phenomenological sample, illustrating how linguistically, material could be understood as a lived-experience.

Keywords: Material, artistic, phenomenology

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1.0 Introduction

Fig. 1. Periodic Table first developed by Dmitri Mendeleev.

Adapted from Material matters. New materials in design (p. 11) by Howes, P. & Laughlin, Z. 2012, London: Black dog publishing.

Every material possesses a dynamic existence, a quality, and a capacity for transformation that allow it to be considered alive, even if it was once a part of something living (Andrews, 1988, p. 1), or what Goble would refer to in citing Bennett as "a vitality inherent to materials' very physicality." (in Goble, 2017, p. 72) Typically, a piece of wood extracted from a tree will respond to numerous transformations and effects applied to it. It could be twisted, chopped into long, thin, or small pieces, compressed, burned, split, connected, and even cosmetically altered to appear aged and rustic, or it could have evolved organically through its interactions with

organisms such as bacteria, fungi, rains, sunlight, and insects. Even man-made substances, such as the synthetic polymers found in plastic bottles and containers, can be called life if they respond to fire or combine with other substances or chemicals, altering their character and structure or assuming a new appearance. The study of materials that engage in a classification of materials "begins at the shortest length scale and progresses upwards from there from a scientific or material science standpoint." Howes and Laughlin (2012, p. 10) According to this reductionist theory, all matter is scientifically acknowledged to be composed of atoms. In what is known as the *Periodic Tables of Elements* (Fig. 1), scientists have tabulated the arrangement of these elements by their number of protons in the nucleus (atomic number), electron configurations, and chemical characteristics (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p. 10–11).

Here elements are categorised according to their size, with larger atoms possessing larger nuclei and more electrons. Hydrogen is the least dense element, whereas uranium is the most dense. Thus, the general focus of a material scientist's research is "the study of the link between the structures and characteristics of materials." (Callister & Rethwisch, 2013, p. 2-3)

Typically, this differs slightly from what Lange-Berndt defined as material practitioners. (2015, p. 12) These practitioners, such as technologists and industrialists in the manufacturing world, propose "substances that will be further processed" (Lange-Berndt, 2015, p. 12) that comply with the production conditions of that specific era. In a mass-manufacturing, all materials are handled and transformed in an ordered and regulated manner, ensuring quality standards are adhered to. Productions are made in a regulated manner, fulfilling the needs of the mass consumer and other stakeholders. For this reason, there is virtually no tolerance for defects or, at worst, material waste. For example, while melting Silicon Bronze for bronze casting, the temperature of the molten material must reach its "optimum temperature limit" of 1204.44 °C (Andrews, 1988, p. 268) for the material to be in its proper pouring condition. If the liquid bronze falls much below this threshold, there is a high likelihood that the pouring process may be hampered, which might cause product damage, thus impacting productivity costs.

Similarly to the material scientist, who is determined by a desire to discover the underlying qualities and many applications of materials, an artist is also characterised by a deep enthusiasm toward his or her medium. However, this kind of commitment is handled slightly differently in various meanings, actions and contexts. The relationship with the material may include sensory, aesthetic, and perceptual issues, or it may also be of philosophical, spiritual, (quasi) scientific, historical, raw, and illogical, venturing into unexplored territories that are mysterious, self-discovery, humorist, and confrontational.

While the depth of natural science is inclined towards understanding and discovering its truth claim towards phenomena based on empirical and verifiable evidence, where "truth is seen as correspondence" (Bolt, 2011, p. 114) or in which statement (findings) of truth or falsity is determined only by the concrete state of affairs, artistic pursuit in and through material is multiple in its pathways. It can sometimes drift towards opening up new perspectives or ways of looking at reality poetically. In the early phases of the Post-minimalist movement, for instance, practically all of its main artists turned their attention to the subject of material, that is, the expressive nature of materials. (Burton, 2005, p. 65-66) However, these artists, such as Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse, and Louise Bourgeois, all worked in opposition to the minimalist predecessors' approach to material emotionlessness characters. Consequently, they deployed practices and produced outcomes in which the materials were left unpolished and uncomposed, influenced more by the personality and poetic quality of the materials they were working with.

2.0 Artist Engaging with Materials

Artists such as Sunaryo displayed the stones in his *Wok Batu* (Fig. 2) installation in its natural condition, with barely a trace of the sculptor's intervention in which Sugiharto penned, "In their quiet, stones reveal an unfathomably long tale: the mystery of existence" (2015, p. 20). In this way, the stone works have reached a realm in which the artist's connection with his medium is lyrical. Also significant are Theo Jansen's PVC pipes, from which he mechanically created his *Strandbeest* animals, and Mel Chin's *Revival field* - grown plants. (Fig. 3)

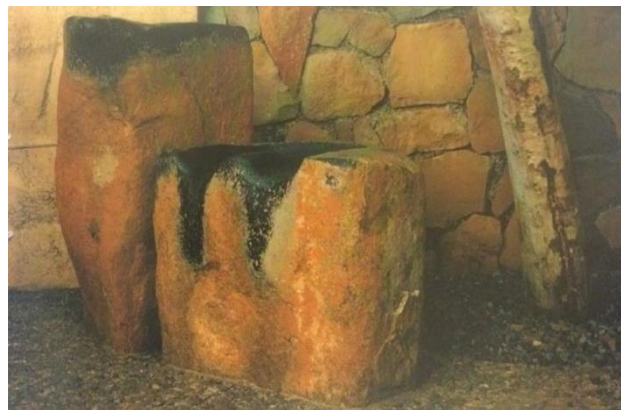


Fig. 2. One of the many stone works from the *Wok batu* garden installation piece, Selasar Sunaryo, 2015. Adapted from *Wot batu*. Sunaryo's stones bridge: a passage through wood, water, wind and soul (p. 105) by Selasar Sunaryo, 2015, Jakarta: Imaji media pustaka

In *Revival field*, Mel Chin considers his plants to be metaphorical in that they function as a "sculpture of cutting away" ("Mel Chin: *Revival Field*," n.d., p. 1) which is analogous to a chisel. He believed these hyperaccumulation plants serve as his sculpture material by

naturally removing hazardous metals from heavy metal-contaminated soil. ("Mel Chin: Revival Field," n.d, para. 1) Here, the plants act not as just biological beings, they also perform as functional objects to ideally 'solve' human problem but is linguistically defined more in the poetic realm of understanding.

Occasionally, artistic materials are also used to express structural meanings, whether it is by "questioning, characterising, and defining itself" (Kosuth, 1992, p. 66) or to celebrate the banality and eccentricities of everyday things, as in Martin Creed's *Work No. 79* (Fig. 3). A form of continual realism relationship "of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings" is also engaged in Lawrence Weiner's explanation of material in art. (As referenced on p. 103 of Goldstein, 2007)



Fig. 3. Revival Field. Plants & cage, Mel Chin, 1991.
Adapted from Mel Chin website: <http://melchin.Org/oeuvre/revival-field>



Fig. 3. Work No 79. Blu-tack on wall, Martin Creed, 1993.
Adapted from Martin Creed works (p. 79) by Martin Creed, 2010, New York, NY: Thames & Hudson.

3.0 Phenomenology of Materials Through Artistic Means

Even though there are differences in the emphasis placed on phenomenological themes when they are analysed in the context of artistic practice, such as in painting (Wentworth; 2004, Bolt; 2007), video art (Hezekiah; 2010), performing art (Kozel; 2007), and also in architecture (Pallasmaa; 2009), few artists will openly claim that their artistic endeavours are a reflection of their phenomenological understanding. However, stating the obvious does not imply that none exists. Some artists and academics, including Lee Ufan, uses installation, painting, and drawing in his multifaceted practice. Suzan Kozel uses performance art, and Jac Saorsa, who uses drawings, assert how this philosophical worldview has influenced and served as a model for how they engage with, think about, and approach their artistic endeavours.

The position of material within the phenomenological framing (in relation to the visual art) as a way of knowing is deeply invested towards the dynamic interchanging relationship, borrowing from Paul Crowther's term ontological reciprocity (2009, p. 3), between and of the subject (artist) and the object. This is honouring phenomenology's spirit, as it is not one, single approach. Here, the experience is employed through creative activity, which offers the possibility and fundamental significance of the event inside a poietic (poiesis) realm, or in its Heideggerian phrase, *poietic unveiling* as described by Barbara Bolt. As poietic revealing, it is a state in which things manifest or "original and originality truth occurs" (Bolt, 2011, p. 151) as they are encountered and felt in a tangled interplay of openness (epoché) and closure (reduction - not scientific reductionist) between beings (human and other beings - things). As a simple illustration, consider the interchange of contact between a painter and his paint via his instruments while painting, or, again drawing from a Heideggerian idea the "happening of truth." (Young, 2001, p. 17) Bolt goes on to say that under such circumstances, "reality is not propositional, but rather truth is existence as it develops... Truth does not arise through the presenting of "establish facts," but rather through doing. (2011, p. 151)

As a counterargument to poietic revealing, Martin Heidegger argues that enframing revealing (Gestell) is a state of being that "concerns an ordering and mastery over what-is". (Bolt, 2011, p. 80) In relation to this, Heidegger points out that this state of being is present in the technological understanding of material or in mass manufacturing production where the focus and objective are towards "unlocking, transforming, storing, (1954/1977, Heidegger, p. 16) In this regimental perspective, a human being alone masters material

for his or her own interests. Here, objects are seen as "means to a goal" (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 312) or, as Baranck puts it plainly, "considered as inert and dumb" in its Cartesian dualism. (2009, p. 70) According to Lyotard, this Cartesian enclosure of mastering and controlling encompasses human interaction with materials as a result of modernity. (1985, p. 201) The materiality of the material disintegrates into ideas inside such a reference and ceases to create resistance when it becomes the backdrop of a perceived reality. 197–198 (Braembussche, 2015)

Bolt further explains that poetic exposing requires the "openness before what-is" (p. 80) and not "an ordering and control over what-is" (p. 80) by the artist in her view of Heidegger's work. It is a mode of thinking and doing that places an openness toward phenomena and the capacity of the material to reveal itself when one is involved in a situation in the pre-reflective lived world. This kind of bringing-forth in art, which Heidegger grasped and referred to as *techne*, or in its operational English language, "bringing-forth as exposing," is "a manner of being's coming to presence" (Bolt, 2011, p. 80).



Fig. 5. Pole (Mast). Lead, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, photograph on chip board, Kiefer, 1984-85.
Adapted from *From Anselm Kiefer and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (p. 208) by Biro, M. 1998, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Matthew Biro (1998) noted that Anselm Kiefer's interaction with his material is a "labours to unleash the transformational potential in the materials upon which he works, so letting it to transit from a lower to a higher plane of being" while reading his works (Fig. 5), for instance. (p. 209) Although he has his own operational staff and works in a vast, quasi-operation and is more like to that of "an alchemist engaged in a process of transformation." (Bolt, 2004, p. 58) Bolt summarised this idea of Biro by characterising it as a poetic unveiling. (Bolt, 2011, p. 85) industrial facility, Kiefer's artistic approach differs from that of a standard industrial



Fig. 6. Without title (One hour blind drawing). Pencil on paper, Anastasi, 2012.
Adapted from *Drawing. The bottom line*. (p. 148) by Van Cauteren & Germann, 2015, London: Yale University Press

William Anastasi uses several drawing mediums, including oil sticks and pencil graphite. He preferred pencil since it resembled the shape of his hand's forces. In interacting with his drawing, he placed emphasis on the questions of what it meant to draw and how the drawing may be executed. Thus, the process of drawing itself became crucial to his artwork's meaning. Each mundane action, from walking to taking the metro or a cab to standing on a stepladder, becomes an existential aspect of his drawing act. (Van Cauteren &

Germann, 2015 p. 148) The particular identity of each of his drawings was determined by the corporeal composition of the material produced by the artist's actions. His drive to complete each painting with his eyes closed was not only a distinctive feature of his work, but also became something of a habit. Instead of planning ahead or acting strategically, they adopted a phenomenological approach. As he strolled along the street, his other hand was busy sketching in a notebook. (Van Cauteren & Germann, 2015 p. 148) Thus, he reached a state of mindless condition that allowed him to evade the premeditated and rational portion of his existence and endure his own ontological predicament by thinking with his hands and body rather than his mind. He was paradoxically closer to the realities he witnessed through this mindless and blind painting than through the more imitative method of creating art. In this way, sketching became a more genuine experience for him in his method of experiencing.

The state of *poiesis* (bringing-forth) towards the existence of material has also undergone innovations via historical record; examples include the paint drop from Pollock's paintings or even the unintentional break in the glass of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. (Fig. 7) In such ordinary happening of the paint drip and cracking glass "being is more a becoming than any particular way of being". (Wentworth, 2004, p. 38)



Fig. 7. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (the large glass). Mixed media, Duchamp, 1915-23. Adapted from DADA companion website: <http://www.dada-companion.com/duchamp/largeglass.php>

Although in the works of Jeff Koon (Fig. 8) and Donald Judd, where the materials used end up looking manufactured-control-like, phenomenologically, their engagement with their material can still be read in a phenomenological poietic sense due to one major principle, which is a deep investment in the practice of openness of wanting to know and experience the materials through the work itself, by going through the work. Crowell argues that Judd's art is a "means of performing phenomenology, of moving from naïve to sublime visual perception." (2011, p. 40-41) As for Koon, dealing with stainless steel was something he "initially recognized as a humble material" (2015, p. 8) but as he worked, the material's potential appeared, and he realised that the steel had become "the vehicle for the transformation of value." (2015, para. 8),

In addition, via this interpretation of phenomenology as ontological reciprocity, the interdependence and co-contributing status of human and non-human things are taken into consideration (human and other entities). Here, the "artist is only one of the entities co-responsible for art's birth." (Bolt 2011, p. 113). Henceforth, artists engage and work with any form and type of materials in art making, whether it be oil paint (Picasso, Gerhard Richter, Thomas Nozkowski), bitumen (Jailani Abu Hassan, Hamir Soib) and enamel for painting (Dan Collen) or wood (Martin Puryear, Rudy Hendriatno), corten steel (Richard Serra) and chocolate (Janine Antoni) or soil, leaves, rocks (For this reason, "material cannot be adequately understood outside of their place in the context of the practice" (Wentworth, 2004, p. 39), meaning that the poiesis of the phenomenon occurs dynamically and meaningfully within the compound of the artist experiencing his work – and never alone or within his self, as he/she is already indebted to other entities in his/her practice.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The contribution of this paper concerns the field of study in fine art and its practice.

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