

Why Matter Matters

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Abstract

Why Matter Matters Art engenders becomings, not imaginative becomings . . . but material becomings . . . in which life folds over itself to embrace its contact with materiality, in which each exchanges some elements or particles with the other to become more and other (Grosz, 2008;23). Installation + Performance = Provocation My current (practically complete) PhD with practice was initiated by attending the first Making Futures conference, where the working title of my project - From Materialism to Materiality: how can my textile art and textile craft processes contribute to an ethical dialogue through an emerging materiality - was conceived. I have attended and presented at the conferences since, always valuing the daunting process of presenting not only my practice as a maker but also my theoretical writing to a discerning and critical audience. Implicit in craft, art and making, yet still largely inexplicable and tenuous in its ontology is the connection with matter we all enjoy and depend on. I prescribe a connection with matter that results in a 'deep materialism', a materialism which questions the impact of our use and misuse of materials, re-assessing its impact on the biodiversity of the planet and also on ourselves. I suggest that although through micro-political action we can alter the way we situate ourselves in the world as humans, bringing about a shift in how we relate to, and exist within, the wider biosphere, the impetus to bring about this change demands an ethical rethinking of current viewings of inertia and stasis within the world of matter. The contextualisation of this practice has been challenging, sitting as it does outside of current definitions of a commercial craft practice and decrying the capitalist consumption that has subsumed our society. My study of what actually constitutes waste and our troublesome relationship with this material is embroiled with issues of disposability and human hubris that threatens to alienate ourselves both from the material world and from knowledge of ourselves. I would relish the opportunity to describe my project in a more 'material' way; by working in situ with the materials that I have been working with and writing about over several years amidst the development of a low impact practice. I propose a 'working' installation, where I place myself, as the maker, at the centre of these materials and work with them in situ so that I can describe them more closely to others, provoking a reaction both verbally and non-verbally. This could be indoors or outdoors, the outside renders us closer to where these materials have originated from. How can we alter our 'inside' to better consider this matter with more respect and give it more dignity than it currently possesses? In a post-anthropocentric world of diminishing resources, some may say an ecological crisis, it is crucial that we re-assess and revise our relationship with matter. The response that I provoke will be documented and disseminated, leading to further development of a practice which has reached a hiatus in its examination of 'the material turn'. Alison Harper 2017

Every thing, every process, every event or encounter is itself a mode of becoming that has its own time, its own movements, its own force. These multiple becomings both make and unmake, they do (up) and they undo (Grosz, 2011: 2).

Having already shared my work with a presentation and slides at previous Making Futures conferences, I felt that this had not been a particularly successful way for me to engage an audience and communicate ideas around materiality and the ontology of materialism, and suggested delivering a more 'hands-on' method of presenting these ideas (see abstract). The intention was to include the audience in a less formal and more creative workshop in order to engender discussion and reveal the processes of my practice. However, due to constraints of time and space, this workshop was more of a presentation of my completed work. Although different from my intended delivery, it resulted in a fascinating discussion and I was gratified to receive such a positive response from attendees. The reaction of the workshop members was affirming; they were as astonished as I have been at the amount of revealed matter implicit in each of the single use objects that I use in my practice.

The installation part of my workshop was the viewing of work already completed, and the performative aspect of the workshop was to have been the creative making process resulting in the provocation – this being the raising of awareness and expectations that takes place when visual and tactile stimuli combine to alter sensibilities, and hence ideas and perceptions around this matter that we so often misuse, mistaking it for an innocuous accompaniment to modern lifestyles.

The purpose of this encounter was also to provoke and push my practice into a different realm from the usual 'look at what I have made' exhibition context, and to discover and communicate an alternative mode of describing our relationships with matter; relationships that at present leave much to be desired. This process aspires to be a heuristic experience, enabling participants to discover for themselves practical and engaging ways to alter and reassess relationships with the material world, provoking a shift in sensitivities which can result in social and cultural readjustment and a move towards positive change.

What follows is an overview of the ideas and discoveries made in the writing of the thesis produced to accompany my practice, in which I draw attention to how the growth and acceptability of a disposable culture alienates us from both the material world and hence from knowledge of ourselves, as we too are material. The title of the thesis was 'How can my textile art and textile craft processes contribute to a dialogue through an investigation of materials used in a disposable culture?'

My practice and this research project seek to uncover, reveal and deepen the connections with our material world; connections that are currently stretched and ruptured by the strictures of capitalism and the politics of neoliberalism. I first look at the various meanings and acceptability of the term 'waste', then go on to describe how an unpicking and new appraisal of the terms 'materialism' and 'materiality' can result in a 'deep materialism', committing ourselves to a new relationship with matter. I also look at the implications of the political and specifically the 'micropolitical', where individuals can be responsible for their own actions and aware of the possibilities of change in the world.



Lace and twine

Two paper cups, one deconstructed

Waste

Like beauty, it appears that the phenomenon of waste belongs to the eye of the beholder. Radical subjectivism of this sort raises an inevitable question: if one and the same thing can be both waste and not waste, does waste, per se, exist at all? (Kennedy, 2007: 5)

Trash presents us with an opportunity to comprehend the peril of our own existential and ontological failure. When we understand how contrary to our mortal essence is our technological treatment of worldly beings, convenient commodities will lose much of their lustre. [They will cease to comfort and sedate us in their old, advertised manner.] Their a priori disposal will begin to alarm us, for therein we have caught a glimpse of our own insensitive rejection of ourselves (Kennedy, 2007: 187).

The references above highlight the difficulty of defining contemporary concepts of waste with any degree of certainty; they also point to the unacknowledged and largely underexplored human relationship with waste, a relationship that can challenge value systems and our own conception of mortality and, as described by Zygmunt Bauman and Jane Bennett below, hint at an area of indecision and danger.

However hard one tries, the frontier separating the 'useful product' from 'waste' is a grey zone; a kingdom of undefinition, uncertainty – and danger (Bauman, 2004: 28).

How would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, or trash, or 'the recycling', but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter? (Bennett, 2010: viii)

Thus the problems and paradoxes in defining what waste truly is are acknowledged. This needs to be examined and articulated before being able to bring into effect any kind of ethics of waste; for instance, how waste affects not just western communities but those who have not produced this waste yet are frequently left with the task of 'disposing' of it. Ethical judgements of the ownership of waste in its post-use phase are also devoid of definition, if things are 'finished with' to whom do they now 'belong'? Who bears the responsibility of disposal?

The American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles has spent her career exploring these and other issues around the use and misuse of matter, of 'waste', and her practice has also focussed on the people whose lives are spent handling and in close proximity to this matter, namely the waste disposal workers from the Sanitation Department of New York. Bauman calls waste disposal workers 'the unsung heroes of modernity' (2004: 28) saying,

Day in, day out, they refresh and make salient again the borderline between normality and pathology, health and illness, the desirable and the repulsive, the accepted and rejected, [] the inside and outside of the human universe (ibid.).

Thus, connections are made between cleanliness, that is, a lack of waste, and human health, both mental and physical – 'sanitas' is the Latin word meaning 'health' and also the root of the word 'sanity'.

The origins of the word 'waste' stem from 'vastus', which is 'giving it the same Latin root as the word 'vast' and meaning a time and space that is void, immense or enormous' (Viney, 2014: 18). This has come to imply that any space that is not useful to, or used by mankind, has no intrinsic value or status of its own; it's worth or value can only be judged in relation to its human connection.

I have centred my practice for this research project and thesis on a particular kind of material commonly viewed as 'waste'; these objects have a designated status of fluid disposability. They are objects commonly used on a daily basis and are intended to be used only once; single use objects which have a fleeting relationship with the consumer before being designated to a waste stream.

The process of gathering these materials and their subsequent altering and re-imagining is transformational for myself as the maker, and also instrumental in enabling my audience to reconsider these materials which have been reinstated into the world, with a heightened and enabled sense of curiosity and awareness. I have restricted this practice to three products commonly thought of as waste; paper coffee cups, crisp packet wrappers and paper carrier bags; ubiquitous, humble materials - readily available and accessible for further investigation.



Skins

Paper carrier bags

Materialism, materiality, deep materialism

The working title for the thesis was From Materialism to Materiality: How can my textile art and textile craft processes contribute to an ethical dialogue through an emerging materiality? I was interested in examining the connection between the material world and intangible concepts, for example materiality, that have emerged from this. This was challenging as materialism in its prosaic sense implies an over-reliance on consumer goods and services, whereas the philosophical concept of materialism is a shifting, disputed and potentially highly complex field of theoretical ambiguity. This is complicated by the emergence of a more recent 'new materialism' in the field of philosophy, as espoused by, amongst other scholars, Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad.

Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt raise the validity of the position of the human in new materialist thought,

With its acknowledgement of agential matter, neo-materialism questions the anthropocentric narrative that has underpinned our view of humans-in-the-world since the enlightenment, a view that posits humans as makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavours (2013: 5).

I have explored these different definitions in more detail within the thesis, and in looking for a reappraisal of relationships with the material world it is worth noting that the root of 'matter' is 'mater', meaning

mother, origin, source, which can be construed as the maternal, life-giving force without which life could not exist. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe an active understanding of a sense of materiality through matter. 'For materiality is always something more than "mere" matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable' (2010: 9). This is an understanding that many artists and makers would identify with.

Jane Bennett, in her work *Vibrant Matter* from 2010, describes an encounter with debris, both organic and inorganic, which she catches sight of unexpectedly in a storm drain one sunny morning. She is entranced by this 'stuff', seeing in it a vitality usually unnoticed and unacknowledged. The objects 'shimmied back and forth between debris and thing [] as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call' (2010:4). Bennett is able to rationalise this reaction, attributing it to her reading and understanding of Thoreau and of Spinoza. When encountering the 'debris' I use in my practice, I also have a visceral reaction to these objects; but I cannot easily leave them behind – they are collected, washed and stored. They are valued and kept as a resource for future work and projects.

The sculptor Tony Cragg's work is grounded in the material; early on in his career he was aware that industrial methods of production are largely concealed and hidden in modern societies, thereby affecting material relationships.

His work is notable for its exploration of different materials, including found objects and raw matter of various kinds. Cragg's dispassionate ordering and composing seeks to make evident the vast array of objects and images that surround us, but with which he feels modern man has only a superficial relationship, based on function alone. In order to enhance our imaginative and emotional relationship with the world at large, Cragg proposed beginning with physical matter as the fundamental basis of experience (Berggruen, 2017).

Cragg himself proposes to build a mythology for the industrially produced objects of our time, and uncannily predicts that, by not knowing a material well enough, we are storing up problems for the future. He states,

I see material or an object as having a balloon of information around it. Materials like wood already have a very occupied balloon. The objects of our industrial society as yet have very little information attached to them, so even if something like plastic can be accepted as a valid material for use, it still remains very unoccupied. There is a lot of work to be done to actually make a mythology for this material, over and above its extremely practical and utilitarian value (Cragg, 1992).

Amongst this enquiry I espouse the acceptance of a form of 'deep materialism', whereby matter is elevated to a higher status and requires us to accept and respond to the ethical use and misuse of the material world by re-framing our place within it. The relationship with matter is redrawn and re-examined; the provenance and also the destination of all matter and materials is questioned and acted upon to lessen harmful impacts both on human and nonhuman actors. The relationship between the 'outside' material world and the 'inside' world of the human changes, the differences diminish, inherently invoking a more reciprocal and caring way to be in the world. As Tim Ingold states,

Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the 'other side' of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds –

through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation – undergo continual generation and transformation (2007: 7).

Looking for different relationships with the material world, while developing varying forms of the different insights a new materialism can give us, prompts an examination of how we can promote change, how resistance can take place. It is therefore appropriate to consider the meanings and implications of politics and the political.



Grace's Foot

Crisp packet yarn

Politics and micropolitics

Having acknowledged the ecological crisis implicit in current methods of production and aware of the need for systems, political and otherwise, to change, it would seem that a first step in an examination of methods of change would be to focus on the meaning of the word 'political'; the American scholar Jane Bennett is described as a political theorist although she is not writing directly about the primary politics of government or the judiciary. It is interesting to note that the subtitle to her work *Vibrant Matter* is 'a political ecology of things'. She states,

It is not controversial to say that trash, gadgets, electricity, and fire are relevant to politics, or to say that although such things do not qualify as political stakeholders, they form the milieu of human action or serve as means or impediments to it (Bennett, 2010: 39).

Political theory has more of a discursive, philosophical meaning and intention than a politics understood as voting in a democratic system might suggest. Bennett sees the political as an inclusive realm of human related phenomena but is frustrated by the narrowness of current definitions, asking,

Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality or between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics? (Bennett, 2010: xvi).

Bennett explains and describes her thinking thus,

My political strategy is indirect because its target is not the macro-level politics of laws, policy, institutional change but the micropolitics of sensibility formation (Bennett, 2010).

When beginning this project I did not consider that the collection of common discarded material, whether paper cups, crisp packets or paper bags, was a political act. I now view this differently as I am altering the world and my place in it through this action, and also suggesting to others that the unremitting discarding of said materials is not a good idea.

My practice interrupts the flow of materials in a capitalist system, even though these materials have no obvious destination. The intent of this practice is to re-present the objects I choose to work with as art/craft objects in order to alter and question what can be viewed as an 'alienation' from this kind of matter, seen as 'waste' and therefore as an unwanted yet inherent and inevitable part of contemporary consumer culture. As William Connolly states in describing the importance of creativity as an agent of change,

When we participate in a creative initiative and when we respond to a creative initiative from elsewhere that jostles received assumption, we both change the world and become otherwise than ourselves to a large or small degree. That is the creative potential lodged between the open logic of identity and the evolution of circumstances with which it is entangled (2013: 79).

Micropolitics can be seen as a series of autonomous independent actions, and can be a powerful force of hope and political intensity, as suggested by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost,

The enormous macroscopic impact of myriad mundane individual actions provokes critical, political and legal reflection not only upon the nature of causation but also upon the nature of responsibilities that individuals and governments have for the health of the planet (2010:16).

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discusses issues of freedom when he raises the question of how, despite western democracies having attained 'freedom', this comes at the price of feeling unable to change anything.

If freedom has been won, how does it come about that human ability to imagine a better world and to do something to make it better was not among the trophies of victory? (1999: 1)

Connolly argues that freedom should be understood more as having the will and the ability to alter ourselves, on a 'micro' level, freedom as the possibility 'to be and to become otherwise than we are' (2013: 80).



Birds - Angel's Wing

Deconstructed paper cups

Low impact practice

Inherent in this study has been the development of a 'low impact practice' in which I set out creative constraints by which I construct the work, where possible not wanting to add any further matter to the stuff I already have. There are no further colouring materials, glues or fixatives used. I have however allowed myself the use of thread, of which I already have a large stock, and the use of a sewing machine, with which to stitch through and strengthen the crisp packet yarn. I have made my own micro-papermaking tools and devised ways to construct the paper forms from these shapes, using only water to make the paper pulp from the stripped cups.

Conclusion

This work aspires to engender a re-evaluation of the quotidian, the overlooked and the unnoticed, whilst also raising an awareness of the agency, presence and vitality of matter, countering perceptions of inertia and stasis, and thus altering and rejecting normative systems of valuation. I have encouraged a 'holistic' viewing of matter, where the term 'waste', when used, does not designate the 'end' of an object, as all matter is in a constant state of alteration and flux. The negative perception of 'waste' is changed into a positive position of creative possibility.

The practice concerns the use of resources, the depletion of which impacts on the natural world and hence on all of us. It seeks to bring about a reassessment of how we view, use, and value everyday objects and materials in post-industrial societies, seeking to bring about and enable a less destructive and combative system of production and reproduction than currently exists.

Through building and creating a framework for thinking which draws on an emerging new materialism, I am making a contribution to understandings of 'the material turn' and in encouraging a transition to a deep materialist way of thinking, questioning the ecological impact of seemingly simple objects and common practises. This adds to the emergence of new micro-political roles and responsibilities of the individual subject and of differing ways of being in the world. This sense of a deep materialism logically extends to other aspects of modern lives. For instance, clothing raises issues of where, by whom, and from what, it was made and with what ecological impact; the production and consumption of food also raises the same ethical questioning.

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