

[...] Discussions of 'material' as an aesthetic category are recent. In its day-to-day applications, material belongs to a lowly sphere. Nevertheless, through its proximity to 'matter' (German: *Materie*; French: *matière*) – a concept from which material was slowly extracted in the modern era – it is charged with a philosophical significance dating back to antiquity, due to its conceptual pairing with 'form'. While matter and material are difficult to disentangle in their historical usage, the purpose here is not to define material in the context of the history of philosophy or the natural sciences. In general, material, unlike matter, refers only to natural and artificial substances intended for further treatment. The substances and objects that constitute material are subject to transformation through processing, and hence they reveal information about the forces of production at the time, or a specific historical technique. In a narrower sense, material is the stuff which provides the parent substance for artistic creation. From this perspective, material – like matter – is part of a reciprocal relationship with form and idea, the bywords for creative invention.

The current debate about material in cultural studies derived momentum from Jean-François Lyotard's Paris exhibition 'Les Immatériaux' in 1985, with contributions from many French poststructuralist theoreticians (Jacques Derrida, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, et al.). The exhibition, with the programmatic title that translates material into its opposite without eradicating the parent substance, displayed not only objects but also image and text programmes generated by computer technology. It asked questions about how the technical development of information systems changed perceptions about the materiality of things. The affected interests reach deep into everyday life and popular culture, because as a consequence of these advances in media technology, hand in hand with widely discussed ideas about extensions to the physical body and ubiquitous surveillance, the world appears to have forfeited its material differences, and perceptions of volatile surfaces seem to be replacing those of firm objects. However, the exhibition in Paris was received less as reviewing the validity of the conventional concept of material than as confirming the substitution of the old world of physical materials by the allegedly immaterial texts and images generated by information technology.

This granted digital codes an aura once reserved for the work of the artist in transforming material into another, higher state. After all, prior to secularization, the historical predecessor to the present aesthetic debate about the dissolution

of artistically processed and aesthetically perceived materials was not directed at earthly purposes.

In an idealist tradition within aesthetic theory that referenced Plato and Aristotle, material was constantly regarded as the base and counterpart to artistic creativity, which, even in its most precious forms, had to be transcended or transformed by art as activity. In so far as texts and images acquire one and the same material consistency in the new media, i.e. as temporary, intangible signs on a screen, the material of which a work consists, or in which it is realized, is also considered from new angles. It is hardly surprising, then, that material only moved into the narrower horizon of reflection within aesthetics when the physical, tactile layers of the old concept of material were undermined and their disappearance postulated.

Firstly, material is understood as an information carrier; in this interpretation, material is a medium. Because this medium, in its most recent manifestation as digitally generated codes, is no longer haptically graspable and no longer incurs tactile differentiation – unlike traditional media, be it the poet's written page or the artist's painted canvas – immaterial properties are attributed to it, as they once were to musical notes. There is a tradition still at play here, for the remote senses – hearing and sight – ranked highest in the hierarchy implicit in the European history of the senses because they came closest to knowledge of God. They seemed capable of perceiving the immaterial, whereas physical material, associated with touch, ranked lowest in the scheme of earthly cognition.

Secondly, as Marshall McLuhan put it, in the information age the medium has become the message. Postmodern positions have latched onto this and revisited old views of material as a more or less neutral medium of transportation. Material needs no longer to be understood as a detachable carrier for a form or an idea, but can be regarded as indissolubly interwoven with it. This trend, expressed in postmodern discourses, was not first triggered by computer-generated data, by images which have no archetypes, but had already been encouraged by changes taking place in the arts during the twentieth century. In the self-referential systems of 'autonomous' artworks, there is a tendency for the idea, the medium and the material to converge. This, too, meant that in the twentieth century attention to the medium was almost automatically drawn to the material.

Since an independent semantic history of the term material is not available, various facets will have to be pieced together in order to establish the concept as a category. That done, an attempt can be made to differentiate systematically and historically between matter and material. Evidently material initially played a role in the history of the fine arts, and so that is where the earliest evidence of historical reflection and evaluation is found.

Material in the sense of a physical substance carried primarily negative

connotations in aesthetic debate until around 1800. It belonged to the lower sphere of everyday life and had to be made to disappear in the process of artistic creation. This distinguished the artwork from all the other things in which material was able to play a part due to its material value, its functional properties or perhaps its semantics. Material, weighed down by the heaviness of the 'first world', apparently threatened the arts, the 'second creation' with danger or seduction, or at least an impairment of the message. Semiotics established laws for this relationship. As long as the sign, be it a word or an image, refers to an absence, the meaning can be detached from the materiality of the sign. The sign can be read through the material as semantic. But as every sign is physically fixed to material, which can be converted into energy, and as even the new media are materials in this sense, even here the material contingency of the sign cannot be ignored.

Before the revolution in media technology, not all fields of cultural production had been equally successful in achieving that triumph over the material that was so highly prized. Into the nineteenth century, the hierarchy in the arts was structured according to their dependence on material, in the sense of physical substances. Music and poetry thus ranked higher than the fine arts, which took shape in an abundant variety of physical materials. Moreover, the materials used in the fine arts – such as wood, stone, metal, etc., in contrast to, say, paper as the carrier of script – were also used in other day-to-day contexts. In early modern artworks, an attempt was made to erase those historical usages that clung to materials. The same hierarchical ordering that was applied to the genres also took place between the fine arts: drawing, which in its commonest materiality is most like writing, was seen from the Renaissance onwards as capable of coming closer to the 'idea' than any other fine art. Consequently drawing, although it was late to acquire the status of an independent art rather than a mere tool, was honoured above painting, and this in turn above sculpture. Before the fine arts were emancipated from the *artes mechanicae* in the Renaissance, they had been attributed to the guilds which worked in other ways with the same materials. By contrast, the verbal arts and music, which although linked to the body do not inevitably materialize in an object by means of manual processing, counted among the superior *artes liberales*. As they were independent of realization in a physical material, they appeared to be an 'immaterial' expression of an idea.

Echoing its historically differentiated treatment, material is granted different valences within the various specialist disciplines composing the field we can designate as cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*). Today the concept of materiality is above all negotiated from the perspective of linguistics and literary scholarship – and more recently media studies.² When literary scholars discuss materiality, they are particularly concerned with its mediality aspect; in keeping with the subject-matter, this research includes phonetic language as a physically

intangible material. In addition, as proposed by Julia Kristeva with reference to Derrida, the materiality of language designates the level of language that precedes all signification, the unformed acoustic material that is the resource of any human being.

In art history, on the other hand, in keeping with its various kinds of subject-matter, the debate is more concretely about physical material in the sense of the substances processed. Following initial reviews of individual materials around 1900, work has been underway since the 1960s in particular on an iconology of key materials such as bronze, granite, porphyry and wax.³

In ethnology, the older concept of sanctity (*Stoffheiligkeit*) has given way to attribution of value (*Materialwertigkeit*)⁴ when addressing the semantics of the materials used for things rather than their everyday properties and functions.

Unlike West European cultures, the cultures of Asia, and above all Japan, ascribe a different status to material, which mediates between everyday culture and high art. In Japan's cultural tradition, material has a communicative function of its own beyond what can be translated with words. A fascination with this other language, reflected in an aesthetic appreciation of plain, simple materials and yet also compatible with a high-tech culture of 'immaterialities', has contributed to an aesthetic upgrading of material in European and North American culture as well.

In recent years, feminist critique has raised fundamental objections to traditional imaginations of material as a pairing for form, initiating a challenge to the ideology behind the history of this form-material dualism, with its gendered implications.⁵ This critique exposes the gendered conceptualization underlying the binary scheme of material and form (of which the model of matter and form in Ancient Greek philosophy is a variant), demonstrating how the idea of femininity inscribed in material (consider also its affinity to *mater* and *matrix*), which is then subjugated to or obliterated by form as the expression of a male-conceived creator, constitutes a thread throughout Western philosophy. The figure of speech coined by Aristotle about matter desiring form 'as the female desiring the male or the foul desiring the fair' (*ὄσπερ ἀνὰ τὴν ἀρσένος καὶ αἰσχρὸν κάλου*)⁶ can be traced down the centuries as a subtext in Western art theory. This construction of gender duality explains why material was always regarded as base and form as lofty. Moreover, it touches upon the binary construction of body and soul. Judith Butler seeks to challenge the binarism in debate about the body from a feminist perspective, describing the body as material that is gendered by cultural attribution. This extracts the body as material from the dual structure that conceives of material not as a prior given, but as itself historically constructed.

On the one hand, then, material is discussed today in the light of an idea that it has been dissolved by the so-called immaterialities of new technologies, while on the other – from the margins – we can observe the consolidation of material

as a category of its own, alongside critical investigation of this category.⁷

- 1 Aleida Assmann, 'Die Sprache der Dinge. Der lange Blick und die wilde Semiose', in H.U. Gumbrecht and K.L. Pfeiffer, eds, *Materialität der Kommunikation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988) 238.
- 2 See Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, op. cit., trans. *Materialities of Communication* (Stanford 1994).
- 3 See Julius Schlosser, 'History of Portraiture in Wax' (1910), in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles, 2008) 171–314; Noberto Gramaccini, 'Zur Ikonologie der Bronze im Mittelalter', *Städel-Jahrbuch, Neuere Forschung* 2 (1987) 147–70; Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe* (Munich, 1994); Suzanne B. Butters, *Sculptor's Tools, Porphyry, and the Prince in Ducal Florence* (Florence, 1996); Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Order of Material: Plasticities, malaises, Survivals' (1999), in Brandon Taylor, ed., *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis* (Aldershot, 2006) 195–211.
- 4 See Wolfgang Brückner, 'Dingbedeutung und Materialwertigkeit', *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums* (1995) 14–21.
- 5 See Monika Wagner, 'Form und Material im Geschlechterkampf – Aktionismus auf dem Flickenteppich', in: C. Caduff and S. Weigel, eds, *Das Geschlecht der Künste* (Cologne, 1996) 175–96.
- 6 Aristotle, *The Physics*, vol. 1 (London and New York, 1929) 93.
- 7 Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich, 2001).

Monika Wagner, extract from 'Material', in Karlheinz Barck, ed., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in 7 Bänden*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2001) 866–70. Translation by Kate Vanovitch, 2015.

Antony Gormley In Conversation with James Putnam//2004

James Putnam [...] What is your first response to clay as a working medium?

Antony Gormley It is the most immediate material that sculpture can use. It is also one of the oldest. Just think of those caves in the Dordogne or in the Haute-Garonne such as at Montespan where there is this loosely modelled bear sculpture formed from the wet clay – still wet! – and completely covered in holes where the Cro-Magnon speared it ritually.

Putnam There are also many caves that have these wonderful marks left from fingers pressed in the soft layer of clay that covered the rock.

Gormley Yes, on the roof at Rouffignac, the 'spaghetti' traces of fingers on a roof of the cave that go on for three kilometres. Those ochre hand silhouettes Peche Merle seem to celebrate the fact that clay is so formable. When I first began using clay I just wanted something that actually carried the sign touching, of an event between a receptive material and the hand. But I was suspicious of the 'Rodinesque' and the virtuosity of modelling. I want things to be directly made, and in as raw a material as possible. I have always used clay straight out of the ground. I get fantastic clay from a brickworks in Essex, just outside Southend. It's a lovely colour. When the loam comes off the surface you come across this sedimentary layer composed of the oldest igneous rocks that have been broken down to this very, very fine particulate and have sat there amalgamating over millions of years. I like that, it's as if you're touching the flesh of the earth, just like those paleolithic hand impressions. [...] *Field* (1991) seems to combine this direct touch, bodies formed not as representation but as event – this act of squeezing in the space between the hands. It is the impression of the moment that gives the form, not an idea about the articulation of an anatomy. Then it is a register of a whole range of touch, because *Field* is made through many hands. It's also important to me that the clay we use is liberated from its destiny of becoming a brick. [...]

I suppose in the conventional hierarchy of materials bronze and marble are at the top, lead and wood are in the middle and plaster and clay are at the very bottom. But I think that has all been turned on its head in the last hundred years. When Richard Long poured liquid china clay on the floor of the Tate's Duve galleries in 1990, there is a work that is absolutely recognizable as a great work of art, and yet it is swept up afterwards and there is nothing left. I think our attitude to time in objects has changed radically, so that we can now appreciate things in terms of fragility and temporality and their relationship to an event much as to their sense of permanence and monumentality. [...]

Putnam Going back to the immediate appeal of clay, we could say it has 'honest', down-to-earth quality to it. Yet its abundance and availability contrast against it in this hierarchy of fine art materials, also the fact that throughout history it was most frequently used in the manufacture of utilitarian artefacts.

Gormley But that is why it's so wonderful, because it is inherently democratic.

Putnam Clay obviously has more appeal to you in its natural state than in its more finished, glazed ceramic form.

Gormley Yes, I want it to be earth. I am very keen on the colour – the redness