MAKING MATERIAL MEANINGFUL:
IDENTIFYING AND ANALYSING THE ROLE OF MATERIAL IN CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURAL PRACTICE AND CRITICISM.

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Contemporary Art at Lancaster University.

The other component of this submission is an exhibition of a body of sculptural artworks, installed at Lancaster University on October 9th, 2020. This was photographically documented and images are included as an appendix.

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ABSTRACT

This written thesis is part of a larger study which identifies and explores the critical meaning material contributes to making, viewing and analysing sculpture.

Sculpture now exists within a new condition of making and occupies an abundance of material possibilities: the messy, precarious, figurative, quotidian, enduring, handmade, found or formless. Contemporary artists demonstrate a multitude of ways material affects sculpture's meaning, exploring both its physical behaviour and the intangible information it carries, which locates it within social contexts. In contrast, art criticism repeatedly fails to fully grasp material's fundamental role. As a result, we as audiences lack "material literacy" and the vocabulary necessary to fully comprehend sculpture both as a discipline and a social commentator.

In response, this thesis combines academic and practice-based research. Analysis of art criticism since 1960 examines material's inferior position in theoretical models. Rigorous testing of one material (salt dough) in the studio results in the construction of a body of work which provides a new image for material sensitivity in practice and identifies concrete sources of meaning. Gathering data from practicing sculptors involves the perspectives of makers and captures the broader ecology of contemporary sculpture. As such, material meaning is examined across different levels in order to identify strategies to establish material literacy which resonate with artists, writers and audiences.

INTRODUCTION

Sculpture is both constructed and experienced in the real, material world. A dialectic relationship between material and sculpture is the result of this condition. Following this logic, art historian Nicholas Penny states: “If we are to understand a work of art, it obviously helps to have some knowledge of the material of which it is made.”[1] This being said, critical discussion repeatedly avoids tackling the meaning material contributes to sculpture with the rigor applied to other aspects such as “form” or “process.” Art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann writes that art criticism “offers ample theories about the aesthetics, style, iconography, perception, reception, collection and so on of artworks but little about their materials.”[2] In spite of continued artistic experimentation with material in the early twenty-first century, this is an enduring pattern, and has resulted in its lowly status. Material is omnipresent in contemporary sculpture, yet we lack the vocabulary required to identify and analyse its meaning.

A study examining material’s meaning in contemporary sculpture is necessary in order to address the rift between concept and practice. This thesis argues that understanding material as both haptic and cognitive opens access to sculptural meaning in its entirety. It identifies a lack of engagement with material in art criticism and presents this as a problem before providing solutions towards developing an approach which asserts a new critically comprehensive language for sculpture. The study is contextualised against a period in visual art characterised by material sensitivity: artists are producing works which wear their material on their surfaces, engaging with it as a concrete source of meaning.

[1] Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 1.
[2] Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “How Materials Make Meaning,” in *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art 2012, Volume 62*, *Meaning in Materials: Netherlandish Art 1400 - 1800,* ed. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Frits Scholten and H. Perry Chapman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 11.

Specifically, the research questions addressed are:

- How is material explored in art criticism, and why is it important to involve it in critical discussion?
- How and why do artists currently engage with materials? What decisions do they face, and what does this tell us about the current conditions of sculpture making?
- How does an individual artist engage with material in order to construct a body of sculpture in the studio and how does this contribute to meaning?
- How does recognition of methods and decision-making processes relating to material offer us new critical language, tools, approaches to discussing and exhibiting contemporary sculpture?

1. DEFINING TERMS

1.1 SCULPTURE

"Sculpture" is difficult to define. It has experienced significant expansions, but critics continue to regard it as a discipline distinct from other manifestations of material such as monolith, landscape or architecture.[3] Anna Mozynska notes that though the difficulty of defining sculpture is ongoing, sculptural works share a particular set of characteristics which are most commonly attributed to its formal devices.[4]

Mozynska's observation is reflected in artists' writings throughout the twentieth century. In 1937, Barbara Hepworth stated:

> The consciousness and understanding of volume and mass, laws of gravity, contour of the earth under our feet, thrusts and stresses of internal structure,

[3] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, vol. 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44.
[4] Anna Mozynska, *Sculpture Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 7.

> space displacement and space volume, the relation of man to a mountain and man's eye to the horizon, and all laws of movement and equilibrium [...][5]

Here, Hepworth outlines sculpture's defining criteria as intangible, despite also stating that "for the imaginative idea to be fully and freely projected into stone, wood or any plastic substance, a complete sensibility to material - an understanding of its inherent quality and character - is required."[6] Though Hepworth acknowledges material's influence on the making process, she prioritises sculpture's formal qualities, citing "volume," "mass," and "horizon" as its primary features. Similarly, sculptors William Tucker and Tim Scott suggested sculpture's core can be distilled to "object," "mass," "space," "number and order," "the centre," and "level."[7] Formal elements of sculpture most commonly map its boundaries, which relate to its composition, aesthetic and spatial relations.

Formal devices may be a common identifier, yet Tucker and Scott also proclaim that "Sculpture penetrates the inhabited world."[8] This aspect sets it apart from other forms of visual art, as it blurs the boundaries between artwork and object. Tension between these two realms is a source of anxiety for many critics. Michael Fried, for example, argues that art is distinct from everyday life, and elevates sculpture's formal qualities in order to segregate art and non-art objects.[9] Exploration of its material attributes is noticeably absent: these overlap with non-art objects where the differences between art and life become harder to perceive. The shifting relationship between these two realms are explored in more detail in a later chapter; the important point here is that sculpture's edges are still marked by formal elements despite its strong relationship with tangible material.

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[5] Barbara Hepworth, "Sculpture," in *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 394-395.
[6] Ibid., 393.
[7] William Tucker and Tim Scott, "Reflections on Sculpture," in *Art in Theory*, 801-803.
[8] Ibid., 803.
[9] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood*, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. Michael Fried (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 152.

Sculpture remains, however, a mediation on our relationship with material. Anne Ellegood notes that it embraces physical manifestation, directly engaging with material of all kinds.[10] Sculptural practice, therefore, provides an appropriate framework from which to unpack material meaning. As such, the task of developing "material literacy" in sculptural criticism is central to this thesis. Lehmann defines this as the ability to "express oneself clearly about materials' qualities, histories, and affordances with words that cling to their object ..."[11] In this view, developing material literacy is timely: definition according to sculpture's formal qualities has cultivated a detachment from physical reality and as such, material meaning has been avoided in art writing.[12]

1.2 MATERIAL

"Material" in the context of this thesis is a unifying aspect of all sculptural work. Lehmann argues that "materials and the processes, which turn them from raw to cooked, inform the meaning of art."[13] In spite of this, we have already observed a critical preoccupation with formal devices. Lehmann also notes that like "sculpture," "material" is difficult to define, as it must be acknowledged for its interactions, attributes and comparisons.[14] For ease of analysis, it is tempting to relegate material into categories according to their contexts or uses. Asserting a distinction between "traditional" (bronze or marble) and "non-traditional" (everyday or found materials), for example, appears to offer clarity: it distinguishes between historic and contemporary attitudes, suggesting a progression away from preceding approaches. This is not the case, however, and artists are continuing to use traditional

[10] Anne Ellegood, *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2009), 6.
[11] Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Cube of Wood. Material Literacy for Art History," inaugural lecture (University of Groningen, 12 April 2016), 14. https://www.academia.edu/24457536/Cube_of_Wood._Material_Literacy_for_Art_History_Groningen_2016
[12] This is an observation that I will explore further in chapters one and two.
[13] Lehmann, "Cube of Wood," 6.
[14] Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 22.

materials in conjunction with non-traditional ones, and segregating the two places limitations on their application.

Hard or soft; enduring or ephemeral; unfamiliar or everyday. Establishing categories implies that each performs a specific role, or that all artists deploy them in the same way. The opposite is true: artists are currently grappling with multiple and conflicting approaches to all kinds of materials simultaneously. Material meaning straddles categories: it is not rigid, and manifests in a multitude of overlapping ways which vary depending on intention and context. Material scientist Mark Miodownik observes that "our relationships with them are too diverse for a single approach to suit them all."[15] In response, this thesis avoids categorising "material," and treats it as an aspect of all sculptural work which contributes differently to meaning depending on its particular situation.

1.3 MAKING CLAIMS

At this point, it is important to clarify the claims made by this study to ensure my resulting conclusions avoid overgeneralization.

When evidencing lack of material dialogue, there is a temptation to claim that it is never permitted to enter critical space. This is not the case. Material has been investigated by major critics, and its presence has grown in recent years. Rather, the claim made here is that material is not viewed as an equal contributor of meaning, and there is a lack of satisfying discussion which reflects the innumerable ways it is used by artists and encountered by audiences. It is not accompanied by the rich, nuanced language evident in discussions of form. Instead, one of the primary aims of this thesis is the establishment of "material literacy" in critical language concerning sculpture.

[15] Mark Miodownik, *Stuff Matters* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 8.

This thesis claims that sculpture now is the product of over a century of experimenting with material capabilities, and encapsulates a myriad of uses and approaches. This does not necessarily mean that artists are exploring material in ways which are completely new, although innovative and experimental uses are continuously pursued. In the mid-twentieth century, new materials pushed the boundaries of the discipline,[16] and now, sculpture operates within the condition that all substances are potential materials for making. This thesis seeks to understand the full impact of this new period, the role that material plays, and how this can be integrated into critical frameworks.

2. METHODOLOGY: THEORETICAL, QUALITATIVE AND PRACTICAL RESEARCH

My methodology is designed to facilitate three parallel lines of enquiry: theoretical analysis, qualitative data collection and practice-based research. The first is the critical analysis of key theoretical texts, comparing and contrasting art criticism since 1960 and theories of "material agency" since the mid 1990s. The second is an investigation into a group of my peers, conducting qualitative interviews with sculptors who demonstrate material sensitivity in their practice. The third is a rigorous, practice-based testing of a specific material, resulting in the construction of a substantial body of sculptural work.

This study is split evenly between theory and practice. Theoretical findings and analysis are presented in this written thesis. Practical research incorporates sculptural production in the studio - which is presented as a body of sculptural work - and data collection in the form of qualitative interviews. New knowledge gathered from other practitioners strengthens claims, avoids bias and demonstrates the complexity of contemporary sculpture. Textual research

[16] This is the subject of Rosalind Krauss' essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."

establishes the foundations for this knowledge, examining the current treatment of material in art criticism and introducing the key arguments in favour of material literacy.

Initially, my activity takes a deductive approach, responding to findings from theoretical research. Once data is generated from practical research, my strategy shifts towards inductive, using these findings to formulate a new approach to contemporary sculpture. This methodology addresses the rift between theoretical and creative research, as it combines the two in order to generate and test new knowledge in contemporary sculpture through the analysis of artist's experiences and studio-based experimentation. These findings contribute to the establishment of new models of material in art criticism.

The new knowledge gained from each strand contributes to vital cross referencing between the three. The sculptures respond directly to academic research in both their construction process and iconography. Likewise, my understanding of contemporary material theory is influenced by experiences of making in the studio, using both my own practice and that of my peers as sources of data gained via the creative material encounter. As a result, the sculptures I produce embody a visual language which illuminate relationships between conflicting ideas about material. This approach draws on the capability of art to initiate conversation around complex concepts which resonates with non-art audiences.

2.1 THEORETICAL RESEARCH

The thesis first presents a summary of materials in sculpture since 1900, as many critics and artists concur that this date marks a significant milestone in material experimentation.[17] Experiences of sculptors and their practical experimentations are evaluated against the way material is presented by critics. Monographs on relevant individuals and movements are

[17] William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

utilised, encompassing a variety of material approaches from the early twentieth century to the present, including Cubism, Dada, process art and conceptual art. This illustrates the ways in which material has been used until now and traces the legacy from which this thesis has emerged.

Understanding material in sculpture cannot be achieved without knowledge of current debates around the subject outside of art criticism: we cannot perceive what is lacking within the art world if we do not acknowledge how material is dealt with outside of it. In response, I analyse relevant theories of "material agency" since the 1990s, a period which spans recent trends of "new materialism" and "object-oriented" thinking which have roots in actor-network theory and Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art.[18,19] These models impact various disciplines including feminism, philosophy and sociology, all of which influence contemporary art. Analysis of key texts demonstrates the importance of understanding material before applying this knowledge to sculpture.

My research into art criticism focuses on dominant voices since 1960 who have significantly influenced critical frameworks. Most notable are the critics Rosalind Krauss and Lucy Lippard, who navigated consequential shifts in art production; Krauss was sensitive to the expansion of the sculptural field in the 1970s,[20] whereas Lippard was immersed in conceptual art and the "dematerialization" of sculpture.[21] Analysis of their writing allows me to identify dominant narratives surrounding material. Threads spun by critics like Lippard and Krauss can only be reflected upon if I am receptive to how they are considered by art critics

[18] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2005).
[19] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
[20] Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 30-44.
[21] John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Materiality*, 176-178.

now. With this in mind, I explore similarities in recent surveys of sculpture, observing any overlaps or divergences with Krauss and Lippard's approaches.[22]

Tension between physical material and written language is something this thesis deals with directly. Tangible sources of data - which emerge from direct contact with material; viewing sculpture in the gallery; or visiting artist's studios - are at risk of receding from touch as they are captured in analytical text.[23] Images appear throughout this thesis in response to this potential. The majority are photographs I have taken in my studio as I test my work; during the collection of qualitative data in artist's studios; and on my visits to various exhibitions across the UK.[24] The final chapter includes both digitally created and hand-drawn diagrams, illustrating a new critical vocabulary. Language is presented similarly to material: complex, volatile and shifting. Photographs and diagrams are presented alongside text in order to draw the material encounter closer to the reader's fingertips.

2.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Constructing a material-centric approach to sculpture would be limited to my own idiosyncrasies and interpretations if my own studio practice were the sole source of information; possible claims would be subject to bias and lack credibility. As a solution, eight interviews have been conducted in order to reach beyond my experiences. These interviews have two motivations: firstly, to contextualise this study by demonstrating the multiplicity of material uses in contemporary sculpture; and secondly to capture and analyse the nuanced ways in which artists are using materials which may not be reflected in art criticism. This will establish new knowledge about material applications and approaches, contributing to a deeper comprehension of sculpture in its contemporary context.

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[22] Including Moszynska, *Sculpture Now*; and Ellegood, *Vitamin 3-D*.
[23] This tension is expanded on in chapters two and four.
[24] Some images appear courtesy of the interviewed artists, and this is acknowledged in the List of Figures.

In terms of the selection process, the pool of potential participants is vast, and my capacity to research them is limited to my own reach. The sampling process is therefore not intended to represent a specific population (for example, sculptors living in London, or working with a particular material) and is not randomised. Participating artists have been selected according to three common criteria. The most evident of these is a shared sensitivity to material: they do not disguise their compositional materials with form or process, but allow them to remain identifiable on the surface of their sculptures. Secondly, all of the artists belong to an emerging demographic. As they have not been exhibiting for more than 15 years, their works are less likely to be externally fabricated and they are all personally engaged in testing new materials. Lastly, each artist represents a dramatically different sculptural practice. Some work intensively with a limited material selection, whilst others encompass an array of different ones. Tactically selecting a broad range of styles and conventions allows me to observe potential overlaps and oppositions: their intentions and values depict plurality in contemporary sculptural practice.

Pinpointing the “field” in which data collection occurs is difficult. In the UK, London remains the dominant hub of contemporary art with a saturation of artists and, as such, a majority of the participants are based in the capital. This being said, I have attempted to involve individuals who operate in other locations in order to generate a multi-faceted range of data, reflecting the multi-faceted art world. The “field,” then, is the art world itself, with its continuing emphasis on London, but with many artists shaking off the pressure to reside there and selecting other UK cities which have become more abundant with artistic activity in recent decades.

Where possible, the interviews took place in the studio: accessing an artist's working environment in tandem with their vocalised thoughts enables me to build a cogent picture of how and why sculptors are working with particular materials. Travelling to the studio of each artist yielded information, as this study seeks to understand not only how material is manipulated in artistic practice, but also how the environment in which art making occurs can impact material engagement. In addition to the interviews, the artists' practices and studios are described and analysed in order to investigate this further.

Though each interview followed a script, this was not rigidly adhered to, as each artist's unique approach to material required flexibility to pursue unexpected topics relevant to this research. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Analysis began with a close reading of each transcription, noting specific sections of discussion which offered pertinent information. The sections were condensed into notational headings which summarised their content, and were then cross-referenced across the eight interviews in order to identify common threads. Each of these threads have been considered in tandem, mapping patterns, agreements or oppositions between each artist's approach to materials. Four "themes" were established from this process: "artist as prospector;" "pragmatism and vibrancy;" "material as information carrier;" and "conceptual access."

2.3 PRACTICAL RESEARCH

Written language as a singular methodology is ill-equipped to impart knowledge about material's capabilities, since it is unable to communicate information about encounters with the immediacy in which it is gathered.[25] Practical research enables me to gain insights into how sculpture making offers the tools to understand the material encounter in a way in which academic theories are unable.

[25] Barbara Bolt, "The Magic is in the Handling," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry,* ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), 29.

My own sculptural practice caters for this need. Rigorous experimentation in the studio works towards the construction of an ambitious body of work which is built homogeneously from salt dough. The practical element is extended beyond the confines of the making process, and material is analysed in three phases: “before,” “during” and “after” the studio. Before it enters the studio, material is embedded in the outside world; the information it absorbs from social context and the means by which it is encountered by artists are investigated in this section. During the studio, material undergoes a period of testing and experimentation where its physical properties are accessed and interpreted by the artist. After the studio, material re-enters social networks as an art object. The final phase of analysis focuses on the sculptures themselves and how they are received by audiences in an exhibition format. Extending the timescale of the material encounter enables me to understand in detail the social origins of material and the ways in which it is transformed in order to manifest meaning.

2.3.1 Salt Dough

Salt dough is particularly disposed to rigor and experimentation: it is highly malleable and does not require the use of specialist facilities. Neither is it connected to established methods, but it is uncharted by technical processes and undocumented by academic writing. This material represents a methodical blank slate, enabling me to freely observe the ways engagement with its properties and connotations contribute to meaning. My practical explorations intentionally shed the weight of formalised techniques and training. Salt dough opens up new possibilities for enquiry rather than repeating existing investigations in sculptural practice.

The sculptures themselves represent a new model of material in response to the theoretical research, presenting familiar objects and elements of sculpture not as static and submissive but shifting and agentic. They are an access point, enabling discussion by overlaying material encounter and textual research. Taking a representational approach, I cross-reference text and practice by emulating motifs from art history, material theories and shared social experiences. They are a visual glossary of objects and ideas, acting as a catalyst for conversation and a critique on the inaccessibility of textual approaches to material theories.

Information is imparted to audiences from the aesthetic experience of the work in tandem with the research which underpins its development. As such, I will present the completed body of sculptures in a public gallery space, and ensure that they reach beyond my academic field. Using the exhibition as a framework, I make use of sculpture's specific phenomena (namely its manifestation in physical space, as explored in Tucker and Scott's statement previously in this chapter), linking new material meanings to established understanding of formal aspects. Due to their visual and corporeal nature, the works convey an approach to material and objecthood that textual information cannot. Experiencing the sculptures themselves is as vital as the analysis of their making, and they represent equal weighting to the written aspect of this research.

2.4 REFLEXIVE RESEARCH

Finally, I must address my own position in this study. Occupying the roles of artist and theorist enables me to draw from practical and theoretical research simultaneously. Miodownik acknowledges the various sensitivities specific to different makers, writing that "those who make things - artists, designers, cooks, engineers, furniture makers, jewellers, surgeons and so on - all have a different understanding of the practical, emotional and

sensual aspect of their materials."[26] I retain the ability to alternate between my knowledge as a maker and as a researcher to cross-reference critical debates in text and practice. It is from this vantage-point that this study draws its originality. Embodied experience of artistic practice is required in order to access and translate information from the material encounter. As such, I argue that theoretical writing and creative experimentation must have a dialectic relationship in order to fully understand material meaning and establish it in critical discourse.

A subjective response forms the core of my approach, and I straddle the roles of researcher and participant. A sustained practice as a sculptor and a recurring attraction to material innovation means I am invested in this field of research. As such, approaching with relativism is necessary. Research specialist Patricia Bazeley urges acknowledgement that participants are embedded in broader social contexts beyond the scope of research.[27] I may be tempted to assume that all of the participants will share my views and practices, or will approach sculpture making from similar frameworks. Though my own ideas and responses will emerge during my research, I will attempt to absorb this bias, acknowledging the differences between my own - often personal - approach to material and that of others. In doing so, this methodology intends to present research that encompasses an array of diverse approaches, observing the shifting fields of theory and practice.

Questions of gender and race are aspects I must also acknowledge. Six of the interview participants are white females: their experiences are likely similar to my own not just of making sculpture, but of personal experience and social identity. As I approached artists to participate, I initiated several conversations with male artists which - for various reasons - did

[26] Miodownik, *Stuff Matters*, 8.
[27] Patricia Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2013), 6.

not lead to an interview. Generally, I found that women were more likely to respond and to openly contribute their thoughts and ideas. One reason for this may be because material engagement is gendered in many ways: it is connected to sensuality, expression and emotional attachment which emerges in the interviews. Whilst this thesis does not centralise gender as a specific area of study, there are many instances in which it impacts the data I analyse, my interpretation as a researcher, and my sculptural practice.

3. CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

The first chapter of this thesis is a summary of sculpture, presenting the legacy of material uses and providing the framework for this study. The second chapter is a literature review, contrasting the treatment of material in art criticism with recent theories of “material agency.” The third chapter presents the findings from the artist interviews and the qualitative strand of the methodology: four critical themes towards material meaning, which have been generated from analysing the interviews, are presented and discussed. The fourth chapter moves from the wider network of contemporary sculptors to analyse my own practice, which divides the making process into three key phases: “before,” “during” and “after” the studio. The fifth chapter compiles, defines and animates the vocabulary I have extracted from this research. The final section is the conclusion of this thesis, and offers a critical reflection, consolidating claims and examining limitations.

CHAPTER 1

MATERIAL IN SCULPTURE

A SUMMARY OF MATERIALLY SENSITIVE PRACTICE

A century of experimentation has led to multiple possible applications of material in contemporary sculpture. In a recent survey of the discipline, Judith Collins observes that it has changed more in the last thirty years than in its entire history.[28] Meaning, markets, genres and styles, relationships to power and the art market have undergone developments and have been challenged by artists. In this chapter, I am attentive to material within this broad landscape, acknowledging significant shifts which mean there is no single dominant material culture. The following survey tracks the key developments of sculptural approaches to materials from the perspective of makers, providing additional context through critical reception in order to examine influential theoretical and cultural frameworks. This documents material's transformation across the last hundred years, and demonstrates the legacy from which contemporary sculpture making has emerged.

Before new material expansion in the twentieth century, the majority of sculpture was historically representational, with sculptors' material selections subject to rigid categorisations according to those that could be formed.[29] A hierarchical structure positioned some materials as superior and disregarded others entirely. Factors such as rarity, size, shape and endurance allocated materials their social status.[30] Parallels between the social and economic status of patrons, qualities of the sculptural material and the resulting object were established. In Ancient Egypt, for example, silver was rarer than gold: silver statues

[28] Judith Collins, *Sculpture Today* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2010), 6.
[29] Karen Wilkin, "Introduction," in *A Sculpture Reader: Contemporary Sculpture Since 1980*, ed. Glen Harper and Twylene Moyer (Hamilton, NJ: ISC Press, 2006), 10.
[30] Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

were assigned a higher financial value and, as a result, a higher social status.[31] Generally, sculpture was made from hardy rocks such as granite and marble; precious stones including soft green jade and polished jet; and glimmering metals like silver, gold and bronze. Materials became increasingly aligned with this context, as was the case until the end of the nineteenth century.[32]

1. SCULPTURAL OBJECT

Though materials were still somewhat confined to this hierarchy, sculptors at the turn of the twentieth century began to explore their possibilities as a means of counteracting traditional approaches. Auguste Rodin is acknowledged by critics for his early explorations of material's physical characteristics. Sculptor Robert Morris observes visibility of process in Rodin's work: bronze casts retain the materiality of the clay in which they were modelled, with sweeping gouges and traces of fingerprints.[33] We see its soft dampness, even in the completed work. This is the beginning of renewed engagement with material in sculpture.

Engagement with material qualities resulted in the idea of the sculpture as an object rather than a vehicle for representation.[34] As visual art moved away from figurative dominance, criticism elevated it above everyday life. Critic Clive Bell asserted that "A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life and into ecstasy…"[35] Bell attributes this elevation to "significant form" which is composed of aesthetic elements,

[31] Ibid., 2.
[32] Aristotle's "hylomorphic" model represents this in classical philosophy. This notion is examined in greater detail in chapter two.
[33] Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, ed. Robert Morris (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 44.
[34] Sculptor William Tucker describes the emergence of the "ideal condition of self-contained, self-generating apartness for the work of art, with its own rules, its own order, its own materials, independent of its maker, of its audience and of the world in general." William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 107.
[35] Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," in *Art,* ed. Clive Bell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), 29-30.

specifically line and colour, and does not accommodate material ones.[36] Later in this period, Clement Greenberg's elevation of fine art above mass culture extended Bell's "significant form:" Greenberg makes a clear distinction between high art and populist art as he describes the emergence of "kitsch," which "draws its lifeblood [...] from this reservoir of accumulated experience."[37] This critical position simultaneously detaches art from everyday life and its material fact, as it obscures the real world processes and substances which produce it.

Despite escaping the attention of many modernist critics, the shift from subject to object catalysed new experimentation with sculptural materials. Henry Moore promoted the idea of "truth to materials," which critic Alan Bowness observes in Moore's "insistence on preserving the hard, concentrated quality of stone right through to the finished work."[38] Moore emphasises material's characteristics, appreciating its physical properties. Echoes of this notion occur throughout sculpture of the period: Barbara Hepworth's exploration of objecthood is apparent in her sensitivity to the affordances of wood and stone.[39] Writing on Hepworth's sculpture, Ann Compton notes that modernism's disregard for material is a contradiction: critics celebrated material innovation yet expelled it from critical analysis.[40] Constantin Brancusi's new treatment of traditional materials is another example: his subjects become increasingly distilled from figurative portraits to abstract forms. Working with bronze, marble and wood, Tucker notes that Brancusi's sculptures are "determined by the shape of the material in its pure state, and by its structural properties."[41] Though the formal approach

[36] Ibid., 8.
[37] Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I, Perceptions and Judgements, 1939 - 1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 12.
[38] Alan Bowness, *Modern Sculpture* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1965), 118. Artist Susan Hiller is critical of this notion, referring to the lack of attention it pays cultural contexts. Susan Hiller, "'Truth' and 'Truth to Material'," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel, 2015), 53-56.
[39] Ann Compton, "Crafting Modernism: Hepworth's Practice in the 1920s," in *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World*, ed. Penelope Curtis and Chris Stephens (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 14.
[40] Ibid., 14.
[41] Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture*, 46.

to sculpture is emphasised here, this was the result of a new interest in material and its qualities: Brancusi's marble works or Hepworth's carved wood, for example, present the potential of the material to assume innovative abstracted forms.

2. MATERIAL EXPANSION

During a similar period to sculpture's objecthood in the 1910s, traditional material hierarchies experienced sudden interruption in avant garde movements. New materials entered art which had other uses outside of sculpture and carried associations of the everyday sphere. They seeped in through a variety of entry points, the most notable of which are Cubism and Dada.

Cubism presented images of fragmented reality. This inquiry began in two-dimensional collage, but flourished into physical space when artists such as Picasso and Braque began to build outwards with cardboard and string. Tucker observes that Picasso's experiments "do things with material, process and subject-matter that had simply never existed as a possibility in sculpture before,"[42] and "demonstrated what sculpture could do without these historic sanctions on material..."[43] Though these materials were initially selected within the medium of collage, they had considerable impact on what was acknowledged as potential material for sculpture, and rigid hierarchical barriers began to disintegrate.

Dada and Marcel Duchamp's "readymades" were another significant material milestone. Attempting to dissipate aesthetic ideals, Duchamp exhibited found objects in the gallery, stating that "the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by esthetic delectation."[44] A snow shovel, a bottle rack and a urinal placed in the gallery created a link between

[42] Ibid., 46.
[43] Ibid., 60.
[44] Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 141.

artworks and everyday objects, creating the potential for almost anything to become sculpture. The effects of Duchamp's controversial gesture perhaps outstripped his intention, as Tucker notes that rather than initiating the end of art, Duchamp flooded it with new possibilities.[45] Artists began absorbing this revelation, and sculpture making split into a multitude of different approaches to material.

Towards the end of the modernist period, artists continued to deconstruct the boundary between art and life. Materials were used specifically to interfere with traditional hierarchies, signalling a new investment in social narratives. In the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg encorporated detritus salvaged from the street in his combine paintings, including car tyres, soiled rags and stuffed animals. Art historian Joshua Shannon observes that Rauschenberg's found materials "bring in particular kinds of signs replete with their own specific [...] associations."[46] Similarly, Claes Oldenburg's use of cardboard scraps and damaged street signs echoes his decaying urban environment.[47] His famous manifesto, "I Am For an Art…" makes the overlap between art and culture explicit.[48]

Artists absorbed their surrounding environment: industrial materials as well as found items began to appear. The American minimalists - most notably Donald Judd's "specific objects"[49] - acknowledged Brancusi's autonomous object whilst symbolising new industrial processes in gleaming, polished steel. Shannon notes of Judd's work that: "The labour imagined by this work is not the manual tinkering actually undertaken to make it, but rather that of

[45] Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture*, 21.
[46] Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 107.
[47] Ibid., 25.
[48] Claes Oldenburg, "I Am For an Art…," in *Store Days: Documents from the Store (1961) and Ray Gun Theatre (1962)*, ed. Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), 39-42.
[49] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 824-828. Donald Judd, "Untitled," 1972; copper, enamel and aluminium. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery.

disembodied mass-production."[50] References to the world beyond art were captured by new materials and their associated processes. Here, we see sculptors counteracting the modernist rhetoric of Bell and Greenberg by incorporating materials which locate their practices within everyday life as opposed to distinct form it.

3. MATERIAL EXPLOSION

Found and everyday materials triggered a movement away from the sculptural object in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s, emphasis shifted onto the making process. Sculpture adopted looser forms. Early engagement with process is evident in the activities of the Gutai group, who explored the physical qualities of ephemeral materials.[51] Jiro Yoshiara writes "our work is the result of calling the material to life."[52] Rather than suppress material into form, fascination with its characteristics began to emerge.

New processes ushered new materials into sculpture. Writing on the *Arte Povera* group, critic Germano Celant comments that "Animals, vegetables and minerals have cropped up in the art world. The artist is attracted by their physical, chemical and biological possibilities."[53] Materials are now present for their unexplored properties. Eva Hesse's work is an example of process-led practice: critic Briony Fer describes it as "a small bomb exploding the category of things called sculpture."[54] Hesse grappled with plaster, latex, wax, fibreglass, wire-mesh and papier-mâché, teasing out their hidden qualities. Robert Morris writes that "Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material."[55] He exhibited

[50] Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects*, 165-166.
[51] For example, Sadamasa Motonaga, "Work (Water)," 1956; installation. In the collection of Fergus McCaffrey, New York.
[52] Jiro Yoshihara, "Gutai Manifesto,"' in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*: *A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 698.
[53] Germano Celant, "Arte Povera," in *Arte Povera*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 198.
[54] Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), 19.
[55] Morris, "Anti-Form," 46.

sheets of cut felt which hung in loose drapes,[56] speaking more of its behaviour than of its form as he notes that "these investigations move from the making of things to the making of material itself."[57] Morris reimagined material manifestation in sculpture: it was no longer limited to objecthood, but included practical engagement with material which brought art making further into the realm of social interaction.

Emphasis on process resulted in a new fascination with material facts and manufacture: artists explored material's potential in performance art. Though this period is characterised by Lucy Lippard's "dematerialized" art,[58] many artists were engrossed in material's allusive capability. Joseph Beuys acknowledged the associations material carries, investigating loaded connotations of fat with its links to Nazi concentration camps, or honey's spiritual associations.[59] Mierle Laderman Ukeles explicitly linked quotidian encounters to the creative act, as she writes: "Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby's diaper [...] throw out the stinking garbage…"[60] Overlapping art production and manual labour, Ukeles summarises the strong relationship between art and life which asserted itself partly through material intervention. This relationship is captured by artist Joseph Kosuth, as he notes that the artist "is operating within the same socio-cultural contest from which he evolved."[61] Sculpture during this period perhaps presented an image for this relationship, allowing the everyday to permeate art making through the catalyst of material.

[56] Robert Morris, "Untitled," 1967-8, remade 2008; felt. Presented by the Tate Americas Foundation 2013.
[57] Morris, "Anti-Form," 46.
[58] Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
[59] Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 25.
[60] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," in *Six Years*, 220.
[61] Joseph Kosuth, "The Artist as Anthropologist," in *The Everyday*, ed. Stephen Johnstone (London: Whitechapel, 2008), 183.

4. OBJECT REVIVAL

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the sculptural object became more recurrent in the gallery. The solid artwork - unlike Morris's process art or Ukeles' maintenance art - drew from numerous uses of material which revived a number of representational modes, including the narrative, evident in Kiki Smith's mythological sculptures;[62] minimalism such as Martin Creed's crumpled paper;[63] and the readymade as in Mike Kelley's stuffed toy sculptures.[64] The figure is commonplace again, with artists such as Ron Mueck[65] and the Chapman brothers[66] depicting hyperrealist subjects in wax and silicone.[67] Marc Quinn's self-portrait created from his own blood demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the relationship between the body's form and its material contents which was underexplored at the beginning of the century.[68] Sculpture experienced a new "democracy of material and meaning,"[69] suggesting a new condition in which artists have more freedom to explore material possibilities. Material uses can be characterised during this period in two dominant trends: fabrication and readymade revival.

In the 1990s, a renewed interest in the solid art object coincided with the liberalisation of the free market in the US and Europe: commercial galleries experienced a financial boom which positioned art products once again as attributors of social status and displays of wealth. Sculpture's commercial status exploded.[70] Lavishness was exaggerated. In the work of Jeff

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[62] Kiki Smith, "Rapture," 2001; bronze. Presented by Pace Gallery.
[63] Martin Creed, "Work No. 88," 1995; a sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball.
[64] Mike Kelley, "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid," 1987; stuffed fabric toys and afghans on canvas with dried corn. Presented by The Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts; Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society, New York.
[65] Ron Mueck, "Dead Dad," 1996-7; mixed media. Presented by the Saatchi Gallery.
[66] Jake and Dinos Chapman, "Great Deeds Against the Dead," 1994; mixed media. Presented by Jay Jopling and White Cube, London.
[67] Martin Maloney, "Everyone a Winner! Selected British Art from the Saatchi Collection," in *Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection: Sensation*, ed. Simonetta Fraquelli and Norman Rosenthal (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 33.
[68] Marc Quinn, "Self," 1991; blood (artist's), stainless steel, perspex and refrigeration equipment.
[69] Maloney, "Everyone a Winner!" 26.
[70] Normal Rosenthal, "The Blood Must Continue to Flow," in *Sensation*, 9.

Koons, this is taken to the point of fetishisation, as he proclaims that “The work wants to meet the needs of the people.”[71] Sculptures were increasingly produced by fabrication facilities; physical contact between material and maker decreased.[72] Wealthy collectors supported artists to construct monumental works in shining steel or opulent marble. Increased economic value of the artwork propelled the artist into the role of entrepreneur. Critic Normal Rosenthal notes of Damien Hirst that his “ strategy of self-promotion, fully grounded on the originality and strength of what was being made, quickly paid handsome dividends.”[73] Artworks became commercial products.

In contrast to the fetishised object, materials simultaneously became more entrenched in personal narratives encoded in readymade objects. Tracey Emin’s and Sarah Lucas’ works are individualistic practices. Rather than reflecting on European history, they use readymades to foreground personal experiences of class and gender. Sarah Lucas linked untransformed objects and food to the body, using trembling eggs and rusting buckets to suggest the female form, connecting it to perceptions of the working class. Critic Martin Maloney comments “Her work rejected the mechanically made and asserted the bare necessities to make a sculpture that amplified a clear and angry voice.”[74] Materials remained raw, accessible carriers of political meaning. In Tracey Emin’s “My Bed,” the artist symbolises herself in soiled bed sheets, underwear, and the detritus of a sexual encounter.[75] Deborah Cherry locates the work as the product of decades of material experimentation, drawing from Rauschenberg’s dirty linens and Carolee Schneeman’s use of menstrual blood

[71] Jeff Koons, “From Full Fathom Five,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 381.
[72] Ibid., 382. Many of Koons’s works were constructed in German and Italian factories which specialised in producing decorative ornaments.
[73] Rosenthal, “The Blood Must Continue to Flow,” 9.
[74] Maloney, “Everyone a Winner!” 31.
[75] Tracey Emin, “My Bed,” 1998; box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects. Presented by The Duerckheim Collection.

in the 1970s.[76] Lucas and Emin reappropriate Duchamp's readymade, acknowledging the capacity of materials to draw attention to working class culture and feminist narratives.

5. MATERIAL MULTIPLICITY

The current condition of sculpture, with its emphasis on material engagement, is the context from which this study emerges. Sculpture today is the product of over a hundred years of both artistic experimentation with material properties (as in Eva Hesse's use of balloons and latex) and the shifting relationship between sculpture and object (spanning from Brancusi and Duchamps to Koons and Lucas). The discipline now operates across many cultures and contexts where material may exist as opulent, expensive objects; assume looser forms akin to process art; remain as untransformed readymades; or combine numerous approaches in one work. Sculptural materiality is an area of rich exploration which is continuing to expand: though the last century has widened or even removed the restrictions of sculpture's constitutional materials, artists are still investigating the full implications of their meaning.

New advances in making and criticism are erupting; material is subject to seemingly limitless applications and approaches. Though this has been the case for a number of decades, sculptor Lucy Tomlins observes a new approach embodied by her work: "The material, process and concept are heavily intertwined and they seem to evolve together in a tangled knot."[77] Material is not overridden by form or process, but contributes to conceptual meaning.

This new condition is accompanied by a drive to create. Sculptor Tara Donovan notes that "For a while, it didn't seem like people were making things, but I think people are getting

[76] Deborah Cherry, "On the Move, *My Bed*, 1998 - 1999," in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 145.
[77] Lucy Tomlins, "Lucy Tomlins," interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, 2013, in *Zabludowicz Invites*, ed. Paul Luckraft (Beveren-Leie: Cassochrome, 2015), 94.

back into making things."[78] This counteracts any assumption that the art object might continue its journey toward dematerialisation, transition into digital media or become mass produced and commodified. Rather, artists are continually more engaged with sculpture's tangibility.

5.1 NEW FORMS OF MAKING

Forms which material now occupies as sculpture include - but are not limited to - the messy, the handmade, the collapsible, the representational and the comic. Papier-mâché, plaster, wax, silicone and rubber; industrial materials including steel and concrete; a host of non-art substances which are bodily, natural or domestic; found objects which are bought or scavenged; and continued use of traditional materials such as marble, bronze and stone form the endless list of possibilities. Artist Heather Phillipson observes that "multiplicity always suggests the onus and responsibility of choice, the necessity of selection in the face of abundance…"[79] Phillipson draws attention not only to the plethora of material options, but also the multiple forms they may assume in the gallery space. This points towards a growing series of decisions that artists must navigate, and the various reasons they might have for working with particular materials.

[78] Tara Donovan, "Rules for Growth: Tara Donovan," interviewed by Collette Chattopadhyay, 2005, in *Conversations on Sculpture*, ed. Glenn Harper and Twlylene Moyer (Hamilton, NJ: ISC Press, 2007), 217.
[79] Heather Phillipson, "Heather Phillipson," interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, 2013, in *Zabludowicz Invites*, 106.

(Figure 1: Francis Upritchard, “Wetwang Slack” at the Barbican, London, 2018.)

(Figure 2: Phyllida Barlow, “Cul De Sac” at the Royal Academy, London, 2019.)

Experimental freedom is the promise of exploring the unchartered territory of new material. El Anatsui, who combines found materials such as bottlecaps and tin cans, notes that "more and more unorthodox materials attract me. They contain peculiar and different challenges, which I think open me up more."[80] Though traditional clay and wood feature in his sculpture, Anatsui embraces the innovative potential of the "unorthodox." Similarly, in her exhibition "Wetwang Slack," Francis Upritchard included a series of sculptures created from balata, a wild rubber produced in Guyana and the West Indies (fig. 1). Upritchard describes a complex making process: "you have this hot pliable material that you flop into the bath, and then you start working and modelling underwater because it stops gravity."[81] Grappling with balata has enabled Upritchard to devise a new working method, and this is evident in the oozing yet solid grey surfaces of her sculptures.

As well as broadening the artist's technical abilities, materials challenge the traditions of the discipline itself. Phyllida Barlow's use of inexpensive materials such as timber, plywood, plaster and polystyrene disrupt expectations of heavy, monumental sculpture as they are installed as towering constructions which teeter above the viewer's head (fig. 2). The threat of collision in the gallery space is present in Barlow's handmade processing of industrial materials.

Particular material qualities are applied in unlimited ways. British sculptor John Summers works with tinfoil, toilet paper and clothing because they "can be twisted, crushed, draped. They are very malleable and can be moulded to all types of structures."[82] Here, Summers selects materials which allow him to perform certain gestures. Lucy Whitford, however, views

[80] El Anatsui, "Out of West Africa: El Anatsui," interviewed by Robert Preece, 2006, in *Conversations on Sculpture*, 317.
[81] Francis Upritchard, "A Slow Weakening of Colour; Francis Upritchard in Conversation with Leila Hasham," in *Francis Upritchard: Wetwang Slack*, ed. Daniel Griffiths (London: Barbican, 2018), 42.
[82] John Summers, "John Summers," interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, 2012, in *Zabludowicz Invites*, 41.

material's characteristics as allegorical, stating "I am drawn to the qualities, longevity and lifespan of materials, as well as their fragility and temporary nature. I like the contrast between those two realities."[83] For Whitford, physical traits can build meaning into the work as their qualities function metaphorically.

Construction methods now occupy a wide spectrum. External fabrication continues to be the norm, with many artists privately owning production facilities.[84] In contrast, renewed interest in artisanal skill is evident. Ceramics have undergone a recent resurgence as artist Grayson Perry has reclaimed the importance of craftsmanship, writing on notions of the craftsman that "His is not an idea of the world but an experience of it [...]. He works within a tradition and has become so at ease with his material world that his works have a more relaxed fluency won through long, hard apprenticeship."[85] Reintroducing craft readdresses skill, which was rejected by process art and fabrication. This reflects Donovan's suggestion that artists are more personally invested in the making process.

Examples of sculpture from the last two decades demonstrate an enduring investment in material engagement. Advancements from the twentieth century persevere as artists continue to investigate new processes, qualities and critical approaches to material.

5.2 CULTURAL CONTEXT

The specific context of the twenty-first century offers possible explanations for the ongoing expansion of materially-led sculpture. Beyond art making, a burgeoning awareness of material has impacted our cultural perception of our bodies and our shared environment.

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[83] Lucy Whitford, "Lucy Whitford," interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, 2012, *Zabludowicz Invites*, 77.
[84] Anthony Gormley, for example, privately owns two foundries in Newcastle and London.
[85] Grayson Perry, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (London: The British Museum Press, 2014), 23.

The age of the anthropocene denotes a period of time wherein human activity has made a lasting effect on the planet. We have collectively come to realise that our treatment of material - specifically plastic, gas and oil - has had a devastating impact beyond our control. [86]

Contrastingly, the ways in which culture is consumed are increasingly digitised. Writing on contemporary craft, Henrik Most notes that “In the electronic circulation of our day, the act of representing reality becomes problematic.”[87] Technology is central to the flow of everyday life: we can access many forms of culture online, blurring the boundaries between the tangible and the intangible.[88] Artist Martha Rosler notes that a social loss of craft skills - a result of industrial capitalism - is negatively impacting our sense of accomplishment.[89] Contemporary art making may enact a response to this condition. Sarah Tanguy observes of Ron Mueck’s enlarged, hyperreal sculptures that “he has been making silicone or fibreglass and acrylic sculptures cast from clay models - a bold adaptation of traditional conventions in defiance of computer assisted design.”[90] Artists may be prioritising the material encounter to counteract detachment from our physical bodies and creative drives.

In parallel to this, approaches to gender and sexuality have transitioned from binary into a fluid spectrum. Theorists such as Judith Butler have altered our perceptions of our bodies from static to shifting.[91] Though an awareness of material dominates our cultural consciousness, the grasp of the physical has become more unstable.

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[86] Jean-Robert Viallet, *Breakpoint: An Alternative View of our History of Progress* (Java Films, 2019). Retrieved 6 May 2020 from Kanopy.
[87] Henrik Most, “On Craft as a Boundary Wrecking Ball,” in *Craft in Dialogue: Six Views on a Practice in Change*, ed. Love Jönsson (Stockholm: Iaspis, 2005), 13.
[88] Parts of this thesis were written during the covid-19 lockdown in spring and summer 2020, which has had a profound and potentially lasting impact on the cultural sector.
[89] Martha Rosler, “For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life,” in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975 - 2001*, ed. Martha Rosler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 5.
[90] Sarah Tanugy, “The Progress of Big Man: Ron Mueck” in *Conversations on Sculpture*, 152.
[91] Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993) is one example.

Though new forms of digital media are common, materially led sculpture is familiar at an institutional level. Galleries and museums are reflecting an awareness of material trends in sculpture with a curatorial emphasis on materiality. Across the UK, there are multiple examples. “Material Environments” at the Tetley, Leeds, presented various applications of object, material and process, featuring Phoebe Cummings’ handmade plantlife which explored and challenged the creative potential of clay (fig. 3). The first iteration of Yorkshire Sculpture International in 2019 broadly presented material multiplicity in Nobuko Tsuchiya’s assemblages of plastic tubing and cables contrasted with glossy, pink fibreglass surfaces; Rashid Johnson’s permission for the viewer to sink their hands into shea butter (fig. 4); Huma Bhabha’s cork and styrofoam statues; and Wolfgang Laib’s perfumed piles of rice. One of the festival’s key aims was “to reframe what constitutes sculptural materials completely…”[92] as curator Simon Wallis surmises, “Not many sculptors sit down with a piece of stone and a chisel these days. There’s an incredible mix of expertise in the area that can help you make work which will continue to reinvent what we consider to be a very exciting art form.”[93] It is clear that the material fact of sculpture is continuing to grow as a presence in the gallery, and the exploration of it in the studio is spilling out into public space.

Though curators and institutions appear keen to present material abundance, there is little unpacking of its meaning. The comments made by Simon Wallis acknowledge the prevalence of material in sculpture, but there is no deeper exploration of its importance or

[92] Holly Black, “On the Future,” in *Yorkshire Sculpture International 2019 Festival Guide*, ed. Joe Townend (Leeds: Cultureshock, 2019), 44.
[93] Simon Wallis quoted in Black, “On the Future,” 44.

(Figure 3: Phoebe Cummings, “Material Environments” at the Tetley, Leeds, 2018.)

(Figure 4: Rashid Johnson, “Shea Butter Three Ways” at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds for Yorkshire Sculpture International, 2019.)

implications in the rest of the supplementary material. This is one example in a recurring pattern of how material is presented as a monolithic aspect of contemporary sculpture, rather than the nuanced and variable source of critical meaning evident in practice.

6. CONCLUSION: MATERIAL MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

This summary of material in sculpture has demonstrated that material has always been located in and aligned with cultural and social practices. From orthodox and hierarchical to radical and confrontational, artists have variously entrenched and innovated. Throughout, sculpture's materiality has multiplied, and its meanings have proliferated. Despite this long period of growth and development, material meaning is still urgently demanding critical attention. Though I have examined ongoing material engagement in contemporary practice, advanced through developments in making and curatorial foregrounding, material is frustratingly absent from critical space.

To fully comprehend sculpture, we must address the contribution material makes to meaning, which can only be unearthed in a rigorous analysis which acknowledges theoretical models as well as practical encounters. At a time when we must increase our collective and personal sensitivity to materials, however, it seems that art criticism continues to under-explore them. What is needed is the language to enable us to understand the various ways this meaning manifests, which can be utilised by artists, audiences, critics, and curators.

Material engagement continues to be a key focus of contemporary sculpture for artists at all levels of their careers. It is clear that artists themselves provide crucial information which could foster material literacy in critical space: by paying attention to their processes and critical approaches, we may be more equipped to develop a language which allows us to

unpack more fully the critical content which material brings to sculpture. This chapter has included examples from internationally recognised artists such as Phyllida Barlow and Ron Mueck to those at an earlier stage of their practice. Emerging practitioners may be a fruitful source of material meaning, as they represent the next generation of sculptors and the cutting edge of practical experimentation. Their words and experiences are more difficult to access, however, as they have not yet been the subject of monographs and published interviews. It is necessary to access this at the source by interviewing early career sculptors in order to gain new knowledge relating to new material experiences.

Before presenting and examining the interviews, the following chapter moves from material interactions from the perspective of the sculptors to the analysis of material in theoretical frameworks in order to provide evidence of this enduring lack of engagement in art criticism.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO MATERIAL

Physical materials and their associated meanings are noticeably absent in art criticism: art objects are commonly critiqued as though they are detached from the material world, floating above it as a portal into the metaphysical. As a result, art writing - which is a significant influence on how artists, curators, institutions and audiences decode meaning from artworks - has created a void between makers of art and wider understanding of it. As viewers, we are ill-equipped to comprehend materials in sculpture, which are unacknowledged for their historical and political meanings. Critic Petra Lange-Berndt expresses concern that if this disengagement persists, artistic endeavours with materials will continue to be regarded as "the antithesis of intellectuality,"[94] relegated to a lower status than form or process.

The previous chapter traced the multiple ways material has been explored by artists in the last century, which has led to the ongoing exploration of new applications and critical models in contemporary sculpture. I have demonstrated that material meaning is not restricted to one particular approach, but the ways in which artists put it to work are varied and complex. I have also observed that artists acknowledge the strong relationship between material sensitivity and criticality which underpins the discipline. This chapter moves on to examine the importance of analysing material and the enduring lack of this practice, comparing art criticism to the ways in which material is tackled in other relevant fields.

[94] Petra Lange-Berndt, "How To Be Complicit With Materials," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel, 2015), 12. This significant anthology is clear in its claim that materials are uncommon in critical writing.

First, a brief discussion of the various definitions of “material” and “materiality” identifies important implications when considering both terms. Opposing voices from overlapping disciplines present material as a shifting concept. This is followed by an analysis of key philosophical theories of “material agency” since the mid 1990s, outlining the complex debates that are currently unfolding around its active potential. Once the main arguments in favour of material literacy are identified, the discussion moves to art criticism since the 1960s. The broad absence of material is identified by focusing on two key critics from the mid-twentieth century: Rosalind Krauss and Lucy Lippard. These voices are selected as they were both active during sculpture’s shift from the expanded field into its current condition of material multiplicity, and their writings navigated disciplinary transitions. Both critics establish a different theoretical model which restricts material meaning and continues to influence recent writing. By acknowledging the problems which emerge, I will consider art criticism and “material agency” in tandem to discern possible methods for promoting material literacy in art writing.

1. SEEKING DEFINITIONS

Definitions of “material” and “materiality” are contested across various fields. In cultural studies, Georg Lukács observes that the process of commodification conceals the physical qualities of the object; the “character of things as things.”[95] “Materiality” here signifies the complexities of an object’s physical presence. Bill Brown points instead towards “materiality” as “different dimensions of experience”[96] which understands the term as an internal, bodily encounter with material. Disagreement between these two ideas demonstrates that “materiality” cannot be easily understood as the manifestation of material, revealing tension

[95] Georg Lukács, as quoted in Bill Brown, “Materiality,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 52.
[96] Brown, “Materiality,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, 49.

between the quality of an object and the subjective experience of material. It can be understood as an autonomous thing or a physical sensation.

In anthropology, “materiality” is surrounded by social and political implications. Daniel Miller states “the stance to materiality also remains the driving force behind humanity’s attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs about how the world should be.”[97] Here, “materiality” is an embodiment of idealism. Lynn Meskell implicates “materiality” as a presence of power,[98] and Michael Rowlands reminds us that hierarchical arrangements of material can illuminate hidden power structures.[99] “Materiality” is defined as a cultural attitude to material, which can impart knowledge about how a society views the world. Anthropological ideas indicate the importance of material literacy as a means of exposing and critiquing imbalances of power. Considering this in tandem with definitions from Brown and Lukács, we see that “materiality” is a means of manifesting power in our physical experiences of the world.

In classical philosophy, arrangements of “material” provide an example of these unequal social structures. Aristotle’s “hylomorphic” model perceives meaning as emerging from form’s domination of material. A lump of clay only has a function when formed into a pot, for example. As a result, materials were divided into a rigid hierarchy, denoting which are raw materials for making, and which are resolutely formless.[100] The hylomorphic model enforces imbalances of power, as it categorises brute material as female and meaningful form as male. Feminist theorists take direct issue: Judith Butler observes that the Latin definition of

[97] Daniel Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.
[98] Lynn Meskell, “Objects in the Mirror Appear Closer Than They Are,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller, 51.
[99] Michael Rowlands, “A Materialist Approach to Materiality,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller, 80.
[100] Monkia Wagner, “Material,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 27.

materia signifies the “stuff out of which things are made,”[101] highlighting a troubling suggestion that female bodies are only of value as a raw material for male form. For Butler, this is a stark contradiction, as she argues that a female body is productive in its own right rather than submissive. Karen Barad concurs, promoting material as simultaneously “produced and productive, generated and generative.”[102] Material, in this case, is not reduced to a blank slate, and problems with its historic hierarchies are exposed.

When submitted to form, “material” is disconnected from its origins. When we look at a pot, we are less able to perceive the lump of clay. Monika Wagner suggests that, traditionally, “material, unlike matter, refers only to natural and artificial substances intended for further treatment.”[103] Georges Didi-Huberman elaborates: “‘Plastic art’ means first of all plasticity of material which in turn means that matter doesn’t resist form - that it’s ductile, malleable, and can be put to work at will.”[104] “Plasticity” in this case does not only refer to the ease with which a material can be morphed, but its capacity to retain the shape it has been moulded into. “Material,” then, signifies a substance which has plastic expectancy and becomes invisible within the completed object. In Aristotle's hierarchy, the most “plastic” materials are at the summit - carved marble or cast bronze - and the most formless are at the bottom - dust or soil. Using idealised plastic materials, art transcends social existence. Sculpture is immortal and enduring, not bodily and fallible.

Modern definitions of “material” challenge hylomorphic hierarchies. Georges Bataille actively abolishes this structure, and celebrates formless material for its ability to “bring things down

[101] Judith Butler, “Bodies that Matter,” in *Materiality*; ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 121.
[102] Karen Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 214.
[103] Wagner, “Material,” 26.
[104] Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Order of Material: Plasticities, *Malaises*, Survivals,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 43.

in the world."[105] Didi-Huberman suggests that "plasticity" should not denote submission to form, but rather the potential to perform a variety of different functions, suggesting autonomous meaning.[106] Deleuze and Guattari link plasticity to "materiality," suggesting instead that "it is a question of surrendering to the wood, then following where it leads by connecting the operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form upon a matter…"[107] These three approaches suggest that "material" is meaningful in its raw form, and "materiality" therefore refers to the physical capabilities and information it holds internally.

Intersecting definitions of "material" and "materiality" establish the complexities of considering sources of material meaning. "Materiality" can denote the experience of social reality as well as the physical qualities of an object. It can be used to enforce power structures as it relates to idealism and hierarchical arrangements of the shared environment. It can also refer to material in its raw form, detached from relationships with humans. After acknowledging various different approaches and meanings material touches on, it is now necessary to look more closely at theories of "material agency" to provide a model for material meaning.

2. THEORIES OF MATERIAL

Philosophical privilege of human intention configures objects and materials as static. They are things we carry out actions upon, making no resisting or influential action themselves. Philosopher Diana Coole notes that the Western world continues to regard matter as "passive stuff."[108] Human dominance and material submission remains the dominant model.

[105] Georges Bataille, "Formless," in *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 31.
[106] Didi-Huberman, "The Order of Material," 49.
[107] Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "A Thousand Plateaux," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 39.
[108] Diana Coole, "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics,* ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 92.

In the mid 1990s, this rigid structure began to dissolve. Anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers proposed a radical new way of thinking about our encounters with the world of objects, and debates around “material agency” began to develop. If material possesses agency, it is not secondary to human intention but actively participates in social behaviours. This model offers a new pathway into understanding our impact upon the world, and the way the world in turn impacts us. Exactly how material possesses and exerts agency is highly contested, yet there is mutual agreement across various theories that the division between human and material intention is blurred. Tracing theories of material agency demonstrates the importance of considering material in sculptural analysis due to the inherent social role it plays.

2.1 OBJECT AS AGENT

In 1998, Alfred Gell identified the need for a new anthropological theory, positioning art objects as involved contributors to social relations rather than distinct from them. Western art criticism was preoccupied with subjective formal characteristics as a measurement of quality and, as a result, the art world had become isolated due to this internally defined assessment criteria. Gell challenges this, explaining:

> [...] art objects [...] are produced and circulated in the external physical and social world. This production and circulation has to be sustained by certain social processes of an objective kind, which are connected to other social processes (exchange, politics, religion, kinship, etc.)[109]

Here, Gell opposes the high modernist rhetoric that separates art from everyday life.[110] He suggests instead that art objects are not passively encountered, but exercise their own

[109] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3.
[110] Ibid., 5. Gell particularly cites Danto (1964) and Morphy (1994). This is evident in texts by Bell and Greenberg.

influence on the "social processes" in which they are entangled, stating "*persons* or 'social agents' are, in certain contexts, substituted for by *art objects*."[111] Imagining artworks as possessing a similar influence to people means that we are able to view them as both produced by and productive of our behaviour. In effect, Gell removes power from idealist approaches to art criticism which are dictated by formal principles, placing emphasis instead on the "network of relationships"[112] which are affected when the art object enters the fray of human interaction. Interpreting the effect of the object - rather than its aesthetic character - enables us to visualise art as emerging from particular socioeconomic contexts and exerting ideological influence. Unless we acknowledge this, we cannot fully understand either art or society, as we are not accounting for the entire scope of making and receiving art into the world.

Actor-network theory (ANT) makes a crucial expansion: all objects are capable of affecting social relations.[113] Sociologist Bruno Latour argues that humans should not be positioned as leaders of action, but rather as collaborators with a variety of other "actants" whether they are human or not. Objects allow us to exercise our intentions: they are almost always linked to verbs - the kettle "boils" water, the hammer "hits" the nail - which demonstrates our inability to affect our surroundings without them.[114] ANT urges us to "follow the materials themselves,"[115] acknowledging human behaviour as entangled with objects; tracing them through their encounters with humans; and increasing our sensitivity to their agentic potential.

[111] Ibid., 5.
[112] Ibid., 8.
[113] The first iteration of ANT emerged in *Science for Social Scientists,* ed. John Law and Peter Lodge (London: MacMillan Press, 1984). This source has not been consulted for this thesis.
[114] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.
[115] Ibid., 12.

ANT calls art production into question. Making is no longer the human mastery of material, but a series of complicated encounters between various actors. The resulting artwork is a *negotiation* between artist and object. Artist Mark Cypher applies ANT to his own practice, and discovers that his tools and equipment have as much impact on the finished piece as he does: “when the artist finally begins to play with the technical components of the project, their material and physical characteristics perform a very different contested reality from the one expected.”[116] Making as well as critiquing art is impacted by material agency.

Gell and Latour both offer useful methods for configuring objects as agentic. They impact art making, demonstrating the importance of assessing sculpture as the product of a complex network of relationships and that the making process is as dictated by objects as much as artistic intention. ANT, however, places focus on entirely on *objects* - kettles, hammers and artworks - and not *materials* - plastic, wood and marble.

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) - which can be viewed as a more recent iteration of ANT - overtly subscribes to processes of objectification.[117] OOO asserts that all actors should be allocated equal attention whether they are either “real” or “sensual,” meaning that we may consider even immaterial things as objects in order to visualise social processes more concretely.[118] However, OOO shares the same problems as ANT: material is packaged into organised, monolithic structures that are inadequate for perceiving a reality that is productive, volatile and formless. Though it continues to disrupt anthropocentric philosophical constructions, it presents all things as compound objects rather than acknowledging and exploring how they may manifest materially.

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[116] Mark Cypher, “Unpacking Collaboration: Non-Human Agency in the Ebb and Flow of Practice-Based Visual Art Research,” in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 16, issue 2 (February 2017): 125. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2017.1292379
[117] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2018).
[118] Ibid., 9.

2.2 MATERIAL AS AGENT

Unlike ANT and OOO, Gell accommodates material's impact upon making processes, acknowledging instances in which "Material inherently dictates to [the] artist the form it assumes."[119] This is more recently identifiable in new materialism, which extended material agency to include materials as well as objects. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost state: "We now advance the bolder claim that foregrounding material factors and reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century."[120] Coole and Frost expand on Latour's argument, stating that since all of our experiences are rooted in the physical world, any study of its nature must take *material* - as well as object - into account. Substances previously perceived as passive are now understood as affecting ourselves and our environment as we touch, manipulate, ingest and discard them.[121] This unearths invisible issues in our construction of reality, and poses new questions about how material might influence social structures.

New materialism implores us to consider the materialisation of objects - how they come into the world - as well as the impact they have on humans. "For materiality," Coole and Frost suggest, "is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable."[122] Here, material is productive in its own right: we can begin to see the physical world in a way which is not anthropocentric, but materially agentic and unstable.

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[119] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 29.
[120] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, 2.
[121] Ibid., 30. Coole and Frost's examples include potential links between pollutants and criminal behaviour, or change of diet as a response to disaffected youth.
[122] Ibid., 9.

New materialism and ANT avoid the claim that material agency is the same as human intention. Latour is clear that objects do not determine action,[123] whilst Gell distinguishes between “primary” and “secondary” agents.[124] New materialists tend towards a spectrum rather than a hierarchy, positioning human intention at one end and dull material at the other. [125] Jane Bennett, however, defines agency as an intrinsic quality of material itself and abolishes a spectrum entirely since it still allows for material to exist as submissive. Bennett calls for an acknowledgement of material in its own right, rather than limited to its relationships within a network, imagining an “activeness that is not quite bodily and not quite spatial, because a body-in-space is only one of its possible modalities.”[126] Here, all material is equally capable of action regardless of human intervention.

Material is ever-present for Bennett, even when it is a component of a completed object. Bennett’s term “assemblage” defines an entity composed of both human and non-human matter. This can be applied to virtually everything, fostering an understanding that agency is not limited to certain objects, but distributed across all the materials involved. Bennett’s example is a power grid, in which every material ingredient influences an outcome: machinery, grid workers, kitchen appliances, electric current, weather - all of which are assemblages themselves - interact to produce unexpected effects.[127] This framework enables us to overcome the barrier erected by ANT and OOO: “assemblages” function on the macrocosmic level of objects whilst simultaneously allowing us to zoom in to the microcosms of their compositional materials.

[123] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.
[124] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 36.
[125] Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 21.
[126] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 55.
[127] Ibid. 20-38.

A plausible account of society from a new materialist perspective means examining all aspects of existence through the lens of material and materialisation. Every level of life is included in this, ranging from government level policy making to personal rituals of feeding ourselves and commuting to work. New materialism teaches us to lead more ethical and sustainable lives by increasing our sensitivity to the impact of waste on the planet, or the effects of our diet on our mood. Bennett urges us to "live as earth" rather than on it as a strategy towards increasing empathy towards one another.[128] For new materialism, interrogating and critiquing material is a means of moving towards an egalitarian social structure.

2.3 MATERIAL AS POLITICAL

In 2016, object-oriented feminism (OOF) emerged in response to problems in OOO, which fails to acknowledge gender and race in the objectification of bodies. Artist and academic Katherine Behar notes that OOO's organisation of all material into objects is indicative of the fetishisation of order.[129] This indicates a failure to acknowledge how power manifests in material, outlined in anthropological approaches to "materiality" explored previously in the chapter.[130]

OOF reminds us that power in the material world is not evenly distributed. Though it also favours material agency as a means of deconstructing anthropocentric attitudes towards social relationships, its crucial departure is the acknowledgement that some humans have always been treated as objects as a means of enacting oppression. Behar summarises, stating:

[128] Ibid., 111.
[129] Katherine Behar, "An Introduction to OOF," in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 23.
[130] Specifically Miller, Meskell and Rowlands.

> Object-oriented feminism's intervention is to approach all objects from the inside-out position of being an object too [...] Shifting focus from feminist subjects to feminist objects extends a classic tenet of feminism, the ethic of care, to promote sympathies and camaraderie with nonhuman neighbours.[131]

Tactical positioning allows OOF to adopt material agency as a means of critique, whilst embodying the feminist goals of inclusivity and equality.

Material agency has the capacity to expose unequal distributions of power. Behar offers an example of the execution of oppression through material things: "This world of tools, there for the using, is the world to which women, people of colour, and the poor have been assigned under patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism throughout history."[132] In order to disrupt this, OOF unites feminism and object-oriented thinking, constructing an approach that places material in the centre of political discourses, and actively strives to critique processes of objectification.

Whilst new materialism and OOO adopt transhistorical perspectives, Behar locates "material agency" within specific social narratives. In the twenty-first century, stability in our corporeal bodies is transitioning into fluctuating spectrums. Constructs of gender and sexuality are undergoing dramatic reimagining.[133] As such, OOF adopts strategies that are enacted outside of philosophy and science, since object-oriented thinking is a product of real world existence.

[131] Ibid., 8.
[132] Ibid., 7.
[133] Ibid., 22.

2.4 MATERIAL AGENCY AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Theories of material agency offer useful insights prior to addressing art criticism. Gell and Latour demonstrate that objects are vital participants in how we affect the world; Coole, Frost and Bennett describe material agency in a way which deconstructs traditional hierarchies; and Behar foregrounds the importance of incorporating material when analysing social imbalances of power. This is not to say that these theories are without their problems.

Textual communication sits ill at ease with their intentions. Material often becomes glorified in written explorations of agency. It is romanticised in a way which privileges and idealises it as writers describe the world as though they are not in direct and daily contact with it. Latour, for example, composes lavish lists of objects which appear fantastic to him,[134] and Bennett floridly details an encounter with a pile of rubbish in the street as unusual and fleeting.[135] Though these depictions are intended to convey the importance of attuning ourselves to the constant material encounter, they cause it to recede from tangible grasp.[136]

Other writers overlook opportunities to link material agency to real-world encounters. Coole suggests Cezanne's paintings are useful as an image of the messy material world, which in actuality detaches new materialism from the physical encounter by linking it to two-dimensional imagery.[137] OOO's tendency to code and digitise objects similarly transcends the daily encounter.[138] In their hurry to convince us of material agency, material theorists forget the tangibility of the ever-present material world.

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[134] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.
[135] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.
[136] This thesis does not argue against expressive representations of material in text, which are explored in chapter four.
[137] Diana Coole, "The Inertia of Matter," 103.
[138] Behar particularly cites Ian Bogost's writing as preoccupied with digital coding as a strategy. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What it's Like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 85-112.

This is reflexively acknowledged as a problem by Coole and Frost, who identify textual approaches as inadequate for understanding society,[139] and recommend returning to our habitual connections with material as a means of understanding this on a quotidian level.[140] Bennett suggests a more imaginative strategy of subscribing to anthropomorphization of material,[141] adopting a child-like view of the world where everything is unexpected, exciting and volatile.[142] Latour similarly calls for an examination of making processes.[143] Though the insufficiency of written language alone is identified, no concrete solutions for exercising materialist approaches in the real world are offered.

Theories of material agency do not provide a simple solution for addressing material in sculpture. Written language as a singular methodology is lacking, and it is necessary to turn to sculpture to access the material encounter. A new language which captures the tangibility of material cannot be appropriated from these texts. What can be gained, however, is the idea that art making is embedded in social networks and that material is integral to discussions of power. These aspects must be kept in mind when analysing art criticism.

3. MATERIAL IN ART CRITICISM

Material is always frequently a follower in art theory; it does not contribute to meaning. Wagner notes that “material was constantly regarded as base and counterpart to artistic creativity, which, even in its most precious forms, had to be transcended or transformed by art as activity.”[144] This review postulates two critical models in art since 1960. A “transcendent” model privileges form, viewing material as a portal into the metaphysical, as embodied in high modernist and abstract expressionist works. An “animate” model perceives

[139] Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 3.
[140] Ibid., 3.
[141] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 119.
[142] Ibid., vii.
[143] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 80.
[144] Wagner, “Material,” 27.

thinking and doing as primary generators of meaning, prioritising action and concept. This operates in conceptual or process art. Two prominent voices from this period were Rosalind Krauss and Lucy Lippard, each adhering to transcendent or animate models respectively. Though both account for material in some manner, I argue that this does not span beyond acknowledgement and is symptomatic of an ongoing lack of material literacy.

3.1 TRANSCENDENT MODEL

As observed in chapter one, modernism asserted a separation between art and the material realm of everyday life, which was perpetuated by critics such as Clement Greenberg.[145] Hope Mauzerall summarises his view of materials, noting that: “Matter, in this tradition is the stuff of this world; form belongs to a higher, abstract realm that transcends worldly materiality.”[146] Greenberg’s Western metaphysical modernism is the epitome of the transcendent model, and an extension of Aristotle’s hylomorphism.

Despite the opening of new material possibilities in the mid-twentieth century, postmodern criticism did not assert a radical break from modernist hierarchies, but rather reassessed existing formal criteria as a means of navigating art production in the expanded field. Rosalind Krauss mapped the transition from modernist to postmodernist paradigm with a particular focus on sculpture.

In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss describes a new malleability of the term “sculpture” as it is now expected to include materials that it did not before. She observes that “‘sculpture’ began to be piles of thread waste on the floor, or sawed redwood timbers rolled

[145] Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I, Perceptions and Judgements, 1939 - 1944*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22.
[146] Hope Mauzerall, “What’s the Matter With Matter? Problems in the Criticism of Greenberg, Fried and Krauss,” in *Art Criticism*, vol. 13, no.1 (1998): 81.

into the gallery, or tons of earth excavated from the desert, or stockades of logs surrounded by firepits, the word *sculpture* became harder to pronounce - but not really that much harder."[147] Here, formal qualities of the discipline remain evident, though they have been obscured by material.

Krauss calls for fixing the definition of "sculpture" in order to accommodate inconvenient materials, explaining that the discipline retains "its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change".[148] In Krauss' view, new materials are forcing sculpture to perform an uncomfortable stretching - since it must include substances that it did not before - and the anchoring of shared formal criteria relieves it.

Krauss acknowledges her own dismissal of materials, as she states:

> [...] the logic of space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.[149]

Here, Krauss concludes that sculpture can no longer be defined according to which materials it does or does not engage with, but rather that we must understand it as emerging from particular forms. In part, this claim is useful as it comments on the disciplinary collapse which unfolded during this period. However, Krauss argues that because the disciplines were previously defined by materials, further analysis of them offers no useful advancement. Rather than initiating a critical break which sought meaning in the analysis of material, Krauss continues to abide by form as a primary critical source and fails to examine the

[147] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 33.
[148] Ibid., 33.
[149] Ibid., 43.

possible meanings embodied by “timber” or “thread waste.” New materialists may point towards a systematic decoding of its social genealogy or its physical effects as a more productive source of meaning.

Material is a portal into immateriality for Krauss, rather than embodying meaning in its own right. Hope Mauzerall observes Krauss’ aversion to it in her critique of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, stating that “Materiality merely provides access to something else; it is not about its own facticity,”[150] as Krauss overlooks key material aspects in Pollock’s work such as the use of cigarette butts and coins.[151] Preoccupation with the formal is a recurring theme in Krauss’ more recent commentary on Pollock, as she emphasises the paintings’ “horizontality” as opposed to their incorporation of new materials.[152] Mauzerall’s concern is that, whilst Krauss’ postmodernism appears to draw material into the discussion, what actually occurs is as damaging as an explicit rejection: they are still not permitted to retain autonomous meaning. The void between artist, critic and audience is as present as ever.

Krauss’ other texts of the same period ascribe to a transcendent model. Material meaning is undermined in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, which is particularly evident in Krauss’ critique of Oldenburg’s soft sculpture. These works deal overtly with the everyday: motifs of food, clothing and household appliances signify Oldenburg’s interest in shared social experiences. His sculptures operate on two levels: the representation of the world, and the reconstruction of it into something which is anthropomorphic. The latter is achieved from the use of soft materials which are not part of the traditional sculptural canon, rather than a formal device.

[150] Mauzerall, “What’s the Matter with Matter?” 92.
[151] Ibid., 92.
[152] Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (New York: MIT Press, 1997), 95.

Krauss observes that the sculptures “promote a sense of interaction in which the viewer is a participant, their mass being construed in terms that suggest their own body - pliant and soft, like flesh.”[153] In the following discussion, material is not centralised despite being the very source of the quality she celebrates. Krauss attributes pliant, soft and fleshy attributes to the sculptural form rather than the compositional material, and the works are analysed on a metaphysical level. Attribution of meaning to material would have uncovered new knowledge and understanding: it is vulnerable to touch, gravity, heat, dampness, filth and wear. Use of fabric associates processes which could be linked to clothes-making and industry. They are more of our bodies than Krauss’ transcendent model has the capacity to understand, and a thorough material analysis would unearth this.[154]

Krauss’ writing is undoubtedly useful when assessing the formal nature of sculpture, however, a satisfying engagement with the meanings carried by materials, or the artist’s intentions associated with their use, is consistently missing. This distances our understanding of materials, and continues to polarise them against an intellectual analysis.

3.2 ANIMATE MODEL

Lucy Lippard was another key voice in this transitional period, with a focus on disciplinary dissolution and increased democratisation of art production. Lippard observed what she termed the “dematerialization” of the art object, which shifted emphasis from the completed work to action, thinking and making as primary sources of meaning.[155] This term has been widely debated for various reasons, but in the context of this study, it is crucial to note that

[153] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 229.
[154] In 1996, Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois curated “*L’informe: mode d’emploi*” at the Pompidou, Paris, which drew directly from Bataille’s anti-hierarchical material model. In spite of this, Hou Hanru notes that she “tries to bring the interpretations and evaluations of their work to a transcendent, almost formalist level in defence of Bataille's notions of abjection and *l'informe*.” Hou Hanru, “The Impossible Formulation of the Informe,” in *Third Text*, vol. 10, issue. 37 (1996): 93. https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829608576645
[155] Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, 176.

even if only the artist's body, text, or space were used, these elements still manifest materially and a new materialist reading would not overlook this. Lippard's criticism did not provide a sustainable solution to the problem of privileging form over material but shifted from a transcendent model to an animate one.

Conceptual art criticism's rejection of material is explicit. Lippard and Chandler write: "matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept."[156] This conversion was viewed as democratic, as it sought to cede from a commercial gallery system which fetishised physical artworks, thereby liberating the artist from economical, technical and geographical limitations.[157] Lippard summarises, stating: "It isn't a matter of how much materiality a work has, but what the artist is doing with it."[158] As such, art became detached from Greenberg's "mind over matter" dichotomy and intervened in the processes and rituals of everyday life. This approach is only convincing, however, if the preceding modernists viewed material as equal to form in its contribution to meaning. As outlined previously, this was not the case. Bataille dismissed modernist critics as material idealists, with fixed ideas about how it "should be" as opposed to allowing its autonomous presence.[159] Lippard and Chandler are not "converting matter," since it was not present in the critical models which came before.

Materials still exist in the animate model, despite arguments to the contrary. Lippard states that in conceptual art, "material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or dematerialized."[160] These adjectives referring to material qualities convey vital information: new materialist critics would suggest that their use tells us something of the socioeconomic conditions from which artists operate. As such, we can see

[156] Ibid., 176.
[157] Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 - 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
[158] Ibid., 6.
[159] Georges Bataille, "Materialism," in *Visions of Excess*, 15.
[160] Lippard, *Six Years*, vii.

artists signalling an investment in the everyday, using “cheap” and “unpretentious” materials. Lippard also insists, however, that they are “secondary” and “dematerialized.” Any further consideration of their contexts and uses outside of conceptual art is denied.

With the knowledge gained from assessing theories of material agency, it is possible to observe a discrepancy in Lippard’s animate model. ANT is clear in its notion that all human behaviour is enacted through relationships to material objects, and new materialists tell us that any understanding of society must consider processes of materialisation. OOF goes further, insisting that analysis of social inequalities must be carried out through material participation. In this light, we are able to see the methods of the animate model as insufficient in their capability to fully embed art making in wider society. Any such attempt must take materials into account.

3.3 CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUE

There is evidence of Krauss and Lippard’s avoidance of materials in recent surveys of contemporary sculpture. Materials are largely unacknowledged for their important role in the expanded field. Like Krauss, Anna Moszynska attributes the loss of the sculptural plinth to removing the wedge between art and life, stating that art “was no longer isolated, physically or literally, from the everyday world.”[161] Though moving onto the floor did partially facilitate this, the shift was largely the work of new materials entering the discipline which remain unacknowledged.

Historic and social material meanings emphasised by Behar and Latour are only considered in contemporary art criticism when they occur outside of Westernised art. New uses of “everyday” materials and their embedded cultural information are often consigned only to

[161] Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2013), 10.

artists of colour. For example, Anne Ellegood states “these materials carry associations with [artist’s] native homes...”[162] and provides examples only of artists from racial backgrounds other than white. For Ellegood, use of everyday material denotes otherness and enforces racial barriers, whereas the capacity to carry social associations should be attributed to all material applications.

Krauss’ use of material as a springboard into metaphysics is still in practice. A different mode of transcendence is in operation as critics are noting the impact of object-oriented thinking. Ben Eastham identifies “a new focus on craft-based techniques, industrial production and physical presence…”[163] As opposed to engaging with the materiality of these objects, however, Eastham relays OOO as an attempt to “reconcile the digital and physical spheres…”[164] and argues in favour of the digitisation of objects. This is emblematic of current criticism, where material is packaged into objects rather than considered in its raw form.

Krauss and Lippard’s ideas about formal analysis and active making are integral to our current understanding of contemporary art. The concern here is rather that the consistent circumventing of material in their transcendent and animate approaches has led to the current lack of a model which investigates how meaning is carried by materials, and the absence of a materially literate vocabulary in art criticism. The above examples suggest that contemporary art critics remain under Krauss’ and Lippard’s shadow. Materials are still only listed briefly; their physical qualities or their social contexts are not fully unpacked. Formal qualities of sculpture remain the focus. Similarly to theorists of material agency, this is perhaps due to the restrictions of written communication: analysing the tangible through text

[162] Anne Ellegood, *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2009), 8.
[163] Ben Eastham, “OOO! The Return to Objects,” in *Elephant,* issue 31 (Summer 2017): 40.
[164] Ibid., 42.

alone is limited. Art criticism still lacks the vocabulary to give material its due, and as a result, it cannot not account for artistic investment in material meaning unfolding today.

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW CRITICAL LANGUAGE FOR MATERIAL

In this chapter, I have made two integral points. Firstly, from analysing theories of material agency, I have outlined the key arguments in favour of establishing material literacy in art criticism. Secondly, I have applied this knowledge to dominant critical models, identifying where material discussion is lacking.

Philosophical theories of material agency configure materials as loaded with information. They are unmasterable, unexpected and influential. They are meaningful even when they are raw and formless. They are the means by which we impact the world around us, shaping our behaviour and enforcing political power structures. Only by dealing with them directly can we fully understand and critique society. However, these theories do not provide the blueprints for representing materials in sculpture as, like art criticism, they are limited to textual communication and intangible thought which risks obscuring our physical connections. This vocabulary necessary to fully engage with the material encounter is lacking.

Art theory continues to follow a pattern of acknowledging material, but failing to unravel its impact on the sculptural work. Material is a follower of form or process; it is not viewed as an equal participant in coding and transmitting meaning. It is treated as a single, monolithic aspect of art practice, rather than an umbrella term for a broad critical framework which artists might access and apply in different ways. In order to enact new models provided by material agency, a new language must be formulated which instigates a comprehensive investigation of material meaning.

It must be stated here that this thesis does not argue for art practice to simplistically illustrate material agency. Rather, artists may possess the skills and modes of communication necessary to formulate a language that is rooted in physical encounters. As makers, we have the knowledge and tools required to intervene in these debates in order to cultivate new information about material's physical qualities and associated connotations. The next chapter lays the foundations for developing a new critical vocabulary, turning to the practice-based experiences of artists who are directly engaged with material making.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH EIGHT CONTEMPORARY SCULPTORS

In this study, I am a researcher and a practitioner. As an artist, I have access to networks of contemporary sculptors, and to tacit knowledge understood on a social level between peers. I am privy to collective observations on emerging trends as I am situated alongside others whose intentions and methods influence my own. From this position, I am able to make two distinct observations about contemporary sculptural practice. The first is that within the last decade, a trend for materially focused sculptural works has emerged. The second is that the historic lack of discussion surrounding material continues in contemporary art criticism, despite the emergence of this genre.

This thesis incorporates both practical and theoretical research in order to address the rift between material and theory. However, my practice alone does not have the capacity to demonstrate the necessity of material discussion since it is susceptible to personal bias. To remedy the lack of material literacy in art criticism outlined in the previous chapter and, more importantly, to work towards a solution, it is necessary to look outside of my own experiences by venturing into the wider network of sculptors.

Responding to this necessity, I have conducted qualitative interviews with eight artists in their studios. The content of these interviews illuminates my findings and captures the voices of artists themselves in academic writing. Their analysis identifies four “themes” which can be applied as critical frameworks for decoding material meaning. Not only this, but the personal undertaking of interviewing each artist offers eight varying situations in which artists

make work, locating them within shared material environments. Before presenting the content and analysis of the interviews, I will first introduce each artist and their studio, exploring their physical situations as well as their approaches to material, building a dynamic picture of the current conditions of sculptural practice.

1. INTRODUCING THE INTERVIEWS: EIGHT ARTISTS AND THEIR STUDIOS

Conventionally, we might imagine an artist's studio as an isolated white space overflowing with traditional materials for making art. Half empty paint pots may gather, flaking motes of colour on every surface. Tools dusty with dried clay handprints may lie strewn about, discarded after a flurry of construction. Henry Moore sitting calmly amongst chaotic chunks of clay, or Constantin Brancusi encircled by hulking carved stone represent this ideal. We may view their studios, like the materials they work with, as separate from the outside world: havens of creativity, removed from the encounters and exchanges which constitute the social fold. This image may be a byproduct of Greenberg's transcendental ideals which shape our understanding of where artists work as well as what they make.

In the twenty-first century, artists' studios are likely to be one of many in the same building, forming a community working across different disciplines. These cultures are also likely to be connected to a gallery or "project space."[165] There are various models for this, ranging from the grassroots to the institutional, and from the not-for-profit to the commercial. Studio cultures are commonplace in many UK towns and cities. They tend to occupy spaces available on a limited budget and as such, may be tucked at the back of car parks, inhabit repurposed warehouses or share space with non-art businesses. Artists commonly operate

[165] This term denotes an experimental and artist-led site for exhibiting work.

close to other forms of material production: places where the separation between art and life is so transparent, it is possible to believe it is not there at all.

Art is made and exhibited jostling up against nail salons, bakeries, nightclubs, hardware shops and office suppliers. I have occupied various studios that had once been a printworks, a mushroom farm and a police horse stable. I have exhibited work in an ex-glue factory, an empty architect's office and a pub basement. It is impossible to think of any of these places without imagining the material encounters that occur within them: buying, selling, building, cleaning, moving, growing and storing substances like soil, hay, solvents, machinery, grease, ink, paper, beer and manure. It is also impossible to ignore the proximity between art production and these material exchanges,[166] and not to wonder whether this has an impact on the ways art is made and meanings manifest.[167]

The qualitative interviews conducted for this thesis took me into eight different studios, providing information I have analysed in order to develop an artist-led vocabulary for material meaning in art criticism. They offer much more than raw data, however: travelling to each studio imparted knowledge of the places artists are working and the material encounters which may influence their sculpture. Studios are not only a place for making; they are the places artists travel to and from for work, and a site for collecting and storing material. Contrary to the notion of the studio as a social vacuum, artists bring their experiences inside with them, and their understanding as a maker outside into the world.

[166] Jane Bennett, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost would argue that material agency has an effect on these interactions.
[167] Joshua Shannon has observed this resonating in the works of Rauschenberg, Judd and Oldenburg. Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

All of the interviewed artists share sensitivity to material. Anna F.C. Smith recreates historic relics from found clay which confront us with forgotten practices; Rebecca Molloy impulsively builds enlarged food, plants and body parts from timber and plastic bottles; Laura Yuile collects construction materials and broken appliances from her surroundings which implicate bodies and urban structures; Elly Thomas explores theories of play, building organic forms from papier-mâché; Jamie Fitzpatrick undermines power structures, replicating classical statues in wax and silicone; Dominique White emulates shipwrecks using kaolin clay and sisal rope which transmit historic narratives; Olivia Bax recycles discarded paint and newspaper into looming sculptures; and Sarah Roberts directs our attention to the host of materials we are in contact with on a daily basis in her immersive installations. Some of the places they work are more comparable to a traditional image of an artist's studio. Others stray away completely. Their overlaps and divergences capture the multitude of ways artists can be positioned within social and physical environments.

1.1. ANNA F.C. SMITH

Anna F.C. Smith researches archaic folk traditions and re-enacts them using performance and sculpture. Her reimagining of forgotten practices forges a contemporary connection: rituals from ancient Britain are overlaid with popular culture references, offering a new understanding of modern behaviour. Smith achieves this with an array of different materials including papier-mâché, clay, tobacco, hessian, printed fabric and cardboard (fig. 5). These substances represent what is available to her, as well as directly linking to particular historic customs. The resulting sculptures embody a handmade aesthetic.

A recent project explored the role of the fool, acknowledging a current need for self-awareness in response to the unwitting foolishness of political figures. Pig's bladders

were included in the work, which were traditionally used as comic inflatables. Historic and contemporary societies are bound together in grotesque, fleshy balloons which carry odours of urine and cured meat, hanging from wonky constructions of chicken wire and painted cardboard.

(Figure 5: Anna F.C. Smith's studio.)

Smith's studio is in the outskirts of Wigan in the north-west of England amongst an active community of almost twenty artists with an associated gallery. It sits on a side street beside a pub, a school uniform shop and a carpet warehouse. There is little distinction between the rolls of carpet underlay crowding the corridors and the various materials spilling from the doors of the studio complex. Piles of paper, paint-tins, cardboard and fabric are lined up against the walls. Smith's awareness of her proximity to materials beyond the studio walls is

apparent in her works. The meaning she invests in materials, which is evident in her sculptures, is drawn from interactions which surround her place of making as they constantly emerge in the completed piece. Her practice, like her studio, is embedded in the material exchanges of the world outside.

1.2. REBECCA MOLLOY

Rebecca Molloy is sensitive to the ways in which material can affect the body; glucose triggers a wave of pleasure in the brain and chemical hormones affect emotion and sexuality. Her sculptures are physical fragments of temptation: sticky doughnuts, body parts and recurring phallic cactus motifs. They evoke the tingle of sugar on the tongue, or the warmth of skin on skin. Molloy's urge to make is so strong that she builds frantically from the materials at her fingertips: discarded plastic bottles, chicken wire, found timber and paper. Their glossy pink and leafy green finishes are seductive. Sculpture, artist and material all embody the insatiable desire for physical connection.

Living in London is commonly acknowledged as a financial struggle for artists. Guardianships - a scheme which preserves historic buildings through occupancy - offer a possible solution. Rent is affordable, and the short notice period of lease termination which might put others off can be appealing to artists whose situations can be subject to sudden change. Molloy lives and works in an ex-youth club in south-east London. Her studio is a cavernous gymnasium which takes up most of the first floor (fig. 6). Raw materials for making and completed sculptures line the walls, which function as an immersive sketchbook. Scribbles and colour tests cover muted school gym blue.

A sculpture of a cactus stands on a stage at one end of her studio. Though its compositional

materials are not immediately clear, its bulging, awkward, glossy surface hints at its stuffing of single-use plastics surrounding an armature of discarded wood. This is an autonomous work, as well as part of a set for Molloy's ongoing performance project "The Cactus Dance" in which she makes fruitless attempts to seduce the sculpture in a display of explicit sexuality. Constant fascination with materials and her drive to physically interact with her work is not only evident from her sculptures, but the space in which she literally lives and works.

(Figure 6: Rebecca Molloy's studio.)

1.3. LAURA YUILE

Laura Yuile's sculptural installations are made from a wide variety of materials. She uses formless substances - dust or lint - which are ever-present but obscured by daily life. Ephemeral materials such as soap and fat suggest warm bodily presence, which is interrupted by her use of cold, rusted refrigerators and washing machines. Yuile integrates

(Figure 7: Laura Yuile’s studio.)

construction gravel which signifies urban development, occupying a space between hard appliances and transient dust. These materials intermingle in her sculptures, as she “pebble-dashes” broken appliances with gravel, and sets tumble-dryer fluff in waxy, translucent soap. All materials are subjected to endless processes of becoming and eroding (fig. 7)

(Figure 8: advertising billboard near Laura Yuile’s studio.)

The journey to Yuile’s studio in a developing site in south London carves a path through sprawling piles of this gravel, passing clanking building equipment. Billboards boast the ambition of this “twelve acre micro-Manhattan” stating the staggering amount of bricks used will be seven times that of Battersea Power Station (fig. 8). Exclusivity exudes from manicured hedges and steaming outdoor pools. Temporary wooden barriers - which contrast

the polished buildings emerging from the ground - provoke an uneasy sensation of trespassing. The studio itself is part of a complex connected to an emerging project space, which has recently relocated to this new site. This is an example of “artwashing,” a term referring to the process of tactically moving artists into an empty or recently completed site in order to increase the rate of gentrification.[168] The situation in which Yuile operates and the urban landscape she passes through are corporealised in her material selections.

1.4. ELLY THOMAS

Elly Thomas’ installations are composed of a growing “toybox” of sculptures (fig. 9). Luscious greens and floral yellows signify organic shapes; vibrant reds and blues allude to children’s playthings; and black and white stand starkly against sparks of colour. Many objects are hand-sized, encouraging tactile engagement. Forms made from silicone, fabric and papier-mâché appear animate as they seem to quiver and tremble. The body is present not only in their mottled, wrinkled surfaces, but coded into them as they capture the indents made by Thomas’ fingers. Each material embodies playfulness.

I interviewed Thomas not in her studio but at an exhibition of her recent work, which occupied an open-fronted shed in the garden of a house just a twenty minute walk from the building development housing Yuile’s studio. Though this is not where Thomas makes her work, there is something to be gleaned from this context: the house itself is home to several

[168] This term is complex and may refer to a variety of different situations. Newspaper critic Jonathan Jones views artwashing as necessary repercussions of cultural development. (Jonathan Jones, “Artwashing: The New Watchword for Anti-Gentrification Protesters,” *The Guardian*, July 18 (2016). https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/jul/18/artwashing-new-watchword-for-anti-gentrification-protesters). Stephen Pritchard argues instead that “artists are increasingly being instrumentalised by the state, local authorities, corporate interests and financial investors, and third sector organisations eager to promote urban renewal and narrow notions of ‘the civic’.” (Stephen Pritchard, “Artwashing: Social Capital & Anti-Gentrification Activism,” *Colouring In Culture*, June 13 (2017). https://colouringinculture.org/blog/artwashingsocialcapitalantigentrification).

(Figure 9: Elly Thomas' sculptures installed at the Rectory Projects.)

artists with a variety of practices and operates simultaneously as a living space, studio and gallery. It is a constant clamour of constructing, discussing and presenting art. On the day I visited, an artist was melting sugar in steaming saucepans which spewed a sickly scent. Once cooled, the sugar was hand pulled into sculptural forms, turning from rosy, translucent glass into peachy chewing gum. Artists in this house are taking up the spaces, equipment and materials that are available to them, utilising their domestic setting.

1.5. JAMIE FITZPATRICK

Jamie Fitzpatrick's sculptures draw from classical motifs, referencing soldiers on horseback, extravagant Georgian wigs, and ruddy red-faced generals (fig. 10). As opposed to strong, enduring marble and bronze, Fitzpatrick renders these forms in dripping wax and ragged silicone rubber; materials which are susceptible to damage and dirt. Rather than sombre stony grey, they are lurid hues of pink, green, red and blue. Gaudy makeup runs from cheeks. The colours, like the clumsy surfaces which carry traces of Fitzpatrick's violent making process, expose the ridiculousness of traditional power structures. Patriarchal masculinity is undermined as the squelchy, smeared sculptures are subjected to mocking laughter for their failed pomposity.

Fitzpatrick shares his studio space with fragments of these sculptures, all in various states of construction. He works from a well-known complex in east London, which has a reputation for cultivating emerging talent. The studio itself is, in many ways, the closest to a traditional situation I encountered in my research: it does not have the intense proximity to industrial development or share spaces with other forms of non-artistic production that some of the other artists experience. This materially-focused sculptural trend, then, is retaining connections to purpose-built studio complexes exclusively occupied by artists. Material sensitivity cannot be reduced to the rejection of more traditional studio settings.

(Figure 10: Jamie Fitzpatrick. “Your Wives Are At Home…” 2017; mixed media; 340 x 152.5 x 122cm.)

1.6. DOMINIQUE WHITE

Dominique White's sculptures suggest shipwrecks as she constructs objects which appear to have surfaced from the depths of the ocean, chewed up and spat out by tearing currents and battered by violent waves. She uses tattered sails, wooden masts and dented buoys which she finds on Ebay and weaves into her sprawling installations (fig. 11). Dusty kaolin clay is worked into their surfaces which flakes away like dandruff. Nautical rope binds the assemblages together. Palm fronds which once flourished in green are now crispy, faded brown. Installed in the gallery, her works hang from the ceiling in tangles of ragged fabric and frizzy net, creep across the floor in drifts, or erupt from the ground in ashy timber totems.

(Figure 11: Dominique White, "Landlocker Prisoner." 2018; clay, tarred rope, rope, dried palm, destroyed sail, cowrie shells, raffia palm, hand carved wooden beads, used mooring cleat; dimensions variable.)

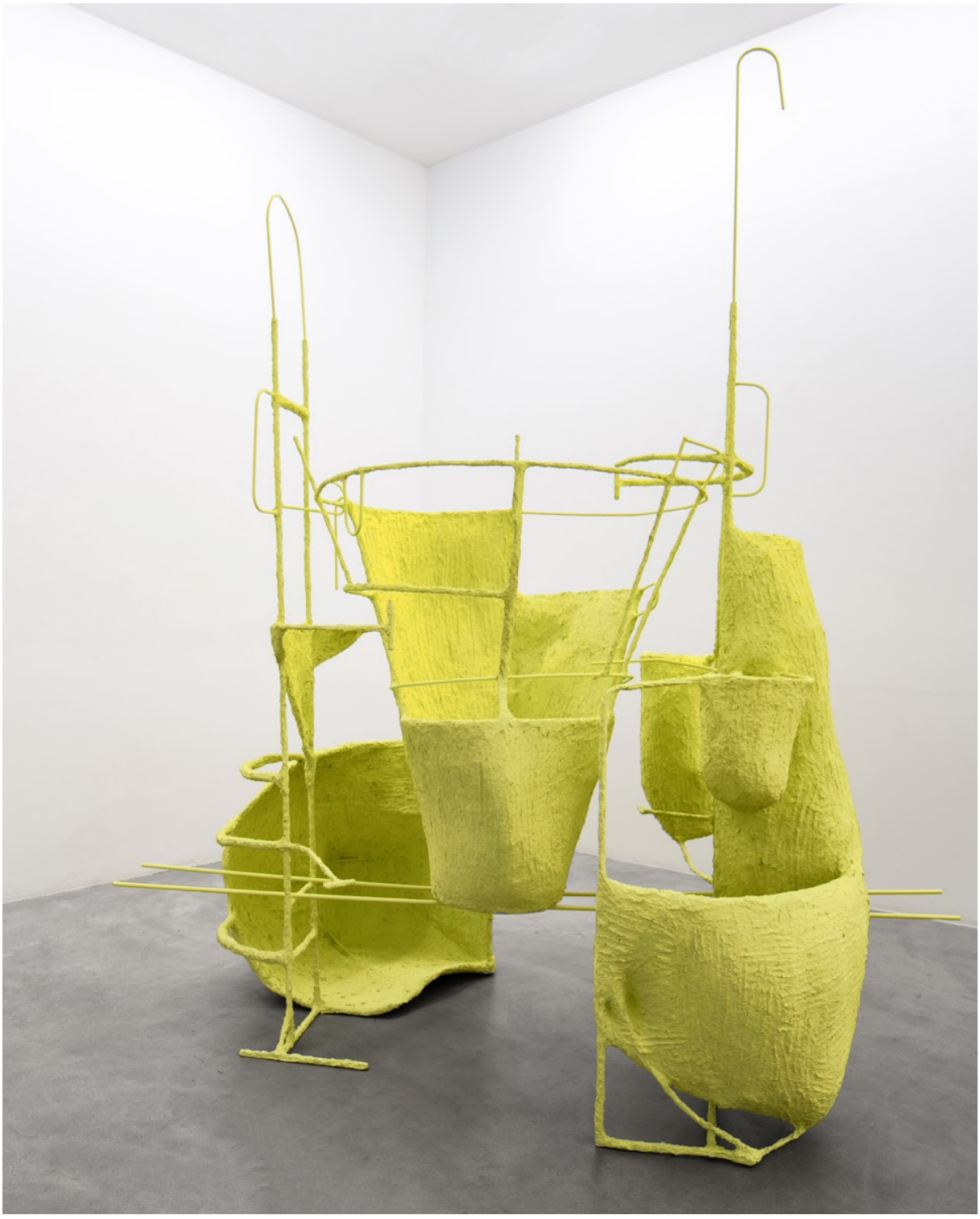
(Figure 12: Dominique White’s studio.)

Traces of White's process are evident in her studio: a fine layer of kaolin covers the floor in watery whorls (fig. 12). My clothes were smudged with silky white dust after the interview. Artist's studios are not places where materials exist autonomously from the world outside, but filter in and out via physical transference, bringing their historical and social connotations with them.

Similarly to Fitzpatrick, White occupies a studio in a site linked to a recognised gallery, and the two buildings are within a fifteen minute walk of each other. This region of the city is on the outskirts of central London, and the studio complex was established in the 1980s - a time when property was more affordable to grassroots organisations. White's emphasis on material transference stands in stark contrast to the clean, white walled corridors lined with closed doors. Again, it cannot be assumed that artistic willingness to experiment with material is directly linked to the environment in which their practice is located, and artists working in this way are also operating from more traditional studio spaces in central London. Relationships between artist and material are far more complex.

1.7. OLIVIA BAX

Olivia Bax builds sculptures which spill their materiality from their lumpy, calloused surfaces. They stand freely, squatting or towering in the gallery, confronting viewers with their domineering posture (fig. 13). Their textured exterior - which Bax describes as a "patina" - are the result of applying a coat of paper pulp over an internal armature which she presses on with her hands. Each has a monochrome finish in egg-yolk yellow, blu-tac blue or rain-cloud grey. Their bulky, twisting forms simultaneously evoke hunched bodies, lurching architecture and bulbous rock formations. Contrary to their appearance, their construction materials of chicken wire on a welded steel frame make them surprisingly lightweight, and



(Figure 13: Olivia Bax, “Mothership.” 2019; steel, chicken wire, paper, glue, paint, plaster; 273 x 250 x 180cm.)

Bax is able to move them around easily herself. The forms and finishes of modernist artists, such as Alberto Giacometti or Anthony Caro (for whom Bax worked as a workshop technician) are reappropriated in contemporary materials and colours. They are a dialogue between two distinct sculptural periods.

Bax's studio is hidden in an industrial wilderness south of the Thames. There is no associated gallery to draw visitors and from the outside, the red brick warehouse appears to be still operating as such rather than housing more than two-hundred practicing artists. Only the gigantic bins with colourful scraps of cardboard, timber and fabric belie the building's current use, which is camouflaged by the industrial trade outlets surrounding it. There are clear parallels between the neighbouring industrial businesses and the artistic activity which occurs in Bax's studio complex: the overflowing bins mirror the heaps of metal and concrete in the yards outside. This is something that clearly influences Bax's work, as she uses free newspaper and unwanted paint from independent hardware shops. Her sensitivity to material is not only evident in the rugged surfaces of her sculptures, but also in their raw ingredients.

1.8. SARAH ROBERTS

Sarah Roberts creates immersive installations, combining found, fabricated and handmade objects. Gallery walls are coated with printed vinyl; floors are covered in coloured fish-tank gravel; and heaps of unexpected things fill the space. We are encapsulated in material abundance. Even the viewer's sense of smell is engaged: heady scents are diffused into the work in thick puffs of white fog which tinge the nostrils with chemical medicine or sweet perfume. The only unifying aspect of Roberts' work is the colour palette; each installation brings together objects in the same electric blue, menacing red or toxic yellow (fig. 14).

(Figure 14: Sarah Roberts. “Everything’s Mustard” (detail). 2019; mixed media tableaux; dimensions variable.)

Roberts undergoes continual investigation into all material. Her research is a conscious part of her quotidian behaviour: her immediate environment is her field, and she is in a constant state of gathering information. The resulting objects which form her installations are physical evidence of the experiences Roberts shares with her viewer: bespoke stainless steel shimmers in seductive silver; chalky plaster casts of cake tins and glossy plastic tubs sit alongside one another in awkward piles, straddling the gap between the found and the handmade. Roberts’ installations are a thrill of material interaction, combined with a nagging awareness of production and waste. As we step in, we share her excitement and her dread regarding material conditions in the early twenty-first century.

(Figure 15: Sarah Roberts' studio.)

Roberts' Leeds-based studio acts as a warehouse as well as a making space, housing her treasure-trove of foraged items (fig. 15). During my visit, Roberts was working with a candy-floss palette. Cardboard boxes erupt with hair-curlers and party supplies, unified in pastel pink. Roberts brings her daily encounters with material into both her studio and her work. Like Bax and Smith, the studio is surrounded by industry. This is not the gleaming development from which Yuile operates, but more entrenched in the everyday grinding of van hire, self-storage and cash-and-carry supermarkets. Close by is a Dunelm Mill - a shopping chain which sells modestly priced home furnishings - and Roberts sources many of her found objects here. The material encounters which provide the subject for her installations are pressing against her studio walls.

1.9 EIGHT DIFFERENT PRACTICES

Investigating artist's practices in tandem with the places they make their work reveals a tangible overlap between material in art making and everyday experience. These eight examples highlight the lack of physical boundary between places of art production and other forms of material exchange.[169] Studios, like artists, are situated within the social fold. To expand further, it is necessary to present and analyse the content of the qualitative interviews in order to examine what new knowledge emerges when makers vocalise their experiences of researching, collecting and manipulating material in their own words.

2. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: FOUR THEMES FOR MATERIAL MEANING

These eight artists represent multiplicity of both technical uses and conceptual approaches to material. Though their work collectively belongs to the same emerging trend and their sculptures have clear similarities, their attitudes to material often oppose as well as support one another. The language used by each artist demonstrates differences in their relationship with material encounters which could not be accessed by aesthetic comparison alone. Assuming that contemporary sculptors working with similar material sensitivity are always in concurrence is reductive, and the current lack of material discussion in art criticism is not equipped to accurately reflect the myriad of ways meaning is creatively coded into material.

In order to investigate the overlaps and divergences, and to demonstrate the dramatic variations in contemporary sculpture, my analysis is presented on a thematic basis. Observing recurring topics of discussion, I have established four themes: "artist as prospector;" "pragmatism and vibrancy;" "material as information carrier;" and "conceptual access." Organised into these areas, I present materially-led sculpture not as a passing

[169] This notion is crucial to a new materialist argument and the crux of actor-network theory.

phase but an ongoing field rich in critical meaning with nuanced values, concerns and debates.

2.1 ARTIST AS PROSPECTOR

As prospectors, artists operate from within social relationships and their experiences of encountering and gathering material can be unraveled from their sculptures. Joseph Kosuth's essay "The Artist as Anthropologist" rejects art's separation from life, positioning makers as both observers and participants in the everyday.[170] Prospecting is a physical demonstration of Kosuth's ideas, connecting art making to Latour's suggestion that all of our actions are rooted in a network of active objects.[171] This theme considers how artists discover the materials they use, how they are physically acquired, and what this activity contributes to the work's meaning.

Olivia Bax collects free newspapers as she travels around London (fig. 16). She buys discarded tins of household paint from hardware shops for an exceptionally low price. Her colour palette is restricted to shades that others do not want. These raw components are gathered from the street as she moves through the city: the papers are equally as available to the next train passenger as they are to her, and the paint is available to anyone with loose change in their pocket. Collection of material for her sculpture signifies a more democratic mode of art making.[172] Bax traces the meaning which emerges when viewers question this activity: "So what is it made of? Newspapers. I wonder why she's using newspaper - oh she

[170] Joseph Kosuth, "The Artist as Anthropologist," in *The Everyday*, ed. Stephen Johnstone (London: Whitechapel, 2008), 182-184.
[171] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.
[172] The condition of art making being "democratic" is a more complex issue than can be fully understood within the capacity of this thesis as there are other factors necessary in order to open up participation. In spite of this, promoting familiar and accessible materials may be more resonant with wider audiences.

(Figure 16: Olivia Bax’s studio.)

lives in London. [...] you get a lot about the circumstances and the way something has come to be. And then you're asking, well, why is she making this? [...] It's like it's kind of fast tracking you to the artist."[173] The materials themselves speak of Bax's behaviour, allowing us an alternative pathway to access critical meaning, and establishing a connection between artist and viewer.

Laura Yuile also harvests materials from routine encounters (fig. 17). Dust, lint, soap and fat suggest bodily presence. Substances are gathered from specific locations in the city: gravel is poached from the building site which surrounds her studio, dust is hoovered from the floor of Westfield shopping centre, and lint is picked from communal tumble dryers. Though dramatically different in their physical manifestations, her pattern of personal rituals - shopping, cleaning, and commuting - are coded into her work via found appliances, construction materials and transient substances. Collection of materials charge Yuile's sculpture with meaning, as it situates art making within the shared daily encounter.

While both artists use material collected from experiences outside conventional art making, their sculptures appear visually dissimilar. Historic sculpture which incorporates found material from the street - Oldenburg's foraged cardboard or Rauschenberg's hoarded detritus - resulted in comparable aesthetics. Bax's and Yuile's sculptures, however, do not solely signify destruction or decay, and do not result in comparable artworks. Materials may allude to their origins, or they may not. What they do have in common is a material presence which overlays each artist's practice with their daily rituals, mirroring the new materialist call to provide images for materialisation, and encouraging viewers to consider how materials are collected and transformed.

[173] Interview with Olivia Bax, appendix 1.7, 227.

(Figure 17: Laura Yuile's studio, detailing the process of "pebble-dashing.")

(Figure 18: Anna F.C. Smith's studio, detailing experiments with found clay.)

Anna F.C. Smith operates according to a different prospecting model: materials reveal themselves from her research. In a recent project, investigating Wigan's ceramic industry revealed the formerly criminal practice of digging clay from public streets to source cheap material for pot-making.[174] Smith ventured out one night to experience this herself and mined enough clay to make a host of traditional toby jugs (fig. 18). Members of the public were invited to contribute to the making process, as Smith uses material engagement as a means of sharing historic narratives. Textual research uncovers materials that are obscured by modern life, as she explains "the interest in dealing with that was actually from a bit of history but about a material. I got excited then thinking that [...] there's all this material under my feet."[175] This cultivates her awareness that the material world still offers itself for the taking, and the process of physically collecting it herself is crucial.

[174] This activity allegedly coined the term "pothole."
[175] Interview with Anna F.C. Smith, appendix 1.1, 209.

Prospecting is located within environmental and ethical concerns. There is a growing realisation that the materials we produce and consume alter the environment, and most of the interviewed artists are making decisions in response to this. Bax uses sourcing material as a solution to putting discarded materials to use. Likewise, Yuile “intercepts” appliances on their journey to the landfill,[176] and Rebecca Molloy stuffs her sculptures with plastic bottles which would otherwise be thrown away (fig. 19). Viewing artists as active collectors of material reveals their values in their actions, and we can contextualise materially sensitive sculpture against unfolding awareness of environmental impact. This demonstrates material literacy in practice.

Questioning artists' prospecting behaviour is a rich and nuanced line of inquiry which sheds light on sculpture’s materialisation, a process which precedes studio-based making and lays critical foundations. Bax’s newspapers and Yuile’s gravel implicate common experiences of traversing the urban landscape, whereas Smith’s “potholed” clay substantiates historically researched materials. The “artist as prospector” theme reveals material origins to the viewer, encouraging consideration of the maker’s attitude towards consumption, production and sustainability in art making. As viewers, it opens up lines of communication which volunteers information about the maker as well as the work itself.

[176] Interview with Laura Yuile, appendix 1.3, 214.

(Figure 19: detail of Rebecca Molloy’s sculpture.)

2.2 PRAGMATISM AND VIBRANCY

This theme establishes a model for observing different artistic approaches to material agency. “Pragmatism” denotes the practical considerations artists encounter which are often obscured by the completed sculpture. This term alludes to Richard Sennett’s philosophical framework for analysing decision-making processes involved in labour and the search for meaning in “everyday, small acts.”[177] Pragmatic artists are likely to view their uses of material as the result of practical decision making as opposed to a negotiation with agentic material. “Vibrancy,” on the other hand, signifies an idea of material that is active, concealing unexpected qualities which necessitates an intuitive response. This term is taken from Jane Bennett’s extreme approach to material agency,[178] and artists who subscribe to vibrancy view material as partially resistant to form. Their works may be more the result of responsive experimentation and unforeseen effects. Application of these terms is not an attempt to place them in opposition or promote either one, but to triangulate how material agency might be approached in a variety of artistic practices.

Sarah Roberts’ proposition that all material is dangerous, seductive and volatile tends towards vibrancy. As we enter the sensuous and overwhelming environments she creates, we are invited to share her shifting, provocative and temperamental perception. A plethora of substances enable us to see the world outside through a vibrant lens.[179] This emerges vividly in the language Roberts uses: material is “seductive” and “delicious”,[180] indicating her visceral, physical response. Roberts perceives her material interactions as “a total collaboration. [...] The material is doing everything that is delicious. I’m just a conduit again.”

[177] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), 286.
[178] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[179] Jane Bennett’s conception of agentic material is referenced by Roberts as a particular influence.
[180] Interview with Sarah Roberts, appendix 1.8, 229.

[181] Roberts relishes the points at which she relinquishes control of material's action, and this is a primary source of meaning in her work which she specifically locates within new materialist debates.

Jamie Fitzpatrick's work suggests a vibrant approach based on the freedom he permits material to resist form. Working directly with his hands, he flings hot, pastel coloured wax and "beats up" mounds of clay.[182] His classical, fleshy statues melt and crumble as malleable materials exhibit their characteristics. Fitzpatrick selects substances which deny permanence, retain gesture and absorb damage (fig. 20). Whilst it may be possible to observe vibrancy, Fitzpatrick views his material interactions operating pragmatically rather than vibrantly, stating "I use materials that I know will work. [...] Fundamentally, the reason I use it is because it's a way that I can trap gesture. That's all it is."[183] Where Roberts views herself as a "conduit" for material agency, Fitzpatrick uses language which distances himself from the physically charged encounter. Instead, most decisions are of an increasingly pragmatic nature, as he observes "[the sculptures] were getting shipped to New York, I couldn't just very well ship a load of stuff that just turned up and it was an absolute mess [...]. So, now they're much sturdier in the way that they're done."[184] Materials are selected due to their potential to trap gesture as well as to survive long journeys.

[181] Ibid., 230.
[182] Interview with Jamie Fitzpatrick, appendix 1.5, 220.
[183] Ibid., 221.
[184] Ibid., 221.

(Figure 20: Jamie Fitzpatrick, “Memorial to Sausage Politics,” (detail). 2017; mixed media; 297 x 124 x 132cm.)

This is not to say that Fitzpatrick has no interest in material's physical qualities: he has a detailed understanding of which particular wax will provide a particular texture, or which silicone is ragged enough for his calculated aesthetic.[185] If the sculptures appear active, it is not the product of material negotiation, but because he has selected the right material to enact his intention. His detailed knowledge is not viewed as a modernist mastery of material, [186] but rather a pragmatic understanding and application of them.

Despite these two differing examples, pragmatism and vibrancy are not mutually exclusive: each participating artist exhibited a unique combination of the two. Smith initially overrides materials whilst recognising their potential to respond against her. Bax works with paper pulp which she can move around easily when dry, but views her making process as a dynamic push and pull between herself and the material, stating "I think materials and practicality and situation are all on top of each other, and it's really quite hard to define where one thing ends and the other thing starts."[187] Similarly to Fitzpatrick, Elly Thomas uses materials that allow her to attain a particular aesthetic, but contrastingly seeks the unforeseen results they confront her with. "The main thing to me is this word 'responsive'," she observes, "It's got to in some way respond to you."[188] Materials do not directly enact her intentions, but embody a vibrancy that is resistant to her use of it.

"Pragmatism and vibrancy" could have a strong relationship to gender identity. Many of the female sculptors considered material engagement as a means of expressing sexuality or developing an emotional attachment. Rebecca Molloy, for example, states that her material

[185] Ibid, 221.
[186] Ann Compton observes that modernist critics celebrate masterful techniques, yet are reluctant to examine other material qualities. Ann Compton, "Crafting Modernism: Hepworth's practice in the 1920s," in *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World*, ed. Penelope Curtis and Chris Stephens (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 14.
[187] Interview with Olivia Bax, 226.
[188] Interview with Elly Thomas, appendix 1.4, 217.

practice operates in parallel to her interest in bodily responses. To her, sculptural practice is "a documentation of me having ability and a body that can express itself and works and moves freely. So in that sense material also has this really emotional connection for me."[189] For Molloy, material engagement parallels female empowerment as a means of occupying space and this is reflected in her understanding of material as an active collaborator, which demonstrates a vibrant approach. She states that "I think it's probably a negotiation. I don't think I've got that thing where I want to make something very exact and then I know the material that I want to render that out in. [...] A lot of it is existing in the studio, playing around with things and then that generates ideas."[190] This resonates strongly with the language employed by Roberts and many of the other female sculptors, and is even identified as an influencing factor: Elly Thomas and Laura Yuile both overtly point towards the link between material engagement and feminist viewpoints.[191] This starkly contrasts Fitzpatrick's distant, pragmatic perception of material and his interactions with it are expressed as dominating, echoing masculine gender identity. As such, "pragmatic" and "vibrant" approaches may allude to constructions of masculinity and femininity respectively.[192]

Sculptural production operates in the gap between vibrant material agency and pragmatic artistic will. Though the artist's practices may appear aesthetically similar in how material is allowed to remain visible, the artists themselves demonstrate contrasting viewpoints regarding material agency. This is expressed in their linguistic choices: Roberts perceives material as "seductive" and "delicious" whereas Fitzpatrick adopts a pragmatic viewpoint. As

[189] Interview with Rebecca Molloy, appendix 1.2, 212.
[190] Ibid., 212.
[191] Interview with Elly Thomas, 219; interview with Laura Yuile, 216.
[192] Though gender identity does appear to have a relationship with "pragmatism and vibrancy," asserting this claim too strongly would be reductive. Firstly, I have not interviewed enough male participants, or individuals of other gender identities and secondly, some of the female artists adopt a more pragmatic view of material agency. Dominique White, for example, suggests that in some situations, she is in charge of the material and in others, this relationship is inverted. Interview with Dominique White, appendix 1.6, 224.

such, this theme demonstrates that material agency is not a comprehensive template for sculptural practice, since it is as defined by practical decisions as it is by unexpected characteristics. What is gleaned from this is that artists are collaborating with materials in order to transform them creatively, yet remaining sensitive to their characteristics and unanticipated responses. These decisions and reactions converge in the completed work.

2.3 MATERIAL AS INFORMATION CARRIER

This theme is underpinned by new materialist arguments that material embodies social and political narratives.[193] The term “material as information carrier” is adapted from Monika Wagner’s assertion that material has “immaterial properties attributed to it” which have the capacity to contribute to meaning.[194] This operates on a more abstract level than material’s physical capabilities, addressing information which can be deduced from considering the associations materials carry with them. Though there are clear overlaps, this is not the same as prospecting, and relates to the intangible connotations attached to material rather than how they are encountered.

Materials become charged by their social genealogies. Smith’s keen awareness that Wigan’s histories are absorbed by the clay beneath its streets is a solid example. “Potholed” clay acts as a vehicle to bring unseen social histories of the town’s ceramic industry into the gallery, speaking of poverty alongside industrial production. Dominique White’s approach is similar. Her use of kaolin clay, which is saturated with histories of Black diaspora, transmits information to audiences by confronting them with narratives which are embedded into material. Confrontation is crucial to White, as she frequently selects materials that impose

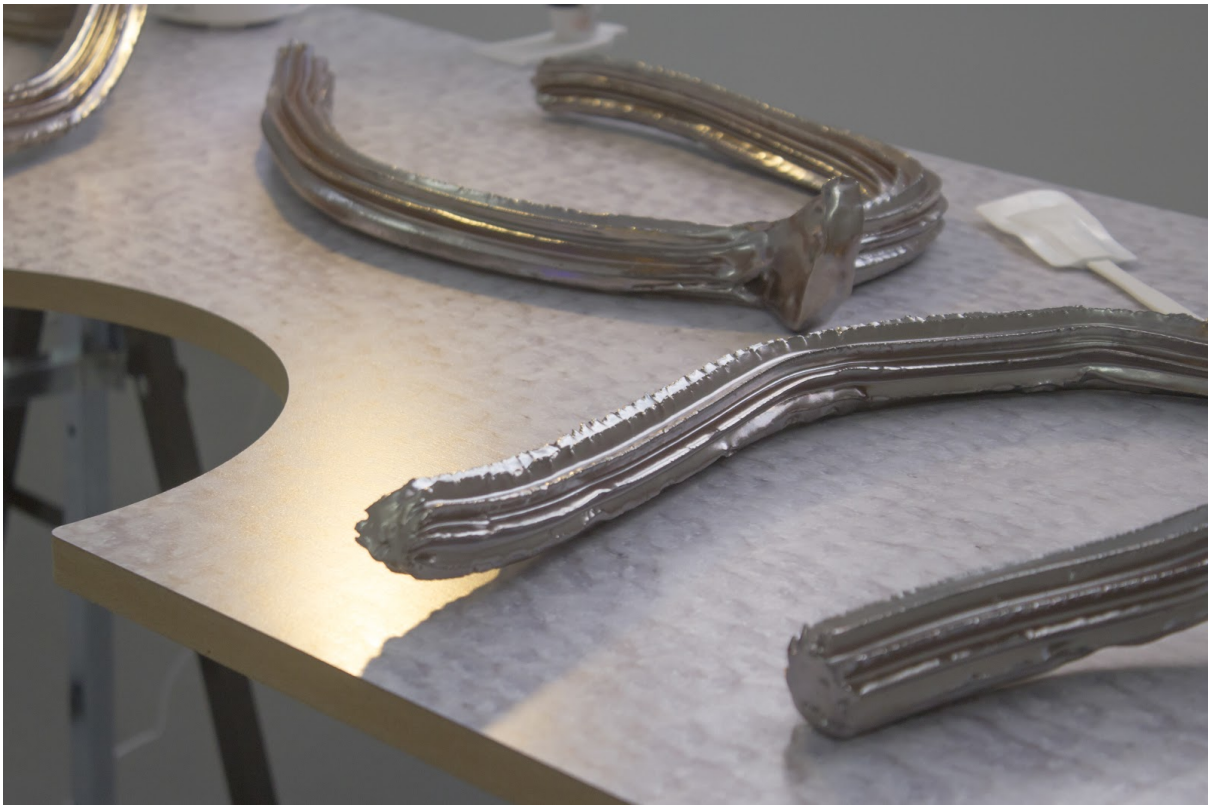
[193] Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.
[194] Monika Wagner, “Material,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel, 2015), 27.

(Figure 21: Dominique White demonstrating her process of working with sisal rope.)

themselves onto the viewer as a means of communicating meaning. She states: “I also like the idea of removing that power dynamic from the viewer [...]. So even looking at my studio floor now, it’s been mopped about six times but it still has the remnants of clay. So it’s like when you walk on it, you also carry it away with you.”[195] Sisal rope, for example, is present due to its nautical use but also because it is tarred and dirties the skin when handled (fig. 21). History, for White, is not intangible storytelling, but is corporealised in material; its traces are carried on our clothes and bodies.[196]

Material may also absorb information from its contemporary surroundings. Yuile’s use of gravel is not exclusively due to its availability to her, but also because it communicates information relating to its current social context. Incorporating construction materials into her sculpture, Yuile presents the city as a monstrous building site, in constant competition with itself. Combination of industrial materials with soap and lint links the macrocosm of the city to the microcosm of personal rituals. This points towards the continual development of our lived environment, the social structures which are embodied within it, and the conditions of working as an artist in a developing city.

[195] Interview with Dominique White, 225.
[196] These histories are not always self-evident from the material alone, and may require additional contextualisation. However, it is the presence of materials that adopt a critical stance within the artwork.



(Figure 22: Sarah Roberts, “Fresh Meet” (detail). 2017; text and interactive mixed media tableaux; dimensions variable.)

Roberts’ practice is similarly charged with social narratives. Working with a wide array of materials which combine the handmade, fabricated and found is a means of visually representing a physical world which is simultaneously seductive and worryingly unpredictable (fig. 22). Roberts’ interest in the materials which steer us through public space is evident, as she works with the foundry which manufactures Transport For London’s metal street tiles to create some of her sculptures. Self-made objects are installed alongside bizarre Ebay finds - nose-plugs or cake tins - all of which signify an array of constructed human behaviours as they carry different and often jarring associations. Dread of single-use plastics emerges if we begin to unravel the material’s associations: many of the objects in the work are evidently disposable. Roberts urges us to pay attention to the connotations the

material carries with it in order to access the full implications of her work: we need to attune ourselves to material's behaviour, as our treatment of it sparks unexpected and often dangerous consequences.

The "material as information carrier" theme demonstrates that material has the capability of absorbing and retaining information from historic and contemporary culture. Artists use this to broadcast the specifics of social contexts to their audiences. The world in its past and present is represented through associations we make with material, as in Yuile's construction gravel or Roberts' plastic relics, and these are integral to analysing contemporary sculpture. To understand the work, we must attune ourselves to contextual connotations of its raw materials and become more receptive to the narratives contained within.

2.4 CONCEPTUAL ACCESS

This theme suggests that the hierarchical arrangement of conceptual idea over physical material is not adopted by contemporary artists and in fact, material may promote access to otherwise obscure concepts and theories. Polarisation of form and material in art criticism has led to the assumption that any artist grappling with materials is unlikely to be invested in conceptual development as material is predominantly unrecognised for its impact upon meaning.[197] In many cases, there is some truth to this. Bax views theory as stunting due to its preoccupation with the metaphysical and to Molloy, it represents a blockage between the academic and the experiential. These artists are knowledgeable of art criticism, but do not find it to be useful during the studio encounter.

[197] Petra Lange-Berndt, "How to be Complicit with Materials," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel, 2015), 12.

This approach is not unanimous, however. Smith's and White's practices both consider textual research as a field capable of corporealising material as they use it to discover new substances. Roberts devours texts of all kinds in the same way she devours material, drawing from philosophy, sociology, science fiction and contemporary prose. In these cases, the tangible and the intangible are not in opposition but intrinsically woven together. Concept impacts artistic engagement with material and vice versa, unsettling the approach taken by Krauss and Lippard that form or process are distinct from material meaning.

Elly Thomas uses academic theories of play to navigate her interactions with material, and her sculptures are objects to explore the world with.[198] Materials are selected for their particular qualities; stuffed silicone and fabric sculptures are squidgy, whilst papier-mâché is surprisingly robust and can withstand collision (fig. 23). Both offer different physical responses and different ways to play. Similarly to Smith and White, Thomas' theoretical research is integral to her material sensitivity. Adopting the language of play allows her to understand her interactions with objects, and the materials she uses embodies this by reflecting contradictions.

Theory is a tool for guidance. "I think the vocabulary within visual art is quite either or," she explains, " [...] and what we're actually talking about is a dialectic [...] you're never choosing a side really, you're always operating in this exchange."[199] Thomas' straddling of material and theory allows her to discern that they do not mutually exclude one another. The role material has to play in democratic access to contemporary art becomes clearer, since Thomas

[198] Thomas particularly cites Brian Sutton Smith.
[199] Interview with Elly Thomas, 218.

(Figure 23: Elly Thomas' sculpture installed at Rectory Projects, London, 2018.)

implies that non-academic audiences can decode meaning and access concept through material engagement.

The question of access is integral to this discussion. Concerns about who may or may not understand theoretical references emerge when we consider how intrinsically concept informs meaning. Fitzpatrick suggests that art's function is not to illustrate theoretical concepts, and work that applies it literally is reductive. White elaborates on this point, arguing that work which relies too heavily on specific theories is inaccessible, even to those who have received institutional training. Though she draws from academic research, her own use of theory is never the sole generator or meaning, and material enables her to promote wider access. "That's why I like to have a heavily material based practice," she explains, "because if you're not from an art background you can still take something from it." [200] Material provides an alternative critical path, allowing audiences to access and analyse conceptual meanings by corporealising them in sculpture.

The "conceptual access" theme shows that there is no unanimous approach to the relationship between metaphysical theory and physical material. The conditions which enable artists to weave theory and practice together are difficult to define and articulate, but it is possible to learn two things about the relationship between them in the context of materially-led sculpture. The first is that they do not mutually exclude one another, but operate dialectically: material can animate an idea, whilst theoretical concepts can assist artists to navigate the material world. The second is that material can enable democratic access to concepts and ideas, connecting the audience directly to the maker. In this way, theory is not detachable from material meaning, as it has been treated by historic art criticism.

[200] Interview with Dominique White, 225.

3. CONCLUSION: STRATEGIES FOR DECODING MATERIAL MEANINGS

Statements made by each of these eight artists has confirmed many of the issues explored in this thesis. For all of them, materially focused practice is a means of addressing material agency; environmental and ethical concerns; social and political contexts; and exploring conceptual ideas. They also concurred that material is not discussed in a way which communicates their actual use of it, which substantiates the primary conclusion from chapter two. In contrast to its treatment in art criticism, these interviews have demonstrated that material in contemporary sculptural production is not a secondary contributor, but encapsulates a multitude of different approaches, ideas and methods which combine in critical meaning.

This analysis suggests that artists' voices provide the means to work towards material literacy. The four themes - "artist as prospector;" "pragmatism and vibrancy;" "material as information carrier;" and "conceptual access" - lay the foundations for a critical material framework in sculptural practice which may be applied more broadly than these eight examples.

"Artist as prospector" invites us to question where materials come from and how they are encountered in the world around us. This theme enables audiences and critics to view art making as traversing a maze of social experiences outside the studio. Yuile's gathering of lint or Bax's collection of newspapers situate artists within the social fold, which enables a higher degree of empathy from audiences. It prompts us to ask questions about the materialisation of all objects, which new materialist scholars view as a requirement for social

analysis. Viewing this as an intrinsic source of meaning can overcome the separation of material and life, suggested variously by Bell, Greenberg, Krauss and Lippard.

“Pragmatism and vibrancy” enables us to understand how both practical decisions and intuitive responses to material are combined in the resulting sculptures. Artists can simultaneously view material as agentic, whilst making practical decisions relating to transportation and construction which may otherwise configure material as submissive. It allows viewers to perceive art making as a complex negotiation between human and material agency and as a result, to become more aware of material’s active behaviour or practical applications.

“Material as information carrier” foregrounds the narratives material carries with it from historical and contemporary society which are literally built into sculpture. Roberts’ installations, for example, embody the horror of single-use plastics; the bodily experience of navigating urban landscapes; and the habitual realm of domestic rituals. Decoding meaning from material via its social and historical contexts is not limited to an informed few, but something that all viewers can engage with as they draw knowledge from their own encounters with material.

“Conceptual access” demonstrates that the relationship between concept and material is not polarised but dialectical. This condition means that sculpture should not be a vehicle to illustrate theory, and reminds us that material meaning is not detachable from the artwork. Thomas’ use of play theories to investigate the world through materials is an example of this. If concept and material are viewed as operating in dialogue, then material opens up discussion around theoretical ideas by exploring them in a physical language.

Throughout its long history to contemporary practice, sculpture is deeply implicated with material interactions. As we encounter it, from the Elgin marbles, to Phyllida Barlow's detritus works, it offers many ways to engage with the world around us. Whilst knowledge and engagement with sculpture may principally be gained by examining and moving around the work or through the installation, an understanding of its material qualities is crucial to fully comprehending its meaning as an individual object, as well as the social network from which it is produced. Vocalising sculpture in material terms - its affordances, surfaces, fragments, even its smells - has the capacity to uncover and illuminate social practices, hidden histories and new tactile encounters.

This chapter has demonstrated that though "material" is not understood in art criticism as containing multiple sources of meaning, equal to those associated with "form," it is used by artists to promote access and communication in a way that challenges this pattern. Identifying and analysing these themes is an initial step towards unpacking material so that it may permeate critical language. Four broad areas of concern have been identified and established, which are shared by eight emerging sculptors. What is lacking here, however, is the detail and specificity which can only be accessed from direct personal experience. In order to observe material meaning first-hand, the next chapter explores and analyses my own experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

INTRODUCTION

This chapter shifts from the wider network of practicing sculptors to examine the individual experience of working with material. Material defies written analysis because it cannot be reduced to a single source of meaning: Ann-Sophie Lehmann suggests that material meaning can be drawn from multiple places, rather than existing as a definite attribute.[201] The artist interviews support Lehmann's claim, demonstrating that meaning manifests simultaneously in the situations in which material is encountered; the physical responsiveness of the material itself; the associated information which it absorbs; or the relationship between metaphysical concept and tangible material. These sources cannot be easily defined and it is necessary to examine material via different methods in order to fully comprehend how meaning is attached to specific material phenomena.

Qualitative interviews are one such method, and perform three functions. Firstly, they provide evidence that early-career practice remains invested in material artworks, and that sculpture is being continually produced despite the growing emphasis on new media, cross disciplinary or digital methods. Secondly, they demonstrate that these artists are considering materials' political and social contexts, uncovering sources of meaning which span beyond sculpture. Thirdly, all of the artists expressed that they are interacting with material in a way which is not reflected in art criticism, and the need for a new language is vital. The four themes ("artist as prospector;" "pragmatism and vibrancy;" "material as information carrier;"

[201] Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," in *Netherlands Yearbook for Art History 2012, Volume 62, Meaning in Materials: Netherlandish Art 1400 - 1800*, ed. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Frits Scholten and H. Perry Chapman, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 8.

and “conceptual access”) developed from the analysis of the interviews is a step towards this, as they translate sculptors’ own ideas into a critical framework which draws meaning from material. However, this methodology cannot reflect the individual physical encounter with material as it unfolds both in and out of the studio.

1. THE INDIVIDUAL ENCOUNTER

A rigorous account of working closely with a specific material is necessary. Turning to my own experiences as a maker, I use myself as a case study to observe the creative material encounter first-hand. Analysis is presented in three distinct phases: “before,” “during” and “after” the studio. Each of these phases are defined by different interactions.

Before the studio, material is encountered by the artist as social fabric where it is charged with associated information arising from its social histories, physical genealogies or personal experiences. The “artist as prospector” and “material as information carrier” themes have already uncovered these sources of meaning. As it enters the studio, material becomes the subject of creative experimentation: its physical characteristics generate meaning, which emerged in discussions of “pragmatism” and “vibrancy.” After the studio, material re-enters social networks as sculpture, where it is encountered and interpreted by audiences. The relationship between idea and material is discussed in the “conceptual access” theme. Though the four themes resonate here, they are unable to account for the ways in which meaning arises from the physical encounter with material, spanning its initial selection, through creative experimentation to the sculptural output.

2. INTEGRATING TEXT AND MATERIAL

The following chapter continues to weave theory and practice together. Analysis of different approaches to material agency in the literature review presented recommendations for

uncovering material meaning including anthropomorphism;[202] examining processes of materialisation;[203] and rearranging our understanding of agency.[204] These suggestions are expanded upon throughout this chapter as I incorporate texts from disciplines which influence contemporary art - namely art history, practice-based research and craft - to navigate the three phases of the material encounter. These fields do not always deal with material or sculpture overtly: they are included here because they present relevant strategies which can be exercised from an artistic perspective in order to access new knowledge. Exploration of theory and material from the perspective of a maker draws out the ways material signifies meaning to both audiences and critics.

Before commencing analysis, it is important to acknowledge the paradox of writing about the physical encounter. Lehmann writes that "the complexity of making challenges our most important analytical tool: written language and its essentially linear structure."[205] Making is not a linear process: all three phases - before, during and after - unfold concurrently and artists may experience unexpected discoveries or setbacks rather than continual progression.

It may, then, seem counterintuitive to attempt to capture the material encounter in a chronological written account, yet this thesis argues that written communication is necessary in order to involve material in critical discussions both internally and externally to visual art. Integrating vocal language, practical research and images - particularly those throughout this

[202] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.
[203] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.
[204] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63.
[205] Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Showing Making: On Visual Documentation and Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Modern Craft,* vol. 5, no. 1 (2012): 11. https://doi.org/10.2752/174967812X13287914145398

chapter - are methods of combining text with other methodologies in order to interrupt written analysis. Though making is challenged by linear structure, this arrangement acts as an organisational framework, positioning particular devices and phenomena along it in order to identify concrete sources of meaning. Though it is presented as such here, the "before," "during" and "after" the studio timeline is not linear in practice, and all phases unfold tangentially. In order to acknowledge this, it is necessary to address the boundaries between making and writing.

"Material thinking" is a term which emerged from practice-based research as an antidote to the deadening effect that language has on material. Paul Carter explains that material thinking occurs as art is constructed, and involves turning attention to the bodily process of making.[206] Rather than asserting control over material, this approach is more sensitive to its creative potential in collaboration with the maker.[207] The creative process is characterised by direct interaction with material, which is something that written text disguises.

Carter dismisses writing as a singular methodology, stating that critics and theorists "lack access to the creative process and, more fundamentally, they lack the vocabulary to explicate its intellectual character."[208] Though Carter argues in favour of material's contribution to meaning, this assertion is an extension of the barrier between material and theory, further preventing material from contributing to critical debates surrounding theoretical meaning.

Whilst Carter establishes a firm boundary between material and text, Barbara Bolt's approach is more nuanced. She perceives their relationship as reciprocal, explaining:

[206] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), xi.
[207] Ibid., xiii.
[208] Ibid., xi.

> Words may allow us to articulate and communicate the realisations that happen through material thinking, but as a mode of thought, material thinking involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and process in practice.[209]

Bolt identifies the role of text as important since it is required to translate and analyse the material encounter as an autonomous generator of meaning, and to involve it in critical discussions. Lehmann supports this claim, arguing that writers do not need to access material knowledge as artists do, but become materially literate themselves, which "simply means that we understand such knowledge and we are able to translate it."[210] In order to achieve this condition, material and text must have a dialectic relationship.

Developing material literacy from the perspective of a maker allows for the possibility of a written vocabulary that does not polarise theory and material, but weaves them together with a flexibility that allows critics to envisage the variety of meanings it may contribute. As both an artist and a writer, I am in a unique position to combine these methods towards the development of material literacy.

3. INTRODUCTION TO SALT DOUGH

Salt dough begins as an equal mixture of salt and flour. These ingredients are brought together with water, forming a substance that can be manipulated easily with the hands, but can also harden to produce solid forms. It can be mixed up from its component ingredients in the space of a few minutes. Flour is absorbent, holding moisture to create a soft and pliable

[209] Barbara Bolt, "The Magic is in the Handling," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), 30.
[210] Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Cube of Wood. Material Literacy for Art History," inaugural lecture (University of Groningen, 12 April 2016), 14. https://www.academia.edu/24457536/Cube_of_Wood._Material_Literacy_for_Art_History_Groningen_2016

material. Salt is necessary in order to dry out the mixture, resulting in an object that is surprisingly hard and resilient.

When the dry ingredients are first combined, they appear as pale beige sand, though it is still possible to discern the difference between the crisp salt and soft flour. Water is initially repelled as it is added, forming fair skin-coloured pools which are peppered with peachy scum. As it seeps in, encouraged with light fingers, the dry ingredients gather together forming soggy, yellow clouds which crumble at first but become more cohesive as more water is added. The disparate materials are kneaded together like bread dough. Pressing down with the heel of the hand and folding the dough in on itself repeatedly ensures that it is the same texture throughout.

The dough cracks and flakes apart, resisting burrowing fingers if there is not enough water. If there is too much, it is slack and clings to skin in oozing clumps like a *roux*. Either situation can be easily resolved by adding more of the necessary ingredients to achieve the preferred texture. Optimal consistency is soft and responsive to touch: it can be squashed in a fist and splurges between fingers.

Salt dough can be shaped and modelled easily with hands, lending itself to free manipulation and removing the need for specialist equipment. It can be worked with basic tools - such as knives or carving implements - to create finer detail in much the same way as clay, and may respond similarly to traditional sculptural materials. It can be flattened with a rolling pin: forms can be cut like cookies and as such, it brings with it associations of childhood and domesticity. To solidify, it can be left to dry over a period of days or baked in the oven on a low temperature from between thirty minutes to several hours.

The reasons for using salt dough for the purposes of this study are numerous and pertinent to both its physical characteristics and associated connotations. These reasons will be unpacked further in the following chapter, addressing the phases before, during and after the studio.

THE MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

BEFORE THE STUDIO

Meaning exists in materials before they are selected by the artist. Extending the creative process to examine material before the studio encounter anchors art making to wider patterns of interaction, and uncovers their loaded cultural information. Both of these elements have been highlighted as important factors from the analysis of material agency and the artist interviews.

The artist must negotiate a series of decisions outside of the studio before material can be transformed into an artwork. Use of materials intended for sculptural construction disguises this, be it traditional bronze or marble, or rudimentary plaster or resin: the choice to work with them is predetermined. In contemporary art making, any material has creative potential, and selection has become more complex. Sculptors are confronted with an endless list of choices: do I pick up that piece of timber from the street outside? Or purchase sacks of straw from a local supplier, or tins of beans from the supermarket? These decisions are not necessarily the product of one specific artistic need. They may be based on situation, associated meaning, or the product of unconscious decisions which develop significance over time.

Addressing material before the studio requires us to expand what we traditionally consider to be art making, and acknowledge artists' experiences outside of creative experimentation or sculptural construction. Sociologist Richard Sennett states that engagement with making "must start earlier, requires a fuller, better understanding of the process by which people go about producing things…"[211] If this is the case, we are more able to connect art making with

[211] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), 6.

wider patterns of behaviour, and as a result address the social and political meanings that emerge when artists select particular materials.

1. CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

1.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Material brings information from its contemporary context into the studio, which can be examined through the experiences that artist and audience have prior to viewing the completed sculpture. In philosophical approaches to materiality, Jane Bennett urges us to attune ourselves to our material encounters as a means of acknowledging the impact that they have on our individual and collective behaviour.[212] This is an important strategy if we are to understand how material influences relationships between sculpture and artist, as well as those we have with one another and our environment. Personal experience has already emerged from the "artist as prospector" theme: Olivia Bax's collection of free newspapers on her commute, for example, tells us that she may be limited by time and resources. Here, we see that autobiography plays a role in the manifestation of material meaning, as it imparts information about the individual who works with it.

Autobiography encourages reflexivity in visual art studies; it uncovers the personal and cultural factors which are influenced by material things. Practice-based researcher Robyn Stewart states: "Autobiography enables the practitioner to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience, in the context of life stories as the basis of research."[213] Stewart calls attention to the understanding that an artist can gain by acknowledging the overlaps between their personal lives and their making activities. Artists encounter potential

[212] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 4.
[213] Robyn Stewart, "Creating New Stories for Praxis: Navigations, Narrations, Neo-narratives," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), 129.

materials as they move through their environment, and this imparts information about our mutual experience of the world.

Joshua Shannon demonstrates how autobiography can be used as a specific tool for decoding meaning from recent art history. His study of artists in 1960s Manhattan contextualises artists' personal situations alongside their material decisions. Rauschenberg's use of discarded objects - the rubber tyre in "Monogram,"[214] for example - communicates that objects of this kind were in close proximity to him, and his use of them is an articulation of his own experiences of Manhattan as a city accumulating detritus on its streets.[215] This is evident in contemporary practice, as Laura Yuile gathers gravel from the construction site outside her studio as a means of communicating information about her place as an artist in a developing city. Many of the artists in this study offer clear examples of using materials that intermingle with their personal lives, and are used to convey information about their social positions which permeate their sculptures.

1.2 THE DECISION TO WORK WITH SALT DOUGH

In 2016, I began working with salt dough. I had recently moved to London in order to develop my emerging practice, and was seeking opportunities to make and exhibit sculpture. Though the capital remains the focus of the art world in the UK, the ability to work there is inhibited by mounting financial pressure, particularly for early career artists. As the cost of living increases, accessing spaces to make work becomes more challenging and showing in galleries is more competitive. Many of the interviewed artists shared this observation.

[214] Robert Rauschenberg, "Monogram," 1955-59; oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas with oil and rubber tire on Angora goat on wood platform mounted on four casters. Presented by Moderna Museet, Stockholm.
[215] Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 128.

Prioritising time making sculpture rather than earning income meant I was unable to afford a studio. It also meant living in a shared house with crowded communal spaces. Working with even the basic sculptural materials I was accustomed to - such as plaster, resin or concrete - became impossible. These substances are toxic and invasive; they create fumes and mess which are unwelcome in the home. I was limited by time, space and resources. Solving these problems was something I negotiated materially.

Like Yuile, Bax and Rauschenberg, I considered what materials I was in daily proximity with. Substances which were at my fingertips such as tin foil, gaffa tape and rubbish bags were abandoned: they lacked substance and plasticity as I searched for a material with bulk and structure. I required a substance that could be modelled easily with no specialist equipment, yet had the capacity to produce solid sculptures. It would be used and stored in the house, meaning that it must be non-toxic, easy to clean away and familiar to my housemates. It needed to be affordable and accessible to me, as money and time were limited. These criteria led me to consider what other processes occur in domestic space, which pointed towards the overlap between sculpting and cooking. Salt dough emerged as a solution. Local supermarkets were my primary source of material; my kitchen became a surrogate studio.

The reasons I continue to work with salt dough have increased in complexity, however, it was the situation I found myself in which influenced the initial decision to work with it. Selecting it involved initial analysis of its social presence through the lens of my personal experience. Flour and salt can be purchased conveniently and cheaply, and can be put to work in the home. Not only this, but my subsequent experience of purchasing ingredients for sculpture from my local supermarket as I bought groceries continually emphasised the accessibility of this material. This resonates after the studio; it is my intention that the

audience will empathise with this experience as they view the work in the gallery. The democratic aspects of salt dough are important contributors to the overall meaning of the work.

It is important to acknowledge that selecting salt dough was not a choice I made whilst conscious of my own experience as a source of meaning. Autobiography manifests material meaning more covertly: it calls us to notice the factors which lead an artist to encounter it, and direct the decision to bring it into the studio. Deciphering this enables us to deepen our understanding of art making in two important ways. Firstly, we are able to view it as something that does not occur only inside the studio but is subject to an unmappable network of encounters with materials which exist in the completed sculpture. Secondly, as a result of this, we begin to understand the ways in which material directs and shapes art making in collaboration with the artist before the studio.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 FOLLOW THE MATERIALS

Actor-network theory's call to "follow the materials" fosters a new way of visualising materials as actors in a network of social relations, though it is a vague aspiration as opposed to a concrete strategy. What does it really mean to "follow the materials?" How can we go about this, and why is it meaningful to artists?

Lehmann suggests that we must actively trace historical and social connotations and in doing so, acknowledge that material carries them into the resulting artwork. She states that "In order to reveal the meaning in materials and the multifarious relations they have established between making, representation and interpretation, materials have to be studied

in their historical and theoretical dimensions as well."[216] As it has emerged in my own experience of selecting salt dough, Lehmann understands that material is not limited to practical or aesthetic considerations, but is deeply entrenched in historical context. She elaborates: "materials are never just an aspect of art. They are always intrinsically intertwined with the aesthetic, historical, social, religious, political, intellectual etc. meaning of a work of art."[217] Material's social origins contribute to the cumulative meaning of the work, and must be acknowledged as influencing its creation.

This is evident in Aleksandra Lipińska's analysis of alabaster during the sixteenth century. According to Lipińska, the "beholder's visual or tactile perception of alabaster, in raw or artistic form, was reframed by 'learned cultural perception'."[218] Alabaster was imbued with religious and mystical properties both from theological texts and its resemblance of the pure body due to its pale colour and translucent, fleshy surface. Sculptors worked with it not only because its softness allowed finer detail, but it also absorbed the qualities projected upon it by the public. By following alabaster's social history, Lipińska unearths a host of cultural factors which influence artistic use, and discovers that spiritual perception impacts material meaning.

Alongside the spiritual, social shifts are tangibly captured in material. Shannon's commentary on artists working in 1960s Manhattan is again relevant here. Artists were quite literally using bits of the city to make work: Claes Oldenburg pieced together installations from scraps of cardboard and road signs which mirrored the "wreckage of renewal."[219] Shannon argues that the use of these materials imparts information about the changing

[216] Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 8.
[217] Lehmann, "Cube of Wood," 16.
[218] Aleksandra Lipińska, "*Alabastrum, Id Est, Corpus Hominis*: Alabaster in the Low Countries, a Cultural History," in *Netherlands Yearbook for Art History 2012*, 106.
[219] Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects*, 33.

nature of the New York environment, as they were a direct product of the shift to consumerism and the decay of the city.[220] Similarly to Lipińska, Shannon finds that following the material to its origins unearths its cultural significance.

When any material is chosen, its history follows it into the studio. These historic and modern examples highlight the importance that following material has to understanding the "material as information carrier" theme. Artists are demonstrating this phenomenon: Dominique White's nautical relics and Anna F.C. Smith's potholed clay are clear examples. What histories, values and meanings, then, can following materials lead to?

2.2 SITE VISITS

I made two site visits - to a flour mill and a salt works - in order to follow salt dough's material histories. Visiting these locations allowed me to understand their manufacture; experience the industrial and social conditions in which they have been produced; and see the effects they have had on the surrounding environment. Both sites are located in Cheshire - just over 15 miles from one another - and were both active during the mid-nineteenth century. Salt and flour, however, have very different histories which manifest in the contrast between the two sites, and the means by which each material was produced.

2.2.1 Lion Salt Works

Salt production has a long history in the UK. The tools and processes used have altered very little since ancient origins; the only significant difference is an increase in size, reflecting an increase in demand. Brine was collected from natural springs and then heated in a flat lead pan. As the water evaporated, salt crystals formed on the bottom. Wooden scoops (fig. 24) and rakes (fig. 25) were used to move them to the sides of the pan and lift them out of the

[220] Ibid., 3.

water. Salt quality is affected by the speed at which the brine evaporates and the rate at which it is stirred.

Salt was first produced in the home. It was extremely valuable during the iron age and traded between villages, establishing links between small communities.

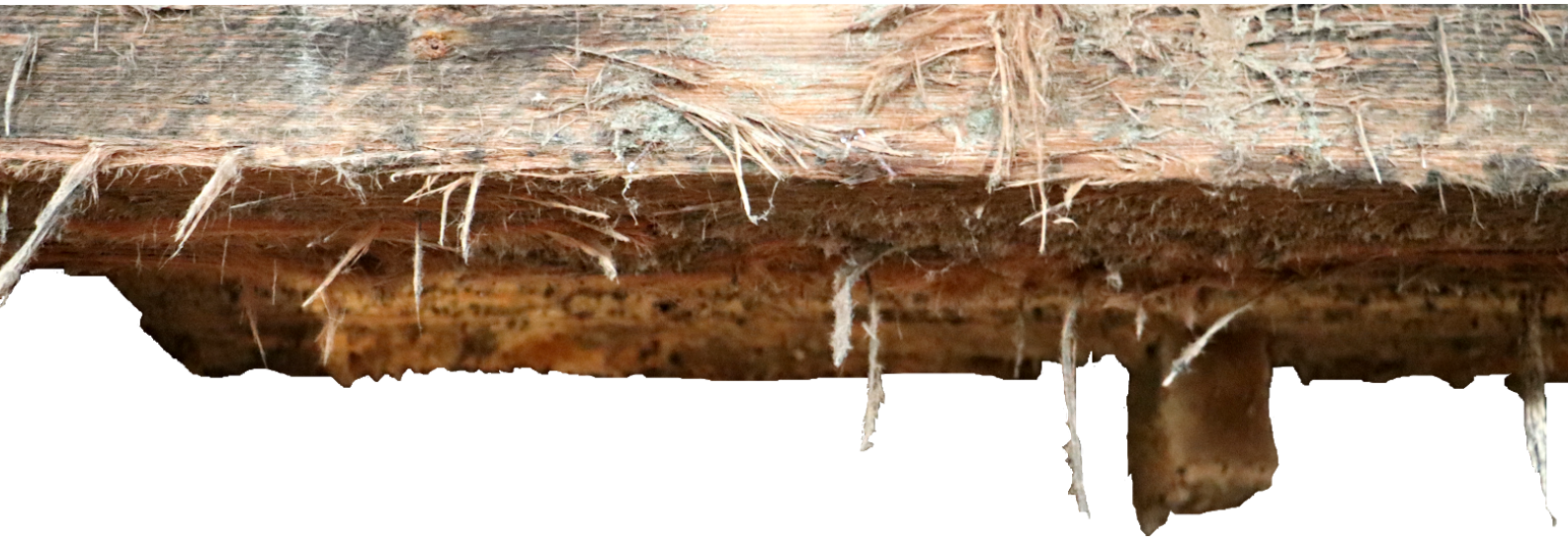
This continued into the Medieval period, when salt making became strictly regulated to control the income of poorer families. In the nineteenth century, demand exceeded what was achievable from domestic production as the population of the UK increased rapidly and its preservative properties were required all the more. Salt's commercial value seeped away: as so much was produced to meet demand, it became more affordable, and transformed into the modern product we are familiar with.

Rising to meet this new demand, Lion Salt Works opened in 1856. The underground rock salt deposit on which it sits was mined, creating vast subterranean caverns, though cautious miners left rock pillars with the intention of supporting the

ground above. In 1890, a shaft was excavated so that brine could be pumped to the surface at an increased rate (fig. 26). The site comprises of a collection of large wooden sheds with corrugated iron roofs, each housing various stages of the salt making process. Pan houses contain lead pans which are close to three meters across (fig. 27). Salt crystals were packed

into rectangular wooden tubs and moved to the stove houses, where bricks of salt crystals like glittering white breeze-blocks would dry out before crushing and packing. Fifteen to twenty salt-makers - or “lumpmen” - were employed, making two million tonnes of salt per year and producing an excess of product with fewer people. Whilst the making process was a basic one, they became skilled as they gained experience judging the heat of the fire beneath the pan, and the speed at which to rake the brine.

Ongoing production increased urbanisation around the works as a larger workforce created a need for local housing. Effects of salt making on this development were volatile and



dangerous. Salt has corrosive properties which damaged the objects and bodies it had repeated contact with. The wooden walls of the pan houses are shredded and torn, the timbers hanging in dangling threads (fig. 28). Metal machinery is scarred red from contact with brine and crystals which increase the rate of rusting (fig. 29). Workers were also subjected to these conditions. Skin painfully swelled from steam and shrivelled from salt. Their shoes, clothes and hair grew crystals (fig. 30, fig. 31); their hands cracked and bled.

The most alarming physical effect is the “flashes” which surround Lion Salt Works: deep indents in the earth where the ground beneath has collapsed. Many are filled with water, creating manmade lakes. This is a result of “subsidence:” the erosion caused by excavating rock salt and pumping brine, which dissolved the supporting underground pillars. Flashes occur without warning. Houses in the village were suddenly destroyed. In 1891, the Brine Subsidence Compensation Act formed, offering financial aid to those rendered homeless by these effects. This group is still active, as the effects of subsidence continue long after production ceased in 1986.

Many different forms of meaning crystallise in salt's history. The national transition from domestic to commercial trade is present: salt began as a valuable substance produced on small scales for thousands of years, and then exploded into a necessity that was manufactured industrially and sold cheaply. At different points in its history, salt has been expensive or affordable, reflecting the importance of its particular properties for food supply. It represents a swelling population during the nineteenth century, and embodies this enormous social shift. Not only this, but the effects of salt demonstrate its agentic capacity beyond its role as a preservative as it causes houses and earth to collapse, and bodies and buildings to corrode.

2.2.2 Bunbury Flour Mill

Flour is a staple of almost every culture across the globe. Cultivation of wheat is an ancient human activity, and crucial to the formation of Western civilization.[221] Milling and baking began in Mesopotamia around 5600 BC and spread across Europe to the UK during Roman rule, contributing to population growth. Early processing of grain into flour was arduous: a

[221] W.P. Edwards, *The Science of Bakery Products* (Cambridge: Royal Society of Chemistry, 2007), 1.

pestle and mortar was used to grind away the tough outer kernel. Later, quern stones were used (fig. 32). These were pairs of circular stones sitting on top of one another. Grain was poured into a hole in the centre, which was crushed as the top stone was turned, and flour spilled from the gap in between. As the population expanded, flour mills were developed by Roman and Greek technology. They were a common fixture in Medieval Britain, and tended to be small initiatives which catered for estates rather than markets.

Bunbury Mill is one of twenty-four watermills which sit beside the river Gowy. It supplied the Tollemache estate, a wealthy family with land across the UK. The mill is over a thousand years old, though the building as it exists today was constructed in 1835. A crew of just a few workers who lived on Tollemache land produced grain and maintained the site, and it remained on this small scale until its closure in the 1960s.

A pair of millstones grind together, shaking the building as grain is processed into flour (fig. 33). Increased pressure and shallow grooves cut in contrasting angles across each stone

improve the quality of the product. A network of iron gears connect the water wheel to the millstones, which grind flour that emerges from a chute (fig. 34). Like salt, we again see the volatile properties of the material as the site was in constant danger: flour is kept dry, and can create the conditions to cause an explosion large enough to destroy the mill should the gears produce a spark. If there is no grain in the mill, the millstones turn too quickly and the building shakes and rumbles, risking damage and collapse. Production was ceaseless as a prevention. The building is at the mercy of the material, which coats its surfaces like dandruff (fig. 35).

Contrasting the industrial production at Lion Salt Works, processing of flour at Bunbury was not beholden to a commercial market until much later. As the UK's population boomed after World War II, however, modern mills were required to meet the demands of the supermarket rather than the private estate. Modern milling is a considerably longer process: flour is more vulnerable to contamination than salt, and became the subject of many government regulations during the twentieth century.[222] Grain must pass through magnets and sieves to remove pieces of machinery and earth. It is washed multiple times on its journey to become flour. Demand for the product has reached optimal commercialisation, and production methods reflect the enormous market that mills must now cater for.

Following flour through its historical processing reflects a recent period of history when food was produced and consumed locally, and this demonstrates the fundamental role that material has in both ancient and modern cultural development. It occupies an important social position due to its ongoing role in feeding growing populations, and its transition from private to public markets echoes the rapid integration of food products into the supermarket. Similarly to salt, however, examining its production uncovers the alarming effects it may incur which contrast its comfortable presence in domestic settings.

2.3 MEANING IN FLOUR AND SALT

The strategy of tracing material histories recommended by Latour, Lehmann, Lipińska and Shannon does, indeed, lead us to the important social positions in which they are embedded. Flour and salt both reacted to and influenced cultural shifts on a global scale. Though they evolved differently - with salt production riding the wave of the industrial

[222] Ibid., 40. During covid-19 lockdown, supermarkets were sites of panic-buying, and flour - unlike other essential products such as pasta, toilet paper and canned tomatoes - did not return to the shelves for many months as supply was unable to meet demand.

revolution, and flour transitioning to modern processes later - they are both products which have a strong relationship with the spread of civilization and the post-war population boom.

If meaning is drawn from the social histories of salt and flour, the sculptures I have produced foreground tensions in the commodification of food; the continuing development of industry; the departure of making from the domestic space; and the unexpected consequences of large scale processing. We can also acknowledge that populations continue to rely on access to flour and salt in order to produce and store vital nourishment. These contextual aspects form part of the work's rationale. Connecting sculpture to these contexts allows me to draw comparisons with art making. By bringing flour and salt into the studio, the resulting sculptures are fundamentally linked to these conditions, and comment on social structures larger than the substances themselves.

3. CONCLUSION: MATERIAL STORIES

The meanings which are present in material before the studio are anchored in their interactions on both individual and social levels. Material stories span from historical processes up to the current cultural situations which influence an artist's decision to work with it. Salt and flour inherit these histories, and the sculptures can follow the materials backwards in time, discovering their importance in the construction of civilization and their role in the development of modern commercial markets. Studying the production of salt and flour also display its volatile characteristics which counteract their usefulness: salt can erode objects and bodies, and flour has the capacity to cause an explosion. Familiar substances are unmasterable. We can also turn our attention to the recent, intimate histories that they share with the artists who encounter them, considering the conditions which lead us to pick up particular substances as sources of meaning.

The meanings which present themselves in this phase follow the material into the work rather than emerging from the creative encounter. Though the artist may not actively draw on them critically, it remains important to acknowledge the influence historical and autobiographical material conditions have on artistic decisions in order to bring art out from its rigid material hierarchies and position it within the messy material encounter of the world outside.

THE MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

DURING THE STUDIO

This phase of the material encounter is characterised by making which, in the context of this study, concerns material's creative potential and the artist's willingness to explore it. A process of familiarisation begins as characteristics and responses are initially unknown. Uncovering and understanding is necessary. As this progresses, the artist acquires a detailed knowledge of what the material can accomplish, as well as its limitations. The outcome is a repertoire of technical methods which contribute to sculptural construction.

Autobiographical and historical connotations explored in the previous section accompany the material into the studio, but the focus shifts to practical experimentation. Lehmann identifies making as an integral contributor to meaning, stating that "if the analysis of things ignores processes of production, it fails to acknowledge how the complex interaction between humans, materials, tools, and technologies shapes the possible meanings and usages of the resulting artifact."[223] Effects of the making process ripple beyond the individual experience, connecting the emerging relationships to the cumulative material meaning. This resonates with the new materialist call to examine the materialisation of objects, and informs the analysis of sculpture in this research.[224]

The making process is not fixed and logical, but constantly disrupted by unanticipated discoveries, failures and successes. Dominique White, for example, used powdered kaolin clay for several years and only found that it could be used for casting after it cured into a smooth, solid white disc at the bottom of a bucket. This led her down a new path of discovery with a familiar material. Lehmann acknowledges this as one of the main reasons

[223] Lehmann, "Showing Making," 10.
[224] Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 2.

why writing about making art presents such a challenge, as it implies a linear progression which is not reflected in practice.[225] Current theories of materiality concur that material is not submissive to human intention and retains inscrutability: we must leave behind the idea that it bends entirely to the will of the artist.

1. MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS

1.1 INHERENT CREATIVITY

Gaining awareness of how material's responsive capability includes the ways it might resist artistic intentions as well as adhere to them. "Pragmatism and vibrancy" has already investigated this: Elly Thomas identified material responsiveness as a rich source of enquiry in her work. Most of the artists interviewed concurred that they perceive their making process as a negotiation between their own intentions and the characteristics of the material. It possesses an "inherent creativity," distinct from the artist's creative will: its behaviour might resist the form imposed on it, assuming one that is quite different.

Material in art making must be re-conceptualised in accordance with material's inherent creativity. Paul Carter states that "Matter ceases to be solid. Its *beau ideal* is no longer the marble from which the sculptor excavates an image. Instead, matter becomes visible."[226] When material is considered "solid," its temperamentality is removed, causing it to disappear within the object. Material meaning is more apparent if artists, critics and audiences perceive it instead as active, which grants it visibility. Carter acknowledges the autonomous creative intelligence which all material possesses. It may morph unexpectedly, shed form or redistribute into other arrangements.[227] I adopt this approach as it allows material to be

[225] Lehmann, "Showing Making," 11.
[226] Carter, *Material Thinking*, 182.
[227] Ibid., 185.

utilised artistically whilst still retaining its capacity to exist as messy and reactive, remaining visible even when the sculpture is complete.

Salt dough is an excellent example of Carter's approach (fig. 36). He describes the dough-like quality of all matter, as it assumes form with difficulty and then gradually loses it.[228] Perhaps this was not intended to be taken literally, but a lump of raw salt dough exudes its own creative potential: it can be modelled easily, but it is not submissive to form. It does not hold relief in the way that clay or wax might, and responds more like play-doh or plasticine. Plump and bulbous, it balloons fine detail into bloated, indelicate forms (fig. 37). Any attempt at careful modelling is erased as it sinks and sags, sweating delicacy away.

[228] Ibid., 185.

Lacking the plasticity of clay, the structure of wood or the mass of stone may render salt dough an inappropriate material for sculpture. According to Carter, however, materials which operate between formlessness and solidity are more visible and therefore more open to analysis. Salt dough is just malleable enough to partially accept the form I impose upon it, whilst rejecting finer details; its bready constitution retains its original materiality. Negotiation between material and artist is a site for making meaning. The inherent creativity of material transformation is present in the responsiveness of salt dough, as its agentic capacity remains evident in the completed sculpture.

1.2 SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

All materials have an array of unique characteristics. Whether they lend themselves well to sculpture making or not, all of them generate meaning. Art historian Frits Scholten observes this in his analysis of snow sculpture, explaining that “the unusual medium of snow, with its often contradictory associations and properties, in part dictated the form and subject matter

of the Antwerp snow sculptures of 1772."[229] Heavy snow caused the city to disappear under a thick white blanket, which local artists took full advantage of. For several days, the streets functioned as a simultaneous studio and gallery: snow sculptures were made and exhibited for all to see. Scholten examines this spontaneous event through the lens of material characteristics and uncovers numerous sources of meaning.

Scholten compiles a list of snow's qualities which affect its sculptural capability. It responds to temperature and is not difficult to shape, meaning that it requires no training or specialised tools.[230] It is democratic: it is available to all at no cost, making it ideal for experimentation. These traits are evident in the resulting sculptures. They impact form, aesthetic and subject matter, all of which were more unusual forms than marble work.[231] Scholten's conclusions support material's "specific characteristics" as critically contributing to meaning, as their discovery and application usher artists through the making process, defining the aesthetic of the completed sculpture and the viewer's interpretation of it.

Turning towards my experiences with salt dough and the meanings produced by its characteristics, I have already established the importance of its accessibility and malleability. Using it to build sculpture communicates that art making may be similarly accessible, open to experimentation and interpretation. Though Lippard dismisses its critical meaning, she does note that material with which audiences have prior tactile experience has increased potential to resonate than one which remains closed and unfamiliar.[232] Known characteristics

[229] Frits Scholten, "Malleable Marble: The Antwerp Snow Sculptures of 1772," in *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art 2012, Volume 62, Meaning in Materials*: *Netherlandish Art 1400 - 1800,* ed. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Frits Scholten, and H. Perry Chapman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 267.
[230] Ibid., 267.
[231] Ibid., 268.
[232] Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 - 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), vii.

encourage empathy in the viewer: the democratic bridge between art making and everyday behaviour becomes more apparent.[233]

Specific characteristics of salt dough emerge through physical interaction. At first, I had little knowledge of its behavior; I assumed that any sculpture I made would be creatively restricted due to its mucid texture. Initially mixing salt and flour, and feeling its similarities to bread dough, I could not imagine this material becoming enduringly solid.

Raw, elastic dough hardens most successfully when baked in the oven on a low temperature. As a large mass, salt dough will not solidify throughout. Dense forms subside into puddles; surfaces become brown crusts whilst the interior remains pale and soft. Internal moisture causes collapse or mould growth. To avoid this, my early sculptures were installations of multiple miniatures, each scarcely larger than a thumb. Failing to test the

[233] This claim is not a simple one, however, as familiar materials may be alienating to wider audiences. Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, with their use of domestic objects and consumable materials, have often faced controversy. Though I intend my material selection to promote empathy, the relationship between viewer and material is complex.

characteristics of salt dough resulted in sculpture which did not demonstrate its visceral materiality. Both the work and the material disappeared into the gallery space.

With experience, a host of characteristics slowly revealed themselves. While it was not possible to construct a large, complex structure from a single mass of dough, small or flat forms hardened well. The material - though yielding when raw - solidifies to the texture of terracotta when completely dry. Tapped, it makes the sound of sturdy timber, and like fired clay or cast plaster, it becomes resilient (fig. 38).

Raw salt dough is sticky.
Sloppy clumps clasp onto my hands.
It calls up Julia Kristeva's abjection, as she describes the "repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck."[234] The material encounter here borders on the unpleasant:
salt dough hangs
from my fingers
in thick,
creamy
clots
like
fleshy
mud (fig. 39).

[234] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

Experiencing its abject characteristics suggested that just as wet dough clings onto skin, so too does it cling to itself. Applied as a glue between baked layers, raw dough adheres and hardens without needing time in the oven. Used like mortar curing between bricks (fig. 40), this unexpected capacity of salt dough facilitated

construction of large sculptures. Gradually, as I worked with its characteristics and not against them, the material revealed ways in which it could be used to build works which occupied space and retained their materiality.

Systematically, small components are assembled into large sculptures using wet dough as surrogate cement. This forms an internal armature. As it hardens, soft, beige dough turns rough and white. Once solid, a layer of coloured dough - tinted with acrylic paint - is applied. Pressed on by hand, it captures fingerprints and nail grooves on its surface (fig. 41). This layer has two functions: it adds colour and detail whilst increasing the strength of the final form by creating a coating which fuses the internal layers together. Contrary to my initial

perceptions, these sculptures are not limited by a non-art material, but have developed to become large and imposing via its specific characteristics.

Examining salt dough in this way challenges the traditional understanding of material in art criticism. It is not limited by formlessness, but has structural and load-bearing potential. It invites innovation and engineering as it lends itself to new construction methods. Creative experimentation demonstrates the capacity quotidian materials have to create large, complex sculptural forms. The making process becomes simultaneously more accessible and more extraordinary, exposing the agentic nature of material as it is explored in theories of material agency.

2. MATERIAL AND SKILL

2.1 REDEFINING SKILL

Unearthing and utilising material's characteristics and creativity is entwined with acquisition of skill. Whilst material's affordances retain their own meaning, expertise with emergent qualities results in refined application. Some of the interviewed artists acknowledged their selection of non-traditional materials as taking ownership of their making process, developing new methods which were led by their individual material encounter, rather than pre-existing technical skills which are connected to institutionalised training. Rebecca Molloy, for

example, salvages detritus and uses papier-mâché because it allows her to evolve and establish her own technical knowledge. Mark Miodownik notes that our ancient ancestors developed metallurgy via the material encounter with no understanding of iron's behaviour on a molecular, scientific level.[235] Similarly, the lumpmen at Lion Salt Works cultivated a detailed understanding of producing high quality salt through physical engagement, which is itself a method of developing and transmitting new knowledge.

Blurred boundaries between contemporary art making and craftsmanship must be negotiated here. Richard Sennett argues that craft sheds light on human behaviour, because it reflects the relationship between theory and practice by combining thinking and feeling.[236] If this is the case, skill is not only acquired through study, but via contact with material which occurs during the making process. Sennett observes the disparity between craft and art as slow versus rapid making respectively. Since artistic disciplines began to dissolve in the expanded field, artists became less concerned with craftsmanship and material specificity.[237] Craft, however, continues to foreground material mastery.[238] Though this division throws up problems concerning the place of skill in contemporary sculpture, it does suggest that it is developed and transferred through repeated physical interaction.

Practice-based research has made significant advances in redefining skill. Estelle Barrett states that it is developed and applied in practice, thus acquired physically through trial, error and experimentation.[239] Barrett views skill as something which is not necessarily the gained through time served as Sennett does, but may be the result of a sudden response to an

[235] Mark Miodownik, *Stuff Matters* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2014), 10.
[236] Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 6.
[237] Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, ed. Robert Morris (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 46.
[238] Ibid., 123.
[239] Estelle Barrett, *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), 5.

unexpected situation and spontaneous understanding of material. Skill is not directly passed on through text-based research, but gained tangibly by negotiating material properties.

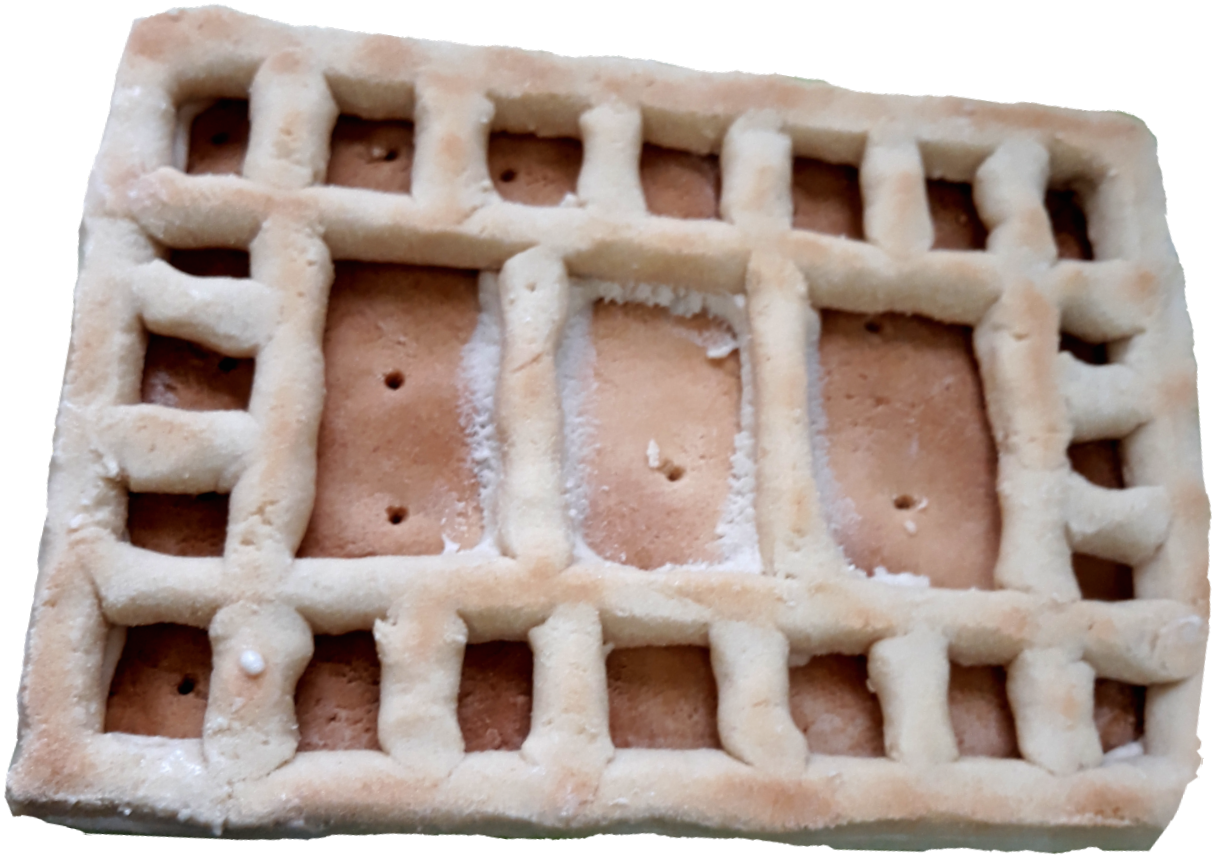
These arguments inform us that skill, like the making process, is not simply the linear transfer of knowledge which progresses towards material mastery. It may manifest from the sustained physical encounter with material, or rapid problem solving. Both are anchored in the physical encounter.

2.2 SKILL TRANSFERENCE

Throughout this study, the salt dough sculptures I constructed developed significantly. Works created in the first year were crude: objects were small, slumped and hunched, shrugging off form almost entirely. More recent works are larger. Though they still lean, they stand solidly upright. Details still depict the material's "inherent creativity," but are more refined and nuanced, and colour more vibrant. The works, which began as clumpy, pale and diminished, have matured into solid, vivid, imposing sculptures.

Touch is important. Miodownik asserts our capacity to access material information unknowingly: our fingers are sensitive to the subtle differences between real and forged banknotes, for example.[240] My skin knows the optimal texture of dough as I mix it up; my fingers add the correct amount of water in unconsciously measured drips; and my knuckles test constructed forms for solidity. I did not possess this knowledge at the beginning of this study, and I scarcely noticed it develop until I observed it in my actions. As Sennett and Miodownik suggest, I absorbed skill through sustained contact with the material. The more knowledge I gained from salt dough, the more technically sound the sculptures became.

[240] Miodownik, *Stuff Matters*, 56.



The making process developed as new problems presented themselves. Structural issues emerged as the sculptures I made became more ambitious in scale and complexity. A tall sculpture unexpectedly collapsed having shown no external signs of weakness: one of the flat rectangles of baked dough built into the base could not support the bulk on top of it. In response, I built cross bars into the layers, much like a monocoque shell (fig. 42). This form supported weight, allowing the sculptures to continue to grow with increased stability and structure. Rather than referring to how well executed a resulting work is, skill may also refer to the understanding of material behaviour and the willingness that the artist has to work collaboratively with it.

If we alter our understanding of skill to something which is the outcome of our actions - in sustained work or reactive problem solving - and a relationship of intra-action - of give and take - then we can perceive material behaving differently to conventions in art criticism. As well as carrying social and political information, material is a receptacle of knowledge and thus of skill. The importance of the physical encounter as a ground for learning must be reflected in analysis of making, and the capacity of material to transfer knowledge must be understood in order to view it as an active agent in this process.

3. SHOWING WORKING

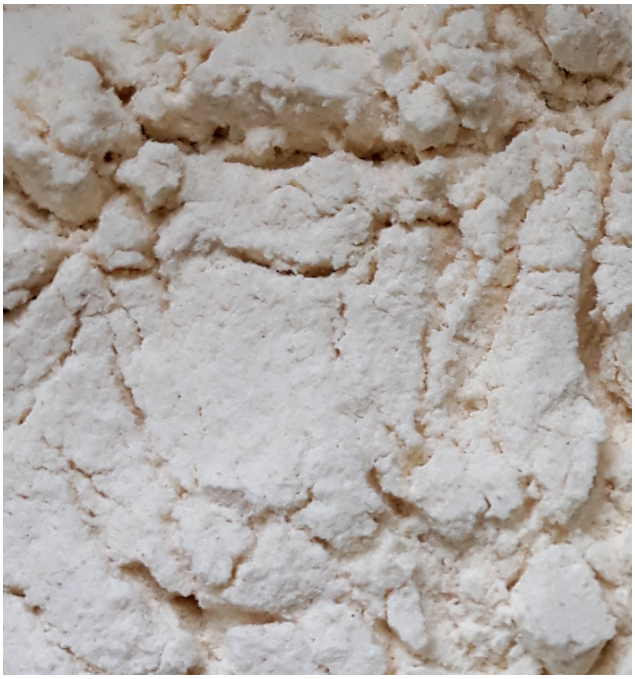
3.1 EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

As outlined previously, capturing material in textual language can be problematic. However, Lehmann remarks that "Just as materials are not alone on a material level, they are embedded in a web of language on a cultural level, and it is through textual references in inventories, recipes, anecdotes, pamphlets and poems that their meaning-making becomes most obvious to us."[241] Because materials possess multiple layers of meaning, translation of the material encounter into other formats is crucial in order to facilitate discussion, as it allows connections to be drawn between its social, historical and physical dimensions in order to uncover new relationships which impart new information.

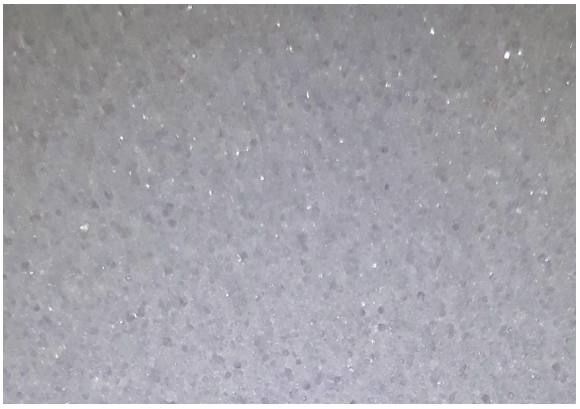
Language may draw out material as well as obscure it. Sennett observes the ways writing captures the physical encounter in his analysis of instructional recipes. This linguistic format has relevance here, as it directly engages with material making. Though this thesis does not intend to develop technical instructions in the same manner as a recipe, it does seek methods to establish material literacy in art criticism. Sennett urges writers to use expressive, literary language as a solution.[242] Description, metaphor and narration are used

[241] Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 18.
[242] Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 179.

by successful cooks to communicate the material encounter in text. These linguistic tools provoke empathy in the reader: viewers can compare unknown actions with familiar ones,[243] and other comparisons allow us to bring in than associated meanings.[244] Rather material acting as a barrier between language and theory, expressive point. may function as an access



Translation of experience into text occurs after the studio. What unfolds during the studio is the contact with material which throws up the expressive language Sennett identifies. As I sink my



hands into flour, I notice its similarities to talcum powder, casting plaster and chalk dust. It is soft and welcoming, like beige velvet. I watch its surface crumble, slide and crack, shifting like small dunes (fig. 43). Salt is like sharp sand,

[243] Ibid., 186.
[244] Ibid., 189.

which alludes to its constructive properties (fig. 44). It bites at skin, raising it in angry red pimples (fig. 45). Feeling salt's sting conjures the lumpmen at Lion Salt Works. Smelling faintly of seaweed or sweat, it glimmers like finely crushed glass. It crunches when squeezed. Dough itself has no consistent texture, fluctuating between creamy mashed potato and stiff, dry soil. It can have a glossy sheen, as on clammy flesh, or a matt, sandpaper surface which is abrasive to the touch (fig. 46). Burrowing fingers into material delves down towards the information it contains within, and uncovers language which illuminates its behaviour.

As I write this thesis, I remind myself that writing about material may cause it to fade into invisibility if it is used only as a portal into metaphysical or intangible discussions.[245] Expressive language can be used to create space for material in analytical text, as argued by Sennett and Lehmann. This is vital for two reasons. Firstly, it allows readers to empathise with my own experiences in the studio, facilitating access to the hidden qualities of salt

[245] As in the transcendent model.

dough which reveal themselves to the maker. Secondly, it creates crucial space for material to exist in critical text, and for its meaning to be acknowledged in art criticism.

3.2 TACTILE IMAGES

Translating material meaning is not confined to written language. John Berger argues that images may be used as a tool to communicate information as he observes that seeing always comes before text. Putting this approach into practice, Berger developed the visual essay, solely using images which are intended to "raise as many questions as the verbal essays."[246] Similarly, Lehmann recognises that images "capture the complexity and simultaneity of making where words fail to do so."[247] Non-linear making may be communicated more effectively with audiences through photography: the flow of written text is interrupted, reflecting the material encounter in the studio. Images extend the sense of touch, allowing the viewer to share the artist's experience.[248] They have both instructional and emotive value.

Previously in this section, I have described the method of working with salt dough which emerged through interaction with its characteristics. My intention was to demonstrate how intrinsically material defines the means by which it becomes sculpture and how this actively contributes to meaning rather than to describe this process as technical instructions. Similarly, the images which appear throughout this section are not intended to demonstrate making, (though some do depict elements, such as the construction of the internal armatures). Instead, they communicate the physical encounter with salt dough. Sticky, raw dough hanging from my fingers (fig. 39) brings the damp texture much closer to the fingers of the reader. Detail of silky, soft flour (fig. 43) or itching, glittering salt (fig. 44) display their

[246] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2008), 1.
[247] Lehmann, "Showing Making," 12.
[248] Ibid., 14.

characteristics more vividly than descriptive language might achieve in isolation. Images of the sculptures during construction contrast the images of slack and formless salt dough, clearly evidencing the stark contrast between the look and feel of the material in its different states, and how vital they are to the making process. Images evoke bodily sensation, which is a necessary condition of material literacy.

As with the material itself, Lehmann notes that images bring together overlapping sources of meaning, imparting information about "the social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the production of artifacts."[249] Photographs appear throughout this thesis with the intention of demonstrating the various elements of the material encounter. The effects of salt and flour production are depicted in the previous section. The awkward, self-conscious presence of the completed sculptures are presented in the next. Introducing pictures in this way animates the knowledge imparted by the text. The images demonstrate, describe and establish empathy. They provide evidence of material's characteristics, and the effects that it has when interacting with bodies, objects and other materials that it comes into contact with. Images resonate with the tactile senses of the viewer, animating material and its physical presence in analytical text.

4. CONCLUSION: THE TACTILE MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

Though making is the focus during the studio, material is the focus of this thesis and process is viewed as equal to material rather than privileged above it. Examining material's impact on making allows it to gain autonomy from Lippard's animate model and establish its own critical framework. However, making and material are intrinsically woven together: it is impossible to consider one without the other following it into the discussion. This section has analysed process from the perspective of material, observing the ways in which salt dough

[249] Ibid., 13.

has educated me through physical encounter, and foregrounding the various ways in which this contributes to meaning.

Material's physical behaviour is a vital element of acquiring and establishing knowledge. Salt dough is not submissive but responsive to my artistic intention: it retains "inherent creativity." This not only defines the aesthetic of the completed sculpture, but enables us to perceive material agency through interaction. "Specific characteristics" of salt dough also direct making: negotiating with them revealed a process which allowed me to overcome my perceived limitations of working with a non-traditional material. Its malleable stickiness combines with its solidity in order to produce complex sculptures. It can be used as an adhesive, a support structure, a colouring agent and modelling material. If we acknowledge salt dough as possessing characteristics which can be applied in innovative ways, we may begin to visualise and articulate all material as agentic whilst retaining constructive potential. Being attentive to "skill transference" via physical encounters with material understands it as a container of knowledge. If we are able to understand skill as something which is passed on from material, we see its role as an active participant not only in how objects are made, but also in the information gained by putting it to work.

Bringing material into analytical space evokes empathy in the reader, forging a relationship between the artwork and the individual which creates the conditions for decoding meaning. The studio encounter must be depicted in order for material to be manifest in art criticism. This is achieved by representing it with expressive language and tactile images. Both are evident at points in this thesis, but it is during the studio that I have the most visceral interaction with salt dough which generates the language and images through which material

can be vividly represented. In this way, salt dough is present in the text, and begins to intervene in critical discussions.[250]

[250] “Expressive language” and “tactile images” are not included in the final vocabulary as they are a means of depicting material’s contribution to meaning rather than actual sources.

THE MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

AFTER THE STUDIO

Material acquires another layer of meaning as it becomes a completed art object after the studio. In the previous section, I demonstrated the significant role material plays in sculptural production. Now, I will examine the works themselves and what it means to manifest sculpture with a specific material.

This phase is characterised by the experience of the completed artwork. Analysis of the sculptures is determined by material's impact on the meaning of the work as it relates specifically to aspects such as aesthetic, iconography and representation. The following approach offers an alternative to Krauss' transcendent model: here, formal devices are viewed as an equal contributor rather than superior to material. I will explore how the two operate reciprocally in order to generate meaning.

As well as the physical features of the sculptures, the ways in which meaning is attributed symbolically are acknowledged, drawing upon the intangible information which the sculptures embody, or that the audience infers from their prior material experiences. This will take into account the social status of both material and subject, examining how the two may influence one another to adopt a critical stance.

Dissemination of the sculptures is another focus of this section. Material moves beyond the private encounter and interacts with public audiences as the work enters the exhibition space. Setting and staging have a dramatic impact here: experience of the sculpture in a conventional white cube space will be different from that in a repurposed warehouse; lighting and arrangement will also play a role. As a result, analysing this phase comes with

limitations. In the section prior, I recounted my personal experience with material which was not subject to external influence. Here, I examine my intentions for the sculptures with the caveat that the work may be interpreted in any number of unforeseen ways by the viewer. As such, I outline my aims whilst being mindful that they are subject to other possible readings.

1. ICONOGRAPHY AND AESTHETIC

1.1 MATERIAL REPRESENTATION

Subject matter, and the means by which it is represented are vital concerns as we begin to question what is depicted and in which material. Though it can be explored as a more complex term, "subject matter" is understood here as the depicted or implicated object,[251] whilst "representation" indicates the formal means and iconographic language in which it is manifested. The interviewed artists demonstrate a wide spectrum of representational modes: the figurative such as Jamie Fitzpatrick's wax statues, Rebecca Molloy's food and plants or Anna F.C. Smith's toby jugs; abstract forms which allude to subjects such as Elly Thomas' organic plant-like works or Dominique White's sunken ships; tending more towards abstract representation as in Olivia Bax's paper pulp shapes; or presenting untransformed subjects as in Sarah Roberts' installations of found objects, or Laura Yuile's piles of gravel. In all of these examples, material remains visible in the completed sculpture and whether or not it is identifiable, its physical presence potentially unearths new lines of enquiry: where has it come from, why has the artist selected it and what social and historical connotations does it carry? Whether it tends towards the figurative or the abstract, the way material is used to represent subjects in these examples is a clear generator of meaning: it is necessary to question the subject and the material in tandem in order to fully understand sculpture.

[251] Alfred Gell refers to this as the "prototype" throughout *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

My sculptures are positioned towards the figurative end of the representational spectrum outlined above. Salt dough depicts subjects from various different sources, including body parts, clothing, food, tools and utensils, and sculptural motifs. A pair of knees, a felt hat, a burger and a hammer perch atop “marble” or “wooden” plinths, reaching tall or slumping close to the ground (fig. 47). Though I adopt a figurative approach, salt dough prevents the objects from attaining illusionistic realism: the material’s “inherent creativity” is retained in their hunched posture, bulbous relief and textured surfaces. The material brings with it uneven texture, a lack of delicate detail and a slumping structure. Its cartoon-like form, derived from simplified colour, graceless relief and clumsy silhouette enables the sculptures to directly address a subject without engaging in conventional dialogues around realism. Salt dough distorts the subjects; they become absurd and comedic. Objects are rendered playful.

A variety of objects is intended to engage the viewer as they explore the work, discovering an array of

different artefacts. John Berger argues that representing a subject allows the audience to experience the world as the artist does: “the more imaginative the work, the more profoundly it allows us to share the artist’s experience of the visible.”[252] This is echoed in Oldenburg’s project “The Store,” when he filled an empty shop with “a wrist-watch, a piece of pie, hats, caps, pants, skirts, 7-Up, shoe-shine, etc. etc., ...” and states that “In showing them together, I have wanted to imitate my act of perceiving them…”[253] For Berger and Oldenburg, representing existing objects is a means of promoting empathy which elicits an emotional response, facilitating a connection between the viewer and the work. Figurative representation displays the inherent creativity and specific characteristics of salt dough to the viewer: its resistance to form and its malleable capacities are drawn onto its textured surface. In this case, the familiar, colourful, exaggerated, animated sculptures reach out to the viewer like toys, inviting them to share a perception of material which is productive, animate, reactive, responsive, political, social and influential.

[252] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 10.
[253] Claes Oldenburg, *Store Days: Documents from the Store (1961) and Ray Gun Theatre (1962)*, ed. Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), 26.

Alfred Gell argued that though every object invites questions about how it came to be in the world, this inquiry is disguised by the daily routine.[254] Encountering a familiar subject - food, clothing, bodies - as sculpture reopens inquisitive potential: salt dough caricatures the subjects, which draws attention back to their origins. The vivid green and red surfaces of the cartoon-like fruit (fig. 48), for example, prompts us to question how they came to enter our lives: what is the effect of their production on the wider network of material causality? Humourous iconography plays an important role. The strangeness of the ordinary is explicit. Together, subject and representation act upon Coole and Frost's call to examine processes of materialisation by creating concepts and images which depict material agency.[255] Sculptural representation invites the viewer to question processes of materialisation as they encounter familiar objects made strange, which implicates the strong relationship that production and consumption has on our environment and our bodies.

1.1.2 Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphising objects is located within discussions of representation: material becomes more like our own bodies and its impact on our behaviour is more visible. Anthropomorphism is a tool which attunes us to our material environment: Jane Bennett urges us to adopt a childlike experience of the world, populated by "animate things" and not "passive objects."[256] Acting on this recommendation better equips audiences to view material as agentic, illuminating its active role in political and social structures. Richard Sennett similarly notes that anthropomorphism has the capacity to "heighten our consciousness of the materials themselves and in this way think about their value."[257] His "honest bricks" example demonstrates a link between natural materials which signify labour and positive

[254] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 66.
[255] Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 8.
[256] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.
[257] Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 136.

human qualities. Materials may be attached to morality and adopt a persona which sites them as actors within a network of social relationships.[258]

Salt dough's aesthetics and associations contribute to anthropomorphism. Cans, fruit and clothing take on new qualities as they become comic, vulnerable, and childlike. The stone's fleshy, mottled surface appears more like our own body (fig. 49). It is responsive and active rather than dull and lifeless. Perceiving the subjects as bodies makes them relatable and self-conscious.

[258] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.

Anthropomorphism and material representation are influenced by my female experience of the world. As well as embodying domesticity and feminine behavioural constructions in salt dough, the image of reality presented by the work is not solid but soft, yielding and sensuous. Representing objects in salt dough is another means of establishing empathy between audiences and objects, shifting perceptions of material from lifeless to vibrant. Empathetic approaches similarly emanate from feminist perspectives on material agency, as previously observed in texts from Jane Bennett, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Empathy, resulting from anthropomorphic representation, creates the conditions for viewers to see their own bodies relfected in the sculptures, an approach which is situated within a feminist perception of material.

More specifically, Katherine Behar identifies the role of the comic in feminist critique, stating that “humor is in keeping with traditions of radical feminist laughter. [...] Humor, too, is a form of making - making ourselves laugh.”[259] The sculptures use humour as a critical tool, presenting objects as figures of mockery and inviting laughter from audiences. The solid plinth forms, which would stand confidently erect in marble or stone, lose their power as they totter and lean towards the floor. Authoritative male artists - Joseph Beuys, Damien Hirst and Claes Oldenburg - become figures of ridicule as they are rendered in slumping salt dough. The sculptures appear soft, yet their softness embodies a hard political viewpoint communicated through humour. Combining material and representation in this way allows me to project a feminist perspective which seeks to undermine unequal power structures, emphasising their fallability by making the viewer laugh.

Figuratively representing familiar subjects in salt dough performs three key roles. Firstly, it is a means of presenting material’s “inherent creativity” to the viewer: the engaging aesthetic

[259] Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 15.

invites them to perceive their environment outside of the gallery according to an agentic model of material. Secondly, the array of materially exaggerated objects invites questions about how all objects and materials enter and affect our lives. Thirdly, combining material, subject and representation imbues the sculpture with anthropomorphic presence, which increases its ability to evoke empathy and to adopt a critical, feminist perspective which uses humour as a critical device.

1.2 MATERIAL IMITATION

As well as subjects, material in sculpture may represent other materials. Lehmann argues that depicting a material using another imparts new information about both. She states: “on both the visual and material levels, imitation is a powerful motor for the refinement of materials and techniques, at times making the initially less valuable material acquire a new kind of value, that of artistic virtuoso, skill or scientific knowledge.”[260] “Material imitation” has a variety of different effects, including exposure of social or economic status; uncovering a new material characteristic which was previously hidden; or contributing to the ways in which material is used. This phenomenon compares and contrasts different attributes including colour, texture, durability, value, status or geographical origin. Imitation may also be a tool for satire, as manifesting contrasting materials may be used to de-value, de-refine and ultimately deconstruct material hierarchies which exist both internally and externally to sculpture.

Material imitation operates in my sculptures. Stainless steel, bronze, glass, felt, wood, bread, flesh, hair and rubber - amongst many others - are all imitated by salt dough. Similarly to material representation, this demonstrates both potentials and limitations: we see that salt dough is incapable of imitating the surface of terracotta (fig. 50) or painted MDF (fig. 51). A

[260] Lehmann, “How Materials Make Meaning,” 21-22.

striking contrast draws new attention to the materials represented and the viewer has a heightened awareness of steel, glass or rubber.

Clumsy comparisons provoke deeper inquiry: imitation of opulent, expensive materials invites a critical response to the privilege ascribed to certain ones and not others. Marble, for example, is a recurring reference throughout the sculptures (fig. 52). Leaning plinths mimic swirling veins and layered shades, emphasising qualities of marble and salt dough simultaneously. Salt dough lacks the ability to fully imitate the plasticity, intricacy and translucency of marble. Our attention to both materials is heightened, which prompts questioning: how is marble accessed, manipulated, sorted, maintained and transported? What are the effects of these processes on the materials and bodies around it? Exploring marble via material imitation helps us to perceive its wider effects and exposes material and social hierarchies. Not only this, but it poses an argument comically that its continued use requires interrogation: if sculptural production using marble or similar materials has a

significant impact through processing, manufacture and transportation, then collapsing material hierarchies would enable a condition in which more sustainable and accessible materials are more widely used. As a result, material imitation demonstrates that the barriers surrounding access to particular materials and their superior statuses are still in place.

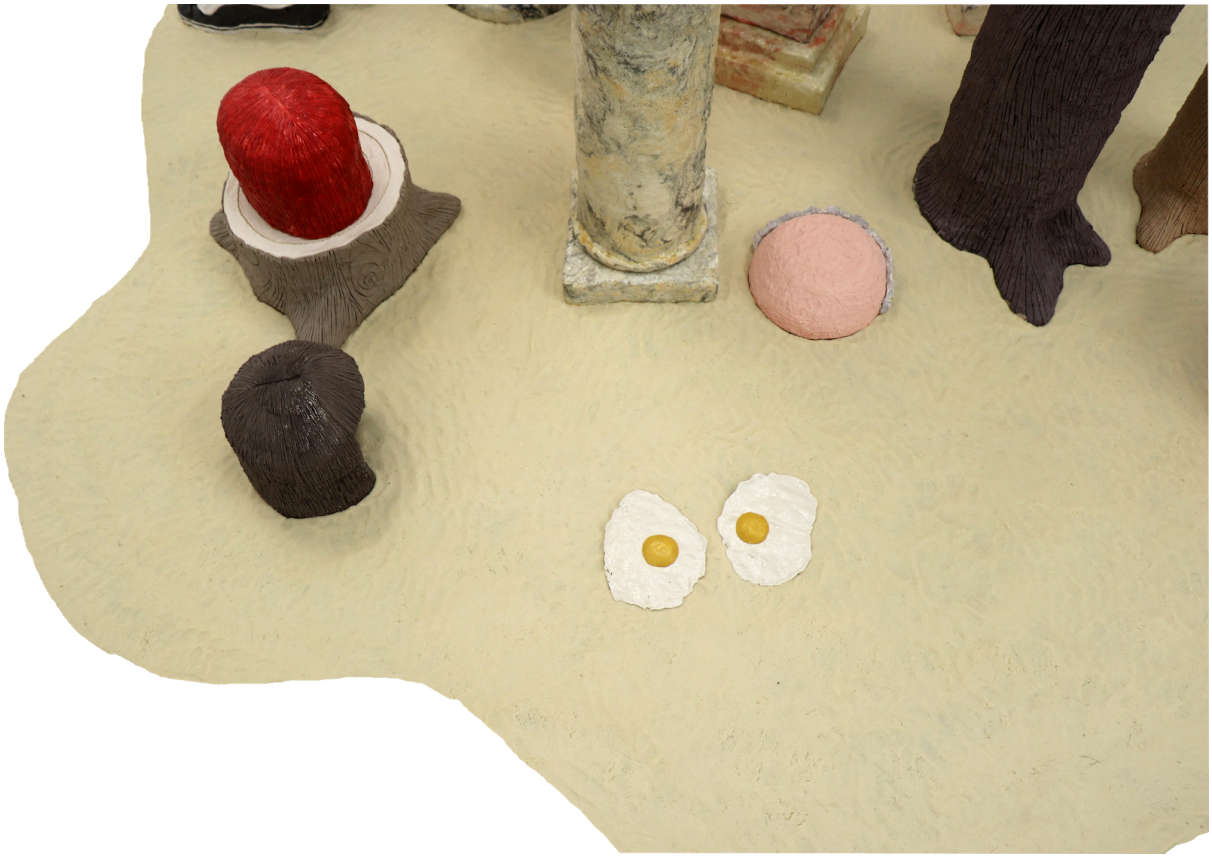
1.3 RAW MATERIAL

Salt dough is present in different states when the sculptures come together as an installation. Malleable and responsive properties are disguised by the hard, dry surfaces of the completed sculptures.[261] What was once soft and moldable now appears rigid and stable. This is a problem: the completed work risks deadening salt dough, and it no longer appears

[261] This effect was explored by Paul Carter and outlined in the previous section. Here, we see its impact on the completed work.

responsive. Our ability to observe it as agentic is reduced. Lehmann argues that “within the finished work of art, materials are still interacting, even in those which seem to exist in a pure or single form…”[262] Here, she emphasises that materials have a lifespan which is not fixed by objecthood, but continues to be affected by internal and external factors. Even as a completed sculpture, salt dough may absorb moisture which causes it to bloat; grow a layer of furry mould; or crack unexpectedly under pressure.

To communicate salt dough’s ongoing responsiveness, the sculptures are positioned on a layer of raw salt dough which I have pressed onto the floor (fig. 53). It seeps around the bases of the solid plinths, surrounding the hardened works as a soft, clammy carpet. Like finished pieces, the surface is mottled with my fingerprints - a trace of the making process which links the raw material to the solid works.



[262] Lehmann, “How Materials Make Meaning,” 17.

Presence of raw dough in the gallery space performs two functions. Firstly, it demonstrates the ongoing lifespan of salt dough throughout the duration of the exhibition: as it is freshly applied to the floor, it remains damp and mouldable, yet it dries out over time, becoming brittle and crumbly. It's colour changes from creamy yellow to anemic beige. It retains traces of visitors in wafted dirt and accidental footprints. Characteristics are laid bare on the gallery floor. Secondly, as the raw dough is represented in contrast to the completed sculptures, the viewer is aware of its unprocessed state which emphasises its unexpected capacity to create large, imposing forms. Positioning the completed works on top of the material they are made from depicts both their ongoing responsiveness and the dough's capacity for constructive innovation.

2. SYMBOLIC MEANING

2.1 STATUS ALTERATION

Material and form may act as autonomous vehicles for different associations which connect in sculpture to produce new meaning, and each has the capacity to alter perceptions of the other. This is a dialectic relationship, which can have the effect of either elevating or demoting social perceptions of material, or influencing its connotations and appreciation.

Art history provides examples of "status alteration" as form and material may raise perceptions of one another. Art historian Martha Moffitt Peacock observes that seventeenth century artist Joanna Koerten selected historical and political figures as subjects in her paper cut works, elevating the status of paper.[263] Images of respected individuals imbued lowly paper with status through admirable associations.[264] Moffitt Peacock argues that Koerten was aware of this phenomenon, and her combination of material and subject was tactical.

[263] Martha Moffitt Peacock, "Paper as Power: Carving a Niche for the Female Artist in the Work of Joanna Koerten," in *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, 249.
[264] Ibid., 251.

Olivia Bax's works are a contemporary example: her use of paper pulp to represent forms which evoke late modernist sculpture elevates the status of newspaper, as it is reminiscent of the bronze works of Henry Moore or Alberto Giacometti.

"Status alteration" can operate with the opposite effect, used for mockery as opposed to elevation. Combining material and form for satire is evident in Scholten's analysis of the Antwerp snow sculptures: "Translated into snow, the properties of real public statues and monuments - durable materials, monumental scale and classical dignity - took on a new meaning."[265] Forms that were traditionally depicted in solid, enduring stone - such as portraits of Royalty - are interpreted differently when represented in a transient, vulnerable material. They become parodic and comical. Satirical meaning arises from the contrast between transient snow and powerful subjects.[266] Undermining high subject matter with low material is evident in Jamie Fitzpatrick's sculpture: the smeared, dripping wax is used to mock the masculinity it represents.

The reciprocal ability of material and subject to alter status is evident in my sculptures: salt dough and the objects it represents exert influence on the perception of the other. Unlike prior examples, this effect neither solely demotes or promotes, but operates in both directions. Salt dough lowers the status of the subjects: the sculptures inherit it's indelicate qualities and its domestic, temporal associations. Simultaneously, selecting artworks or other objects with social privilege as subjects raises salt dough's status: it is elevated as it absorbs the associations of costly commodities or precious materials.

Dialectic "status alteration" operates throughout the sculptures, but it is most evident when acclaimed works from sculpture's recent history become distorted and crude when remade

[265] Scholten, "Malleable Marble," 282.
[266] Ibid., 282.

in salt dough. The authority and solidity of Barbara Hepworth's bronze work "Four-Square (Four Circles)"[267] is undermined as it tilts and sags, it's surface with pock-marked my hands smudges from effect is (fig. 54). This representing comedic: enduring a solid, ephemeral piece in an renders it material Bronze's the opposite. alienate high status may requires viewers: it training and specialist may only be equipment; it wealthy accessed by tactility is makers; and its audiences. unfamiliar to

Salt dough overtly lacks these features, as well as the plasticity, permanence and socioeconomic value of bronze. Rendering Hepworth's work in this material is

[267] Barbara Hepworth, "Four-Square (Four Circles)," 1966; bronze. In the collection of the Royal College of Art, London.

simultaneously critical of a sculptural model which distances its material origins from audiences, whilst also paying homage to her important contribution to the formal language of sculpture which influences contemporary practice.[268] The slumping salt dough doppelganger draws attention to material hierarchies in sculpture and opens them to scrutiny: if we see this bronze work as vulnerable and active, we can more easily understand sculpture as situated within a network of shifting material encounters.

This phenomenon allows me to adopt a playful, explorative approach which is both critical and commending of material use throughout historic and contemporary sculpture. Each work both elevates and demotes subject and material in order to encourage further enquiry. Here, I have demonstrated material's potential to alter or be altered by form as an important generator of meaning: it may be used to expose democratic limitations which are hidden by the object. Representing a multitude of subjects - with an array of social statues - in salt dough positions them within the same material environment: a burger or a dustpan and

[268] Barbara Hepworth, "Sculpture," in *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 394-395.

brush (fig. 55) stand starkly against the marble plinths on which they perch. Using salt dough in this manner demonstrates material's ability to act as a levelling device.

2.2 SYMBOLIC CAPACITY

The capacity to present multiple and often conflicting concepts simultaneously is possible in sculpture in a way that it is not in text. Lehmann's idea that written language is confined to linear structure which introduced this chapter is relevant here: theories must be unpacked sequentially in written language, whereas symbolism depicts multiple sources concurrently.[269] Image-based communication is more immediate and may be used to efficiently present an argument. Berger demonstrates this in his visual essay on the female figure as he positions two images together, inviting the reader to make comparisons.[270] I draw upon sculpture's "symbolic capacity" when selecting subjects, which are also deployed as references to intangible concepts. The works perform a similar task to the written exploration of material agency and art criticism in chapter two. They are a visual library of material models.

The sculptures bring together two overlapping points of reference. The first is the direct physical encounter which the audience will personally draw from: the visceral, abject experience of eating a burger accompanied by the sensation of grisly meat, sodden bread and oozing sauce (fig. 56). This also alludes to the shared social imagery the object evokes: the crisp, succulent burgers we see in advertising, for example. The second is a reference to an artist, an artwork or a critical theory; in this instance it is Claes Oldenburg's "Floor Burger," which is

[269] Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 8.
[270] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1.

soft and enlarged, presenting a new experience of a familiar object.[271] Each subject is crucially selected due to its familiarity with the audience, as well as its symbolic references. Drawing personal and theoretical references together in a single sculpture enables me to overlay the complex relationships between social material encounters and explorations of material in art practice and criticism.

Personal or social references in the sculptures are accessible to most viewers, but theoretical symbolism requires further explanation. The hammer, for example, symbolises two theories explored in this thesis (fig. 57). Bruno Latour emphasises our reliance on material objects as he points out that we cannot carry out our intentions without them, using the example of hammering a nail.[272] Katherine Behar also explores the impact of tools on social behaviour as she identifies their power as a means of enacting oppression, drawing attention to their effects on bodies.[273] Crystallising these different approaches into a single object represents multiple ideas about materials simultaneously, and an exchange of ideas between artists, viewers, critics and materials occurs when the sculptures are installed together in the gallery space. Each work represents different voices in the unfolding debate on materiality, and the installation as a whole is a means of dynamically presenting a complex discussion about the nature of material.

The sculptures establish dialogue between art criticism, creative materiality and social interaction, but a problem occurs when making theoretical references which may be

[271] Claes Oldenburg, “Floor Burger,” 1962; canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, painted with acrylic paint. In the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
[272] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.
[273] Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF” in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.

inaccessible to the majority of my audience. Whilst the viewer will have prior personal and social experience of the subjects, I do not expect existing knowledge of the artworks or theories in question. Neither do I expect viewers to subsequently research these references in order to access meaning from the sculptures. However, I do acknowledge that they should be made known during the encounter with the sculpture: only then does the layering of different ideas through “symbolic capacity” become clear. The viewer does not need to understand the theories, but rather comprehend that they are present, multiple and conflicting.

An accompanying publication is presented alongside the exhibition in order to overcome this problem.[274] This takes the form of a visual glossary, listing the theoretical and artistic references alongside images of the sculptures, and performs two important roles. Firstly, the sources are attached to particular objects and the viewer is therefore able to perceive the different viewpoints from different disciplines which contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding the nature of material. Secondly, this thesis argues that material and text must not be segregated but used in tandem in order to represent and examine sources of meaning. Combination of written language and visual imagery in the glossary facilitates interpretation of the sculpture: just as space is made for material in critical language, so is written communication present alongside the visual experience of the sculpture.

As explored previously in this thesis, the sculptures are not intended to illustrate theory and as such, the references listed in the glossary are not fixed or finite. I anticipate and welcome audiences contributing additional layers of symbolic meaning from their own material encounters which I cannot foresee. In this way, I present the different associations which accompany objects and materials, which can be explored simultaneously as embedded

[274] Appendix 3.

sources of personal, social and theoretical meaning. The sculptures are a means of playfully attuning ourselves to material as a carrier of different sources of information. Their various pools of reference demonstrate the work that material can do as a critical receptacle of both tangible and intangible meanings.

3. CONCLUSION: FORM AND MATERIAL

Analysis of the completed sculptures through the lens of material unearths the central role that it plays in making meaning when encountered by the viewer. Salt dough collaborates with form. Using subject and representation, it depicts a new materialist model; one that is vibrant, responsive and volatile. Form makes material's links to ourselves and our social environment more apparent. As it imitates other materials, existing hierarchies are brought to the foreground and interrogated as we become more aware of questions of democratic access and environmental impact. Subjects are anthropomorphised by salt dough so that we may understand them as social agents which intervene in ethical concerns. Raw dough reminds the viewer that these sculptures began as a soft and malleable substance, and indicates that they are still interacting even as apparently static objects.

Combined formal and material devices affect social privilege, experience, perceptions and symbolic meaning. Salt dough has a dialectic relationship with its subject: its capacity to alter perception is influenced by the objects it represents. "Status alteration" is used by artists as a tool for analysis. Material's capacity to symbolise brings personal, social and theoretical experiences together in an installation, acting collectively as an image for ongoing debates about our shared environment. This shifts perceptions of material from something that is passive and fixed to something that actively affects the world and our experiences in it.

The phenomena operating in my completed salt dough sculptures may be applied more broadly to other works in order to view material as an important contributor to meaning. Whilst form takes a central role, it is not more or less important than material, and the two must be examined as operating dialectically in order for material to become established within critical frameworks.

This section has completed my navigation of the material encounter from the perspective of my own experiences throughout this chapter. The next and final chapter functions as a critical reflection which draws together the sources of meaning which have been identified from the qualitative interviews and first-hand observations, thereby consolidating and animating a new artist-led vocabulary for sculpture.

CHAPTER 5

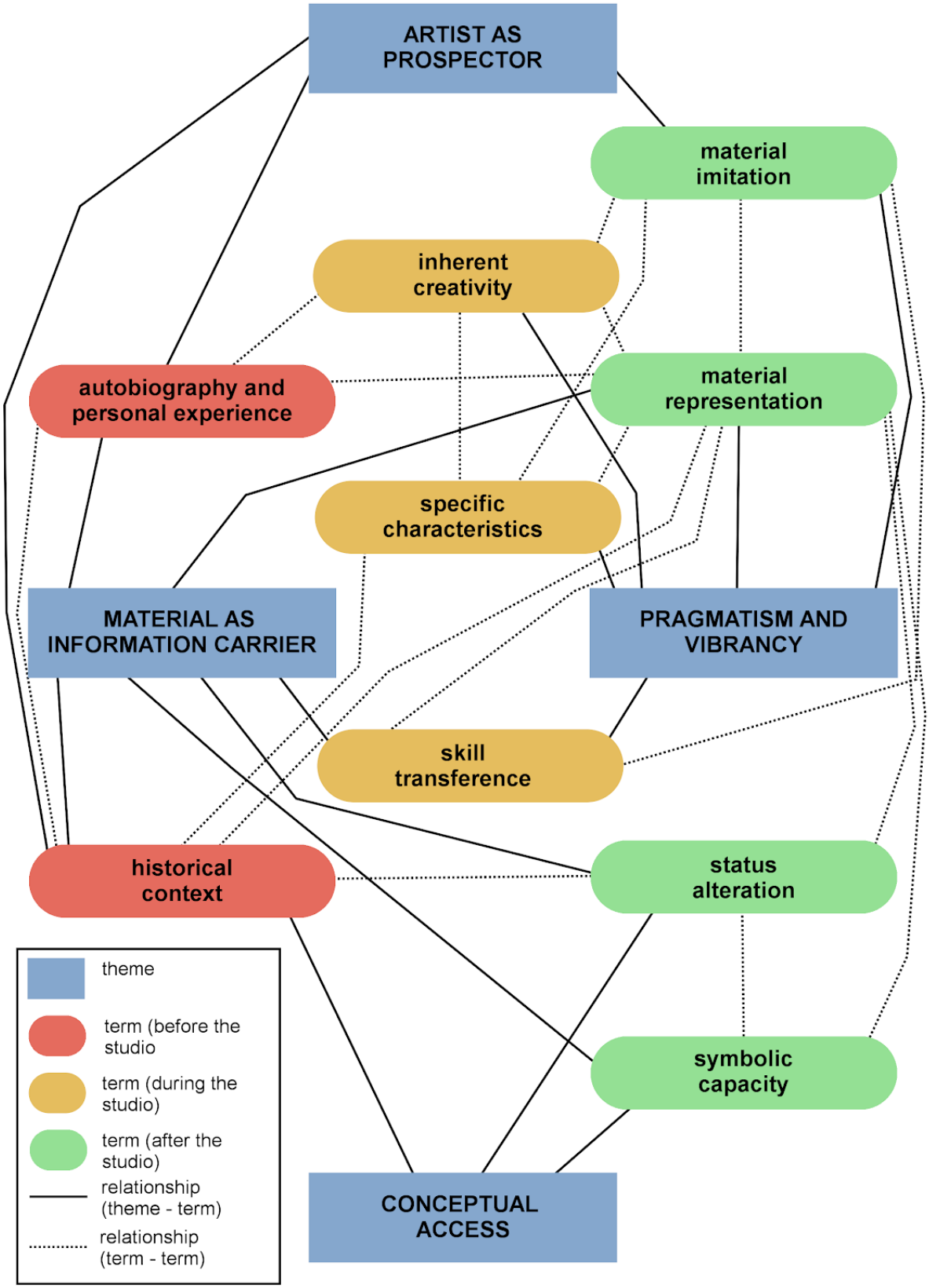
CONSOLIDATING LANGUAGE

A CRITICAL VOCABULARY FOR MATERIAL MEANING

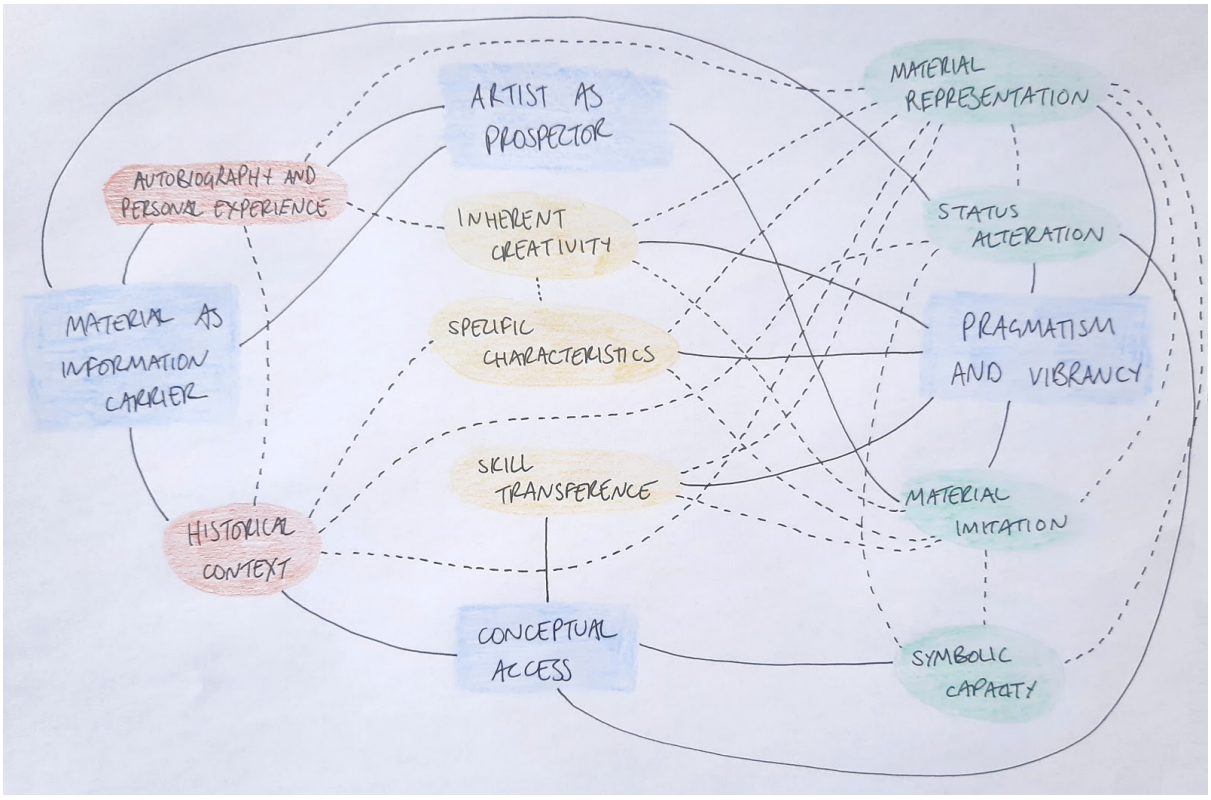
This final chapter activates the language that has emerged both from the qualitative interviews and practice-based research which was presented in chapters three and four. Consolidating and analysing the language generated by this study animates the “themes” and “terms” by demonstrating that together, they form a concrete and complex language which foregrounds and decodes the meaning that material contributes to contemporary sculpture.

Four “themes” (blue in fig. 58) were developed from the analysis of interviews with eight contemporary sculptors: “artist as prospector;” “pragmatism and vibrancy;” “material as information carrier;” and “conceptual access.” These themes were established from identifying common trends which repeatedly emerged in conversation with the artists, comparing and contrasting each individual’s response and establishing spectrums, overlaps and shared practices. The themes are positioned as wide areas of interest, demarcating broad boundaries of discussion across the current ecology of contemporary sculpture.

Nine “terms” (red, yellow or green in fig. 58) were generated from examining my practical processing of salt dough, offering the perspective of an individual artist. These terms are more concrete as they anchor specific associations and phenomena which are implicated by the broader themes. Practical applications are demonstrated in action, uncovering intangible information which is embedded in material and contributes to sculpture’s meaning. The terms also have relationships to one another, and may operate in tandem to highlight particular overlaps and spectrums which are vital to material meaning.



(Figure 58: diagram detailing all relationships between the themes and terms.)



(Figure 59: hand-drawn version of fig. 59, demonstrating the complexity of the intersecting relationships.)

Together, the themes and terms form a “glossary:” a collection of terminology, each of which can clearly be attributed to a specific definition. It is intended for use. The particular sources of meaning I have identified within this glossary form a “vocabulary:” they have wider applications across sculpture. Georges Bataille argues that “A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their task.”[275] A vocabulary becomes truly useful when it is explicitly linked to an action and demonstrates practice. The following analysis reflects this statement by presenting this vocabulary as animate and yet concrete.

Throughout this thesis, I have presented material - both its physical manifestation and its associated information - as complex, volatile and constantly fluctuating. Even when it is

[275] Georges Bataille, “Formless,” in *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 31.

packaged into a working glossary, this remains the case: the themes and terms not only denote specific sources of meaning, but weave together to illuminate new relationships which galvanise them as an overlapping and critical network. This is demonstrated by figure 59, which maps the links between the themes and terms.

Analysis of interconnected relationships demonstrates that, like form or process, “material” is not a monolithic word which denotes a single tool at an artist’s disposal, but rather that it is a large and multifaceted field containing complex sources of meaning. Some of these sources relate to the tangible material itself and others refer to material’s impact outside of art making, linking it to its social structures and environmental effects. The vocabulary contained in this glossary unravels and anchors material meaning: it can be applied to any sculptural practice as a means of accessing coded information which enables us to fully comprehend an artwork’s critical potential.

1. FOUR THEMES

1.1 ARTIST AS PROSPECTOR

Engagement with any material positions the artist in the role of prospector, provoking activity which is infused with meaning. This theme relates to the means by which artists encounter materials and the process of selecting them to use in the studio. It applies to found objects (Laura Yuile’s scavenged appliances) and non-art materials (Olivia Bax’s newspapers and my own purchasing of flour and salt), as well as traditional materials (Jamie Fitzpatrick’s silicone rubber and sculpture wax). Historic sculpture may be examined through the lens of prospecting to yield new information: Helena Bonett examines Barbara Hepworth’s carvings from rare and unusual guarea wood, asking “Who ordered the samples, how did the wood

arrive and where was it stored?"[276] Prospecting is tied to the ethics and sustainability of production, and we can observe an artist's values in action as they consider the impact of their art making on the world around them (as in Rebecca Molloy's use of plastic bottles as a means of reducing her domestic waste).

1.2 PRAGMATISM AND VIBRANCY

The artist's view of material's behaviour is the subject of this theme, whether that is approached as a series of practical decisions (pragmatism), or perceived as a responsive negotiation between artistic will and material resistance (vibrancy). "Pragmatism" and "vibrancy" are not opposite ends of a spectrum and may overlap; an artist may select a material specifically for its malleable properties, for example, and simultaneously view it as capable of resisting their creative intentions. Elly Thomas' approach to papier-mâché and my own relationship with salt dough both demonstrate this intersection: materials may be understood as working with and against the artist.

1.3 MATERIAL AS INFORMATION CARRIER

Material is an information sponge, absorbing its historical and contemporary surroundings and uses. Flour, for example, carries with it the history of ancient farming and a common global need, as well as the increase of industrial production and domestic uses in the home. Dominique White selects materials and objects which are soaked in historical narrative and corporealise particular contexts. Donald Judd similarly represents industrial capitalism using construction metals. This information is not detachable from the material but embedded into it: both the raw material and the completed sculpture carry this information.

[276] Helena Bonett, "The Guarea Wood Carvings: Between Myth and Reality," in *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World*, ed. Penelope Curtis and Chris Stephens (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 85.

1.4 CONCEPTUAL ACCESS

This theme presents a general agreement amongst artists that rift between idea and material does not apply to contemporary sculpture. Rather, material and concept have a dialectic relationship and each may facilitate access to the other. This theme draws attention to the exchange of knowledge between material meaning and metaphysical information, rearranging the privileged positioning of concept over material. This is evident in both the approaches of the artists (Jamie Fitzpatrick's and Dominique White's dismissal of illustrating theory) as well as in their practices (as Elly Thomas uses theory to facilitate her engagement with material and my own investigation of the relationship between theoretical research and physical artwork).

2. NINE TERMS

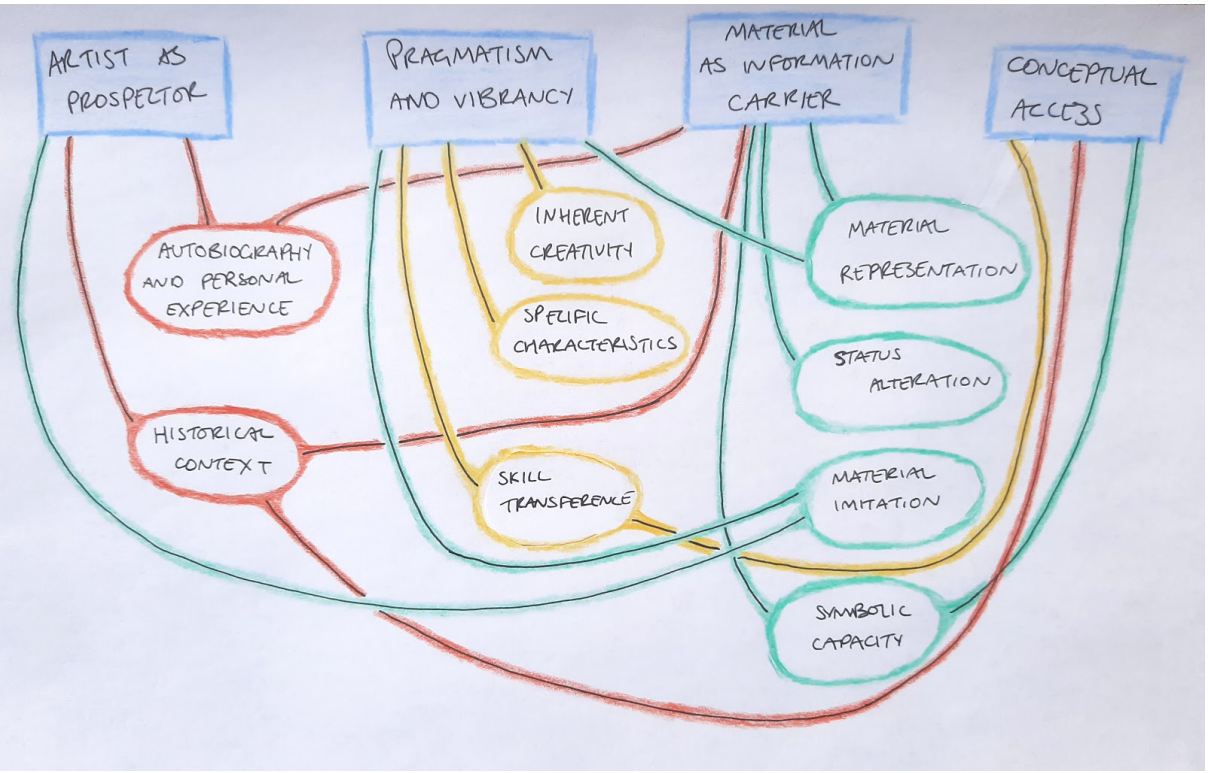
Summarising the nine terms brings them together as a functioning vocabulary which can be deployed in order to focus on specific areas which are implicated by each of the four themes. As I provide each definition, I will reintroduce instances from my own practice alongside contemporary and historical examples in order to offer different applications and meanings, demonstrating that though the terms are specific, they are broadly relevant across sculpture. Links to historic examples also provide evidence that artists have always engaged with material meaning despite its inferior treatment in art criticism.

Relationships between each term and the four themes deploy this glossary as a multi-faceted and useful critical language. The table below (fig. 60) extracts the connections between the themes and terms from the complete vocabulary (fig. 58), visualising the nuanced overlaps between the glossary as a whole and emphasising the multiple applications it may have beyond this study. The relationships presented here are selected because they are the most apparent based on the research and analysis conducted for this

thesis. They do not necessarily represent the limitations of the interconnectivity of this vocabulary.

	ARTIST AS PROSPECTOR	PRAGMATISM AND VIBRANCY	MATERIAL AS INFORMATION CARRIER	CONCEPTUAL ACCESS
Autobiography and personal experience	1.a.		3.a.	
Historical context	1.b.		3.b	4.a.
Inherent creativity		2.a.		
Specific characteristics		2.b.		
Skill transference		2.c.	3.c.	
Material representation		2.d.	3.d.	
Material imitation	1.c.	2.e.		
Status alteration			3.e.	4.b.
Symbolic capacity			3.f.	4.c.

(Figure 60: table detailing the relationships between the terms and the themes. Each number corresponds to a particular relationship, which is referenced in the footnotes and elaborated on in the text.)



(Figure 61: hand-drawn version of fig. 61, showing the relationships between the themes and the terms functioning as a network.)

2.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Examining material in tandem with personal experience considers the particular conditions from which a sculptural practice emerges. Meaning is imparted to the viewer in the gallery as they question why a particular material is present through an autobiographical lens. In doing so, information relating to socioeconomic conditions or the artist's values come into focus. By exploring the situation which led to the artist's material encounter, we are more able to understand their critical perspective and the work's meaning.

This is widely at work in contemporary practice. Bax's newspapers indicate restrictions of time and finance placed on the artist; Yuile's construction gravel hints at the effects of urban development on accessing studio space; and Sarah Roberts' confrontations with single-use plastics demonstrate sensitivity to environmental issues. My decision to work with salt dough

imparts information about my environment as I relied on access, affordability and domestic setting. Historically, autobiography is at work in Robert Rauschenberg's combines and Claes Oldenburg's cardboard assemblages, as their proximity to discarded rubbish tells us something more of the wider context from which they emerged.[277]

This term is situated within the "artist as prospector" theme, facilitating deeper analysis as prospecting unfolds in personal experiences.[278] "Material as information carrier" also has a relationship with this term, as the autobiographical narratives of the artists offer insights into the wider social connotations absorbed by the material.[279]

2.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This term highlights the meanings emanating from a material's genealogies, specifically the history of its production and its cultural, political and social effects. These narratives resonate in the completed sculpture and open a dialogue between contemporary practice and other forms of production. It is a means of comparing and contrasting art making and the materialisation of other objects.

My experiences at Bunbury Mill and Lion Salt Works are a demonstration of capturing meaning from historical context. It is also evident in White's use of kaolin clay which speaks of Black diaspora, and Anna F.C. Smith's potholed toby jugs linking to the ceramic industry. Artists such as Joseph Beuys' fat and Kara Walker's sugar works have made use of this source of material meaning with their references to concentration camps and slavery

[277] Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 128.
[278] 1.a in fig. 60.
[279] 3.a in fig. 60.

respectively.[280,281] Historical context is vital to new materialist dialogues: Coole and Frost implore us to examine materialisation and production in order to build a true picture of society.[282]

Relating to “artist as prospector,” this term suggests that the artist’s discovery of a material could be influenced by historical context.[283] Situated within “material as information carrier,” [284] it is a means of decoding the information material absorbs from its historic contexts, allowing us to examine it as socially agentic. In connection to “conceptual access,” historical context is a means of promoting access regarding archaic ideas and practices.

2.3 INHERENT CREATIVITY

“Inherent creativity” denotes material’s capacity to produce or respond autonomously or even resist artistic will. It prompts us to visualise material as active rather than passive, easing comprehension of material agency. All materials may possess inherent creativity, and sensitivity to this allows us to view their impact on the resulting artwork as well as the external environment.

Thomas identifies inherent creativity as a vital source of meaning in her practice, as she views material responsiveness as a defining factor of the completed sculptures. It is the crux of the Gutai group’s exploration of the relationship between spirituality and material,[285] and a

[280] Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Phaidon Press, 2014), 29.
[281] Kara Walker, “Kara Walker in Conversation with Kara Rooney,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel, 2015), 57.
[282] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.
[283] 1.b in fig. 60.
[284] 3.b in fig. 60.
[285]Jiro Yoshihara, “Gutai Manifesto,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*: *A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 698.

core argument in new materialist theories: Jane Bennett's model of material agency is a theoretical exploration of inherent creativity.[286]

This term is a practical exploration of "vibrancy" in action, animating this aspect of the "pragmatism and vibrancy" theme.[287] Artists who view material as autonomous and agentic are more likely to be sensitive to its inherent creativity.

2.4 SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

Material's "specific characteristics" refer to its definite qualities which the artist may purposefully utilise. Material intrinsically defines the forms it takes and as such, all art making is carried out in response to its affordances.

Identifying and applying salt dough's malleability, stickiness and solidity enabled me to develop an innovative making process. Purposeful application of specific characteristics is evident in Fitzpatrick's sculpture, as he selects wax for its receptiveness to gesture or silicone for its ragged aesthetic. Experimentation with specific characteristics is fundamental to process art, and we can see this in Robert Morris' felt cutting[288] and Eva Hesse's testing of latex and rubber.[289]

"Pragmatism" is demonstrated in practice when an artist identifies and works with a material's specific characteristics.[290] As such, it represents the other side of the coin from "vibrancy" and accommodates artistic collaboration with material traits into art making.

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[286]Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[287] 2.a in fig. 60.
[288] Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, ed. Robert Morris (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 46.
[289] Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009).
[290] 2.b in fig. 60.

2.5 SKILL TRANSFERENCE

"Skill transference" is the process of absorbing information through physical interaction with material. It can be the result of a long period of engagement, or rapid and reactive problem solving.

Unconscious refinement of my sculptures over the course of this study demonstrates this phenomenon. Thomas mentions that her current practice is the result of a long period of engagement with one material before moving onto the next in order to fully understand the effects of each one. Francis Upritchard's innovation with balata rubber is another example: her sculptures emerged from a growing consciousness of a new material.[291]

Skill transference may occur from engaging with material in either pragmatic and vibrant modes.[292] It emerges from accidental discoveries (vibrancy) or long periods of testing and refining (pragmatism). This relationship suggests that an artist's view of material agency may be influenced by the transference of skill and how this is accomplished. Skill transference also contributes to the "material as information carrier" theme: information is not only related to contextual connotations, but also to material's internal knowledge of its own behaviour. This may not be initially visible and revealed through experimentation in the studio.[293]

2.6 MATERIAL REPRESENTATION

"Material representation" relates to the aesthetic mode, subject matter or iconographic language the material occupies in the completed work. This is a loose, overlapping spectrum

[291] Francis Upritchard, "A Slow Weakening of Colour; Francis Upritchard in Conversation with Leila Hasham," in *Francis Upritchard: Wetwang Slack*, ed. Daniel Griffiths (London: Barbican, 2018), 42.
[292] 2.c in fig. 60.
[293] 3.d in fig. 60.

spanning the untransformed, the abstract and the figurative. Material and form may be used in combination to present a visual argument or direct a line of enquiry.

I adopt a figurative approach, representing particular subjects from salt dough and constructing a relationship between a sculpture's compositional material and its subject. Roberts' complex use of material representation, combining found and handmade objects, displays the current conditions of material abundance. Claes Oldenburg combined solid subjects with soft materials in order to present a vulnerable version of reality,[294] and Phyllida Barlow mimics monumental sculptural forms from debris and construction materials as a means of challenging disciplinary traditions.

Material representation is linked to "pragmatism and vibrancy:" the mode of representation or the aesthetic of the completed sculpture may encourage us to share an artist's pragmatic or vibrant view of material.[295] In the context of "material as information carrier," representation draws out connections between a subject and a particular material.[296] For example, representing the fragmented body in edible salt and flour suggests that there is a parallel between consuming food, art and bodies.

2.7 MATERIAL IMITATION

Material imitation occurs when one material imitates the form, aesthetic, qualities or even processes of another. Its functions include discovering new uses, developing techniques, testing characteristics and comparing traits.

[294] Germano Celant, "Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things," in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1995), 13.
[295] 2.d in fig. 60.
[296] 3.d in fig. 60.

In my sculpture, salt dough is used to imitate an array of other materials including marble, wood, flesh, fabric and metal. The audience is able to observe the unexpected yet crude ability of salt dough to mimic other materials, and becomes more aware of the characteristics of other caricatured materials. Molloy's cactus sculptures operate in a similar way, as plastic bottles and chicken wire armatures are at odds with the organic surface of her natural subject. Liza Lou uses glass beads to mimic wood grain, noting that "Taken on its own, wood grain becomes abstract painting, and I was interested in pushing that."[297] Material imitation allows her to present a known material in a new way which exaggerates its other properties.

Material imitation has a relationship to "artist as prospector" as the materials which are represented capture other substances which have influenced the artwork.[298] Material imitation also links to "pragmatism and vibrancy" as it is a means of examining the behaviour of two materials by comparing and contrasting them.[299] Similarly to material representation, it may draw out new characteristics or creative potential.

2.8 STATUS ALTERATION

Material and form combine to dialectically alter the status of one another. A lowly material might decrease the social perception of a privileged subject, and vice versa. This foregrounds the social status of both components, and can be used to either criticise or commend both subjects and materials.

Status alteration is deployed in my representation of Hepworth's sculpture in salt dough, undermining the authority and solidity of bronze. Fitzpatrick critiques patriarchal structures

[297] Liza Lou, "American History Is Not What It Appears To Be: Liza Lou," interviewed by Jan Garden Castro, 2003 in *Conversations on Sculpture*, ed. Glenn Harper and Twlylene Moyer (Hamilton, NJ: ISC Press, 2007), 151.
[298] 1.c in fig. 60.
[299] 2.e. in fig. 60.

by depicting statuesque figures in vulnerable materials. Bax elevates the status of newspaper by linking it to late modernist sculptural forms. This effect is also evident in Sarah Lucas' use of food and found objects to lower the status of the female body and parody the means by which it is consumed, drawing attention to objectification, or Jeff Koons' use of enduring, opulent materials to depict lowly relics from mass culture.

This phenomenon relies on the connotations carried by the material, which situates it most prominently within the "material as information carrier" theme.[300] It may draw on a viewer's prior knowledge of a particular material in order to generate meaning, and demonstrates a strategy artists may adopt if they attune themselves to material's associated information. Similarly, status alteration has implications for "conceptual access" as artists may critically comment on a theory or an idea, raising or lowering its status by referring to it in a particular material.[301]

2.9 SYMBOLIC CAPACITY

This term refers to a sculpture's relationship with a conceptual or intangible source of information such as a theory or an idea. If material representation denotes what is visually present, then symbolic capacity relates to what is referentially present. It relates to sculpture's ability to represent multiple perspectives simultaneously if material is viewed as a means of layering information.

As well as specific subjects, my work refers to theories, texts and ideas in order to situate them within a network of objects. This provides tactile images for contrasting debates around material. Symbolic capacity is at work in White's shipwrecks, a motif which relates to her academic research on Black identity. Thomas' sculptures manifest theories of play, using this

[300] 3.e in fig. 60.
[301] 4.b in fig. 60.

framework to physically overcome binary language structures. Kara Walker's sculptures also draw on this function: her giant sugar sphinx is a motif for ancient mythology and culture.[302]

Symbolic capacity influences the "material as information carrier" theme.[303] Information may be embedded from multiple sources and viewed simultaneously: both material representation and symbolic capacity populate this broader theme by representing present and non-present information respectively. The "conceptual access" theme has direct relevance here, as this relationship demonstrates how material plays a part in symbolism which may promote access to ideas and concepts.[304]

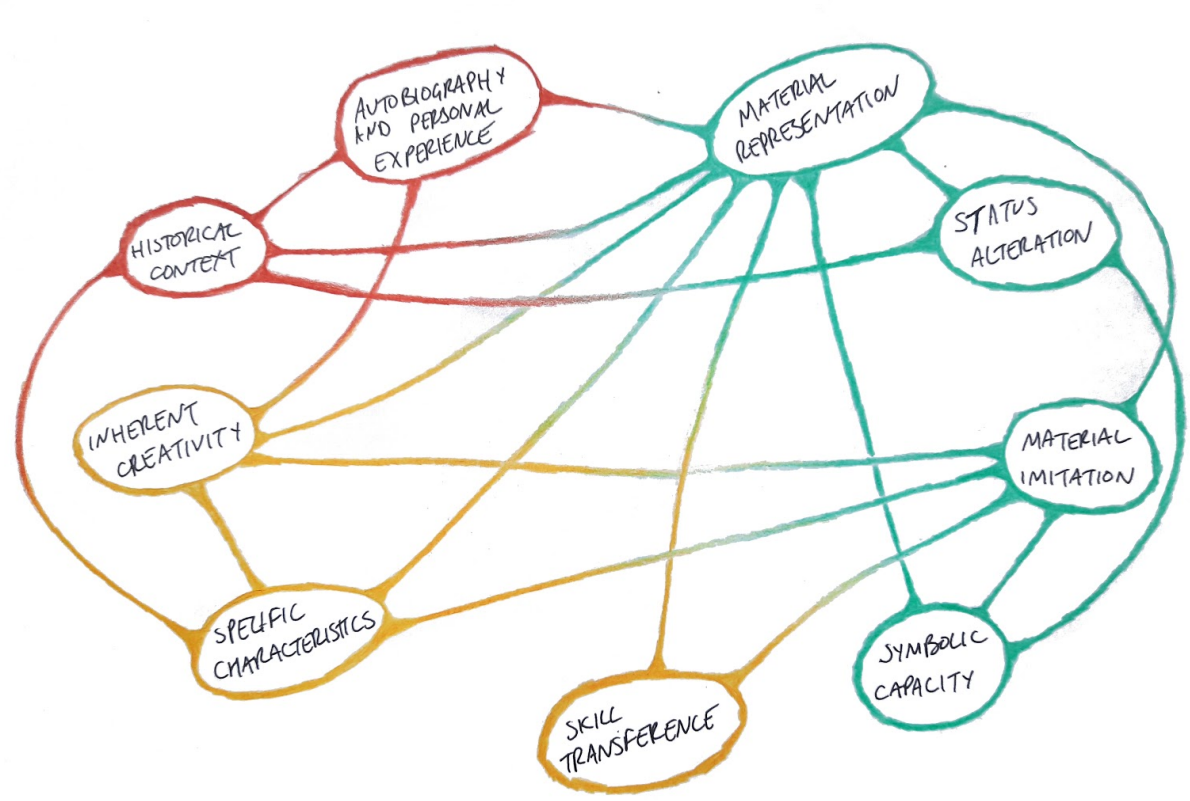
3. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TERMS

Relationships between the terms are more complex than their connections to the themes. This is because the terms are more concrete and detailed, and the crossovers between them more numerous (fig. 62). Similarly to the relationships presented between the themes and terms, the seventeen relationships identified here are not necessarily finite, but are the most evident from the issues and debates which are central to this thesis. Cases could be made for each theme to impact upon every other. Indeed, the terms do not operate in isolation, and a single sculpture may be affected by many concurrently. By considering the relationships between them, we can observe yet more physical phenomena and sources of meaning emerging from their combinations. Many of these have already been implicated by various discussions: it is here that the potential of this vocabulary to assist detailed material analysis is activated.

[302] Walker, "Kara Walker in Conversation with Kara Rooney," 57.
[303] 3.f in fig. 60.
[304] 4.c in fig. 60.

	Auto/ per. ex.	Histo. con.	Inhere. creat.	Spec. chara.	Skill trans.	Mat. repres.	Mat. imitat.	Status alt.	Symb. cap.
Autobiography and personal experience		1	2			3			
Historical context	1			4		5		6	
Inherent creativity	2			7		8	9		
Specific characteristics		4	7			10	11		
Skill transference						12	13		
Material representation	3	5	8	10	12		14	15	16
Material imitation			9	11	13	14			
Status alteration		6				15			17
Symbolic capacity						16		17	

(Figure 62: table detailing relationships between the terms. Each number corresponds to a numbered paragraph below which elaborates on each of the relationships.)



(Figure 63: a hand-drawn diagram of the relationships between the terms. Presenting them in this way as opposed to in isolation (fig. 62) demonstrates that relationships weave the language together.)

1. “Autobiography and personal experience” and “historical context” collect together the microcosm of individual encounters and the macrocosm of social narratives in material. Material becomes a means of fluidly connecting historic and contemporary time periods.

2. “Autobiography and personal experience” and “inherent creativity” demonstrate that the artist’s personal encounters with material influence their perception of its agentic capacity. For example, Roberts’ view of vibrant materials emerged from her vivid experiences of everyday material reality.

3. “Autobiography and personal experience” and “material representation” together suggest that the artist’s encounters may also influence subject matter and mode of representation. The objects I represent, for example, tap into experiences shared by my viewer.

4. “Historical context” and “specific characteristics” demonstrate that the material’s physical traits affect its production and operate in its historical genealogy as much as in the studio. The experience of the lumpmen at Lion Salt Works was reflected in my own cracking skin and drying hands. Historic salt making processes are defined by the characteristics of salt, as is my own process in the studio.

5. “Historical context” and “material representation” in combination bring the social histories of both the subject and the material into the fray. For example, representing a marble plinth in salt dough compares and contrasts art making to other forms of historic industrial production.

6. “Historical context” and “status alteration” have a relationship as materials’ historic genealogies may be altered by a sculptural subject. This relationship manifests in my work as I compare the historic production of salt and flour to art making.

7. “Inherent creativity” and “specific characteristics” are considered in tandem as they represent different (although not necessarily conflicting) ways an artist might perceive a material’s behaviour.

8. “Inherent creativity” and “material representation” consider the extent to which a material may resist form. Inherent creativity affects the aesthetic of the completed

sculpture and this may be used by the artist to present a material as vibrant. Salt dough's clumsy ability to represent suggests that it possesses inherent creativity and is not completely submissive to my intention.

9. "Inherent creativity" and "material imitation" demonstrate that inherent creativity also affects the means by which material is able to mimic another. Together, these terms are another means of drawing attention to a particular aspect of a material, either the one which is imitated or the one used for imitation.

10. "Specific characteristics" and "material representation" enable us to discern that, as well as its inherent creativity, material's affordances influence the means by which it assumes form. Physical traits impact the making process, influencing the completed sculpture. Salt dough, for example, is sticky and malleable but dries solid, so it may be used as a covering which fuses internal armatures together and shapes the representational mode of the final piece.

11. "Specific characteristics" and "material imitation" have a similar relationship to the one outlined above: specific characteristics impact a material's ability to imitate another. They are also points of comparison between materials. Salt dough is unable to mimic the translucency and fine detail of marble, yet it is able to imitate processes of bricklaying with its use as a mortar.

12. "Skill transference" and "material representation" refer to the artist's ability to apply a material, which is impacted by the transference of skill from the material to the artist. As a result of this, my sculptures became more refined and their subjects more recognisable as I continued to work with salt dough.

13. “Skill transference” and “material imitation” again, connect development of the artist’s skill to their ability to imitate one material with another. Skill transference may also be aided by material imitation, as Lehmann notes that applying a technique associated with one material to another may enable discovery of new possibilities.[305]

14. “Material representation” and “material imitation” summarise the clear link between the subject of a sculpture and the material that is represented as a result of this. Presenting a pot, for example, involves representing both the object (the pot) as well as its compositional material (terracotta). This relationship allows us to view the completed object as well as its compositional material, mirroring Jane Bennett’s “assemblage” model.[306]

15. “Material representation” and “status alteration” describe the connection between the form a material assumes and its subjection to status alteration. Representing an acclaimed sculpture from salt dough, for example, lowers its high cultural status and raises the viewer’s perception of salt dough simultaneously.

16. “Material representation” and “symbolic capacity” in combination demonstrate how an artist might use representation to refer to a non-present or intangible concept. Representing a motif from an academic theory - a hammer, for example - in salt dough anchors it to a tangible object and situates it in material reality. The aesthetic of the completed sculpture affects the reading of the symbolised information; the

[305] Ann Sophie-Lehmann, “How Materials Make Meaning,” in *Netherlands Yearbook for Art History 2012*, *Volume 62, Meaning in Material: Netherlandish Art 1400 - 1800,* ed. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Frits Scholten and H. Perry Chapman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 21-22.
[306] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 20-38.

lumpy forms of the salt dough sculptures, for example, present the theories as well as the objects as crude and misshapen.

17. “Status alteration” and “symbolic capacity” have a relationship because the symbolised connotations of the sculpture are also subject to status alteration. If a theory is represented through the symbolic capacity of the sculpture, then it is also susceptible to status alteration, similarly to material representation.

Though the terms are positioned along a linear timeline, their relationships demonstrate that their effects resonate throughout the lifespan of the sculpture. The historical context of a material which presents itself before the studio, for example, has an impact on status alteration which comes into effect after the studio. Internal relationships exemplify complex and overlapping sources of material meaning whilst at the same time, offering concrete language to identify, decode and analyse particular effects.

4. CONCLUSION: A GLOSSARY FOR MATERIAL MEANING

Restating the four themes and nine terms collects them together as a functioning vocabulary. I have demonstrated the ways in which the themes and the terms apply broadly to sculpture as well as the numerous connections between them which outline each phenomenon in action. This vocabulary is designed to both uncover strategies artists employ to generate material meanings alongside methods for decoding and analysing them. In this way, it offers a trajectory towards further developing material literacy in art criticism so that artists, critics, curators and viewers might more fully comprehend a sculpture’s entire meaning and situate it within wider social practices.

“Material” here is not a secondary aspect of sculpture, but a field rich with critical potential. In the introduction of this thesis, I observed that lifting the lid of “form” led to the extraction of a series of terms artists and critics have used to examine its associated devices.[307] Similarly, generating this materially-led language from the experiences of sculptors has presented “material” as a large umbrella term housing a range of different approaches, phenomena and sources of information which intersect in a completed sculptural work. In doing so, I have presented material not as the “antithesis of intellectuality,”[308] but as an important and equal participant in critical meaning.

[307] Barbara Hepworth, “Sculpture,” in *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 394-395; and William Tucker and Tim Scott, “Reflections on Sculpture,” in *Art in Theory*, 801-803.
[308] This quote from Petra Lange-Berndt opened chapter two and depicted material’s inferior position. Petra Lange-Berndt, “How To Be Complicit With Materials,” in *Materiality*, 12.

CONCLUSION

This final section concludes the thesis by returning to the research questions in order to consolidate what has been learned and demonstrate how this new information can be put to use. I will also examine the limitations of this study and acknowledge areas for further research that have been uncovered.

1. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

First, I will provide an overview of the research conducted via a review of the methodology and connect this to the research questions in order to assess the outcomes.

1.1 MATERIAL IN ART CRITICISM

The first research question asked "how is material explored in art criticism, and why is it important to involve it in critical discussion?" The theoretical research strand of the methodology responded directly to this, which was explored in chapter two. A detailed discussion of philosophical theories of "material agency" since 1990 articulated new concepts and ideas which link material to social and political structures. Though these ideas are emerging from disciplines outside of art, they emphasise the crucial value of involving materially-focused theoretical frameworks in art criticism. Material has a significant impact on human behaviour: it influences our actions and operates in unexpected ways.[309]

After demonstrating the importance of material meaning, I interrogated the treatment of material in art criticism since the 1960s. Analysis of writing by Rosalind Krauss and Lucy

[309] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Lippard demonstrated two dominant critical models - the “transcendent” and the “animate” - which prioritise form and process respectively. In contrast to the agentic model, material is viewed as a submissive follower in Krauss and Lippard’s writing. Its secondary treatment in art criticism is an enduring condition, which demonstrates the current urgency to establish a critical language for sculpture which acknowledges its multiple meanings.

1.2 MATERIAL IN SCULPTURAL PRACTICE

The second research question moved from theoretical sources to the current conditions of sculptural practice, asking “how and why do artists currently engage with materials? What decisions do they face, and what does this tell us about the current conditions of sculpture making?” This was addressed in the qualitative interviews with artists, which were presented and analysed in the third chapter. Adopting a methodology which incorporated data from artists allowed me to bring makers’ voices into critical space towards developing a new framework which strongly resonates with practitioners as well as writers.

The interviews themselves captured the current conditions of contemporary sculptural practice, wherein artists are exhibiting a keen sensitivity to material and selecting them for an assortment of reasons. Contemporary sculptors adopt a variety of approaches, evidencing the multiplicity of material-led sculptural practice which is underrepresented in critical language. By comparing and contrasting the content gathered from the interviews, I exposed common approaches, attitudes and applications which are broadly shared across a range of practitioners. These points of comparison were consolidated into four “themes,” which relate both to artistic uses of material in the studio and its effects beyond art practice in wider networks of social interaction. Material engagement allows artists to demonstrate their values in action, represent their own experiences of the world and deal directly with

social and political debates. As such, these four themes form the foundations for building a new materially literate language.

1.3 MATERIAL IN THE INDIVIDUAL ENCOUNTER

The third research question transitioned from the wider ecology of sculptural making to my own experiences, asking “how does an individual artist engage with material in order to construct a body of sculpture in the studio and how does this contribute to meaning?” My practice became a case study. I specifically selected salt dough as the focus of this study as there are no existing techniques associated with this material: it provided freedom to be experimental which enabled me to develop unique, innovative methods. This activity identified concrete sources of meaning which emerge from putting a material to work.

I positioned my observations along a linear timeline, examining material “before,” “during,” and “after” the studio. Adopting this framework allowed me to explore my own decisions, responses and critical applications of material in detail as they pertain to coding meaning into my sculptures. Similarly to the four themes, I solidified my experiences into nine “terms,” relating to both intangible (such as “historical context”) and physical information (including material’s “specific characteristics”). The terms apply concrete language to material meaning, which can be nebulous and difficult to discern,[310] as a means of populating the broader fields which were established by the four “themes.” As a result, I have demonstrated that material meaning is not deployed in one specific way, but encompasses a range of phenomena, devices and approaches. Though I observed them as appearing from a particular point in a sculpture’s lifespan, they are not fastened to linear time and accumulate in the completed work. As such, material can be deployed by artists to develop critical

[310]Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “Showing Making: On Visual Documentation and Creative Practice,” in *The Journal of Modern Craft,* vol. 5, no. 1 (2012): 11. https://doi.org/10.2752/174967812X13287914145398

meaning in a sculpture, as it allows simultaneous layers of information to converge in a single work, constructing a complex - yet accessible - line of enquiry.

1.4 MATERIAL IN A NEW CRITICAL LANGUAGE

The last research question drew together knowledge gained from the previous three, asking “how does recognition of methods and decision making processes relating to material offer us new critical language, tools, approaches to discussing and exhibiting contemporary sculpture?”

In the final chapter of this thesis, I consolidated the vocabulary I had generated from the experiences of eight contemporary sculptors and my own exploration of salt dough. Together, the four themes and nine terms form a critical vocabulary, which I have presented as a working glossary designed to identify and analyse the meanings that material contributes to sculpture. This has been generated from varied experiences and approaches of emerging practitioners, meaning that it successfully captures the material encounter from a maker’s perspective and bridges the rift between material and idea. If applied to any sculptural work, it can facilitate a more rigorous exploration of material’s critical potential and a comprehensive understanding not only of the artwork itself, but of the wider context from which it emerged.

If material is taken into consideration, sculpture becomes a catalyst connecting theoretical space with everyday experiences. Here, we see the capacity of materially-led sculptural practice to enact, embody and test different conceptual models. Examining material, then, not only enables us to access the complete meaning of a sculptural work, but also that it allows sculpture to act as a social commentator.

Critical language may arise from practice and engagement with material as well as theoretical research. “Material,” then, is not a singular method of inquiry, but a considerably larger term which includes multiple devices, phenomena and knowledge which may be deployed in numerous combinations. These layers of material meaning bind contemporary art to the social context in which it is located, as they have the ability to communicate arguments or ideas relating to political structures, gender and sexuality, social behaviour and ethical production. This amplifies the ways in which sculpture may engage with different issues and concepts which impact the world around it. As such, this study has offered a vocabulary which recognises artistic material engagement and can be put to use by artists, critics, curators, researchers and audiences in order to perceive sculpture’s wider cultural relevance.

2. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

After assessing the research questions and identifying the new information that this study has generated, it is possible to observe its limitations and the new lines of enquiry it unearths.

Perhaps the most apparent limitation is that it attempts to cover a lot of ground. A methodology in three parts, adopting both deductive and inductive approaches, is less concise than a singular strategy of gathering information. Incorporating textual analysis, qualitative research and practice-based enquiry investigates large areas, and each field has the potential to offer more information beyond the confines of this study. In spite of this, spreading the research over a three-part methodology was necessary in order to answer the research questions for two key reasons: it is able to situate materially-led sculpture in direct dialogue with critical writing, and uncover multiple areas which require further research.

Firstly, bringing together data from critical texts, a group of emerging sculptors and my personal practice allowed me to analyse material in sculpture via different levels of magnification: my own practice demonstrated the microcosms of contemporary practice, as I focused in to examine the finer details of material meaning; and the textual and qualitative research accessed new knowledge in order to link this to the macrocosms of interdisciplinary-level dialogues. This strategy is vital, as it demonstrates the link between critical vocabulary and material-led practice, which is a key finding of this thesis. As such, this model of material literacy is situated across text and practice, which is fundamental to produce new understandings of sculpture.

Secondly, a multi-faceted methodology has uncovered the new lines of enquiry, and suggested areas for further research that can be accomplished in academic writing, qualitative research and studio experimentation. Material has links to sustainability and production, gender and racial politics, socioeconomics and class, and natural sciences such as chemistry and physics. The ability of material to communicate information about social narratives means that there is more work to be done examining how this is achieved in each field. This thesis examines the means by which material may achieve new sculptural understanding through the use of sympathetic, accurate and critical language. The research also offers methods and conceptual tools through which artists may expand their practices and materials to engage new topics and fields of activity beyond those they currently address. This may reach out further towards disciplines outside of visual art such as feminism and gender studies; anthropology; and sociology in order to examine sculpture's relationship to each from a material perspective.

Perhaps most crucially, the qualitative interviews have the most potential for further research. As detailed in the introduction, the pool of participants was limited by my individual

reach and the timescale of this thesis. Though I attempted to include a group of diverse participants, seven were women and only one was male, and seven were white whilst one was black. Though the four themes may still be applied to any sculpture, the data generated is more representative of white female sculptural practice rather than authentically capturing a more general - and therefore accessible - experience. In particular, this is evident in the different approaches towards material engagement: many of the female artists used emotionally charged language to express their material interactions, which contrasts Jamie Fitzpatrick's approach. However, since only one male artist is included, I am unable to draw any specific conclusions. There is more scope for this study to be expanded to increase the diversity of voices, providing a wider spectrum of approaches which has the potential to identify other uses of material that may not have surfaced in this study. The research carried out highlights the need for further qualitative data in order to truly reflect multi-faceted sculptural practice in current social conditions. This study demonstrates the necessity, value and potential of a larger research project which expands this methodology in order to make a significant contribution to material literacy.

The vocabulary generated by this thesis contributes to material literacy in contemporary art criticism. The four themes act as larger areas of inquiry, connecting broadly to current dialogues in sculptural practice. The specific terms which emerged from the material encounter denote concrete strategies or phenomena which are situated within the themes, providing nuance and richness. In spite of this, these themes are not finite, and this thesis cannot capture all possibilities for making material meaningful. Further work is needed in order to test and evaluate this vocabulary, putting it to work by applying it to a variety of sculptural works, as well as increasing the potential to develop language collaboratively with other participants in order to ensure that it is widely relevant and accessible to contemporary practitioners.

The practice-based strand of this thesis has yielded a variety of methods and devices an artist may utilise in the construction of sculpture. Here, however, only one material - salt dough - was tested in detail. Can the template provided by this thesis be applied to other materials in a similar way, and would the outcomes change? Analysis of the material encounter in the studio could be developed with a broader range of substances in order to discover new phenomena and language, adding detail and richness. The nine terms could be further refined and understood through continuing post-doctoral work, and enhanced testing by other artists.

3. SIGNIFICANT OUTPUTS

Bringing this thesis to a precise conclusion, the significant outputs of this study are twofold.

Firstly, it has clarified that material is not a submissive follower but a vast field which encompasses many complex layers of meaning. It is not secondary, but equal to form and process - which have been prioritised at various points in the previous century. Analysing a material in this way has demonstrated that it is not positioned hierarchically beneath theory, but rather that it has a dialectic relationship with critical language. It is necessary to capture material's effects in written form in order to analyse and understand them. As such, art criticism relies on material's capacity to manifest meaning and to facilitate access to concepts and ideas. Material is not an outsider, but a vital aspect of conceptual communication. Both the research and the vocabulary it has generated are a step towards establishing material literacy in contemporary sculptural practice.

Secondly, this thesis has carried out the work necessary to make new claims about the full extent of sculpture's potential when material is given its due. Sculpture may represent new

images for our shared reality as a means of presenting arguments or ideas to viewers in accessible formats. It may unearth hidden links between art making and social material encounters, which work towards democratic engagement with contemporary art by providing an access point between ideas and everyday experiences. Material in sculpture has the unique ability to impart meanings specific to social and political context, and to intervene in debates regarding the conditions of inhabiting our shared environment. These critical elements are vital to sculpture's continued strength as a discipline.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. ARTIST INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION EXCERPTS

APPENDIX 1.1
INTERVIEW WITH ANNA F.C. SMITH, 08/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: What are you doing with your work overall?

Anna F.C. Smith: So my main themes are folk; histories and folk cultures and history in general. So I'm interested in how we repeat an awful lot of stuff throughout our time and how we reconnect with folk cultures and our own history we can see a lot of repetitive traits and features that we can then maybe come to an understanding of ourselves, but that understanding isn't an understanding that we're going to do better or worse. [...] So, I'm quite interested in bawdy culture and bawdy humour, and characters and things that show that sort of lighter side of life. [I'm using history] as a lens to look through and then almost that it emphasises something that we're doing now. [...]

EB: How is this achieved through the materials that you use?

AS: So, the objects are the main crux. And then the performative element just manipulates them and moves them. And the materials themselves are very based on literally the research that they've come from. So they come from that history. So, for example, everything's very connected so I do kind of jump around in my materials because I'll look at a very specific thing for a specific project.

[speaking about the project *The Last Bound Sheaf*, a residency in an old tobacco factory]
AS: I interviewed and spoke to a lot of people who used to work there and I also spoke to health specialists and people about the relationship that people had with tobacco, looking at tobacco as a another presence in people's lives, like a plant, an urban plant, that people had a real life with but we don't see it as being a plant. So I've elevated it back to being a plant again and people's relationship with nature and that plant in the context of that Glasgow city factory. So using ancient Scottish traditions of corn dollies or barley dollies really in Scotland, I kind of, like, gave tobacco that human presence like, anthropomorphised presence that Scotland had given to plants in the past but gave it to the urban Glasgow people. So it was like, actually working with tobacco, you know, growing tobacco, drying tobacco, making sculptures that were like, basically corn dollies but tobacco dollies. So, that was very, kind of like, it was just totally that the material came out of the project. They were papier-mâché coated in tobacco and, to be honest, quite a lot of hay, because it was really hard to grow enough tobacco and I wanted, like, live plants and drying plants and the actual, like, my processing to be part of the show, so I didn't have enough tobacco to cover the whole thing. [...] But it has a sacredness because it has this magical power over people and when you're talking to people actually about that. I did smoke then, so I also had that inner knowledge actually about how I had a relationship with this plant and how it, kind of, affected my life and how I, kind of like, loved it and loathed it and it was everything to me and it was this social ritual and it got me friends, it got me partners in the past, and it had actually been a really big thing in my

life. [People] talked about it like a friend, so anthropomorphising it was interesting. It can be both evil and good to you at the same time.[...]

EB: Are materials important to you?

AS: It's really interesting because when you first said do I want to participate in this, I hadn't, I mean, obviously now speaking I think about materials absolutely loads. I think it's just that I'm so whimsical with materials because I'm just like, I'll do a bit of this, I'll do a bit of that, like, so I don't kind of get to know material. Which is why I assumed I almost don't deal with materials. [...] I pick something up, have a go and then chuck it down. [...] So yeah, so I do test out materials for a little bit of time and then I'll get to know it slightly. I select them on a thematic basis. [...] I have a massive back bank in my head of things that I need to deal with. Some of them are half baked with materials within them.

[...]

EB: To what extent would you say your work is materials led? Would you say it's the materials showing you what they're capable of or is it you, kind of selecting materials because you want to make this form?

AS: I think I override the materials somewhat. I think I force myself onto materials. And so I try my best to make the materials do what I want them to do as opposed to being material led. But then after I've gone through that process, the materials a little bit can override me and be like, well actually, I'm not going to quite do what you wanted. So then, things are, like, often more wonky or slash I don't practice enough so the work's kind of a little bit more shoddy so I kind of like a folk aesthetic anyway so I'm not too worried about that. But yeah I think, I think I force form onto material more than the other way around.

[Speaking about researching and collecting "potholed" clay]:
AS: When I started working with the dug out clay, I came across this law from the 1700s that said you can't, erm, dig clay from the road or from anywhere that wasn't a designated place because Wigan used to have a clay industry before it had a mining industry - it was like a cottage industry but it was one of it's biggest industries. And again, I'm all history, so the interest in dealing with that was actually from a bit of history but about a material. I got excited then thinking that oh my god there's all this material under my feet. So, we went out with a torch and did some midnight digging so there was a kind of the rebellious, kind of like, bawdy element was like I'm breaking the law. So I went out and dug different holes around the place - refilled them - but found some clay and started working with that. But what I knew I vaguely wanted to make pots but because that clay was so unwieldy and I was like trying different techniques and refining it, they did tell me what they were gonna become - the project was almost defined in the clay and then working with it. [...] But I think that is where the term pothole came from. There are loads of other cases in the court records that I was looking at in the archives of people getting done for it, you know, like, digging up pot holes in the town centre. [...]

EB: How do you position yourself theoretically?

AS: I locate myself because of my obsession with the history element. But I'm not good enough at my research to be able to be a historian. So, it's a lot of book reading, archive research into genuine just history. So there's no theory. I mean obviously, historians theorise or have their own perspectives but I'm not looking at critical thinking.

[...]

EB: Do you think there's a current need for material focused practice?

AS: I've noticed that there has been a real return to materials anyway actually just in general. I mean, from visiting shows and seeing how people are making I think looseness and really allowing materials to show themselves up in work has really started to make a comeback. [...] There's been a real look at, suddenly, the general art world seems to have been, particularly the younger artists coming out, seem to be very interested in ancient history, materiality, and sort of getting back to nature and touching rocks and all that stuff. And then, also, use of materials has become looser and more fluid. It reminds me of the 1930s when they had the back to the land movement that came after the great depression, or the 1970s which had seen a big rise of hippiedom and people really wanting to connect with their folk backgrounds. So I think this interest comes in waves. And I think it often comes off the back of something quite traumatic. [...] I'm talking from being in it in terms of judging it, but there's a kitschification of ancient culture. But it's like, getting much more, kind of like, dirty again. It seems to be responding to a digital alienation as well. [...] I think that people seem to be wanting to do that now. You know, like, touch things and make things a lot more messy.

EB: Do you feel like materials are picked up in art criticism and reported to the public?

AS: From what I have read I just merely see the concepts getting discussed. Sometimes things like big and bold or fun or sort of like the emotional responses to the material is mentioned but not necessarily how it was applied or the skill or the physicality of the physical thing. If something's splashy or whatever it would be described as being sort of fun and bold and maybe messy but it wouldn't be - messy as in the description of the thing - but I just think it's more emotionally described or the theory or the basic idea behind the show is described much more than people talk about the paint. [...] My work gets described as like folk art or having an interest in folk art, which is referencing the material background but it's not really described like she wrapped a such and such a thing in a thing. [...] Because then basically that bit was the kind of like, the dirty side of things, and the craftsman was like… the skill of the craftsman was respected but not the actual getting down and dirty.

APPENDIX 1.2
INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA MOLLOY, 09/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: Can you briefly summarise what you're doing?

Rebecca Molloy: [...] The work is about the body. So me using my own body, physically but also emotionally I guess. [...] I'm interested in the relationship between our bodies and objects. I'm interested in my body and feelings of sensations like lust and desire and how I could create that for myself and for an audience member. I'm interested in exploring the weirdness and darker sides of sexuality. So there's something quite absurd about a woman just provocatively trying to grind a cactus. I'm really interested in popular culture, so it comes from absorbing a lot of imagery of women presenting themselves in an overtly sexual way. There's two sides of it for me where I feel empowered by that but then it's also a double edged sword of… I guess in terms of politically, how we feel about feminist issues and that's obviously had such a lot of coverage at the moment. [...] There's a few things with material that's quite important. I think firstly the most important thing is my need as an artist to be doing something physical. So that's either dancing or singing or in the case of object making, handling materials and handling paint. So I've got this desire, which I feel like is a bit prehistoric in a way, like a bit instinctive in me. And I feel like that's anti of the way we're living now in a digital age that I need to handle materials and through that process, it's like a thinking process, as soon as I'm touching something, or making that form, I'm able to work through ideas and I guess it's just about me and my own physicality and that's a really important thing for me in my practice.

EB: Do you see making as quite an empowering thing?

RM: Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's fraught with other things as well but it is generally, I feel like once I've gotten through the process of finalising a piece that something empowering has happened and I feel like I've made sense of something in a physical way.

EB: How are your aims achieved with the actual materials that you use? Does that enter into your thinking when you select the materials?

RM: So the selection of materials is often based around what I've got in my studio and what's cheap and available to me. I think that's mostly where it's come from so far. So a lot of the sculptures I've made have been out of paper mache and wood and then things in my studio that I was going to throw away so there's an element of recycling. Also what's really important is I work very quickly and I want to stay as closely as possible to this instinctive process. [...] Materials tend to lend themselves to just something more immediate and maybe I can hammer it together really haphazardly. There is also something really important about materials that are in my surroundings in a sense that I want to use things that are a part of my life. So I want to use materials that somehow represent what's going on now for me. And I think that's important because it symbolises my connection to the material. [...] My Dad has Alzheimer's so a lot of what he's doing, because he will hallucinate for example, and so there're a lot of times when he's using his touch to work out and then he will feel it to understand it and to rebalance his reality.

And also I think he was always very tactile because he was a welder and he was handling these materials so I think maybe it's a part of him anyway. But I guess through the process of reusing this material that he's had throughout his life and now he's coming towards the end of his life it's the material that's really present for him. I guess. I want to use it as well for that connection, to understand it, to be tactile with it. So there's a lot of working out to do but it feels like there's an emotional connection to materials as well. [...] It's like a documentation of me having ability and a body that can express itself and works and moves freely. So in that sense material also has this really emotional connection for me. There is that sense of materiality. I actually feel very disconnected, if I were to make a painting with a brush, I don't want that. I want to be handling materials. So in that sense, materiality is really important. I'm still finding every which way I can be tactile, in which I can touch something. So I think maybe that is one of the key points is materials. To touch and to handle.

EB: To what extent would you say that it's materials led? What I mean by that is would you say that the materials work for you and you get them to act in a certain way or would you say that it's more of a negotiation between what you want the material to do and what it does?

RM: I think it's probably a negotiation. I don't think I've got that thing where I want to make something very exact and then I know the material that I want to render that out in. [...] A lot of it is existing in the studio, playing around with things and then that generates ideas. So the recycling of things is quite important and figuring out how I can make something 3D from the things that I've got around me. [...] If I spend too much time on the computer for example, because I make a lot of video, I kind of feel really weird. I can't be on the computer for that long it's like I guess it's a bit about my own understanding of the world around me and how I want to interact with it and what I really want is physicality and to be moving and to be using my hands and then when you're on a computer that contains everything into small, miniscule movements. And that can be a really interesting process particularly in terms of editing but it also takes you away from your physicality. [...]

[Speaking about constructing the cactus sculpture]:
RM: Literally, yeah, because I was like dirt poor and that was affecting it as well. So they're filled with grabbing stuff from paint racks and empty bottles. And part of it is I think this concealing thing because I have this - as an artist in 2018 - I definitely have a conflict in me about making more stuff for the world when there's so much stuff in the world. So somehow utilising things that I know I'm not going to use and making them into a sculpture makes me feel a little bit better about the whole process of using material. [...] And then papier mache came in to give it a surface. [...] The material in a way and the making of something is almost happening on the side and there's this thinking going on and it might be a subconscious train of thought or you might be thinking in particular about a very specific idea that you want to achieve, but there's a lot of other stuff going so so you kind of feel like, oh yeah I don't really think about material that much because it's just happening.

EB: Do you position yourself theoretically in any way - and that can be art theory or outside of art - and do you think that is important to your work?

RM: So, I think this has been a bit of a battle for me because so I think about when I make my work I'm talking about it in this instinctive way which I feel like I've always made work in that way. Like when I was doing my BA for example, I was making paintings in a day, like there was a sense of not wanting to let the academic mind come in so much. Always a sense of wanting to be present with the material of whatever I make. [...] I want to be able to go into the studio and have the freedom to make freely without being tied down by certain issues of academia or theory. But then that's not entirely true because I'm also interested in these things. [...] What I would like to read about if I'm reading a paper on something physiological that happens in the human body and then how that relates to the actual experience of emotion. So for example, to make it a bit more clearer, when women are ovulating and they dance they use their hips more. So actually, you can go back and look at it scientifically what's happening chemically with the release of our eggs, and what's going on in a physiological way, and then how that comes out in a physical way through the use of the body using the hips and then how that comes out culturally and socially and how we find mates and sexual partners to procreate now, like how we do that. So I really enjoy reading things like that because it's got all of these layers which tackle lots of my own thinkings and wonderings about the world.

EB: Do you think there is a current need for materially focused sculptural practices? And how do you position yourself in that?

RM: [I'm working] in this way that is all about physicality and being present in a moment. [...] If I make an installation and I transform the space then the audience has to be physically in that space and then I perform within that space so it's got another element of physicality them watching me perform or having a kind of reaction to that. So my position on that is that because I'm kind of sick of instagram - seeing things in a 2D digitised affected way and I also contribute to that in the way that I photograph my works or have a clip video online. I realise that I am feeding back into that but the main focus for me is to do something physical for myself and the audience as a way to… because I guess with the cactus dance in particular, seeing lots of images of girls who have instagram pages where they are posing and using their body as a way to get likes or watching music videos where women are displaying their sexuality. [...] I guess it's the same as in pornography, it's easier to absorb it through that medium of the screen. You are anonymous watching other people and observing. So as a female as well, part of me wants to be I guess as beautiful or as attractive as these women who are displaying themselves or how do I feel about that if I displayed myself sexually for example.

EB: So it requires that kind of presence of an art object or some kind of made object or material object to open that conversation?

RM: More than an art object I think it's my object that I made. I couldn't do that with any sculpture.

APPENDIX 1.3
INTERVIEW WITH LAURA YUILE, 09/11/18

Ellie Barrett: How would you describe what you're doing with your work overall?

Laura Yuile: I'm interested in thinking through these very big global all consuming structures and things. But, I guess working a lot of the time with objects and materials that are quite domestic or scaled to the body or something we have quite intimate contact with. I'm interested in thinking through these issues and different things related to technology but not really using technology I guess, but doing that through working with ready made objects and other quite day to day materials. [...] But yeah, around that time, I made some things with dirt that I'd hoovered from the floor of the Westfield shopping centre [...] I like this idea of this kind of I guess by-product or non-descript substance that's generated by this activity happening in the space and using that. Or naming that to suggest another space that's not present in the work.

EB: How do materials fit in to that - how do you approach finding them and how do they fit in with what you're trying to achieve?

LY: I'm interested in using materials that kind of point towards a different space that's not present in the work, or point towards usually a kind of intimate proximity with the body, like working with soap and lint as well is something that's quite connected to the body. So yeah, I think it's about bringing in an intimacy that maybe sits in contrast with a lot of the readymade objects that I use in installations. [...] Some of them are quite perishable or soap sometimes kind of disintegrates or I've worked with for a while, with food - dough and dried pulses and spices and things - which is probably quite different work but again it goes mouldy and rotten and changes over time. [...] I did a show where it was in an old railway arch space that was cold and damp and the soap started to kind of sweat and melt. So they kind of transformed over time and took on this strange… you know when old soap and it looks kind of cracked and horrible skin or something. [...] I buy the soap base, and you can add things to that and you just melt it and pour it into moulds. And also another thing I really like about it is you can just chop it up and melt it down and reuse it. So it's quite recyclable although it does get dirtier and dirtier, but that's quite nice. [...] I guess I think about [recycling] a lot. I mean, at the moment, this is not a huge studio but I kind of keep a lot of what I make for now, like there's been times where I've just had to make the thing, throw it in the bin, then you just start to feel like shit. But then, my more recent work, I've been pebble dashing a lot of appliances. So that's also been quite nice in the sense that I've been buying or getting broken appliances off people, pebbledashing them and either I keep them or they go to the recycling place and you kind of intercept this process of something being thrown out and you don't really generate something new as such.

EB: To what extent are materials important to you? Do they lead your projects, or do you find that the research comes first?

LY: I think I'd never feel like anything specifically leads that much. I think it just kind of goes together somehow. Yeah. I'll just come across a material and I'll want to do something with it. Like the lint, for example, it was there and it looked kind of amazing and it was an interesting material. So, yeah, I guess I kind of found a way to bring that into the work.[...] I guess you do like a body of work and then move on to something else. With the pebbles, I started using them because I was initially using pebbles that were used in some decorative features on this island. Which I guess I like the kind of generic urban, suburban camouflage it kind of provides to these objects. I stopped using the ones from here because it became difficult to steal them all the time. There's a lot of CCTV. So then I bought them - now I buy them at Wickes. And they're a very cheap material to work with. Which is great. But yeah I guess I just wanted to create this veneer of a surface that you just kind of see in the city a lot and it seems like this horrible stupid idea to pebbledash a fridge. But in a really, like, kind of like nice dumb way. [...] These ones I used this kind of grab adhesive because it's very easy and very strong but normally for the larger pieces you use some kind of cement mix. And then just chuck the pebbles at that when it's wet. [...] I think a lot of stuff I make is quite quick in terms of the sculptural stuff. [...] I think it's just impatience and I kind of hate, like, casting is a slow process. That's what I hated about it. I just got really impatient and I hate the having to be really precise about a process for it to work. Stuff like that, you know, it's like I really love cooking but I can't stand baking because you have to be precise and measure things and… urgh. [...] when I was working with spices and food materials, it took me a long time to find a way to mix them with something that would hold them together. And I think at first I'd been very reluctant to use glue or something because I wanted it to be also food based rather than kind of tainting this material with something completely different, or from a completely different world. But that just made it really difficult, I think, finding combinations of materials that work together if you want them to be of a particular world I guess. But a lot of them are quite… working with pebbles there's not many surprises. [...] I just stick them on to a thing.

EB: To what extent would you say your work is led by materials? Do you think that you have this relationship with them where you make them work for you? Or would you say it's more of a push and pull negotiation with them to try and get them to look a particular way?

LY: I think the materials kind of lead it in that sense. I work with things that are quite different in terms of how they work as materials. But I don't interfere with the material in a way that completely transforms it or kind of, I'm not doing some kind of wizardry. [With the soap], I guess that is different because it needs a container to set in, so you have to think about that. When I first started working with it I was being a bit more, like, just pouring it into containers that I had, basically, and then I realised I could be a bit more ambitious and actually make a mould. But still, the moulds were casts from readymade objects. But, yeah, I'd say I've done a couple of things with resin, they are probably the only things that I've used when you have to have a plan for that kind of… transformation to take place. I guess they're more akin to traditional art materials. [...] I think that's why I usually hate the idea of working with art materials. It's that kind of like… they're there to be made into art. [...] I guess there's a popularity now of very handmade looking ceramic

work which is maybe the opposite of that but is still something that's very desirable and sells and… kind of the loadedness of working with art materials that have that history I think is quite daunting and it's something I can't really push to the side of my brain. You really need to learn the way to do it. And you're not really meant to think about why you're using the material, perhaps. You're just using plaster because it's a cheap and easy thing to use.

[...]

EB: How do you position yourself theoretically and do you have any particular textual references - whether that's art theory or another sort of textual reference?

LY: I think I try to avoid art theory. I mean, there's nothing wrong with it per se, but I guess in terms of my work I mostly read things that are probably either more general cultural theory or like sociology or philosophy. I've been reading Peter Slaughterdyke's Spheres series. I guess this kind of thing feels more connected to my work in a way, for me. That in particular for this idea of… I guess that kind of quest and the kind of wholeness of the world or to feel contained by something. I think I'm more interested in probably kind of slightly abstract seeming ideas that aren't really about or connected to art. But then, who… who is reading these art theories? Curators I guess? [...] I feel like there is a bit of a return to thinking about materials in art at the moment in a kind of quite more interesting way. I don't know, and I guess it is maybe a reaction to this kind of oh, everything is now immaterial. Certainly for me, I think it is a reaction to that. Not that I'm not specifically referring to any theory.

EB: Do you think there's a current need or trend for material focused sculptural practice? And how do you position yourself?

LY: Yes, I think there is and I think, like I was just saying, I think for me, part of it's about this kind of ridiculous promise of technology and things becoming immaterial and this failure to keep issues relating to materials and just like the actual world around us kind of at the forefront. I think things get kind of forgotten when there's this, like, drive for technological innovation and stuff. Meanwhile the world is collapsing around us. [...] I'm not sure what art's role is, obviously. I guess it's just a way of thinking and talking about things. I can't stand the kind of like, oh no we must be working with cutting edge technology in art now and that's that. I'm more interested in working with rubbish. Stupid technology like glue.[...] I mean, maybe it's a feminist thing as well, I don't know.

APPENDIX 1.4
INTERVIEW WITH ELLY THOMAS, 09/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: Can you briefly talk about what you're doing with your work overall?

Elly Thomas: Well I look at a continuity between childhood play and adult creativity and I tend to focus specifically on the toy, so how an understanding of the functioning of the toy can come to play along with the sculptural practice. That involves looking into play theory, games theory, and how that might inform studio processes.

EB: And how is that achieved with the materials that you use?

ET: [...] The materials generally: the major criteria is they allow you to do stuff. Really, that's the whole thing is that the objects are doing objects and thinking about them, how they're connected to what is entwined, obviously, an object that isn't an ornament and it doesn't sit on a shelf. It's something that's activated and it's an object to experiment with, and to investigate the world with and to return to repeatedly. So with that in mind, that's how materials are chosen. And they're often things like papier-mâché. [...] I work with fabric and latex and silicone. And sometimes even the most simple thing to communicate which is often that they're stuffed. If they were solid it wouldn't allow it to give and to interact with things. So the main thing is that the choice of materials is always how they can maximise what you can do and the life of the work beyond the point it's made. [...] [papier-mâché is] light and it's incredibly tough. You'll come off worse if you collide with it and it's fine. It's that it's an object most of all the choice is that it's very very appealing that it's primarily free as well, so it's using recycled materials. Again, it's about having materials that do have a connection with, you know, the classroom or something like that. Something that isn't or doesn't operate on a position of art history. I suppose that's important, really, it doesn't carry that whole history. It has a history but maybe a history that's much more specific to my biography, really, than it is to art history. So the fact that it's a recycled material, and I work with found objects a lot. [...]

EB: So, do you think there's an immediacy as well about the materials: that they're at your fingertips?

ET: Absolutely, absolutely, yeah, that's definitely it. [...] And again, the thing about them being cushiony is that they're responsive as well. [...] I mean that's the main thing to me is this word responsive. It's got to in some way respond to you. And then I think beyond that, it's not just one way traffic - it's not just about it responding to you, it's got to then push back and then do something back to you again.

EB: Do you think about the process of your work as being materials led? And by that I mean to what extent do you think the material works for you, or do you think there's a kind of negotiation - a push and pull - between you and the material?

ET: Absolutely, yeah. I mean that's sort of primary, actually. There's nothing I'm disappointed in more if it comes out as I imagined. That's utterly crushing.[...] And it's much more sort

of as a dialogue in that way. But I think the sheer joy of working with objects as being sculptural rather than on a canvas is, again, it's not illusion, the kind of persona that's coming through is very much formed by the same forces that are working on us. It's in our world, it's responsive to the things we're responsive to. [...] none of my work would be possible unless I'd have stumbled on papier-mâché, really, and it's that thing that it just allows for, so much more. [...] I find it's almost like your palette is broadening and sculpture's so much slower, isn't it? Even if you're making an object that's quick, it's just slower in terms of developing a practice I think. [...] And just being able to put contrasting materials together I find takes an inexplicable amount of time, personally. It takes you years to understand what the object - what the material - will do so that you're stopping yourself from telling the object what to do. And I think, for me, you know, there's a point where obviously you can become too knowing about it but I find actually there's a sort of sweet spot where you know enough to let it do what it wants to do, you know. And when it starts getting too familiar you switch material for a while and then have forgotten something and come back. [...] I often find it takes so long as well to communicate. Because I think - and as I say this is a huge generalization - but I think a lot of the time the vocabulary within visual art is quite either or. Something fits in this category or fits in that category and what we're actually talking about is a dialectic really, aren't we? We're talking about how something is both this and that and it's this and that and the work is coming from the inbetween. So this is where, as I say, it seems to be utterly the language of contradiction but this is where play is so incredibly helpful with the vocabulary that exists within play because play is by its very nature an engagement with duality. [...] you're never choosing a side really, you're always operating in this exchange. [...] There's a brilliant formulation for working with the unforeseen that the contemporary play theorist Brian Sutton Smith has, that because play had been defined in terms of an engagement with the unforeseen and he said that's just not quite enough, that's just not quite specific enough. It's an engagement with the unforeseen in order to exert control over it, which is to me brilliant again because it's so often the misconception around play is that it's about just abandoning yourself, but the only way that you actually can abandon yourself is if you've set up rules and then you have to obey the rules so that as Gadamer says the game starts playing you.

[...]

ET: Are we still trying to get over hierarchies here? With the workshop craft if you're talking about materials, you're you know, dumbing yourself down in some way? There's a kind of… you're on this quite literally a low level rather than engaging with concepts. Again it's like because these things are separated out rather than thinking, well maybe, concepts come through materials and it's what the materials allow you to do that allows for that. [...] It's kind of well, let's not sit around talking about squidging clay or something. [...] I think it's happening though. I do think it's happening. And I think it's happening with artists that are yet to be written about, actually. I mean, the real kind of new graduates, they're so incredibly informed because they've grown up in the information age and so I think they can wear their knowledge lightly, actually, and there's a hunger for stuff, again because we're in an age that's so screen dominated, there's an absolute real hunger for contact. And that sort of feels exotic again, doesn't it? And it is a slight re-discovering the wheel, there's a slight element of that. [...]

EB: Do you think there's a current need for material focused sculptural practices and how do you position yourself in this? And how do you feel materials are discussed in contemporary art criticism?

ET: They're not. They're peripheral. But we need artists to be writing, that's the thing. You can't write about what you're not doing. So we just need to hear those voices, really, don't we? And, again, as I say, it again comes from this separation of do you deal with concepts or do you deal with materials and that's how opporessive a construct that is and how banal to polarise those things. [...] The language that - and it sounds so negative, but I don't know how to do it without being it's not this or this - but again, it's like things like, you know, you either think with your hands or you have concepts. [...] which kind of dismisses the whole history of art, really, doesn't it? You know, so it's exactly that, it's not that you don't have concepts it's that if you are, to me, at all fascinated by what substances do in the world and how materials operate and kind of experimental practices - the concept is the start. That's the starting point. That's something to get things rolling, and then it's like, well I've got this start point, what will it do when it collides with the world? It's not standing apart and it's not being all knowing. It's not sitting there going and I have a statement to declare about society. It's going let's get dug in.

[...]

ET: Is that gendered at all? Because someone mentioned this to me years ago. We were talking and we were saying that - and I really dislike these over simplifications - but it was just a, and I'm sure I'm completely wrong, but it just sort of came up that it seems to be something that women seem to do a bit more than men, which is to find something and then work out their own way to use it that isn't a recieved way. I don't know if you're finding it to be gendered.

EB: I probably am actually because, if I'm honest, most of the artists I'm speaking to are women and maybe there's something to do with a lot of the artists I've spoken to, when we're talking about the materials they've used they're saying it's a really quite overt rejection of formalised training.

ET: And the workshop maybe? [...] You see we again don't have the language there because then you start to get into occupational therapy sort of sounding language where it is just the most mysterious thing that everything can seem in flux and kind of utterly seemingly… I don't know, sort of unmanageable. And then you just feel that. Or maybe it's just you've spent too long all day just writing behind a screen, you know, and then you just squidge a bit of paper mache and god knows why but you just feel good.

APPENDIX 1.5
INTERVIEW WITH JAMIE FITZPATRICK, 10/11/2018

EB: Can you start by just briefly summarizing what you're doing with your work overall?

JF: [...] I think there's the kind of materially driven sense of making and that kind of idea of creating forms that kind of adhere to these tropes of authority, whether they're figurative sculptures or whether they're architectural forms like plinths and pillars and stuff like that that kind of have this inherent sense of authority about them and to try and undermine and destroy that authority through a kind of aggressive making - by having that kind of violence of making being recorded in the trace of material.

EB: How is what you're talking about achieved specifically with the materials that you use?

JF: Well up until this point I guess I've been using a lot of wax in sculptures and a lot of that came out of… there's a… the works are made, relatively speaking, surprisingly quite quickly, you know, they're just thrown together. With these ones here, they're different in that they were made in clay and they're now cast in rubber and so they've got this kind of squidgy element to them. [...] initially they start off as this block of clay that gets kind of beaten up into things. So you can see there's a kind of aggressivity to the way they're put together. And also I'm actually very good and capable at mould making, but I purposefully do them in this very rough shod way and again this kind of… by trying not to give the material the respect it's due if you know what I mean? Like the whole process, the whole casting process in itself is a kind of reverential thing. It's about kind of taking this one object with a kind of temporality. [...] And so, the whole reason for using wax was originally… it was a way in which there was an element of stability in that they could be kept and moved and they would probably last for 50 years, and taken care of they would last for 100s of years. Obviously clay would destroy itself within weeks. And so, yeah so the casting process is purposefully done badly as, again, an undermining of that whole structure of authority in the process. [...] It's not a rejection of them because I am casting. I'm trying to purposefully fuck it up by not giving it the kind of kudos it deserves kind of thing. [...] When you can do something, to do it badly is also quite difficult. So it's like, I don't know, I have to kind of employ… I'll purposefully rush things or I'll use materials. So I use this kind of melting rubber partly for economic reasons but partly because it's a really shit material to cast in as opposed to - it probably would have cost me about the same amount to make silicone moulds for those rubber things. [...] And back then, I wouldn't even have a steel armature running through them so they would literally be balanced and would constantly fall over and smash and snap. You'd have, like, 50 kilos of wax balanced on thin bits of polystyrene, so there was an element of… there was an inherent fragility that was part of those works that was on purpose, you know, it's these kind of ideas of these monoliths that would topple and crumble. [...] And there would also be - I mean, at the time, as much as it was a kind of… an academic decision, it was also a financial decision that at the time I didn't have the kind of finances to be able to make things that have a sense of permanence and it was just easier to rebuild the works on site each time. And yeah, it's still that I don't want to be storing big works that, you

know, they do take up a lot of space. So it was easier just to smash them down and start again. Which I kind of enjoyed as a whole process.

EB: Is that something you think about when you choose wax as well is that quality of it being very impermanent and susceptible even after the work is finished? The qualities it has that make it nice to work with are still there in that it picks up damage and it's responsive to heat?

JF: Yeah, at the beginning very much that was the reason, that it kind of picked up the trace of its history. You know, if it got dropped or bashed those things would remain on it. [...] But then things started to sell and as much as people who are buying work love the idea of that at a kind of conceptual level what they don't want is to spend money on something that's absolutely going to fall apart. So there was an element of I had to find ways in which to kind of control and corral that sense of energy in the works. [...] And I had a show in New York and it was like OK, so these works had to be made - they were getting shipped to New York, I couldn't just very well ship a load of stuff that just turned up and it was an absolute mess and shambles. So, now they're much sturdier in the way that they're done. I mean I haven't been making a lot of big sculpture just out of necessity really, recently, because yeah it costs a lot to make sculpture. [...]

EB: To what extent is your work materials led? Would you say that you make the materials work for you, or would you say there's a negotiation going on with you and the material?

JF: No, I think I use materials that I know will work. Particularly the wax - I use it in a way that it's not intended to be used. [...] And so I would blend up different waxes to make this one that functioned in the way I wanted it. I wasn't using it in its traditional sense so I guess in that way I was forcing it to my means. But at the same time, I used it because it had that quick and speedy way of being able to retain gesture. [...] But generally speaking, I think that the idea comes first and the material fits the idea. [...]

[speaking about material selection and application]:
JF: Also with this rubber here, it's a PT flex which is quite a thin rubber so it tears really easily. Like here, it just does that as opposed to how I made them in silicone. Yeah that wouldn't tear, so these'll tear quite easily which means there's all these kind of flappy bits here, which I like as well. But when I work with wax, there would always be bits that would just fall off and these things had a kind of… a temporal shelf life and they had a potential to destroy themselves and I quite like that. I mean, it's not something that I actively chose but I didn't want these to be in high end rubber like silicone that would have that, again, that kind of sense of stability and permanence, like I wanted something that would have this raggedy kind of feel to it. [...] Everything's applied by hand. So whether it's with clay or whether it's with wax these things are applied. [...] One of the reasons why I've started straying away from the wax a little bit - and partly because I was getting a bit bored of the oh that's the guy that does the sculptures in wax, and it was becoming a bit more… I mean, particularly within conversations and interviews and stuff, people would focus on the material when for me it was just, it was really just a pragmatic thing, essentially, it was able to have these traces. [...] So it's punches, it's really kind of

getting things… it's trying to destroy it, trying to destroy that beauty, so it would be gouging them in the eyes and stamping on them and leaving footprints and stuff like that.

EB: Do you look at art theory in any way? How do you position yourself theoretically?

JF: Less so now. I mean, definitely when I was at college I would be reading things. [...] When I did my BA I did it in philosophy and art and it was a dual honors course [...] And what all of us ended up doing would be to kind of use art as a way of illustrating a concept. And I very quickly began to see that as quite a bad position. [...] I felt when I read things particularly with theory, I would process it too literally. And I didn't enjoy that and I didn't enjoy the way that it manifested itself in the work. So I do read things. I tend to read if I do read anything more sociological things more than philosophical or kind of theoretical things. [...]

EB: How do you feel materials are dealt with in art criticism or art journalism?

JF: I feel like what are often very prosaic and just, you know, the kind of process of things are described as a novelty. So the amount of times you'll read about, I don't know, someone's made some big bronze thing and the journalist went with the artist down to the foundry you know and talks about the kind of, oh, there was all these, you know, the fire and the heat and this and that and you know, like, it's a foundry mate, I wouldn't go into the mechanics of oh, the grease and there was a welder and they used… there were sparks flying everywhere as they welded the chassis, it's like yeah mate, it's a fucking mechanic's. What do you expect? And I've had it with me where it's like, wow, there were pots of wax everywhere and heaters and it's like, yeah, that's what the process is, it's not… and I feel that people overly romanticize material quite a lot. [...] There are reasons why I've made these choices and I like them and I'm engaged with them in a physical, haptic kind of way, but I don't romanticize them. They are just materials. [...] That's what was frustrating me about the wax is that people were making it the crux of the practice. And that's why I began to start rejecting it, because I kept feeling like if that's your take away from this then you're missing the point, you're getting the wrong idea. [...] I don't build something for you to be, what a beautiful use of wax. I build this to make you engage with something. There's a kind of culturally significant thing that I'm trying to address here, not I've chosen to use wax in a way that you haven't seen being used before. [...] It's pragmatic. Fundamentally, the reason I use it is because it's a way that I can trap gesture. That's all it is. If I can find another material to do that I will use that. [...] I suppose it goes all the way back to making - it does go back to that thing with making, like, fundamentally, I think it's all kind of like even though I'm an adult I'm trying to work through things in the way children do when they play. It is essentially a very grown up way of playing with dolls, you know, like that's essentially what I'm still doing. These things are worked out through creating these fictitious worlds in which things kind of happen. OK, I'm going to get 3 figures and pretend that they're on a raft and we're going to all argue with each other until we'll see who comes out the winner. And in the making, it's in a very childish way that I put these things together, it's like kids playing with play-doh.

APPENDIX 1.6
INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE WHITE, 10/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: So, just to kind of give a context and to sum up before talking directly about material elements, can you talk about what you're doing with your work overall?

Dominique White: I use very specific materials to emulate shipwrecks et cetera. I'm very interested in nautical myths and old world politics. So everything looks like this kind of dystopian relic almost, of this civilization that has either existed or, I don't know, doesn't quite sit in linear time if that makes sense. So everything does look partially destroyed. But that is also because of the very specific materials that I use, such as palm fronds which will eventually be completely destroyed through decay. Or even just certain sail rope and stuff, the way that I manipulate it means it's very delicate yet strong at the same time. [...] I'm very interested in afro-pessimism and accelerationism from a black perspective. [...]

EB: How is this achieved specifically through the materials that you work with?

DW: Everything is either a found object, so, I've got a sail behind me that I source. And I source very specific ones that are highly worn and patched up. Then I'll also use nautical buoys, and then materials that I guess are almost stereotypically other. So whether that's palm fronds or shells, kind of things that are associated with black civilizations, or historically black civilizations. Because, for example, you don't really use shells as currency anymore but it's something that existed for thousands of years.

EB: So you're definitely choosing materials that have a loaded history?

DW: Oh yeah. Even down to the rope that I use. So, this, for example, is actually tarred - sisal - so it leaves a weird residue on everything. So when this gets slightly heated from manhandling it, it kind of leaves this black residue over everything that it touches. It's a very odd material that I came across. But now I love using. Even down to its wispyness - that's from me manipulating it. It actually comes quite solid. So I do that with all rope. So even the rope behind you that's unpicked. It would have come in a two-strand. And then it takes so long to unpick and then I weave it again. [...] I want to push the boundaries of [kaolin] clay. Because you've seen me use it as a paint, and it wasn't until earlier this year - around July - that I realised it can completely solidify. But it has to be under, like, really certain conditions and essentially left for one or two days. [...]

EB: Do you have a sustained engagement with one material or are they selected as appropriate to projects?

DW: I usually play with this kind of vocab if that makes sense in terms of materials. And then I guess it develops over time. Even down to really minute things like I don't really use that kind of rope any more. It's the same rope as that - it's probably about three years old. I couldn't really give you a reason why I don't use it anymore. I just think the way that I've developed it, like the rope that I use now is more loaded than using like a perfect

almost like colouring manufactured material. [...] I do continue to use raffia because I know it's weirdly strong, it can soak up water, so that's why I use it in casting almost as like a filler if that makes sense. Because it is such a liquid clay it won't set unless you kind of layer it with other stuff. But then it does create this, like, weird texture at the same time.

EB: To what extent would you say that your work is materials led? Would you say that you make the materials work for you, or is it more of a collaborative relationship?

DW: I think a bit of both. With some materials, it's me in charge. But stuff like kaolin, that's me experimenting and realising actually, I can't make a completely solid mass that's that dense. There has to be a compromise. I feel like it's more me in charge of the materials as opposed to a collaboration a lot of the time. I don't know whether it's the way that I handle it or force it almost to work. It just does.

EB: Can you speak about how you interact with them when you're making and the kind of processes you go through when you're figuring out what they can do?

DW: Most of the time I discover stuff by accident, to be honest. So it actually cast solid in the bottom of a bucket and I managed to get it out and it was this beautiful disc that was completely solid. But then, obviously, it kind of has those qualities it kind of crumbles under weight. That's how I guess I treat most things. Most materials, actually. It's how much force can it take? How much can I load it with? So even with kaolin it's like how much water or other materials can I mix with it before it just completely loses those qualities. But yeah, I guess everything's time based. [...]

EB: When you say you find the kaolin at the bottom of the bucket and it had this thing that you didn't expect it to but because it did it you picked it up and went with it and took it a bit further.

DW: I guess that's how I also treat my work. I like to protect it during it being in my studio and in transit but when it's there I'm not really bothered. So for example the work that I had with you sustained so much damage from being out in the rain and in the mud that I probably can't show it again to be honest but that's fine. It's still here but I think that also ties in to people's attitudes towards preserving art works as this monetary object. And I'm very anti. [...] It's also particularly in the history of institutions preserving black artist's work against their will. I don't know, either after they'd died or they've preserved it or repaired it in a way that shouldn't have happened if that makes sense. Or it's even shown in a way that people don't get to experience the whole thing. [...] So it's like, a weird ownership of materials, I guess. Or like how I feel like I make work so the materials retain their autonomy almost. So they can decay on their own terms.

EB: How do you position yourself theoretically? And by that I mean do you have any textual references both in and outside of art theory, and is this important?

DW: [...] So all of that is art theory or just, like, critical theory. Quite heavy. And then, yeah, outside of art theory and critical theory, it's again, things about black history or also religious history. [...] So, kaolin, that I came across about five or six years ago in one of those really gross anthropological texts. And it's essentially what a lot of tribesmen use on their face, so it's a very naturally occurring thing. You can get it in skincare and stuff. [...] In terms of rope, I always use stuff that you would find on boats. [...] It's very specific to the nautical realm.

EB: So do you find you have a particular attachment to materials that get you mucky when you touch them, or leave a trace or transfer onto bodies? Even if it's a rope that you wouldn't expect that quality from?

DW: Yeah. I hate sterile work. I also like the idea of removing that power dynamic from the viewer if that makes sense. So even looking at my studio floor now, it's been mopped about six times but it still has the remnants of clay. So it's like when you walk on it, you also carry it away with you. That's what I mean about this weird power play between art and the institution - it's like art is elevated to this level for the viewer. So what happens when art is almost attacking the viewer through materials?

[...]

EB: Do you think there is a current need for material focused sculptural practice?

DW: Yes. Yes. I'm very bored of highly conceptual works that are super inaccessible to normal folk. Like, that weird specialised language and education that you have to have even to have an entry point. That kind of stuff that I see and I'm like I have not read this theory so therefore I can't enter it. So I guess that's why I like to have a heavily material based practice because if you're not from an art background you can still take something from it. You can still be, like, this looks like a shipwreck, this looks like it's from, I don't know, like the Carribean or something - what does that mean? And then if you're like, oh, ok I know about art and this means this, you know what I mean, it's like I don't know, I have beef with inaccessible work. [...]

EB: How do you feel materials are discussed in art criticism? Whether that's from the last sixty, seventy years or now? And how is your work discussed, do you think?

DW: In a review sense, it's always discussed in a weirdly surface level way. I read a review the other day that was talking about my work as if it was hair. Which is ok, but I feel like you're missing something massive, massive thing that you could be talking about. [...] But I think that's because people are scared. [...] I think people do forget that people do give a shit about the materials if that makes sense. I think sometimes art is so focused on stuff that appears to be something else, that the material is completely disregarded. It's like, oh, they're using that so it appears to be… I don't know, they're using black paint so it appears to be oil. They're not thinking why actually they would be using black paint instead of oil.

APPENDIX 1.7
INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIA BAX, 10/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: Could you say something briefly about what you're doing with your work overall?

Olivia Bax: [I think] a lot about how we sort of navigate our domestic space and that, for me, is kind of in parallel to how we deal with people and relationships. So the work is personal in a lot of ways in that I was kind of imagining objects that I use that I find useful in my kind of daily life, but then also at the same time thinking about how the front we have for human relationships and how people have got so many kind of cavities and hidden spaces. So I guess I'm always loosely thinking about these things, but when I'm making work, I'm very much responding to material. [...]

EB: How do you achieve that particularly with the materials that you use?

OB: I think materials and practicality and situation are all on top of each other, and it's really quite hard to define where one thing ends and the other thing starts. Like most artists, I have a part time job that supports my practice, but it means that by the time I've rented studio space and lived here, you know, my budget for materials and making is sort of limited. But I very much use that as a strength in a way of trying to creatively think around things. I find it very difficult to make small things. [...] So with scale becomes the problem of needing a vast amount of materials, and with that, it's you know, even plaster becomes expensive when you're buying bags kind of all the time. So the paper pulp I've been using since being on my masters has come because I thought, well, newspapers are something that you can collect for free any day, any time in London, and it was like, there's got to be a way that I would use that to become part of the material. And my day job had moved from being practical to being in an office, and we were shredding so much paper on an hourly rate because they needed things printed, I just thought it's not useful as what it is, but it could be useful if it was transformed into something else. So the kind of process of like, watering it down and adding glue and household paint became a way of making material *en masse*, so it could keep up with my demands of scale, almost. [...]

EB: Do you feel as if you have a sustained engagement with just one material or are they selected as appropriate to projects? What makes you move between materials or find a new material?

OB: I mean, I guess, definitely circumstances and spaces. [...] But I always want it to be integral, so I'm always thinking about how to make the material be the material, if you like. So I was thinking a lot about using pigments to get colour, but then - just on the way here, actually - I was actually, you know, I'm trying to make it behave too much like paper pulp. Maybe, if it's going outdoors, it should be kind of really glossy and have like a layer, like a protection layer, which I would never think about with an indoor piece because you don't have to worry about that. So then again, the material problems become the aesthetic result I guess, because a really glossy paint finish would actually help it

outdoors. So yeah, I guess practicalities are the biggest concern. And, yeah, things within your means all the time. But I also like pushing material as far as you can. That's why, in a way, making - mixing something, or making something - is more appealing to me than, like, buying a readymade because it feels like the… it's already too created somehow, or it's too difficult to use. But anything that I can physically manipulate is more appealing. [...] I guess as artists we all feel an urge to be making things and you can't really - and nor you should - suppress it. But I - on a personal, moral level - do feel kind of good about the fact that I'm picking up newspapers that aren't being used. And lots of my paints are paints that are outside hardware shops, you know, that have either been mixed wrong or somebody's ordered and then never picked up so they're just sold off for a fiver. And there's something nice about that in that it helps me because I don't feel like I've got a hideous choice of colour spectrums, I've just got what's lying out, which automatically makes any choice easier. But there's also something nice about the fact that it would probably go to a landfill if I wasn't just taking that away. [...]

EB: To what extent would you say your work is materials led? Would you say that they work for you, or is it more sort of a collaborative negotiation?

OB: Oh definitely the second one. Yeah, for sure. I mean, I don't think I would work with anything for any length of time if it wasn't a push and pull. And I think I would get bored if I felt like I understood it too well. And actually, it puts me off when I… again, a reason I think I went off steel for a long time was that I felt too much like I knew how to use it. So, like, I know how to cut that, I know how to weld it, I know what happens when you bolt that or when you weld that or whatever the thing is, and I had lost a kind of imagination of how I could use it in an interesting way that was surprising for me. So that's to do with a complete push and pull. And now that I'm… now it's behaving as a facilitator for another step, I can see its function and it's working alongside and with me again. [...] And then introducing another material, then that dialogue starts all over again. If I felt like I knew how it would be every single time, I think I'd be bored. [...] you kind of need to tame it to work with it, and that means it's exciting. [...] [material] becomes then an entry point for the viewer, and when people don't really know at all what they're looking at, then at least there's something there that anybody could see - they can see the handprints. Even if they ask themselves, I wonder why she did that, that's a question that then needs answering and then a conversation has started. And then it might develop into better questions, like I wonder why the form's like that, or why it's sitting here. But I think material is the best starting point in a way. [...] And then if they're asking the kind of questions that you've asked, you get to the root really fast. So what is it made of? Newspapers. I wonder why she's using newspaper - oh she lives in London. You know, you get a lot about the circumstances and the way something has come to be. And then you're asking, well, why is she making this? [...] It's like it's kind of fast tracking you to the artist.

[Speaking about the making process]:
OB: OK, well, the paper pulp is shredded on my Dad's old shredding machine [...] And then it goes in a big bucket, then these bits would be raw steel, and then I would build things up with chicken wire and I'd probably use just newspapers on the chicken wire to get rid of

the holes, not modrock, because it makes it too heavy. And then the paper pulp's mixed in those big vats and then applied. And I use the word applied because it's quite important because if I'm not, kind of, pressing it - like how you can see here - the material will just sort of fall off. So it has to be, kind of, like weighted down. And the bits where you see long bits of material, normally because it kind of feels like it might collapse, so the handprints are really kind of crucial to the finish, and I've always thought that it ends up being a sort of patina of the work in that even though there's lots of different marks in there, it kind of makes it one (25:00) in some kind of weird way. A bit like traditional bronze patina or something like that. And I like that it's completely ingrained in the material - that's the last stage. So, the colour's in there, so that's the last bit. [...] I think about that all the time when I'm making work about how it's such a labour of love, you know, you're putting everything into it like all your physicality - and my stuff's a lot of the time quite physical, I'm kind of wrestling with this stuff, and it gets bigger than me and I'm trying to contain it. And even the mixing of the pulp is kind of really quite strenuous because I really have to mix it hard to get the consistency that's going to actually stick. And it all involves such a lot of you.[...]

EB: How do you position yourself theoretically? And that's art theory and outside of art theory.

OB: Oh, well that's hard. It's hard because I really try and keep this room sort of empty of art theory because I feel like it can kind of stunt you somehow, you know. It's too hard if you think people have done that before, or people have spoken about that or it might have been done ten years ago, and thinking can be problematic. [...] I think that can be too overwhelming. It's already overwhelming enough dealing with the materials.

EB: Do you think there's a current need for material focused sculptural practices?

OB: Fortunately, sculpture has to have a strand of including materials whether it likes it or not. [...] And there are a lot of sculptors who I suppose use maybe manufacturing techniques and digital techniques and remove themselves in a certain way. Which is fine. Personally, I always think that makes the nature of the work quite cold because it hasn't included any human interaction. But I think because of that, there will always be a strand of sculptors who want to include more human physicality. And maybe I'm just too much of an optimist, but in way, I think because of the way things are going and because of everything becoming more digital and more screen-based, I have a theory that this kind of material language will still sort of… will keep trying to push against that because people will always want an opposition to where anything's going. And I think we've got a good challenge on our hands, almost, I mean, I hope that… you know, the work gets photographed a lot and lots of people I know only appreciate sculpture and work in images, but if I can make something that I think looks confusing on a screen and forces somebody to visit, that's a real success, for me. It's like, you can't replace physicality to a false experience. And that's why I think that kind of sculpturally and materially speaking, we're on a good thing, because we're talking about that difference. It's like getting your kids to play outside or getting them onto an ipad, I mean, it feels like that for me. [...]

APPENDIX 1.8
INTERVIEW WITH SARAH ROBERTS, 20/11/2018

Ellie Barrett: Can you just talk briefly about what you're doing with your work overall?

Sarah Roberts: I generally for research will go to a place that I think is quite materially seductive and it's a place that sort of strikes some kind of chord where you feel like everything's quite delicious in that instance. And I think in my practice I'm trying to re-evoke that sensation of like some kind of visceral response to that visual place. [...] And things kind of collapse around you a bit, so you stop looking at objects and things, and you start feeling yourself in that environment as a body with all that stuff that's around you. I've just been working on a piece called *Peach Melba* - I normally draw from surfaces of architecture and objects, but this one was about a foundation that was recommended to me by a lady at a MAC counter - it was called something like Paradise Peach - and the fact that this woman wanted me to slather this new facade onto my own skin made me feel like, you know, it's like the body was coming into it in a different way. [...] There's that whole thing, you get older, you know the way people are looking at you and your role in everything that you're doing and your private life and your working life and everything collides somehow. [...] You have to acknowledge yourself as this conduit because you are entwined in your own practice and I think sometimes my practice is touching on this sort of abject repulsion at the amount of material and sometimes it's like absolutely, like, entwined in that delicious experience of encountering the material and I want people to feel that, but at the same time I want them to feel that level of responsibility that comes alongside it. And I don't want to be judging from somewhere outside - that's why I have to acknowledge my position as stuck in that weird hoarding situation. We're like these organised art hoarders. It's like we've created a validated route to be able to have this weird relationship with material.

EB: How is that achieved with the materials that you use?

SR: I have quite an instinctive approach to material. I like to use quite forgiving materials like plaster and clay. You know this idea that you're sort of peeling off one surface and making another? Or pouring it into something new? That's how I always used to describe it and I think it's still accurate - this notion that I can have complete control for a moment over that material but at the same time completely lose control. And I think that's the only place where I can get that thing that surprises me as well at the end of it which is great. But at the same time there's this weird obsessive control that goes on in the insane sourcing of weird objects that even I don't know what they are. [...] And it's like, they exist already, so maybe there's a little bit less guilt but there isn't because they're the ones that make you feel the most guilty. [...] And it's like they respond to the environment that they're in so until the vinyl shell or the painted walls or whatever or the carpet goes in, the materials know how to respond to the space. [...] I like installations to have that moment of flux as well, the fact that they can still move, the fact that things don't look deliberate and the fact that, you know, it could change - you could move things around in that space and it would still make the same level of sense or nonsense. If it takes itself too seriously, then it just becomes another series of objects, like art objects, so just new

things, whereas I want them to stay material. [...] The whole world is full of these really bizarre objects and we rationalise them continuously. And yeah, I think in this climate where we're really questioning our excessive use of material and the fact that this machine just keeps going, it's important to think about that.

EB: Do you have a sustained engagement with one, or are they selected as appropriate to projects?

SR: [...] I don't want any one part of it to have too much value. And I also use other manufacturers as well to physically make things for me which are bespoke sometimes which is doubly confusing, because you're like, why? I used to use a foundry in Essex that makes the treads for TFL, and they were making these really weird things that were just dug out of the ground out of brass. And they're made by these same people that make these beautiful things that you step on all the time that are so well made that you won't even look at. [...] [I use] that shitty foam that you have gym mats made of that you're not looking at. But again, put a gym mat in a gallery and everyone's like oh my god, where did you get this, it's amazing. [...] Everything is important, and it's about this non-hierarchical look at materials as well. I love material, I love all material, and I look at everything and the way everything is made. [...]

EB: When you're working with the material, would you say that you make the material work for you, or is it more of a kind of collaboration or a negotiation?

SR: It's a total collaboration. And I really like to use really crude moulds, or I'll even use trays and stuff that I just find places. I like the plaster to stay plaster. And if it's too elaborate I think you start to look too much at the form of it. But I like the forms to emulate things that you would find in an interior or like garden homeware. Blocky things are really good. I like this idea that you literally, like, dug something out of something out of something or sliced something off of somewhere. [...] So the material is doing everything that is delicious. I'm just a conduit again. [...] Just this idea that it's coming out as this sort of new material and finding a new form and you just gave it a vector and now it's just doing this amazing thing. You're just squeezing through and it's taking on this new form and it's going to be fixed in that way. It's really crazy. I love watching the moment when you pour the plaster out and it almost has that weird plastic coating on it. It feels almost the same as when you get something through the post that someone sent you, like unwrapping or something. So, it's weird - I guess in some ways I'm totally engaged with the material, but I really enjoy that moment when after you detach from it and it's setting or whatever, and it has another birth and that's my favourite moment and you're always a bit surprised by it. And it does always surprise you because it changes and it's like it has that capacity in itself, that moving between this powder to this liquid to this really solid form. [...]

EB: How do you position yourself theoretically if you do at all?

SR: I look to quite a lot of things I think for inspiration. [...] I got really so embedded in French philosophy when I was doing my thesis that I nearly quit my art degree and went and studied French philosophy because I was like, oh, these guys really know what they're

talking about. And then at the same time I'm looking at texts like Miranda July. I like this way that people who are just kind of like are looking at the world in a certain way and vocalizing it in their own words. I feel like that's how I want to use material and that's how I try and use text, I think. [...] I look a lot at merchandising and architecture and I'm quite interested in Bauhaus and this weird thing of colliding worlds. Again, it's kind of the same as the practice, it's like everything is all in. And most of my research is quite hands-on, so I will have to physically go to places. I find places, normally, on the internet, but then I will physically go to that place to have to collect the palette. I can't use internet images or anything. It has to start with something I can touch physically that I can then flatten down and then take to somewhere else.

EB: So even your research is very materials led.

SR: Absolutely, yeah. Also Jane Bennett? I've sort of started reading more about my positioning as a woman as well in the work, and I think that's been showing a little more lately. [...] I've got a casual politic in the work, and it's not shouting, but there is this slight underlying anger as a female, as a person that lives in the current climate, as someone that does care about the environment even though she is partially responsible for wrecking it. [...] I read a lot of science fiction as well. Science fiction is amazing, I think, and it's always been sort of pointing the finger. [...]

EB: Do you think there's a current need for material focused sculptural practices?

SR: Yeah I think there is but I think we have to try and figure out a way that perhaps we can be more responsible about it. I think that, like, visual art can be a really good conduit for addressing the impact that this material world is having on the one that is effectively underneath it. [...] Being able to find a way to channel that into a space which is better for you as a maker, your own conscious and the world beyond that is important. [...] And I think that material practices make you look at material and make you value material and I think that's what we need to do more. I guess in my practice, maybe that is the thing - I'm trying to get you to value a watering can as much as you would value a ceramic piece that's hanging in the installation. I want you to look at them as things that are equally weighted, I want you to look at them as things that would last for the same amount of time, I want you to stop thinking that things are just completely disposable somehow. Which is maybe why I remind myself by having my whole storage unit pulled into my studio every now and again. That's become quite resonant for me, the fact that I am effectively living with my own archive on my back. It's strapped to me. [...] I start to think about it and I feel like the practice is unsustainable, and that there must be another way of articulating, but I think it's needed the material to get this far and it will need the material still to get into another space. I don't want material to die because it is delicious.

APPENDIX 2. EXHIBITION INSTALLATION


FLOUR


FLOUR


SALT

APPENDIX 3. ACCOMPANYING PUBLICATION.

This was originally produced as an A5 stapled booklet which accompanied the sculptures.

"It is a tool, hence an index of agency; both the agency of its maker and of the man who used it."(Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 16.)

Martin Creed, *Work No. 965: Half the Air in a Given Space*; balloons; 2012.
Eva Hesse, *Ingeminate*; enamel, cord and papier-mâché over two balloons connected with surgical hose; 1965.
Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Blue)*; mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating; 1994.

El Anatsui, *Untitled*; aluminium, liquor bottle caps and copper wire; 2009.
Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)*; painted bronze; 1964.

"the complexity of making challenges our most important analytical tool: written language and its essentially linear structure." (Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Showing Making: On Visual Documentation and Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2012): 11.)

Pablo Picasso; *Still Life With Guitar*; paperboard, paper, string, [illegible]; 1913.

Robert Morris, *Silver Brain*; plaster; 1964.

Sol Lewitt, *123454321*; bricks, masonry; 1979.
"The attribution of ethical human qualities - honesty, modesty, virtue - into materials does not aim at explanation; its purpose is to heighten our consciousness of the materials themselves and in this way think about their value." (Richard Sennett, using the example of "honest bricks" in *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2008), 137.)

"Food will appear as actant inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer-producer of salient, public effects." (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University P 2010), 39.)

Claes Oldenburg, *Floor Burger*; acrylic on canvas filled with foam rubb cardboard boxes; 1962.

"Not only is the car a locus of the owner's agency, and a conduit through which the agency of others (bad drivers, vandals) may affect him - it is the locus of an 'autonomous' agency of its own."(Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 18.)

Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*; oil, paper, fabric, reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and te with oil and rubber tire on Angora goat on wood platform mounted on four casters; 1955-59.

Barbara Hepworth used a cheese- as well as specialist tools to model plaster.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*; text; 1969.

"an organism's particular properties and susceptibilities are produced through complex interactions between genes and a host of other factors such as hormones, neurochemical stimuli, dietary intake, and environmental conditions." (Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 17.)

Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*; wood, glass, metal, fabric, pain thermometer; 1964-85.

Thus formless is not only an adjective having given meaning, but a term that erves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing ave its form." (Georges Bataille, "Formless," from *Documents*, no.7 (1929), in *Bataille, Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 31.)

Barbara Hepworth; *Four-Square* *(Walk Through Circles)*; bronze; 1966.

Sarah Lucas, *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*; fried eggs, kebab, table; 1992.
Claes Oldenburg, *Fried Egg*; canvas, dyed cotton and expanded polystyrene; 1966/71.
Heather Phillipson, *My Name is Lettie Eggsyrub*; multi-screen video and sculptural installation; 2018-2019.

Roelof Lowe, *Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)*; oranges, wood, plastic; 1967.
"Cezanne's painting brings the material world alive; it does not measure or represent reality but emulates the way it materializes in perception." (Diana Coole, "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 105.)

Damien Hirst's blue tinted glasses.

Michael Craig Martin, *An Oak Tree*; glass, water, shelf and printed text; 1973.

"For had the sun not glinted on the [redacted], I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert." (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.)

Yayoi Kusama's hair.

"This world of tools, there for the using, is the world to which women, people of colour, and the poor have been assigned under patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism throughout history." (Katherine Behar, "An Introduction to OOF," in *Object Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.)
"there is hardly any doubt that kettles 'boil' water, knifes 'cut' meat, baskets 'hold' provisions, hammers 'hit' nails on the head [...]. Are those verbs not designating actions?" (Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.)

Auguste Rodin, *Hand Study*; bronze; date unknown.
Richard Serra, *Hand Catching Lead*; 16mm black-and-white film; 1968.
Richard Serra, *Verb List*; graphite on paper; 1967-68.

Joseph Beuys'

Claes Oldenburg's head.

Claes Oldenburg, *London Knees*; polyurethaned latex, acrylic base; 1966.

Jasper Johns, *English* ; sculpt-metal; 1970.

Claes Oldenburg, *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*; weathering steel; 1969.
Sarah Roberts, *Peach Melba*; mixed media installation with scent and sound; 2018.

Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Jardin d'Hiver*; artist's book; offset lithograph, twenty-eight pages with printed folder; 1974.
Giuseppe Penone, *Gesto Vegetale (kneeling)*; bronze; 1984.
Rebecca Molloy, *The Cactus Dance*; mixed media; 2018.

Tracey Emin, *My Bed*; box frame, mattress, linens, and various objects; 1998.

Grayson Perry, *Puff Piece*; glazed ceramic; 2016.

"The long history of crafting clay shows three ways of becoming aroused consciously by materials, in altering, marking, or identifying with them ourselves." (Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), 144.)

Yayoi Kusama, *All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins*; acrylic LED lighting, black glass, mirrors, wood, metal; 2016.

Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags*; marble and textiles; 1967, 1974.

"Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material." (Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, ed. Robert Morris (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 46.)

Robert Morris, *Untitled*; felt; 1967-68.

"Not many sculptors sit down with a piece of stone and a chisel thes ys." (Simon Wallis, quoted in Holly Black, "On the Future," in *Yorkshire Sculpture International 2019 Festival Guide*, ed. Joe Townend (Leeds: Cultureshock, 2019), 44.)

For academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape." Georges Bataille, "Formless," from *Documents*, no.7 (1929), in *Bataille, Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, 1927-1939, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 31.

Claes Oldenburg, *Giant Gym* , plaster and enamel; 1963.

"Mineralization names the creative agency by which bone was produced…" (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.)

Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Skull and a Writing Quill*; oil on wood; 1628.
Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*; platinum, diamonds and human teeth

Joseph Beuys, *The End of the Twentieth Century*; basalt, clay and felt; 1983-85.

Pablo Picasso, *Still Life With Guitar*; paperboard, paper, string, cardboard box; 1913.
Dominique White, *Landlocked Prisoner*; clay, tarred rope, rope, dried palm, destroyed sail, cowrie shells, raffia palm, hand carved wooden beads, used mooring cleat; 2018.
"'sculpture' began to be piles of thread waste on the floor...

...or sawed redwood timbers rolled into the gallery, or tons of earth excavated from the desert, or stockades of logs surrounded by firepits, the word sculpture became harder to pronounce - but not really that much harder." (Rosalind Krauss,"Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 33.)
Phyllida Barlow, *Cul De Sac*; mixed media installation; 2019.

"In some times and places, the 'small agency' of the lowly worm makes more of a difference than the grand agency of humans." (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 98.)