

# Materialism

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and  
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## A Material Wrapper Materiality, Things, and Objects

At the behest of Elizabeth Mead, and after a foolish blurt that I would write something formal about materiality, I here piece together some thoughts over the years that I have had about materiality, things, objects and sculpture, based upon my own practice as a sculptor. These thoughts exist on two levels: one of making, which is primary, and the other of discourse, in which I have some training. I will attempt to fuse them without making the mistake of the one illustrating the other, or the other explaining the one. As they do not necessarily trace one upon the other, so I apologize for the confusion in this writing—it is at best meant to be provocative in laying out some issues. When I am sculpting I do not think about materiality, I simply think *materially*—it is only later, at some remove or when questioned that I ask “why this and not that?” Since I take confusion to be of benefit to my students in teaching, and certainly of benefit to me in creating, I will assume that the confusions here are to the good in questioning this problem, and that you will, too. As Vilem Flusser suggests, if we come to the end of our obstacles (problems) we are dead.

First, I am providing a set of texts (only) that are based in thoughts about materiality, things and objects from years of making that I do not want to at first reference (visually) directly—I will try to get to that later in my talk. Object-thinking (thinking from within materials) is entirely different, and perhaps more important to me than words, and I will try to give it proper attention at that time.

This difference, between materiality itself, and thought about materiality, will inevitably lead to a referential and conceptual looseness. My relationship to philosophy has informed my work but mostly in the sense of “doing sculpture” as a kind of “doing philosophy”. I read fairly constantly in the literatures of Heidegger, Phenomenology, Kant, aesthetics in general (particularly Wollheim), ordinary language (especially Wittgenstein and Austin), the communications theory of Eco and Flusser, and more recently Deleuze and (now) “new materialism”, and use them in my teaching. But beyond my early studies as an undergraduate these forays have been based in desires and tropisms arising in my own work and the work of my students, so I did not search for any coherent results that such thoughts led to. So I cannot in any reasonable way suggest that I am constructing actual arguments from this literature or within it, despite reference to it. My relationship is more dialogic—a long and extended conversation that goes on today, as it has so many other days. If I use Wittgenstein’s analogy in the PI of crossing a field, now this way, now that, you have something of a sense for this, and indeed, I am always surprised how many things that I read or thought or made without particular reason now seemingly map onto more recent work in ways I would not have expected.

## Materialism Itself

It is commonplace to say now that we no longer *look* at the world, yet of course we do in some way, perhaps different from before. We look through both old and new means, and perhaps the most important function of art is as a *memory* of looking. When I say *looking*, this is in shorthand for all sorts of ways in which we experience and thus acquire our world, *bodily* through the agents of the body (senses, memories, dreams, neurological glitches) but also through an increasing number of agents for the body, including our various mechanical and technological extensions. Whether or not these “extensions” actually extend or restrict is another matter. Usually, in the physical world, any extension or tool restricts a broad base to a more narrow focus.<sup>i</sup> Tools necessarily de-materialize some qualities of things and materialize others. In the sense that certain materiality constitutes an obstacle or resistance we remove one obstacle but also create a new one, a new sense of resistance, a “new material”. Thus spinning de-materializes the soft, amorphous structure of cotton, which is based in a sensation of compression, an all-over thing, and rematerializes it as a tensile, linear thing. The loom proceeds further, now completing a shift from cotton as *cloud*, to an algorithmic structure, a mathematical pattern.<sup>ii</sup>

In general we take all of this for granted—my body, my senses, its/their world, the ebb and flow of resistances, the constantly changing nature of materiality—as I am (mostly) *within* the world. As Cavell notes, it makes little sense for me to think about musicality (“this sounds like music”) when I am listening to music—rather, I think of such things when I stand outside of it, when it is problematic—I may be in doubt as to what I am hearing, or in doubt about what music *is*.<sup>iii</sup> The nature of materiality is much the same—I am enmeshed within it, and only when I pick things out of it, or it arises an obstacle to me, that I am aware of it and aware that *it is not I*. This picking out and obstacle making is one of the jobs of sculpture, such that *the world now becomes intentionally available to me as what I stand against*. It is thus impossible to talk about materiality without reference to things and objects and bodies. They are all enmeshed and form the geometry and grammar of my living.

Let us first question the word “materiality” in a general sense as versus that way in which it seems to sound like material to be used for making. This sense of material differentiates itself from mere materiality in much the same way that Merleau-Ponty separates sensation from perception. In fact sensation is just *of* materiality, “the greyness which surrounds me” from which nothing at first stands fore or against—on the “hither side of any content”, both a state of total everythingness or total no-thing-ness”.<sup>iv</sup> The materiality of the world we could first think of as an *ambience*—something present but not present as thing—much as Deleuze describes the environment of the close-up as “anyplace, whatever”. I know I am somewhere, but at no *place*. Material as material arises out of this greyness, traditionally with the perception of use—material is basically *for* something. When say “raw material” or “mere stuff” we are basically hedging an uncertainty—is the mountain the raw material or the copper ore? What really is useful here? The mountain is useful differently for skiing, or gaining water, than for mining—its materiality is not fixed.<sup>v</sup>

Obviously, this is rather a hard line to take in the ordinary way we talk about materials and things, use them, and inhabit the world. While there may be some primordial haptic sensum, in general we take the world as a set of things—objects, things, parts of things, stuff, treasures, detritus. But this is an evolving sense, in fact as much about language acquisition and spoken language as about sense. We acquire thingness as we acquire language, but differentially—I can be at home in the world of words about things/sensations but not in the world of things/sensations, which entails sensations and perceptions, which have no words. What are we “thinking” when we monitor our body, the discomfort in our left side, or the awkwardness or fit of a room or a set of clothes?

Language points to, distinguishes, and pulls this from that. Our nascent material sense, within making, is just such a vocabulary, with all of its complexity, place, history and cultural specificity. Different *practices* yield different *materials* from the same stuff, and different *things* yield different *states of affairs*. This is at the core of sculpture, particularly in its recent past. It is also at the core of my work as a sculptor—my thinking sculptural thoughts.

I take a walk, let’s say in some state of attentiveness but without looking for anything. I am aware of the smell of the morning, the slightly cool breeze, the shifts from hot and cold as I walk through the trees, taking no path, but avoiding branches, impermeable barriers. I find my way, aware of when I turn this way or that, perhaps feeling the sun shifting on my body, some notion of time and space in my head.<sup>vi</sup> There are clearings, closures, shifts in terrain and vegetation and inhabitants. I notice a rock, a bent stick, in just this way. I pick it up.<sup>vii</sup>

At this point, a thing (or things), amidst the array of things, has been picked out from the overall materiality—become for me *material*, pulled into *my* world from the ambient materiality. It is, at this point, a thing to no one but myself, unless I *show* it. In *showing* one could say I push it further into the world of objects and away from mere materiality mere things. I pick it out from the greyness of materiality and then put it into the world of other bodies. It is no longer taken for granted.

I might conceivably have been “looking for it” all along—I needed a rock of just this shape to fill a chink in my wall, or such a stick to complete my arbor. But let us just say here that I notice it and pick it up, for no apparent reason, other than (perhaps) that they afford some interaction. It feels good in my hand. (Again, we might here be thinking of a process—it too can feel good in my hand, and is in this way something I pick out.)

Material, to be material, undergoes some such process. It is there all along, but idle and given as *materiality*, involved in *the* world of things but not *my* world of possibilities. To become material a transformation of sorts takes place. From within the general materiality I notice something *becomes a possibility*. Whether idly, or with reason, I pick it out—not as an object per se but as a *quality*—a brilliance, a softness, an odor, a resistance, a symbol for my frustration. One quality generally guides the others that come along after it. It *fits* something in my world and as quality it is embedded in my world, as a value.

Pulled from materiality, traditionally material suggests a “use”, and thus a *place*. And here the relation between material and space is opened and revealed. Material pulled into things has a place—it makes a place in a world. I am bedazzled by gold before I realize that it can be worked into very thin and ornate shapes, or that it is rare. I find that only from *within* material, once I have picked it out. Once within the world, a language unfolds, a “form of life”, different from those of other materials. Each material is another form of life—only certain things are possible from within it, it only *affords* this and not that.<sup>viii</sup>

### Granularity and fluidity

Our tendency in a world of things and materials is to have a tropism towards a granular ontology, (which can be found in Wittgenstein’s early “All that is the case”—the *all* suggests an additive and granular world.) Materials, pulled from materiality, seem to suggest this, particularly if we look at them as assemblies of properties, which seems to be an additive process. Over the years, I have had a lively conversation with a colleague, Barnaby Fitzgerald, about fluids versus particles, especially in drawing. I am drawn to both: on the one hand, the vast majority of my sculpture comes from granular materials—plaster and straw for the main part, recently cast iron for another (cast iron, when compared to bronze, exudes granularity, as versus the latter, which, in contrast, presents a fluid surface. Even their “dust” reflects this, as iron produces a dusty residue, part iron, part carbon, while bronze a chip. The sensations, on working, are entirely different, butter versus salt.) On the other hand, my drawing is almost always fluid, relying on pools of ink or chemicals to mix and shift. Charcoal lies somewhere on the cusp between each. It has always struck me that the fluid world of my drawing is necessary to capture the granular world of my sculpture.

The “granular world” suggests that things (and the world) are additively composed, whether of a simple atomism, or of an assembly of parts. (At the same time an atom is equally an assembly of forces (fluids). Note the difference between Leibniz’s monadology versus a more mechanistic atomism, or Goethe’s color theory versus Newton’s). Yet the play between parts and wholes suggests something different, or at least more complex. Certain things, mechanical, or ways of building—stone or brickwork—suggest such an assembly, but in fact the parts of each are dependent upon the prehended “whole” which then is variably (dependent upon materials but also our analysis) broken into parts—the “parts” that compose it are not necessarily its parts. The parts of a house are indeed doors, windows, walls, roof, but also sticks, stones, tiles, and also, in either case, their absence (apertures, hallways, rooms, clearings). Each “set” of parts reflects a distinct aspect, yet each set forms simultaneously the others in a fluid interaction, read back from a particular “picture” that assembles it.<sup>ix</sup>

Almost no material comes to us as “pure” and in fact much of the history of materials is one first of “purification” followed by a controlled “corruption”, as in the forming of an alloy. We can look at this process as changes of state between the granular and the fluid, as when iron is transformed into steel. In much of the contemporary history of sculpture and even architecture and music, materiality has shifted from the unified towards the composite. Most material

complexes, rather than merely adding individual properties, reactively supersede (either positively or negatively) them, a fluidic interaction, as in the stoichiometry of ceramics.

Bodies and voids:

My body is neither a material, nor a thing. The body is, in the legacy of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is found *in* the world—it forms itself in the world, and only approaching death (and sometimes within sickness) does it withdraw within itself and become material. Stroll, in talking about surfaces, suggests in this way that “a person” does not have a surface; I take it as a given that a person is embodied within the world, and that “I is not the name for a person, place or thing”. To see the body as a thing, I would have to see it in a particular way, to see it as a surface, and even in extremes of objectification (sexual objectification, torture) it extends beyond itself and draws in other things. <sup>x</sup> We do not need to invoke an extreme subjectivity to state this, or notions of the “other”.

I lay in my bed, next to my dying wife, with the question of how the body brings itself to die. The body itself, no matter how reduced, brings itself into the world and also leaves it. Is this a physical, material withdrawal, or a lack of place that it perceives? At the end of life, we return the body to a thing—we wash it, we clothe it, we present it in a way we did not just before. Is this not a change in its materiality, and not just due to a loss of an animism? <sup>xi</sup>

Yet the body is, as such a *unit*, even if we do not know its shape, surface, or extent. Stephen Hawking is no less a body than I am, (though we want here to invoke the mind, which we shouldn't) nor is a child less, nor an old woman. There is no *measure* of the body, and thus, as Stroll suggests, there is no “surface” to the body. <sup>xii</sup> Other forms and beings share this quality: there is no more or lessor rock, though at a certain scale “rock” describes a material rather than a form. So too, in choosing a log, the log is itself, as described above, a body (a *trunk*, which describes both a torso and a part of a tree). Can we say that the log or rock lies in the world in the way that the body does? I think we can, and we see this in their role as “stand-in's” for the body—I mark my place with a rock (the stele and menhir) and hold my world with the log.

In response, the void has its own corporeality and is indeed an analogue of my body, “where I am not”. As the “outside”, which we see in the configuration of simple and early settlements that re-present a body image in constructing a structure, membrane, and barrier at its extent, with varying decay in the paths and fields and zones of control that seep out into the world and bring the world in. At a certain extent this outer zone becomes a formless void—“nature” (with its own vitality and rules) or “chaos” My room, too, has such a form and materiality, even as a void, just as the void impinges upon my body. I feel at home within a certain area, an area that fluctuates due to light, solidity, height and width, variables that shape my body. But a room remains a room, its materiality formed within other materialities.

## Boundary vs. membrane

What is the relation of body to void?

Recent ecological discussion, on all sorts of levels (sociological, political, cultural, biological) has focused on boundaries, borders, and membranes, all of which are important to and expressive of materiality and the relation between materiality and space. A case in point: Recently, in traveling in the highlands of Guatemala in the region of Xela, we traveled through a series of towns, specifically looking for markets and festivals. The first was San Francisco El Alto, a hill town and in general a market town (thus both removed and connected), the second Momostenango, an old Mayan community more remote but in a valley, and the third Totonicapan. All, it could be said, share very common cultural and settlement histories before and since Spanish conquest. Yet each is quite different, and in part due to its proximity and response to modernizing or westernizing influences. <sup>xiii</sup>

One of the indicators that I relate to materially is the relationship of trash to detritus, the latter I take to be effluvial remains to some level of production but still potentially useful, the former to the last remains of everything. Here, in the US, in Dallas, almost everything of what we consider trash is in actuality effluvial detritus, merely “downstream” of consumption, and a consumption that is of a fairly refined level. The dumpster down my block, from a house renovation, could keep probably 10-15 Guatemalan builders in business for months. In Guate, it is almost impossible to find such fragments of unused material—let’s call them boards longer than 6”. At the same time, we find trash in both regions, which remains the same

Essentially, the border between Xela, a fair-sized city, and San Francisco el Alto appears to be one defined by trash. As one leaves Xela, there is a border of sorts where the roadside is now full of castoff residential refuse (never more useful detritus). Then in leaving San Francisco for Momo, one can almost draw a chalk line at the end of trash. All of this within a hilly area of relatively old-growth pines and farming which is intensive and careful to fit within its space: a relatively idyllic area.

The boundary is a cultural one: numerous signs on walls in Momo point to the responsibility for one’s environment, both in external terms (tourism) but also internal (moral responsibility to tradition). Momo has, I would say, tried to carefully fix its boundaries against the more modern world—itself a bodily definition-- and this boundary is expressed materially, not by what is, but by what isn’t (trash). I could read that purely culturally, but as a sculptor I prefer to read it materially, related to the permeability or impermeability of boundaries; this boundary was surprisingly fixed. To note: within materiality there are no *pure* boundaries, only in the immaterial world of geometry. Stroll describes this difference in terms of epistemology, what we know about objects and surfaces. It is significant that computer graphic cannot describe a true material edge. In the material world, things push into, pull back from and are surrounded by or drop off to.... If we examine the world of “surrounded by” we do not find a sense of edge. “Push in to” seems opposite in force, but in boundary it is not. (think of our cotton example above). In fact, most of our perception of materiality stems from our perception of edge,

boundary, or membrane, which are the defining characteristics of materiality and surface. We “find” a soft or a hard surface at the edge of the surface: “what it can support”. That “edge” is not just a material (tactile) edge, but also projects into other senses, particularly sound and sight. What is it to have an edge or interface between a cloud and a rock? How does this sound?

Thus we will find, within a world of soft *physical* inflections, one of soft aural and visual inflections. We continually read across senses: we know how the sharp corners of a cement structure will project sharp sound and harsh shadow. The worlds of touch, sight, and sound are not separate at all. A friend, Karl Williamson, has likened this to the stain inside a cup or a bowl, where the porosity of one material takes in and reveals the presence, over time, of another. Purity, the clean (open?) surface, is, in one sense, non-absorptive and resistant; in another sense, oppositely, it seems porous—the trash, spilling out, seems to allow no more within, there is no *place* for any more, whereas the open field seems to allow or invite. This seems again, an affective and fluid sense of materiality; I, myself, given open surfaces, fill them up with things to be seen, while others hide such things away.<sup>xiv</sup>

And so we could say that the world of San Francisco el Alto, with its profuse trash, which softens the boundary between commerce, life and consumption, also opens onto a different materiality, one that is more negotiated in terms of color, or the ability to absorb. And the values of the market are as well different, more slippery, say between the “indigenous” and the “modern-commercial”, even where the indigenous wants to preserve a purity value against the modern-commercial, it has a more difficult time, and that is revealed in the attitude towards trash. While we often speak of material culture in terms of capitalistic values, culture is always material and expressive through material: what is possible and what is obdurate; what is fixed and what is fluid; what is, and what isn’t.

I will end here.

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<sup>i</sup> See Vilem Flusser “The Lever Strikes Back” and “Design: Obstacle for/to the Removal of Obstacles”, in *The Shape of Things*. Reaktion Books, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Consider, for those of you who remember, the “chemical revolution” commercials that brought us synthetic fibers out of oil and resins. We can also look at this in an opposite sense, using Gibson’s ecology of things based in affordances. Here, it was the fibrous structure of cotton that afforded its linkage, through spinning, then thread/weaving, etc. See JJ Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances” in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979. One offshoot of this theory is an emphasis on the *affective* nature of our material ecology.

<sup>iii</sup> See Stanley Cavell “A Matter of Meaning It” in *Must we Mean What We Say*, updated edition, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge, 1962. pp3

<sup>v</sup> In considering the problem of material, form, and the “immaterial” Flusser refers to material in one way as stuff, for “stuffing” for a form (concept), and we can see here that there is no one “materiality” of a material—that it takes different natures within different “forms” (viewed platonically). But also materiality degrades the form of its purity. See Flusser, *the Shape of Things*, pp 22-28 and 85-89. See also Stroll.



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<sup>vi</sup> I don't have a reference for this, but one of Edwin Land's more interesting experiments involved the perception of "overall tonality" within a gridded field of sharp tonal boundaries. Presented with an area of squares of different tones, one could, for example, take an average reading of its overall value (tone), with an instrument. At the same time, Land found that a perceiver, in visually following a path from one edge to the other, moving through tonal boundaries sequentially, was capable of a similar calculation, with a similar result, a "running sum" of differences. Thus the idea of ambience and overall "tone" may be a composite of many separate bodily experiences, which we unconsciously average across distinct boundaries. Similarly, when we are discussing complex "social" boundaries of race, class, or culture, we are often speaking about what is essentially a bodily, haptic, sense of materiality—a sense of things rather than a set of definitions or data.

<sup>vii</sup> We do not have to rely upon the single thing, but we could "pick out as well an array of things, a group of things, any state of affairs, a process. It is the process of picking out that is important. See Robert Morris "Anti Form" Art Forum, April, 1968. At one point he refers to this as a move from "the making of things to the making of material itself". Note too that I need not have a purpose in mind (as in traditional "use" of material.

<sup>viii</sup> See Gibson on affordances, but also Judith Lipton (below)

<sup>ix</sup> See Julia Lipton "Thinking with Things: Hannah Woolley to Hannah Arendt" in *Postmedieval*, 2012 Vol 3. about the relationship between "higher order thinking" and "higher order cooking" with reference to craftsmanship 17<sup>th</sup> c. cooking practice. Here, craftsmanship, which is a specific relation to materials, can be described as a fluid practice of almost constant feedback and correction. In this sense, a machine can be trained to an operation, but not to craft. As well, the notion of a fluid materiality may emphasize its *affective* nature (towards arousal, desire, refusal) versus a physical (scientific) nature. It has recently come to my attention that Harman's construction of "overmining" and "undermining" might be relevant here as well. A similar axis (I prefer axis to binary) might be text/fact in our "reading" of material as embedded or discrete.

<sup>x</sup> It is interesting that at certain points of crisis, and at liminal junctures, the objectness and materiality of the body is invoked, often through ritual. These involve the mutilations and self-mutilations of puberty rituals, other scarification rituals, the self-abnegation that is often within ecstatic practices, and it haunts Foucault's description of the heterotopic space of crisis. There is both a material/thing component and a world/spatial component.

<sup>xi</sup> Pre-Renaissance tombs often had two or three levels. The triple tombs showed above, a priant (spiritually praying), then a gisant (a cadaver, often with embalming stitches), then a caro pulvis, a dessicated corpse. Outside of the Christian tradition of spiritualism animating the body, the relation to the body as something to be cared for (gisant) and not (pulvis) is striking. Funerary ritual honors the body as object in ways it was not honored before.

<sup>xii</sup> See Stroll and Foelber, "Talk about talk about Surfaces" in *Dialectics*. Vol. 31, No. 3/4 (1977), esp. pp. 421 ff. on what "objects" have surfaces and what don't, and the implications for their objectness and perception. Here I am inflecting his discussion of persons not having a surface to the more phenomenological notion of the body.

<sup>xiii</sup> It is interesting that many of the highland Mayan towns describe themselves as the center of resistance to Spanish conquest, or the last center of resistance. They cannot all be such at the same time, but clearly it is an identity-construction, clearly suggesting that the indigenous Mayan body of contemporary Guatemala is in most senses a collective one, at least as placed against the modern European body. This is important to certain tensions within Guatemalan contemporary art.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Anusas and Ingold, "Designing Environmental Relations: From Opacity to Textility" *DesignIssues*: vol 29 no. 4, Autumn 2013. Thanks to Hellen Ascolli for this reference (which owes heavily to Flusser). The notion is that modern surface/infrastructure models hide the infra from the surface, thus hiding the flow of the infra from direct perception. Yet, as Hellen and I have wondered, in Comalapa we crossed daily a "river" that was a gouge of shit, sludge and trash, right next to an area for washing clothes, clearly visible. Here, the visible infra had no effect upon ecological perception, even as it severely impacted human health. Why does San Francisco el Alto not see its trash, its stain? Why does Momostenango avoid it?