MATERIAL SENSITIVITY FOR SUSTAINABLE ART PRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION: SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ART MARKET

'Sustainability' is a dirty word in the art world. The term has uncomfortable connotations, linking to individual artist's career development, the impact of production and fabrication, and the economic value of artworks. Asking about 'sustainability' throws up questions about how materials for art are sourced, purchased, processed and, ultimately, how ethical it is to be continuously making objects which are mostly built to last, and must be stored and maintained indefinitely.

Because of the plunging moral rabbit hole connected to sustainability, the art world - for the most part - appears to be in a state of strategic ignorance. The sheer mass of work that is churned out for art fairs or biennials; for sale at the enormous expense of the wealthy; or for institutional commissions to fill ambitious public programmes is staggering. Whilst the rest of the world is realising that industrial production is irreversibly damaging the planet, art has managed to avoid the scrutiny that other sectors have been subjected to. Hunger for contemporary art ownership has grown rapidly in the early twenty-first century, as the world's top earners stockpile wealth with a need to spend it on original products. Artworks made from galvanized steel or cast platinum are fetching substantial sums of money at auction and the ongoing amassing of art objects is showing no signs of slowing, despite the current urgency to deal with the ethics of production. Whilst there is a growing demand, there is a growing need to produce. Art does not care to be troubled with questions about whether this should continue.

THE MIND OVER MATTER DICHOTOMY

To talk about sustainability, we must talk about 'material', and art has spent centuries eradicating any trace of it from its critical vocabulary. 'Mind over matter' is its enduring mantra. Classical Greek philosophy is the root cause of this separation: Aristotle believed that material was of no interest until it was combined with form[1]. Matter was messy and crude, but form was

[1] This concept is known as 'hylomorphism', a word comprised of the Greek for matter (*hylo*) and form (*morph*). Feminist theorist Judith Butler includes a critical exploration of the hylomorphic model. See Butler J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*, Routledge.

the physical manifestation of idea, imposed by an intelligent creator. A lump of marble is idiotic, but a statue is of importance.

The historic divide between material and idea found a more recent home in the first half of the twentieth century during the Modernist period, when art freed itself from the need to represent the world around it, and began searching for a new reason to exist[2]. In order to justify the necessity of production, critics removed any trace of the real world origins of artworks, and instead exaggerated the importance of aesthetic or metaphysical aspects[3]. Taking their cues from Aristotle, Modernist critics found meaning in form, and any discussion of the material aspect of the work was not only ignored, but viewed as unintellectual[4]. Terms like 'scale', 'composition' or 'subject matter' became the criteria by which all artworks were assessed. Art lacks the language to acknowledge its material connections to the world around it.

UNSUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION

Patterns of ignoring material continue well into contemporary practice, though recently, controversial incidents have provoked some grudging consideration of its impact. In May this year, Jeff Koons broke the record for the sale of a work by a living artist, securing £71 million for his 1986 *Rabbit* sculpture. The auction house Christie's marketed the sale with the tagline "a chance to own the controversy", summarising:

> "*Rabbit* tells us that life is good, that all tastes are acceptable, that we should be at one with ourselves. Gleaming like some luxurious futuristic idol, it is a mirror not for princes, but for the public, reflecting us, incorporating us within the ever-shifting drama that plays out on its surface. We are all embraced by this totem."[5]

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[2] Art began to move away from realism when artists began depicting the world as unstable. Cubism, Surrealism and Futurism all contributed to this, which led to the rise of abstract expressionism in the 1940s in the work of artists such as Barnet Newman, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. This approach is summarised in Rothko's 1947 statement 'The Romantics were Prompted…" in 2002 Harrison C & Wood P (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishing, 571 - 573.

[3] Art critic Clement Greenberg was the figurehead of this critical language, which is crystalised in 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in 2002 Harrison C & Wood P (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishing, 539 - 549.

[4] This has been recently observed by art historian Petra Lange-Berndt in "How to Be Complicit With Materials" in (2015) *Materiality*, Lange-Berndt P (ed.), Whitechapel, 12 - 20.

[5] Taken from the Christie's press release: https://www.christies.com/features/Jeff-Koons-Rabbit-Own-the-controversy-9804-3.aspx

The work is sold to us as an escapist antidote to current social issues of sustainability, permitting us to ignore the worst parts of modern life and celebrate the good. It tells us the future will be clean and shiny. It tells us not to worry.

The materials in Koon's work and the significant effects they have on the environment and public resources is a very real source of controversy. *Rabbit* is made from stainless steel, and is just one of hundreds of pieces like it that Koons has continuously fabricated. One such piece - *Bouquet of Tulips* - was 'gifted' by the artist to the city of Paris in 2016. After a long negotiation, the 33 ton sculpture found a place outside the Museum of Fine Arts, after Koon's intended site at the Palais de Tokyo was unable to support the work due to its colossal weight risking the collapse of an underground basement. *Bouquet of Tulips* is yet to be put in place. Though the sculpture was donated, the city must draw on public money to install, maintain and preserve it. Koons has been the subject of criticism, with many journalists deeming the act one of arrogance and self-importance rather than generosity, as he appears unphased by the effect that his sculpture has on sustaining public spaces and resources. Though undeniably part of the problem, this event finally broke the silence of the material impact of art work on the environment around it, and triggered discussions of ethics involved in the sustainability of production of this scale.

Another example of the cause-and-effect of extreme art production is the work of Damien Hirst. His 2007 work *Beyond Belief* - a platinum cast of a human skull, embedded with 8,601 flawless diamonds, costing £14 million to produce with an asking price of £50 million - raised questions about how ethical it is to use so much of a material which is not only unsustainable, but has direct ties to violence and bloodshed.

More recently, Hirst's 2017 exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* came under similar scrutiny. A fictitious shipwreck containing the priceless collection of a freed slave (which raises questions of racial ethics, and it is difficult to understand Hirst's reasoning for this choice, but that is another discussion entirely) which has been excavated over time results in the 190 pieces on display. Motifs span classic mythological monsters and ancient relics, including nods to the contemporary likes of Jeff Koons with sculptures of Mickey Mouse and Optimus Prime. The works are made from a range of opulent materials, including marble,

bronze and precious metals. Conceived by Hirst as a solution to his waning popularity and diminishing sales, the show was met with mixed reviews, with critics mostly commenting on Hirst's desperation to remain relevant rather than the exhibition's content. One critic described it as "the most expensive flop in living memory"[6]. The lack of critical success combined with the ridiculous fabrication costs (an alleged £65 million) and the vast amount of heavy, long-lasting objects produced again triggered conversations about why many artists are unconcerned with the effects of manufacture and preservation on the rest of the world.

Two particular issues of sustainability arise in these examples, relating to economic and environmental impact. Firstly, the most immediate association we can make about the work of Hirst and Koons is the hefty price tag that accompanies production costs as well as sales. Working with marble, bronze or steel is restricted to wealthy artists. Increased usage - especially on this bloated scale - is widening the gap between 'emerging' and 'established' demographics. For early career artists, this sets the unattainable precedence of using expensive materials, which is not only unsustainable for future career development, but enforces elitism in the art world. For audiences, the abundance of works like *Bouquet of Tulips* or *Beyond Belief* in public spaces and exhibitions anchors credibility in materials which the majority of artists cannot access, meaning that we are less likely to acknowledge artistic achievement in accessible substances[7]. Emphasis on restrictive materials prevents democratic access to art making, creating an unsustainable art world which fails to welcome those with limited income.

Secondly, we are prompted to ask questions about the environmental impact of production. How much energy does it take to produce 190 works in pressure-cut marble, or 33 tons of stainless steel? How are they transported across continents? What sort of emissions are being pumped out from privately owned foundries because artists feel the need to produce in this way? Koons, Hirst and countless others are hiding behind the "art for art's sake" doctrine, which other industries do not have the luxury of. Though it is easy to point at individual artists, the blame does not lie on their shoulders alone: the art world has long held onto the "mind over matter" dualism, and critics, educational institutions, collectors, museums and commissioning bodies all

[6] Tiernan Morgan, 'Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy Sinks in Venice': https://hyperallergic.com/391158/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-venice-punta-della-dogana-palazzo-grassi/

[7] In contemporary art, this broad term can be applied to virtually any material. This is elaborated on in the last paragraph of 'Sustainable Solutions'.

carry collective responsibility. This approach endures because it is transhistorical: art does not engage with material and sustainability, and as a result is disconnected from current social dialogues unfolding around these issues.

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Calling for a complete halt to art making is not up for discussion here: contemporary art contributes to the formation of culture, and creativity promotes wellbeing and confidence by empowering communities. It can explore and question social truths, promote democratic access to theoretical ideas, or draw attention to inequalities, and for this to happen, it must allow artists from any background to create work. Abandoning or reducing art production is not a move forward.

Perhaps the solution is as simple as directly turning to the meaning which is embedded in material. Rather than perceiving it as easily controlled, the art world must understand that material can have unexpected and often dangerous consequences. This approach could result in works which are created responsibly by artists, and have an important role to play in drawing audience attention to issues of sustainability. A new awareness about material is indeed creeping into the art world, and artists are using their practices to intervene in social dialogues. The shift to postmodernism in the 1960s saw artists use literally anything as a raw material - including dirt, rubbish, hair, fat, tar, oil and even bodily substances - as a rejection elitist modernist ideals[8]. Now, these materials are also considered in the context of how they are made, where they come from, and what impact their use has on the world beyond art.

MATERIAL IN PRACTICE

In 2018, a work by artist collective Invisible Flock embodied this approach. *Aurora* was immersive environment installed in the cavernous Toxteth reservoir outside Liverpool, which invited the public to experience “walking on water”:

[8] Rosalind Krauss describes shift this in her 1979 essay ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ in *October*, Vol. 8, Spring 1979.

> "[...] water surrounds, floods and falls around you, both beautiful and terrifying. [...] Because when we understand that water is more precious than oil or gold, we view everything differently."[9]

As opposed to avoiding material, *Aurora* tackles it head on. Our attention is fixed on water and its implications: dripping ice sculptures unshakably evoke melting polar ice caps. Material is explicitly linked to sustainability and climate change, and experiencing it in a creative context communicates this.

Not all artists are overtly dealing with these issues like Invisible Flock, but art works are increasingly constructed from materials in a way that seeks solutions to sustainable production. Artist and researcher Laura Yuile is one example of this, as she works with gravel salvaged from construction sites; broken washing-machines and refrigerators destined for the landfill; formless dust and lint vacuumed from the floors of shopping centres; and perishable materials like soap and dried pulses[10]. Though gathered from various origins, they are tied together because their impact on the world outside of Yuile's practice is reduced. Gravel and appliances exist prior to her use of them; dust collects as a product of human presence; and food will inevitably degrade. These materials are able to zoom in and out of social and individual behaviour, connecting the global and domestic scales of sustainable living. They are affordable and available to anyone, and they site her work squarely in the present environment. Use of transient objects and ephemeral substances demonstrates an awareness that material has rippling effects outside of individual art practice, and Yuile is one of hundreds of artists like her who are weaving issues of sustainability into their making process with a new sensitivity to the materials they use.

Artists are feeling the pressure of working as makers in the age of climate change, and are attuning themselves to material as a result. These materials allow for more sustainable art practices in many ways: they are cheap and available at a time when early career artists face mounting financial pressure; they make use of substances and objects which exist in the world already as opposed to processing raw materials; and, most importantly, they draw the attention of audiences to these issues. Art is a call to action, but only if material is finally given its due.

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[9] Taken from the *Aurora* press release: https://www.fact.co.uk/event/aurora
[10] For more information on Yuile's practice, see https://laurayuile.com/

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

Whilst there remains a demographic of unsustainable producers (in many senses of the word) including Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, there is also a rising urge from other groups of artists to rid art of its pretensions against material, and use it as a framework for dealing with issues of sustainability. Material awareness as a practical solution is an antidote to the transhistorical approach of the megastar artists, because tackling material firmly anchors art in the present by linking it to our immediate environment, and has the capacity to investigate how sustainable that present actually is.

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