

The Immateriality of Material

Victoria Jensen
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Introduction

As a young elementary school student, I learned that a noun is defined as a person, place, thing, or idea. I have been mesmerized by this for practically my whole life. When something is the subject of a sentence grammatically, it makes sense for it to be tangible. The same usually goes for materials used in art. As an artist whose art focusses on materiality, the idea that material goes beyond things we can touch opens new doors to creative expression.

Physical Materials (The Thing)

Often, materials thought of for art are super traditional, such as oil paints and marble. 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.¹ In this new world of the extraordinary ordinary, anything can really be art.

One artist who exemplifies the elevation of the ordinary is Tara Donovan. Donovan's work revolves around using every-day materials and enhancing them for the viewer's experience. In her terms, "neutral" materials and objects are transformed through both her and her assistant's labor. By using large quantities of ordinary materials, Donovan

¹ Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, (New York: Simon and Schuster).

helps the viewer to contemplate the every-day. By repeating the use of each object, turning it into a mass-material, “the infinite modularity of the material [...] contributes to the illusionisms produced.”² Because of sheer volume, Donovan provides an experience where the viewer can think of the ordinary in extraordinary terms.

I was recently able to do my own investigation of ordinary material on an interactive level. In my piece, *Pure, Preserved, Precious*, I filled a delineated space with salt crystals, creating a space for participants to interact with the ordinary. Many people only think about salt when seasoning their food, or when it snows and they don’t want to slip on ice. But why do we use salt for those things? Creating a space for viewers to think about a material that is so often dismissed, was at the core of the piece. Everyday objects (including salt) dissolve into our lives without appreciation. Bringing these things to the forefront allows an opportunity to find beauty in the mundane, and joy in the little things that we interact with daily.

Architecture as Material (The Place)

Some artists not only alter the materials they use, but the very space they are made from. Richard Wilson takes materiality to a new level. From removing and rotating sections of a building’s façade to filling rooms with oil, Wilson brings attention to the viewer’s immediate surroundings. Both interior and exterior architecture are highlighted in this over-scale material interaction. In speaking of his piece *20:50*, critic and writer

² Nora Burnett Abrams, Tara Donovan: *Fieldwork*, (New York: Rizzoli Electa).

Claire Bishop describes that “at a certain point the reflections ceased to be the spectral double of the room and actually assumed the uncanny solidity of a darkened world.”³

With his simple use of motor oil, by filling the space waist-deep, everything transforms, both doubling and swallowing the world around the viewer.

Performance Art (The Person)

The colloquially named grandmother of performance art, is a terrific example of unexpected materials in contemporary art. Marina Abramovic uses her body as the medium in her performances. Simple, pre-existent, and familiar, this idea of materiality verges on abstract ideas. By utilizing a material that we are all intimately familiar with, the audience can connect with the performances on such a deeply personal level. Art is no longer something just to look at, but something one directly relates to. In her piece *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic “emphasizes her function as a mirror that both deflects her own gaze and reflects that of sitters back onto themselves.”⁴ In this beautiful piece, the material of her body (beyond that, the very way she looks at people becomes the utilized material), connects with others interacting with her on a personal, soul-striking level. The body, the human gaze, and the feeling hovering in the air are all transformed into material through interactive performance. The interaction itself becomes palpable in the room, it’s own material within time and space.

³ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publishing).

⁴ Kathryn Brown, *Interactive Contemporary Art*, (London: Tauris).

Invisible Materials (The Idea)

While working with tangible materials is often the mark of a visual artist, material isn't always as obvious as we would like it to be. Artist Robert Barry made sculptures out of noble and inert gasses. Releasing a container of them into the air in pre-determined locations, the idea of sculpture became more than visible, tangible matter. "The sculpture is all the molecules together, invisibly and endlessly expanding into the atmosphere."⁵ While gas is scientifically just a state of matter, Barry's work brings art one step closer to the realm of abstract, tangibly non-existent material.

What then of material-based art that may not always include the viewer in such a defined setting? In video art, time becomes as much the material as space. Last year, I made a video piece that highlights the participant's interaction with time, space, and the idea of media/technology. Inspired by Andy Warhol's screen test videos, this piece uses eleven individuals, and records their interaction with the video camera for 60 seconds each. The only instructions given to the test subjects was to interact with the camera how they saw fit. The resulting video was an incredible insight into today's culture of technology interactivity. The tension that held in the air when the participants had free reign was incredibly different with each individual. Some were comfortable, the idea of a camera watching them completely unaltering. Others became uncertain of their own actions and responses with the knowledge that what they did was being recorded to be seen by many. The eye of the camera was petrifying for some and freeing for others.

⁵ Matheiu Copeland, *Voids : A Retrospective*, (Zurich: JRP/Ringier).

Some of the participants turned to a narcissistic side that I had never seen, while other naturally charismatic people froze up. The extraordinary few however, remained themselves through the whole encounter with the camera.

What exactly is the meta-material of the project *Screen Test 2019*? Ideas. As I so curiously thought about the concept of an idea counting as a noun, almost twenty years later it finally makes sense to me. Time, space, community, society are all nouns, while not tangible. They are made by connecting visible things, thus defining the invisible. What grander call for an artist than to make visible the invisible?

Conclusion

What is a noun? A person, place, thing, or idea. Each part of the definition more abstract than the last, yet reaching still further and further into the mind. Definitions dissolve like sugar in tea, as material becomes technically immaterial and ideas become substance. And just like that, the artist makes the impossible possible. The invisible becomes visible to the mind as ideas materialize into matter.

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