James Charlton

Acts of Materiality

In 1968, when Lucy Lippard gathered the collective conceptual practices of the time and packaged them up as 'dematerialised', I was six. In a way I have always been dematerialised, or at least I can never remember a time when art was not.

So now as an artist practising in an era of the 'internet of things', where online services and digital fabrication have blurred the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, what constitutes materiality?

In this paper I want to examine parallels in the constructs of materiality within my own hybrid digital/sculptural practice – specifically Øform, 2011, and *iForm*, 2010, and that of 1960s conceptual art practices – in particular Robert Morris's performance work *Site*, 1964, and Alan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in Six Parts,* 1959, in order to develop an understanding of how we might go about engaging 'the digital' as a material in a manner consistent with other material sculptural practices.

These two works from the 1950s/1960s serve as examples[1] of a period in which new methods of interrogating materiality were being explored, and as such present means by which we might go about approaching 'the digital' in order to develop a practical understanding of digital materiality. 'These are forms of behaviour aimed at testing the limits of possibilities involved in that particular interaction between one's actions and the materials of the environment' (Morris 1970: 33–4).

As artists associated with Lippard's dematerialised 'ultra-conceptual practices' (Lippard 1973), both Morris and Kaprow were central in developing a contemporary understanding of materiality. As Jacob Lillemose explains, Lippard's dematerialisation of art as an object is not an argument for the disappearance of materiality but a rethinking of materiality in conceptual terms (Lillemose 2008).

> … instead of understanding dematerialization as a negation or dismissal of materiality as such, it can be comprehended as an extensive and fundamental rethinking of the multiplicity of materiality beyond its connection to the entity of the object. (Lillemose 2008: 3)

This non-corporeal attitude to materiality establishes an argument where immateriality becomes a new material condition (Lillemose 2008). With materiality defined as being immaterial, we can conceive of 'the digital' as possessing materiality once we accept 'the digital' as a structural method rather than a technological function: 'dematerialization designates a conceptual approach to materiality whereas immateriality designates the new material condition – or just a new material' (Lillemose 2008: 5).

So what is this digital thing?

As loosely used terminology, digital is used largely as a qualifier of an object – for example digital-media, digital-network, digital-camera … denoting superiority over the analogue.[2] Thus digital-media is distinct from 'the digital' in the sense that it is an artefact of that which is digital. 'The digital' is really the underlying *structural method* that results in the production of what we call digital-media.

In this argument I am extending Lewis's (1971) widely accepted definition of 'the digital' as being a *discrete* representation in opposition to the analogue, which he describes as a *continuous* representation. While the differentiation between discrete and continuous modes provides a sound definition of 'the digital', I reject the necessity of any representational modality as mediation through representational systems unnecessarily distances us from a subject.

While digital-media operates from an imposed modality that is in representational deference to analogue materiality, 'the digital's materiality should not be bound by representation any more than analogue material. Rather 'the digital', as proposed by Barbara Bolt in her counter-representation reading of Heidegger, should be located in a dynamic

non-representational space directly between artist and material, thus eliminating the necessity of any representational mediation by digital-media.

> According to such a counter-representational understanding of art, the work of art is no longer an object for a subject; the relationship between artist, objects, materials and processes is no longer one of mastery and all elements are co-responsible for the emergence of art. (Bolt 2004: 20)

It is precisely this co-dependent dynamic between human and non-human actants that Leonardi (2010) clarifies in regard to digital-media. Arguing for a definition of materiality that is inclusive of instantiations of non-corporeal agents, Leonardi (2010) stresses the affordance of materials rather than their physical properties, stating that it is in the interaction between artefacts and humans that the materiality is constituted.

> These alternative, relational definitions move materiality 'out of the artefact' and into the space of the interactions between people and artefacts. No matter whether those artefacts are physical or digital, their materiality is determined to a substantial degree by when, how and why they are used. These definitions imply that materiality is not a property of artefacts but a product of the relationships between artefacts and the people who produce and consume them. (Leonardi 2010: 13)

With materiality liberated from both representation (Bolt 2004) and corporeality (Lillemose 2008; Leonardi 2010), the argument for a materiality of intent within process returns us to the work of Lippard's 'ultra-conceptual' artist of the 1960s. Although predating Lippard's (1968) seminal text on dematerialisation, aspects of Morris's performance works of the 1960s taken in the context of his subsequent sculptural practice articulate this approach to materiality.

Site, originally performed by Morris and Carolee Schneemann[3] in 1964, starts and finishes with Morris standing in front of a small white rectangular block of similar proportions to a large cuboid in the centre of the space. During the course of the performance Morris removes panels from the larger box, revealing a reclining nude figure posed as *Olympia* (Manet 1863). The noise of a jack-hammer is also heard throughout the performance.

What is of interest here is not the narratives of the work[4] but the interactions between Morris and the plywood. Morris is seen to manoeuvre the plywood slowly and deliberately though a series of actions: lifting, rolling, and flipping. … The artist is seen to be intently focused on the task at hand which, given the size and weight of the sheet, would have required some concentration and physical exertion.

While each action is short and relatively unimpressive, breaking it down in individual frames shows how a material dynamic is formed between the body and the plywood sheet.

As Morris moves the board from one side of his body to the other by rolling it over his back, the board becomes both subject and object. By the same token, the artist's body is doubled as if performing some unbounded cartwheel. In the tension of the space between the two neither are dominant – each yields to and demands of the other in the same way to constitute the materiality of the work.

Somewhat later in 'The Phenomenology of Making' (1970), Morris writes of this idea of finding form in the activity of making by testing the limits of a material against the body. Clearly, when Morris (1970) speaks here of interacting with a 'material in relation to (rather than in control of it)', he is expressing the idea of co-constituted materiality that is seen in *Site*.

Øform (2011) makes similar claims to a shared agency through the use of a haptic modelling system in which the performative actions of the artist constitute a materiality in a network with digital-media. To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that this work engages digital materiality. Rather it is seen as indicative of a means of engaging with a non-corporeal material agent that might subsequently be applied to materialising 'the digital'.

Øform uses Microsoft Kinect to track the spatial coordinates of the artist's hands in order to generate 3D forms within CAD software.[5] What is of interest to me here now is not so much the resultant forms but the structural method through which they are achieved that forces the body into a shared agency with the digital-media.

Through algorithmic analysis of the gestures, the artist's body becomes spatially disassociated from the virtual form, and the artist must defer his movements to the virtual content. Action becomes dissociated from outcome as anatomical norms of spatial organisation are redefined by the system.

As with Morris, the artist is intensely focused on the material subject that in return instructs the movement of the body. The agency here is identical to the co-constituted materiality identified in *Site* – in the exchange between action and material neither is dominant. Each yields and demands of the other in the same way to constitute the materiality of the work. (The software yields intent to the artist as the artist surrenders bodily action to the software.) It is in this engagement that the materiality of the work is contrived.

In a contemporary context any argument for shared agency must be considered in regard to Speculative Realism's critique of the Kantian anthropocentric privilege of human perception. Speculative Realism's flat ontology[6] provides a model of irreduction[7] in which agency is not reducible to human encounter and objects remain irreducible from each other (Bogost 2012).

While the principle of irreduction supports an autonomous reading of 'the digital', Speculative Realism's[8] insistence on the equality of agents in a network fails to acknowledge the instigative and intentional role of the artist in the work. As we see here at the end of Site, the plywood without human involvement cannot maintain its state and simply falls to the ground, whereas Morris is able to instigate a new action.

Addressing this problem, Kirchhoff offers an interpretation of ANT that supports a shared agency of materiality that privileges embodied experience. For Kirchhoff, 'material entities do not have agency as an intrinsic quality by virtue of their materiality' (Kirchhoff 2009). Like Leonardi, Kirchhoff's materiality exists only 'if the concept of "material agency" is a relational and asymmetrical quality … that emerges in the "symbiotic interplay" between human embodiment and material properties" (Kirchhoff, 2009: 7).

Happenings

If the staged performativity of *Site* engaged the body of the performer/artist in an inter-subjective dialogue with the plywood, then Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* extends this further by actively drawing the audience into the network of the piece. Despite preceding *Site* by several years, Kaprow's early *Happenings* of the late 1950s were more 'radical' in their disregard for performative conventions and less committed to formalised subject – object relations. 'Kaprow had continually questioned the aesthetic conventions of framing the relationship between subject and object, the distinction between artist and audience' (Kelley and Kaprow 2004: 34).

As *Happenings* were taken up by Kaprow's contemporaries,[9] they rapidly evolved into more theatrical events that were seen as an '"anything goes" form of avant-garde theatre' (Kelley and Kaprow 2004: 43) and quite removed from the initial methodologies found in Kaprow's seminal *18 Happenings in Six Parts* (1959).

While in the recent rash of re-enactments both Morris's and Kaprow's works have been videoed, only photographic documentation exists of Kaprow's original *Happening*. As a result, much of our understanding of *18 Happenings in Six Parts* is based on Kaprow's extensive notes, drawings, scores … or descriptions by members of the audience.

Audience members were assigned to one of two rooms within the three-room installation in which the six sequential parts – simultaneous performances that involved eight overlapping sound tracks, ritualised movements, projected slides, spoken text and eccentric props – occurred. With unspontaneous movements lacking in emotion, performers carried out a variety of sustained choreographed tasks including playing musical instruments, striking matches, spray-painting plastic with kitchen cleaner and squeezing juice from oranges. The performance concluded with scrolls of text unfurling from the ceiling and performers walking out in single file (Kelley and Kaprow 2004).

While such descriptions provide a sense of the experience, what is more important here than the specific actions are the structural implications of the work in regards to the role of the audience.

Developing out of Action Painting, in particular the work of Jackson Pollock (Kaprow 1958), Kaprow's *Happenings* attempted to generate an environment that immersed the viewer inside the work, not just by putting them inside the performative space but by making them active agents in the work through tightly prescribed instructions that – in the case of *18 Happenings in Six Parts* – fragmented narrative by breaking the audience up, moving them around and creating ambiguous 'free' time within the work (Rodenbeck 2011). 'Being inside one was like being inside an abstract painting' (Kelley and Kaprow 2004: 20).

This score with its sparse instructions is commonly seen as a precursor to later development of

interactive art works. Although it is initially hard to see the audience as participants in the manner we accept or even expect today, the invitation for the audience to 'consciously insert themselves'[10] (Rosenthal et al. 2007) into the works undoubtedly informs our understanding of the *idea of interaction* as a breaking down of the audience and artwork hierarchy. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin and many others have observed: 'The "Happenings" are a touchstone for nearly every discussion of new media as it relates to interactivity in art' (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003: 1).

More than simply providing a precedent for current approaches to interactivity, these early works also highlight *inter*-action as a means of separating 'the digital' from representational media. As Soke Dinkla expresses it in direct reference to Kaprow:

> The widespread judgment that interactive intercourse with computer systems prepares the ground for an emancipation from the media context, via the development from 'passive' to 'active' reception, is being euphorically defended by referring to the participatory art of the sixties. (Dinkla 1996: 289)

What we have in *Happening*'s vision of interaction is not simply the prospect of a singularity of subjects that co-constitutes materiality as with Morris, but a further liberation of subjects from representation.

I am not proposing *Happenings* as a means of accessing 'the digital' but rather suggesting that their strategy of collapsing audience and artist relata, as an extension of the performative engagement with objects found in Morris's work, suggests 'the digital' might also be realised in a co-constituted materiality between two human agents as much as between human and non-human agents.

The *coding* of Kaprow's audience via a score, to carry out a series of scheduled tasks, is a strategy repeated in *iForm* – where participants were given a set of rules to structure their actions within a variable environment.

Programmed to perform a set of functions, ten participants each with iPhones were dropped off in different locations around a circular bus route. At a designated time they opened a GPS App and started feeding geo-spatial data to a server. Their instructions were to remain on the bus until someone else from the group got on. At that point they were to catch the next bus in the opposite direction. This was to be repeated until all participants reached a designated bus stop. The performance lasted several hours. Using the GPS data, a three-dimensional form was made by defining points from distances between participants rather than geo-spatially. The form resulting from the performance was 3D printed and exhibited. Like Kaprow's performers and audience, the participants in *iForm* were carrying out *non-matrixed* actions though which they blindly assembled a concrete form.

> If a nonmatrixed performer in a Happening does not have to function in an imaginary time and place created primarily in his own mind, if he does not have to respond to often imaginary stimuli in terms of alien and artificial personalities, if he is not expected either to project the subrational and unconscious elements in the character he is playing or to inflect and colour the ideas implicit in his words and actions, what is required of him? Only the execution of a generally simple and undemanding act. … The performer merely embodies and makes concrete the idea. (Kirby 1995: 30)

Conforming to their instructions, *iForm* participants were isolated from both each other and the software constructing the form. Their function within the work is discrete – self-contained and digital in a way that parallels both the compartmentalised structure and likely experience of the audience in *18 Happenings in Six Parts* (Kirby 1995). Broken into parts both temporarily and spatially, the audience experience was likely one of discontinuity in which it was impossible to perceive the whole of the work. Divided as they were across three spaces and distracted by multiple events, it is unlikely that any two people witnessed the same thing.

What I propose is occurring in *18 Happenings in Six Parts,* then, is an emergence of a *digital structural method* that is a function of both a shared agency and fragmented isolation that relocates the individual at the spatiotemporal centre of the materiality of the work. What we have is not one continuous material but multiple co-constituted materialities all of which are inter-connected in the relational network of the piece.

While at first this seems contradictory in the sense that I am claiming both a continuous singularity and discrete individuality within the work, this is not at all problematic when we accept this as a *state of the work* rather than the participants. The work can be split across multiple sites, spaces and times that operate independently and at the same time function as a whole.

Conclusion

What is it then that constitutes materiality in these works, and how might this analysis assist in engaging 'the digital' as a material within sculptural practice?

Materiality has been presented not as a corporeal property of a subject but as a materiality of intent that denies representation and is located within an exchange between co-dependent actants. 'The digital' has been articulated as a structural method that governs relations within a network. Thus any efforts to engage digital materiality within sculptural practice should be focused on identifying operations that, like Morris's performative actions and Kaprow's scored events, are historical precedents for methods of interrogating materiality.

That 'the digital' for the moment remains hidden behind representational interfaces points to the need to develop specific actions and processes that operate within that structural method in order to rematerialise 'the digital' within sculptural practice.

Notes

1. These works are both from early formative stages of the artist's practice and have the advantage of being more conceptually 'open works' (Eco 1989). Although Morris stopped doing performance works and moved on towards objects-based work, the significance and origins of his interest in process are clearer in *Site* and *Neo Classic*. Kapprow's later happening became somewhat diluted by the influence of more theatrical strategies, and the role of the audience diminished.

2. As Florian Cramer has pointed out, the '*digital* had been synonymous with *better* for a long time' (Cramer 2013).

3. Morris was briefly involved in performances with the Judson Dance Theatre, New York, from 1961 to 1964. Continuing work begun in San Francisco with Simone Forti and Anna Harpin, he carried forward dance-related explorations in a workshop situation with Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann (Morris 2012).

4. Without wanting to dismiss other important readings of this, work such as feminist readings of Schneemann's role, which can itself be seen as co-constituted through the image of the gaze and digital internal and external construction of self, I am focusing on Morris's physical engagement with materials in order to highlight a point.

5. The project uses blob detection software to track the movement of hands that enter into the capture space – a narrow plane of space in front of the user's body. By evaluating the volume of each hand within the capture space the software computes dimensions on three axes. As a simple example – the position on the Y axis is derived from the volume of the left hand presented to the camera. With only the tip of a finger in the space, the Y axis is set to one.

6. In particular here I am referring to Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology in which objects exist independently of human perception (Harman 2002).

7. Drawing on Latour's (1988) notion of irreduction.

8. 'Speculative realism is a movement in contemporary philosophy which defines itself loosely in its stance of metaphysical realism against the dominant forms of post-Kantian philosophy or what it terms correlationism. Speculative realism is believed to have taken its name from a conference held at Goldsmiths College, University of London in April, 2007' (Taylor 2012). Key proponents include Ian Bogost, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant and Quentin Meillassoux.

9. Red Grooms, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg.

10. 'Invitations to the event said "you will become part of the happenings; you will simultaneously experience them"' (Beaven 2012).

References

Beaven, K. (2012) Performance Art 101: The Happening, by Allan Kaprow. Tate Document. Available at: http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/performance-art-101-happening-allan-kaprow (accessed 9.1.13).

Bogost, I. (2012) *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bolt, B. (2004) *Art beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris.

Cramer, F. (2013) Post-digital: A term that sucks but is useful (Draft 2). Post_Digital Research. Available at: http://post-digital.projects.cavi.dk/?author=11 (accessed 10.2.13).

Dinkla, S. (1996) From participation to interaction: Toward the origins of interactive art. In: L. Hershman-Leeson (ed.) *Clicking in: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press.

Eco, U. (1989) *The Open Work*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harman, G. (2002) *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago: Open Court.

Kaprow, A. (1958) The legacy of Jackson Pollock. In: A. Kaprow and J. Kelley (eds) *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kaprow, A. and Kelley, J. (2003) *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kaprow, A., Rosen, B. and Lepecki, A. (2007) *Allan Kaprow, 18 Happenings in 6 Parts: 9/10/11* (November 2006), Haus der Kunst, Munich. Göttingen: Steidl Hauser & Wirth.

Kelley, J. and Kaprow, A. (2004) *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kirby, M. (1995) Happenings. In: M.R. Sandford (ed.) *Happenings and Other Acts*. London/New York: Routledge.

Kirchhoff, M. (2009) Material agency. *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 13(3): 206–220. Available at: http://www.pdcnet.org/techne/content/techne_2009_0013_0003_0206_0220.

Latour, B. (1988) *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Leonardi, P. (2010) Digital materiality? How artifacts without matter, matter. *First Monday*. Available at: http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3036/2567 (accessed 11.1.13).

Lewis, D. (1971) Analog and digital. *Noûs* 5: 321.

Lillemose, J. (2008) Conceptualizing materiality: Art from the dematerialization of the object to the condition of immateriality. *Histories and Theories of Intermedia*. Available at: http://umintermediai501.blogspot.co.nz/2008/01/conceptualizing-materiality-art-from.html (accessed 10.1.13).

Lippard, L. (1973) *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. New York: Praeger.

Lippard, L. (1999) The dematerialization of the art object. In: A. Alberro and B. Stimson (eds) *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lippard, L. and Chandler, J. (1968) The dematerialization of art. *Art International* (February): 31–6.

Manovich, L. (2002) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Morris, R. (1970) Some notes on the phenomenology of making. *Artforum*. Available at: http://artforum.com/inprintarchive/id=34191 (accessed 11.1.13).

Morris, R. (2012) Judson Dance Theatre: 50th Anniversary. *Artforum*. Available at: http://artforum.com/words/id=31187 (accessed 9.11.13).

Rodenbeck, J.F. (2011) *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Rosenthal, S., Kaprow, A., Meyer-Hermann, E. and Lepecki, A. (2007) *Allan Kaprow 18/6: 18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Göttingen: Steidl Hauser & Wirth.

Sandford, M.R. (1995) *Happenings and Other Acts*. London/New York: Routledge.

Taylor, J.D. (2012) What is Speculative Realism? *Zero Books Blog*. Available at: http://zero-books.net/blogs/zero/what-is-speculative-realism/ (accessed 10.29.13).

Wardrip-Fruin, N. and Montfort, N. (2003) *The New Media Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.