

Interaction and Materiality

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Introduction

As I think about the driving forces in my own artwork, I always come back to the ideas of materiality and interactivity. Why do I choose to work with the materials I do, and why do I want the viewer to become an active participant in the work? Coming from a family of creatives, yet being the first visual artist, it might come from a place of seeking understanding. Music and performance are, and have been for generations, defining characteristics of my family. While this certainly informs my work, breaking off into the realm of visual art has been a challenge in many ways. The materials that I'm drawn to certainly come from this background, as does the yearning for creative interaction.

Interactivity

When thinking of interactive art, the ideas seem to start with the movement of Relational Aesthetics and Social Practice art. Artists are now often seeking not just to beautify the world, but to change it through interaction with the previously inactive viewer. Critic and writer Jerry Saltz even proclaimed this shift towards Relational Aesthetics to be "the most influential art strain to emerge in art since the early seventies."¹ With this new frontier captivating the ideas of contemporary artists, the viewer has become the participant: a living, breathing part of the work itself.

¹ Renate Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery: Relational Aesthetics and Cultural Difference*, (New York: I.B. Tauris).

Rirkrit Tiravanija brought this idea of social interaction itself to be a work of art. With his piece *Untitled (Free)*, Tiravanija creates an environment that welcomes people of any background to sit down, talk, and enjoy a bowl of Thai curry together.² The gallery space no longer feels like the spectator's theater seats, but instead the viewer gets to be on the inside of the whole experience. In a sense then, the viewer becomes more than just a passive participator, but essential to the existence of the art itself.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, MoMA

This brings up the question of the artist's actual importance in creating a work of art. Is their intent even important when the piece doesn't exist without the viewer? Moreover, is the art the same without the viewer present? Roland Barthes addresses these now crucial questions in his essay *The Death of the Author*. By using an open text, or a permutable factor such as viewers with their own reactions and backgrounds "[the] disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins."³ The reader thus becomes the writer and the viewer the very artist. The meaning and interpretation of the piece is entirely dependent on the interaction and experience of the viewer, not what simply what the artist put forward. A work of art is

² Renate Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery*.

³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (New York).

practically non-existent without the viewer's presence. Ideas like these encouraged artists to pursue how to embrace this idea instead of fighting it.

Community and Impact

As long as I can remember, this ideology has been present in my own work. It was always an assumed truth that the viewer made the piece what it really was. Initially, I was interested in the emotional response of viewers, and how that response could change person to person. As I have studied the ideas of interaction and authorship further, the more control I've wanted to surrender to the viewer. My challenge then has become to create situations that allow the viewer to become a participant without leaving the meaning and content of the piece overly open. Guy Debord mentions this idea in reference to architecture, but it is equally relevant to art. "Architecture must advance by taking as its subject emotionally moving situations, more than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with."⁴ Emotion and community interaction (which is often a source of emotional responses) liberates art to a new level of impact for all involved.

⁴ Tom McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press).

Community has been a frequent topic for Social Practice artists. Previously discussed Tiravanija worked to create settings for community to form, while other artist such as



Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates #15: Twin Cities Minnesota*

Fritz Haeg strive to strengthen pre-existing communities. Haeg's *Edible Estates* work to create opportunities within communities as front yards become gardens and gathering places. This is certainly a more practical side to community-based practices, but above all

is there to bring together a community as it simultaneously strengthens its resources.

Other artists have placed their participatory ideas on the individual's impact. Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama has several installations that reflect the impact of one person, which in some instances is strengthened by a multiplicity of others participating in similar activities. In her famed obliteration rooms, participants are given a small sheet of polka dot stickers to place throughout the installation as desired.⁵ While each participant physically leaves their mark, each individual's impact is lessened as more and more is added to the space.

⁵ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publishing).



Stills from *Screen Test 2019*—Victoria Jensen,
Screen Test 2019

What then is the viewer/participant's true purpose? Does the art just make them feel good about their experience, or could it change their very outlook on life? I've been interested with the viewer's connection with the art after their participation for a while. Recently I did a video piece titled *Screen Test 2019* where I had several subjects sit in front of a camera and let them do whatever they wanted. Inspired by Andy Warhol's screen test videos, I wanted to see

what different people would do when given free rein to interact with the camera (and space and time) as they pleased. Every person had different reactions from discomfort to narcissism. Months later, each of the participants has inquired multiple times about the outcome of the project. While I can't know yet how they will be impacted in the long run, the experience for each participant caused them to reflect on their own actions, and raised a curiosity of the other participant's decisions. Nicolas Bourriaud defends the position that all art today must be inclusive of the viewer, or it is obsolete. In his essay *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud says that art "create[s] free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they

encourage in inter-human intercourse.”⁶ In today’s super-connected world because of the ease of travel and technology like the internet, art that doesn’t ask for interaction is often dismissed.

Some artists have taken this idea of participation to a very hands on, play-like realm. Carsten Höller is known for his playground-like installations, which invite viewers to interact by sliding down slides, or riding on carousels, “which defies the rules of normal adult behaviour in a public place and in the presence of others.”⁷ Interactions with his work not only highlight the participant’s experience for the participant themselves, but allows the audience (spectators or other participants) to watch in this interaction, creating a community performance of sorts. Each individual in this scenario becomes aware of themselves, and further yet their community. By inviting whole groups of individuals to consider others, slowly the social fabric changes. Individuals are less ego-centric, and the ripple effect starts to change society. While this change is more subtle than more artists intentionally go for, it is more than just art for the sake of beauty.

Also working with the immersion of the participant is artist Ann Hamilton. In her piece, *The event of a Thread*, viewers are invited to sit on swings that physically move the piece. By swinging, the fabric sways and ripples. A chain reaction starts by just one

⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique Relationelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel).

⁷ Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art*, (London: Tauris).

person (and eventually others joining in) as the sea of illuminated fabric comes to life.

This “visually seductive installation art...retain[s] a specific interest in the viewer’s sensory experience.”⁸ After the viewer sees the visually mesmerizing environment, they are pulled into a physical interaction with it. Her work shows how one person can make a huge impact socially, involving others one by one as they interact with both the art and each other.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Intersection*, Dia: Beacon

Another example of interaction leaving a literal mark is an installation by Dorothea Rockburne. In this installation, *Intersection*, Rockburne not only visually interacts with the viewer, but makes them an active participant in the work. As they walk through and touch the installation, their footprints and handprints are tracked across the room after coming in contact with the carbon

paper. This interaction becomes a never-ending documentation of those who’ve passed through the space. The environment set up by Rockburne can only become art as the participants take authorship and leave their mark. In Claire Bishop’s eyes,

“Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a

⁸ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*.

more positive and non-hierarchical social model.”⁹ When the public is able to come together then to create a work like Rockburne’s, the social distinction between artist and viewer, rich and poor, and so on is dissolved. Each contribution is valued and documented for the world to see.

Play

Another popular way for artists to encourage interactivity is through play. This idea is best encapsulated in artist Allan Kaprow’s happenings. These happenings were amazing opportunities for participants to actively become a part of his performances. They “challenged the boundaries between performers and audience by mixing them up and moving them around.”¹⁰ For Kaprow, the tasks the performers were given allowed experiences for everyday life to become art. Communities came together to elevate the ordinary by expressing it together. It was the chance for adults to feel as children, freeing up creative energy.

I recently was able to create an installation involving others’ interactions, that like Kaprow’s happenings, helped many participants unearth child-like actions. In *Pure, Preserved, Precious*, I created a designated space for participants to physically interact

⁹ Claire Bishop, *Participation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel; MIT Press).

¹⁰ Jeff Kelly, *Childsplay*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press).



Victoria Jensen, *Pure, Preserved, Precious*

and think about salt. As mundane and everyday as salt may be, various participants' responses were fascinating. Some harnessed their inner child, pouring salt crystals on others' heads, others laid down to enjoy the sunshine and think. The purifying simplicity of material helped participants to reflect on their memories with the material and their interactions with it in the moment. For some, it transported them to an imaginary world where they were salt monsters that fed off of salt rats. For others, the calming environment encouraged thoughts of the restorative, preservative, and enhancing powers of the salt surrounding them. Others still turned their focus to the now apparent size and prism-like shape of the crystals, reflecting on the beauty of the mundane and typically ordinary. This conscious interaction with the everyday "turn[s] the *quotidien* into a sphere of invention."¹¹ Invention and inspiration coming from everyday events or materials will continue to speak to the participant through their memory as they reencounter these in their daily lives.

¹¹ Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, (New York: Oxford University Press).

Extraordinary Materials

Everyday materials are easily relatable to an audience not of the artworld. The lay man has never studied pigments and oil paint, types of clay and marble. By using ordinary materials such as plastic cups, city buildings, and wilderness landscapes, art is removed from the realm of the art elite into the rest of the world. It could also be as simple as an action such as baking bread or jumping in puddles.¹² In this new world of the extraordinary ordinary, anything can really be art.

Earthworks

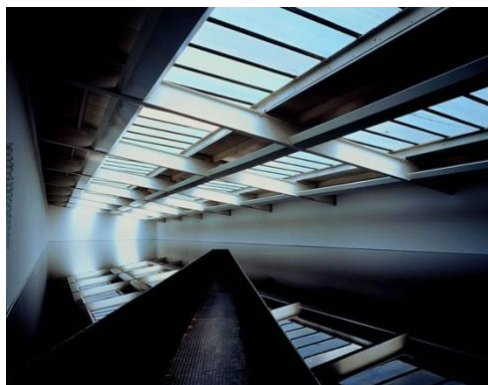
Some particularly fascinating materials are those of the Earthworks artists. From taking rocks and dirt into galleries to sculpting the very face of the land, the most basic of materials is brought into the limelight. In *Double Negative*, Michael Heizer literally cuts gorges out of the two bluffs, showcasing the land around it by removing material. How does removing the very material of the piece highlight the material? In the words of Vilém Flusser, “Design, like all cultural expression, illustrates that matter does not appear (it is not apparent) except in so far as one in-forms is, and that, once in-formed, it starts to appear (become a phenomenon). Thus matter in design, as everywhere in culture, is the way in which forms appear.”¹³ Any material (or “matter” as worded above) only becomes important and apparent when it is removed from the ordinary context.

¹² Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, (New York: Simon and Schuster).

¹³ Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things*, (London: Reaktion).

James Turrell uses another unexpected set of materials: light and color. While normally thought of as artistic tools or elements, these two take new form with the elimination of other materials. Often when walking into one of his installations, the viewer walks through a dark corridor to adjust the eyes to the intricacies of light and color. “This colour becomes stronger (and even changes hue) as the cones and rods of our eyes adjust to the drop in light, a process that may take up to forty minutes.”¹⁴ Once the viewer has the chance to adjust to the material’s needs, they are “immersed in a rich, thick atmosphere of coloured light almost tangible in its density.”¹⁵ By removing light from our everyday expectations of light, the new environment helps it to become more than just a concept of science or a way by which to see other things, but a thing in and unto itself.

Architectural Installation



Often times the materials artists choose to work with not just fill the room or create a new space but are the very room or building they occupy. In his piece *20:50*, Richard Wilson reflects the room on itself by filling the room about waist deep with motor

¹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

oil. Most unexpectedly, the dark black of the oil reflects most brilliantly the light coming in from the skylights above. The medium is mesmerizing, and completely engulfs the room, both opening and closing the space. The “oscillation between presence and absence, threatening and seductive, draws the viewer into a dizzying, disembodied state.”¹⁶ This all-absorbing piece expands the very room in the eye of the viewer,

Richard Wilson, *20:50*, Saatchi Gallery

utilizing the simple material of oil to turn the architecture of the room into the installation material.

Brazilian artist Henrique Oliveira incorporates the building into his installations, expanding the ideas of the materials the space is made from. Utilizing used wood, he expands the conversation of the place, bringing the once hidden structural material to the visible surface of the site. The viewer begins to think about his chosen material and its use. Within the building it interacts with, the wood provides structure and support, but in flimsy plywood form, also holds a certain fragility. “They have something of the quality of a dreamlike, imaginary universe without losing sight of reality.”¹⁷ This symbiotic relationship is just one example of how material can bring address ideas beyond technique and beauty in contemporary art.

¹⁶ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*.

¹⁷ Martina Weinhardt, *Brasiliana*, (Frankfurt: Frankfurt Schirn Kunsthalle).

Sculptor Richard Serra takes sculpture beyond being just an object to look at and turns it into a space to be a part of. With his large-scale steel sculptures, one enters and feels the tangible aspect of space by walking through and interacting with the forms created. The steel of his sculptures is just as important as the proximity of the viewer. When first made and installed, the sculptures' cool grey of the steel is remarkably utilitarian and industrialized. True to its material however, over time the sculptures become bright orange as the exterior oxidizes into beautiful, fragile rust. "The formal aspect of [...] works comes about through something essential in the initial materials."¹⁸ This natural patina could only be accomplished with the materials Serra has selected, the natural beauty of the properties the steel itself contains. What might otherwise be seen as a nuisance has become mesmerizingly beautiful.

Mesmerizing Materials

The ability to transform a space with material deeply resonates with me. But why can material be so enticing in and of itself? Perhaps the exploration of material is the new frontier of the old idea of avant-garde. Historically, artists used tried and true materials, such as oil paint or clay. In recent years however, artists have chosen to branch out, letting anything and everything become the building blocks of their art. Most notably starting with the Dadaists and early conceptual artists, especially Joseph Beuys and

¹⁸ David Peters Corbett, *Jane Beckett and Fiona Russell* (Journal of British Studies).

Marcel Duchamp, the unimaginable was used to create art. The fascination with readymades and industrialization lead artist to look beyond the traditional.¹⁹

For me personally, materials' interest comes because of nostalgic memories connected to them. Many of the materials I choose to work with come from childhood memories. Growing up, my mom looked for affordable ways to entertain five kids when we were all home for the summer. Even though not an artist herself, my mom was a resourceful creative by anyone's standards. Her patience with us lining her kitchen counter with mugs and glasses growing salt crystals to the colorful mess of tie-dying coffee filters brings fond memories of expectation-free creativity of childhood summers. Without even thinking twice about why, these materials spark creative possibilities in my mind, and the process begins. While I may not often use the same methods I did as a child, some similarities remain. Instead of tie-dying coffee filters with water and Crayola markers, I have dip-dyed them with india ink. This modification of childhood creativity, driven to a higher formal plane, is at the core of my work. For me, there is a sort of magic in transforming the ordinary into something beyond its original purpose. My mom always told us that she raised us to "appreciate the finer things in life," but I've come to see that not only did she teach us to appreciate the finer things, but also elevate the ordinary to this level, finding joy and beauty in every corner of this world.

¹⁹ Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, *The Allure of Matter*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

Perhaps that is the appeal of everyday materials. The opportunity to elevate the mundane has in some ways, always been the goal of an artist. Utilizing material as both concept and inspiration is just a new way of expressing that. Artist Robert Barry, who works with materials often invisible to the human eye, considers that “the idea of material reminds me of the phrase ‘ideas come out of objects’. Our connection to the real world is always important.”²⁰ Maybe that’s the underlying truth of the fascination. Materials physically connect us with the world around us. Each has an inherent meaning, even though materials are often altered and manipulated by the artist, at their core, they have an innate purpose. This translates through to some degree or another in the work created. In the Bauhaus school of thought, drawing from technique, craft, and utility, “the nature of materials determines their use, broadly understood.”²¹ Born to make connections, members of the human race seek for understanding while interpreting the world around them. These material associations then help to both deepen and expand the meaning or interpretation of a work of art. Not everyone knows the symbolic associations of color, types of lines, or forms, but substance and material that grows from everyday life will always carry connotations of meaning.

The Everyday

²⁰ Matheiu Copeland, *Voids : A Retrospective*, (Zurich: JRP/Ringier).

²¹ Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, *The Allure of Matter*.

One of the champions of everyday materials in artist Tara Donovan. Transforming ordinary, affordable materials into mesmerizing sculptural installations, Donovan elevates the mundane. “Donovan starts with everyday objects—plastic cups, straws, Scotch tape, pencils, pins, toothpicks—and obsessively arranges them in seemingly infinite series to make large-scale installations.”²² Initially, I would have never thought that Styrofoam cups could make a formally stunning work of art, but Donovan engages with the material in such unexpected ways. Reminiscent of a child’s imagination, turning anything in their sight into a toy, magic universe, or otherwise, this creativity inspires in me, a desire to never overlook anything as potentially beautiful.



Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*, PACE Gallery

Tokujin Yoshioka utilized materials in a more ephemeral way. Ordinary materials become extraordinary installations in Yoshioka’s work. From feathers to prisms, solid material becomes ephemeral as it moves within the installation or through the viewer’s interaction with it. Yoshioka also utilizes light and transparent or translucent materials to highlight the fragility of form. Light, gravity, and gusts of wind shape the materials into a

²² Nora Burnett Abrams, *Tara Donovan: Fieldwork*, (New York: Rizzoli Electa).

living, breathing, piece. “Sometimes a direct manipulation of a given material without the use of any tool is made. In these cases considerations of gravity become as important as those of space. The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms that were not projected in advance.”²³ The material is free to be itself, unaltered by precisely designed human alterations.



Another great use of material is shown by artist Beili Liu. Materials often associated with feminine craft, such as thread, sewing shears, and fabric, become incredibly mesmerizing installations. Often accompanied by a

performer, the material interacts not only with space and ideologies surrounding the colloquial use of the material, but directly interacts with the viewer as well. In her piece *The Mending Project*, viewers enter the installation space to find a performer sitting in the middle at a table, sewing. The viewer cuts a piece of fabric and gives it to the performer to mend back together, filling the space again with an ever-growing patchwork of white fabric.²⁴ The performance with viewer's help is self-perpetuating,

²³ Robert Morris, *Anti Form*, (Artforum).

²⁴ *Installation Art Now*, (California: Ginko Press).

shrinking and growing as the material fulfils its most basic purpose: to be sewn. The material quite literally demonstrates its cultural connotations, informing the viewer (in actuality, the participant) of the purpose of the material.

Conclusion

Beili Liu, *The Mending Project*, Saatchi Gallery

Connecting with materials has played a huge part in the development of my art.

While I don't expect the other participants/viewers to have the same connection as I do, I welcome their point of view. Each person has their own history with a material or place. These points of view add to the conversation as each interact with what is laid before them. Even with these differences, there are so many things in each material that bring us together. Interacting with these experiences together expands our appreciation for everyday beauty, opening our eyes to the world around us.

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